

Right and far right: Cait in their studio; art from the exhibitions 'Souvenirs of the Wasteland' and 'Dirty Mirror'; Canyon the cat



# WILD WONDERLANDS

Artist Cait McCormack stretches the boundaries of fine art using crochet, and reveals through many exhibitions that there are no limits to crochet's imaginative possibilities

Cait McCormack's 'Souvenirs of the Wasteland' exhibit featured in a recent *Hooked*, and we were so intrigued we couldn't resist finding out more. Growing up in rural New Jersey influenced the creations of the talented fibre artist, who explores themes such as grief and climate anxiety via crochet sculptures of bird skeletons, plants, and other organic forms.

## ART AS AN HOMAGE

"I grew up as an only child living in a tiny two-room cabin," says Cait. "My parents are both artists and I would use their leftovers to make my own toys." Not only did they use art materials, but Cait's grandmother taught them to crochet before the age of four. "She was Italian, and she and her sisters learnt to make doilies and other domestic creations,"

says Cait. "She'd challenge me to do a scalloped edge or just to crochet for as long as possible without making any mistakes, and I would crochet blanket-sized masses of material sitting with my grandmother. I've always been a very anxious person and doing something repetitive alongside another person had a calming, meditative effect on me. I loved the communal aspect of crochet. It was comforting."

Initially Cait only used their grandmother's scrap yarn, limiting the colour choice. "She loved purple!" Cait says. "When I realised crochet was something I really enjoyed, I'd ask for other yarn for Christmas, so I had more control over what I produced."

In 2010, Cait gained a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Illustration from The University of the Arts, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. "It was a strange market to enter and I felt sort of

lost," Cait admits. "Immediately after I graduated my grandfather died and then my grandmother passed away. It was a traumatic time for my family."

Looking through their grandmother's materials, Cait found the tiny crochet hooks she'd used for making doilies. Sitting surrounded by their grandfather's carvings of birds, Cait started crocheting lace and then began to create their first sculptural forms. "I developed a method to crochet a bird skeleton, paying homage to both of them," Cait says. "That was a stepping stone to the things I create now. My grandparents might have been confused by my artwork, but I hope they would have been supportive of it. There would have been a conversation."

Crochet makes the perfect sense to Cait as their go-to artistic expression. "As a sculptural medium, it's as tight or loose as



you want and encompasses an infinite range of possibilities. "Recently I've been making effigies and uncanny simulacra. Crochet is almost cellular. I love the elasticity, both creatively and physically." Recurring themes show up in Cait's work. "The skeletons revolve around grief and trauma – each piece records particular memories. Because I grew up in the woods, animals represent moments in my life. Sometimes I want to represent something absurd, angry, or even funny, introducing more colour to explore these facets."

More recent interests include gender and work actively exploring how crochet is perceived. "Crochet exists in the gap between craft and fine art."

## EMBRACING ENVIRONMENT CRAFTIVISM

Currently, Cait is exploring ideas around ecology, crocheting "plant-animal hybrids that may eventually walk the earth" as a form of environmental activism, and comments, "We're facing a wide variety of apocalyptic issues, and I'm expanding crochet into something that can be used to represent this." As a vegan, Cait uses only plant-based yarns and favours second-hand and antique cotton, hemp and linen. "The colours in synthetic yarns are tempting, but the more naturally-derived the better. I love how the age-stained white or ochre gradations in natural fibres impacts the final product. My process can feel like painting. The 3D sculptures and wall-mountable fibre-paintings pieces I've made are a weird

intersection of collage and painting."

Cait began teaching workshops in 2017 and lectures at many institutions. Their love of teaching was prompted during an exhibition at one of the oldest medical museums in the country. "During 'Tracing the Remains', my exhibition with an artist

"DUE TO SEXISM, AGEISM AND CLASSISM THERE'S A BIAS AGAINST CROCHET WHICH I WANT TO ADDRESS AND DISMANTLE"

named Sabrina Small, exploring memory, trauma, and human bodily specimens, I led a Philly Touch Tour lecture for visually-impaired museum attendees, which included crocheted pieces they could touch. The experience was really rewarding."

Cait has won prestigious awards including the Maurice Freed Memorial Prize, but says their greatest pleasures stem from the success of individual artworks and how

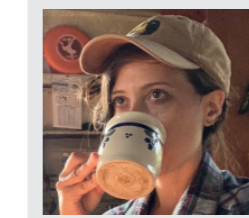
they come together for a show. "I use my background in illustration to create an inventory list of thumbnails, and consider how the pieces correspond with each other. If I have a wild idea, I have to go out on a limb and hope it works first time," they say. "I might have a year and a half to create an entire body of work."

Cait has held recent exhibitions at 'Souvenirs of the Wasteland' at Elijah Wheat Showroom, VOX XIX: Vox Populi's 19th Juried Exhibition in Philadelphia, 'Plantasia' at Commonweal Gallery in Philadelphia and 'Conversation Pit' at The Yard in Brooklyn, NY. Cait was also an artist in residence at the Provincetown Dune Shacks, Massachusetts. In short, there's a lot going on!

"I've lived in Philadelphia for half my life," Cait says. "I can travel to New York or escape to the woods. There's a huge state park in Philly that runs all the way along a creek, similar to the forest where I grew up."

It's clear that nature and art merge for Cait and the stories they need to share with the world. Crochet is just the magic ingredient.

Written by Judy Darley



## A few of their favourite things

When Cait puts down her hook...

"I go for a lot of long walks. That's like my only hobby. I love spending time in nature, or at home with my cat, Canyon. I also like to cook food for my partner and loved ones – I prepare vegan dishes with heaps of vegetables and herbs."

Visit <https://www.caitlintmccormack.com> @mister\_caitlin on Instagram