

(opposite)  
Make Do and  
Mend lamp.  
(far left) Bonsai  
Temple lamp.  
(left) The  
Vulcan lamp,  
all by Mel  
Winning.

# THE AFTERLIFE

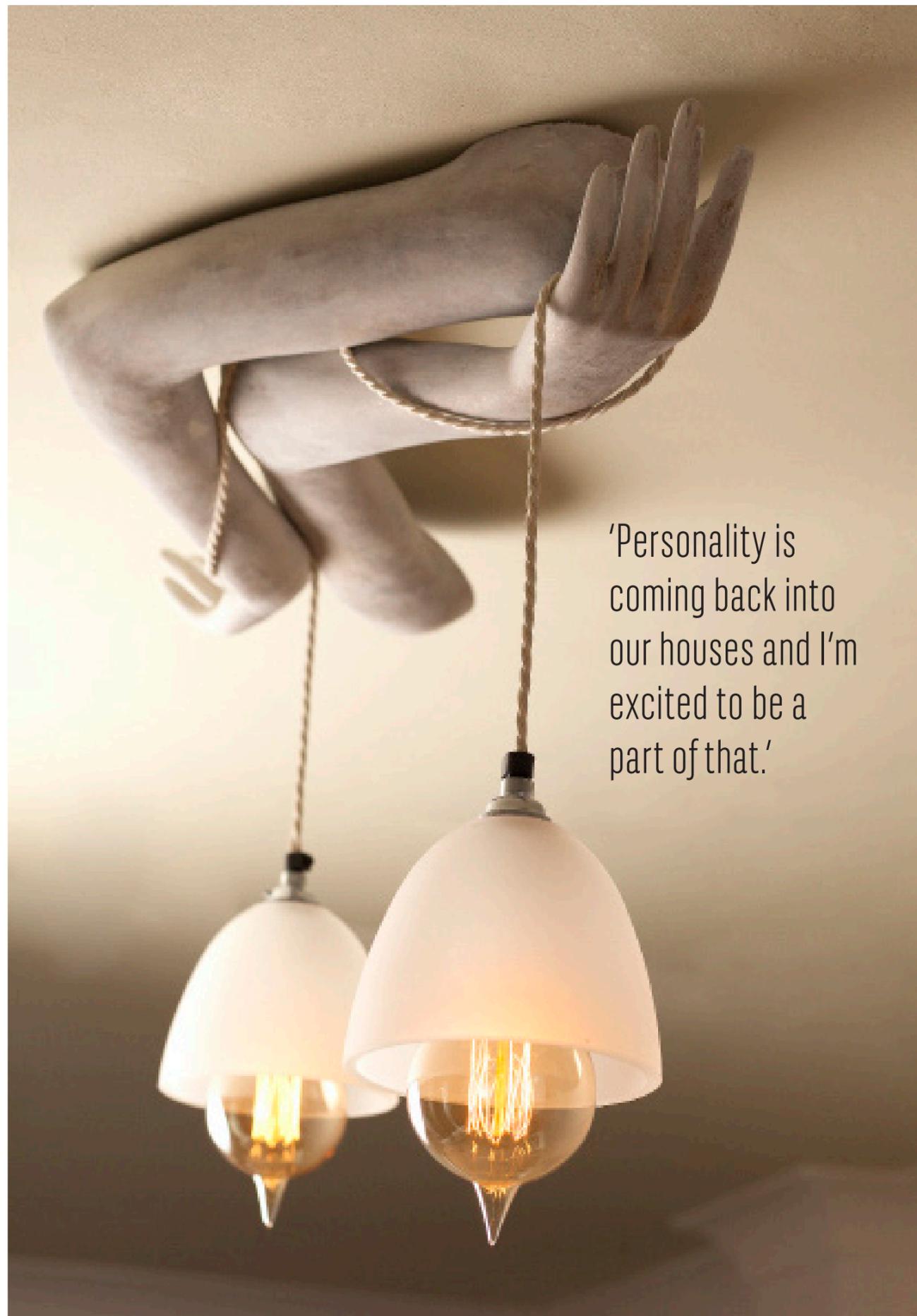
ARTIST MEL WINNING RESCUES ABANDONED MANNEQUINS AND GIVES THEM AN ARTISTIC AND FUNCTIONAL NEW LIFE

BY RACHEL TOMPKINS

**H**ave you ever thought about what happens to mannequins after they've done their stint in the shop window? Frozen in time, the once decorated and admired mannequins are often broken up into pieces and thrown into a skip. With no further function, their ultimate destination is landfill: a macabre bundle of arms, legs, torsos and heads buried in waste. But the fate of mannequins is not entirely sealed – there is hope for at least some of them. Artist Mel Winning rescues discarded mannequins and uses them to create unique and surprising lights and other pieces. Here, she talks to Reclaim about how her experiences as an actress in the West End and as a make-up artist inform her work.

**Creating mannequin lights is by no means an ordinary job. What's your background?**

I went to stage school and worked as a child actor in the West End and in my mid 20s I got a part as Columbia in the Rocky Horror Show. After working in the West End for about eight years, I ended up working for a friend in the music business. And, after having my daughter at 34 I retrained as a make-up artist and got a job at the Theatre Museum in Covent Garden. The combination of performance and doing people's theatrical make-up meant that it was my ideal job. Then I went onto work at the Opera House in the wig department. I also worked for Disney styling their shoots and doing hair and make-up. When my daughter was about five she was ↔



'Personality is coming back into our houses and I'm excited to be a part of that.'



(left) Note the pencil in the mannequin's hand in *The Sketcher* table. (below) *Naiad Water Nymph*. (opposite) *The Michelangelo* ceiling light.

really into fairies, so one day I dressed her up as a fairy and took some photos of her in the garden. Other mums loved the photos and asked if I could do the same for their children, and from that a business emerged. I enjoyed it so much I did a digital media arts course and loved it.

**Wow, what a CV! So where did the interest in mannequins come from?**

When I was in my 50s a friend died and left me some money and I decided to use it to pay for a Masters degree course at Camberwell Arts School. My degree work was all based around image - related to my make-up work. For one project we had to create a self-portrait and weirdly my interest in mannequins came out of that. I didn't want to draw myself so instead I decided to use an old wig block that I had at home. I put a sock in its mouth to represent the fact I talk too much, and had a bramble sticking out of it because I have a spiky side! I had great fun taking photos of it, and then I started creating more things like that, essentially building personalities out of wig blocks. Then I bought a mannequin on eBay for £1. She only had one leg so I started chopping her up and transforming her. I wanted what I made to be a work of art but also to have a function. And for some reason she just seemed suited to lighting.

**How do you decide what to create?**

Usually I'll find a mannequin online or someone will come to me with an old one they don't want. I have it sitting around in my workshop for a while. Then, eventually I'll have a go at working on it. I start by repairing the mannequins first, then painting them. Then I begin to see it come alive and develop a personality. For example, the one I've just finished working on is Miss Havisham. I started by sticking tiling mesh onto her, then plastered on top of it. My brother gave me some old horse shoes, and she just evolved into a Miss Havisham like personality. My husband is a trained electrician so he does the technical electrical bits for me.

**Do you ever sketch out your ideas?**

I do sketch quite a lot. I tend to sketch when I'm on the train



because I feel like I'm being held captive in my seat! If I've got a piece on the go and I'm thinking about ideas I'll sometimes sketch a few ideas for that shape. For example, when I made the table, *The Sketcher*, I did a lot sketches when I was working out what to do with her head.

**So it's not just lights you turn the mannequins into?**

No, not at all. *The Sketcher* was a mannequin that I transformed into a table. She was a whole mannequin with a head but I didn't want it to look like a piece of a body staring at you, so I started sketching ideas and worked out a way to weigh her leg down to make her balance. I removed her head and put a glass top on her to create a table. And I started ➡

'Some mannequins are so beautiful, someone somewhere has put a lot of work into making them, and then they're just discarded.'

Mel with The Telephone Hen. (right) The Offerings Table.



thinking about her as a kind of story, working with her shape I slid a pencil into her hand as if she was holding it, and she just came alive.

#### What does the name, Nice Anubis, mean?

Nice Anubis was born about three years ago when I moved out of London to an old property in Essex. I love theatrical things and there's nothing more theatrical than ancient Egypt. They were an ancient civilisation who actually manufactured make-up to sell. Anubis is the Jackall God of the ancient Egyptians who helped the dead to an afterlife. He's doing something nice getting the bodies ready for another world. When I'm working I'm in another world, and that's the time I'm not worrying about the mundane things like bills.

#### You refer to 'restoring objet d'art to an afterlife', do you believe in the afterlife?

No I don't, but Nice Anubis does! I'm saying: 'I've got a load of art work from another world, that I've made for the next world. For someone to enjoy.' Some of the mannequins are so beautiful, someone somewhere has put a lot of work into making them, and then when they're finished with they're just discarded. So I like that I can give them an afterlife!

#### Does obsession with image inform your work?

The obsession with image is a theme in all my work. I've grown up in image-obsessed industries and I find it fascinating. During my degree I researched lots of image-related areas, such as anorexia. Being at stage school and

working with dancers at the Opera House it was such a huge problem. So it's my way of drawing attention to these things in a light way.

#### Where can we see your work in the 'flesh'?

I've just done an exhibition called BrushStroke in Sudbury which was to raise money for stroke victims go get into art as therapy, and I'm exhibiting at the Tendring Show in Essex in July. It's good to have an exhibition to spur me on to keep making things. In amongst that, I'm always doing my illustration work and working at the V&A where I run and teach theatrical and vintage make-up courses, so I'm always very busy.

#### What's next for you?

Next year I'd love to exhibit in London. I love the fact that in London you get such an eclectic mix of old and new. I feel very privileged to be working at the V&A too, and every time I work there I take my camera and end up taking photos of something. What I'd really like to do is get my work placed in a bar or restaurant. There's such a movement away from the sort of mass produced stuff that you get in the likes of Ikea at the moment, which is great, because it means that personality is coming back into our houses, and I'm excited to be a part of that! 📸

» Mel's work can be seen at the Tendring Show exhibition in July. Visit [tendringshow.co.uk](http://tendringshow.co.uk) to find out more.

» Prices range from £150 - £900. To commission Mel or buy one her pieces, go to [niceanubis.com](http://niceanubis.com)