



Meredith Woolnough installing *Typologies*, 2015
Wall installation, embroidery thread, 70 x 70cm
PHOTO: JOERG LEHMANN

Turning over a new leaf

Mesmerised by the shapes and forms she observes on land and in the sea, Australian artist Meredith Woolnough's delicate embroideries capture the wonder of nature without harming the environment

FINELY HONED CRAFTSMANSHIP enhances the artistic impact of Meredith Woolnough's works. She turns systematically to nature for inspiration and the outcome is a series of sculpted embroideries with a clear modern aesthetic, both compelling and memorable – a whirlpool of beauty that takes us deeper and deeper, like the spirals and whorls to which the young Woolnough is clearly addicted.

From what she describes as 'the amazing unconstrained shapes and forms' of coral to the intriguing qualities of the scientific specimen box to the arterial veins in leaves, Woolnough has an unending source of subject matter to interpret and is finding her work has such appeal that she cannot keep up with demand. A subtext for her is the wish to create a substitute for the natural world – a world that must be protected. As she says: 'I hope that people will see my work as the piece of coral that you can feel good about putting in your home.'

Her passion for snorkelling and scuba diving can be indulged readily on the east coast of Australia, especially north of Woolnough's home in Newcastle, NSW, as you travel up the coast and over the Queensland border and eventually reach the start of the 1,400 kilometre phenomenon that is known as the Great Barrier Reef. This vast resource is not the only one she has explored however. A place she also speaks of with reverence is Palau, where the slow moving currents allow the coral to grow into 'amazing unconstrained shapes and forms'. The sketchpad is irrelevant when you are underwater so Woolnough continually works on fine tuning her observational abilities, creating 'a visual library in the mind'.

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Above, from left: *Golden Ginkgo Square*, 2014. 70 x 70cm. *Spring Leaves*, 2016. 65 x 65cm. *Mushroom Coral Circle*, 2015. 93 x 93cm. *Red Cabbage*, 2014. 94 x 94cm. All embroidery thread and pins on paper. Opposite: Meredith installing *Scribbly Gum Leaf* at Tamworth Regional Gallery in August 2014

In contrast, when walking in bushland – another major source of inspiration – she creates rough sketches, taking them home for a detailed process of refinement. There is nothing rough remaining in her polished and seemingly perfect replicas, informed by her highly individual choice in colours. Rather than mimic nature, she contrasts her organic forms with the surprise of strong colours, synthetic in feeling, thus enhancing the impact of her pieces.

Woolnough has a great attraction to specimen collections as well, calling attention to ‘the power in repetition’. For her, they also speak of the naturalist’s wish to explore and compare traits and features. The science of nature is as important to her as the visual appeal of many small, beautifully formed fragments. Connective systems are often depicted and speak, in a microcosm, for the whole connectivity of nature.

The horizons created through freehand embroidery stretch out as a challenge to many who seek to use the sewing machine as their paintbrush. The top thread reaches down to engage the thread beneath; top and bottom join in a kind of knot, moving with restless intent over the fabric. When re-worked many times, the sculptural effects begin to dominate. When all this takes place on water soluble fabric, it becomes possible to abandon the background in the final stages, as it is dissolved, and then deal with an object that has the qualities of a three dimensional tracery – a sculptural drawing composed from a skeleton of stitches.

To enhance the sculptural effect, Woolnough uses a system of pinning to mount her work, with the heads of the pins eventually painted to match the areas they imprison. Thus the works float above the backing board and, depending on the lighting, dramatic organic shadows become an important part of the final product. The pinning is also reminiscent of preserving the natural specimens that so intrigue her.

Woolnough keeps her eye on the market. Since relinquishing her teaching career, determined to make her income from her art, she understands this demands an engagement with the buying public. The pinned work is custom framed behind glass, giving the buyer confidence; creating the effect of a delicate treasure, carefully handled.

‘I studied Fine Art at university, straight out of high school and it was there that I fell in love with textiles, free machine embroidery in particular.’ She received her BFA with First Class Honours in 2006 from the University of New South Wales, College of Fine Arts and continued on to get a Masters of Teaching in 2008. While the coral specimens became a fascination in 2009, creating them was juggled with her teaching career. So in 2012 she decided to pursue ‘the seemingly unrealistic dream of making it as an artist and yes, it has been a rocky road at times’. She had to become her own photographer, web designer, social networker, publicist and secretary. She rents office and studio space in the Newcastle Community Arts Centre and stresses the importance of a place of her own, ‘not just

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PHOTO: STEPHANIE OWEN

Above: Meredith Woolnough in her studio

Top: Stitching in progress on *Red Coral*

Opposite: *Nature Studies*, 2014. Embroidery thread and pins on paper, each measuring 40 x 40cm

strewing things around the house . . .'

Woolnough admits she loves commissions and creating bespoke pieces, and is often asked how long her work takes to make. Small ones may only take a few days but, 'most pieces are with me for a long time – there is a lot of labour involved. . . The larger pieces can take me weeks, even months'. Given the amount of time she must spend in the office, attending to the business of being self employed, Woolnough cherishes the opportunity to sketch, plan and sew, and strives to make sure this happens each day as an essential process in feeding the business of art.

The business grew 'one exhibition at a time'. Now she is challenged by works that can be installed directly onto the gallery wall. She has already been collected by two of Australia's regional galleries, which have a textile focus: Wangaratta Art Gallery and Tamworth Regional Gallery. Plus she is able to list 'collected in Australia and internationally' on her CV. In 2014 she received the Craft NSW Emerging Artist Craft Award and acknowledges how important a validation this was to her.

When an object intensifies our experience it moves beyond fine craftsmanship towards art. The robust beauty of Woolnough's forms, contrasted with their elegant fragility is a source of intensification, as is the power of repetition, and pursuing the limits of scale. Now, more than 50 million stitches later, her skills and her output truly set her apart in a class of her own. 🍷

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