

AUSTRALIAN COUNTRY STYLE

MAY 2001



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LIFE STORIES



Harmonious Blend

In her artists' colony in the bush, landscape painter Elisabeth Cummings aims to inject a sense of both change and structure into her works. By Rosalea Ryan. Photography by Nigel Noyes



Sunlight falls like shattered mirror glass across the broad timber deck. In the distance, the calls of nectar-eating bush birds echo along the gully and, once in a while, a gentle puff of wind moves through the forest, stirring its canopy of dull green-grey leaves.

Elisabeth Cummings leans back from the table and turns another page of her crisp new book. Exploring the biography of a fellow painter, she relaxes in the tranquillity that, in the mid-1970s, became her inspiration, her studio and eventually her home.

"Originally I was living in Glebe [in inner Sydney]," Elisabeth says. "A friend and her husband, Barb and Nick Romalis, owned 100-plus acres of land at Wedderburn [near Campbelltown, southwest of the city], but although I knew I wanted to have a studio in the bush I hadn't even thought of this area until I came down to visit them."

Elisabeth's dream began to take shape when the owners announced they would set aside 10 acres (four hectares) of their property as the foundation of an artists' colony, limiting the number of dwellings on the allocation to a maximum of five.

"I erected an old army tent on the site and set to work," she says. "Eventually, slowly, four other people became part of the group and we formed a company and bought an additional 15 acres to form our subdivision. Now nobody else can build here and we can't touch the bush."

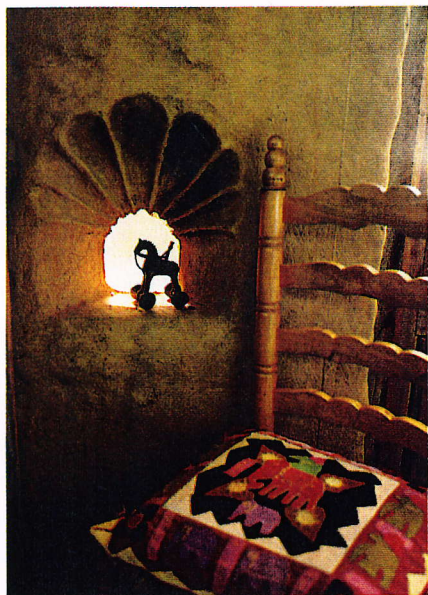
In 1975 Elisabeth — with the assistance of friends — began construction of an unobtrusive stone and mudbrick house set in dense scrub at the foot of a gravel track.

"At that stage I was still living in Sydney and spending two or three days a week at Wedderburn. In the end I relocated my studio from Glebe, and 10 years ago I moved down here permanently."

Views from an assortment of irregularly shaped windows and rough-hewn doorways influence Elisabeth's work: abstract landscape paintings in various sizes, many inspired by her travels through the Australian outback.



Facing page, top Working artist Elisabeth Cummings surrounds herself with works-in-progress and a vibrant home environment that also expresses her creativity.



Above Interesting nooks carved into the walls display a collection of tiny statues.

"I've painted this country a lot over the years," she says. "Also, my work has been about the 'inside-outside' — an interpretation of the interior of the studio in relation to the bush."

From an early age, Elisabeth yearned to paint, with the result that as a 17-year-old student she left her family home in Brisbane to enrol at Sydney's National Art School.

Soon after graduation, she headed overseas. "I was away for quite a while — 10 years in all — and in Florence for most of that time. Then, when I did come home, I taught art in Sydney for years."

In January 1994, Elisabeth's routine at Wedderburn was thrown off course when bushfire destroyed a small studio and threatened the house. Paintings were lost but the residence, with its treasury

of foreign artefacts, survived the blaze. Encouraged by her architect son, Elisabeth then extended the original building to include a semi-detached bedroom-cum-living area and rearranged the main space to incorporate an open work corner. Her former sleeping alcove was reborn as a storage nook for stretched canvases.

Today, jars overflowing with well-worn brushes and palettes caked with paint are scattered casually around several works-in-progress. A series of cavities crafted into the walls hold tools or serve as backdrops for tiny cast-metal statues from Africa, Nepal and India.

Pursuing her fascination with bronze, Elisabeth has been a frequent visitor to a foundry in Wollongong on the New South Wales south coast for the past few years.



"It's about an hour's drive from here," she says. "I teach at the [Technical and Further Education] college in Wollongong during the week so I've been dabbling in bronze-casting there too. But, although I enjoy it, I certainly wouldn't call myself a sculptor."

Other objects — wicker baskets, wooden masks, and clay pots from northern New Guinea — are displayed in wall nooks and on raw timber dressers and tables. Invitations to exhibition openings in Sydney are stacked among piles of books and art works by friends hang against rough, white-washed bricks.

It is her own painting, however, that occupies most of Elisabeth's time.

"I'm always building towards something — another show. My last one was in August, and although I had lots of

'beginnings' I had to work solidly through the last months to finish them off."

Elisabeth says her style has changed a lot, particularly over the past decade.

"My paintings are a dialogue between what is observed and remembered and what emerges through the process of painting. I'm interested in light as a means of conveying flux and shift — the sense of ambiguity in the natural world. Yet I want structure — the thin line between instability and stability," she says.

"I paint whatever engages me. Each painting just becomes another experience — I don't analyse them at all."

Inspiration for her current series includes photographs and reference drawings from trips to the Kimberley region in 1998 and '99: vast red-sand plains, billabongs teeming with

waterlilies, and masses of brown spinifex.

Elisabeth's work reflects the play of light across the landscape. "I love broken light and the beautiful shapes and winter shadows created by the sun," she says.

Sharing her appreciation of the pristine bush setting is Willa, her three-year-old springer spaniel-pointer cross. Remarkably, despite its geographical isolation, the area offers opportunities for regular contact with other artists. Colony members Joan Brassil, John Peart, Fred Braat and Roy Jackson maintain studios on the cooperative property, and Suzanne Archer and David Fairbairn live permanently on a neighbouring block. David Hawkes and his family are on a separate block close by. Together they produce an eclectic mix of the highest quality contemporary art.

