

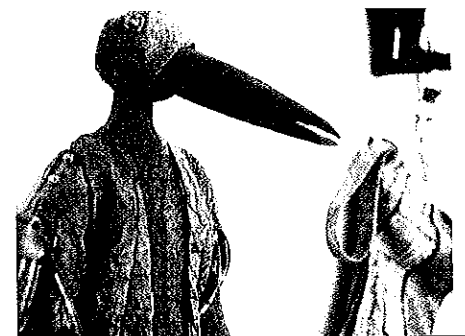
artist's workshop



ART MEETS SCIENCE

Six years ago, Alana Tibbets walked away from her career as a biologist to sew dolls—and found that the two pursuits have a lot in common >

ABOVE: The decorative scarf and jacket mimic the blue-throated hummingbird's actual coloration. ABOVE LEFT: When Alana does human figures, she depicts them in masks. "I want to avoid facial expression because I'd rather focus on the clothing."



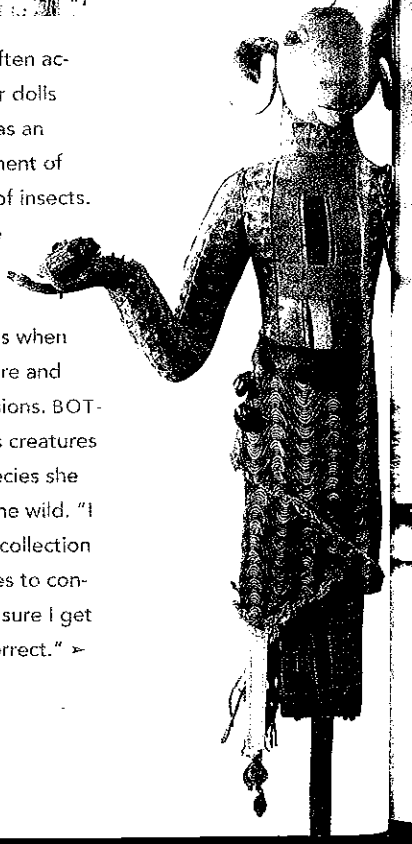
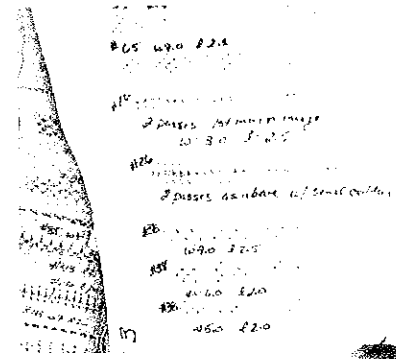
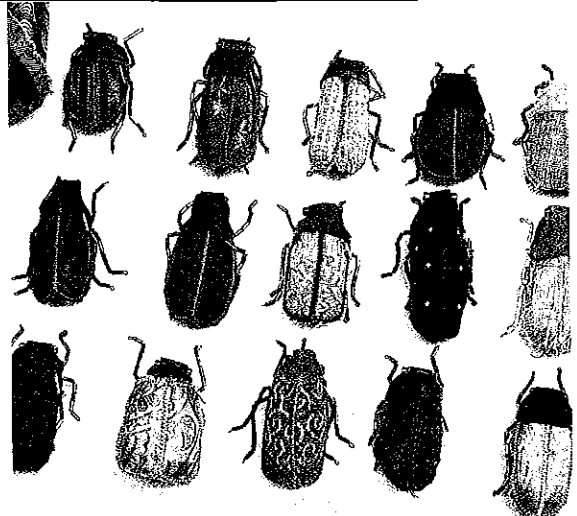


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IN WHAT SEEMS LIKE A FORMER LIFE, C. Alana Tibbets earned a Ph.D. in biology from Arizona State University, studying an endangered species of minnows. In 1999, she moved to Illinois when she and her husband got jobs teaching at a university. Two years in, she discovered that, among other things, she didn't like the politics of academia. "I started looking around for something else to devote my life to."

She had always sewn. "I was of that generation of girls who took home ec in middle school and high school and loved it." In graduate school, she had started a quilting circle to help maintain her sanity. "So I wandered into a quilting store in my new hometown." Soon, she was teaching other women how to quilt. Six years ago, she began making dolls. "It was the perfect outlet for my love of sewing clothing."



TOP: Alana often accessorizes her dolls with beetles as an acknowledgment of the ubiquity of insects. CENTER: She consults sheets of stitch samples when making texture and pattern decisions. BOTTOM: Alana's creatures are often species she has seen in the wild. "I have a large collection of field guides to consult to make sure I get the colors correct." >




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LANA WORKS IN A STUDIO AT THE back of her house, which sits in a charming setting full of flower and vegetable beds. "When we moved in, we dug up the lawn and turned our yard into a woodland garden." When she works, she sews the individual pieces—the arms, legs, heads—for 10 dolls at a time. For inspiration, she goes through old magazines, looking for textures and designs she admires. She then searches her large collection of recycled fabrics for the right material for the clothing. "People who know what I do often leave bags of material on my front porch." One wall of her studio is white and completely devoid of decoration. "Sometimes when I'm sitting at my sewing machine, I want to be able to turn away from it and let my mind work on the project without any distractions."

Almost a decade after she left the lab, people often comment on her surprising career switch. "They always ask me how I got from biology to art. I tell them, the two things are not that different. They perceive science as rigid and

analytical, but in both art and science, you're always testing hypotheses: will this work, will that work. They're both extremely creative."

BELOW: Alana's versions of a Townsend's solitaire and a juvenile whooping crane. "I prefer natural materials, especially wool, because of the texture. Also, they've been around a long while and so, unlike man-made materials, I know my work will last 150 years." 

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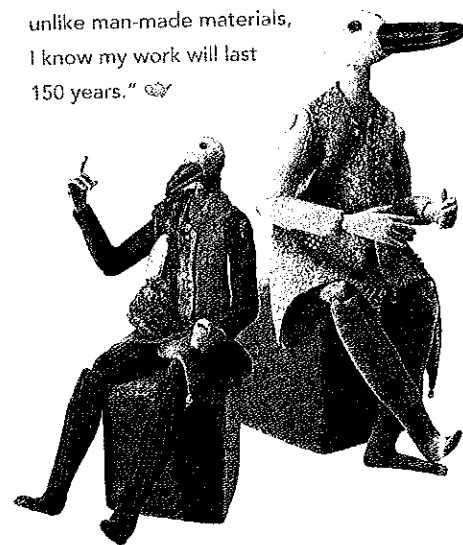
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