



*Before The Sun Goes Down, oil, 40" by 30"*

*"I had the simple pleasure of playing with the transition between light and shadow in this reference. This pair of horses had been working all day and were looking forward to drinks and dinner, I think."*

KATHY ELLEM

# A World of Possibilities

*By Robyne Robinson*





*Bullocks on a Hot Summer's Eve, oil, 30" by 40"*

*"It had been a long hot summer, and it was a challenge to try to capture that feeling of exhausted heat diffusing out of the landscape at the end of the day."*

Australians will tell you that stories about the Outback are more truth than fiction. Hardships come naturally in that part of the country; what you learn about life doesn't always come from a book.

"If you don't put in the hard yards, you will not get results," says Kathy Ellem, who grew up in Beechworth, a small town about 175 miles north of Melbourne in the state of North Victoria, where her family owned and operated a 100-acre apple farm. "Sometimes nature or the markets seem to be against us but without that effort in the first place we would go nowhere."

Ellem talks about farming with a smile on her face that belies the grit it takes to make it work. "I think it was perfect, particularly the cherry season when it was all hands on deck," she says of growing up on the

apple farm. "Working 12-plus-hour days with the family was tiring, but we were always able to squeeze in a few jokes. It was just really nice to be working side by side."

With a love of the land firmly embedded in her, Ellem headed off to study biology and agriculture at Central Queensland University. It only seemed natural to her that she'd return to North Victoria after she graduated and start a career in plant sciences. Like the Outback, however, life has its moods and changes.

"Growing up I had three things I was never going to do: marry a red-head or have anything to do with cattle or Queensland," Ellem says with a laugh. "Funnily enough—I got all three."

In 1994, while on an agricultural exchange program in Canada, she met Chris, an Australian copper-

headed rancher. They fell in love and married in 1998. Shortly after, they moved to Chris' family's cattle ranch in the southwest part of Queensland.

The change was a culture shock for Ellem. "Living in Queensland prior to the birth of my children was a little depressing," she says. "I most certainly wasn't used to the isolation. I had no employment prospects and didn't really want to just be an at-home mum. Little I did I know how vitally important that job is, and how rewarding.

"When we moved in 2003 from southwest Queensland to Pembroke, a 20-thousand acre cattle farm, we battled from the moment we arrived. It felt like one of those classic country songs where nothing ever goes right."

During those days of fighting drought, wild dogs, and restlessness, Ellem felt a call to become an





*A Gentle Light, oil, 30" by 40"*

*"It isn't very often that I will be out taking photos and know without a doubt that I will be using that reference image and have a plan just come to mind immediately, but it did happen on this occasion."*

artist. She first picked up a paintbrush 18 years ago, while she was pregnant with her daughter Sariah. It was five years later, however, after visiting an art exhibit by an Australian calligraphist, that she became convinced to seriously pursue it.

"Her work was in a variety of mediums with the most inspiring quotes," Ellem says. "I spent an hour reading each and every one of them. I walked out of there so inspired. I thought, 'What a way to spend your life, lifting other people up; that is worth so much more than money.' I never looked back."

It wasn't long before Ellem dis-

covered that the biology and science she thought she had neglected were now ready to serve their purpose. "I found that the biology gave me the confidence to research subjects deeply," she says. "But I think that the analysis I do in my art has something more to do with my inability to take my mind off a topic once I start to burrow into it.

"My first mentor, Bill Sass, told my husband that I had no specific talent when he first met me but applauded the fact that I just stuck at a thing until I figured it out. I've always had the motto that, if someone else can do something inspiring,

then I can, too. But I'm not so gifted, so it's going to take me a little longer to learn instead of being put off even trying when something seems too incredible to be possible."

The solitude Ellem felt in Queensland suddenly had meaning. Like working the land, it was a test for her to discover her worth as an artist. "We got to a point where there had been three dust storms in the space of a month, then they banned live export, which led to starving cattle across the northern part of Australia because it coincided with a drought," she says.

"Farmers were going out, shoot-





*Two Lefts and a Right, oil, 30" by 40"*

*"I was very inspired by the relationship this Bullocky had with his animals; there was a great deal of mutual respect. On a technical note, I was captivated by the light on the subjects and really wanted to show texture and grit walking in the dusty paddock."*



*Straight Six, oil, 24" by 47"*

*"The challenge in this painting was to subtly pull the viewer into the 'conversation' between the primary three horses. It was a challenge in subtle value, hue, and edges to distinguish without separating the horses."*



ing their cows, then turning the guns on themselves. The final straw for me was when our milking cow [that] I'd raised from a calf, died after eating the only green plants around, which happened to be poisonous. I was very sad and decided that, instead of doing work that protested the injustice of it all, I wanted to do paintings that left people feeling uplifted. I think that the light I achieve in my work is a result of this need, but I wasn't conscious of that connection until years later."

Light is what makes Ellem's oil paintings stand out. While the artist in her loves the multitude of colors in vast Australian skies, the scientist in her moves her to look deeper. "Color isn't as important as value," she says "That just opened up a world of possibilities for me, realizing that I can

get away with the most incredibly outrageous combinations as long as the values are correct. I've had many an adventure in the studio and felt like I've climbed Mount Everest.

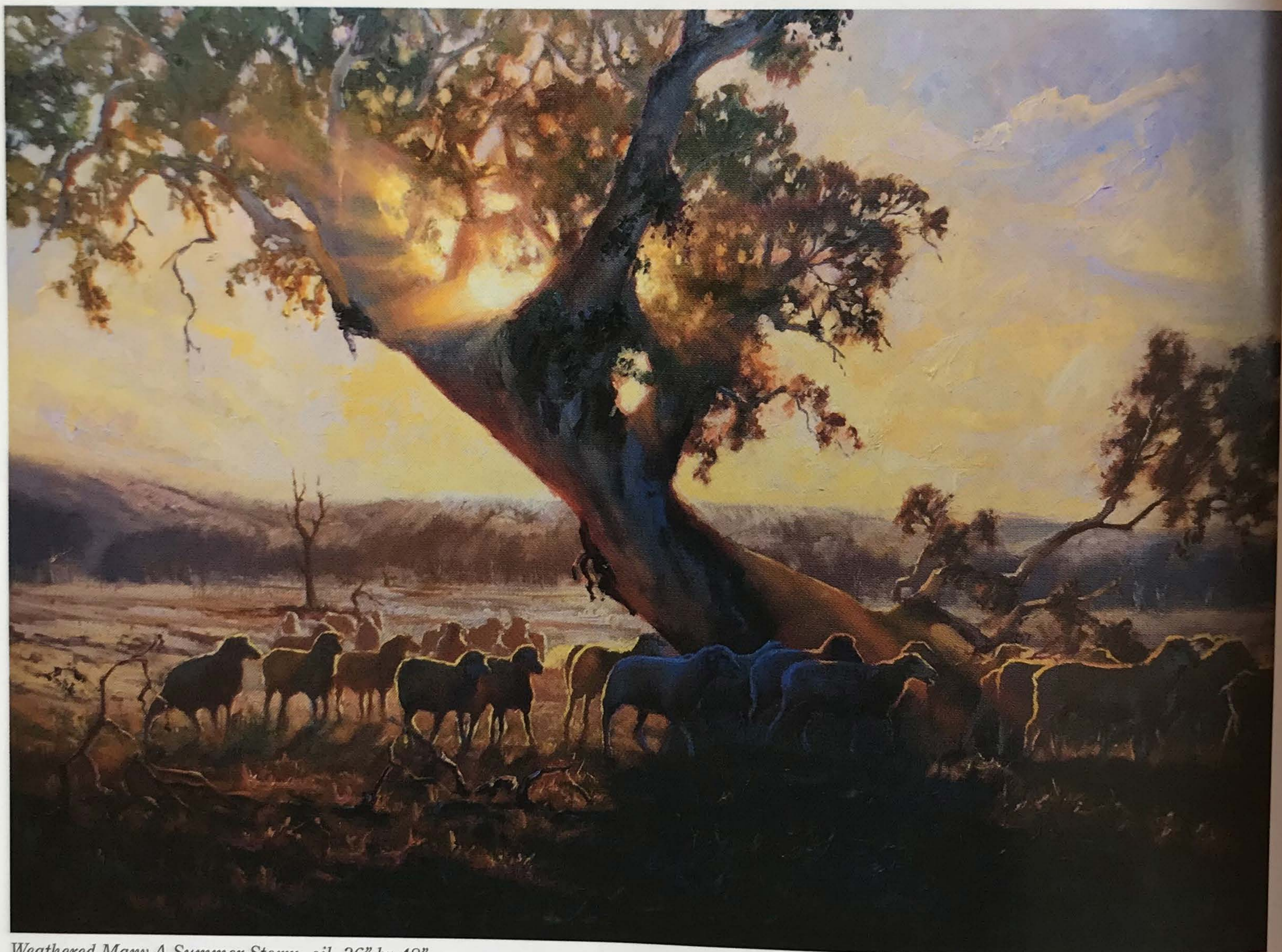
"I love to own the whole creative process, from getting out in the dust and photographing my subjects, talking to the owners of the horse, or puttering around on my ag bike on the back roads. Then I take the photos and tweak and twist them a little to tell the story I have in mind. After I've drawn everything up, I let loose with the color.

"My quest at the moment is to see how many colors in the correct values I can load on my brush and accurately place on the canvas with free strokes so that the viewer can see something that appears to be true and accurate from a distance

but filled with gems of pure color up close. I've been exploring this with both brush and palette knife of late and am still incredibly curious about it and the textures you can create."

Ellem's exploration of the Outback around her goes deeper than the colors on her palette. Like aboriginal art, the images of livestock and the land tell stories about the world around her. "I love the working horses for a number of reasons," she says. "They represent steady, calm strength and a strong work ethic and an ability to work as a team at something that is hard, possibly mundane. The people who own them are down to earth and great to talk to. They do it these days for the love of it, which I deeply admire."

Now 45, Ellem has had a life in which hard work bore rich fruit that



*Weathered Many A Summer Storm, oil, 36" by 48"*

*"This is one of my favorite landscapes, where the dust in the air allowed me to actually 'see' the light that was filtering around the old gum tree and silhouetting the sheep. I had been in a hurry to get home with a million jobs to do but saw this setting and just had to pull up and take my reference photos. I had to wait at least 15 minutes for the sheep to finally get bored with looking at me before I could capture anything truly interesting. I've learned to keep my camera with me at all times."*





*Just One Short Straw...Please, oil, 30" by 40"*

*"This is another one of those images that I knew immediately on taking it that I had something to paint. This painting won the \$8k National Equine Art Prize in 2017."*


includes winning the Women Artists of the West Award and the John Villiers Outback Art prize in 2020.



She, Chris, and their two children—Sariah and Alex—now run a ranch across the valley from her family's apple farm. Ellem splits her time between her studio in Hansonville, running the Beechworth gallery that she opened with prize money from the Australian National Equine Art Award in 2017, tending to her family, and raising beef cattle.

But there's more; Ellem also drives across rural Victoria, New South Wales, and Queensland to teach art classes. "Living in the remote community in southwest Queensland, the classes became as important on an emotional level as [they were] technically," she says. "Finding a new way to help others to unleash their creative spirit has

been challenging fun. I enjoy sharing my work with other people but, when you see the joy on students' faces when they do something they never thought they'd achieve, it's so incredibly rewarding."

After some tough times on Pembroke, Ellem says she feels art healing her every day. "I think that people pick up on this joy when they see my work," she says. "I've often had customers come into the gallery and say, 'I just feel so much happier now.' I almost dance with joy when I hear that because I know that I'm achieving what I set out to do." 

*Robyne Robinson lives in San Marcos, California.*