

A blooming career

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Nikki Barrowclough

Lucy Culliton's prize-winning paintings are coveted by art lovers and her exhibitions regularly sell out, but she is just as at home surrounded by paddocks as she is by paint.



Violet femme ... Red Hot Poker from Lucy Culliton's new show *Bibbenluke Flowers*.

Lucy Culliton is standing in her studio, arms wrapped around a handsome Muscovy duck. She manoeuvres the duck onto her forearm with practised ease, whereupon the remarkably insouciant creature, whose name is Cuddles, adopts a pose not unlike a bird of prey.

"Look!" the artist says. "My falcon!"

Hanging on the wall behind her is one of her glorious paintings of flowers, bound for her latest exhibition in Sydney. She's known for concentrating on a single subject. All the new paintings are of flowers in bottles. There's one bewitching little bunch of daisies that I want to pick and might even have tried to do so if Earl, her possessive, all-white greyhound - who's blind in one eye - hadn't nudged me, wanting a pat. Earlier, in a fit of insecurity, he'd suddenly hurled himself at Culliton.



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Lucy Culliton with her greyhound Earl in her studio on her property, Bibbenluke Lodge. *Photo: Steven Siewert*

"Don't be such a dick, Earl," she'd responded affectionately.

Outside the studio - a converted barn - geese stroll through long grass, ignoring the common garden ducks and chooks milling in the drive. As we leave, trailed by Cuddles and Earl, Culliton's three other dogs fall in behind, followed by the geese. "Stephen Fry once said that it's best to wipe your bum with a live goose," Culliton says with mild indignation. Fry was quoting Rabelais. It's lucky the quote wasn't about sheep. She's very fond of her sheep, who have names such as Map and Marvel - although no more fond of them than she is of Tristan Honey, her enormous white pig.

"My pig looked good in the studio," Culliton says. "We built a ramp to make it easier for her to come in. But she's so big now that it's hard for her to turn around, so she doesn't visit much any more."



Lush ... a painting from Lucy Culliton's studio on her property at Bibbenluke Lodge. *Photo: Steven Siewert*

We do talk art - in between feeding animals. Culliton has become a star in the art world for her serial paintings of "ordinary" subjects, from her celebrated iced cakes on plates, cacti, knitted toys, and roosters, as well as for her vivid, impressionist-style landscapes. Her exhibitions sell out, despite the fact that some of her paintings are now in the \$50,000-plus range.

But her menagerie is an important part of the slightly surreal life that Culliton, 45, leads at Bibbenluke Lodge, her 1930s homestead on the remote Monaro plains in south-east NSW, five hours' drive from Sydney. Besides, almost all the animals have starred in her paintings at one time or another.

The homestead, with its out-buildings and disused, overgrown tennis court, is separated from Bibbenluke village by the Bombala River, which passes under the main road. "There's my Jeffrey Smart bridge," she says, gesturing at the spare, grey structure in the near distance just as a semi-trailer crosses the view beyond the dahlias.

Culliton, who learnt to drive when she was 40, bought Bibbenluke four-and-a-half years ago - painting the homestead's interior for an exhibition last year, aptly called *Home*.

Map and Marvel, now grown up, were the orphaned lambs in one of those paintings, titled *Good Room - Spring 2010*. The bottles holding the flowers in her new exhibition are lined up on the windowsill in that painting - and will no doubt turn up in future paintings, which will please Tiger Bobbin, the local who dug them up while rebuilding a historic stone well at Bibbenluke.

Culliton, who says she likes to "know" her subjects, excels in grouping objects to paint. Sydney artist McLean Edwards, a close friend, says that in the hands of lesser artists, the same sorts of groupings would merely be theatrical. People respond to the honesty in Culliton's paintings, he says more generally of her work.

At the *Home* exhibition, in which everything from the dogs to dolls on shelves appeared, the artist's father, Tony Culliton, noticed a woman moved to tears. "If I'm painting red sauce, I want it to look like red sauce," Culliton says. "If I'm painting a flower, I want people to see that it's a peony, not a rose. It has to look right."

Did the image of sheep in a living room simply make sense to her as an artist? It did, she replies: "Sheep are aesthetic. Map was hand-raised inside the house in nappies. I didn't paint the nappies because they didn't look good," she adds.

Culliton talks about all of her work in the same straightforward, unromantic fashion. "I'm not very good with words. I describe everything in my paintings."

The good room is now also where she and the new man in her life, Jamie Morgan-Bruce, who owns Jamie's Bobcats in Bombala, entertain visitors.

The pair met just over a year ago when Morgan-Bruce came to re-shingle her drive. Their relationship means she's less keen than ever to leave Bibbenluke, she says as we walk through the garden still accompanied by the ducks and the dogs - as well as Donny, the tame magpie, who often flies inside the homestead in search of her, and then perches on her head. He follows us to the vegetable patch and does fly-bys as Culliton, a vegetarian, picks some things for dinner.

"I'm really in Lucy-land here," she continues, "although it's great when I have a show in Sydney because we go to the pub afterwards and I feel like one of the gang."

Ray Hughes, the famously eccentric Sydney art dealer who has shown Culliton's work since 1999, has already told me what a reluctant traveller she is. Hughes likes globetrotting with his artists and Culliton accompanied him to Europe three years ago. On the flight over, via Japan, she missed the view of Mount Fuji through the plane window because she was drawing horses. In Paris, she bought a toy rabbit in a shop and carried it around in her handbag.

Culliton painted *Ray in Paris* for the 2011 Archibald Prize, which Ben Quilty won with his portrait of Margaret Olley - although Culliton's vibrant entry was good enough to win, according to the *Herald's* art critic, John McDonald.

Culliton has been a finalist in the Archibald, Sulman and Wynne prizes, and won the 2006 Portia Geach Memorial Award for her painting, *Self with Friends*. But she stresses that she doesn't paint for competitions, only entering a work if she feels it's relevant. "I'd been travelling with Ray and knew him well," she says.

Her remarkable productivity as an artist could still partly be a reaction, perhaps, to the 10 years she spent working as a graphic designer in Sydney, which she hated.

"I used to walk home to Surry Hills at night crying from frustration," she says. She abandoned graphic design at 27 and began studying art at East Sydney Tech, now the National Art School.

"I'm tenacious," Culliton says of her determination to survive as an artist. Her parents had moved from the family home in Hornsby to Hartley, west of the Blue Mountains. In 2003, she joined them, living in a studio on their property and taking cleaning jobs when she needed money. At Bibbenluke, she's in her element, painting seven days a week. "I love the routine of painting," she says.

That routine was shattered last year when Culliton's beloved 17-year-old nephew, Reuben Culliton - her sister Anna's son - was killed after falling asleep while driving home from the beach. Culliton, who considered Reuben her "borrowed" child, was devastated: "I spent six months in my garden not painting at all.

"When I started again, the first thing I painted was the bottles," she says of the paintings that led to her latest series. "I [did] a whole lot of bottle paintings. Then for some reason I put a flower in a bottle and painted that. It changed the series. I felt the bottles by themselves weren't enough."

There's an intriguing aspect to the luminous quality in Culliton's work. It turns out she's the great-great-niece of the French-born impressionist painter Alfred Sisley, although she didn't discover this until she was already at art school. (Her cousin, Alan Sisley, who's the director of the Orange Regional Art Gallery, is Alfred Sisley's great-great-nephew and was invited to France in 1999 for the 100th anniversary of the artist's death.)

Sisley had a fascination with skies. Culliton does, too. She says that even as a young girl, dabbling away at landscapes, she was always at pains to paint in the sky *around* the branches of the trees. "So there was one bit of sky, then another bit of sky, rather than one big sky. When you paint a landscape, there's wind, heat, cold, insects, and you've got to paint it quickly," she says. "You've got to get the shadows in under the clouds before they move. I love that challenge. I love the skies."

At dusk, we stand on the verandah at Bibbenluke, watching the sky change colour in the fading light. Culliton still remembers the moment as a teenager when she realised the enchantment of light: "It was the yellow light that hits the trees in the late afternoon. Even now, I always stop and look at that time. I feel pressure sometimes to paint it. But then I think, 'I've painted enough today - I'll just enjoy it.'"

***Lucy Culliton - Bibbenluke Flowers* opens at Ray Hughes Gallery, Surry Hills, today. Until May 10.**