

ART FOR ART'S SAKE

INSPIRED BY RUGGED LANDSCAPES AND A 19TH-CENTURY FEMALE EXPLORER, GEMMA LYNCH-MEMORY IS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S MOST SUCCESSFUL ARTISTS.

STORY JESSICA OWERS

IN A BUSTLING café on Keppel Street in her hometown of Bathurst in central-west New South Wales, artist Gemma Lynch-Memory sits with her husband Terry. Between sips of coffee and amid the hustle of hospitality they talk about art, and one piece in particular – a landscape painting in dull and moody hues with a mountainous horizon, a hut and a broken, weather-beaten fence line. Its frame is functional, though unflattering, and the whole painting is small enough to tuck under your arm like a fashion purse. A small inscription on the bottom right-hand corner confirms that Gemma painted it when she was nine years-old. “It’s extraordinary that a child could do this,” Terry says, still in awe though he has seen it a dozen times before. Gemma remains reticent, almost uncomfortable, in the spotlight of her own early brilliance.

Beyond the age at which it was completed though, the little painting is remarkable for its suggestion of things to come. There are sky scapes, fence-lines and an old country shack in it that have become iconographic trends of her current work – abstract landscape pieces embossed with deep horizontal colour chords, horizon lines and the use of reference points such as gates, waterholes and paddocks. Her work, rich in colour and distinctive, has earned her \$2 million-plus in painting sales in the past 15 years.

“I never thought about how it was going to support me,” Gemma says of her painting career. “I just had an underlying feeling that it always would. I never once considered that I would be an artist with the knees out of my jeans for the rest of my life. I just thought, ‘I’m going to keep doing this until it gives me a reason to stop.’” That reason never presented itself.

After a childhood spent skipping through paddocks with a sketchbook and pencil, Gemma obtained a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the University of Southern Cross with a painting major in 1992 and a Master of Art Administration from the University of New South Wales in 1994, the same year she debuted *Testimony*, her first solo exhibition, in Sydney. It was an earthy, melancholic collection of nearly 100 small paintings and their abstractness gave way in subsequent exhibitions to more clearly identifiable landscape work. Gemma progressed from painting on paper to canvas. She drew on her childhood and travels for inspiration in later work, using pastel blues and beiges in the late-1990s to create mottled, thirsty landscapes with her characteristic suggestions of outback features starting to slowly appear. By 2001, when the Trevor Victor Harvey Gallery in Sydney opened her *Waiting*

For Rain exhibition, Gemma was painting abstract waterholes and paddocks with clear segregation of space on her canvases, unmistakable horizons and extravagant swathes of paint. Though abstract, her paintings were now clearly definable as landscapes.

Both Gemma and Terry are guarded when they talk about Gemma’s success and there’s a gentle modesty to that. Her undergraduate works were the only paintings of her graduating class that were snapped up by the art faculty and her exhibitions over the years have been sell-out events. “But success – how do you judge that in this country?” says Terry, who has been managing Gemma’s career for the past four years. “It would be hard for me to think of many artists who earn, consistently, six-figure annual incomes from art. Gemma’s a painter and people want to buy her work and we don’t make it any more complicated than that.”

In simple terms, Gemma loves her work. The success has been a bonus for work that she would have done regardless. She has an infectious, boisterous personality unmarred by her success, and in faded jeans, loose cotton shirt and ponytail she is hardly removed from the grounded country girl she was during art school. “I don’t ever remember a time when I sat around and looked at my paintings as a value that was going to be exchanged for money that was going to pay my bills,” she says. “I think I was living in fairyland most of the time because I didn’t have the thought that this was going to be a way of making a living. For me it was just a way of living.”

Based in Warburton, Vic, on a quaint stretch by the



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The Expedition Party, a painting from the Emily explorer exhibition. OPPOSITE: Gemma Lynch-Memory outside the Gregory Hotel, Qld, during her journey across the Gulf Country in 2007.

Yarra River, Gemma and Terry chose to live away from the hub of the metropolitan art scenes. Gemma’s work continued to develop its own unique personality and, after 2002, she was exhibiting annually, featuring canvases with the same striking delineation of space, stronger representations of manmade objects and rich, relentless reds and oranges, shimmering yellows and cool blues. Each one identified a horizon line and her *Incandescent* exhibition that opened at Brisbane’s Libby Edwards Galleries in 2006 featured tiny words engraved onto the canvas in different colours, something she had started in *Testimony* many years before.

But her blending of art with words extended well beyond her wildest ambitions when, in 2006, she stumbled upon a book in

an old store in Warburton whose rust-coloured jacket featured an expedition party on horses riding towards a horizon. It was the diary of Emily Caroline Creaghe, heralded as Australia’s first female explorer who, in 1883 and with husband Harry Alington Creaghe and explorer Ernest Favenc, crossed the uncharted Gulf Country from Normanton in the east to Powell Creek Telegraph Station to the west and north to Darwin (Issue 55).

Creaghe’s diary is filled with vivid descriptions of hardship and thirst, of unforgiving terrain and a relentless search for water. “I have to say, it became a bit of an obsession for me after I finished reading it,” Gemma says. “I was just compelled to paint the way she described the landscape, because reading between the lines I feel she expresses an



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emotion for how she feels about the land and that's what I do. If you read between the lines of my paintings I express how I feel about the land in the way that I paint it and I felt a really strong connection to her because of that."

Gemma and Terry undertook an extensive, carefully executed voyage across Creaghe's route to retrace the explorer's steps, navigating as close to the original 1883 party as was humanly possible. Gemma collected soil and clay textures along the way for later use in the now celebrated and ongoing exhibition *emily: explorer* that debuted at Chifley Tower in Sydney in 2007 and toured the nation last year. It is the first collection of work in which Gemma has unequivocally identified a subject – ghostly white horses and riders engulfed in a sea of textured reds and browns; telegraph stations mottled with the clays and soils of northern Australia and engraved with transcripts of Creaghe's diary.

"The *emily* work is a bit of an aberration," Gemma says. "I'm trying to represent things in more of a realistic sense because I wanted there to be a narrative and communicate the story. There's horses in this work, for instance, and that was a big decision for me. When I decided to paint this series I just felt as though I couldn't leave the woman on horseback out of it. The landscape she is sitting in is still essentially abstract I think, but there are clearly identifiable elements now."

Gemma's *emily* paintings are extraordinary. There is something silent and haunting about her explorers pushing their way west across her textured layers with Creaghe's diary extracts hovering like a voiceless storyteller above them. If the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, as French novelist Marcel Proust wrote, but in having new eyes, then Gemma has borne new vision. Her abstract work has blended to Creaghe's story



with seamless ease and she hasn't, for a second, compromised the linear styles that made her so successful in the first place.

"Between school and university I took a gap year and I had actually been accepted to study psychology," Gemma says, "but during that year I painted all the way through and by the end of it I just thought, 'How could I not do this all day every day?'. That determination, her tenacity and her simple, unequivocal love of painting have stood her in excellent stead. "I was born a painter," she says. Her work, without a doubt, is art for art's sake.

Gemma will be exhibiting her paintings at two upcoming exhibitions: March 7–April 4 at Cudgegong Gallery, 102 Herbert Street, Gulgong, NSW, phone (02) 6374 1630 and March 10–20 at Chifley Tower lobby, 2 Chifley Square, Sydney.



Melting The Iron is one of Gemma's early works from an exhibition in 1998. TOP: Terry and Gemma Lynch-Memory collect soil samples outside of Powell Creek, NT, that will later be used in the *emily: explorer* paintings. OPPOSITE: Gemma works on a canvas in her studio at home in Warburton, Vic.



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