

Lucy Culliton: the celebrated artist who paints to feed her animals

By Caroline Baum

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"You're not afraid of dogs are you?" Lucy Culliton asks solicitously on the phone.

Anyone who might feel a bit nervous at the welcome at Bibbenluke Lodge, Culliton's property in the Monaro, the remote high plateau of New South Wales between the coast and the Snowy Mountains. On arrival, a pack including five greyhounds and two sheepdogs surrounds the car, making it impossible to move forward.

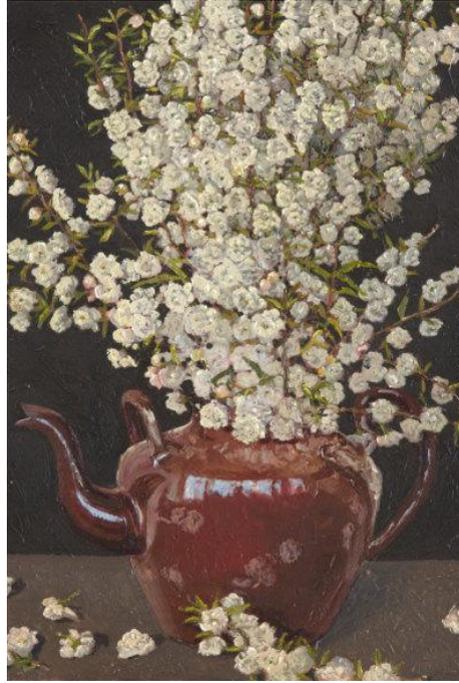


Animal-loving artist Lucy Culliton in her studio.

Striding to greet me in gumboots, Culliton has been picking spring onions for lunch and makes vain attempts to shoo them away. As soon as I open the driver's door, Kitty, a Staffordshire cross, leaps in and sits on my lap before inspecting every inch of the interior. Other snouts sniff and poke about while Culliton chuckles approvingly.

The sun is out but it's still winter and the frost is heavy with sparkle on Culliton's extensive gardens. The weeping cherry and apple trees are still bare-branched. The veggie patch yields a bountiful crop of brussel sprouts, but not much else.

Only a grove of shy hellebores and a scant scattering of blossom bring a hint of colour to the mostly dormant landscape, which will explode in a riot of red and pink dahlias and lupin spikes with the arrival of spring, providing Culliton (who buys all her plants by mail order) with seasonal subject matter. Her recent show of floral still lifes at King Street Gallery in Sydney sold out before it opened, and generated plentiful commissions for more.



Double almond blossom in teapot by Lucy Culliton (2018), from her recent sold out show

Culliton first came to the district when she was eight years old. "My parents had decided to take a year out from city life and live in shearer's quarters on a nearby station. My younger sister Anna had no feel for the place, but I loved it.'

Today Anna, a ceramicist, lives in the Blue Mountains close to her parents, who are both elderly and unwell. After years living in Surry Hills with her sister, Lucy returned to the area following the success of her first big show with the late gallerist Ray Hughes (for which she painted farm machinery from the district) and bought Bibbenluke.

"I needed to get away. I've never wanted children, perhaps because of sharing with Anna when she had hers; our place was a drop-in centre for every mother with a baby and I needed to get away from Ray, who always wanted to have a beer.'

The farmhouse, built in 1937, is unheated except for a wood fire in the sitting room. Initially Culliton lived there alone until she met her partner, Jamie Morgan-Bruce, three or four years ago. His grinning portrait in a high-vis vest hangs in the hall. "He came with a dog, a fridge and a very big television," she says.



Country folk are too time poor to be painted, says Lucy Culliton of her neighbours

"Jamie runs the local earthmoving business, which has been handy. Before him, each time one of my animals died it was expensive to bury them, but now we have the excavator. They're all in one paddock with a tree over them, which is the same as what I want for myself.'

Right now the landscape is bone dry, in the third year of drought. There is a river beside the property and Culliton harvests rainwater and has a plan to put all her animals in one slashed paddock if a fire should come.

The only new building on the sixty-four acre property which includes substantial bush, punctuated by outcrops of basalt and old cottages, is her studio, an extravagantly large space built five years ago with one wall made entirely of glass. On her easel is a nearly complete commission, a still-life of pink and yellow hellebores in a jar. Her vast collection of succulents, a favourite subject, (she is a member of the Cactus and Succulent Society of NSW) is prominently displayed on stands and in hanging baskets, brought indoors until the weather warms. Her skinny brushes stand to attention, meticulously clean. Her wiping cloths, covered in marks like colourful tadpoles, dry on a rusty metal rack. The space is both ordered and disordered in a way that feels productive.

Before lunch, Culliton offers me a guided tour of various animal enclosures. First we visit Tristan, a very large white pig who, despite his name, is female. "Mind you, he doesn't know if he's a boy or a girl," shrugs Culliton. A gender fluid pig, perhaps.

"I got him as a piglet from a litter. I only took one so he would be my friend and not bond with another piglet. He became part of the pack of dogs and lived in the house and came into my studio until he got old and cranky."



Lucy Culliton is an unsentimental vegetarian: none of her animals breed

There are seven horses, three cows, four emus including two that Culliton was given for Christmas, a flock of more than fifty sheep, a goat, a gaggle of geese, nineteen ducks and five guinea fowl. In the aviary, various chatty cockatoos perform show-off dives, squawk loud hellos and whisper sweet nothings in Culliton's ear while perched on her shoulder. Forty glossy-feathered fancy breed chooks, some with heads like pompoms and named after friends, peck in the dirt. There are two hundred pigeons, saved from the fate of becoming animal food and featured in several of Culliton's best-loved works (including a self-portrait, which was a finalist in the Archibald Prize in 2016).

The place is a sanctuary for farm and domestic animals but, Culliton, an unsentimental vegetarian says: "Nothing here breeds. I take all the eggs and I desex everything because I think there are too many creatures on the planet." She does not rescue native animals "because they are nocturnal; you have to get up in the middle of the night to feed them. That's my sister's department; she has a wombat compound."

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Caring for her menagerie is costly in both time and money, which fuels Culliton's productivity. "I'm fast, I can usually do a picture in a day. I'm in the studio by 9am, seven days a week, except when I'm looking after the animals or the garden. The work pays to keep me in Lucy-land and means that nothing goes hungry."

As a result of her dependants, Culliton does not travel, except briefly to visit her family. "I don't go anywhere except Woolies in Cooma," she quips.

Instead, the world comes to her. "The best day was when I got a call from Sam Neill," she says, beaming with undisguised pleasure.

She fills a sunshine yellow enamelled kettle in the kitchen, where every surface is covered with bowls of fruits, arrangements of flowers and the clutter of a confirmed bowerbird. One bow-fronted vitrine contains a chaotic collection of bones and shells, all chucked together in dusty disorder.

"He was a mate of Ray's and wanted me to do his portrait and came here," she says, showing me the jaunty result on her phone. "He came for a day, never stopped moving, spent a lot of time on his phone to Laura (Tingle, his partner) as it was the day Malcolm was knifed, sang along to Emmy Lou Harris. He loves pulling faces, so he sent me lots of kooky photos. And of course, he has a pig," she adds, approvingly. "I ended up doing four pictures of him, including one he asked for as Captain Cook."

Shy by nature, Culliton has no interest in social media, with the exception of Instagram, on which she is active although she follows more than she posts. Culliton's father was a TV producer - "he did the ABBA special and I got their autographs" she says, adding that her taste in music, which she listens to while painting, is for alternate country, Nick Cave and a bit of blues.



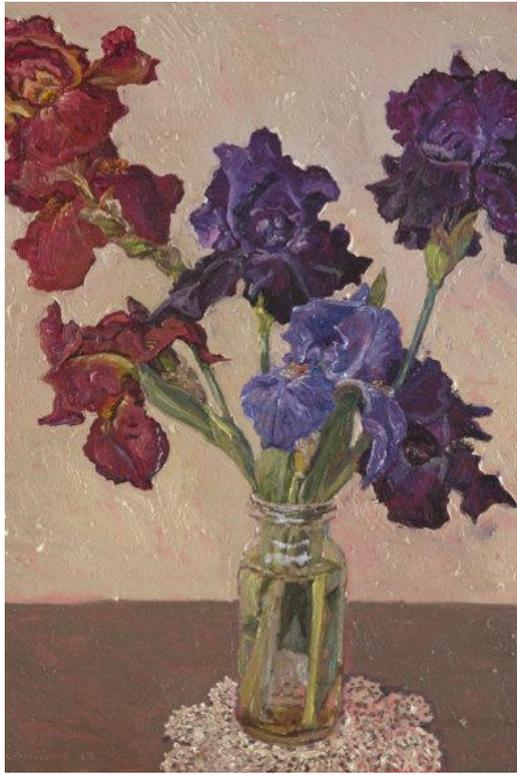
Lucy Culliton's painting of Pushy, Brocky and Bison.

Celebrity has no interest for her; she's as happy painting a goat as a person - perhaps happier, as a goat does not involve conversation - but she confesses that she would love to paint Hannah Gadsby, "so we could talk about our dogs. *Nanette* made me cry," and Costa Georgiadis, the host of *Gardening Australia*, her favourite show (together with Dr Noel Fitzpatrick, the TV *Supervet*).

Why not ask them then? "Oh, I'd never ask someone I didn't know to sit for me," she says, as if the idea were profoundly shocking. "When I lived in Sydney I painted my flatmates and friends and my folks. But not the people round here: country people are time poor."

She still finds portraiture difficult: "You put the eyes too wide apart and it's wrecked. I tell myself to relax and keep at it. I prefer a challenge like painting flowers in a crystal vase, where I have to get the light playing on the facets. In a way a still-life is a portrait, too."

"I love detail and the negative space around and between things. Lately I've also become more interested in pattern on ceramics and tablecloths. I suppose it all goes back to my days as a graphic designer," she says, referring to the period of her life when she was so miserable she used to cry her way home from work before breaking with it and going to the National Art School.



Bearded Iris by Lucy Culliton (2018): The artist enjoys the challenges of painting flowers in a vase

"I was so hopeless that when I was given jobs that involved letters I would leave them out if they didn't look good."

Being dyslexic may have had something to do with that. Despite the difficulty, she persists with reading, a slow but enthusiastic fan of Annie Proulx and Cormac McCarthy.

"All my work is selfish, it's all about me and what's mine. I grow most of what I paint, or I collect or get given it; I've got all my grandmother's dresses, my godmother's crockery, several tables from my aunts, and things like these," she says, pulling a box of very dusty castors from a high shelf - nothing is unworthy of Culliton's brush, as her paintings of padlocks and tractors prove.

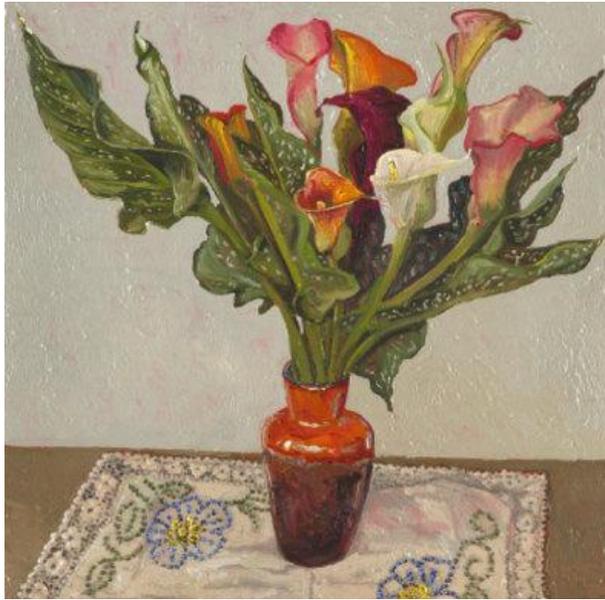
"I hate wastage, I love rescuing," she says, opening the door to an entire room piled high with books and furniture, which includes her battered collection of hats; one is a bike helmet she hot glued with cone shells so that it looks like a hedgehog.

I bite my nails, I have a nervous feeling in my gut always, it keeps me busy.

She has no idea what the origin of her collecting compulsion might be, but admits that by nature her disposition is one of permanent anxiety.

"I bite my nails, I have a nervous feeling in my gut always, it keeps me busy, I am never still."

Fortunately, she has never experienced depression "although when I was a graphic designer, I was beside myself all the time. Painting has given me such freedom."



Calla Lilies by Lucy Culliton (2019)

Despite a high level of domestic clutter, she is also extremely organised: "I'm very punctual about dates and deadlines, I'd never deliver a still-wet canvas."

Housework is not a priority but as in many homes of this era, the parlour is the one room kept almost formally neat and never used, although, like the long hallway, it displays her impressive collection of works by fellow artists, with whom she has done swaps. A large canvas by her mate Ben Quilty dominates the sitting room scattered with dog beds. Her sister's quirkily elaborate ceramics are displayed throughout the house, many of them reliefs depicting naif-style scenes of play, figures and animals. The two women look strikingly alike, remain close and speak regularly.

When they were children their parents denied them colouring books. "That was considered lazy, we had to do our own drawing," says Lucy. "At Christmas, our gran gave us a lump of clay and calendars of pictures of Old Masters and Impressionists. We had a useful box of scraps for making things." Which, in her unique way, is exactly what Lucy Culliton has done, fashioning frugal beauty from modest objects and her passion for the natural world, so that everyone can enjoy a glimpse of Lucy-land.