

AUSTRALIAN GARDEN HISTORY SOCIETY
NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION
SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS BRANCH



Photo: provided by Ruth Bailey

Interviewee:	ELAINE MUSGRAVE
Interviewer:	RUTH BAILEY
Date of interview:	27 JANUARY 2020
Place of Interview:	THE KAYA, WILDES MEADOW NSW
Details:	TOTAL 19 MINS
Restrictions on use:	NIL
All quotations:	SHOULD BE VERIFIED AGAINST THE ORIGINAL SPOKEN WORD IN THE INTERVIEW

This is an oral interview with Elaine Musgrave, Botanical Artist and spouse of Les Musgrave, at The Kaya, Wildes Meadow, New South Wales. Elaine will be speaking with me Ruth Bailey, for the Australian Garden History Society (AGHS) as part of a collaboration with the Berrima District Museum (BDM) to create an exhibition of 8 significant gardens of the Southern Highlands, to be showcased at the BDM digital gallery 'Story Centre'.

Elaine, on behalf of the AGHS and the BDM I would like to thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview.
(Elaine's comments in *italics*).

It's my pleasure.

This interview is taking place, today 27 January 2020 commencing at approximately 10 a.m.

This interview is intended to cover Elaine's career as a botanical artist and how her craft has developed over time. Also this recording will be kept at the National Management Office of the AGHS in Melbourne as well as in the Bowral Library.

So, let's start this with some biographical details:

Can you tell me where you were born?

I was born in Sydney.

In a particular part of Sydney? Which suburb?

I was living in Northbridge, brought up in Northbridge.

That's on the North Shore, a really lovely area, on the water?

Yes, a lovely area of Sydney.

And how many siblings do you have?

Two, I have an older sister and a younger brother.

And are they living locally, or are they still in Sydney?

One is living in the Hawkesbury area, and the other is in Queensland.

OK, so they are a little bit distanced from you.

Yes, they are spread out now.

And where did you go to school?

I went to school in Sydney at Cremorne Girls High.

And do you have any tertiary qualifications?

Well, I went straight from school. I was always going to be an artist, always. My parents thought I should do a secretarial course, so I did that, and from there I went straight to Art School.

And was that in Sydney?

That was in Sydney. I started at North Sydney. It was technical colleges in those days, North Sydney Technical College for a couple of years, and then I got a job in an art studio and I finished the course at night at East Sydney Tech, which is now the National Art School.

Do you mind me asking when that was?

I don't mind you asking, but I don't think I can remember when that was.

No problem, and who were the greatest influences on you as a young budding artist, or a young person?

Well, chiefly my mother. My mother was an artist and that's obviously where I got the idea from I suppose. Her family were all artists also, so my mother's two sisters were artists, and her mother was an artist, so it was almost a natural progression I think.

Oh, so it was predetermined.

Yes, I think it was. So, the main influence would have been my mother and my grandmother. I can remember sitting with my grandmother particularly at her table in the breakfast room, drawing, drawing, drawing yes, I was always drawing.

And were they botanical artists?

No, my grandmother was a landscape artist, one of my aunts was a sculptor, my mother was a portrait painter.

So where did you get your influence to develop botanical art?

That was from Les.

Oh really?

Well I went into commercial art. I was working in art studios and then I was lucky enough to get a job at John Sands doing greeting cards and wrapping papers, and so a lot of that work was floral, not all of it, we did baby cards and wedding cards, but a lot of it was floral. Then, when I married Les I became more interested in the plants and the accuracy. I wasn't very accurate with the botanical detail with cards.

Right, interesting. So your passion started very young then, because of your mother's influence and your passion for art, the little person you were, doing lots of paintings, always drawing and painting. That's wonderful.

Yes, always drawing.

So, what's influenced your painting style? Is it family, or is it Les, or is it research or travel or friends?

I think it's something that's just grown really. The influence has come from a lot of different areas, and I think with botanical, it's such a precise art form, that you learn the style I think, as you go along. I couldn't say there's been a particular influence anywhere. I think you just gather it, I think you do.

Right, oh that's lovely. And what medium do you prefer to use when painting?

5:00

Water colour, it's always water colour and I like to introduce graphite quite a lot as well. It just adds another dimension, a bit more interest.

Why water colour? I'm not an artist so you'll have to explain to me why that's your choice.

Water colour is really the traditional medium for botanical work. Some people use acrylic but you can get a lot finer work in water colour and there's also a certain translucency that you can get with water colour that you don't get in oils, so that's usually the way it's done.

And you said it's graphite pencil? So, you do a lot of drawing as well, without colour?

I like to have some drawing in the background. Not always, but I started out that way, just something that I always thought I liked, a little bit of something in the background.

It gives a nice contrast.

Yes, it does.

So, it makes the painting itself pop a little more.

Yes, there's more interest.

So, coming to a little bit of history about how you came to The Kaya. So where did you live before coming here, to give us an idea of your experience?

We lived at Kurrajong Heights in a lovely big garden there.

Yes, so that was where we started out. So, Les developed a very large garden there. After we'd been there some years, we opened the garden to the public and my studio gallery to the public.

So, you started to do a lot more botanical work then, or were you doing a lot more botanical work prior to that?

No, I really started when we lived there. We were there for 30 years. So, as our children were growing up I was doing commercial art and then as they got a little bit older and I was able to spread out a little bit, I went into the botanical.

Right, a bit more time. It's very time consuming I gather, is that right?

Yes, it is.

And you need a lot of concentration?

Yes.

Are there any particular subjects you like to draw?

I can't really say that there's a particular, I don't really go back to the same subject. There is so much out there to be painted and drawn that once I've done it, I prefer to move on. I have done a number of hellebore, I love hellebore and I think they're so gentle, they almost need their little faces to be painted because they've always got their heads hung.

Yes, that's true, they are gentle little plants, they're beautiful.

Yes, I've also done a few Waratah. Completely different. I like the structure of a Waratah, so, I love doing anything to do with fungus, lichen, anything that's dead and dying. Yes, it's got a lot of character.

So, character, that's what you're looking to bring out in your art.

Yes, character.

Right. Excellent, and how do you identify the specimens? Do you walk the garden, or does Les find them?

I do, well Les does find them sometimes, but mostly I walk the garden when it's time to start a new painting. I'll wander the garden. Sometimes they jump out and grab me at a nursery, or somewhere else, or in someone's home, in someone else's garden. But a lot of it comes from here. They identify themselves to me I think, because I can just wander the garden and suddenly I'll see, I can almost see the painting. I see the plant and I see the painting and I get excited. But I might've walked past that same plant last year and didn't, but it just appeals at the time.

So how do you keep your plants fresh? When you're selecting something from the garden, do you bring it in and put it in water? And then do a drawing to keep that freshness?

Yes, exactly, and it's wonderful if I have another specimen in the garden that I can carry on with. But I'll do my initial drawing. The drawing up takes a long time, so I've always have the plant beside me so, I do, I bring it inside and put it in water, start working as quickly as I can. I do take some photos, but I don't like working from photos. They're a bit of a reference point but I can't really work from them.

You'd lose some of the detail?

Yes, you can't see it. You've got to have the plant there, to turn it upside down, inside out and have a really good look at it. I love to get a specimen in a pot, as that will last a long time. Occasionally I've been brave enough to ask Les to dig something up out of the garden for me. He will sometimes!

Oh, that's funny. But it actually makes sense, because the freshness in a plant, it gives a different look. They're more plump.

It does, completely, they're happy.

Yes, and you can capture that in your drawings.

Hopefully, yes.

I've got to then do colour swatches and I'll do a little tiny drawing of something, or a section and get the colour. If I think I'm going to lose the plant, if there's another one in the garden, then I don't worry, I can get the colour from that.

So, you have your palette of colours and then you create them – I'm not an artist so I don't understand how this is done.

Yes, so I mix the colour and then put it down on the same paper that I'll be using for the painting eventually, so the colour's the same. Then I'll write a little note about how I've mixed it.

So, do you use a particular kind of paper?

Mmm, always use a smooth watercolour paper.

OK, so that keeps the colour richer, it doesn't absorb at all, is that what happens?

It does, I always use, it's always smooth to get the really fine lines.

Ah, the things you learn about botanical artistry.

So, coming back to a day in the life of you here at The Kaya, what's a normal day for you, if there is such a thing?

Well, there is a normal day, and really, because there's so much work to be done in the garden, we're home most of the time. But a normal day for me, once I get the boring household chores out of the way, if I can get down to the studio by 10 o'clock every day, everyday that we're home, I'm down there.

So, it's a discipline in many ways. It's a commitment that you make to yourself.

Yes it is. I don't see it as a commitment or a discipline, but I suppose it is. I love doing it, so the sooner I can get down to the studio the better.

12:11

I walk into the studio and there's a big sigh, 'I'm here, I can do my thing'. And then I just get into whatever I'm working on at the time.

The studio is separate from the house, so it's like going to a private little space.

Yes, I think that suits me. I've tried working in the home at other times and I find I'm always thinking about the rooms that need vacuuming or the washing that needs to be done. If I'm down in the studio I don't think about it.

Right, it becomes totally absorbing.

It is a workspace I suppose.

It's a lovely workspace, it's very calm and very pleasant to be down there which is really lovely.

Yes, I think that's why the sigh. It feels calm, I walk in there and yes, it's my space.

And then your mind relaxes and then you can do that fine work because it takes a lot of concentration I would imagine.

Yes it does, and it has to be tidy as well. If I've left it in a bit of a mess I do have to tidy up first before I can start.

A clean slate?

Yes.

I understand.

So, what is your favourite area in the garden?

I don't have a favourite area, I love the whole garden, and I think at different times of the year, maybe different areas maybe, but no, I just think it's a beautiful garden and it just flows and you just go from one to the other, I don't have a favourite.

So, Les has designed it so there's always something in flower I gather, is that right?

Yes, well there's always something happening in the garden, he definitely plans it that way, and he's planned the garden so that it draws you around.

Right, so we did touch on this earlier – what are your three favourite botanical specimens? One is the hellebores?

Yes, we did touch on that. Another is the mushrooms, fungi, any of those things. I've painted dried Waratahs, drying hydrangea. The colours in plants that are dying are beautiful, to me they are beautiful. Some people might look at a dead Waratah and think that it's just brown, but it's not, there are beautiful colours in it.

Are there different browns?

Yes, different browns, yellows, golds, bits of red, purple, it's amazing what's in there if you look.

The decaying process brings that out?

Yes, I recently painted a purple cabbage and the colours in that were really exciting.

And that was a dying process? Challenging I suppose?

Yes, challenging, but very exciting too.

And I vaguely recall Les mentioning that you always like to paint seed pods.

I love seed pods. Again, they're brown aren't they?

But they have exquisite detail.

Oh, they're gorgeous.

If you pick up a seed pod and look into it, they're quite beautiful.

Yes, they are.

And, is there a least favourite plant that you had a go at and don't like to paint?

I couldn't say there's least favourite. I'm not drawn to really small things, tiny flowers and I find that doesn't really interest me. I think I want something a bit more bold. I must say I'm not really into painting roses. I have done them. I think when I was doing the greeting cards I had my fill of roses, and I probably don't need to do them anymore. But no, there isn't anything really.

OK, and one or two final questions. Where do you exhibit most of your work, or don't you?

It's always botanical exhibitions. Botanical work just simply doesn't sit well in a general exhibition beside a great big contemporary black and white thing.

Contrast too great I suppose?

Yes, so it's always been a big exhibition in Sydney, in the Sydney Botanic Gardens. I've always exhibited there, for twenty-something years. A long time.

Is that an annual exhibit, or is it a permanent exhibit?

No, it has been annual, until now, and it's now going to be every second year. So, they always have one in the Melbourne Botanic Gardens too, so I can always exhibit there, on the off year if I want to. And there are a few other botanical exhibitions around, but that's the main one.

Has any of your work been hung in notable institutions, that you're aware of?

Notable institutions, yes, The Hunt Institution in Pittsburgh, they have one in their collection. The Regional Gallery in Richmond, Windsor, they have one, two in their collection.

It's a nice that that's permanent, and an acknowledgement of your work, and I believe that you've received a prestigious award at some stage, could you tell me a bit about that?

I did, that was, I received a Gold Medal at the Royal Horticultural Society in London for a series of paintings of dendrobium orchids. So, for that exhibition you have to exhibit a series of eight paintings, so I did eight. So, they judged the eight paintings, it's not just for one, all eight have to be up to the standard to get the Gold Medal. If you have one that's not, you won't get the medal. So, that was quite exciting. That was in London.

Was that international?

Yes, it was open to anybody.

Well, that's quite a credit to you, you must be really thrilled.

Thank you, yes, that was nice.

Did they keep all the paintings?

No, I still have two, others have gone elsewhere.

Right, lovely.

Is there anything else you feel you'd like to tell us about that we haven't covered today?

I don't think so, I think we've covered it all very well thank you, Ruth.

On behalf of the AGHS I'd like to thank you for agreeing to do this interview, Elaine, it was very interesting. I learnt a lot as well, so thank you very much.

Interview ends 19 minutes.