



Words Jude Rogers | Photographs Linda Brownlee

SOMETHING  
IN  
THE  
WATER

Not content with being one of the few artists using fish leather  
as the prime raw material in her work,

Kari Furre is also one of the pioneers of wild swimming in the UK  
(‘We used to call it going for a swim,’ she deadpans).

One thing’s for sure: there’s a lot happening under the surface...





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Four miles out of Totnes, in the leafy heartlands of Devon, sits an old cottage by a church, near a busy main road. Outside it stands a clotheshorse, draped with the materials Kari Furre uses to put together her products, which are drying slowly and gently in the soft autumn sun. They are unquestionably beautiful. One glows a pearlescent white, almost alive with light. Another is a pale silvery green, blushed shyly with pink. The third is a deep charcoal and chocolate-flecked grey.

‘This is cod, this is bream, this is angler,’ says Kari Furre, taking us through the rack. ‘God, they take bloody ages to dry.’

The idea of making objects out of fish skin may seem as outlandish as it sounds messy, but Furre’s work tells us a fascinating story about the natural world in art. Furre produces her own fish leather, using a process closely connected to her Norwegian roots (her father left Oslo at the beginning of the Second World War; her English mother was born up the road from here in Devon). She does this slowly but painstakingly, in the three-bedroom house she moved into 12 years ago, where she’s knocked two bedrooms upstairs together into a light, airy workshop. ‘I’ve basically reduced the value of the house by half,’ she says, laughing, as we walk inside.

Furre moulds the fish leather in different ways into products for use, such as bowls and purses and covers for notebooks (examples of which are dotted around the

house). Each item is one of a kind, showcasing its unique base materials beautifully, subtly revealing the different delicate patterns and processes of the natural world. Her work is also getting noticed in the art world: next February, it will be exhibited at the Crafts Council’s *Collect 2018* – aka the International Art Fair for Contemporary Objects – at the Saatchi Gallery, as part of a group curated by arts consultancy Guilded, who celebrate exceptional skill in contemporary craft.

As you walk through Furre’s home, you also realise that, aside from her art, she has a parallel life. There are fish everywhere, yes – on linen that lines on the hall wall, even being used as lamps in the living room – but there are also many images of the sea itself, and of swimming. An abstract, brightly-coloured photograph of Furre hangs on the wall in the kitchen, a swimming cap tightly on her head, bubbles exploding from her fingertips. Furre became one of the pioneers of wild swimming in the UK around the same time as she moved to Totnes, semi-retiring, in 2005. ‘We used to call it going for a swim,’ she says, self-deprecatingly. ‘I’d been on a few swimming holidays abroad, then I suddenly realised I could swim in England too – well, duh! It just so happened that other people did too, at the same time.’

On one fortuitous swim from Bletchley to Oxford, she met Kate Rew in the water, who was working on her soon-to-be-ground-breaking book, *Wild Swim*. Furre helped



Previous spread:  
Kari Furre dries off  
after a swim in the  
river near her Devon  
home. Above: fish  
skins drying in the  
open air before being  
worked on (left) to  
produce leather.  
Fish skin takes much  
longer to soften than  
animal skins due to  
the dense network  
of fibres



her with research, travelling to the Outer Hebrides and the Lake District to find good places. Still close friends, they have only just returned from a 10km wild swim together, moving inland from Barmouth in North Wales along the river Mawddach, taking in the landscape and the current and the calm as they went.

‘The need to swim like that – not for fitness, but to see new things – comes from the same place in my brain as making things,’ Furre explains. ‘They’re both very process-led: about me finding out how to do something, then doing it again and again. It’s all about focus, really. I mean, if you’re swimming or making something and thinking about other things, you might as well not be swimming or making things.’ In other words, Furre’s art and her sport are of a piece with each other – and indeed, at a peace.

As soon as we sit down for coffee and ginger biscuits in her living room, it’s clear Furre’s no delicate water spirit. She is lively and funny, with an interesting history: after taking science A levels at school, she studied acting at university, then got much more interested in the props than performance, so became a theatre designer. She also learned metalwork, a skill that helps her in making her stands and frames today, and spent the bulk of her career working as a fabricator for artists and museums. She worked closely with the British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare, and also at York’s pioneering Jorvik Centre, which revolutionised museums in the 1980s (it recreated a

Viking village on Viking foundations, filling it with people, sounds and smells, including, yes, a fish market). But by the early 2000s, Furre was desperate to do her own thing. ‘I was all, “God, stop telling me what to do”. I wanted to explore the process of something for myself.’

In this way, she’s like her Norwegian father, Hans, who, she says, was ‘a maker, always starting things, often not finishing things, and hopeless at working for other people too!’ After marrying Kari’s mother, Joyce, whom he met in service in the war, he did a multitude of jobs in rural Somerset, where Furre grew up, including the doing-up of houses. Once, he started building a pond in the Furre family garden, but after digging it out and lining it with concrete, lost interest. ‘But the water came anyway. Brown, peaty water. I learned to swim with frogs and newts – I still remember the newts’ horrible light-coloured bellies.’

Furre nevertheless remembers those days fondly. ‘You always love what you loved as a child didn’t you? You come back to that.’

She thinks it’s intriguing how her interest in swimming returned around the same time as she moved back to her mother’s hometown, and also started making leather. She’s a big advocate for the material. ‘I’ve always found leather amazing. I mean, you get Roman sandals that have survived. Isn’t that incredible?’ Her new interests also coincided with the time her pension kicked in. ‘So I could eat, do some swimming teaching to top up my money, and

Above: the raw materials of her craft sit ready to be turned into Furre’s trademark fish leather products, such as her almost impossibly delicate bowls (right). She has started to line some in gold to highlight their inherent value





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make things for myself – it was joyous.’ She drains her mug. ‘Do you want me to show you everything? Come on, let’s head out.’

Welcome to Fish Leather Central, a small space outside Furre’s front door. After she gets her fish skins out of the freezer, she cleans them with soapy water – other people use white spirit, but she likes to keep things simple. ‘I use domestic or natural items as much as I can. It just feels right.’ She then removes the fish scales with a small sheep-bone she found on her travels in Iceland, where this practice has a history. The skins are surprisingly tough. Putting a gleaming salmon skin between my fingers and thumbs, she directs me to yank it and she’s right – it never feels like it will tear.

Then the process of tanning begins. Sometimes, Furre immerses skins in a mixture of egg yolk, oil and soap, and then leaves them in the sun for a week (‘the process needs UV’). At other times, she steeps them in a tea made of willow bark, a common plant growing on the banks of English rivers. Then she washes them again, and this is when the ‘real work’, in her words – the softening – starts.

Fish skin takes much longer to soften than mammal skins as they’re made up of a dense network of fibres, Furre explains – plus they get heavier during tanning. During softening, they have to be constantly dampened and stretched, which she does in her workshop upstairs, using the base of an upside-down lawn trimmer, ‘but anything rough will do’. Previously, she has used stones from a nearby beach, or the edges of road signs. ‘I’ve had to adapt things, as there is no special shop for this stuff. It’s like I’m working it out for the first time, and I like that.’

Furre will know when the leather is ready by feel – like all the best art (she shows me a long piece of halibut, with a back that feels as gorgeously fuzzy as suede). She then uses an old black Singer sewing machine to stitch her skins together, and other ordinary items help her achieve different effects. Glazes are achieved, rather simply, with the use of cling film. Old Lycra tights hold the skins over

wooden formers to help them become bowls. But one fancier material has also entered the fray: Furre has started lining some of her bowls in gold. ‘I’ve done so because I want to make a point: to show how fishes and the natural world are things we should value. They’re things we often forget. We shouldn’t forget them.’

Furre often finds herself working at her fish-skin products in the winter months: in the summer, she’s usually elsewhere, enjoying the meditative power of the water. ‘It’s well chronicled that it calms the heart down, is good for depression... and cold water always helps you to focus.’ She’s interested in Alister Hardy’s theory of man having evolved from the aquatic ape, going to live by the water, where food – and fish – were plentiful. She’s also an advocate for the Alexander Technique school of swimming. ‘It’s about being comfortable in the water, and that’s so important. We’re too tied to pushing kids down the pool to get their badges, to aim for the Olympics, then they retire at 22. Splash around with them, play with them. Be happy in the water. That’s what it’s all about.’

For her, swimming is not competition, but a communion with the water, of sorts. ‘When you’re in it, you think about the ancient-ness of it. The rivers, the seas – they’re as old as mountains. And we know less about the sea than we do about space. That keeps pulling me back.’

She plans to travel further to meet fellow fish-leather experts. ‘But there are a lot of people who are into fish skin in a sort of Bear Grylls, survivalist kind of way. Or just use it for decorative twiddles.’ She shrugs. ‘As far as I know, I’m the only person who is trying to make something contemporary rather than antique. I’m also trying – although I know this sounds a bit wanky – to honour the spirit of the creatures.’ She laughs, self-effacingly, but it’s true. In her objects shimmers the beauty, mystery, and endless variety of our natural world, so often lost in the deep, which she helps swim to the surface.

*karifurre.co.uk; to watch a film about Kari Furre’s wild swimming, visit [holeandcorner.com](http://holeandcorner.com)*

Kari Furre pictured in her Totnes home: her newfound interests coincided with her first pension payments, meaning she had time to make for herself while topping up her income by offering swimming lessons (‘It was joyous,’ she says)

