



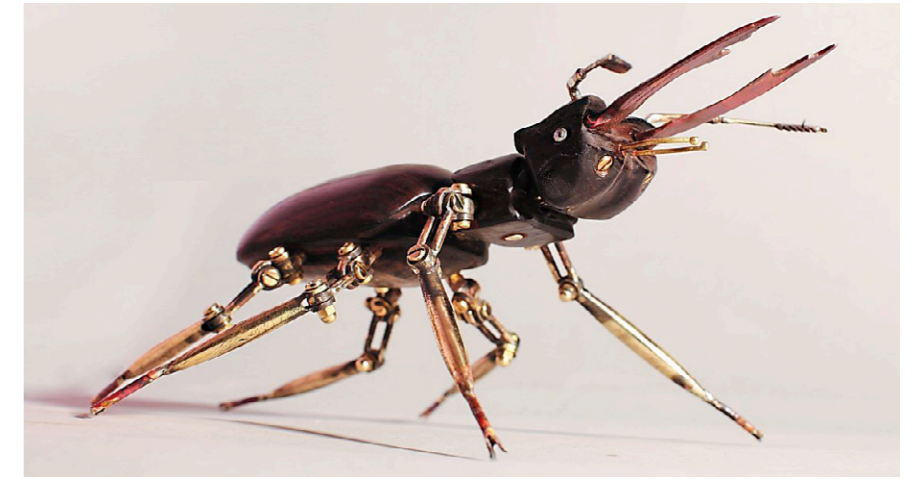
ART OF THE UNUSUAL

NEIL THOMAS MEETS A SOUTH SHROPSHIRE SCULPTOR WHO HAS FOUND A NICHE FOR HIMSELF AS A CREATOR OF THE BIZARRE



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Artist Nik Burns with his sculpture of a bee at The Big Art Show in Shrewsbury last year; this lamp would be useful in the dark – and perhaps a little scary; a seahorse design that is both pretty . . . and pretty unusual.

PREVIOUS PAGE: Nik working on a giant turtle sculpture in his workshop.



Nature and industry combine for this piece; art for those who love creepy crawlies; below, left, Nik at work at the wood lathe; plans for another sculpture.

Nik Burns was a professional photographer making a decent living when he decided to turn his life upside down. Nik had always harboured dreams of being a sculptor and believed passionately that there would be a market for his original brand of work.

He believed heading to college as a full-time student would give him the grounding and credentials he needed.

It was a huge decision, for he and wife Phillippa already had a baby son Rhyley, whose brother Aaron was also on the way.

“Phillippa was incredibly supportive. She was really behind me, which was essential,” he says.

Giving up his photography career in July 2009, he initially worked for a year as a cover supervisor at Bishop’s Castle Community College, before gaining a place as a mature student at Hereford College of Art and Design, studying Applied Arts.

“I was the youngest of five mature students on the course and was very focused,” he says. “I was aware that with a young family, I had to make it work.”

The hard work and commitment paid off and in 2013 he graduated with First Class honours.

The next stage was to turn the art that he loved into a commercial operation.

In his favour was the fact that his work is rather striking and individual. It stands out from the crowd.

“I started by taking some pieces I’d

already made along to the Malvern Spring Show,” he recalls. “It didn’t start well – I sold nothing on the first day. However, it was a four-day show and things picked up,” explains Nik, as we chat in his workshop at the family home nestled at the foot of Cleve Hill, near Ludlow.

To say his work is unusual is an understatement. He creates unique sculptures of animals, fish and insects – often giant versions which are more science fiction creatures than life studies.

It is an unusual combination of nature and machine, made predominantly from wood and metal. The concept marries objets d’art with functionality so you will get, for instance, a working lamp that’s in the form of an eye-catching sculpture or a bold statement piece of garden furniture.

“My work is very niche, which is now a big advantage,” Nik says.

UNUSUAL

“When I started, though, I was always worried that it would not sell because it was too unusual. Who has the room for a giant turtle?” he says with a broad smile.

Well, it turned out plenty of people were interested in unusual works as diverse as Nik’s take on the anglerfish from the film *Finding Nemo*, a glow worm made from an old paraffin lamp, or more abstract pieces, whose sheer oddity can make your flesh tingle.

If there is a sinister aspect to some of his work, then that’s Nik’s love of science fiction coming through. The ‘weird’ appeals to him. He is also inspired by our industrious Victorian forebears, whose period is partly defined by great building, invention and progress.

“I find metal an exciting medium, the warm characteristics of copper and brass sit perfectly alongside cold, unforgiving steel. Contrasts intrigue me and I work them into the creative process,” he explains. He buys materials for his work

from a variety of places including flea markets, on ebay and from scrap yards.

“We are very much a throwaway society, which, from my point of view, is good. I can give materials that people don’t want a second life.

“With my background in photography and design, I can create renderings of how I imagine the piece to look and then devise step by step instructions on how to build it. The complexity of the designs and the mechanical nature of the pieces benefit from modern technological processes. The mixture of machine and handmade is a nice contrast.

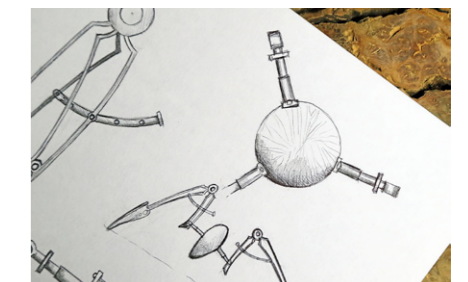
“Years of visiting museums have given me grounding for my work for I have a fascination with the Victorian, with natural history and with industrial contraptions.”

His family background has played a big part in the self-motivation and practical skills that inform his work.

“I always wanted to be my own boss because my mum Wendy was and my dad Duncan was. She was a florist and he has made a career working with vehicles.”

Nik also spent much time as a child with his grandparents, Bill and Doreen Deedman, who were great influences.

“In his younger days, Grandad was a toolmaker and engineer and worked for Vickers making aeroplanes. He was very practical and I used to love going along with him and helping with his many different projects. As a boy, rather than buy toys, I used to like making them



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Nik specialises in the unusual – and occasionally rather sinister. This lamp is a case in point; the Manta sculpture; with a larger outdoor piece, Tripod Goliath; welding skills are required for this kind of art.

myself.” The former Ludlow School pupil also enjoyed model making as a boy.

Nik has exhibited both nationally and internationally, including in Texas, USA. In 2014 he was accepted to show his work at the New Designers One Year On show and has also won a Designer Craftsman of the Year award from the Society of Designer Craftsmen. He was part of the prestigious Fresh Air Sculpture Show in Cirencester, Steampunk fans love his work and he has sold pieces on the continent as well as in the UK.

As well as being a full member of the Society of Designer Craftsmen, Nik is also a member of both the Shropshire and Worcestershire Guilds of Craftsmen.

“In the past six months I have been developing my sea life pieces and have added more figurative pieces to my portfolio,” he explains.

His Giant Turtle, Tripod Goliath and Manta sculptures are on display at the British Ironwork Centre near Oswestry.

EXHIBITIONS

In February he exhibited at Parallax International Art Fair in Chelsea, west London, off the back of which he will be showing at further exhibitions in London and Berlin.

“I have also been commissioned to make three benches for a show garden at the Malvern Spring Show in May. They are for the Primrose Hospice Garden created by Martyn Wilson, who I worked with last year. I will be also be having a joint exhibition in Ludlow during April and May at Silk Top Hat Gallery.”

Nik Burns’ strikingly ornate lamps and one-off creations today sell for upwards of £500.

It’s just as well, for Rhyley, who is now seven, and six-year-old Aaron have been joined by Jacob, who is three, and six-month-old daughter Autumn.

“Family is a very important part of my life,” says Nik, who is also close to his brother Andrew and sister Louise.

With a dependent family, it’s as well that he is as busy as he is. That, and the prices his pieces now command, suggest that the decision he made six years ago to give up work and become a full-time student has paid off.

He smiles before adding cautiously: “I never take anything for granted but it has gone quite well, so far.”

