

## WHY PAINT A VASE OF FLOWERS?

The great French painter of flowers Henri Fantin-Latour despaired of the need to paint his famous floral still lifes; “I am forced to do flowers. This cannot go on.” Yet he continued to do so; “After all, one has to make a living.” Indeed, to feed the apparently insatiable demand of his British collectors, the artist painted more than eight hundred of them between 1864-96. Their enormous popularity was clearly no salve to his frustrated artistic ambitions which lay elsewhere, in grand history paintings and portraits of the great men of his age.

Some of Fantin-Latour’s attitude can be put down to his natural misanthropy, while much of the rest can be attributed to the prejudices of his age and class that associated subjects such as flowers with the feminine or bourgeois – that is, trivial, unserious necessities that stood in the way of making real, important art. The irony of course is that the works to which Fantin-Latour attached the least importance are today considered his greatest legacy.

Yet is there anything more serious than art that attempts to capture the essence of something before its inevitable decay and demise? What is it that prompts an artist to paint a flower cut from her garden, placed in water to preserve its beauty for a few hours or days before it wilts and rots and gets thrown on the compost? To preserve fleeting beauty for posterity is surely a noble aim for any creative soul, be they painter or poet.

Lucy Culliton has spoken of her urge to ‘rescue’, which is indivisible from her impulse to collect. Her early paintings of grouped objects – toys, animals, glassware, even industrial items - invested value into unloved or under-appreciated things. Her more recent paintings have also been collections of a sort – single images of still life or landscape, or ‘portraits’ of individual animals coalescing into bodies of work to form their own collection. Her living situation in rural Bibbenluke, southern New South Wales, has given Culliton the opportunity to collect anew – not just objects, but also her glorious garden of countless species of flowering and non-flowering plants, and a menagerie of rescue animals that are given as free reign of the house as they have of the grounds outside.

Culliton’s use of her garden as a subject is a reflection of her tendency to paint things in which she has a deep personal affection and investment. The garden she has cultivated at Bibbenluke is an oasis of fecund colour situated in the windswept expanses of the Monaro Plains, with its more muted Australian hues of olive, silvery grey and ochre. It is hard work maintaining such a garden – her 2014 exhibition “Weeds of the Monaro & others” attested to that – in which she showed paintings featuring the weeds she was constantly forced to keep at bay, as a way of ‘paying their

way’. The garden is planted and maintained with a variety of plants that ensure that it changes as the seasons change, with fluctuations in the foliage of deciduous trees and various flowers. The colour of nature is a perfect complement to Culliton’s own love for and facility with colour and rendering it in paint, and it is little wonder that it has become her most consuming subject for art.

Paintings such as ‘Cosmos, Bibbenluke’ 2019 bring the viewer right into the thick of the garden, with a sense of immersion within the dense growth. This is nature as it is experienced most viscerally, with the scent and touch of the plants present and alive. The sky and fields of the countryside can be discerned in the distance, framed by the boughs of small trees that demarcate the edge of the garden and the wider landscape beyond.

Culliton’s images of the Bibbenluke garden extend back to her first moving there in 2007, and are a continuation of her longstanding interest in landscape painting. She has also been painting still lifes consistently since the early 2010s, with this recent series painted over the past two years after a short hiatus, extending her interest in landscape into a more domestic realm.

The still life paintings bring the Bibbenluke garden indoors. Unlike the famous still lifes of the Dutch masters with their improbable combinations of nature’s bounty depicting plants and fruits grown at different times of the year, Culliton picks her flowers as they come into season, painting them quickly over a day to capture the blooms at their best before they close or wilt or die. Occasionally, she will consider the composition wanting and may add additional flowers in a second painting session, to re-balance or correct a perceived compositional deficiency.

The vessels that contain the flowers are carefully selected from her collection or borrowed from friends, as are the doilies or tablecloths they sit upon. From humble glass jars to the most Baroque of vintage vases, each is chosen for its shape or colour or facility in reflecting or refracting light and is as key a part of the composition as the flowers. Together, the forms are positioned, often off-centre, within a flattened picture plane, thrusting towards the viewer with a subtle pulsating energy.

In painting such unashamedly personal subjects - the objects and places that mean the most to her – and the simple joy that they evoke, Lucy Culliton invites us to share her world with an unpretentious generosity and honesty that is hard to resist.

Anne Ryan 2019

References:

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Robert O’Byrne ‘The flower painter who was fed up with his masterpieces’ *Apollo* October 2016 (<https://www.apollo-magazine.com/fantin-latour-fed-up-with-flower-paintings/>)  
John Russell ‘Art view; ‘I am forced to do flowers - this cannot go on’ *New York Times* 5 June 1983 p.29