



Uncommon threads

Australian artist Meredith Woolnough creates sculptural drawings using little more than a sewing machine and some thread. Here she tells Breathe about her inspirations, her love of nature and her desire for balance and harmony on Earth

Tell us a little about yourself.

I'm an artist, nature lover, teacher, a relatively new mum and an even newer author (though I'm not used to that title yet). I live in the coastal town of Newcastle, [south-east] Australia, with my husband, daughter and a cuddly cat.

Where did you study?

After high school, I went to the College of Fine Arts [COFA], which is a part of the University of New South Wales. It was at COFA that I fell in love with textile art and developed my way of working with embroidery. Following my BFA I went on to study a Masters of Teaching at the University of Sydney. More recently, I completed a Bachelor of Natural History Illustration at the University of Newcastle. That deepened my love of nature and I learned how to paint and draw with more confidence.

Could you describe your work and what you do?

I make embroideries inspired by natural forms and structures. But when I say embroidery it's probably not whatever you're thinking of. I use a domestic sewing machine and a water-soluble fabric to create what is essentially a sculptural drawing made of thread.

Can you explain the technique? It looks fiendishly tricky!

I turn off all the settings on my sewing machine so that it's just that needle going up and down really fast. I then move my base

fabric around the needle to build up a drawing in thread. It's the equivalent of moving a sheet of paper rather than a pencil to do a drawing. The base fabric I use is water-soluble so it acts as a temporary surface for my drawing. Once the drawing is complete, I wash away this base fabric leaving my stitched drawing behind. This drawing can then be shaped and mouldled to give it more form. I generally mount my drawings onto pins to display them, similar to insect specimen collections.

When did you realise you had a talent for embroidery?

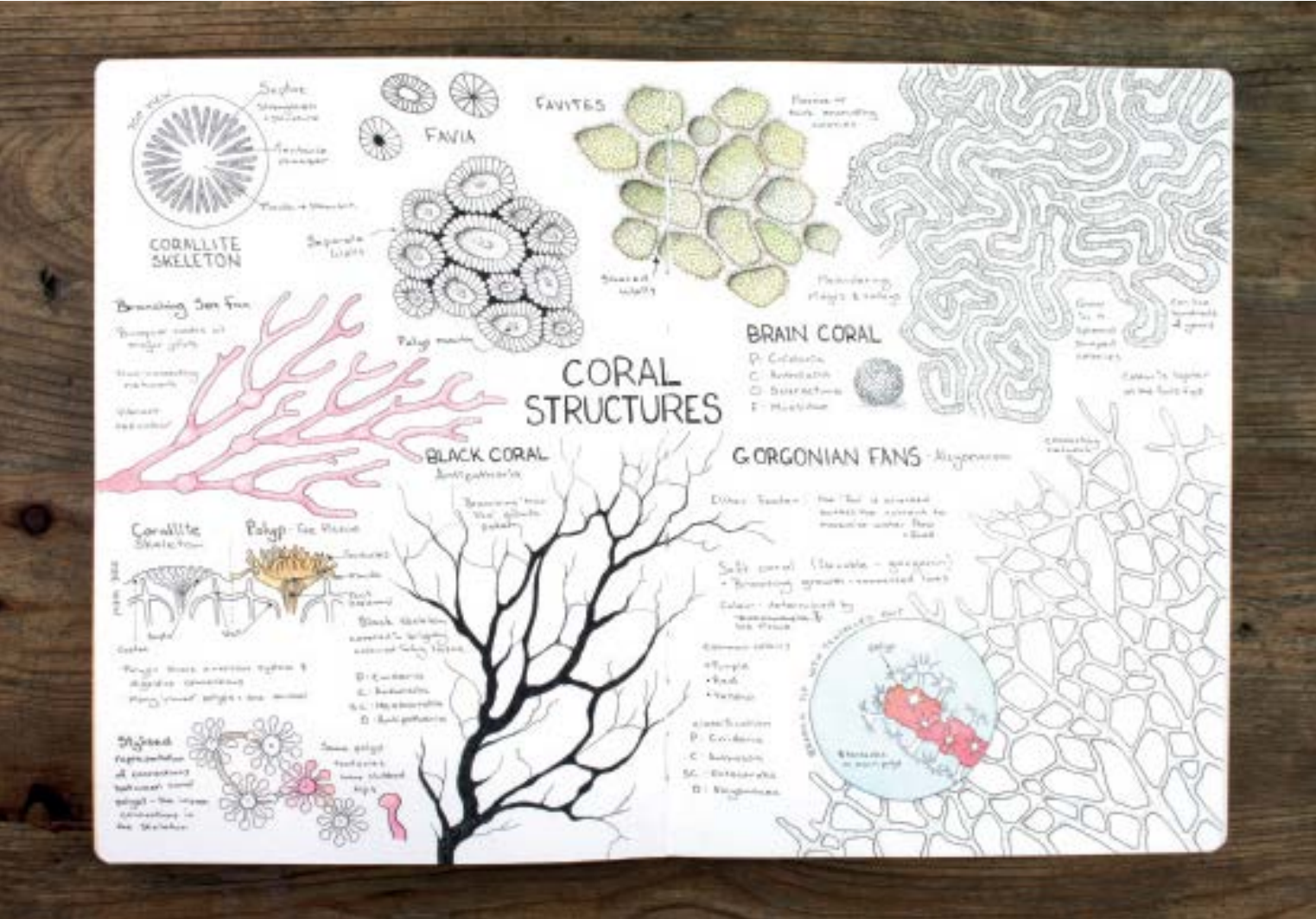
I don't know if I have a talent for embroidery, I just see it as a great drawing technique. I've become good at this particular type of embroidery simply through lots of practice. I have been stitching like this for more than 12 years so I've had plenty of time to hone my craft.

And how did you find out your work could be sculptural?

I learned pretty quickly that water-soluble fabric goes sticky when it's wet. So, after some experimentation I discovered that if I didn't wash away all of the base fabric it would act as a mild stiffening agent, giving form and shape to my drawings. It's these sculptural possibilities that I find most exciting.

Which materials do you use in your work?

I work exclusively with polyester machine embroidery thread and I love the soft sheen of this material and the stitched



surface it produces. The colours are also very vibrant with this type of thread – which I love. I haven't experimented with too many other thread types. I haven't needed to.

What do you love most about the process?

My favourite part is the moment when I wash away the base fabric and my stitch drawing is revealed. I still find it exciting and satisfying to see my drawing come to life at that point.

Do you work from actual specimens or photos?

I work from specimens and photographs, followed by lots of research and sketching (see image, opposite, and page 89).

The initial stages of my practice is all about observing and understanding my subjects. Looking closely and mindfully at the way something is structured or the way it grows. This is much easier to do with actual specimens and there is something nice about being able to touch, hold and interact with a subject first hand. I also take lots of photographs and these become valuable reference later on when developing artwork designs.

And what about your underwater work? Do you take photos?

Yes, I take photos when I scuba dive, but my underwater shots are terrible. I don't like to collect specimens from the ocean, it's unethical and often illegal. In this case my bad photos have to do.



You've spoken before about the importance of balance, harmony and connectivity of life on Earth. Do you find the creative process mindful?

I've always loved making things and I'm happiest when I'm creating. I find the act of stitching relaxing. I get into a kind of meditative trance when I embroider – the rest of the world goes away and I just focus on that needle and the small part of my drawing I'm working on. I also enjoy going into nature for the research aspect of my practice. This helps me to feel connected to the world. The more I study nature and its intricate systems the more I want to get back out there to learn more, it's a lovely creative cycle.

Given your love of nature, how do you feel about the impact global warming is having on the coral reefs?

It's very upsetting. I've seen the effects of coral bleaching first hand at some of my favourite dive spots and it breaks my heart. I've made several artworks recently that comment on these issues but I attempt to draw attention to coral bleaching in a different way to most. Instead of depicting the devastation, or the actual bleaching, I try to celebrate the beauty of coral in my work and help promote awareness in a positive way. In saying that, I strongly encourage everyone to get out and see a coral reef first hand while they still can. They truly are the most beautiful and amazing environments.

Other than one work, Leaf Lines, you don't hang any of your own work at home. Why is this?

To be honest, I have a hard time keeping up with demand for my work. These embroideries take a long time (sometimes months) to make and as soon as I finish a piece, it either goes off to an exhibition, gallery or private client. Also, I live in a small townhouse without much wall space. Any space I have is already filled with artworks by friends or artists who I admire. I prefer to be surrounded by other people's art rather than my own. I spend my entire workday with my own art, I don't need to see it on my wall at home as well.

What advice would you give to other artists wishing to turn their passion into a business?

If you're truly passionate about your art and want to make a living out of it, you need to take the plunge and throw yourself into it, but be prepared for a lot of hard work. It isn't a conventional career and most of the work in this job isn't the physical making of the art. My biggest tips for running an art business would be to be organised, reliable, friendly and a good communicator.

Can you tell us more about your book, *Organic Embroidery*?

I still can't believe I have a book. In *Organic Embroidery*, I share all that I know and love about working from nature and the embroidery process that I use to create my artworks. I discuss

my practice from start to finish with lots of stories about my favourite artworks along the way. There are plenty of instructional elements throughout the book as well.

How long did it take to write/put together?

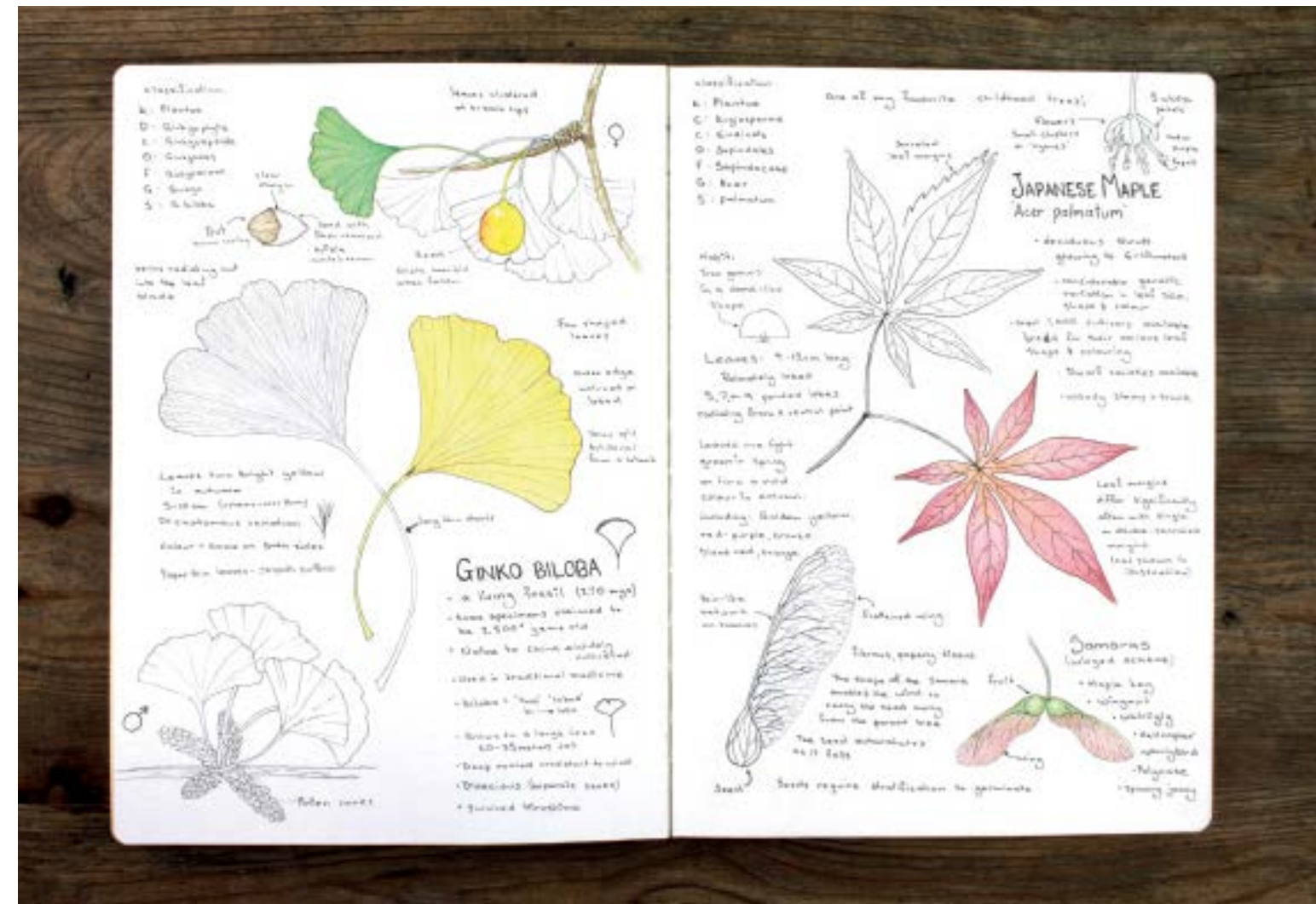
I was first approached to write the book back in September 2016. So, I then chipped away at it for about a year and a half, working around other projects, finishing off a university degree and having a baby. In the scheme of things it was terrible timing. But I didn't want to turn down the opportunity and I'm glad I found a way to make it work.

How did you select the activities?

There are a handful of step-by-step activities in the book to illustrate specific techniques, but it's largely a technique-based book rather than a series of projects. These activities are designed as starting points, ways to apply the knowledge so that you can understand it through the act of making.

Do the readers learn different techniques?

Yes. The book covers many different techniques across all areas of my practice. People can pick and choose what they want to take on board for themselves. In the research and development section of the book I discuss fieldwork, observational drawing, photography, specimen collection and preservation. Once you get to the embroidery side of things you learn how to draw with





your sewing machine through different stitching approaches. Then there is extensive instruction and explanation about dissolving the base fabric and shaping the embroideries for different effects. There's also a tips chapter where I share more of the technical side of things as well as my tricks and secrets for success with these embroidery techniques. I tried to share all the knowledge that I would impart in my workshops, just in a written form with lots of pretty pictures.

Is it suitable for beginners?

I wrote the instructional aspects to be suitable for complete beginners. But even seasoned machine embroiderers will still get a lot out of it. The book is also suited to people who simply like my art and want to know more about it. I tried to make the book visually striking, informative and instructional. So it makes for a good coffee-table book.

What are you working on at the moment?

You've actually caught me in a rare quiet moment between exhibitions. I'm giving myself a few weeks to relax and reset before I put my mind into planning for my next show. I have a joint exhibition with an American artist next year and I want to take my work in a slightly different direction. I haven't quite figured it all out yet, but I'm playing with more sculptural pieces with a botanical focus.

How do you relax?

I like to get out into nature for a bushwalk, swim or scuba dive. Now when I go for walks I take my daughter with me, so it's not as relaxing as it used to be. But it's a lot of fun seeing her experience and enjoy the natural world. If I do get some quiet time to myself (which is rare these days) I like to read.

Do you practise yoga or mindfulness?

I enjoy yoga. It's the only form of 'exercise' that clicks with me. Since having my daughter, it's hard to find time for a daily practice but I attend a community yoga class once a week and it's a special point for me. It's about the only time I have to myself among the chaos of work and family life. For that hour or so I get to focus completely on my body, breath and mind. That weekly class is my reset button.

To learn more about Meredith and her work, go to meredithwoolnough.com.au, Meredith Woolnough Artist on Facebook and check [meredithwoolnough](#) on Instagram

Organic Embroidery by Meredith Woolnough, published by Schiffer Publishing Ltd, £21.99, is available now. Copyright © 2018 by Meredith Woolnough.

DRAWING WITH YOUR SEWING MACHINE

Fancy the idea of drawing with a sewing machine? Here, Meredith explains how to give it a go

The freehand embroidery technique is simple but highly versatile. By changing just a few basic settings you can transform your sewing machine into a freeform drawing tool.

What you will need:

- A sewing machine (with the ability to turn the feed teeth off)
- A darning or freehand embroidery foot
- Fabric to stitch onto (calico or any other plain woven fabric works well)
- An embroidery hoop
- Good quality machine thread
- Embroidery scissors

Setting up:

- Install your darning foot and turn your 'feed dogs' off – these are the little teeth that pull the fabric through the machine for regular sewing. There is normally a button or switch on the machine that will drop them down.
- Set your machine up for straight stitch (stitch width set to 0)
- Stretch your fabric in an embroidery hoop so it is nice and tight (like a drum)
- Thread your machine as usual

Getting started:

- Place your hoop, fabric side down, on your sewing bed under the needle. Using the sewing machine hand wheel, pull the bobbin thread up through the top of the fabric.
- Stitch a few little stitches to secure your thread and trim off both top and bobbin thread ends close to your fabric. This will help avoid messy backs on your drawing.
- You are now ready to start drawing with your sewing machine! Simply run the machine and move the hoop around the needle to draw with thread. It is as simple as that.

Stitching tips:

There are no strict rules when it comes to this way of stitching so be free and have fun. Move in a way that is comfortable and feels natural to you. Start by drawing basic lines, swirls and shapes, then try writing your name or drawing a simple picture to build up confidence. You will soon be scribbling and drawing all over your fabric.

Try to be mindful when you stitch and develop a smooth, steady stitching technique. Avoid sudden changes in direction and aim to stitch at a consistent speed. This will help avoid frustrating snags and thread breakages. Don't worry too much about the end product. Just enjoy the process. Embrace the scribble and the wiggle. Play and experiment. You never know what you will come up with.

Happy sewing.



PHOTOGRAPHY: MEREDITH WOOLNOUGH