

Lucy Culliton

By Owen Craven |
July 25, 2014

Lucy Culliton wants her paintings to be things of beauty that people will love to look at. Her inspiration is her country home and its garden in the Monaro district of NSW, which is also home to her menagerie of pets – from dogs and cats to emus, sheep, horses, chickens and even a pig.

Artist Profile visited Culliton's property and studio to experience first hand the life she has cultivated that inspires her indefatigable creative output.

Routine is a big part of your practice. Can you take me through a typical day?

I get up early and feed all my animals, and I'm usually in the studio painting by nine. I paint all morning, solidly, and then I decide after lunch whether to do gardening or ride my horse.

What is it that takes you back to painting?

If I'm unresolved with a problem or I have a deadline, or if I just feel like painting. Sometimes ... I've just done enough painting and I go and garden.

Your paintings have a freshness. There is a pace and texture to them that is very immediate. Do you paint one work wet-on-wet or do you have multiple works going on at the same time?

One work at a time and I tend to just have one still life or one view. I try to do it in one sitting. If I don't do it in one sitting – say, if I'm painting flowers – I paint in the flowers and roughly sketch in the rest. Then I come back later and paint it in another sitting. I paint wet-on-wet; I don't like scratching on dry paint.

If I go out to paint in situ, I'd do a quick study painting then come back to my studio with my study and a couple of photos that I might have taken out there to make a bigger painting.

With your still life paintings, do you create studies or go straight into the big things?

I go straight into the work. It's still; it doesn't go anywhere. When you're outside in the elements it changes: temperature, light – everything changes too quickly. I can't make a long painting outside successfully, whereas if I have a still-life setting I can take my time.

Something that has struck me while visiting you here is the importance of being a collector. Collecting objects is very much a part of your lifestyle and must influence your work. Tell me about the importance of subject matter?

I spend a lot of time with my subject matter so I like to be connected to it. It does tend to be things that I collect. With my [painting of] flowers in a box, the bottles came out of a well here when we cleaned it out and the flowers came out of my garden. What I am painting now are basically weeds from my garden.

There is still a connection to the weeds; there is still a beauty.

They are flowers firstly, and secondly they are weeds. I have dropped my bottle theme, so now I am putting the flowers in vessels – vases and jars – but more ornate, with tablecloths.

Tell me about the importance of leaving Sydney and then Hartley (near Lithgow), and building your life here in Bibbenluke.

Painting is a part of my everyday life, and so are my animals and my gardening. It is all one. Bibbenluke gives me a space to paint, plant my garden and keep all my animals, which is very important.

The animals will be another subject of my painting. The pigeons will be the first cab off the rank when I finish my new studio.

Do you ever paint on canvas or do you prefer board?

Not often because it's slippery and I don't like the texture of the canvas and I don't like the bounce in the canvas. But when paintings get bigger, anything over a metre needs to be on canvas as board gets too heavy.

How important is scale? Is that why a whole other studio is being built for you, because you feel constrained?

Well, I feel these days that you should go in some competitions because that is an important audience. And I feel competition paintings are more successful when they're bigger and I'd like that opportunity. Also, I think when you have a show it is nice to have some major works.

There is an unconventional perspective to your work yet it still has a reality, an authenticity. How do you 'see' and construct pictures?

I love negative space. I think that sets up the composition the best within the shapes that I am painting, and that is really important. I am always looking at negative shapes, so when I am painting flowers I will make sure that the negative spaces work successfully. I may change my angle to describe the vases better. Sometimes I might look down on the subject matter to get a nice tilt or shape or more effective colour.

Looking at the painting of St John's Wort, the table and cloth on which the vase is sitting is not in perspective to the vase. Are they painted from different viewpoints?

Yes, I am making different views to make a more interesting composition. So, you're looking directly out at the flowers and also looking down onto the tablecloth. I do that when I want more tablecloth in the picture. I did that with the St John's Wort as I needed more negative space.

So, that gives you more room to play with texture.

I don't specifically paint texture. It is just how the paint comes out. I paint wet-on-wet and as I add paint it gets fat in areas. There are areas where the paint is thin, where I don't need, much paint. Then when you get to the tablecloth and there is pattern on top of pattern, you get fatter paint.

Do you differentiate your still lifes from your portraiture and your landscapes?

I think portraiture is the hardest, because when you're painting a landscape it doesn't matter where you put the tree. But if you are painting someone's face, it does matter how big the nose is.

When you're painting your animals, do you take the same approach as with your portraits or with your still lifes?

I painted my animals for the 'Home' show and I did them sitting on the furniture. They were animals as still life sitting in situ, but it was important that you knew which animal it was. So, it was important to make Earl [the the dog] look like Earl. I'm a realist; I like things to look real. If I'm painting food, I want you to know if it's red sauce, it's red sauce. It has to be the right shiny red. So, yes, the animals are important – I have to paint them like I paint people.

The survey show at [Mosman Art Gallery](#) features more than 17 years of work. Do you find yourself analysing what did and didn't work?

When I look at my work I can see different stages; some days I was fresher and faster and more gestural in my painting and sometimes I was tighter. I could see how space or subjects related to that perhaps. Then I look at the freshness of some of the paintings I did in Hartley, where I made hundreds of paintings in the same view, and I got so relaxed and gestural with that. I'm hoping that that will happen in my landscapes again.

Sometimes you look at a subject and think you'd like to try that again, see if you can do it in another way. I'm looking more forward than back on what I've done. There is a lot more to paint, especially the views around the Monaro.

You've got a lot of artist friends. Who are some of your influences?

Yes, when it comes to living artist friends, Maclean Edwards and Euan Macleod would be my favourite people – I get excited about looking at their paintings and painting with them. Dead painters: I just love Margaret Preston. Her still life compositions are based on negative shapes, like mine are. And they have a lovely colour palette which I love too. Then I like Fred Williams and the American and German Expressionists. I love Maynard Dixon's still life. He is a cowboy painter; he did the open desert paintings with big clouds and colour. I also love De Kooning's crazy lady paintings with all that mad paint, and I wish that I could paint like that, but then my work gets kind of tight. I am a figurative painter so I do look at figurative painting. Then I've got Japanese and Chinese paintings ...

... which have an asymmetry that features in your work. There is something woodblock-esque about your composition.

I love that; it's a big influence. It was very influential on Margaret Preston too.

What about Cressida Campbell's work?

I love her work; it's awe-inspiring, it blows me away. It is sort of like decorative cake making at the Easter Show, it's so exquisitely perfect. Her work has a disconnect from mine though – I'm fast compared to her, with her planning and making out of compositions, then the [wood block] carving and colouring. It is intensive labouring. I like to finish a painting as soon as I can. Often there is another flower that is about to finish that I have to paint before it's gone.

You were a graphic designer for 10 years before you went to art school.

I was good at art at school and hopeless at school. So I dropped out in Year 10 and I went and did graphic design. The folks encouraged me to do that and get money and not go to art school. I hated it; I don't think I was good. I was dyslexic, so I used to leave out blocks of type and I'd leave out letters because I was just looking at negative spaces between letters and not the letters themselves. It used to be a very stressful job.

Also I didn't like fulfilling other people's briefs – they always knew what they didn't want. It didn't suit me. So, when I was 27 I decided to go to art school. I didn't have to go to art school. I could have dropped everything and started painting. No one taught me at art school to paint or draw.

So what did art school provide?

Art school gave me a peer group – access to a whole bunch of people in the art world that I didn't know before.

What's important about that? Did it allow critical analysis from people you trusted? Or was it just a likemindedness?

It's more just the likemindedness, because everyone is different and nobody is the same. I was riding horses at the Showground and had my cactus garden at the back [of my place in Surry Hills]. Nobody else did that. I'd ride horses at 5am and then go to art school. Other people would come in late because they'd been up all night. No one was the same but there were people that you met that had a good work ethic. At the National Arts School they were all practising artists that at the end of their day would go back to the studio and do works. That was the most important – the work ethic. You're only as good as the last painting you made.

Do you travel much or plan to?

I've have been overseas to Europe and the States and seen the paintings there, and I guess right now I am here and fixing up this space and I am happy not going anywhere. I have a nice library of books and I do look at them quite a lot and I am interested in what is going on from a distance in the art scene of Melbourne, Sydney or broader. I do plan on travelling – I painted daffodils in Tasmania where I buy my bulbs for my garden.

So, it's about circumstance and the time.

I wouldn't go on a holiday or go and do a residency as that doesn't relate to me personally

How important is drawing to your studio practice?

I don't use it, it is not related to painting. I do like drawing though because it is immediate and I take it with me when I travel.

It doesn't sound like you paint for anyone but yourself, but your paintings are wildly loved.

Well, I love pretty and lovely things, and I want my paintings to be pretty and lovely. I think people like that.

Does it give you a buzz when people get to see the beautiful things that you see?

Yeah, I love that. I love making something like a weed pretty and important; that I can paint a thistle, a noxious weed, and make it look beautiful.

Lucy Culliton is represented by The Hughes Gallery Sydney.

EXHIBITION

Weeds

4 to 30 September, 2014

The Hughes Gallery

Eye of the beholder: The Art of Lucy Culliton

20 September to 30 November, 2014

Mosman Art Gallery

www.thehughesgallery.com