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# How heart flu changed the way Luke Sciberras paints



Artist Luke Sciberras near his home in Hill End, NSW. Nic Walker

by **Jill Margo**

In the autumn of 2012, Luke Sciberras felt he was coming down with the flu. His joints hurt and he put himself to bed hoping to sleep it off. But in the middle of the night he woke with the strangest sensation.

"I realised that all the aches in my joints had gone and all the pain had become concentrated in my heart," he says.

"It was weird because I'd never recovered from flu so quickly and I'd never felt anything like that sharp, twisting, cramping pain in my chest before."

While Sciberras, then 37, was in no doubt he was in trouble, he couldn't have imagined he had flu of the heart, a condition that had silently crept into him and would ultimately alter not only his mindset but change the focus of his work.

Alarmed, he managed to get out of bed and calmly tell his teenage daughter Stella that he was not feeling well and was going next door for help. There was no question of calling an ambulance because he lives in half-forgotten Hill End, an old gold rush town at least an hour from the nearest big hospital.

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Sciberras in his studio, a deconsecrated church. Nic Walker

## A Mecca for artists

Hill End is a sacred site of modern Australian art. Three generations of Australian artists have been drawn to the flimsy remains of this town in central western NSW that historians say once resounded with 10,000 voices and hosted eight churches, an opium den and an oyster bar. The Royal Hotel in the main street stands as the only survivor of the 28 hotels that thrived during the boom. Sciberras can be found there most afternoons, in the company of locals and an artist or two.

When the gold ran out in the late 1800s, the town emptied and began falling away. Then, one winter in the late 1940s, [artists Russell Drysdale and Donald Friend arrived](#) and were captivated by the district and the town's quiet desolation. With that visit Hill End's renewal began. [Drysdale's famous 1948 painting, The Cricketers](#), is set there, giving the town kudos in collector as well as artistic circles.

In the years since, the likes of John Olsen, Margaret Olley, Jeffrey Smart, Brett Whiteley, John Firth-Smith and Garry Shead have all made their way to Hill End. Sciberras is in that tradition. According to John McDonald, art critic for The Sydney Morning Herald, he's become the nucleus around which much of the town's artistic life revolves. Describing him as hospitable, sociable, a good cook and an enthusiast for other artists, McDonald says Sciberras is "the star attraction" among a group of painters, writers, sculptors, printmakers, potters and photographers who make their way to the town.

But at 2am that chilly night, as he stumbled through the dark to his neighbour, Sciberras was not his ebullient self. He was in survival mode. "My neighbour had been drinking all night and I could smell the alcohol on him but we both ignored that and climbed into the car."

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With locals at Hill End's Royal Hotel, the town's social centre. **Nic Walker**

## Only a heartburn?

The nearest hospital was in Bathurst, a long way away on unlit roads notorious for night-time accidents with kangaroos. During the journey, fearful and in some pain, Sciberras recalled a conversation with his friend, the artist Martin Sharp, who had recently had heart surgery. (Sharp subsequently died, in December 2013). Sharp had imagined his chest open and the surgeon holding up his heart. The image heightened Sciberras' attentiveness and he decided that if this were to be his end, he would watch it unfold.

At the brightly lit hospital his mood lifted. He had a series of tests and was handed a "pink lady", a cocktail of antacid and anaesthetic designed to relieve gastro-oesophageal reflux. It's a quick way of determining in the emergency room whether chest pains have a heart or digestive origin. If symptoms persist, the patient is investigated for a heart problem.

The pain settled and Sciberras was told he had heartburn. By 6am he was back on the road. "My neighbour berated me all the way home saying 'next time you wake up at two in the morning with bloody heartburn ask someone else!'"





'Story', painted soon after Sciberras' illness, "arrived as a great image of my emotions".

Once home, Sciberras rested a little, then strolled across an empty plot to the deconsecrated Methodist church in Temperance Lane that serves as his studio. He used to share the airy, double volume space with his wife, the painter Gria Shead. Sciberras would paint there in the morning and Shead would use it in the afternoons. But when the marriage ended, it became his space entirely.

## Definitely more than a heartburn

He was preparing to paint when the local nurse appeared. "He came into the studio and stopped me working," the artist says. "He told me to sit down because he needed to talk to me about some blood results, about troponin and other things, that he'd just received."

Troponin proteins are released when the heart muscle has been damaged, as in a heart attack. The more damage there is, the greater the level of troponin in the blood.



'Up Shit Creek, Gallipoli', 2014 by Luke Sciberras.

“The nurse drew me a graph of where the troponin levels are meant to be. Then he drew this incredible trajectory, a ski jump shape, and said: ‘This here, at the top, is you! It means something is very, very wrong with your heart, so get your pyjamas because you’re going back to Bathurst now.’”

Sciberras soon found himself back on the road.

“That’s when I started to panic. I began to move very slowly because I thought if I move quickly I’ll have a heart attack.” He adds with a wry laugh: “I did have the satisfaction of being able to say to my neighbour on the way back to Bathurst that I’d been right. I was really, really crook.”

## **'Meat of my heart was inflamed'**



'Buffalo Country, Katherine', 2015 by Luke Sciberras.

It's an unseasonably warm winter's day and Sciberras is recounting the story in afternoon sun in his studio garden. On an engraved stone table stand some beautiful small champagne glasses for the cold bottle of Mumm he's just opened.

“Flu of the heart” typically comes from a viral infection that moves to the heart and causes an inflammation in the muscle tissue. Known as myocarditis, it can reduce the heart’s pumping ability and affect its electrical system, inducing irregular rhythms. Just as it can be mild and pass without lasting effect, so too can it be severe and lead to a stroke, a heart attack or death.

“In my case, the meat of my heart was inflamed and it began to grow and grow, becoming weak and flabby,” says Sciberras. “My doctor described it as an empty football that could no longer pump effectively.”

While Sciberras only spent a few days in hospital, he spent many more confined to his home, which frustrated him. “When I asked what I could do, they said ‘do nothing’. I should just stay calm and in bed for three months. I’m a very active person so that was hell, but it was only intellectual hell because I was ill and physically tired.”

## **Strikes out of the blue**

Unless it has an autoimmune origin, myocarditis can strike out of the blue, says Professor Diane Fatkin of the Victor Chang Cardiac Research Institute. It's common

for the diagnosis to be delayed, although in major city hospitals the pathology results would likely have been available more quickly. “Flu of the heart” is Fatkin’s description and although it has many possible causes, a viral infection is top of the list, particularly with those who’ve been through sustained stress, which can render them more susceptible.

Sciberras, who previously never gave his health a second thought, had been through a period of intense emotional turmoil culminating in double pneumonia. “A great friend had died, I’d fallen out with another friend and other things happened that weakened me,” he says.

Fatkin says once a person has had myocarditis, there’s a 10 per cent to 20 per cent chance of relapse. “It’s not possible to predict who will recover totally, who will have lingering pain from time to time and who will go downhill.

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“This depends on what caused it, whether the cause is ongoing and if the damage is reversible. Afterwards some people continue to have heart rhythm problems and experience palpitations, a racing heart, dizzy spells or may even collapse.”

While there’s no specific preventative treatment, she says some people may have increased susceptibility. “Some may, for example, be genetically predisposed to heart muscle dysfunction or have other medical illnesses or lifestyle factors that can affect the heart,” she says. “Alcohol is a direct toxin to the heart and there is no doubt that repeated drinking can catch up with your heart. Although myocarditis is not linked to alcohol, if someone was predisposed to heart muscle impairment, it may make them more susceptible to going downhill with an acute inflammatory illness.”

In Sciberras’ case, his doctor told him no dietary or lifestyle factors had contributed to his diagnosis.

Over her career, Fatkin has noticed how serious illness can give people pause, time to stand back and reflect on their lives. “I’ve often come across young people in coronary care who have had a heart attack and who regard it as a warning to re-evaluate their priorities and take their lives seriously.”

## **More than a 'mere physical pump'**

Although every organ in the body is critical, none seem to be assigned the same metaphysical importance as the heart. That the heart has an emotional, spiritual and moral dimension is woven into our culture. It’s in our faith, our literature, our music and our vernacular. Professor Peter Thompson, cardiologist and clinical professor in

medicine at the University of Western Australia, likes to consult the thesaurus and look up allusions to the heart, of which there are more than for any other body part. This is “strongly suggestive” that the heart is more than a mere physical pump, he believes. “Whether the science is there I don’t know but it’s certainly real to people.”

After his stint in hospital, Shead took Sciberras home to Hill End. “She was very generous with her time and insisted on helping around the house, making sure that I wasn’t tempted to go jumping around doing things that I’d been told not to,” he says. “I’m not a good patient – I’m too restless. Having been divorced for two years at that time I was touched that there was still, and remains, a tenderness between us.”

As his heart shrunk back to its normal size, Sciberras tried to resume his normal activities. But there had been a change. His confidence had shifted and with it, the youthful assumption of being physically invulnerable. “You realise you are just a little animal and something could happen to you. You see things differently and your curiosity is enlivened.”

Something was gained, too. In his work, which he has previously described as “predominantly landscape based and abstracted”, he found a kind of maturity.

“Before, I would rush to a place and paint the landscape, scooping it up in superficial view. Now I settle in and internalise something of the place, of its layered history – and there’s a scale, a strength and an energy that wasn’t there before.”

He continues: “I believe that the heart holds body memory and is a kind of prism through which the soul is reflected, and my work is now more of an expression of my deeper understanding of an environment, a landscape, an animal.”

## **Paintings became 'of', not 'about' a place**

He began to think more carefully about how he spent his time. “My creative output had to mean something to me in a changing way. I had to learn something from everything I did.” It changed his focus from making paintings “of” a place to making them “about” a place.

“My travels now not only take me out to places but into places, where I can learn the natural and human history intimately and then respond in my way,” he says. “Art that takes itself seriously is an expression of the artist’s placement in or before the subject and is in some way a self-portrait. This may sound egotistical but too bad. I’m not painting the world through anyone’s eyes but mine, and from my heart.”

It was not just his paintings that changed. “This turned me a corner physically and emotionally. It was as though, on a molecular level, my body was being governed by a heart that somehow had recreated itself.”

But the illness threw shadows, too. If Sciberras works or parties too hard, he can feel it in his heart and it makes him uneasy. Earlier this year, it drove him to hospital where the doctor dismissed it as “just anxiety and exhaustion”.

His double pneumonia and myocarditis have left another subtle legacy. Both hit in the cold and together have made Sciberras just a little apprehensive at the arrival of each winter, particularly in freezing Hill End. Around his garden, a master carver has engraved aphorisms about winter into slabs of stone. While he was recovering, Sciberras constructed a Haiku to this season, which is also carved in stone:

*The heart of winter*

*With overripe persimmons*

*Standing in the sun*

He's looking for the bursting life, the joy in winter and it's no surprise that his energetic first exhibition following his myocarditis was called Tu-Whit! Tu-Whoo! It's a line from a poem in Shakespeare's *Love's Labour's Lost*, and is quoted in the catalogue that went with that [2013 exhibition, held at the Bathurst Regional Art Gallery](#). Among the icicles, the milk frozen in the pail, the wind and the coughing, the poem sounds the merry note of the singing owl: Tu-Whit! Tu-Whoo!

Sciberras identifies *Story*, one of the works from the show, now in the collection of businessman and philanthropist Pat Corrigan, as very important to him.

"It arrived as a great image of my emotions coming out sideways. I remember gestating the cow image while I was lying low, and then in a kind of dance the painting appeared and it gave me a kind of lift-off that began my poetic exploration of the landscape and of its history."

## Mortality helps - or breaks - painters

Art writer Anna Johnson believes the experience darkened Sciberras' work. "Gravitas is not something that comes naturally to every artist. You either have to grow into it or be shocked into it. Mortality helps painters, or it breaks them.

"In Luke's case, something deeper than mere pleasure entered his work once he had a brush with serious ill health. Very swiftly he graduated from facility to a more immersive approach. His sense of reverence for landscape deepened and so did his work. It became darker, stronger and just that bit more profound for the blow he was dealt."

Sciberras remembers something Johnson's father, the artist Michael Johnson, said of landscape: "We hate views!". Sciberras explains: "That's what cameras are for and as Martin Sharp said, the artist's job is to make the invisible, visible. These two sayings are very much a summation of how I feel about painting as my eye hones.

"It's about looking into the landscape, not just at it, and turning a place inside out to find its essence, just as the gold miners did here in the Victorian era."

**The *AFR Magazine* fashion issue is out Friday, August 26 inside *The Australian Financial Review*.**

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