

ANNA CULLITON Of Wombats & Pottery

Story Carolynne Skinner
Photographs Peter Adams and Jacqui Dean

The visit

As you come out of the Victoria Pass, suddenly the skies are huge. The massive rock walls, the eucalypts that towered above have moved away and now the landscape opens out on both sides, green paddocks, horses, hillocks, boulders.

There's the historic landmark of Rosedale on the left, the stone homestead convict-built in 1839 now a holiday farm

with horses and dirt bikes. Just beyond that as you head west, a cluster of parked cars indicates that the Lolly Bug is open for business. A new yellow VW bug parked on the roadside is their mobile advertising board and then immediately there's the turn off at Cox's River Road.

It's sunny but cold and the cumulus clouds are scudding along in fluffy clusters. We've descended from the higher

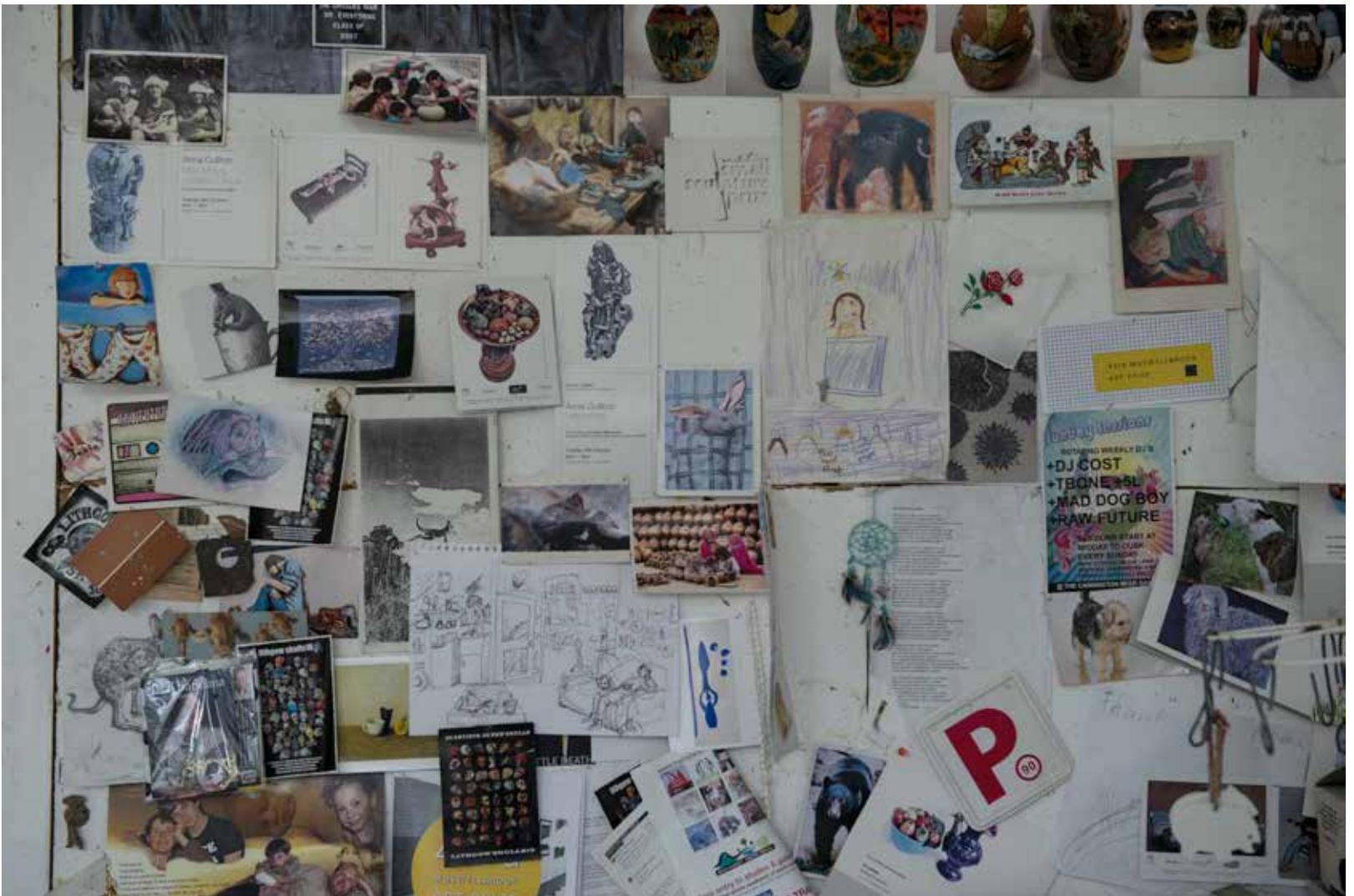


Photo Peter Adams

plateau and this is undulating country with scattered boulders of granite. These distinctive granite outcrops were noted by the early European explorers and William Cox's road builders in 1814/15 made good use of it for culverts and embankments. The resource remains of great value and is extracted commercially in nearby Austen Quarry. The drought of last year was followed by drenching rains and although not lush, the landscape is a palette of different greens.

I've come with our mutual friend Fran Hayes to see ceramicist Anna Culliton and her wombats and it's just about 3.30 pm. Time for a cup of tea in the kitchen before meeting 'the gang' who are late risers (of course – they're nocturnal). At the back door the rose bushes have been partly uprooted by a visitor the previous night. Although it's winter, the heads of sunflowers are drooping but still upright. Bulbs are in bloom and this hilly, boulder strewn homestead is packed

with plants, shrubs and trees - native trees and fruit - many protected with plastic sleeves or chicken mesh. Down in the valley there is the Cox's River. It's heaven of course, not only for kangaroos and wombats.

There are the hazy colours of the valley in the handmade tiles on the wall behind the stove – bluey greys, greens, fawns and creams. Coloured birds (parrots, lorikeets...) come and go to the feeders hanging on the open verandah. Fran has brought a homemade fruit slice and there is tea with soy milk. Today ceramics are low on the list of conversation topics, displaced by the all important wombats.

Anna is wellknown and highly regarded as a maker of ceramics and worked at the famous Lithgow Pottery until 2015. It has closed down now and the old building will soon re-open as the Lithgow School of Arts. Anna's ceramics which were part of the Hands on Clay exhibition (in conjunction with the Clay Gulgong Biennial) at Lithgow's Gang Gang Gallery recently, sold out - a 'hand full' of a tiny bilby or wombat or possum or joey proved irresistible. Anna's forte is story-telling in clay. Her studio noticeboard flutters with memories, reminders and sketches. Currently the studio (in a shed nearby) is out of action – rats have eaten through the electrics – and anyway there are many other things on her mind.

What last year's horrifying fires have achieved is the most extraordinary coming together and focus of wildlife carers and supporters far and wide. While the major crisis has passed and the horrors slipped just slightly into memory, serious long term problems have become clearer than ever and these now preoccupy the rescues. Anna has for many years cared for macropods (that is all kangaroos, wallabies and their relatives such as pademelons, bettongs...) and that is where her considerable experience and expertise lies — until the wombats entered her life.

Animals hit by vehicles on the roads are a high proportion of the creatures requiring urgent help – many of these the offspring of a killed mother (which is why we are always implored to check the pouches of animals which have been killed). Four years ago a baby wombat was rescued from its dead mother on a Hartley road by Warwick Fuller, local artist, and Mary his wife. No-one else was available to take on the onerous feeding schedule of the baby animal. Initially the baby seemed impossible to feed and Anna struggled, but finally with guidance from those more experienced the tiny creature took the milk and began to put on weight. Giving life and love to these tiny vulnerable creatures brings immeasurable rewards. Just a few days after Anna's father died last year she was asked to take a new baby. At first she



Right: Boris and Anna with little Ash
Photo Peter Adams
Left: Anna at the potter's wheel
Photo Peter Adams



*Down in the wild garden
behind some trees a quartet
of brown heads with pointed
ears all turn to watch us.*

said no, she couldn't, but then she agreed and says taking baby Ash at that time turned out to be life changing. (Ash is Anna's number eleven.)

The dogs are left indoors and we are off to meet the wombats. Down in the wild garden behind some trees a quartet of brown heads with pointed ears all turn to watch us. It's the four household kangaroos, Eastern greys (in fact they are a soft dark brown colour), all raised by Anna and now free to live wherever they wish. The older two roam into the valley, coming and going as they please, while the two younger ones are still kept safely in a pen at night. People say they are wild animals now that they are independent, explains Anna, but they are not. They have been raised by us and lived with us and their lives are bound with ours.

Opposite top:

'A hand full of bilby' from Hands on Clay exhibition

Below: Girls with animal friends

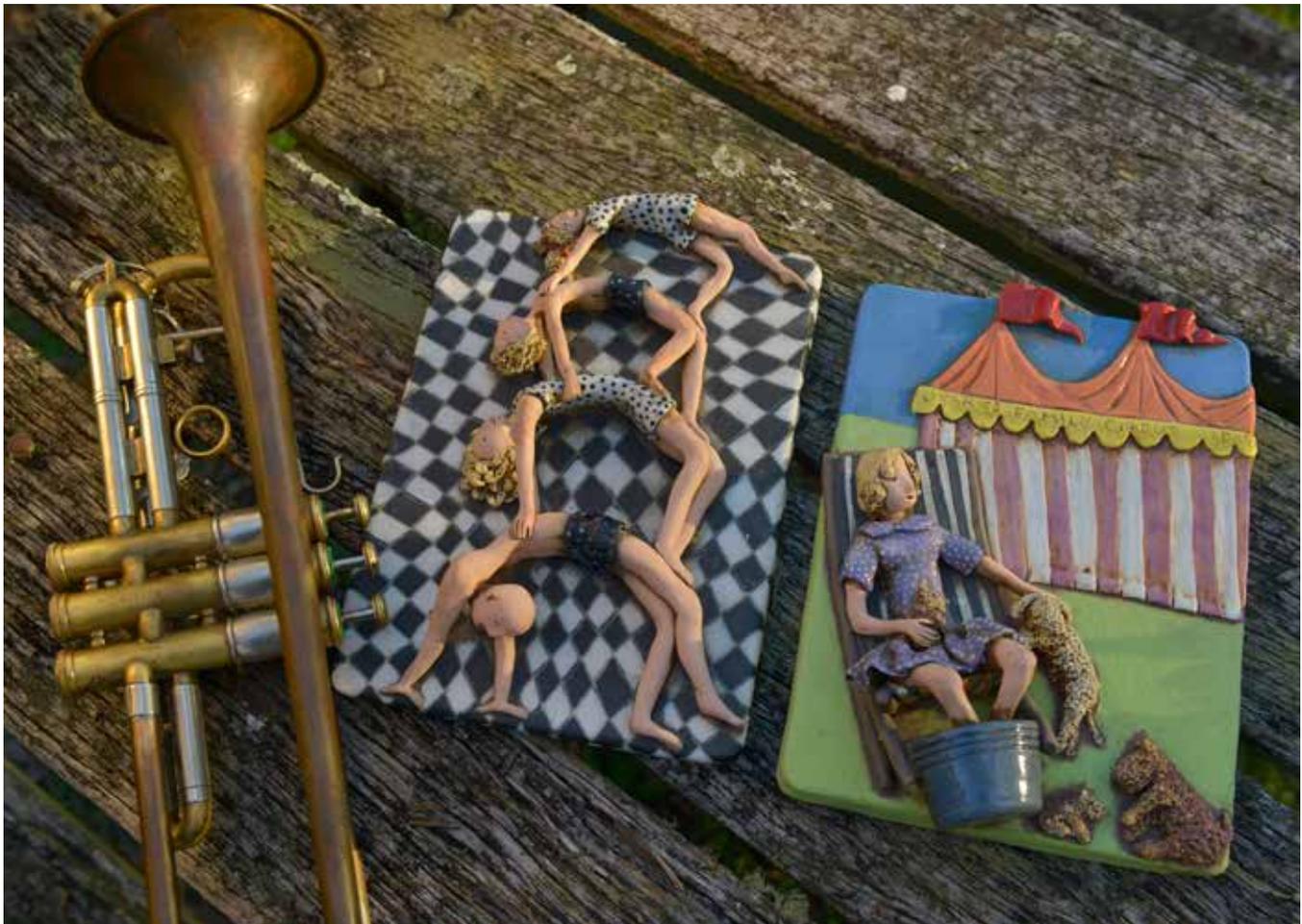
This page: Circus ceramics & Boris's trumpet

Photos Jacqui Dean

I love that with the macropods and the wombats which have been cared for by Anna, when they are old enough they will simply be let free here. For some years I have had a WIRES aviary in my wild valley in Wentworth Falls where young possums which have been saved but which have never had their own territories, are placed for a week or two until they become familiar with the sounds and smells of the valley and then the hatch is opened and they, in their own time, take their freedom—never to be seen by us again. Their carers are discouraged from forming the close familial relationships which Anna has with her macropods and wombats.

The wombat pens have high walls of galvanised sheeting and the first occupant we visit is in a very sorry state. Mange is the terrifying and lethal enemy of the wombat. Introduced by us, it is also found in dogs and foxes, while in humans it is scabies. It decimates the wombat population, hideously disfiguring and finally cruelly killing its victims. This fellow is a lucky one and although it will take time, the mange treatment will mean that the horrible scabbing over his entire body will gradually fall away and his fur will grow back. He is still scratching constantly but is on the mend.

The next pen is empty – one always needs to have a place available for a new arrival, and then the third is the





What is immediately conspicuous is that the majority of wildlife carers are women and one must wonder why this is so. Do we care more?

present home of a cheeky trio of young ones, the youngest of them baby Ash. It's the end of the day and nearly meal time and so time to emerge to play. They are heavy and strong and very fast. A wombat can charge along at 40kph. Their fur is tough and wiry and not as dusty as you might imagine; their noses are like hard rubber. At nightfall Anna takes a wombat baby under each arm and husband Boris carries the third, and they take the 'family' into the house with them for the night.

Largescale mange treatment for wombats in the wild is now the top priority for the very active group of local wildlife carers, thirty of whom turned up at Anna's recently to work on their plan of action. It's simple and cheap but time-consuming. The recommended dosage of medication to be applied each time to a wombat has recently been increased which means that the treatment is quicker than in the past and the application methods are imaginative – currently a vegemite lid holding the medication is inserted in the lid of an ice cream container. This contraption is then pinned in place (using a variety of techniques) above the entrance to the tunnel or hole used by the wombats.

The liquid in the lid spills along the wombat's back as it enters and leaves the tunnel. So wombats are treated on their home territory where possible, although the very ill must be taken into care.

Anna's current priority is for a quarantine pen for these mange cases and a couple of weeks ago, after consulting an expert wombat carer, she was astounded to receive a gift of \$1,000 as the first contribution in a funding drive to enable her to build the new pen. A few days later another mysterious donation turned up, for more than \$3,000. It seems miraculous and yet what is clear and so heartening is that there is increased awareness in the community of the work being done by wildlife carers and rescues and of what it is imperative that we do to ensure the health and security of our creatures. Unfortunately the love isn't always shared equally and rescuers tread carefully and diplomatically when they are trying to help animals which may be near or on private property. Even here kangaroos continue to be killed for sport and wombats are regarded as pests by many property owners.

Anna was showing us where the new quarantine pen is going when we heard loud scuffling noises and could see that the gate to the home garden was being pushed open by a very large wombat squeezing under it. Another resident, this time with just a small patch of mange on his face, ran up to Anna and cheekily grabbed her trouser leg then her boot. He had heard us and decided that it must be



meal time. Anna used the opportunity to spray the magenta coloured treatment on his face. This was likely to be the miscreant who had dug up the rose bushes.

There is a great deal to do in the life of a wildlife carer and there are not always volunteers available to give a hand. When a call is put out to pick up a hurt wombat or macropod, it is likely to require two people – for instance to get an adult wombat into a wheelie bin and then into a vehicle. Having to euthanize a suffering animal out in the wild is one of the most heart-breaking and difficult situations rescuers find themselves in. Only a registered shooter is permitted to do this and to locate someone and get them to the animal can often take hours, or even be impossible. As for other help, Anna has a young woman friend who comes when she can to help in feeding the residents but she says that in general she manages herself. What is immediately conspicuous is that the majority of wildlife carers are women and one must wonder why this is so. Do we care more? Are women more willing to take on unpaid work? I am reminded of Alan Kohler's comment on the ABC 7 o'clock news recently when showing a graph indicating that women 'care' more than men about COVID-19. He said he asked his colleagues why they thought women 'cared more', and received the response: 'women care more about *everything*'. Interestingly, a number of members of Anna's group are established artists.

Dusk is falling. The sky is still a soft blue and there is one fluffy grey cloud tinged with pink. It has been a perfect day. Driving back along the Cox's River Road, now with lights on, Fran pulls over to let a small car race past. She drives carefully because this is the time when kangaroos and wombats are emerging.

Sarah Engledow visited Anna at Hartley and has written an informative biography for the National Portrait Archives <https://www.portrait.gov.au/content/anna-culliton> Since that time Anna's parents whose home is nearby, have both died - last year and just a few weeks apart. Her artist sister Lucy continues to live at Bibbenluke, six hours' drive away, and Anna still leaves flowers at the place on the Great Western Highway where their son Reuben died in a car accident.

The next time you hear of Anna Culliton it may well be news of the publication of her children's A-Z written as a collaboration, each letter illustrated by a funky tile ceramic, beginning with A for *the biggest azalea in the whole of Australia!*

(I wish waratah began with 'a', says Anna.)

Carolynne Skinner

Anna's musician husband Boris plays an antique trumpet, one of his treasured collection of musical instruments.
Photo Peter Adams

