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# Lucy Culliton's Eye of the Beholder survey of her work urges recollection of the long familiar

John McDonald

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Matisse said an artist should look at everything as if seeing it for the first time. No Australian artist better captures this thrill of perpetual discovery than Lucy Culliton. Although she is now of an age that permits a mid-career survey, Culliton has an energy and enthusiasm that puts most teenagers to shame.



Lucy Culliton's portrait of Ray Hughes.

Culliton lives in the hamlet of Bibbenluke in the Monaro, where she keeps a menagerie that is also an extended family, but her survey, *Eye of the Beholder*, is being hosted by the Mosman Art Gallery. Why Mosman? It's partly that Culliton is a past winner of the Mosman Art Prize; partly that curator, Katrina Cashman, has a passion for the work; and perhaps an acknowledgement of the affinities between Culliton's art and that of a famous Mosman resident of the past, Margaret Preston. relook



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Preston was renowned for her still lifes, and so is Culliton. She is an old-fashioned artist who sticks to a repertoire of still life, landscape, portraiture, animals and genre painting. As far as I know she has never had the slightest desire to make a video installation. If she did, it's possible that the Hughes Gallery, which has represented her since 1999, would refuse to have anything to do with it. They love Lucy just as she is, and have recently shown their devotion by publishing a new book on her work.



Spark plugs, 2008, by Lucy Culliton

Culliton is that rare phenomenon: a natural painter. She proceeds from instinct, choosing her subject matter spontaneously, never letting go of a motif until she has exhausted every option. This kind of ability cannot be taught, as it springs from a deep part of the artist's personality. Just read her "artist's statement" in the catalogue. Culliton's naturalness is no less apparent in the paintings than in the way she dresses or the way she cuts her hair. In a business that adores artifice she is utterly free of affectation.

It's possible to overstate the "instinctive" aspect of the work because Culliton is also an advertisement for the benefits of constant practise. Anyone who labours as tirelessly as she does learns how to look at the world with acute perception.



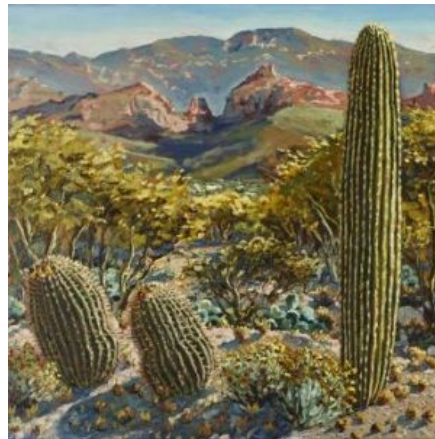


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This struck me as a major point of contrast with an artist such as Joshua Yeldham, when I visited his mid-career survey at the Manly Art Gallery & Museum (until November 2) on the same day that I saw the Mosman show. As an artist Yeldham is no less dedicated, but he turns his impressions into a stylised vision of the world – a dreamscape shaped by his own sensibility. Culliton is completely devoted to the object. She is a realist who makes us look again at those things that have become invisible through long familiarity.

Her most extreme examples are a series of unconventional still lifes from 2008, one showing a mass of sparkplugs spread out on a flat surface; another depicting the wheels from shopping trolleys; a third displaying a cluster of tiny automobile lightbulbs. One could hardly imagine less promising subject matter but the paintings are mesmeric. Culliton's sparkplugs are surrounded by vivid blue shadows that create dancing rhythms. Some of her auto lights are exposed in all their nakedness, while others inhabit little red or yellow boxes. These still lifes are like teeming city squares seen from above, inanimate objects imbued with personalities.

A variation of this theme is *Rocks, paper, scissors* (2002), in which rolls of pink and white toilet paper are intertwined with various types of scissors and rocks. Completed six years before the paintings of sparkplugs, trolley wheels and lightbulbs, it is a more careful, considered arrangement. It shows Culliton working up the courage to make apparently informal pictures.



Morning, Alta Vista, Tucson, by Lucy Culliton

It may be significant that Culliton spent a decade studying and working as a graphic designer before she decided, at the age of 27, to attend the National Art School. Right from the beginning her predilection for thick paint and no-frills composition seemed to reject every tenet of graphic design. One thinks of Nicholas Harding making a living as an animation artist while turning out volcanic oil paintings in his studio.

Her training in design was something that Culliton had to overcome but it has left its mark in the clarity and simplicity that have become trademarks. One thinks of a story about Toulouse-Lautrec, who allegedly exclaimed: "At last I don't know how to draw!" It may be only when an artist can escape from self-consciousness and stop following imaginary rules that he or she has the sensation of making progress.

Having been "a horse-mad little girl", it was natural that Culliton's

first exhibition should have featured horses. One of the few significant omissions from this crowded, busy show is a large-scale horse painting from those early years. Instead there is a brilliant little picture of a donkey, and a portrait of a miniature pony called *Stumpy lollipop* (1999); as well as a *Horse multiple* (1999) made up of 135 small panels.

One series followed another in rapid succession: cups and saucers, shells, plates, food on plates, old trucks, stripey rocks, cacti, roosters, knitted toys, flowers – weeds, really – in antique bottles. Along the way there have been epic landscapes painted in Hartley, where Culliton had an earlier studio, and then Bibbenluke. Neither can one overlook an eye-catching suite of desert landscapes painted in Tucson, Arizona.

It's not an unbroken sequence of masterpieces. Any artist as prolific as Culliton will necessarily produce works that are average or repetitious. Some will feel this survey could have been improved by judicious editing but I can understand the urge to celebrate such abundant creativity. The artist may not achieve perfection but rarely does she make a piece without some small detail that testifies to her superior abilities. It may be nothing more than a brushstroke or a clever twist of composition. Some pictures are tiny, others monumental.

Culliton loves to juggle unexpected elements. In *Good room, spring* (2010) two lambs in the lounge show no interest in a glorious view from a window. In *Lucy's bathroom* (2010), the artist's one-eyed greyhound, Earl, looks out at us from a shower recess, as if channelling Madam Bonnard.

*Knitted dolls, crowd scene* (2007) is another unsettling work. Ostensibly a study of the knitted toys displayed at the Royal Easter Show, it has a slightly sinister aspect, rather like James Ensor's paintings of carnival masks. You'd feel uneasy about sleeping in a room with this lot.

Culliton's portraits are key pieces because almost everything she paints is treated like a portrait, be it only a rock or roll of toilet paper. This is apparent in her animal pictures, which are never simply generic. All the birds and animals in her life have names, and this influences the way she portrays them, being alert to every sign of temperament.


With human beings she is even more incisive – from her quirky portrait of painter Del Barton wearing knickers and red gumboots, to her nude self-portrait in emulation of Picasso's *Boy Leading a Horse* (1906). There is a sly eroticism in these works but also a good deal of humour, as Culliton spoofs the reverential approach that many artists – and their subjects – bring to a portrait.

Her portrait of art dealer, Ray Hughes, is arguably the most arresting work in this exhibition. It's not exactly flattering, but anyone who knows Ray will recognise that air of mischief and menace; the shrewd, twinkling eyes peering out of a red, whiskery face. Hughes holds a spoon poised over a defenceless bowl of gelato, ready to strike. We see the action from the gelato's point-of-view. The attacker's striped shirt and patterned tie seem almost hallucinogenic.

The work was painted after a trip to Paris that took the artist away from her rural comfort zone into the world of international museums and fine dining. It might have won her the Archibald in 2011, if it hadn't coincided with Ben Quilty's inevitable Margaret Olley. Like all great portraits Culliton's *Ray in Paris* (2010) it is much more than a character study. It's a report from the frontline by a traveller who was obviously thinking fondly about life on the farm.

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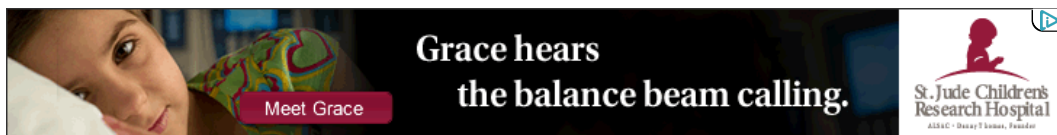


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