



ELISABETH CUMMINGS

LANDSCAPES AND INTERIORS

Front cover image: *Journey through the studio* 2004 oil on canvas 175 x 300 cm

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# ELISABETH CUMMINGS

## LANDSCAPES AND INTERIORS

SHOALHAVEN CITY **ARTS** CENTRE

12 Berry Street, Nowra

King Street Gallery  
on William  
[www.kingstreetgallery.com.au](http://www.kingstreetgallery.com.au)

*Shoalhaven*  
City Council



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Robert Linnegar and Amanda Hart

Sally Stokes and Tony Scotland

Liza and John Feeny

Peter Travis

## ELISABETH CUMMINGS: LANDSCAPES AND INTERIORS

### INTRODUCTION

Elisabeth Cummings enjoys the almost universal respect of her fellow artists but is poorly represented in Australia's public collections. This suggests that either the artists or the institutions are getting it wrong – but it can hardly be the artists. Focused on their own work, they are more inclined to be critics rather than fans.

Since moving to bushland near Wedderburn in 1990 Cummings has painted the most important pictures of her career. She may be modest, hard working and self-effacing, but it is these paintings rather than her personality that have won the admiration of her peers and private collectors. One would hope the art museums might interrupt their quest for the Next Big Thing and pay attention to the strength and consistency of this oeuvre.

The problem begins with mere classification, as Cummings's work falls between abstract and figurative schools. It used to be commonplace to hear her described as an abstract painter, but she has always been anchored to the motif. No matter how strenuously she manipulates her surfaces it requires little effort to discover a subject.

That subject is essential to Cummings but only to get her started. She needs the stimulus of the landscape or an arrangement of objects, but the painting soon takes on a life of its own. She works from memory rather than direct observation but those memories will have been formed by her habit of constant drawing.

Looking at major pieces such as *White Billabong* or *Edge of the Simpson Desert*, it's clear these paintings are landscapes, albeit of a heavily abstracted variety. Earth, rocks, water and vegetation may all be discerned, but they appear as planes of vibrant colour or quick outline sketches. We are not simply looking at the landscape but inhabiting it sympathetically. Cummings captures the sensation of sunlight flickering on the surface of a pond, or the vivid, almost hallucinogenic colour of the desert on a hot day.

She wants us to have the sort of experience a photograph cannot provide. Instead of seeing the landscape laid out in orderly perspective we are asked to imagine an environment that keeps shifting and changing as we focus on different aspects in succession. These multiple viewpoints may be compressed into the space of a single canvas but they maintain their distinctiveness.

Cummings will paint a room in the same spirit in which she takes on the landscape. There is nothing 'still' about her still lifes and studio pictures, which combine areas of strong colour and busy, calligraphic lines. These works owe a debt to Bonnard, who was a powerful influence on Cummings's early paintings, but the abstract element is more pronounced. A painting such as *White Still Life* is almost explosive in the way objects seem to push outwards from the centre of the composition. The visibility of the brushstrokes produces a startling energy.

One can feel Cummings's love of painting in every work in this show, but nothing comes without a struggle, as her ideas about a picture have kept evolving, pushing into unknown territory. She is living proof that a true painter can do the same thing every day and always find something new.

***John McDonald***

*John McDonald is art critic for the Sydney Morning Herald  
and film critic for the Australian Financial Review*

**[www.johnmcdonald.net.au](http://www.johnmcdonald.net.au)**

## ELISABETH CUMMINGS: LOOKING AND SEEING

*to **look** is to gaze your eyes upon or acknowledge presence*

*to **see**, is to understand and pay attention, to look past the obvious and take time to thoroughly enjoy.*

It could be said that Elisabeth Cummings had a 'dream run' when it came to supportive family and a great arts education, however having a supportive family and attending the top art education institution in Australia does not automatically confer greatness, that only happens through application, hard work, developing technical and theoretical expertise and learning how to see; to look at the work of others, to look at the world around you, and really see.

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*I think everything you see influences you in some way.*

Elisabeth Cummings in conversation with Peter Pinson 2013

*One's eye is always attuned to relationship of colours and shapes*

Elisabeth Cummings interviewed by Rosalie Higson. *Weekend Australian* Dec 2003

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Elisabeth Cummings has been a quiet achiever, and one of Australia's most respected artists. For most of her artistic life the respect and celebration of her talents has been by her peers, it is only in the last few years that the 'market' has discovered that Elisabeth Cummings is one of the greatest artists this country has produced.

Born in 1934, in Brisbane, to a family sympathetic to a career in the arts, her father, an architect and distinguished academic, with artist and sculptor friends and the home a display case for paintings and sculpture, in her last year in school Elisabeth started painting with Margaret Cilento and from there, with parental approval, went to Sydney and studied at the National Art School in Darlinghurst, East Sydney. Teachers included Godfrey Miller, Dorothy Thornhill, Jimmy Cook and Ralph Balson, the latter teaching Abstract Art for one class a week. Then came the first of many awards and scholarships, in 1958 Elisabeth was awarded the New South Wales

Travelling Art Scholarship that took her to Europe with stays and studies in Paris, London and Florence then toward the end of her ten year stay in Europe she studied at the School of Vision in Salzburg under Oskar Kokoschka.

Back in Australia, in her unassuming style, Elisabeth concentrated on life, teaching at the National Art School and various institutions and being a wife and mother, all the while quietly going about her art.

Her studio, in the bush at Wedderburn came into being via Barb and Nick Romalis who donated some land for artists to set up their studios. This eventually became a company title with each artist owning the bricks and mortar of their own studio. Four other artists became involved, John Peart, Roy Jackson, Joan Brassil, and Fred Braat and all worked independently, coming together socially and to discuss the management of the common company property.

The bush, the landscape, along with still life, have been keystones in Elisabeth's art. The studio at Wedderburn has been a strong influence and subject matter, *Studio in the Bush*, *Night Studio* and *Journey through the Studio* all attest to this.

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*'Journey through the Studio' is dominated by a single colour – red – that is inflected right across the canvas by related and clashing colours: an orange –inflected brown, a deep burgundy, a pinkish red. These clashes and harmonies are lent further sensory fizz by the extraordinary variety of Cummings's marks.*

Sebastian Smee *The Australian* 2 November 2004

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While the bush and landscape at Wedderburn feature, the artist has travelled extensively and it is

the Australian landscape, from *Pilbara Landscape* to the *At the edge of the Simpson Desert*, that mark her recent work.

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*...in 'At the edge of the Simpson Desert', she takes a bold, up-front approach to the colours and shapes of a stark, arid environment. This dynamic landscape is also one of the most recent works in this exhibition, indicating that Cummings is in the prime of her career right now. In fact, she has yet to peak. I can't think of a younger Australian artist who could pull off a large-scale work with comparable verve and confidence.*

John McDonald, *Sydney Morning Herald* 21 January 2012

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Elisabeth Cummings's connection to the Shoalhaven Regional Gallery Collection is through a work from the 1970s, a landscape, *Wedderburn Bush*, which was acquired via a painting prize held by the Shoalhaven Council. (There are also three works in the M G Dingle & G B Hughes Collection that is bequested to the Regional Collection.) Since then the artist has won many awards and prizes including the Fleurieu Art Prize, the Portia Geach Portrait Prize, the Mosman Prize, and the Tattersalls Art Prize and is represented in many private and public collections including Artbank, The Queensland Art Gallery, The Gold Coast City Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of NSW.

A number of commentators have tried to look at Elisabeth Cummings's work and assess it in relation to what it has in common with other major artists and influences, however I prefer the school of thought that it is better to assess art by its unique qualities. The thick layers of paint laid down in clashing, and contrasting harmonies, the battery of mark making



and complex brushwork, all of which would require a complete book to categorise and describe. The artist seemingly veers from abstraction to figuration and back again drawing the eye into a complex lattice of bush strokes and where, as noted by John McDonald, in 2010, the artist 'barely seems to recognise a dividing line between figuration and abstraction' and 'cannot be summed up in a tidy proposition but its vagueness makes it feel no less real or close at hand.'

To fully appreciate Elisabeth Cummings's works requires the viewer's complete attention, the works need contemplation and time to see, time to reveal the secrets held in the whirling paint, to allow things to resolve themselves into curtain or tree, a sand dune or pebble and a second viewing allows greater access or even for a different story to emerge. They are a product of seeing and analysis, the numerous sketches made by the artist while on site serve as

keys to unlock the memory of shapes and colours, to help inform the painting that takes place in the studio. Each painting starts dictating where it is heading as the artist progresses, but each work also encompasses a sense of place as well as the emotions and experiences of the artist.

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*Everybody's struggling to find a voice... there's so many ways to go – the conceptual movement, abstraction, minimalism. And there are people like me, who just keep on painting what they see.*

Elisabeth Cummings interviewed by Rosalie Higson.

*Weekend Australian* Dec 2003

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### **Max Dingle**

*Max Dingle is an artist and an independent curator and writer*

**[www.maxdingleart.com](http://www.maxdingleart.com)**



*JOURNEY THROUGH THE STUDIO* 2004

oil on canvas 175 x 300 cm

The Arthur Roe Collection, Melbourne



*STUDIO IN BUSH* 2006  
oil on canvas 115 x 130 cm  
Private Collection



*BIG ROCK AT THE RIVER* 2000

oil on canvas 130 x 166 cm

Private Collection





*WHITE BILLABONG (diptych) 2002*

oil on canvas 150 x 300 cm

Private Collection



*WATERHOLE* 2008  
oil on canvas 70 x 80 cm  
Private Collection



*WHITE CLIFFS* 2006  
oil on canvas 60 x 70 cm  
Collection of Randi Linnegar,  
Robert Linnegar and Amanda Hart  
King Street Gallery on William, Darlinghurst



*CROSSING OPEN GROUND* 1994  
oil on canvas 183 x 168.5 cm  
Collection of Malcolm Young



*MOONLIGHT AT CURRUMBIN 2002*

oil on canvas 165 x 200 cm

Collection of Sally Stokes & Tony Scotland





*EDGE OF THE SIMPSON DESERT* 2011

oil on canvas 175 x 301 cm

Collection of Liza & John Feeney



*BREAKFAST IN BALI* 2011  
oil on canvas 65 x 80 cm  
Private Collection



*BILLABONG* 2001  
oil on canvas 90 x 90 cm  
Private Collection



*RAIN CLOUDS OVER THE TWEED* 1999  
oil on canvas 195 x 220 cm  
The Arthur Roe Collection, Melbourne





*THE SHEARERS KITCHEN MT MURCHISON 2011*

oil on canvas 165 x 201 cm

Private Collection



*BLUE FLOWER* 2004 / 5  
oil on canvas 40 x 40 cm  
Private Collection



*BLUE ROOM WITH VIEW* 1983  
oil on canvas 51 x 46 cm  
Collection of Tenzin Yeshe  
aka Elisabeth Green



*FOWLERS GAP* 2012  
oil on canvas 115 x 130 cm  
Private Collection



*KIMBERLEY RED EARTH WITH TERMITE MOUNDS*

2013

oil on canvas 100 x 126 cm

Collection of Richard Weinstein & Richard Benedict





*WHITE STILL LIFE* 2013  
oil on canvas 101 x 126 cm  
Private Collection





*MORNINGTON KIMBERLEY 2012*

oil on canvas 1500 x 126 cm

Private Collection



*WEDDERBURN BUSH* 1979  
oil on canvas 105 x 160.5 cm  
Shoalhaven City Art Collection



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