

A woman with curly hair is sitting in a chair in a studio. She is wearing a dark shirt and light-colored pants. The background is a white brick wall with many long, thin reeds or sticks hanging from the ceiling. The lighting is warm and natural, coming from the right side of the frame.

"It's a studio at work, a working studio," says artist Alison Coates (**this page**) of her Sydney workspace. Within the "harmonious chaos" of the old joinery shed (**opposite page**), her sculptures are forever in progress – be they a suspended spiral of stacked waxed paper straws ("very time-consuming") or pieces of board textured with threaded metal wire, corrugated metal and old tin. →

“ALISON IS INCREDIBLY TALENTED, SENSITIVE AND PRACTICAL. SHE HAS A KNACK OF KNOWING WHAT THE SPACE WANTS,” SAYS INTERIOR DESIGNER AND ARTIST ANN GYNGELL, WHO SOUGHT ALISON TO CREATE A WORK FOR A STAIRWAY

For Alison Coates, life moves at a different pace from the way it did a decade ago. Throughout the 1990s, the Brisbane-born floral artist was best known to Sydneysiders for her groundbreaking flower arrangements. In 1991, her Paddington flower shop-cum-terrace was first featured in the book *Australian Style* by Betsy Walter and Jean Wright, with a description of its “tan walls that match the waxed paper and baler’s twine, hand-dyed by Ms Coates, used to wrap the ‘bouquets’”.

Even then, Alison’s focus was never just ordinary bunches of flowers. Everything about her work was raw, honest and larger than life. Big blooms with pods, twigs and cactus – combinations nobody was using back then – drew those who appreciated her vision and understood that she wasn’t “just selling weeds”.

It was Alison who trained and mentored the next generation of leading florists – both Saskia Havekes and Tracey Deep, who went on to establish their own successful businesses, were part of her team in the early days. “I felt totally inspired,” says Saskia, who founded Grandiflora in 1995. “We really lived it, Tracey and I.”

But for a creative force and self-confessed dreamer, “having to be a business person was a shock”, admits Alison. In 1997, shortly after the birth of her second child, she closed the doors of the shop. She spent a few years running master classes in floristry at Vaucluse House tea rooms, then found herself ready to explore other areas.

Nowadays, the urgency involved in floristry has been replaced with the reflective pace of her sculptural work, which is a completely different process. “Flowers are about doing things quickly,” Alison explains. “This is a different space to be in.” She works in a creative state of flux surrounded by her materials of choice: old bamboo, she-oak branches, split hemlock stalks, fish scales, bones, shredded stalks, river rock, bits of lead flashing, slate, old broken blinds, waxed paper straws (for their luminosity) and endless wire (Alison talks about the “beautiful rhythm of wire”).

She is fascinated with everything organic (the shape of a tree, moss on a stone) as well as the effects of nature on the

man-made. Weathered industrial cast-offs, discarded building materials, debris found in skips, shipyards and back lanes all grace her studio, an old joinery shed that “is so reflective of Alison”, says Saskia. “It’s more her than anything else.”

Alison has already had two successful exhibitions of her work and is currently preparing for her third. Commissions come from the architects and designers of offices, foyers and restaurants, as well as for the homes of private clients. “Alison is incredibly talented, sensitive and practical. She has a knack of knowing what the space wants,” says interior designer and artist Ann Gyngell, who sought Alison to create a work for a stairway. “She made these sculptural sticks in groups going down the stairs. They create lovely shadows and hang at just the right height to be seen from below and above, but not intrude into the space.”

Alison’s sense of space and scale is also praised by lawyer Tony Ryan, who commissioned a piece for his Sydney office. “She doesn’t overplay her hand. We wandered around her studio and talked about what materials I liked the look of, rather than the concept first – taking the material and letting the art work around it.”

The final piece was made up of more than a thousand bits of old wooden venetian blinds, looped together with wire in long strands and suspended from the ceiling. The varying cascading lengths look “absolutely spectacular in the small space”, says Tony. “Alison has made something mundane into something quite extraordinary.”

Another piece, a large suspended circle of split hemlock stalks threaded through wire – a work-in-progress when *Inside Out* photographed the studio (see page 140) – now hangs in a protected courtyard of Tony’s apartment. “It floats over river rock and when lit is very Zen,” explains Alison.

While she’s busy with her commissions and her upcoming exhibition, Alison still enjoys doing private flower work, and made a foray back into retail four years ago with a collaboration with Saskia and Simone Gooch. “My creative palette is broadening but I’m still thrilled by flowers and organic material – they are my fix.” →

NATURE STUDY

FORMER FLORAL ARTIST ALISON COATES HAS TURNED HER UNIQUE VISION TO SCULPTURE, FOCUSING ON NATURAL AND MAN-MADE OBJECTS FOR HER ORGANIC CREATIONS

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Alison's studio reflects her interest in a wide variety of materials, from paper string on cardboard reels (**above left**) and old Japanese ledgers suspended from lengths of wire (**above**) to notched pieces of bamboo (**left**) and she-oak branches with waxed paper straws (**right**). The sink (**above right**) came with the original joinery shed and is still in use. Afternoon sun bathes Alison's desk (**below right**) and casts a glow across the stalks of split hemlock standing in plaster bases (**below left**).



Alison (**above left**) takes inspiration from both natural and man-made elements and her work often combines the two. The patina of a weathered board from a shipyard creates a backdrop for a rock wrapped in lead flashing (**above**), and long panels of venetian blinds are combined with pieces of bone (**below right**). A circle of split hemlock stalks (**above right**) and fish scales threaded on wire (**left**) demonstrate her use of materials en masse, while a group of burnt palm-tree fronds (**below left**) shows a willingness to embrace the unexpected. The tools of Alison's trade are at the ready on her work table (**opposite page**), surrounded by what she calls "a litre of mess" scattered on the floor. A plastic-coated cane creation by her friend Rodney De Soos hangs above the space. ✦ Alison's next exhibition will be held at NG Art Gallery in Chippendale, Sydney, from October 28 to November 15. Visit www.ngart.com.au. To find out more Alison's art commissions, contact her on 0418 118 285.



