



Ms Vivian Tham, who is pursuing a master's degree in pathology, preserves specimens such as bees, butterflies, mice and dead pets, and sells her works on Carousell. PHOTO: VIVIAN THAM

Breathing life into the dead

The Sunday Times talks to taxidermy hobbyists and professionals, who preserve everything from chicken skulls to dead pets and fishes

Chelsea Kiew

On Saturday mornings, Ms Nicole Chan looks forward eagerly to her mother's return from the wet market.

Not for a breakfast takeaway, but for the two dismembered chicken heads her mother usually picks up from the butcher.

The 22-year-old art student at Nanyang Technological University then charges to the kitchen sink to begin the process of cleaning the heads.

She removes the skin and as much meat as possible with a small knife, then boils the bones and soaks them in a peroxide bath to whiten them.

Her hobby is bone preservation. She says she has always had a fascination with the macabre. Her animation and sculpture works tend towards depictions of death.

She taught herself the basics of bone preservation, picking up bits and pieces of information on the Internet over the past six months. Her hobby was given a boost by the Covid-19 outbreak, which allowed her more time at home to experiment.

She usually works with chicken skulls and finds immense pleasure in learning their anatomy and piecing together their intricate bones.

"The bones are tiny. Everything has a certain way of fitting back together, kind of like a puzzle," she says.

The trickiest part is removing the eyes, which takes some getting used to. "The act of digging into an eye, it was very psychologically..." she stops mid-sentence and shudders.

She has also buried the carcasses of her dead pet hamsters in her mother's flower pots and unearthed the bones two months later.

"When you take them out, all the meat and muscle and cartilage are gone. It's just the bones left."

"There's no smell of meat or rot or anything. It just smells like earth," she says.

Preserving the skulls and rib bones of her pet hamsters was cathartic, like creating "something to remember them by".

Another avid dry animal preservation enthusiast is Ms Vivian Tham. The 27-year-old Singaporean is pursuing a master's degree in pathology at Universiti Malaysia Sarawak in East Malaysia, a hot spot to study zoology.

She got exposed to the mechanics of animal preservation while working on her bachelor's degree in zoology there.

She preserves specimens that she stumbles upon, such as bees, butterflies and mice, as well as dead cats and dogs that pet owners give to her.

Her most memorable find was a five-day-old carcass of a snake by the roadside. "It was bloated and infested with maggots. The flesh was rotting, but I managed to save the bones. Those were all that was left to articulate it," she says.

For her, the best part of taxidermy, "of course, isn't the smell or the maggots", she says with a laugh.

She continues: "You're making something beautiful again. You are breathing life into something with your hands."

Over the past four years, she has been running a Carousell shop. She sells about 10 works a month, which fetch from \$5 to \$100.

Most in demand now are her cat skulls. The asking price: \$20.

"You'll be surprised. There are many people in Singapore who collect these things. They call these items 'curiosities'," she says.

The circuit breaker gave her more time to create more aesthetic pieces.

She sees her hobby as the intersection between art and science.

"Many in our society, particularly because we are Asian, do not accept this type of activity. But if I can change the mindset of a few people, it is enough for me. I hope that people can be open-minded and love flora and fauna in all forms," she says.

That is also the goal of Dr Zeehan Jaafar, 42, who has made his passion for preservation his job.

When asked if he has a favourite specimen to work with, the lecturer at the department of biological sciences at the National University of Singapore says: "No, not really. There are so many fascinating organisms, both plants and animals, that it is impossible to pick."

"We have to understand the beauty of their interactions and how these behaviours impact natu-

ral ecosystems.

"There is nature everywhere, and there is beauty everywhere."

His work focuses on the ecology and evolution of marine fishes.

And preserving fish has its own set of rules.

Once permits have been obtained, he traps the fishes, then places them in a chemical to euthanise them. They are injected with formalin, then immersed in the solution for a week or more, depending on size.

Once a specimen has been prepared, it is transferred into ethanol for long-term storage for study.

In procuring the specimens, he has had many adventures through the years, such as getting lost in a mangrove swamp in Thailand and getting caught in a storm on a small dinghy in the middle of the South China Sea.

Most invaluable to him is the joy of discovery his work has brought him.

"By working on these ecosystems, I hope to contribute, even in a small way, information to help us understand, manage and conserve these ecosystems and their components. We have still much to achieve, as we learn the secrets that our seas hold."

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More about taxidermy



PHOTO: TAN HEOK HUI

There are two types of arthropod preservation – dry and wet, says Mr Leon Tan, 28, specialist associate at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum.

Taxidermy mounts, skeletons and the like are dry preserves, while wet specimens (above) are usually immersed in alcohol or formalin, a toxic, colourless solution.

Formalin, used in the preservation of both animals and humans, is also a disinfectant.

For storage, desiccants are used to remove moisture from the air and slow down the formation of mould. Mothballs prevent ants and other scavengers from eating specimens.



Nanyang Technological University undergraduate Nicole Chan, seen here with chicken skulls she preserved, taught herself the basics of bone preservation using the Internet. She has also preserved the skulls and rib bones of her pet hamsters (above). ST PHOTOS: LIM YAOHUI