



Six questions with Sonia van de Haar

When Sonia van de Haar moved back to Australia from England in 2010, she decided to design herself the ‘perfect job’, one that would combine her experiences as an artist and architect. “To me that meant working for myself, working across disciplines, pursuing collaborative opportunities and working with colour on a large scale,” she says.

Sonia founded her practice, Lymesmith, as a bespoke colour studio working across the built environment. She studied painting at the Canberra Institute of the Arts, ANU and architecture at the University of NSW, but she also studied fresco painting at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, India.

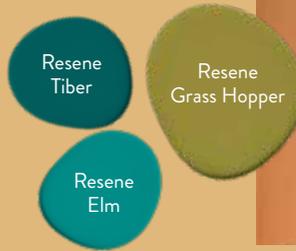
“I had recognised a lack of colour knowledge in the discipline of architecture and I felt there could be an opportunity to create something unique in that area. My first job was to design 12 large chimneys for an eco-powerplant in a city park. I used colour to create a resonance between the industrial chimneys, the park trees and the architecture of the swimming pool within the park. It’s subtly playful, and people really responded to the concept. Lymesmith grew from there.”

“I always wanted to work in an interdisciplinary way, it just takes time to develop the skills to get there. I tend to think of interior colour design as painting in three dimensions, and I think about exterior building colour through a lens of urban design principles.”

Sonia tells us more about her journey, influences, and what she does when she feels stuck on a project.

How has your time in India and your education in fresco painting influenced your architectural and interior design work in Australasia?

India was a turning point. I was a very young art student, my head in the clouds, all my ideas were very esoteric. India was not a spiritual experience for me; it was a hard, physical shock. I had my eyes opened to the physicality of life, of colour, of pigment and painting, through studying fresco. Working daily with the caustic lime plaster had the effect of burning away my fingerprints.



Lime is ubiquitous in Indian life – every family kept a bucket of slaked lime in the house. It is used to cleanse and purify, to make mortar and plaster, for ceremony, for painting and decoration, and even in food and medicine. My studio name Lymesmith comes directly from that experience. It represents the interconnectedness of our bodies with nature, art and architecture.

Whom or what has influenced your style?

There are so many influences, it’s difficult to pinpoint the most important ones, and they don’t stop accumulating. I’m just going to list a bunch of them in no particular order and people can look them up if they want to: Louise Bourgeois, Mark Rothko, Gerhard Richter, Mabel Juli, Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Colin McCahon, Bernini, Rover Thomas, Joseph Albers, Alexander Calder, Gerrit Rietveld, Le Corbusier, the Bauhaus, Nonggirnga Marawili, Matisse, Paul Pholeros, Phillip Thalys, Indigenous architecture, Jorn Utzon, Jean Nouvel’s Cartier Foundation in Paris, Studio Mumbai, Hella Jongerius, Katrin Trautwein, Piet Mondrian, Fiona Hall and Carlo Scarpa. Being on land in the country with traditional owners and always trying to continue learning are influences, too.

Of course, my clients are also a vital influence. I want to work with their influences to create spaces with which they have a strong affinity. This keeps me trying new things and taking risks. I don’t like repeating myself, even when I have sometimes used the same colour in different projects, I would never repeat an entire colour palette in a different location. The palette has to



left: Sonia recently completed this mural, titled ‘Floating Vamps’. It features Resene Ruby Tuesday, Resene Grass Hopper, Resene Hive, Resene Fresh, Resene Tiber, Resene Elm, Resene Red Berry, Resene Adrenalin and Resene Drop Dead Gorgeous. Image by Vikram Hingmire, www.vikringmire.com.

develop from the site.

I have a passion for colour, and specifically for colour that is contextual and colour that carries meaning for a site, place or for the people using it. Clients and architects who value that approach and want to experiment with colour are the ones that tend to seek me out.

Which are your favourite types of projects to work on?

Architectural projects where I am involved from an early stage, so that the conceptual approach to colour and materiality is developed in an integrated way. I always work with long-term collaborators, such as Sam Crawford Architects, like this, and our results speak for themselves.

Also, projects where the clients are involved and contribute to the journey, and where there is enough time for the research into the local context of the site, the environment, history of use, culture and architecture. Everything becomes better with time and care.

And mural commissions. I love painting on a large scale, it’s physically demanding, it involves taking risks, but I am happiest when I’m on the tools rather than at a desk.

Where do you find your inspiration for new designs, both for your 2D and 3D work?

Hella Jongerius said, “it’s absurd and arrogant to begin the design process with an empty piece of paper. Cultural and historical awareness are woven into the DNA of any worthwhile project.”

Researching the site and its context is often my key source of

inspiration. Native flora, fauna and geology are important to me. In Australia, this naturally means developing my awareness of the Indigenous culture of the place, which is deeply significant for me. The best colourists in Australia are undoubtedly Aboriginal painters.

A recent mural project, 'Floating Vamps', is a small example of how research informs my process. I discovered that there used to be a Boot Making School and Factory in Erskineville, very near to this house. While looking at old boot making pattern books, I realised that the proportions of the mural wall mirrored that of the human foot. The mural was therefore based on shoe making patterns, as a subtle reflection of family life – all the shoes that get strewn about in various sizes as the children grow. The colours were developed in response to the interior colours in the house, and to provide a striking and playful focal point in the house. The clients' lives, their colour tastes and local history are woven into the work.

I know this year has been really hard to plan for with so much being 'up in the air' for many people, but do you have any exciting upcoming news to share?

The largest, most complex project I've ever worked on has just gone to tender. It's a new Animal Rehoming Centre in Western Sydney designed by Sam Crawford Architects. I first started working on it in 2016, and I have designed a 100m long screen/ security fence, which is made up of hundreds of coloured metal angles. The colours represent six different bird species from the endangered Cumberland Plan Woodland habitat that's adjacent to the site. I have also designed the interior and exterior colour palettes for the six buildings of the facility. Each building represents a bird, so there is a lot of colour variation and playfulness incorporated into what are actually very utilitarian, shed-like structures. The colours are a key element for wayfinding and public engagement, but they also carry a story of place. I can't wait to see this one built.

What do you love about Resene products?

I use Resene for lots of different reasons, but foremost among them is they have the best colour range. For interior spaces, I almost always use Resene SpaceCote Flat. It has a beautiful finish, the painters love it, and because it is so much more serviceable than a standard flat paint, I can sell its benefits to most clients. **BW**

www.lymesmith.com.au



Resene Duck Egg Blue

Resene Quarter Pearl Lusta



	Resene Half Escape		Resene Hive		Resene Apple Blossom
	Resene Fresh		Resene Paper Doll		Resene Red Oxide
	Resene Feijoa		Resene Tacao		Resene Cape Palliser
	Resene Turtle Green		Resene Ruby Tuesday		Resene Black

above left: Sonia created this colourful and stunning mural for C.C. Babcoq Restaurant in Cronulla, NSW for Tom Mark Henry Studio, www.tommarkhenry.studio, using Resene Half Escape, Resene Tacao, Resene Paper Doll, Resene Apache, Resene Cape Palliser, Resene Turtle Green, Resene Black, Resene Feijoa, Resene Red Oxide and Resene Apple Blossom. Image by Damien Bennett, www.damianbennett.com, and Rachel Kara, www.rachelkara.com.

above right: Sonia paired upper walls and a ceiling in Resene Duck Egg Blue with lower tongue-and-groove walls in Resene Quarter Pearl Lusta on her Ballast Point House project. Architectural design by Fox Johnston Architects, www.foxjohnston.com.au, image by Anson Smart, www.ansonsmart.com.