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Painting Lila's Garden

Words by Bo Wong
Images by Bo Wong



There's nothing like doing a little thieving around your neighbour's garden – hey, we all do it... but artist Samantha Dennison has taken this to the next level. It started with an innocent lemon that looked good enough to paint and now her local community, including her elderly neighbour Lila, have become her greatest supporters. Cup of tea? BYO secateurs.



Artist Samantha Dennison in her studio in Little Grove, Western Australia



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In the small seaside town of Little Grove, just around the bay from Albany in Western Australia, sharing blooms for Sam's meditative still life paintings has become a generous, community minded launching pad for getting to know the neighbours, orchid appreciation, soil support, art chat – and for Sam, belonging.

On Christmas Eve in 2012, Sam and her husband and their three young children relocated to the small coastal town from the city. One of her clearest memories of that first day was taking in the view from her kitchen window – in front of the distant mountains and glimpses of dolphins on the bay was a eucalyptus tree in full flower. Behind it were an elderly couple, Lila and Gerry, pottering in their garden.

Sam soon turned her garage into a painting studio, where the double doors opened directly out to the garden she had been admiring from her kitchen window. She remembers a feeling of comfort at the sight of Lila and Gerry working and talking amongst their garden.

In snatched moments, between part time work and parenting her three young kids, she tried to continue with painting landscapes in her new studio, as had been her interest when she lived in the city. But somehow, trying to paint powerful landscapes had lost its sheen among the competing and equally powerful forces of family life and work.

What she needed in her painting (and life!) was something more gentle, quiet and subtle. The antidote came in the form of a single bloom in a vessel, placed on a sideboard in the lounge room one morning.”

The sight of it blissfully still and alone amongst the commotion of kids, Lego and family banter was a blessing. As she says, ‘everything else can go to pieces – but this one corner is calm, with beautiful light’.



Green Still Life with White Blossom, Oil on Canvas, 71 x 71cm, by Samantha Dennison

Like many women fitting in an art practice with work and children, Sam had to find ways to make it work. When the light was perfectly landing on her painting subject it was, of course, also the perfect time to be making school lunches and getting to work. Painting straight from the still life setting and getting her Morandi on was not possible. To loosen up the time and give her the space she needed to approach her layered style of painting, she began photographing her small, humble scenes when the fleeting, natural light was perfect. Sam's collection of vessels grew and began to fill all the window sills of her house in clusters, awaiting their moment in an arrangement. What she really needed, though, was flowers.

Sam was offered a show in Sydney, so hunting for interesting flowers to paint with a looming exhibition deadline was the impetus that finally led to Sam mustering the courage to go across the road and talk to Lila (86) and Gerry (91). Originally farmers, they'd retired in Little Grove and had set about establishing and developing this smaller, more ornamental parcel of land. The garden design is Lila's and Gerry is the worker and technician. The garden is a living shrine to the couple's teamwork and love for each other.

With a nearby, reliable library of blooms now available, Sam began to enthusiastically raid their garden (with Lila's blessing!) and paint every day with gusto."

Tending the garden and pointing out when a flower is ripe for picking has become a practical way for Lila to support Sam's art practice as well as creating a neighbourly bond. Lila and Gerry began to attend Sam's exhibitions, inadvertently becoming patrons of the arts through their shared love of gardening.

Since that first big show, some things have changed. Gerry has begun losing his eyesight, so another neighbor, Steve, has stepped in to help in the garden a few days a week.

Lila and Gerry's garden has changed as their ability to maintain it diminishes – there are less dahlias and roses now – but Lila is still very proud of her orchids, open and generous as ever with chats and cuttings."

Sam now paints in a purpose built studio in the backyard, instead of in the old garage – the new studio no longer looks out to Lila and Gerry's – although they are still there – just a 'yoo-hoo' away.



Orchids and Pomegranate, Oil on Canvas, 70 x 100cm, by Samantha Dennison

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