

The art of Australia is exceptionally diverse, with Aboriginal works emerging alongside paintings by newcomers to the country from as far afield as Laos and Romania. Photographer R Ian Lloyd and art critic John McDonald capture these new creations in the places where they are forged.

STUDIO AUSTRALIA



Luke Sciberras in his studio, Hill End, New South Wales, the isolation of which allows him uninterrupted exposure to the surrounding landscape.

For an artist, the studio is the engine room of his or her creativity. It is both playground and prison cell, the place where long days are spent wrestling with the muse. For the public, the artist's studio is a mysterious and magical place where an infinite diversity of images are brought to life.

In a new book, *Studio: Australian Painters on the Nature of Creativity*, R Ian Lloyd and John McDonald capture a broad cross-section of artists working in a variety of styles. They also tackle questions that relate not just to this vast continent, but to painters working elsewhere in the world, and at other times. What does an artist do when he or she reaches a creative block? How important is subject matter and the environment in which it takes shape? Where does work begin and play end?

The book from which the following portraits are taken presents an extraordinary anthology of insights into the way paintings are made, and the complex blend of motivation and inspiration that sustains the painter in his or her solitary search for meaning.

AN EYE ON THE HORIZON

In a relatively brief career, Luke Sciberras has found his subject, and ideal environment. "I've always concentrated on the landscape," he says. "I was never really interested in anything else." For the time being, this means one particular landscape: the dry fields and jagged gullies around the old gold mining town of Hill End, where he and his family have bought a cottage. The soft greys and muddy ochres of that tortured earth recur in Sciberras's semi-abstract paintings.

One reason he is attracted to Hill End is its status as a sacred site in modern Australian art. In the 1860s gold rush, Hill End was the third most populous centre in New South Wales. By the time Russell Drysdale and Donald Friend arrived in the late 1940s, it was almost deserted. Melancholic and dilapidated, it inspired some of Drysdale's most iconic pictures. Soon the old hamlet had become a branch station for Sydney's Bohemia. The trend continues today with a lively programme of artist residencies and Sciberras has become a leading Hill End personality. Yet, on the other hand, Sciberras sees his residence as a way of curbing his gregariousness. Most of the time he can immerse himself in his work, free from social temptations.

"For me, the act of painting is the ultimate intoxication and addiction," he says. "But being in the landscape is also pretty special. I'm learning how nature behaves, and how to translate that into a painting. You form a relationship with the landscape, like you do with a person. It provides endless compositions, and challenges with colour. Inspiration comes from a perpetual, unresolved, engagement with this environment." Sciberras feels he is not trying to capture a likeness of the landscape, but rather to express how he feels about it. "It's only ever a parody," he contends, "whether you're painting with a single hair brush or a broom. It's a clumsy parody, but it's something you've got in your system.

"It's the challenge of never feeling you've got it right. You ask: 'What the hell is that colour made of?' You look at the grass—the blandest colour you can imagine. How do you make that?" In his broken-down shed of a studio, Sciberras works spontaneously and claims to never have artist's block. "That's the wobble of a frantic mind. I like to go into the studio with a fistful of drawings and fly into it. It's got to be a vital process, otherwise you're just projecting this egocentric, cerebral thing," he says.



Elisabeth Cummings', *Night Studio* 2004, left, reflects her bold, expressionist style.

A ROOM WITH A VIEW

Success has come late for Elisabeth Cummings, an artist who has been exhibiting her work since the late 1950s. After being seemingly invisible for decades she is now in demand, with private collectors and public institutions queuing up to buy her paintings. A modest person, Cummings enjoys the fact that there are now many people who seem to appreciate her pictures, but it doesn't change anything. She is still "quietly plodding along".

Since 1990 Cummings has lived alone in a mud-brick house in bushland near Wedderburn, on the outskirts of Sydney. She is part of a makeshift artists' community where everyone has their own properties built to their specifications. Cummings has one of the smaller places, an attractive bungalow with undulating walls, exposed beams, and a verandah that looks on to a gully filled with ferns and gum trees. "I could spend the rest of my life just painting this bit of bush," she says, "because it's endlessly interesting and varied." She does, in fact, spend a lot of time drawing on the verandah. A few steps take her back into the studio area, a few more into the lounge and kitchen. When she has a big painting pinned up in the studio she can study it from many angles. Sometimes, out of the corner of her eye, she catches a glimpse of where the work has to go next.

Cummings has been referred to as an "abstract expressionist", because of the loose, gestural manner in which she paints. Yet she is just as happy to see herself as a painter of landscape and still life subjects. She always starts from observation, making numerous quick sketches in pencil or charcoal. These drawings might provide the basis for a large canvas, but she does not follow a rigid blueprint.

"I love putting the first marks on the big blank canvas. It's when I get to the middle stages of a painting that I fall into total confusion. When I'm beginning I may have an idea, a memory of something, but often I just start with random marks and colours; sometimes with the basic lines that describe the image I've got in my mind. Then it diffuses and becomes something else. It just goes its own way, and then eventually comes back to some part of what I was looking for... I like to let the paint, the random shapes and lines, take me somewhere. I don't want to follow one idea right through to the end."

Cummings describes herself as a great procrastinator in the mornings, but when the painting is underway she takes a keen pleasure in the work. By the time the daylight begins to fade, she feels she could go on and on.



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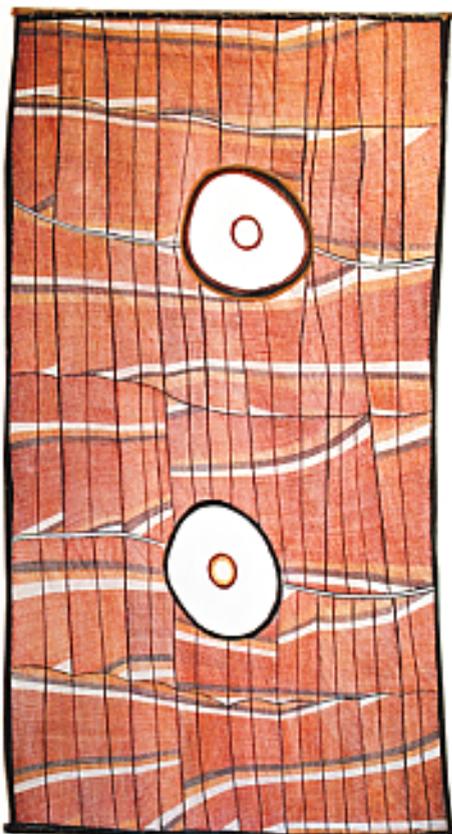


CONTINUING TRADITIONS

To understand John Mawurndjul's force of personality, it helps to have seen him speaking to French journalists and cameramen at the opening of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris in 2006. For ten minutes, Mawurndjul held forth in a confident, fluent manner. The fact that none of the press could understand his language—Kuninjku, not English—did not concern him. The press never wavered in their attention. Mawurndjul is, quite simply, one of Australia's most important artists—a painter whose skills transcend both his medium and ethnicity. He is the only Australian artist to have been given a retrospective by two leading Continental museums—the Tinguely Museum in Basel, and the Sprengel in Hannover in 2006 and is widely acknowledged as the greatest living bark painter.

Mawurndjul and his family spend most of their time at outstations at Mirringkan and Mumeka on their clan lands, but often come into the town of Maningrida. When we visit Mawurndjul, he is sitting on the ground in front of a hollow log that he paints with traceries of delicate lines known as rank. He grinds a little ochre from a stone, mixes it with water and glue, and dips a brush with a few long thin hairs into the colour. With a steady hand, he applies line after line. A typical painting may take two to three weeks of patient, unremitting toil, but Mawurndjul seems to have all the time in the world. He is a genuine innovator who has taken the art to a new level. To compare his small works of the early 1980s filled with animals, to the large, quasi-abstract paintings of the present day is to witness the growth of a formidable talent. The rank patterns on Mawurndjul's paintings come from the body designs used during the Mardayin ceremony—a sacred rite that has not been performed in its entirety for years. The paintings are a way of honouring that ceremony.

With his wild hair, straggly beard and piercing gaze, Mawurndjul looks like a Bohemian. He is, however, an artist who has been embraced by the international mainstream, and an ambassador for his people and country.



John Mawurndjul, *Mardayin at Dilebang*, left, painted using the distinctive rank technique.



MIRROR IMAGE

Although she is known for her success as a portraitist—winning the Archibald in 1999 and Portia Geach in 1995 and 2000—the idea of a portrait commission horrifies Wendy Sharpe. “I’m not interested in trying to get a likeness of someone,” she says. “The pictures that won the prizes have been self-portraits, and I wasn’t worried if they looked like me. In all my paintings the woman artist is me. She usually has my hairstyle, but I don’t care if she’s thinner, fatter, older, younger. It’s not relevant. She’s playing me in the movie, if you like.”

Sharpe has been drawing and painting obsessively all her life. She painted the backdrops for the school play, she stayed at art school as long as possible before launching a career as a figurative painter. Her constant subject has been people and their relationships. She has no qualms about describing herself as a narrative painter, and is amused by the art-world snobbery that finds banality in anything “too entertaining or too interesting”, and assumes that whatever is boring and difficult-to-like must be “intellectual”.

Sharpe frequently destroys and reworks paintings. She will begin by making small oil studies, but the image is not easily transferred onto a larger canvas and she often has to scribble over a composition. The fact every painting seems to go through a “disaster” phase has made her suspicious of anything that comes too easily. “If it all seems to work, there’s something wrong. It means you’re too comfortable, no longer striving. I sometimes think you shouldn’t really know what you’re doing.”

Sharpe’s studio is an old factory in Sydney that she shares with the painter, Bernard Ollis. Each artist has a space the size of an aircraft hanger. Sharpe is a prolific artist, with a passion for what she does. Sent as an official war artist to East Timor in 1999, she did more than 500 pieces. She says she is never stuck for a subject. “Sometimes I feel very disillusioned with what I’m doing. I feel that I don’t know how to paint, and it all gets pretty bad. But I don’t think I ever get painter’s block. Does anyone get painter’s block? I can’t imagine.”



Wendy Sharpe
Man eating, woman reading, above, depicting an image of herself.



ANIMAL MAGIC

Although she paints animals, Yvette Watt doesn't see herself as an animal painter. For her, that title conjures up thoughts of George Stubbs, with his anatomically correct horses. Watt says she is far more interested in the interface between humans and animals. She paints creatures chosen for their anthropomorphic qualities, or even Frankenstein hybrids of animal and human, as in her self-portrait with the body and ears of a pig.

Watt comes from Western Australia, but Tasmania is her adopted home. She teaches part-time at the Tasmanian School of Art in Hobart, where she has a studio that looks out over the docks. It's her second stint in the same studio but it was still hard to settle in. "I spent a long time, both times," she says, "figuring out how to arrange things to make it feel right." Where to put the easel is the easy bit—it goes where the light is best. Watt is one of very few artists we interviewed who uses daylight-correcting bulbs for those rare occasions when she is forced to work at night.

By preference she keeps nine to five hours, feeling that she works more effectively when she sticks to a routine. Watt finds that part of the psyching-up process in preparation for painting, is to clean the studio. "I'll sweep it up, scrape down my palette, and reorganize things," she says. "It's all about getting into a particular frame of mind, more conducive to start the ideas flowing."

Watt knows that her work is heavily informed by her background as an animal rights campaigner, but she has no desire to make paintings that deal simplistically with political issues. "What I do reflects a passionate interest in human/animal relationships, but I approach the subject from many different angles. I do a lot of reading—anything from philosophy and sociology, to books on other artists who are working in a similar field." □



Yvette Watt
Dumb Animal
(Pig), reflecting her fascination with human/animal relationships.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Visitors to Orient-Express's two Australian hotels, The Observatory in Sydney (tel: +61 2 9256 222) and Lillianfels in the Blue Mountains (tel: +61 2 4780 1200) should ask the concierge for information on art-related activities in the region.

Extracted from *Studio: Australian Painters on the Nature of Creativity*. To order a copy, please visit www.australianstudiobook.com.