



# Christmas stuffing

Frustrated by a lack of taxidermy courses in the capital, **Simone Baird** meets unorthodox 'DIY' practitioner **Charlie Tuesday Gates**, and, on the following page, has a go herself. Photography **Rob Greig**

**L**et me start by explaining that I am not a taxidermist.' It's an odd thing for a woman hosting an event called 'DIY Taxidermy' to say. Even odder given she's using a scalpel to skin a rabbit for the benefit of a hip audience gathered in some damp London Bridge arches. She pauses, holding up a bloodied hand: 'I wouldn't call this performance, this is just me talking shit.'

So if the woman on stage parting a bunny from its fur isn't a taxidermist, what is she? 'I'm an artist using found objects in assembly art,' says Dorset-raised, London-based Charlie Tuesday Gates. 'I'm not trying to be like Polly Morgan. She's amazing. She's proper. I'm more interested in the surreal assemblage culture, and found objects include dead things. This is the art of experimenting with found materials.'

Still, it's the closest I've been able to come to learning about taxidermy in the

flesh, so to speak. Despite its rise in popularity, thanks in part to aforementioned artist Polly Morgan and her exquisitely macabre pieces, and Walter Potter's fantastical and surreal Victorian tableaux currently at Peter Blake's Museum of Everything, it's a surprisingly difficult craft to get into. Searching online for taxidermy classes only produces ones in Edinburgh, Leeds and West Yorkshire. I turn to the Guild of Taxidermists, whose helpful secretary, James Dickinson, admits that 'London's a desert for taxidermy. People learn from old books. And YouTube's popular.'

Charlie agrees that taxidermists are a breed apart. 'Most taxidermists won't let you watch them,' she says. 'It's like it's a sacred art. When I first thought of doing it in public, even I was really shocked. Opening an animal up is a disturbing, intimate thing, and to share that would be weird.'

Delicate sensibilities notwithstanding, she has performed her 'live taxidermy' show three times this year, and is willing to show me the basics, as she's picked them up – although she's quick to point out again that she's no expert:

'I only started at the start of this year. My brother gave me a dead fox he found in a London wood, and I put it spreadeagled in a suitcase, so my first piece is my "Fox in a Box", and it's still my favourite. I could have done a course, but I think that if you want to do something, you should just do it. That why I call it "DIY taxidermy". I'm making it up as I go along, taking it right back to basics.'

**Charlie Tuesday Gates's next live taxidermy show** will be in **late Jan 2011**. For details visit <http://charlietuesdaygates.blogspot.com>.

# 'My first taxidermy lesson' by Simone Baird



**1. Find your subject** You won't get an eBay seller auctioning off animal corpses. If you come across a dead magpie, rat, pigeon or fox you can use that, but otherwise you have to prove how the animal died. Thankfully, the butcher I speak to at Borough Market says he knows the provenance of the game he has in stock. However, he's all out of rabbits because of the snow, so I opt for a teal and a pheasant. When I show Charlie the birds, she points out that the pheasant I've brought is mangled on one side. It'll be fine when plucked and gutted to eat later, but not pretty enough to stuff.



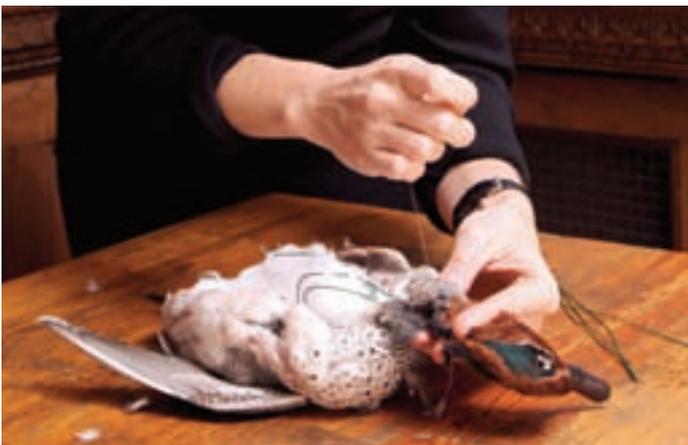
**2. Skin it** Using a scalpel with a curved blade (Swann-Morton No 10, if you're intending to try this at home) and wearing latex gloves, we slice through the belly of the teal. It's soft and the skin easily peels away from the chest cavity. Gently cutting the skin away from the body – 'Be careful not to pierce the gut!' – takes patience, especially the meticulous work around the head. 'YouTube is invaluable,' says Charlie, 'but I usually look at ones about skinning an animal or bird, not taxidermy-specific videos.' I save the breasts to cook for dinner. Waste not, want not.



**3. Salt the skin** In the interests of finishing the demonstration within a week, we race through the salting step. Because Charlie preserves her animals the lo-fi way – using salt rather than taxidermy chemicals, for instance – there's always a bit of an odour around her work, but this is part of the point, she says: 'Taxidermists want to preserve the illusion of life whereas I'm interested in preserving the illusion of death. I leave animals to decay, I go through the death process with them. Even the smell is part of my work in a way. It's unusual to smell an artwork before you see it.'



**4. Mount it** We start to stuff the bird – although taxidermists prefer the term 'mount' – using cotton wool. Keeping to the DIY ethos, a few pieces of gardening wire make a rib-cage frame and provide a spine, and cotton wool balls do the rest. 'This isn't how you would usually do it,' admits Charlie. 'A taxidermist might take a cast of the skinless body and make a mould, or fill it using a special frame.' Her approach is a world away from traditional taxidermy, the sort James Dickinson of the Guild of Taxidermists refers to as 'a bird in a box'.



**5. Sew it up** Luckily, the thick down of the teal covers my appalling sewing. A quick running stitch down the length of the bird and it's suddenly whole again. This is pretty straight work for Charlie: 'I usually put other things inside. Mirrors, glass, shiny things. Always shiny things!' Her taxidermy-as-art pieces include plenty of evidence of her magpie-like tendencies – pretty ribbons on a cow's skull positioned over a piano, for instance. And she adores Victorian taxidermist Walter Potter, whose surreal fairytale tableaux of boozing squirrels are currently at the Museum of Everything.



**6. Position it and keep it forever** As we finish the teal, I realise that Charlie has, throughout, acted as though the bird is alive: stroking, patting, carefully touching. Still, for someone who keeps dead foxes in suitcases, it comes as a surprise that Charlie is a vegetarian. She's passionate about what she sees as horrifying waste of animals and animal pelts both in her native Dorset and across the country. 'I use roadkill and by-products of the game industry. To see that sort of waste in your face is breathtaking. Although taxidermy's fashionable again, I'll always keep using what I find.'