



The Queen of Scales

Dominic Garnett reports on an unexpected collaboration with artist Kari Furre

Of all the unlikely friendships I've made in my life, it's perhaps odd that a pastime as solitary as angling has accounted for so many. Indeed, not all of those who share our love of watery worlds are

diehard anglers. Over the years I have randomly befriended everyone from marine scientists to down-and-outs; but never had I encountered anyone with such an intimate and fascinating relationship to water as Kari Furre.



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The nature of our meeting in the first place owes as much to technology as the mysterious pull of H₂O, it must be said. Perhaps five years ago I had chanced upon a sample of fish skin leather; a wallet made of tilapia skin that took me aback with its feel and quality. I was told that handbags, belts and other items could be made from it too; so why not use the stuff to bind a book?

In spite of Google searches and enquiries leading nowhere, the idea of creating a fish skin bound version of *Crooked Lines* had totally grabbed me. But was it even possible? And with the exception of the occasional Inuit, from who would you even source fish leather in the 21st century? Alarmingly, the few global suppliers of the stuff I could find didn’t reply, had gone bust or had no idea about book binding.

Despairing at finding any solution, I then started to search for art and artists working with real fish skin. Just as I wondered whether to give up, I found the creations of Kari Furre. Popping up on the screen were panels of real scales and bowls made of plaice skin; mermaid’s purses fashioned from steel. If anyone could help realise my dream of a scales-and-all fishing book, it was this mysterious artist. And by pure good fortune she was based only 30 miles away, in my home county of Devon.

TOTNES HAS ALWAYS BEEN A HUB OF ARTISTIC ECCENTRICITY, TO PUT IT MILDLY. A glance at the local notice boards in the local shops and cafés reveals a world of bewildering

alternative lifestyles and ideas, from radical theories and therapies to the type of leftfield politics that would make a *Daily Mail* reader glow with indignation. Perhaps that’s why I love the place.

So while Devonians sometimes tease Totnes for its eccentricity, it is unmistakably and fiercely independent and free-spirited. While our other small towns sold out to Poundland and McDonalds, Totnes kept it real. Or perhaps unreal would be more accurate. Underneath the “Welcome to Totnes” signs, the locals once scrawled “twinned with Narnia”.

I have no idea what Kari expected of me on our first meeting, but the person I anticipated and the one I met were very different. The genteel lady of the arts I might have expected. But here was someone with a very direct, earthy—and I’m tempted to say immersive—take on her craft.

When not in the studio, Kari’s other great passion is wild swimming. Like me, she is quite obsessed with water, but while I use a rod and line to meet this other world, she prefers to dive in and explore it physically, whether that space is Windermere or the Devon coast. Impressive, but it also sounds bloody chilly to me.

Perhaps there are two kinds of artists in the world; the private, conceptual kind, and the hands-on style maker who likes to plunge in. Kari Furre is firmly in the latter category. And for anyone who thinks of art as something a little fussy and aloof, the image of a polite Devon lady hammering away at metal panels, or skinning a fish in her backyard is a refreshingly jarring one.



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Her way of life could not be much more different to what I create then, but it quickly became apparent that there were some similarities. “It’s the physical process I enjoy most,” she admits, “I’m often a little deflated when the piece is finished, to be honest, because the rendering and making is the best part.”

I know the feeling entirely. I love to write, but the process itself is the most enjoyable part of the deal. Once an article or chapter is finished, a lot of the fun and the freedom of not knowing is gone. If it’s not stretching it too far, I think the same is often true about fishing. Anglers are always harping on about the final catch, but it’s the flow of the river, the bite, the sudden pull on the line that give us that joy and sense of connection. Ironically, once the deal is finished something is lost, no matter how much it weighed.

Is this why artists and anglers alike feel the endless need to try new ideas, locations and methods? The results of Kari’s endless making and tinkering are all around when you walk into her house. There are human objects made of unusual natural materials, such as her fish skin bowls, but also beautiful organic forms made of clay, mixed media or metal. Fish swim up the walls, human faces grin and grimace in clay, a leather cod floats there as we sip tea.

She had yet to bind a book in fish skin when we first met, but given Kari’s many years in museums and galleries across Scandinavia, Britain and worldwide, it had to be a doddle, right? Not quite. After all, fish skin is notoriously

tricky to work with. Otherwise, surely everyone would be doing it? By an insane piece of luck though, I had not only located perhaps Britain’s only expert fish leather maker, but an artist with connections to Dartington Book Bindery.

“YOU’VE NEVER TRIED FISHING THEN?” I ASK, SLIGHTLY INCREDULOUSLY. After several weeks and conversations later, I can’t quite believe the idea has only just occurred to me. What could be better for a fish artist than to catch their own raw materials? A plan is soon drawn up; the artist will try and catch a fish, while the fishing writer will leave the keyboard and get his hands dirty skinning and preparing the raw materials to make authentic piscatorial leather.

We arrive at Hatchlands Fishery, near Totnes, without any reply to my earlier email. We get our tickets from a rundown caravan and one or two venue tips from a chap who emerges from a shabby old shack on site. It later transpires that the owner did in fact receive that first email but was too baffled to respond. I guess it’s not every day you hear from a customer who wants to use the skin of your stock to make a book cover?

Unlike so many of my normal fly fishing students, Kari is in no desperate hurry to catch a fish once we’ve tackled up. She is as fascinated with the mechanics and art of casting as the thought of hooking a fish. Quite refreshing and, once again, we’re back to the pleasure of process rather than finished result. The fact that she is a swimming coach probably helps



A natural: Kari fights her first fish

too (and dare I say it, men are often so intent on catching fish they rush through and don't listen well).

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Even with the startlingly smooth casting lesson and some other basics, I am pleasantly stunned at what happens next. It takes a little adjustment to propel the line over water as opposed to grass, but this is quickly overcome. Kari's third cast lands around 10 yards out into the lake; she retrieves as I've shown her and just as the fly nears the bank, the line pulls tight.

"Lift the rod! That's a fish!" I say, but by this stage there is no need to do much other than hang on. Whatever is there has already hooked itself. For the second time in as many minutes my expectations are turned on their head: Kari utters an exquisitely pointed burst of foul language, the rod jumps and we're both laughing.

The temptation for anyone helping a newcomer at fishing is to dictate or grab the rod, but this is inevitably the wrong thing to do. Instead I simply stand back and offer some steady words. "That's good! There's no rush, just keep the rod up."

The fish does its best to come adrift, but after a few hair-raising runs it is safely netted and dispatched. Sometimes it is only when you introduce a friend to fishing that some of the details and jargon seem odd ("this blunt stick is called the priest. We are not allowed to let the fish go here. On that pond over there it's coarse fishing and we are not allowed to kill the fish.")

We manage a few more in the same afternoon and I think Kari is surprised just how exciting this fly fishing business is. "And you thought this was a sport of retired blokes sitting on their backsides?" I tease. Aside from any battling or eating qualities, it's the beauty of the fish that takes her aback. They're certainly beautifully spotted and vivid in colour, even if they are farmed and not wild creatures.



IF YOU HAVE NEVER SKINNED A FISH BEFORE, IT IS QUITE STRIKING HOW WELL PUT TOGETHER THEY ARE. Indeed, it is time for me to take the role of beginner as we roll up sleeves and deal with the catch. It's a messy, bloody but educational business, I must say. After we gut the fish, scales are scraped off using an Eskimo-style bone scraper, before a knife is used to prize up a corner of the skin. It takes quite a pull to remove the skin, which is held in by countless little stubborn fibres. Kari's experience is obvious compared to my slightly clumsy efforts at getting it off in one piece.

Once removed, it is important to treat the skin quickly before decay sets in. The skin is put into a washbasin containing water, soap and sea salt, to remove bacteria. This will keep it fresh and retain the natural markings and some of the colour.

The rest of the process involves both ancient

and more modern techniques, along with some pure alchemy. The skins are removed from the solution and worked vigorously to break down their structure. They can also be tanned at intervals, whether in oils or traditional dyes such as willow leaves.

It takes many steps and several days to finish a piece of fish leather properly, and is also dependent on the weather. This is because the leather is sundried the traditional way, before being turned into the finished product, or even moulded into a bowl or other shape.

Trout are pretty readily available, but various other sustainable fish can be used, I learn. Sharkskin, for example, is over five times tougher than cow leather. But I'm even more drawn to some of the North Sea species Kari can source from the commercial fleet in places like Norway and Iceland.

It has been a fascinating process watching my books bound in the material, with results I never would have assumed possible. Inevitably, the numbers of books are fairly low (only eight to date). All but a couple of the salmon skin editions have been gobbled up by collectors, but there are two other particular gems still in my keeping, one in red-dyed cod, the other in wonderfully strange wolf fish hide. I think I will be simultaneously pleased and gutted to see them go in the end.

As for future ideas, who knows? Kari asks me if carp skin might make a suitable medium, but I explain we would probably get lynched. Even with those fish that are sustainable and acceptable to anglers though, there are many possibilities. A fly box actually finished in trout skin could be a beautiful little keepsake, not to mention a good excuse to get out fishing again with my charmingly unorthodox friend, Kari Furre. ●

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You can see more of the artist's work at www.karifurre.co.uk while Dominic's site www.dgffishing.co.uk has further details on the limited run of collectible books.