

THESE PAGES
Many of Lucy's paintings
depict the countryside
around her Suffolk home
(below), and combine
native flora and fauna with
vernacular architecture



An eye for detail

*From a quintessential village green edged
with quirky cottages to fields of wildflowers, the intricate
work of artist and illustrator Lucy Grossmith
beautifully captures the colours and charms of the countryside*

WORDS BY CAROLINE ATKINS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY TARA FISHER



THIS PAGE, LEFT The shed, which was originally full of cobwebs and damp, has been transformed into Lucy's studio. Its calm, ordered state reflects the careful precision of her work



The Suffolk landscape where Lucy Grossmith lives and works used to be 'Lovejoy Country', its improbably photogenic open roads and

cornfields interspersed with pretty market towns full of antiques shops. Now, many of their treasures have been bought up, and instead it's galleries that flourish along the elegant high streets, including the one selling Lucy's paintings of buildings and country scenes, created partly from memory, partly from imagination and partly from the requests of those who commission her.

Her own house – a 15th-century thatched cottage in the village of Glemsford, with wonky beams and low doorways – is the kind of subject she relishes. "I love old tiles and bricks and crooked chimneys," she says. "Nothing in this area is straight – the houses in Lavenham [about six miles away] are so crooked I don't know how people avoid falling over." Lucy's style exaggerates such idiosyncrasies, playing with perspective so that buildings appear to tip off the end of their street, while details such as birds and flowers are given the outsize prominence of a Lewis Carroll dream sequence. "And there's always something that makes my pictures move – a car, or a rabbit running by: one piece was for a woman who wanted me to include her friend's dog, which walked past her

house every day." In another, a higgledy-piggledy house swept across the canvas like an engine pulling a line of carriages.

Perhaps her instinct to capture scenes on the go is prompted by having moved constantly as a child: although her family originates from Suffolk, her father's job for the Forestry Commission took her from Lincolnshire to Surrey and then to Wales, which means, she says, that she and her two sisters never put down roots. It bound them together and inspired their creativity. "We didn't have a television until I was about ten, and even then it had no sound, so to get the news, we'd put the radio on while we watched the pictures. We sewed, knitted and painted. My mother was an artist before she married, and she would draw with me for hours."

Her parents still live in Wales in a farmhouse beside the wood planted by her father, and Lucy's recollection of where she grew up is so vivid that she could reproduce it easily from memory. "Everything I paint stays in my head," she says. But the area didn't hold many



opportunities for an aspiring artist. So having already begun to take on illustration commissions from book publishers and local businesses, she went to Devon – initially when she was 19 for a painting holiday she'd read about in CL but decamping there full-time on her 21st birthday to help in the gallery, look after students and run a papier-mâché course.

Entirely self-taught, Lucy found herself in the perfect environment: immersed in the creative community in and around Totnes. Within three months she had her first exhibition after which she was spotted by the London-based Camden Graphics company who gave her a job as an art editor and illustrator. Suffolk, though, was where she dreamed of settling – a place where she had holidayed as a child, where both her parents had gone to school and where her great-grandparents' cottage still stands, just around the corner from hers. And after eight years as an unlikely urbanite, during which time she continued to exhibit her work and also married her husband, Dan, she moved to Suffolk in 2002, where their son, Jack, was born, and where, she says, she finally feels a sense of belonging.

The pink thatched house, the oldest in the village, is her workplace as well as her home. Each day, after taking six-year-old Jack to school on a 15-minute cycle ride to



THIS PAGE, LEFT Lucy with her son Jack. BELOW Her house is full of informal floral arrangements, which often feature in her distinctive paintings



Hartest, she heads for her garden studio. The interior is painted white and immaculately tidy, echoing the careful precision of Lucy's paintings. Her images are built up from layers of acrylic, with the details etched with a scalpel so that colours show through – the cream of a chimney stack's mortar highlighting the brown of the brickwork; the delicate starburst of cow parsley revealed through a froth of white.

Out here she can be inspired by the horizon of fields through the window, the flowers and blossom that fill the garden in summer, and the birds that sit on the gate. "I lose myself so deeply in my work that the only thing that keeps me on track is knowing I need to do the school run," she says. "When I work at night, I can hear creatures rustling in the leaves and owls hooting in the dark nearby," she says.

She is also surrounded by her customers. As well as her illustrations for magazines and greetings cards, and her exhibition work, Lucy receives commissions from people she runs into at the school gate or in the village, or from friends of friends who have seen her pictures and want one of their own. Her art combines a vivid sense of season and weather so that the painting of the green in Long Melford has grass the dry purple-brown of late summer; and in a piece for CL's extract from Susan Hill's *The Magic Apple Tree* ('The Village in

Winter, CL January 2008), you can feel the chill of the snow that muffles the fields.

Lucy's eye for quirky perspective gives character to still-lives, so clients are happy to leave the details to her. "They want me to make the pictures my own. Fitting things together is like a jigsaw." On one occasion, a customer asked her to depict a set of Japanese porcelain, so Lucy chose pieces in vibrant colours – emerald, coral, cobalt blue – and painted them on a table, playing with the representation of three-dimensional items in a two-dimensional setting so the cups and saucers appear to exist on two different planes.

Her aim is to weave together places and items of personal significance, blending her own, slightly fantastical, observation of the subject with a sense of its importance to the owner. Along with a love of rural life and the subject matter it provides her with, this is the heart of her work. "London was wonderful for getting close to pieces by other artists," she says. "But now I'm settled in the countryside I have the raw materials I need all around me." 🐾



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