



Loribelle Spirovski

Gentle Courage



Right: Archibald Prize 2025 ANZ People's Choice award winner Loribelle Spirovski
Finger painting of William Barton, oil on canvas, 182.6 x 137 cm © Loribelle Spirovski

A stone's throw away from Newtown's Enmore Road are lines of peaceful terrace houses. Bathed in sunlight on this spring day, Loribelle Spirovski's street is leafy and narrow. I open the gate to her home and she invites me into her living room with a warm smile. As we settle on the couch, her cat Nana nestles between us making a perfect croissant curl.

Spirovski was born in the Philippines in 1990 and, at the age of eight, immigrated to Australia with her parents. She tells me, 'As a kid, I really didn't make that much art. I hadn't been to a museum until we moved to Australia and it was only in 2001 that my dad took me to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, which I remember very well.' Once she was in high school, Spirovski's teachers recognised her natural ability and entrusted her with free reign of the storeroom. For her, 'it was like *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* ... they gave me something so priceless'.

Name: Loribelle Spirovski.

Lives: Newtown, Sydney.

Reading: *The Accidental* by Ali Smith.

Listening to: *Witches* by Alice Phoebe Lou.

Enjoying: learning how to do a pull-up.

Spirovski went on to study fine art and education at university, returning afterward to her own high school with a hopeful outlook. However, she found the adjustment from student to teacher an unexpected struggle. 'As it turns out, being a teacher in charge of teenagers is a very different thing,' she says. 'The performance anxiety was just awful.'

Finding herself unsettled about the direction of her future, Spirovski fell into a depression. 'That really was why I started oil painting, as a way of curing myself,' she said. As she painted, she also worked from home as a private English tutor. 'After a while,' she said, 'I realised this is do-able. I can explore with painting and I'm still making money. I feel like a functional human being. Then I got my first portrait commission.' As more commissions flowed, the artist quickly built up an impressive portfolio.

Spirovski didn't focus specifically on oil painting at university. As a result, she unreservedly threw herself into the medium in order to hone her technique and grow confident. She was also searching for her style. 'In the beginning I wondered, how do you choose a style? It's all amazing. How does anyone choose just one? I thought, I want to paint like John Singer Sargent, but Francis Bacon also exists ... Then there's Lucian Freud. I realised that I had to forge a multi-pronged painting practice where I was working on all these skills side-by-side.'

After years of intense productivity, Spirovski now manages chronic pain from thoracic outlet syndrome, a nerve injury that impacts her ability to paint. 'Before the injury came along, I was really going for it,' she says. 'These days it's a very different situation. I see how my arm feels after I wake up. I go to the gym, do the rehab stuff, I take many breaks. I've got an hourglass in the studio I set to 15 minutes at a time.'

Her advice to artists in a similar situation? 'Breathe through it and be kind to yourself. Don't be afraid to switch off because it comes back, and not only does it come back but things happen in the background.' Spirovski found common ground and reassurance with artist Tsering Hannaford, who also suffered a strain-related injury to her dominant arm. Despite the challenges of their pain, both Spirovski and Hannaford found ways to adapt and were finalists in the 2025 Archibald Prize.

Being a finalist in the Archibald is always hugely exciting for any artist, but Spirovski was overjoyed to hear she was the People's Choice award-winner for her portrait of musician and Kalkadunga man, William Barton, which she painted using her fingers. Speaking about the award, she said, 'It touched me





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so deeply ... when you’re working you’re doing it for the experience and living for the moment, and it’s so embodied. The fact that people felt it too ... I don’t even have a word for it.’

Per the Archibald’s rules, she conducted a live sketch with Barton prior to starting the painting. Given his busy schedule as a touring musician, she only had one sitting of two hours with him. She explained, ‘His apartment was being renovated, so I went in thinking about contending with the space. But, I thought, let’s just ground down and I’ll tell you about myself and my intentions.’

Barton responded by showing Spirovski many items of personal significance. He firstly took out two objects (depicted on the table in the final painting), which are totems from his Country. He told Spirovski about himself and his values and showed her photos of his parents and partner. While they chatted, Spirovski noted that Barton had a specific way of holding himself. She also took in the natural light in the room and pondered how to capture a sense that he was enmeshed in his own world.

When it came to painting in the studio, Spirovski followed her instincts while she listened to Barton’s song *Birdsong at dusk*. To her surprise, she discovered that painting with her fingers was virtually painless. She felt ‘joy, thrill and intense excitement. I literally threw the brush away, put the glove on and everything just slotted into place.’ Spirovski was also delighted by the alchemy of the process. ‘It’s this addictive feeling of risk and also power, because you know that it could go entirely wrong, but the risk is what can take a painting to the next level.’ Able to move her body in an intuitive way, the portrait reflects a sense of levity true to the artist and the sitter.

This portrait marks Spirovski’s fourth time in the Archibald Prize. She has previously painted actors John Bell and Nicholas Hope and musician Megan Washington; but the person she has painted most, without doubt, is Simon Tedeschi, a celebrated concert pianist and her husband. ‘Simon has been really pivotal to my journey as an artist,’ she says. ‘It’s just so stimulating for me, creatively, to be around him. Our discussions range from internet brain rot to philosophy,’ she laughs. ‘Shades of life.’

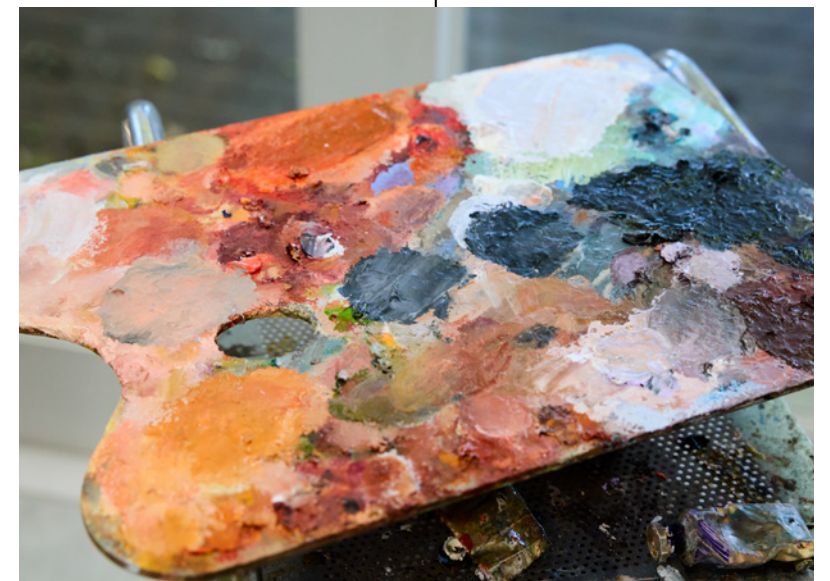
Spirovski shows me Tedeschi’s practice room that houses a beautiful piano and books from wall-to-wall. ‘We talk about writing a lot and we talk about reading a lot,’ she says. ‘Our jobs are so solitary, it’s nice to have someone who reminds you that you exist in a world outside your own brain.’ Indeed, both creatives have written books themselves. In March 2025, Spirovski released her memoir *White Hibiscus: A Portrait in Words* and Tedeschi authored the book *Fugitive* in 2022. Her artworks feature on both covers.

Spirovski guides me to her studio which sits at the back of the home. While small, the space has a high ceiling and a large window looking out to a tree-filled backyard. She’s currently working on a large canvas where a portrait is beginning to emerge. Sketches in oils and pencil adorn the wall, alongside a rubber banana in a nod to Maurizio Cattelan’s 2019 tongue-in-cheek comment on the art world. I ask what’s coming next and she explains that she will attend a residency where she plans to explore landscape painting; something she hasn’t fully dived into before. ‘The Australian landscape is unwieldy and overwhelming. It has such a huge personality. But now I feel like, okay, I have a voice and I know what I can say [about it].’

Spirovski’s generosity and immense kindness can be felt throughout her home and in the glow of her paintings. This is sure to be seen by others too, as her portrait of William Barton tours Australia with the Archibald Prize. As we begin to say goodbye, we talk about good food, David Lynch and Nana the cat, who hasn’t moved much during the visit. It’s a nice reminder to enjoy the moment. I hold on to this as I dip back out into the sunshine.

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Emma McLean, *Look* deputy editor



Loribelle Spirovski’s 2025 People’s Choice Award-winning portrait, *Finger painting of William Barton*, is touring to regional galleries throughout Australia with the *Archibald Prize 2025*. For details, visit agnsw.art/archibald-25-tour