

No place *like home*

MICHELLE BALL'S LOVE FOR THE AUSTRALIAN BUSH BLOSSOMED INTO A NEW CAREER.

WORDS HILARY BURDEN PHOTOGRAPHY JEREMY SIMONS



SHE SITS, PERCHED birdlike at Pittwater's edge, absorbed in her work and the peace of the landscape, on a beach accessible only at low tide to locals in the know.

The life of artist Michelle Ball echoes that of the short-tailed shearwaters that migrate around the world, only to return to the very same burrow. She was born in Ingleside, not far as the crow flies from where she now lives in Elvina Bay, NSW. Her grandfather, Jack King, was the first in her family to settle in the area, doing so in the 1920s. An apiarist by trade, he roamed the countryside looking for the perfect habitat for his bees. He decided that the Bilgola Plateau, about 10 kilometres north of Ingleside and surrounded by the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, was the place to be.

Formerly a magazine art director and a book designer and illustrator, Michelle's creative professional life has taken her around the world, from Sydney to Geraldton in WA, and New York where she met her husband Michael Wiener, an architect. The couple were living in a Tribeca loft — next door to Robert de Niro — but when the lease ended, they relocated to Australia, settling in Manly. Michelle says they wanted their children to learn to walk on the beach. "It wasn't a difficult decision," she says.

After eight years in Manly, Michelle and Michael bought a "shack" in Elvina Bay, a community of less than 100 people who have fought to keep it a walking only area, accessible by

boat. Locals keep their own small tinny at home and take the three-minute trip across the water to Church Point.

But Michelle finally decided to leave her full-time job last year and throw herself into her painting. "I've always painted," she says. "Even as a creative director the most important thing was to do a drawing for every page to share with my team members, photographers and stylists."

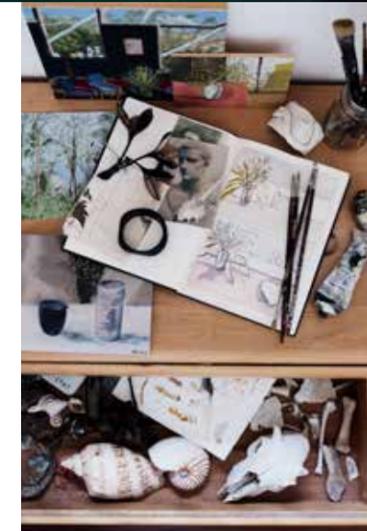
She loves to paint *en plein air* and it's easy to understand why, surrounded by the stillness and quietude of the coves and bays of Pittwater. "I remember my mother saying to me: 'I know why you love spending time in the bush. When I was pregnant, I used to go down to sit in the creek with you.' Mum was right — I love living and painting in bush surroundings. It's so rejuvenating."

Another place Michelle feels at home is the Upper Hunter region of NSW. It connects her with her great-aunt, artist Edith Priscilla King, who grew up at Tower Hill, the family property near Barraba, north of Murrurundi — where, coincidentally, Michelle's work is being exhibited as part of *Country Style's* exhibition, The Country Interior, in March. She remembers her great-aunt as "a wild woman" who lived and painted in the area all of her life. "I don't think my paintings are as good as hers, but I'd like to think one day they will be," she says.

Michelle discovered botanical painting during her time in New York. After living in the US for 10 years, she had >



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT Michelle's studio, in the old part of the house, is decorated with her own works as well as a treasure by great aunt Edith (in frame); Michelle at her easel; an aerial view of Trahan Cove; works in progress; a neighbour's charming boat house; Michelle waits for the tide to go out; tinny is the preferred mode of transport in Elvina Bay; Michelle's light-filled living room. FACING PAGE The beach at Trahan Cove is only accessible at low tide.



become homesick, as much for the bush as the people. After visiting the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, where she joined a watercolour painting class — and found a new passion.

On returning to Australia, Michelle became involved in bush regeneration and began painting landscapes rather than plants specifically. She also taught herself to use oils “to be true to the artform”. Last spring, she discovered an amazing plant — a type of grass tree — she’d never seen before and can’t wait to put it in a painting.

Michelle’s current series of paintings is entitled *Stories of Home*. “It’s not really a history of my life in still-life; rather, I’m using still-life to retrace events in history and memory,” she says. Her process includes arranging found objects with interesting family pieces, including a chest with a charred corner that her grandfather dragged out of their burning homestead; two vases her mother had given her; and a horse skull Michelle found when camping on the site of her great-grandparents’ homestead. She is clearly really enjoying telling her stories in a place she so loves to call home. *CS*
For more information, visit michelleball.com Michelle’s work features in the Country Style exhibition, *The Country Interior*, March 7th–9th, at Michael Reid Murrurundi, corner of Boyd and Mayne streets, Murrurundi, NSW, (02) 6546 6767, michaelreidmurrurundi.com.au



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT Artfully arranged works in the studio include a portrait of Michelle’s dad and paintings by great aunt Edith and Michelle’s grandmother. The white bowl is one of Michelle’s pieces, the taupe vessel was a gift from a friend; yachts moored in Elvina Bay, with Scotland Island in the background; a pair of paintings from Michelle’s Tarkine Grounds Capes series; walking along the beach at Trahan Cove is a favourite pastime; well-used oil paints; Oversize watercolour paper helps Michelle capture more of the magnificent landscape; Michelle often paints in the tinny; tools of the trade. **FACING PAGE** The public dock at Elvina Bay South.

