

HOME TO ROOST: Deborah Meaden, The King & a million hens

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Exmoor'

CASTLE CARY
EXHIBITION

Picasso's
Muse
at 90

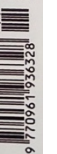
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FROM MUSE — TO — MAKER

It was 70 years ago that artist **LYDIA CORBETT** posed for Pablo Picasso, who created over 75 portraits of her. To mark her 90th birthday an exhibition of her own paintings will be on display in Castle Cary

WORDS: Emma Bovill

It's an indication of someone's openness when, within minutes of meeting, you find yourself seated just centimetres apart, jointly contemplating an artwork they've created. A painting that represents not only a pivotal moment in their life, but their continuing creative journey.

I'm perched next to artist Lydia Corbett, former muse to Pablo Picasso, in the studio of her Devon home. Together we examine a monochromatic charcoal she's created of her younger self, depicting 'the girl with the ponytail', captured in over 75 portraits by Picasso, in her own style as she looks back on the experience.

As she approaches her 90th birthday, Lydia (born Sylvia 'Sylvette' David) is as industrious as she is reflective. Her studio bears all the traces of an active artist. The stool I rest on is spattered with paint, as is the floor. There are mismatched glass jars brimming with used brushes and every available surface is taken up with her paintings, variously framed and unframed, and ceramics.

Side by side, we find ourselves discussing, as you'd expect, the summer she spent sitting for Picasso in

Vallauris near Cannes, France, in 1954 aged just 19, an interlude which spawned the renowned 'Sylvette' series of paintings and sculptures which made her face and trademark high ponytail iconic. She has since adopted twin plaits, giving her a girlish air even in her later years.

Lydia's studio seat, a carver dining chair, is not unlike the high-back rocking chair on which she posed for Picasso over several months. Noting that their meeting was the result of Picasso buying a chair made by her then boyfriend Toby, a talented craftsman who she >

right: Lydia at the easel in her studio with a work in progress, a charcoal capturing her younger self, *Sylvette in Vallauris*, as she studies a photo of the period on her iPad. Photo: Emma Bovill

left: *The Little Princess of Velasquez*, watercolour and ink by Lydia Corbett. Photo: David Simon Contemporary



attended the progressive Summerhill School in Suffolk with, I tell her that my first introduction to her artwork also involved an incident with furniture.

Visiting Castle Cary to speak to gallerist and art dealer David Simon ahead of his exhibition of Lydia's latest artworks in November, I crouched down to admire her intricate earlier paintings, brought out by David for me to see, in detail. I rose only to misjudge the location of the chair I'd been sitting on and slipped off its leathery edge back onto the floor, much to my own amusement. Lydia is also tickled with the anecdote, chuckling heartily as I retell it.

Picasso didn't expect Lydia to sit still, offering her cigarettes to smoke and (although she has described the sessions as peaceful and meditative) sometimes behaving in a playful, occasionally provocative, way to try and bring the then shy Sylvette out of herself. 'I was quiet and didn't dare talk,' Lydia reveals. 'He gave me confidence in myself and made my work come out.'

The daughter of an English artist mother – by whom she was painted as a young teenager – and a French

art dealer father, it would take Lydia until her forties to pursue her own career in art. While Picasso may have been an internal catalyst, her creativity became material thanks to her time at Dartington Hall near Totnes, Devon, where she landed in 1977 when then husband Rawdon Corbett became vice-principal of the higher education college and manager of the associated arts centre there.

Lydia has called the south-west her home ever since, settling in the village of South Brent on the edge of Dartmoor after years living on the Dartington Estate. Her childhood in France however, including idiosyncratic and dramatic years spent within a nudist colony on the Ile du Levant and hiding from the Nazis in the village of Dieulefit in the Drôme, summer holidays at her father's house north of Avignon and, of course, her stay in Vallauris, means her French heritage still looms large.

When we meet she seems delighted that I take my coffee strong and black just as she does and that I wish her good health in her native tongue, gently clinking our mugs.

It is in our relaxed position at her dining table, surrounded by more of her artworks, decorated pots and candlesticks and a pile of what she modestly calls her 'funny little sketches' that I get a true sense of her as a person. Due to her failing eyesight, which has

right: *Lying in the Autumn Leaves*, oil on canvas with gold leaf by Lydia Corbett
below: *Five Tulips*, oil on board by Lydia Corbett.

Photos: David Simon Contemporary



'I was quiet and didn't dare talk. He gave me confidence in myself and made my work come out'

prompted her to adopt a bold unfettered style in favour of her detailed earlier Indian ink, pen and watercolour pieces, she asks me to choose a passage from *The Way To Love: The Last Meditations of Anthony de Mello* to read aloud. She also shows me her copy of *The Art of Living* by 'the father of mindfulness' Thich Nhat Hanh.

David Simon, who has exhibited Lydia's artwork regularly since 2016, had told me I would find Lydia, who changed her name as the result of deeply personal encounters with the international Subud movement, a spiritual person. He is a huge advocate for her art which he believes, quite rightly, transcends the link with Picasso.

'To an extent she's fed-up of the link,' he explains frankly. 'I've known her for over 20 years and seen her move from having an ambitious sense of her own

work to a more neutral approach, making art more for her own enjoyment. She's got so much left to say and still paints every day. She sees the good in everything – she's a very wise person.'

What David says rings true, Lydia puts across the feeling of being present in the moment and evidently enjoys creating art in whatever way she can. She tells me she sometimes uses her left hand, for added freedom of expression, or children's colouring pens. 'I never stop scribbling,' she laughs. Five years ago, when a fall forced her to recuperate in hospital, she adopted her iPad as a substitute canvas.

Lydia seems keen however – beyond the generosity of indulging my interview – to process her experience as Picasso's muse, of which she is the last one surviving. There are several artworks in her studio in which she



'It's a part of her story, but only a part. She's got her own language in paint'

references her role as his model, and, although aged 19 she was shocked when Picasso showed her all of his collected pieces of her, she now says: 'I love doing my own portrait.'

Together we look through *Sylvette David / Lydia Corbett Ceramics: Painter and Sculptor in Clay* by art historian Lucien Berman at her earlier artworks. She giggles and exhales in equal measure at the proliferation of her work shown within the book's pages, seemingly amazed. Lucien co-curated *Lydia Corbett, Sylvette David | A Retrospective* at the Penwith Gallery, St Ives, in March 2024.

I Was Sylvette: The Story of Lydia Corbett, the illuminating biography by Lydia's daughter, the artist Isabel Coulton, details the many influences on her journey from muse to successful artist in her own right. The community of artists at Dartington Hall and in nearby Totnes would be a launch pad for her creativity before her works caught the eye of the wider art world. Art dealer Francis Kyle would prove instrumental in

Lydia's trajectory, asking her to exhibit at his Mayfair gallery as part of a thematic blue and white still life show in the late 1980s and beginning an enduring collaborative relationship.

Working for the Francis Kyle Gallery would introduce passionate art historian David Simon to Lydia's work, which he has been championing ever since.

Based in Castle Cary since 2019 after opening his first art gallery in Clifton, Bristol, in 2006, David has become an expert on the link between Lydia Corbett and Picasso. *Lydia Corbett At 90: A Life in Painting*, which runs from November 1-30 at David Simon Contemporary on the High Street, will feature original works on paper by Picasso from the 1950s and 1960s alongside Lydia's paintings drawing links to that period of her life.

The exhibition coincides with Lydia's 90th birthday and it is this, and not the anniversary of her posing for Picasso, which is the driving force behind it.

'People fall in love with her paintings and unique approach, then they learn about the connection with Picasso,' David asserts. 'It's a part of her story, but only a part. She's got her own language in paint.'

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above: *Stillness*, watercolour and ink by Lydia Corbett
right: *Bremmen Sylvette*, oil and charcoal on board by Lydia Corbett

Photos: David Simon Contemporary

