



## Birds on a Feather



**ARTIST Rebecca Jewell** explains her reinterpretation and reimagining of the traditional headdresses of Papua New Guinea for a contemporary art audience

In 1982 I lived in a village in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea with anthropologist, Wojtek Dabrowski, his artist wife and four children. This experience had a profound impact on this 18-year-old Londoner. 30 years on, those Gamugai men and women, dark oiled skin glistening and bird-of-paradise feathers cascading from their headdresses, are still clear in my mind. I went on to study anthropology at Cambridge, then went to art school and took a PhD at London's RCA in the department of Natural History Illustration. Birds and feathers are my fascination and inspiration.

In 2005 I gained a Leverhulme grant to be artist-in-residence at the British Museum, Department of Oceania. I worked with the ethnographic collections in storage, exploring the dislocation and re-interpretation of museum objects and traced the narratives and histories of artefacts in etchings, monoprints and collages. I am still at the museum on a voluntary basis, with access to the Pacific collections and, in particular, the featherwork from Hawaii, New Zealand and New Guinea: feather capes, gods, helmets, masks, shields and headdresses. In 2009 I went, with the BM, as artist on a field trip to the Solomon Islands. The residency is a two-way exchange between host and artist: I gain access to the collections plus the curators' expertise and, through my exhibitions, talks and publications, artefacts gain a new voice (99% of the collections are in storage) and are made visible to the public.

In 2006 I was awarded an 'Artist Access to Art Colleges'

residency at London Metropolitan University Print Department. Here I worked with (the late) David Skingle, Head of Print, and Nigel Oxley, senior lecturer. I continue at London Met. as Visiting Research Fellow, where interaction with students, artists and teachers led to my recent works printed directly onto feathers.

Process is as important to me as product. I like to 'construct' images through collecting feathers, preparing plate, inking-up, headdress construction and final printing. In 2009, my exhibition, *Charmed Adventures*, at London's Rebecca Hossack gallery, explored, through print, the power of the image to take on properties of the object represented: I made a series of prints of 'magic charms' created via etching or monoprint. This inspired my next collection: *Birds becoming Artefacts* (2011), for which, having perfected a way of printing directly onto feathers, I constructed headdresses imparting qualities of the feathers and printed images onto the wearer. In Papua New Guinea, Highlanders wear bird-of-paradise feathers to acquire the birds' beauty. Likewise, the wearer of my *Owl Headdress* might acquire the wisdom and majesty of the printed owls. Most of my images are from 19th century bird illustrations, transferred to feathers on my etching press. The feather acts as a print surface, accepting ink and surviving the press's pressure; the picture emerges with the quality of an historical engraving, the barbs on the feather's vane imitating lines made by a roulette tool. Single, delicate feathers framed as isolated images represent the precarious status of many species.

I hope to continue to make artwork, which is, like a Papua New Guinea headdress, perfectly crafted, beautiful and meaningful.

Rebecca Jewell is showing on Rebecca Hossack Gallery's stand at the *London Art Fair*, Business Design Centre, London N1 0QH, 16-20 Jan, [www.londonartfair.co.uk](http://www.londonartfair.co.uk); & *Art 13*, Olympia, London W14 8UX, 1-3 Mar [www.artfairslondon.com](http://www.artfairslondon.com) **Contact** [www.rebeccajewell.com](http://www.rebeccajewell.com)

### Images, left to right

*Captain Cook's Headdress* 2012. Printed feathers & string, 450 x 390 mm  
*Lear's Headdress* 2011. Printed feathers, gold pigment & string, 430 x 490 mm