

Cultural capital

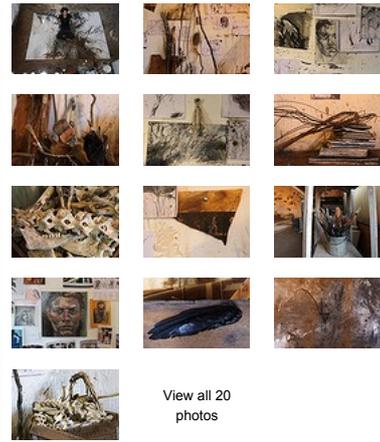
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Darryn King

Inside Sophie Cape's studio

Sophie Cape. Photo: Tamara Dean



The moment of creative inspiration is often characterised as a flash, a spark, a spontaneous flicking of a light switch or - somewhat dangerously - a lightning strike. *Yesterday* visited Paul McCartney in a dream. William Blake and Giacomo Puccini described themselves as careful transcribers of heavenly dictation.

It may be tempting to dismiss the essential nature of creativity as a mystery, or confuse stirrings from within as instruction from above (not surprising, considering the religious roots of the word "creation"). But these are notions that distract from the reality of human creativity, an activity that generally requires more than a blinding moment of cosmic wattage, and demands planning, focus and perseverance.

Just as the individual needs to work hard to sustain their creativity, it takes work to transform a city into a creative capital. The City of Sydney council is at the drawing board. With its Creative City cultural policy, it hopes to reinvent Sydney as a major player on the world arts scene. There are plans to link the city's unnavigable cultural landmarks in a walkable trail, energise new cultural precincts on Oxford and William streets and generally make it easier for our artists to live and work.

As the council strives to build a creative city, six of Sydney's brightest sparks reveal their tips for finding inspiration.

Sophie Cape, artist

Work outside the studio. I begin my works outdoors, living with them for weeks, dragging them around the landscape, allowing them to be rained upon, frozen, washed away, picked at and moved by animals; using local materials of trees, snow, bones and soil. The landscape is imbued in the works. In this way I am free from the constraints of the studio. In an uncontrollable environment I am able to be much more physical, robust and performative in the process of creating the work. It's so important to truly see and feel the world around you in order to respond to it, and find your voice within it. When I am in the landscape, the environment dictates the routine. In making my current show I was caught in everything from heatwaves to cyclonic floods and bushfires.

Know your history. Without artists such as Goya, Twombly, Tapes, Bacon, Kiefer, Nitsch and Parr, I would be utterly lost in the void. You cannot rely on self-expression alone; you need to be able to position yourself in the greater context in order to contribute to the art dialogue. The role of the artist [is] to present an alternative perspective via their unique experience.



Investigate everything. I take inspiration from all disciplines, from philosophy to poetry to theatre, because I feel it's invaluable to stretch beyond the parameters of your own practice.

Trust your instincts. Listen to what resonates deep inside of you. This will carry you through the good times and the bad. In the studio I'm generally nocturnal; working through the night in order to avoid distractions.



Shock of the new: Flume seeks inspiration from new releases. *Photo: Rachel Murdolo*



Off to a strong start: it's the opening image that inspires Kate Mulvany's storytelling. *Photo: James Brickwood*

Romancing the tome: love your subject, advises Thomas Keneally.

Take risks. Do something you've always been afraid of.

Treat mistakes as opportunities. Most things can be turned around. Sometimes you have to kill the work to save it. Inspiration can come at any time so keep your stamina up, don't force too hard, and trust yourself.

Sophie Cape: Magistra Natura is at Olsen Irwin Gallery, Woollahra, until April 21.

Thomas Keneally, author

Let the subconscious do its thing. Insofar as you can use the word "inspiration" at all, the desire to tell a story often begins with a story you heard or have known for a long time. You think, my god, that would make a good novel. That material lies in your subconscious, sometimes for years. And then, like the egg of some obscure creature that will only be awakened by the touch of water from a rare rainstorm, it can then emerge as a sort of necessity. Suddenly you really want to write this book, you really want to pursue this idea. This sense of necessity, I suppose, is what you'd call inspiration.

Romance your subject. You become infatuated with the subject, and you have the delusion you're writing a really important book that people need. The illusion later vanishes like the illusion of infatuation between human beings vanishes over time. Getting through a novel - bits of it can be drudgery. But bits of it are intoxicating, and it's the intoxication that we do it for.

Do what works for you. I know writers are supposed to have a notebook where they jot things down - whether they're aphorisms, nuances of perception or nuances of character - but I'm afraid I don't. I rarely hear a detail, or a sentence, even from people capable of great sentences, that makes me think I want to expand on that concept.

Get out of your head. Often I think the doubt that comes from writing a novel is a result of overworking the conscious and unconscious brain. You should get out - but that's easier said than done. Staying in the dumps is more likely. Given the temperament that novelists have, you're more likely to stay around and just endure and wait for the voices to come back.

No really - get out of your head. If you're wise, you go walking, or you go to the beach. I use my grandchildren. My grandchildren - or any children - reduce the world to scale. They're not interested in whether your novel's going well or not; they're interested in whether you have enough dosh for ice-cream, or they just want to go for a swim. Everyone says I'm a good grandfather but I shamelessly use them.

Kate Mulvany, playwright and actor

Peer between the cracks. I'm inspired by the small stories. I don't go hugely political and epic with my storytelling. Instead, I look for the spaces



Know your market: Swimwear designers Indhra Chagoury and Jeremy Somers aim to please the customer every time. *Photo: Dean Sewell*

within the huge stories - the gaps that people fall through or emerge out of. They're the spaces that get my pulse racing.

Lay the groundwork. Before I write anything, I research everything. You can't write what you don't know. So I make sure I know as much as I can.

Start at the beginning. I usually start from an opening image or scene. I write chronologically, so a strong start usually sets me in motion. I have two cups of tea as I go over my research and what I've already written. Then I start again.

Go out on a high note. I have a rule that I stop writing for the day when I'm at my most inspired - not when I run out of ideas. That way, I'm inspired and excited to sit down and write the next day, rather than feeling blocked.

Bump minds. Explore family secrets. Attend dinner parties with slightly sozzled friends. Read the small articles in the back of a newspaper. Have a conversation with a stranger at a bus stop. It's all about having a dialogue. And listen to the elder statespersons of the industry. They've been there, done that. They're brilliant fonts of wisdom and know a hell of a lot more than you.

Surprise yourself. Take a risk. Kill your hero. Exalt your villain. Take a left turn instead of a right turn. Drop a bomb. Turn it on its head, shake it and see what drops out of its pockets. You might find something very tasty to keep the story moving.

Harley Streten aka Flume, music producer

Listen to everything. Once every month or two I'll get each member of the Future Classic (record label) team to compile a bunch of their favourite new tracks on a USB and I'll swing by the office and pick it up. We call it the "inspiration package".

Find your own sound. Of course, other people's music is super-important. But what I'm really into is crafting unique sounds and textures. I spend a lot of time searching for the right sounds, the sounds that shouldn't really work but do.

Make a plan. Sometimes just figuring out where to start is the hard part. Starting with a blank canvas can be pretty daunting. I like to come up with a concept before sitting down. For example, I recently wrote a song and the concept behind it was about a super-old, lo-fi, dusty sound palette, which at some point would go into the big epic chorus that was the total opposite: massive drums, sharp clean synths with a slick polished sound.

Spend time in your head. Back in school I used to sit in maths class and just write these tunes in my head all day, then I'd go home and try to bring them to the real world. That's all production is. A medium for taking what's in your head out into the real world.

Go surfing. An ideal music-writing day would start with me waking up nice and early and going for a surf. While in the water I'd be coming up with ideas, musical experiments to try when I get home.

Avoid distractions. I'll usually try to spend eight hours in the studio, as though I'm working a normal nine-to-five job. I sit in the studio with a fresh pot of coffee. Sometimes I like to unplug the internet, too; it can be so distracting.

Don't force it. If I'm not feeling inspired, I simply don't try and write. Instead, I'll go on the hunt for something inspiring.

Flume plays the Hordern Pavilion on April 29 and 30.

Indhra Chagoury and Jeremy Somers, fashion designers, We Are Handsome

Keep your eyes open. A typical day's creative session involves trawling the internet, reading books and keeping up to date with local and international magazines for that little spark which sets everything in motion. We have a plethora of archival images and it's so easy to get lost and come out the other side with a new concept. Our memories, imaginations and dreams spill out into our range.

Head to the coast. Some of the silhouette and colour inspirations are drawn from regular beach trips as well as local and international trends.

Kill your darlings. The main obstacle we have creatively is deciding which prints to select each season. We often have so many options or themes and have to scale it down to six per collection. We're ruthless with our selections.

Self-analyse. Both of us draw inspiration from our travels, memories and experiences. Before our brainstorming sessions we review previous collections and feedback from our agencies to assess strengths and weaknesses.

Think about your audience. We really try to create something each time that will resonate with the wearer, conjuring up a memory of feeling. We love the reaction our prints get, not only from our customers and fans but also from our friends and families.

We Are Handsome's Fashion Week Australia show is at Carriageworks, Eveleigh, on Wednesday.

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