

Interview with Olga Prinku for the Textile Art Magazine

Where did you grow up and where do you live now?

I grew up in the Republic of Moldova but I've lived in the UK for over two decades now. I'm based in North Yorkshire, a beautiful part of the country with lots of moors, dales and countryside to enjoy walking, foraging and taking inspiration from nature.

Do you have an artistic education?

I have a foundation degree in graphic design from the Cumbria Institute of the Arts, now the University of Cumbria. Although it didn't directly lead to my artistic practice, as the techniques I use now are self-taught through trial and error, it was very useful grounding in the basic principles of visual design, such as colour theory and use of negative space.

Why do you use plants and textiles to show growth, care, and renewal?

I think there's something very special about creating with nature, because there's so much beauty already in nature that I see my practice as being about structuring and accentuating that beauty.

I try to do that in ways that invite reflection on the themes you mention – how nature is simultaneously resilient yet fragile, our human responsibility to the natural world, and the idea that there is beauty and interest in all kinds of plants at all stages of their life cycle. I take special pleasure in creating with plants that are often overlooked, such as twigs, seedheads, or those that are seen as weeds.

How do you use real plants as thread in embroidery and textiles?

It starts with sourcing the materials, which sometimes I buy in ready-dried, but often I grow or forage for myself and then treat in various ways to prolong their lifespan before creating with them.

I then use a variety of techniques to attach the organic material to net fabric, such as threading the fragile stems through the holes in the net, or securing the materials in place with invisible thread or sometimes metallic embroidery thread to achieve a different visual effect.

What do the branches and circles in your work mean?

They're both very common patterns in nature. The recurring circle motif in my work very much speaks to the fundamental idea of the circle of life, the cycle of growth and renewal. I also have in mind the circles you see in tree rings, which are a historical record of those repeating cycles of nature.

I'm intrigued by branching structures because once you start to look for them, you see them at all scales in nature – from the tiniest veins in a fragile plant, through trees, and even up to river patterns seen from above. Branching reflects how life adapts, seeks out new paths and distributes its resources.

Both together combine the idea of growth in nature, the circles growing outward from a centre, the branches reach outward to new spaces.

Why mix natural irregularity with tidy shapes—what are you saying about harmony with nature?

There's actually a surprising amount of geometry and symmetry in nature, although we don't always notice it unless we're looking for it – think about a pine cone or a petal on a flower – but it often isn't perfect symmetry, which is part of why it feels alive. To an extent, I'm trying to reflect that idea of a coexistence already in nature, between wildness and a degree of precision.

On another level, imposing our own structures and boundaries on nature is what humans do – we contain things within tidy frames to help us to make sense of it all. So the work suggests that idea of a balance in which human structure can support nature, rather than trying to subdue it.

Why do you use tulle as the background?

On a practical level, it has a net structure that I can use to trap the organic elements in place, but it's also light enough that it becomes almost transparent and invisible as a backdrop. It can make the organic materials look as if they are floating, which gives a second dimension to the work through a play of shadows in the right light conditions.

More broadly, I like that tulle is also connected to the themes of femininity and fertility that I explore in my practice. The fabric is most closely associated with bridal ware, so it's fitting to use it as a backdrop for artworks especially with seed heads, which contain future life within them. Because of its connection to traditional embroidery, it links in with a history of women's domestic labour and traditional exclusion from fine art hierarchies.

What does it mean to treat nature as a collaborator?

To me it means being conscious of how my work is led by nature, and inviting that to happen. When I'm outside in nature, I'm always looking to observe things that might give me a new creative idea. Perhaps I'll pick a branch that has a certain shape, and that will be the starting point of my artwork – thinking about how that branch is going to sit in and divide the space on my fabric.

I don't pre-sketch my work, instead I start to form patterns with each shape that's added. I'm led by the materials themselves – I never try to force things into place. If something does not want to go into a particular spot I'll try it in a different one.

How did being a graphic designer influence your plant embroidery?

I think working as a graphic designer honed my understanding of the general design principles I mentioned earlier in relation to my degree. But it also directly inspired a series of works I call "Nature's Poetry", in which I use organic materials to make letter shapes. That series grew from how much I enjoyed working with typography during my time as a graphic designer.

Can you tell me about a piece that shows life continuing into the future?

My piece called Nest is a good example, because of the symbolism of the branching twigs surrounding the alder seed cones. As well as resembling a literal nest, I hope it communicates the ideas of a living network, a protected centre and a cyclical structure – taken together, this is how nature survives.

The outer circle is intended to feel like a never-ending supportive living system, while the seed cones inside represent life waiting – the potential of the next cycle of growth, being guarded until it's ready.

You love the opportunity to be inventive, where do you think this will lead you in the near future?

Last year I was fortunate enough to be awarded the QEST Clothworkers Company Scholarship, which I used to take training courses in haute couture embroidery techniques and gilding. I'm still at a very early stage of seeing how I can apply what I learned to my creative practice with organic materials, but I have lots of ideas and I'm excited to find out which ones have potential.

