



WORDS BRIDGET SHIRLEY PHOTOGRAPHS DAVID SHIRLEY

VANESSA FORBES HAS WANTED TO LIVE in the Southern Highlands ever since she was little. “When I was six,” Vanessa reflects on a childhood memory, “my parents took me down to Bundanoon to go horse riding. I remember the clip clop of the horses’ hoofs on the stony road, and the ancient trees which met in an archway above my head; the interplay of light and dark from the shadows that they cast, the sounds of the birds, and – still today – the sense of the rhythms and cycles of nature.”

Vanessa finally realised her dream of living in the Southern Highlands last winter when she moved to Bowral from Sydney in freezing cold and pouring rain. As soon as her furniture was installed and her three little dogs had sniffed out their new home, Vanessa rugged up and set out to explore the landscape. The translucence of the light – the misty, in-and-out focus it cast

on the countryside and farmyard animals – was a visual feast.

“The spirit of the land, its beauty and fragility, is the focus of my work,” she says. “I love the climate, the colour of the distinct seasons, the space. People are kind-hearted and genuine here; I have been made to feel tremendously welcome.”

Vanessa cannot remember wanting to be anything other than an artist. When she was a child, she and her girlfriends spent countless hours creating and illustrating their own newspapers and journals. Her first “life” model was Paddington Bear.

Serious art lessons began at the age of 14 under the guidance of Sydney painter Lionel Taprell. They worked both in his studio at Lilly Pilly and *en plein air*: down by the river and in the surrounding landscape of the Sutherland Shire.

Vanessa was awarded a scholarship to the Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education where she studied teaching during the week. Her weekends were spent at the Julian Ashton Art School at The Rocks. She gained her High School