

**T**WO heads appear round the door of the back room of the King on Burton Gallery on a very hot Sydney Saturday. They quickly disappear to wash off the dust accumulated from driving all over the city with an airconditioner that repeatedly stalls the station wagon. Up for the day from her home in bushland southwest of the city, painter Elisabeth Cummings, accompanied by Bess the kelpie-cattle dog, is busy with arrangements for a party for an old friend. She squeezes in this interview between errands — what a busy life for a self-described shy and retiring artist who lives down the bush.

Since she began her career nearly 50 years ago, the 69-year-old has quietly gone about her business of abstracting and expressing what she sees. “Yes, oh ...” she says, and pauses, looking at the ground. “I’m not good at talking about myself.”

Cornered on a couch in the storeroom, the coolest room in the place, Cummings patiently endures my questions. A sudden breeze sends a large canvas crashing down, as if her mental anguish had wrenched it across the room.

Have you always painted, I persist. “I have ... and ...” Cummings looks down. She clasps her hands and smooths her trousers. A small woman with an elegant, calm face, she is a Modigliani model grown older and she’s almost as silent.

I glean that she is from a middle-class Brisbane family. Her father was an architect, as is her brother and her son. She was married and now she isn’t. She never talks about it.

When did you begin painting, I prompt gently. She takes a breath. “I always did, from childhood onwards. And then went to art school and won a scholarship and went to Italy.” Pause. In fact, young Cummings won the Le Gay Brereton Prize for drawing, quickly followed by a coveted NSW travelling scholarship after finishing four years at Sydney’s National Art School.

I imagine her in bohemian gear, black tights and a poloneck, but she won’t be drawn.

# THE FACE

Rosalie Higson  
meets

## Elisabeth Cummings

### ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONIST

“I went to Italy. In 1958, I remember a duffle coat ... Yes, that was wonderful ... wonderful ... I went to Paris for a while, then back to Italy. The scholarship lasted for three years, so then I taught English and stayed on.”

There’s a whole world in the spaces between her words. The quiet young woman hung out with the robust American abstractionists, who were soaking up Old World culture to take back to New York and knock up into another new face of modern art.

She studied with Oskar Kokoschka at his School of Vision in Salzburg. “That was a month of intense activity, students came from all over the place. It was exciting, very intense. He came around to everyone once a day. He was very old by then, but it was a good atmosphere. One worked with the figure and it was very different from the way we worked at art school here, much more expressionistic.”

When Cummings returned in the late 1960s she quickly became known as a painter’s painter and spread the word on abstract expressionism. She has an avid following among fellow artists and collectors. She won the Portia Geach portrait prize in 1972, the Fleurier in 2000 and a swag of others in between.

Critic John McDonald is a fan. “Cummings’s work calmly restates the imperishable

value of a fundamental visual intelligence,” he wrote in 1994. In other words, for her, painting is a life not a lifestyle.

Now her works, always in demand, are at a premium. Her latest exhibition of trademark landscapes and still lifes sold out in 10 minutes in a frenzy of duelling credit cards.

None of this impresses Cummings, who is dying to get back to her mud-brick studio, her two dogs and her bushland garden and shrugs off such mercenary concerns. For her, an artist of the old school, success is not necessarily measured in dollars.

“I’ve won occasional awards. I’ve always taught, part-time. Sold a few paintings. It’s only the last few years that I’ve sold more paintings, so that’s why I feel horrified when you say people walk in with their big credit cards out, quite appalled. If it happens when one’s young it’s probably difficult. I hope I’m old enough to detach, to handle it without it being too much of a burden.”

The art market, she says, is a funny business. “Success can happen or not happen — it’s very fragile, unreal.”

She has lived on the land for more than 30 years at Wedderburn with a sprinkling of other artists in separate homes spread over 10ha, a whole subdivision of refugees from the city in search of peace, beauty and affordable real estate.

It was a philanthropic act from two friends who gave 4.5ha of bushland to a few artists to live on. “We don’t think of ourselves as a community. It all happened, it just grew naturally. And then there were five of us and that was enough. A lot of people call us the Wedderburn group but we didn’t ever set out to be that.”

Life in the bush proved inspiring but

**‘One’s eye is always attuned to relationship of colours and shapes. That’s exciting’**

Picture: Bob Finlayson

hazardous. “It’s a very bushfire-prone area and I had a little studio that was burnt down when we had the ’94 fires. There’d been a few scares, but that one came pretty close. Then the next day a spark must have caught something under that building ...” Her paintings were ashes.

Insurance paid for a new studio, an extension to the house and a fireproof bunker — just in case. “Last summer was dreadful and this summer doesn’t look good, either.”

Cummings proves happiest discussing the process of putting paint on canvas. “One’s eye is always attuned to relationship of colours and shapes,” she says. “That’s exciting. There’s a lot in the world that’s exciting.” Now she’s talking.

“Then there’s memory and experience of the visual world. Memories accumulate as one gets older. All those layers, one dips into the pot. I think that all the influences you’ve ever had — painting, literature, music, people — it’s all there.

“But a lot happens through painting, through the actual work. For me anyway. I like starting and then as I get into the painting, I might get into a mess and you have to work through. It’s hard to push on through the problems that arise. But very rarely does a painting flow easily all the way through.”

With age comes courage, even ruthlessness: “I’ve learnt to make dramatic changes and not be so frightened and that helps one go on instead of getting bogged down into something that gets tighter and tighter ...”

Cummings has lived through tectonic changes in the artistic landscape but has always been true to herself — and that is her measure of success.

“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.”