

Elisabeth Cummings and the Wedderburn Story

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This article was first published in South Coast Style Magazine at the end of 2013. With the opening of an important show of Elisabeth Cummings' work (curated by Max Dingle) this weekend at the Shoalhaven City Arts Centre in Nowra, it seemed a good time to share the story of her background with the Wedderburn property that has so influenced her life and work....

Down a winding bush track, on the edge of the south western Sydney suburbs, sits a 25 acre property that holds one of Australia's most amazing art stories. There is no sign, no fanfare - just a rough road, some dry forest and a couple of post boxes to indicate that this is the place where the Wedderburn community of artists live. In total there are 5 studios here, currently housing a writer/poet, a street performer/web artist and 3 painters. And although these artists are all, in their own right, vital participants in the Australian art world, our story revolves around how they came to be here.

To find the South Coast link, we'll need to take a 3 hour trip from Wedderburn down to Bingie, the home of Nick and Barbara Romalis. Renowned for their energy and enthusiasm, Barb and Nick's commitment to projects has always played a part in their local community. But for the tale of Wedderburn, we have to take them back to the start of the 1970s, when bell bottoms and hippy hairdos were all the rage - and when this story began.

Barb and Nick Romalis were in their thirties and active in the art world. Barb was a practising artist herself and the couple often took friends with them to their bush property at Wedderburn to paint. One of these friends was a woman of a similar age to Barb; a promising painter by the name of Elisabeth Cummings. Elisabeth developed a strong affinity for the bush around Wedderburn and began to spend more and more time on the Romalis' property, camping out on her own in an old black army tent and painting from the landscape.

"I'd been away from Australia - in Europe - and what I missed most was the bush," Elisabeth explains, "It's

a physical thing of Australia that's so...so different from Europe. So I was looking around vaguely for a place... a situation where I could build a studio in the bush.”

Aware of Elisabeth’s dreams of a bushland studio, Barb and Nick stepped in with a proposal. They would gift their land at Wedderburn to be used as a living and working space for artists - and Elisabeth Cummings would be the first one to take up residency.

“It was an extraordinarily generous gift and a visionary concept,” says Elisabeth. “Barb is a force of nature! She worked very hard with the council and got special permission to use this bit of land for this purpose in perpetuity. It was official.”

Elisabeth began to build her studio and suggested fellow painter, Roy Jackson as another potential Wedderburn resident. Artist and teacher, Joan Brassill and a student of hers, Fred Braat were also in at the very beginning and began the building process in the mid ‘70s.

“We all built our studios in the bush,” says Elisabeth, “and got on with our own lives, our own work.”

Roy Jackson – today a senior and well-respected artist - describes his life and work as ‘enmeshed’ in Wedderburn. It’s been his home and work space for the past 38 years.

“If someone asks me what has influenced me most in my work I simply point to the landscape of this place. It is really absurd how a moment of fate turns into destiny - human connections and ideas turn into a life lived.”

The final member of the five was John Peart who arrived nearly a decade later, after a suggestion from the already-established group.

“I was auditioned more than most” says John. “Barb came to visit me in Paddington to ‘interview’ me – she wanted to know what side of politics I was on! I think if I’d given the wrong answers I wouldn’t have been in!”

But John **was** in and built his studio in the ‘80s to complete the community of artists. That community now works as a company where the artists all own shares. Joan Brassill died a few years ago and her home remained empty for some time. Recently the group agreed on a new resident for her old studio, a poet, Theresa Bell.

The property has become known as Widdin Weddin – meaning ‘I came, I stayed’. The artists are often referred to more widely as the ‘Wedderburn Artists’. And those young, promising artists of the 70s and 80s have developed into mature, leading lights of the Australian art world. Elisabeth Cummings, John Peart and Roy Jackson in particular, have long and illustrious painting careers. The Wedderburn project that Nick and Barbara Romalis first conceived of in the ‘70s has matured into an influential and much admired artistic community.

“Our legacy of the venture has been years of happy times,” says Barb, “watching the artists work in their studios, enjoying food and time together.”

And for each of the artists, the gift has been life-changing. As Elisabeth Cummings sums up:

“The experience has sustained and enriched my life immeasurably. When I wake up in the morning and look out at the bush I often think, ‘Thank you Barb and Nick’.”

Written by Alison Mackay & Richard Morecroft

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In Memory of Roy Jackson and John Peart who sadly, since the writing of this article, have both passed away.

Picture at top: 'Journey through the studio' Elisabeth Cummings Oil on canvas

Below: One of the last photos of the Wedderburn artists together with Barb and Nick Romalis at their Bingi property. L to R: Teresa Bell, Fred Braat, Elisabeth Cummings, Barb & Nick Romalis, Roy Jackson & John Peart. (Photo courtesy of B and N Romalis)

