

# LIFE AS ART

*Sydney painter VICKI LEE on family,  
staying PLAYFUL and ACCEPTING that she  
might never be entirely happy with her work.*

WORDS MELANIE DIMMITT  
PHOTOGRAPHY TED O'DONNELL

HAIR & MAKE-UP: CHRIS COONROD / H&M COAT AUS\$89.99





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**W**hen an artist emerges from the throes of creating, one would assume they'd feel elated – euphoric, even – or, at the very least, harbour something in the way of a smug sense of achievement. But as the glossy colours set in the studio of Vicki Lee, the painter finds herself in a familiar state, one she can only describe as... weird.

"You know that feeling if you go out and party and really let yourself go, and you go home and you get a bit of discomfort inside you? Like, 'what was that?' Seeing a side of yourself – an uncontrollable side of yourself – will always make you feel weird." Which is why, despite producing works that, in all their beauty and strangeness, are exquisite on the eye (and hang in homes across the globe – including those of songstress Mahalia Barnes and fashion icons Sara Donaldson and Margaret Zhang), Vicki feels uneasy upon their completion. And often unflinchingly paints right over them.

It's a predicament she's pondered often with her partner in both life and art, photographer Ted O'Donnell. "He thinks that it's just a part of who I am, and that's what's going to keep me always in motion and drive me," says Vicki, who was a lawyer in a previous life. "I'm just not the type to be content, I guess, or satisfied. Which creates unnecessary torment, but I can only accept it for how it is, because it's consistent."

The flow of our conversation, conversely, is charmingly inconsistent, as Vicki and Ted's oldest daughter, two-year-old Yokie, vies for her mother's attention. Their youngest, Opia, was born in early 2017, some weeks after unveiling their seventh joint art collection, *Deluge*, at an intimate party in the University of Sydney's Great Hall that served, in its grandeur, as a fitting backdrop to the duo's vibrant works of blooms engulfed in inky plumes.

It was 2013 when the couple launched their iconic exhibition IS./WET, which showcased a variety of flowers artfully drizzled with brightly-hued paints – a testament to both Ted's lighting genius and Vicki's masterful pouring of paint.

Like those from their earlier, similarly haunting, collections, these images put forward a profound perspective on florals, one that the pair – who work together under the moniker Tovl – have been forming since their very first date. Chancing upon a cluster of Gymea lilies in Sydney's Bellevue Hill, the duo acted on a sudden urge to drench the giant blooms in a mixture of honey and tahini. "We were just having fun, being silly. Ted had his camera on him so we took some photos, and it kind of started from there," says Vicki, likening the spontaneous occasion to when she and her now-fiance locked eyes at an organic grocer in 2011, and Ted struck up a conversation over a bunch of spinach.

The pair had actually met one year prior to their grocery store encounter, Vicki reveals, when Ted had a girlfriend and Vicki's career had a false start. Growing up as a "good Korean girl" in the eastern suburbs of Sydney, she studied law – partly because she got the marks, and partly because it fell in line with her parents' "immigrant success

story". "My parents came in the late '70s, and they didn't have any money. We started off really humbly, and they worked their arses off and managed to send me to private school. I studied law and practised as a solicitor for a while, and then had a moment [of realisation] when I was in the firm one day. It was almost like I was going a bit nuts, but I ran with it at that moment, and I've never really looked back. I can't even believe that's what I did before."

It wasn't so much what she was doing, Vicki explains, pointing out that law can be just as creative as any other job. "I just didn't feel it. And I was so jealous of my friends that I went to law school with – the people that are really passionate about it. Because that's all you need, you just need passion. It doesn't matter what you're doing. But it wasn't for me, I was just dying on the inside."

In 2006, with no formal training, Vicki dove into art on an impulse – buying paints, brushes and canvases and shutting herself away for the entire summer. (She soon lost the brushes, preferring to get her hands dirty). "I've contemplated studying [art] many times," she says. "Obviously learning different skills

is never going to be bad, but there's something that I would quite like to keep sacred. And I can see it when my two-year-old is painting now. There's just a freedom in it, even the way she holds the pencil – there's no tension in her wrist and the way that she's moving. I really want to remain as innocent to the process as possible."

Vicki's own childhood was spent running amok in the shopping centres where her parents ran homewares stores, dressed in 'singlets' she would fashion from plastic shopping bags with the bottoms cut out. "By the time I was on

to the largest size [bag] it was a bit weird, because I was a teenager. But you know, I think it's just expression," she says of the fixation. "If I don't express myself – not just in painting, in everyday experience – it

bottles up, and if it bottles up and there's no release, it gets a little bit scary."

The inspiration behind such expression is something Vicki regularly contemplates, "because if you could buy inspiration, you'd be at the shop every day". But, she has come to believe that it's always inside us. "It's whether it's stagnant or not. And then when it starts flowing you can sort of speed it up – usually caffeine speeds it up, that's the best thing you can do in the morning," she laughs. "I think when you look after yourself and nurture yourself, that's when there's a movement and flow through your own body, and that's what allows the inspiration to flow through. When you're in that space, anything and everything is so beautiful." >

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Having started painting with no intention of ever selling a single piece (Towl's success has thus come as "quite a pleasant surprise"), Vicki's made her way through several occupations, helming her own fashion label for a time and, more recently, an online homewares store called The Twenty Two – until she had "that lawyer moment" again. "I was very confused about what the hell I was doing. I guess that's the social conditioning that I needed to really demolish in my own mind – I always felt like I needed a 'real job'." She gave the venture the treatment she gives to most of her paintings, and made it disappear. "I wanted to set up a life where I don't have to check my emails when I wake up in the morning, [so] we got rid of it – all that work. I had to follow my gut. It was liberating, and that's when things started getting really serious."

Shortly before Vicki and Ted released Deluge there was Night Rain, an energetic body of work inspired by Yokie, while a Robert Browning poem called *Porphyria's Lover*, dealing with the tragedy of unrequited obsession, saw the making of their decidedly

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darker Asphyxiate collection in 2014. "It's really weird," says Vicki on her fondness for poetry. "I've realised that I actually find it really hard to read properly. I can read, obviously, but the concentration required to read is pretty hard. But once you sit down and have that moment for amazing poetry, there's nothing quite like it, because you create the visuals and you create the sensory experience yourself. It's one step before an actual painting."

In 2015, Vicki and Ted found a muse in Sydney style- and social-influencer Margaret Zhang, who stripped down for a series of abstract images celebrating the female form. Pregnancy further stirred Vicki's awareness of "feminine energy". "My art had always been driven primarily by masculine energy... so the whole sort of 'girl power' of female energy has been really confusing, yet enlightening at the same time. Finding that balance will always be a thing for me. I'm really aware of that in myself, because it's like two separate people," she says.

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Since giving birth, Vicki has also come to appreciate

the innate strength of women. "What I realised when I had Yokie is that women are so powerful. After you have a baby, suddenly you are connected to other women in a way that you weren't before. The whole Beyoncé thing starts making sense – her female empowerment. And then I realised that's why misogyny exists – because women are so powerful. You don't want to keep something down that's not a threat. If something's not a threat, you don't even look at it. I think that's the driving force behind women's issues around the world."

A self-professed 'mad feminist', Vicki is acutely aware of a persisting imbalance in her industry, but notes that it's in no way exclusive to the art world. "Just being taken seriously as an artist, it seems like it's easier [for men] – maybe less now but, I think generally, working women will always hit a point where [we] have to pause, a little bit at least, or a lot, because if you want to have a baby your time [for work] is shortened." >



The next few months will see Vicki's role of mother come to the fore and, although family is a focus for the artist (who, with Ted and Yokie, joins an eclectic celebration of modern Australian families in Westfield's AW17 campaign), she stresses the importance of making space for herself. "To be a good mum you have to remain independent of the family to some degree, and have your own time." She applies the same thinking to her art. "Even if I have half an hour at home looking after Yokie while she's sleeping, I just get in there and do it. Because you're never going to move forward unless you move, and keep moving. Keep in motion."

Currently in preparation for her first solo show (an undertaking that will require her to refrain from hiding her final creations under layer upon layer of paint), Vicki works from her garage – a space she describes as "quite disgusting". "I'm a little bit embarrassed it's so messy... and you know how they say your workspace kind of emulates your state of mind? You can't see the floor. I can't have a thing out of place in the kitchen, so I don't know why it's like that." Ted, on the other hand, has a meticulously ordered studio – and that's not the only way their working personas differ.

"Ted, professionally, is a bit more assertive than he is as a partner. So when we first started shooting together it was a bit of a shock. When you're being creative, there's a lot of ego involved – you just can't help it – so we've definitely had our moments. But I think that there's always a separate space when you're doing something outside of the relationship, even though you're doing it together. There kind of has to be. I don't think you can really push boundaries unless you're a bit more critical, or a bit more provocative to each other than you would be normally."



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Striving to live a simple life, Vicki, who is planning a "Greek beach wedding where everyone has to wear their swimmers", and her family, have eschewed the idea of moving to a creative city like New York – for now. "We might do a stint there later in the year, but I keep having babies!" she laughs. "We always go looking for dense forests and anywhere you can't use your phone and you can get away from city life. Can you imagine how much we'd be craving that if we were in New York?

"My old motto used to be, 'If you feel something, close your eyes and start running really f\*\*\*king fast, because if you don't, you'll start questioning yourself and not listening to your intuition and your gut.' But now that I'm in the real world, I think there are issues that you need to contemplate and make sure are sorted out. If you want to make art, how are you going to make a living out of it? [It's about] finding that balance – not ever losing touch of that intuition but, at the same time, being realistic about your vision for the future." ■