

Slow

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We've done this one for the orangutan – it's our round-up of cosmetics, toiletries and household products that are palm oil-free or use certified sustainable palm oil.

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Memory and Morse code are important components of artist Sophie Conolly's work. Reclaiming material is important to her, and she also drinks a lot of tea in the name of art.

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Climate change is complex. To get the message across to as many people as possible, Katerina Gaita has set up an organisation that runs small gatherings, using the Tupperware party model.





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Objects of great beauty and delicacy, Sophie Conolly's artworks depict aspects of her life and contain cryptic messages.

NATURAL HISTORY

Words by Leta Keens Photos by Saskia Wilson

There's almost nothing new in Sophie Conolly's art. She reworks, reuses, repurposes found objects and materials, transforming them into something that's often quite unrecognisable from their original form. That's the case with old teabag paper – tannin stained and used like papier-mâché, moulded around flint stones or built up like a beehive in front of an old photo.

The paper features a lot in her work, which partly has to do with being English and drinking a lot of tea. The fact that she's using something reclaimed is also important to her, she says. "I don't always know why I'm drawn to certain materials, but they're usually infused with memory, which is important to me."

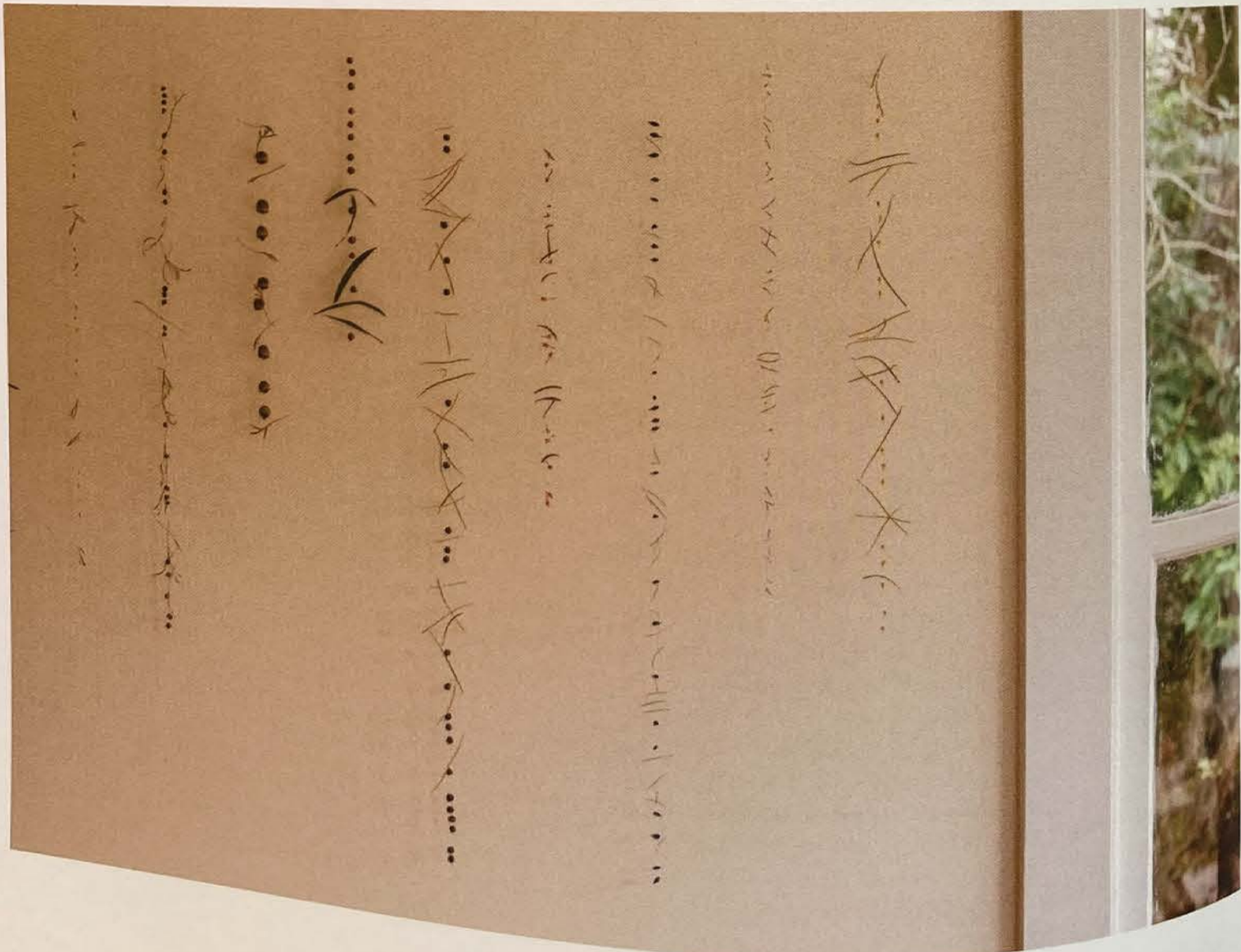
On her desk in her studio, at the front of the house in the Blue Mountains she shares with her partner, Colombian artist Leo Uribe, there are tiny china tea cups filled with seeds and other bits and pieces she's collected. "I used to play with the tea set when I was a girl," she says. "I brought it over from England with me." She's planning to make artworks with some of the cups – filling them with stitched portraits set in resin (she's already tested one using a portrait she stitched of her French grandmother). Nearby, there's a framed photo of herself as a kid with her two brothers, at a little table in the garden having "the tea to end all teas – we look absolutely delighted with ourselves". Hanging above is a whole wall of pieces made with teabags. "Look how sturdy they look – but they're all changing and contracting over time."

On another wall, even more ephemeral and delicate looking, are petals, seeds, leaves and other bits of plant matter strung on lengths of cotton. She's collected most of them from the bush, which she can see from her studio. "Every time I pierce them, I get a whiff of eucalypt, tea tree – that beautiful smell that's so evocative of here."

That piece is called *Morse Code* and, in the same way reclaimed materials find their way into her work, so too do words, handwriting and, above all, coded messages. "I like the graphic nature of the dot and dash," says Sophie. She knows what those symbols spell out and sees it almost as "a little test" for viewers. "If you're willing to make the effort to translate them, you have my confidence."

While there's real beauty to her work, it's usually hiding something quite painful – much of the Morse code contained within the pieces are messages to her father, who died when Sophie was 13. "I had a very strong association between Morse code and my dad," she says. "He was born at the end of the war and, like a lot of men, loved watching those war films. He was a linguist, you would say, and I know he'd be able to understand Morse code."

A set of Memory Stones – 41 of them, symbolising the age her father was when he died – are soft and round and beautiful to handle. "They're made of stuffing and old bits of scrap and teabag and lots and lots of thread," she says. "It's almost as if I'm padding myself. It's so cathartic making them – I stitch and stitch and stitch and it's such a slow process." Another set – the teabag ones – were formed







around flint stones she picked up from an area of the countryside she and her family used to go for walks in when she was a child, and where her father's ashes are scattered. They're lighter than they look. After forming the paper around the stones, Sophie "cut it and surgically removed the stones, then sewed them back up again. I like sewing onto paper – it leaves that nice hole."

Sophie often uses stitching in her work; it's something she feels comfortable with, unlike more conventional methods such as painting. "I stopped studying art when I was 11," she says. "You were only allowed to do one creative subject for the exams, and I was pushed into music, which I really didn't want to do at all." The school she went to, however, was strong on crafts and even the little kids were let loose on full-size looms, which were worth a fortune, to weave things like rugs.

Memory also takes the form of texture in her work, with one piece made from a scrap of tweed from some of her grandmother's clothing. "My childhood was filled with texture. Growing up in the countryside, I was hugging trees, nibbling the sweet part of grass, touching soft petals. My grandmother was always in tweed and wool, which were scratchy and itchy, but wore silk as well. Everything was so tactile in a textured and natural way." Translating those sensations, emotions and experiences into her work happened after Sophie started reading about Frida Kahlo and Tracey Emin. "These amazing women who had used art to personally express things – something inside me clicked."

After leaving school, Sophie studied psychology and then went into marketing. "I fell into it – I didn't really have any plans," she says. The media agency she was working for in England offered her a contract in Sydney for a year-and-a-half – which was 10 years ago. Coming to Sydney was such a delight, she says. "The smell of the ocean and the smell of the jasmine, it was all so beautiful."

Gradually, creative pursuits crept back into her life. She studied graphic design, which she still works at from home "to earn a crust", and in the evenings made art at home. It was on the strength of those pieces that she got in to art school a few years ago, "and began the art journey in earnest", encouraged and strongly supported by Leo, whose work also focuses, to a large degree, on memory.

While much of Sophie's art-making happens in her studio at the front of the house, she does her graphic design in a room at the back, overlooking the garden. Everywhere in between are other signs of her creativity, set among Leo's extraordinary artworks and the furniture he has made for them. Even in Sophie's craft pieces, memory and repurposing almost always play a significant role. There's the rag rug in the bedroom she made from old t-shirts, the mat at the front door from denim jeans, the outdoor cushion knitted from plastic bags. There's even the bed for their cat, Cookie, on a corner of her desk. It's made from an old woollen jumper she picked up from Vinnie's, the arms wrapping right around to form the sides of the bed. "It's stuffed with memory foam," she says. "It's the most luxurious cat bed ever – she loves it in there."



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