

ARTS



Lucy Culliton, Bibbenluke gardens, Lupins in Bibbenluke Spring. Picture: Supplied

Well-crafted, honest, gutsy works

Art review

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LUCY Culliton: *Bibbenluke Spring*. Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin. Until March 22, 2020.

Lucy Culliton, a painter in her mid-50s, lives on her property at Bibbenluke in the Monaro district of NSW, near where the Monaro Highway crosses the Bombala River. Here her garden, home and the menagerie of animals that surround her provide the subject matter for her art.

Bibbenluke Spring is an honest exhibition - honest in the sense that the garden and the flower pieces that form the subject matter of the 23 oil paintings on display are all well known to the artist.

They form her backyard and it appears important to her to paint with a backyard mentality, as Pierre Bonnard was to say; in other words, artists should only paint that with which they are intimately familiar. Culliton paints as a local and a settler, not as a tourist passing through.

Without resorting to botanical accuracy, Culliton's peonies, azaleas, lupins, wisteria, magnolias and rhododendrons retain their characteristic forms and are completely convincing in their depiction.

These are quite well-crafted paintings, in a gutsy expressionist sense, with clever underpainting and bold emotive impasto paintbrush work and bright vibrant

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colours. While many of the plants may be exotic to this country, the bleaching light and the occasional Australian backdrops unmistakably anchor this blooming spring garden within Australia.

The other unusual feature of this exhibition, which I noticed shortly after it opened, is that it has virtually sold out - a rarity for art exhibitions today. What is it about Culliton's flower paintings that make them so popular?

If we examine one of the major paintings at this exhibition, *Bibbenluke gardens*, *Lupins*, something of the attraction of Culliton's art becomes apparent. At 138 centimetres by 138 centimetres, it is one of the two large oil on canvas paintings at the exhibition and at \$24,000 it is also one of the more expensive ones.

In the foreground, there is an explosion of colour as the stick-like lupins burst into

full bloom in a chaotic explosion of textures. Behind this there is a profusion of plants, including what appears to be a climbing rose and beyond this is a sunburnt paddock with a clump of gum trees on the horizon with a radiating colour saturated blue sky above.

It is a happy, joyful painting that is easy on the eye and makes no tough conceptual demands on the viewer.

Culliton is not as tight or botanically obsessed as Criss Canning, one of Australia's most popular contemporary flower painters, nor as loose and slapdash as the late Margaret Olley - she is somewhere in between.

I have often noticed that in times of economic uncer-

tainty, the art market turns to the happy, well-crafted conservative feel-good paintings that breathe a sense of security and stability. Culliton's exhibition certainly fills this spot beautifully, where the best of the smaller paintings, such as *Wisteria*, *black vase*, have an atmospheric charm, although a number of the small flower pieces appear a little rushed and formulaic.

In the 23 years that Culliton has been exhibiting since graduating from the National Art School in Sydney, she has established a reputation as a very competent artist with a high profile in art competitions and with a growing band of collectors. *Bibbenluke Spring* serves only to enhance this.