



01 Ralph Borland with *Starling 1.2* by Ralph and Lewis Kaluzi (wirework).

02 *Starling 1.1* by Ralph Borland, Bongani Magwenzi (wirework) and Daan de Beer (electronics).



What attracted you to wire art?

I am interested in creating new aesthetic forms and the wire toys made throughout Africa have always appealed to me.

What inspired you to add electronic components to the models?

I have a background in art and electronics, so I'm interested in both disciplines. In 2013 I had the idea of combining the skills of wire crafters on the streets of South Africa and Zimbabwe with the informal networks for cellphone repairs in the same areas, imagining that you could combine discarded cellphone parts with wire art to make animatronic devices.

Why starlings?

Starlings are clever little urban birds that share the same pavements as informal

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BECAUSE
STREET ART
IS TAKING
OFF

Artist and designer Ralph Borland has taken wire art to a whole new level with **African Robots**. We asked him how and why.

traders, and move between different zones in the city.

My first attempt, *Starling 1.0*, was made with the help of Henrik Nieratschker, a master's student in design at the Royal College of Art in London, and wire artist Dube Chipangura. It runs on a cellphone battery and can make simple head and wing movements.

My second effort, *Starling 1.1*, was created with the assistance of wire artist Bongani Magwenzi and electronics engineer Daan de Beer, and features a repurposed MP3 player that plays a recording of a starling call. It has a transparent cover made out of a plastic bottle, so it looks kind of space-age!

The latest version, *Starling 1.2*, has a Scotch yoke, a mechanism that transfers the rotary movement of the motor to drive the wings, and its sound comes from a hacked bird toy. It was made with the assistance of Lewis Kaluzi.

What next for African Robots?

I would love to start an academy where wire artists could come to share skills and learn how to make more robots – and I recently received a grant from the National Arts Council that allows me to explore this idea!

• africanrobots.net

PORTRAIT: JANSEN VAN STADEN BIRD PHOTO: COURTESY OF MUTI GALLERY WORDS: TRACY GREENWOOD