



ELISABETH CUMMINGS

Story Leo Robba



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The artist community at Wedderburn is where Elisabeth Cummings quietly works away. Her beautiful but modest studio, part lounge room, part dining room and part kitchen, is nestled in the bush on the fringe of Sydney. Through every door and window, you look out into her beloved Australian bushland—old established eucalypts, new growth after recent rain, the shifting light and shade. For Cummings, after almost six decades as a working artist, this special place provides an anchor—artistic breathing space and a cushion from the outside world.

When talking about her work, and art in general, Cummings is hesitant to speak in absolutes, careful not to make pronouncements. She prefers to describe art in terms of its possibilities and the wonderment of the journey. In 2010, as suburbia threatens to encroach on this artist sanctuary, Cummings recalls her time growing up in Brisbane, memories of Currumbin, Oskar Kokoschka and Sydney's fledgling art scene of the 1950s.

Can we talk about the early days, growing up in Queensland?

Yes ... the war years were part of my childhood. We were evacuated and went into the country for a while. I think Brisbane was rather threatened, so my parents were worried. I was five or six when the war started but otherwise it was just a normal childhood—just my brother and I. Later, in 1944, my sister was born. That was wonderful to have a younger sister. We lived at Alderley with a lot of bush around and we were very free.

Were the other members of your family artistic at all?

My brother and I drew all the time ... my mother had been a primary school teacher and I remember she got us to draw and we had these little pastel books and she would put a broom up and we would draw the broom and she would put something

else up and we would draw that. That's just how they taught in primary school in those days. And my father (an architect) came home and said: 'Just let the kids draw what they want.' He was quite an appreciator of painting. He'd been in Europe, he knew quite a lot.

So did you grow up with paintings in the house?

My parents collected painting, sculpture and lots of books. And they had friends who were painters, sculptors. Father was a trustee of the Queensland Art Gallery for some years when Robert Campbell was there. As children we went there on Friday afternoons to Vida Lahey's art classes. I think John (Peart) did too, at a later time.

Who would you say were some of the artists of that time that were influential to you?

Ahh ... I knew of Margaret Olley. Donald Friend and David Strachan from the Johnson Gallery. I loved Donald Friend's drawings... so I think I did that sort of thing for a while. I always painted, then my last year of school my parents went to Europe for a whole year. My sister and I stayed with friends. That was a terrific year. I really enjoyed it.

I painted every Saturday with Margaret Cilento. She was a big influence. She'd travelled and lived abroad with her family. She had bright red hair and I remember, she had different shoes on. I was very impressed. She was the one who encouraged me to go to Sydney to the National Art School. Well you know, in Brisbane there wasn't much going on.

At the time, was it unusual for a young woman to pursue an art career?

Oh yes—I think actually my parents were sympathetic. Well I caught them at a good moment. They had just come back from Europe and I had just finished senior (school) and was going to



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be an architect. I said I really want to go to art school instead. My mother was cross with herself for letting me go, but it was good for me.

So early on, which Australian artists really interested you?

The influences started at art school—Douglas Dundas was in charge of the painting department. Wallace Thornton, Godfrey Miller and Ralph Balson—they were very influential. Jimmy Cook was a wonderful teacher. That's when the doors started opening and I looked at different things: Grace Cossington Smith, Margaret Preston, later it was Fred Williams, Drysdale and Nolan. They were all just young then. Olsen and Jimmy Rose, they were all beginning when I was at art school.

Can you tell me about your travel to Europe after art school and studying with Oskar Kokoschka.

Yes a lot is often made of that, my time at Kokoschka's School of Vision—I left for Europe in late 1958. I was only there for a month in 1960—a fascinating time. Young people came from everywhere, America, all over Europe. In Salzburg there's a large castle on that big bluff overlooking the city, where he had the school. Those rooms were wonderful and he must have had a hundred students. We had models continually and everyone was using either gouache or watercolour.

So it must have been amazing, arriving there from the National Art School in Sydney?

It was, it was. A lot of the young ones, especially the Americans and Europeans were very expressionistic, very much [I guess] influenced by the Kokoschka way. That was a big shock for me. Back home, we were into a more formalist way, you know, Cezanne, and that was what I responded to when I was young.

Did it affect the way you thought about scale?



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Yes, I guess so, the whole thing, we had drawn and painted from the model forever. We had Dorothy Thornhill who was an excellent teacher of figure drawing and Godfrey use to come in to a lot of those classes and just draw away and occasionally he'd have a little moment, he was such an eccentric. He'd come into his painting class with his little Bakelite suitcase. It was a sacred moment for us ... we'd all gather round and he'd open the suitcase and bring out these little drawings and we'd worship at the shrine.

Quite minimalist, real economy of line ...

Yes, but marvellous structure, brief, but very strong. That's the sort of drawing I had admired ... but the Kokoschka thing—I hadn't made the jump into that more fresh stuff. So it was all a learning experience. There was also a sculpture section and I think [Emilio] Greco was teaching—interesting to see those studios. It was a good time.

Kokoschka went round to each student every day, he was amazing ... he was an old man and if he liked your drawing he'd put 'OK' on it and gave you a lolly. Being in a place and every day we did that one task ... the figure. I wouldn't mind doing that again. A month of just drawing or painting, or using clay, wouldn't it be fantastic?

So let's talk about Italy, you lived there for a while?

Yes, in 1958 friends were renting a villa outside Florence. A number of us had different apartments in the villa and we met a lot of the G.I Bill American's, young men who'd come from the Korean War to study. I was painting and looking and talking.

Wine, food and art?

We didn't have much money but certainly had wine and food and a little Lambretta. I loved being there. Then I went to Paris for about eight months, then on to London for a few months and

back to Italy where I met up with Jamie (Barker) in the same villa. He had been 2 or 3 years ahead of me in painting at art school. Eventually we married.

Jamie was teaching English, part-time. I still had my NSW travelling scholarship, the Dyson's Bequest [which my uncle found out about and organized for me] so I had four years without having to worry about money. It was a huge gift.

I think for a young artist it is important to cut yourself that time.

Yes it is—to look around, to talk to people and to paint ... I kept painting.

Tell me a little about the gallery scene around Sydney during those student days.

It's huge now, compared to what it was—Macquarie, the Blaxland Gallery, David Jones, that was about it. The Macquarie was a very good gallery and a lot of good events happened there. I remember seeing a Balson show, when I was a student—all non-figurative work. It was so good that period. At art school we did abstract painting with Balson, but that was not central to my painting practice at the time. Abstraction was a stronger influence with the next generation.

So have you had a period where you've been a fully abstract painter?

Not really. I've always been influenced by what I've seen around me. I was semi abstract, always looking out at the world. What was happening in America hadn't touched us in Australia. I was influenced by the French—Cezanne, Picasso, Matisse, Bonnard and Vuillard.

I still get that sense, the yellow that you use.

Bonnard and Vuillard were a huge influence at that time. They were the painters I looked at and funnily enough they are still the ones I respond too a lot. When I travelled, I did love a lot of things that happened with the American painters, de Kooning, Gorky, Milton Avery ... there are so many. It all goes into the pot, as well as the Aussie ones.

You've taught for a long time. What has teaching given to your painting practice?

Well opened it up ... just being with students, watching what they do ... it's really a dialogue in a sense, more than teaching, I really come from my own perceptions of things, what I think about the world around me and so I'm talking about that and the students are feeling their way towards what they want to do. It's a personal encounter.

And yet you want to enter into each individual's world, understand something of what they want to do. Yes, over the years it's been enriching and hugely rewarding. A lot of my friends are ex-students. Teaching has been very enriching. When you're painting away by yourself, it's a lonely business. When you're teaching, you're out in the world with younger and older students, the variety, and the different experiences, helping them with what they are seeking ... yearning for.

Can we talk a little bit about your methods of working? Compositionally there is often a lot going on in your paintings. Do you enjoy the problem solving side of things and do you start with a plan?

No, I generally have seen something that triggers off the painting, a memory or often something I see around me. I do a lot of quick, little sketchy drawings, not big drawings, just lots of little jotting down ideas. I have a whole bunch of those around and then I start a painting and get into a big mess very quickly. I



put a lot of stuff down and the painting then starts to talk to me. Sometimes it's very confused, chaotic and I have to pull something out of it that's going to hold. That really does interest me.

So painting bits out and bringing other bits in? For me, your work often has a sense of collage.

The layering.

Even when you're not using collage, say fragments of memories?

Yes—well I often block out whole areas. There might be a residual image coming through and I just keep working—that's the way I work. So it's a process of finding. I don't know when a painting is really finished but I just say at this point I'm going to stop working on it.

Often I get a sense, there are a series of veils and I often travel across your paintings rather than through them in the more conventional sense. You tend to flatten the picture plane.

I want to flatten it but I also want to go in and out. I want to have both, punching holes in it. I want to have some sense of space too. Not just two-point perspective. Anyway it's always frustrating and I don't find it easy. Sometimes it is, just sometimes it flows but it often takes time to get to a place that holds.

On our trip to the Flinders Ranges in 2007, I noticed that you seemed to do almost 'warm ups'—with a series of quick sketches and then you slowed down as you began to work on larger sheets of paper. Is that your normal way of working in the field?

Yes, it's like playing scales, just getting a feel. I love that feeling

of looking, learning and being in the landscape and some of it's very representational. Being in the landscape—its all about looking and having time to look. It's often very 'look and put' too. It's the way of learning. I love that!

Looking at some of your paintings, I'm reminded of visits to Currumbin Bird Sanctuary (in Queensland) as a child. There is a lightness and beautiful sense of colour in your work. Is it that Queensland childhood coming through?

Currumbin of course has always been in my life. We went there from the time I was born. My Aunt and Uncle had a banana farmer's cottage on bit of land. I would go out and paint watercolours in the landscape during those teenage years.

So with your landscapes do you want to capture a sense of place or is it connecting with memories of landscape?



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I hope to capture a sense of the place I've been in; I do hope to do that. But of course when I get going the painting has it's own life and it starts demanding certain things itself. There is that dialogue between the painting and memory itself. Sometimes the painting takes over and goes in it's own direction.

Lets talk about Wedderburn. How you came to be here, it's importance to your paintings and being surrounded by the bush, it really is a beautiful place, quite special on the fringe of Sydney.

Out of Campbelltown. And then once you get down the gorge and then up.

Past the tomato farmers.

Yes—and the veggie farmers, the orchardists, they were the first ones up here, and are diminishing now. It used to be an orchard growing area, one of the oldest around Sydney.

The Wedderburn land was an amazing gift from the Romalis family—Barbara and Nick. Barbara was a painter and went to art school with James. I was looking for a place outside the city, in the bush and came out here with James to visit. Barbara and Nick got in touch with us later and said 'we want to give ten acres for artists to put up studios'. So that was the beginning and then the others came bit by bit.

It was about 1970. I put up my tent where the kitchen is now and came up at weekends. Eventually I built and then the others built. It grew like topsy really. Later we bought another fifteen acres. We created our company in the 80's and that's how it all happened. It's been a wonderful thing for me, for all of us, to have this place and to have it protected.

John Peart and I and our environmental group, got together to protect Wedderburn from further development. That happened some years ago.

Tell me a little about your trips to work with children in India.

In a little village near Varanasi, a sponsorship program was started by Buddhist nun friends of mine working with a very special man, Dr Jain. He is keen to bring as much education to as many of the poor kids as possible. Wonderful man. He has no money himself. He gets sponsorship, with assistance from my friends and Charlotte, my sister in America. Three hundred kids are being sponsored to go to school. It's a minimal amount of money to Australians. Charlotte and I go and paint with them ... Well, we held a show of paintings by the children at King Street Gallery on William, in October 2008

There is another big bunch of paintings. These kids have never painted; they just have that beautiful sense of colour. This time they did self-portraits, some good paintings.

You'll have to organize another show.

Yes. It's good to make a little bit of money for them. It all helps. It's a bottomless pit of need.

So what's next for Elisabeth Cummings?

(Loud laughter) More of the same! Well last year was a very fragmented year so I'm looking forward to getting back into the rhythm of work. ■

Born 1934 in Brisbane, Elisabeth Cummings is one of Australia's most respected artists with work held in all major Australian public collections. She lives and works in Wedderburn, NSW. Cummings is represented by King Street Gallery on William, Sydney. www.kingstreetgallery.com.au

- 01 **After the wet, Elcho Island**, 2004, 175 x 300cm, oil on canvas (diptych), private collection
- 02 **Birds over Waterhole**, 2008, oil on canvas, 86 x 100cm, private collection
- 03 **A Bend in the River**, 2008, oil on canvas, 85 x 100cm, private collection
- 04 **The Yellow Jug**, 2005, oil on canvas, 70 x 90cm
- 05 **Day to Dusk Wedderburn**, 2008, oil on canvas, 85 x 100cm, private collection
- 06 **Riverbend**, 2008, oil on canvas, 175x 300cm (diptych), collection Arthur Roe
- 07 **Journey through the studio**, 2004, oil on canvas, 175 x 300cm (diptych), collection Arthur Roe

Courtesy the artist and King Street Gallery on William, Sydney