

# REMAINS

The bones, shells and claws left over after dinner find new life in the work of Emma Witter.

# OF

*Priya Khanchandani drops in on her weird world.  
Photography by Chieska Fortune Smith*

# THE DAY

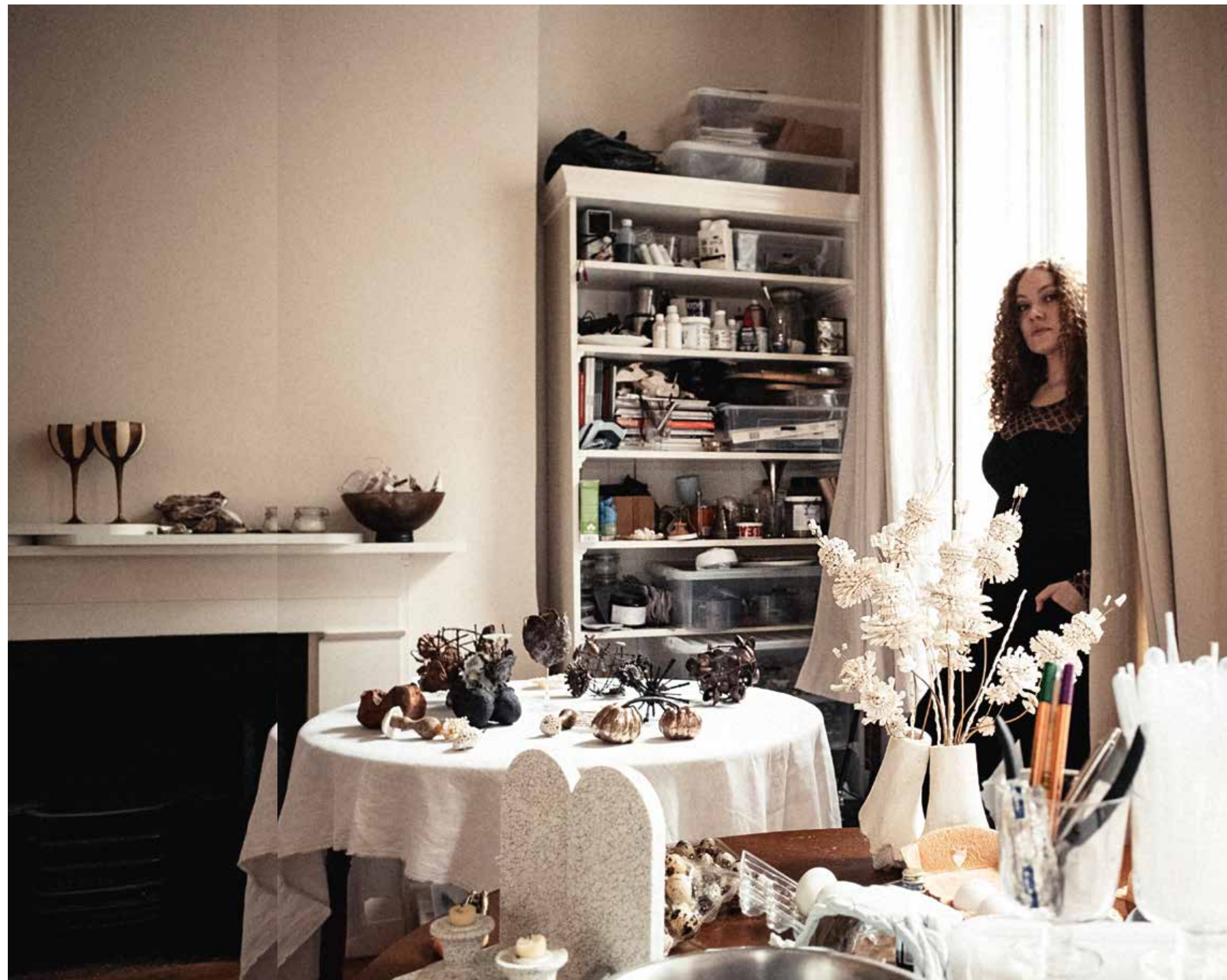


When I visit artist Emma Witter's flat-turned-temporary-studio in central London, she shows me some of her works – jewellery, ornaments, sculptures and a bouquet of flowers. I say 'flowers', but this piece – like many of her others – is actually made from chicken bones. Yes, bone: an unlikely material for anything, but least of all for creating delicate petals, and yet the juxtaposition of form and material is strangely sublime. How did Witter think of using it? 'I was at a restaurant and remember people putting bones into a bowl to throw away and I thought, "but they're beautiful",' she says.

Bones aren't exactly a comfortable material for art. They become available only after death. They're associated with decay. These ones were rescued from dustbins and boiled down in Witter's kitchen. The sculptures she makes with them could be grotesque or uncomfortable, if it weren't for the amazing intricacy of her craftsmanship, which imbues them with a delicate lace-like beauty. Once they're cleaned, the bones are submerged in bleach, placed in salt, then organised by size and shape, before being painstakingly sculpted with instruments and glues, then sealed. 'Bone is a perfect material for a sculptor. It's free, readily available everywhere, incredibly strong and really lightweight,' she tells me when I ask why she is drawn to it, 'and yet, we're throwing most of it away'.



ABOVE: pig skull and teeth, byproducts rescued from restaurants  
RIGHT: Emma Witter in her home-turned-studio, surrounded by her works





ABOVE: *Natural Born Passenger*, 2022, old house keys, copper wire, electroformed copper

Having graduated from Central Saint Martins in performance design in 2012, Witter's early career as an artist was defined by the use of such skeletal fragments. In recent years, however, she has expanded her repertoire by using other waste materials ranging from clam, oyster and egg shells, to powdered glass and pearl from the inside of mollusc shells and new techniques such as electroforming. At the time we meet, she has recently returned from a residency in Seoul. There, she was inspired to carve, mould, bend, chisel and weld diverse materials into new sculptures, including a pair of traditional Korean *namaksin* clogs made from large oyster shells. The residency culminated in a solo exhibition titled *Small Ceremonies* at an art space called A Piece A Peace. In London, she'll have a solo show at Bosse & Baum gallery in Peckham this April, and in May, will exhibit in a group exhibition at Painters' Hall, a striking space that is home to the Worshipful Company of Painter-Stainers, one of the oldest livery companies in the capital. Titled *The Gilded City*, the show will bring together the work of 11 artists practising in, and pushing the boundaries of, the ancient craft of gilding, with exhibition design by Witter.

The way she embellishes her materials – to give them a new story, or a touch of magic – also reinterprets them, so that they're no longer what they first appeared to be. A bunch of speckled grapes still on the vine reveals itself to be made of ostrich eggs on



LEFT: *Unidentified Object 10, 13+14, 2023*  
 ABOVE: *Ostrich Egg Goblets, 2023*  
 OPPOSITE: *The Study of Ceremony, 2022*

closer inspection, while a series of spiky objects akin to sea urchins are actually shells adorned with a crown of wooden matches. The way Witter presents, preserves – and enriches – found objects elevates them to a new preciousness, making us re-evaluate the things we throw away.

Her recent experiments with copper take the idea of reinterpretation – and immortalisation – one step further. In 2021, she did a short course in electroforming, a process that involves using an electric current to coat a non-metallic object in a metal skin. She acquired the kit but was apprehensive about using it before she did a residency at Xenia Creative Retreat in North Hampshire, where she pushed herself to start practising. ‘What’s so beautiful about the process,’ she reflects, ‘is that it’s silent and gradual and feels very organic.’ She now keeps a big bucket for plating in her living room, which she uses regularly to apply copper sulphate to objects such as waste oyster shells. They bring to my mind the tooth-shaped earrings and other surrealist jewellery by fashion brand Schiaparelli. Getting to know how copper electroforming works has helped Witter make the most of the red-brown metal’s nuances. ‘When it comes out of the tank, it’s rose gold,’ she explains, ‘then I use chemicals to bring out the more earthy tones.’ Other examples include casts of beef tomatoes in solid copper and bones covered in copper skin.



The collection in Emma Witter's home-turned-studio – flowers intricately carved from bone, tongs with lobster-claw ends – wouldn't be out of place among the collages of found objects by surrealist artist Eileen Agar, or next to the lobster-topped telephone of Salvador Dalí



RIGHT: detail of *Fertile Ground*, 2022

Among the most alluring metal works are goblets made from large ostrich eggs and striped with copper, an effect achieved by using latex to cover the sections she didn't want to plate, before electroforming the rest. 'Next, I'd like to experiment with oyster shell glass,' says Witter.

She is currently experimenting with materials that can be mixed with powdered glass to create a clay with a unique, glossy consistency – another effort at tricking the eye. Oysters, a relatively new medium for her, also feature prominently in her latest copper series because she's attracted to the texture of their knobby shells, and the idea of mixing a material that is considered of low value (once the pearl and the edible mollusc have been extracted) with a material of high value such as copper.



ABOVE: *Unidentified Object 03*, 2023  
OPPOSITE: *Fertile Ground*, 2022



The collection in Witter's home-turned-studio – flowers intricately carved from bone, tongs with lobster-claw ends, mosaics made from the broken pieces of ostrich eggshells and oyster shells plated with copper – wouldn't be out of place among the collages of found objects by surrealist artist Eileen Agar, or next to the lobster-topped telephone of Salvador Dalí. Agar, like Witter, was preoccupied with a hunger for the new possibilities of materials, and the magic she could find in them through play. In a text titled *Am I a Surrealist?*, Agar wrote: 'To play is to yield oneself to a kind of magic, and to give the lie to the inconvenient world of fact, and the hideous edifice of unrelieved utility.' Surrealism's ability to free us from conformity injects our understanding of the material world with a spirit of magic and adventure that pervades Witter's work.

Although the spell cast by Witter's magic is primarily down to its illusory aesthetic, her work also holds a message about our relationship with nature. 'I'm obsessed



LEFT: *Trade Bodies*, 2023,  
bone, brass wire  
RIGHT: quail eggs

#### IN FOCUS

with tricks in nature and the idea that nature knows best,' Witter says. 'We've been here for such a short time and the shapes of natural things are smarter than what we can create.' The tactility of her work also conveys her appreciation for her materials, which she collects and processes before beginning to assemble them in an almost ritualistic manner. She experiments with how to enhance the materials, using intricate tools such as rotary cutters, scalpels, tweezers and spice grinders. 'My work area becomes a kind of studio-cum-kitchen-cum-lab,' she says.

Although she doesn't consciously demarcate disciplinary boundaries, Witter's preoccupation with waste is that of an artist, not a designer – she isn't claiming to solve any environmental issue with these works and is conscious of the 'greenwashing' that she feels undermines the idea of sustainability. Nonetheless, her interests



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extend beyond the individual objects she makes to the systems that surround them: in the future, she would like to scale up her studio to an industrial level so that she can work with bones, bottle corks and other materials discarded by local restaurants in larger quantities. ‘If only the idea of collecting, reusing or repurposing materials was as important as the end result,’ she says. Once boiled and cleaned, she points out, bones can be enjoyed in many ways – whether in a broth or a sculpture.

For now, despite being busy, Witter is only able to sustain her creative practice in London thanks to her parallel career as a prop designer and stylist, which she developed during her degree at Central Saint Martins. Rather than shy away from discussing this, she is candid about the influence commercial work has had on her as an artist – designing sets, for example, has deepened her understanding of how to tell stories through objects. ‘There is this idea that artists keep their side-hustles quiet,’ she says, ‘but we need to get over that, as it all feeds in.’

In this sense, her story is reflective of the realities of being an artist in London without wealth to fall back on, difficulties that have been heightened in the cost-of-living crisis and are compounded by the shortage of affordable workspace. During the pandemic, Witter lost her studio and was only able to secure permission to occupy a disused space on Fulham Road after writing to the landlords and stakeholders of a hundred spaces she saw were vacant. And still, despite her persistence, the studio wasn’t sustainable as the bills were far too high. Eventually, the electricity was cut off and she was compelled to move her studio home. ‘So much goes into surviving in London in order to be able to sit down and work, and it’s important to acknowledge it,’ she says.

If it weren’t for her agility and resourcefulness, she probably wouldn’t be able to remain an artist in the city. Those same qualities enable her to see the worth in materials, bringing us sculptures that turn the grotesque on its head, drawing out the magic in the unexpected, the surreal in the mundane. ☞

*‘The Gilded City’ will be on show at Painter’s Hall, London, 14–15 May.  
emmawitter.co.uk*

OPPOSITE: the artist with a jar of bone powder