



# ULTRA VIVID SCENE

## Artist Michelle Lucking

Interviewed by Mellony Taper



Ask Michelle Lucking to describe her work in three words and she is unequivocal:

***Immersive. Water. Light.***

And indeed, the works that Michelle is best known for could arguably be described as archetypes for one interpretation of each of these states.

Water - Hockney's California pools brought to life; the life enhancing qualities of water surrounding, supporting, resisting a body.

Immersive - this isn't about a surface observed from a distance, but about the feel of that pristine water enfolding a body; warm, buoyant, pleasurable.

Light - Here, it is perpetually summer. Not the Kagoule-in-pocket, triumph of hope over experience of a British summer. This is Ibiza summer. Endless sunny days in water inhabited by perfect, dappled bodies.

Of course, take a different artist, and all three of these words convey a different set of meanings. There is a dark side to all three states - yes, even light - but that isn't what these works are about. Lucking's latest series Club Tropicana says it all – it's a celebration of colour, blue water, and bright bikinis.

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It's important, I think, to mention how much Lucking's chosen style contributes to this glorious, endlessly perfect summer narrative. Described as hyper realism, everything is "extra" - light is enhanced, colour is saturated; the subject matter of course is depicted perfectly - but then the subject matter is perfect to begin with: beautiful, youthful bodies - no scars, no sagging, no fat, no age - and idyllically represented environments. "I adore painting swimmers" she says. "There's such beauty in the way light refracts on skin and the reflections that happen underneath the surface of the water are distorted and abstract and exciting to capture in pastel."

Lucking is the archetypal water baby. She describes herself as “very much a water person” but this is something of an understatement; she has always spent time in, on and under the water: surfing, scuba diving, snorkelling, sailing, free diving and of course, swimming.

“Being immersed in water creates a quiet in my head that allows me to find peace from too much thinking and anxiety” she says. “And it’s beautiful, both under the surface and above. The light has such an ever changing relationship with water, it’s continually dancing through and off the surface. I find it mesmerising. It’s all these qualities I try and capture in my paintings.”

So it is no surprise that it is undoubtedly “water” that inspires Michelle Lucking, the artist. “I love capturing all the different moods of the sea; from the angry turbulence to that “golden hour” translucency. I think there’s a huge narrative in these pieces of our relationship with water that has unlimited potential.”





Lucking says she fell back into painting by accident, in a narrative familiar to many artists. Having painted and drawn obsessively as a child, she ended up pursuing a completely different, corporate career path - for all the reasons that artists do. But eventually, Michelle realised she was pursuing an empty dream that wasn't making her happy, yet still had no direction or real understanding of what was lacking in her life.

It was around this time that she stumbled across the artwork of Zaria Lynn, who creates enormous hyper realistic paintings of icebergs in pastel.

"When I saw her work I had such a deep yearning to start creating again. I'd not used soft pastel much before; mainly oils, acrylic and graphite. But her work has such vibrancy and detail, and a softness to it - I was amazed that this could be achieved in pastel. And that was it. I bought my first set of pastel and decided to paint something that brings me great joy: the sea."

Lucking was hooked. "I couldn't stay away from my easel and what started as a hobby became an obsession very quickly. I'd wake up at 4 or 5am to paint before going to work. I'd paint late at night, at weekends."

Soon, Lucking was putting in 30 hours per week behind her easel on top of her full time job. It wasn't sustainable and Michelle began to resent her day job enormously. Her paintings had started to sell and the dream that she could actually make a living from her art started to feel attainable.

Then, Lucking had two paintings selected to the annual Pastel Society exhibition at the Mall Galleries in London, and won an award. That painting sold to an international collector and Lucking realised this was the time to make the leap: to become a full time, self-employed artist. She has never looked back.

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Back to the present and Lucking's latest body of work "Club Tropicana", is a delectable vision of sun saturated bikini summer. Colour, saturation and hue are so integral to Lucking's work. Her ultra-vivid, saturated tones are impossible to ignore.

"It's all about the vivid pool blue, and the bright bikinis" she says.

"That's how I see and feel those summer days spent in the pool; they're bursting with joy, light, colour and fun. The same applies to my seascapes. The sunsets I've painted are true to how I remember seeing the sea at that moment; it's all warmth and golden light bouncing off the sea."





However, there are some pieces that are more subdued in colour. 'Be Lost in Me' and 'Swan Song' are both examples of works in a more subtle palette.

Swan Song in particular, must have been challenging to create and the piece is testament to the skill of the artist: the lace fabric and reflected tree branches in the water are beautifully recreated.

The making of the painting Swan Song became part of an award winning short film collaboration by four North Somerset artists: Director Barry Wilkins, musician and composer James Oram, performance artist Niamh Gaia and Lucking herself.

Being part of this collaboration, it was essential that the painting told the story true to the film. In marked contrast to her usual sun-soaked pieces, this one had to reflect a cold winter day in a forest. Lucking wanted her skin to look pale, to emphasise the subject's frailty in that moment.



"I built so much imagery into the piece – her engagement ring, the rose from her wedding bouquet. The fabric had to suggest the possibility of a her being a bride. It was fascinating and challenging exploring how to express her grief and hopelessness whilst still trying to capture a quiet beauty in that moment, so a softer palette was essential."



**“It’s one of the greatest pleasures as an artist, when you see the connection people get to your paintings and the emotions it can make them feel.”**  
**– Michelle Lucking, 2022.**

Lucking’s mastery of materials and technique is stunning. As a medium, pastel has a tactility and malleability that is addictive. Within seconds, your fingertips and palms become your brushes and sponges. And if, like Lucking, you know what you are doing and what you want to achieve, they offer a degree of speed of creation that can serve an artist well. But in the main, it is the need to physically touch the work, to blend and move colours around, that Lucking loves most.

And in order to achieve that degree of physical immersion in the work, they need to be - BIG. The scale of these works is very important to the overall effect. Because of their size, we the viewer can more easily imagine ourselves in that pool: feel the sun and water on our skin, the ripples as the bikini bodies slides past us. We are in that water, with Tropicana Girl, with Lucking.

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**Michelle Lucking is exhibiting at ArtPort 2022, 24-25 September.**

**Short film 'Swan Song' will be screened at ArtPort Festival, followed by a Q&A session with Director Barry Wilkins, artist Michelle Lucking, composer James Oram and Performance artist Niamh Gaia, 24 September, at 3.00PM. at Somerset Hall, Portishead.**

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## BIOGRAPHY | MICHELLE LUCKING

Michelle Lucking is an award winning, international pastel artist specialising in realism to create large scale, beautiful seascapes and underwater portraits. Her art explores the contrasting raw power and calm serenity of the differing states of water, and the technical challenge of capturing both its translucency and movement.

Lucking's interest extends to both the anatomy of water and the human form, and how the two interact; how light and water refracts the human form into abstract shapes dissected by light and shadow that still resemble a person.

A keen sea swimmer and photographer, Lucking draws on her own reference photos and immediate experiences of the sea and swimming to recreate and convey the emotions and narrative of water, using both realism and

scale, and capturing light and movement, to draw the viewer into her paintings.

Her work is collected and exhibited internationally and in 2017 she won the prestigious Annie Longley award at the annual British Pastel Society exhibition. She is brand ambassador for the internationally acclaimed pastel company Unison Colour, and has been featured in several magazine publications including Artist and Illustrator. Her work has also appeared on television.

