



Material Girl

The artist Ann Carrington makes sculptures from discarded everyday objects and materials, creating new, rich stories from life

WRITTEN BY *Stephen Dandrow*

British artist Ann Carrington works in multiple mediums, often using only recycled materials. Left: The artist is shown sculpting her series entitled *The Four Seasons* (2023), polychromatic sculptures made of beer and soda cans, bottle tops, and aluminum, with a steel armature. Right: *Fish Wish* (2024) is composed, in part, of tuna and sardine cans, and fishing rods, her commentary on the overproduction of this world.





“I think about my work as telling stories,” states UK-born and based sculptor Ann Carrington. “I have a story in my head I want to tell. The materials I choose have to express that.” With a prolific career already spanning decades, Carrington has built a serious reputation, recognized by artists and collectors from around the world, with major fans in finance, fashion, design, including Queen Elizabeth II herself.

Trained as a painter at the Royal College of Art, Carrington developed a style and process that blurs traditional craftsmanship with contemporary themes. Her work explores ideas of beauty, utility, and decay, as she repurposes ordinary objects such as cutlery, buttons, and denim that she discovers at fairs, antiques shops, and junk stores. She transforms them into complex sculptures that challenge viewers' perceptions. “It’s good when someone does a double take and looks at something they pass every day in a completely new light,” explains Carrington. “It helps draw people into the work when there is something familiar about it, yet extraordinary as well.”

Her work is often striking. But as Carrington puts it, having something beautiful is not the goal. “I’m not interested in ‘craft’. That said, I do like the maker’s hand to be evident. See where the weld is,

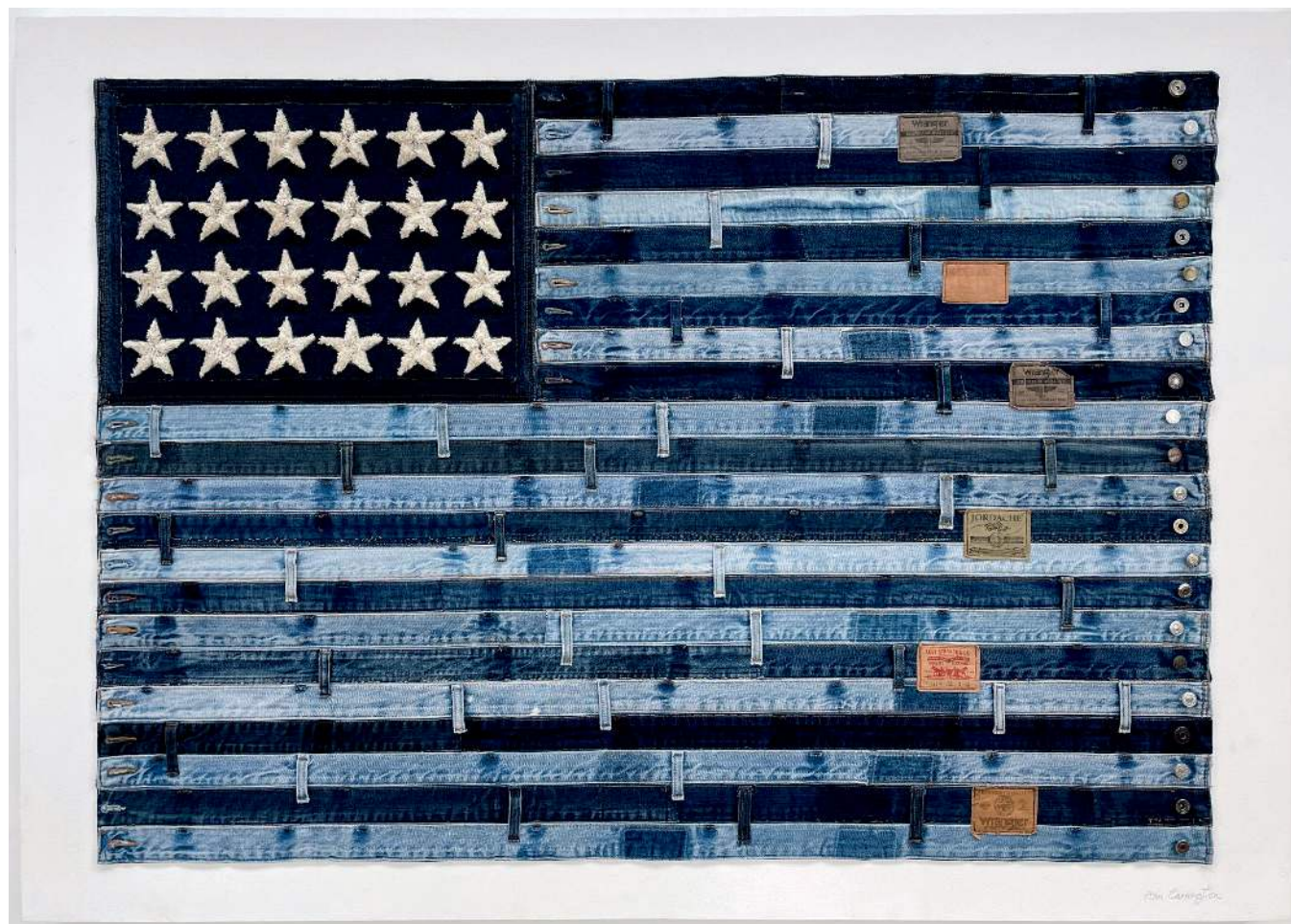
where is the cut, where it isn’t smooth.”

Her exhibition history and recognition are extensive, with accolades that include one from the prominent Arts Council of Great Britain, as well as the Freedom of the City of London award for excellence in the arts. Commissioned works have also landed her in rarefied situations. Take the *Royal Jubilee Banner*, requested by the Queen for a procession barge on the Thames during her Diamond Jubilee. For this, Carrington embroidered 500,000 golden buttons onto a banner, a mix of modern hand-dyed pieces with older ones provided by the military.

When asked why she prefers repurposed items, Carrington replies that they tell stories, and then thinks of her father, a coin and stamp collector. Growing up with his possessions scattered about the house, she admits, “I hated it. They were everywhere. But as I got older, I began to love them.”



Bouquets are among Carrington’s preferred forms. “It’s me wanting to make a contemporary version of what the Dutch still-life painters were doing,” she says. “I’ve made flowers that will never fade.” Above: *Sweet Cicely* (2024) is comprised of silver-, nickel-, and steel-plated spoons. Right: A detail of *Shomu-en* (2024), a term that references a Japanese garden, was created for an installation at Cheekwood, the historic mansion in Nashville; it, too, is made of spoons.



Among her signature items are her bouquets, which, as she claims, “transport me to a point in time.” She recalls a visit to Amsterdam’s Rijksmuseum to look at the Dutch still lifes, or what are known as the *memento mori*. “It’s not just decaying objects on canvases,” she remarks. “You’ll have a set table to show the pleasures of life. These are symbolic. You might have a butterfly or wilting flowers to show the passing of time. So, as I’m looking I think, ‘Isn’t it amazing that the only thing in this image that will survive is the cutlery.’” Her bouquets composed of cutlery, however, counter that notion of decay, by remaining in place, by not decomposing.

Currently, Carrington is exhibiting at the Cheekwood Mansion in Nashville, which was built in the 1930s by the Maxwell family of Maxwell House Coffee fame. The exhibit focuses on the home and the lives of two former occupants, Mabel and Leslie Cheek. Avid travelers, they collected art and furnishings throughout Europe which became sources of “recycled” objects for Carrington to use in telling their story. Works include a large bouquet made from hammered and cut spoons, as well as a large “charm bracelet” that details the life of Mabel, who also collected charms representing important moments of life.

Reflecting on earlier years, Carrington remembers the limited attention her work received. Having moved from London to Margate—a then-quiet town on England’s southeast coast—she purchased studio space. “There were no artists there at the time,” she recalls, embracing the lack of peer pressure to explore her own vision. Despite feeling “unfashionable” in the art scenes of the 1980s and ’90s, which favored conceptual and minimal works, she remained steadfast. “I put my head down and said, ‘I won’t change what I’m doing. I’m just going to carry on.’” ■

Carrington has always been interested in textiles and classic quilts, especially of the American South. Of such vintage textiles, she says, “They are beautiful and have history and tradition.” For her *Liberty Star* (2023), measuring approximately 68” x 103”, Carrington used discarded denim affixed to tulip wood.



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