



Nests

ON THE FRAGILITY OF MEMORY



*the reason my work is so light
is because it reflects memory.
Memory is light and fragile
and precious. Time is light
and fragile. It feels like a
metaphor for who I was and
how I feel*

In her delicate artworks Sophie Conolly uses copies of pictures, letters and cards from her family in order to confront the moment when as a child her life changed forever.

Underlying my practice is an examination of the self, memory and a desire to both reconnect with and validate past experiences.

Themes of reinterpretation and recognition in my work frequently reference the natural environment of my years growing up in rural England. I have always found nature to be restorative and consoling.

I choose materials, textures, colour and process that are laden with memory and association. I force myself to remember in a way that is at times painful and difficult. My childhood in the countryside was filled with the textures and soft colours of the landscape. I watched my mother cross-stitching samplers and cushions and walked in the woods with my father in his tweed and coarse woollens.

When I was 13 my father died and I lived in cities after that. So the connection I have to nature is symbolic of the happiest and the saddest days of my life.

I am influenced by the personally specific, self-expressionistic work of artists who have drawn on their past experiences in order to express and understand themselves more fully.

I have focused on that moment in my childhood that had such a huge impact on the rest of my life: the turning point when everything changed. I have consciously and unconsciously begun to reconnect to my past.

Pictures, letters and cards from my family are symbolic and very precious and valuable, they hold so much meaning that I cannot work with the originals. Only copies. I use photographs and letters from that time, or earlier, in order to confront that moment.

Using traditional craft techniques such as sewing, embroidery and papier mache to re-contextualise personal memories, I try and piece together the good memories and the bad memories. I am searching for catharsis—trying to

Soft Memory Stones (opposite below)

In 2010 I read a book by Donna Schuurman, Director of the Dougy Center for Grieving Children, and there was a concept in the book that interested me (see Appendix).

The concept is about memory stones (rocks) that the children take away with them to remind them of their healing, but also of their grief. I was struck with the notion that as children my brothers and I had missed an opportunity to heal and grieve in such a beautiful and open way.

I wanted to make memory stones that I could hold. They take so long to make and each stitch gives me an opportunity to gently probe and examine the wound of grief. I have used soft, delicate and gentle materials because the subject is sensitive; I need to protect myself by using materials that will cushion the blow when I come up against a memory that is too difficult.

In August I took my memory stones back to the countryside in England. I placed them in the grass, where my father's ashes lie, and let them become infused with that sense of place—and then I brought them home.

Tea Paper Stones (opposite top)

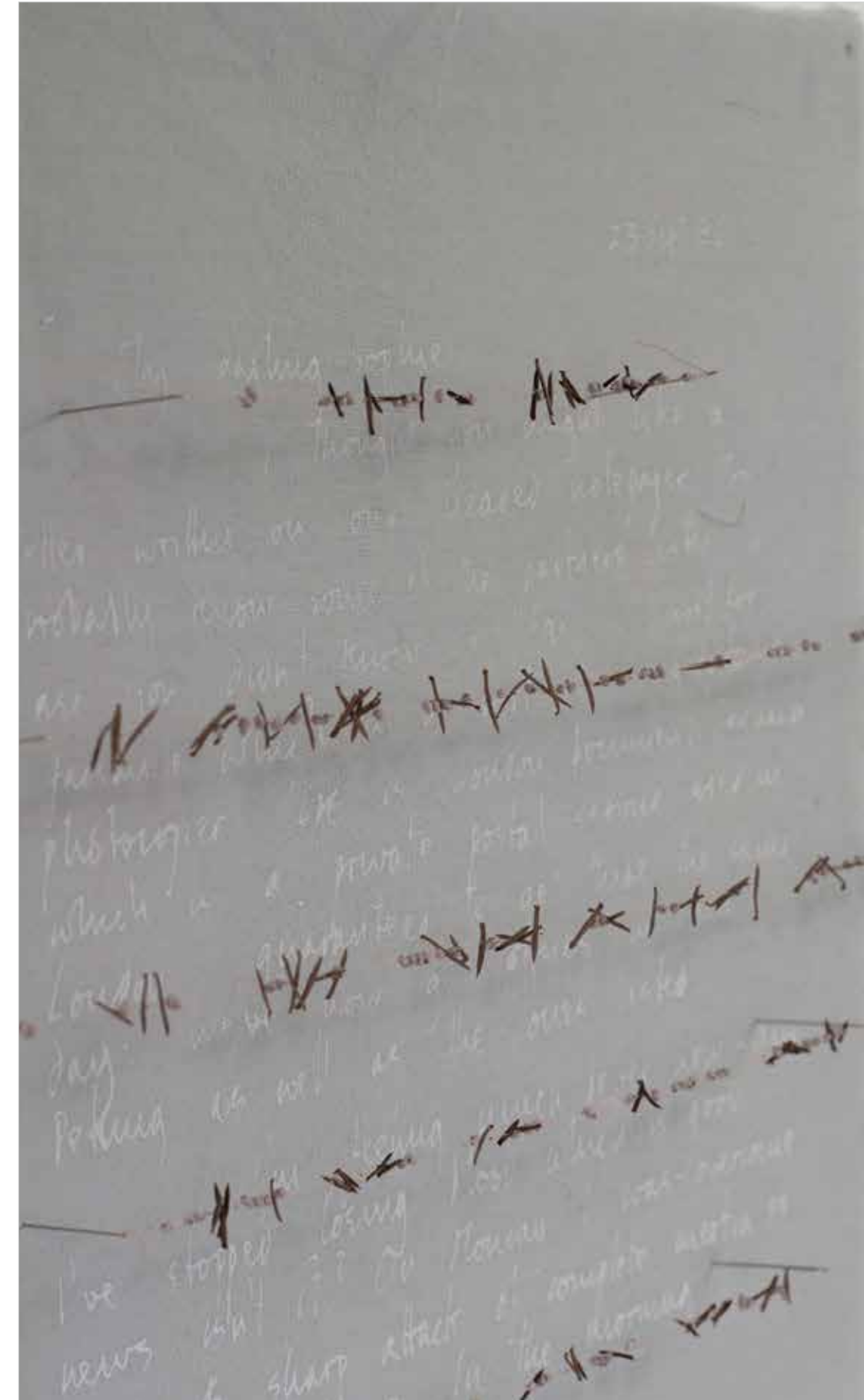
These memory stones are copied from flint stones that I took from the place where we grew up, and where my father grew up and where his ashes now lie. It was his favourite landscape.

I copied the flint stones with teabag paper made from my old teabags. I then cut them open, removed the hard stone and stitched them up again. The process feels like surgery: removing the hard stone within. Now they are light as air... little light vessels filled with nothing but air and memories.

Letter (right)

Simply put, it is a way to communicate with the author of the letter. The fabric is screenprinted with one of my father's letters to me when he was already ill, and between the lines I have written a response using dots made of thread and dashes made of leaves.

I use Morse Code because the things I want to say can still overwhelm me at times. And they are too personal to be made public. But my father loved Morse Code, so...



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release myself from a moment in time that I can't seem to escape. I am sewing to repair and close the chapter.

An early psychology degree and studies in counselling have also influenced my decision to create conceptual artwork through which the process of making itself holds importance. The creative process of picking, stitching, moulding and mending has been transformative, meditative and cathartic.

I feel that the reason my work is so light is because it reflects memory. Memory is light and fragile and precious. Time is light and fragile. It is like a metaphor for who I was and how I feel.

The vulnerability of the material reflects my sense of self. Even my connections with my past feel thin and loose.

This sense of time and fragility is present throughout my work.

Sophie Conolly

www.sophieconolly.com



Nests (at top of article and opposite)

*The skin is the boundary of the self**— Layers of paper thin tea paper, threads and petals create subtle texture that is reminiscent of skin. In Nest below, I have subverted the morse code by stitching the words dot and dash into the nests, instead of using the symbols. As the tea paper shrinks, the nests slowly shift and move.

*Claudia Benthien *Skin: On the cultural border between self and world*. Skin is the ultimate boundary organ '(i)t is only at this boundary that subjects can encounter each other' (p.1)

Morse Code

I started using Morse code as a way to express the 'unutterable'—the words I needed to say, while still burdened with a child's sense of shame. The natural materials help me to connect to happier times, reminding me of the connection to nature that my father and I shared.

I love that the works slowly change and degrade over time: the leaves, seeds and buds, once dry become more fragile and slowly change colour. Some of the leaves and seeds may fall—meaning some words may disappear with time (perhaps some bad memories may drop away too). This ephemeral quality is reminiscent of life's own impermanence and inevitable decay.

The lightness of touch needed to construct the strings of Morse Code is symbolic of the vulnerability that I feel—and felt.

