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Interview

BASEL

“I’m Obsessed With Ambiguity”: 20 Minutes in Miami With Artist Lucy Bull

By [Sammy Loren](#)

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Lucy Bull, photographed by Robbie Barnett.

Late in my conversation with the painter Lucy Bull, the artist casually mentioned that notorious shitposter Tom Tuna was on

the guest list for *The Garden of Forking Paths*, her solo exhibition now on view at the ICA Miami. It’s quintessential Bull: inviting the carnival to crash the art world. Since her early days curating shows from the desk of her East Hollywood apartment, Bull has brought together distinct scenes and transformed them into something new and electric. That sensibility bleeds into her feverish and dreamy paintings. The colorful canvases mix abstraction and hallucination, blurring precision and chaos, visual clarity and emotional ambiguity. But despite all the auctions and openings, Bull maintains that she’s still a generous, scrappy spirit. For art week this year, she rented a Miami Beach crash pad for all her friends. “I had to take initiative with only 3 Airbnbs left,” Bull explains. “But they’re also DJing for me, so I’m not just a Good Samaritan.”

SAMMY LOREN: You’re in Miami. How are you feeling?

LUCY BULL: I’m pretty tired. I thought the sauna would help me sleep better last night, but I ended up not sleeping well at all. My mind was racing about the opening.

LOREN: Do you often get anxious before opening a show?

BULL: Who wouldn’t? It’s not that I’m not confident about the show. It’s just the anticipation of an intense event, you know? My whole family’s coming and there’s a lot about to happen.

LOREN: Before we get into that, let’s rewind a few years. You’re mainly a painter, but you also ran this cool curatorial project out of your apartment and did that funny thing in your Prius. There’s always been this scene-building, communal aspect to what you do. Take me back – where did you grow up?

BULL: I grew up in New York. I was born in the city and we lived in Brooklyn until I was about six. Then we moved to the suburbs for better public schools. But I’d go into the city on weekends and took pre-college art classes. I really latched onto art. Having a twin sister, I felt like I needed to differentiate myself. She picked up the clarinet and I picked up the paintbrush. She’s a lawyer now.

LOREN: What were you like in high school? Super dedicated to art or a bad girl partying in the city?

BULL: I was a slightly delayed bad girl, but a good, nerdy student. I figure-skated through junior year, so I’d wake up early to skate before class. I took a class at SVA and hung out in the city on weekends. I hated the suburbs and got out of there as soon as I could.



Lucy Bull, The Bottoms, 2021. Oil on linen.

LOREN: Where did you go then?

BULL: I went to RISD for two years and then transferred to the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. I feel like I created the best art school education I could have had. RISD’s foundation was more Bauhaus-oriented and rigorous. Chicago’s was more conceptual.

LOREN: How did you end up in L.A.?

BULL: Teachers told me they thought I would like L.A. Part of why I got into apartment galleries was Chicago’s DIY scene. I had my first curatorial project there—an art show in the style of a potluck, organized around a lazy susan at a dim sum restaurant. I was taking a class with Joseph Grigely on Exhibition Prosthetics, analyzing everything that shapes your perception of a show. But I moved to New York after college because I met a guy. He wanted to move to L.A., so that’s how I ended up there. I had never even been before.

LOREN: What was it like when you first moved to L.A.?

BULL: It was interesting. I moved slowly, to Venice Beach first. I didn’t drive, so I was secluded, but I loved it. I had a youthful lifestyle biking everywhere with a garage studio. I got invited to this ceramic studio that was a co-op in Ken Price’s old space. It was weirdly magical meeting all these random people. The studio felt like school, I could work on my stuff but also have conversations. It was a revolving door of personalities, from people with face tattoos to girls in stilettos throwing pots. I even ran into people I knew from RISD. It felt like an incubation period. I was working in ceramics, making slab paintings and pastel drawings in my garage studio. Eventually, I moved more central.



Lucy Bull, 13:22, 2024. Oil on linen.

LOREN: You never got an MFA, right? I think that’s interesting, since L.A.’s art scene is known for famous MFA grads from UCLA and CalArts. Did you consider getting one?

BULL: Maybe if things didn’t work out. But I’ve always felt I can teach myself and find my own way. I never totally studied the “right” way of painting. I MacGyvered my way through. When I got to L.A. I felt I learned through doing. There was no right way but I knew the quality I was after. It took time to figure out a process that allowed me to hit that vein.

LOREN: Tell me about your new show, *The Garden of Forking Paths*. What’s the title about?

BULL: My curator Gean Moreno thought of it based on the Borges story. It made perfect sense to me. There’s a quality to my work that’s about time. For me, the work is about leaving room for future interpretations. It’s layered and dense with information. It’s really important to me that the works continue to shift and morph over time. I’m obsessed with infinity and the potential for the paintings to live on and do different things. My understanding of them constantly changes. That’s exactly what the Borges story is about. I like how it leaves room for interpretation.

LOREN: There’s real poetry to it. Something cool about your work is it’s not overly determinative emotionally or thematically. It allows for ambiguity.

BULL: I’m obsessed with ambiguity. I’ve always been more interested in nonlinear narratives about the unknown. There’s more potential there. It’s more about feeling and accessing the unconscious, which is easier when you’re channeling ambiguity.

LOREN: What vibe do you think the opening will have? I think

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of you as this fun party person. You’re a serious artist, but there’s an effervescence and inclusiveness to you, with the parties and your curatorial projects. What will it be like at the museum?

BULL: I don’t really change how I act in different settings. I’m bringing as many friends as I can. We’ll have a live Chanel Beads set and three friends DJing. I want to make it as fun as possible. I believe in inclusivity. When I started The Desk, I realized how rewarding it was to invite different people into an intimate space. In my small studio apartment, I’d push everything out of the way for each show, exhibiting work on my low coffee table. People would gather around it on the floor. It opened everything up and that’s when I started figuring out my process, experimenting with marks and layering paint. Curating those site-specific shows was rewarding and the shows bled into and influenced each other. That’s when opportunities started coming my way.



Lucy Bull, 12:35, 2024. Oil on linen.

LOREN: Where were you waiting tables at?

BULL: Speranza.

LOREN: Oh right, you were a Speranza person. Do you still go there?

BULL: It was almost an art world restaurant at the time. I wouldn't be able to go to the openings, but everyone would go there after and I'd see them. I'm still friends with people who work there, but it's not the same post-COVID. The owner, Hieu, and her architect husband have a smart design. It was an inspiring place to work. I'd paint all day on a strict schedule, then rush over there. In the bathroom, I'd reflect on what I worked on. It allowed me time to paint during the day, which was important. I couldn't get enough done working retail at night. Daylight is really important.

LOREN: I was just at Art Basel in Paris. People were whispering two things: a fear the art market is about to collapse, and that it will explode once Trump wins and collectors start buying more. Does the market give you anxiety, or is that your gallerist's problem while you focus on painting?

BULL: I don't want to make this about the market. I worry about smaller galleries surviving and opportunities for new voices. But the art world works in cycles. Maybe there were too many galleries to keep track of. We're in a cycle with some weeding out, but good artists will continue making work. Platforms will always emerge. The good artists will persevere. I don't know if it has to do with Trump or if the economy will really flourish with him. I'm not an economist. What do you think the vibe will be at the show?

LOREN: I think it'll be fun. I'm sad I can't go. That after-party will be great.

BULL: I'm excited. Certain old friends I haven't seen in years will be in town, plus new friends and non-art world homies like Tom Tuna.

LOREN: Wait, the meme guy Tom Tuna is coming?

BULL: Yeah, of course. Last time I was in Miami, he was a fixture. I had invited the Ion Pack to DJ a party for me—this was four years ago when they were still anonymous and they'd wear morph masks whenever making an appearance—basically KJ (Ion 2) couldn't make it because they were doing a screening on the East Coast, so Tom was his stand-in.”



Lucy Bull, Most Attractive, 2019. Oil on linen.

LOREN: That’s amazing. Is anyone staying at the crash pad you mentioned?

BULL: I rented an Airbnb for certain friends who are DJing: Curtis and KJ (the Ion Pack), Robbie Barnett, Dalton Halcombe and Jacque Kramer. Fabiola Talavera might come stay too. Basel prices make it hard for people to afford coming otherwise. The ICA rented me a room at The Standard, so that’s where I am. But it’s nice having a South Beach landing pad.

LOREN: You rented an Airbnb just for your friends to party at? That’s nice of you.

BULL: They were trying to organize it themselves but people were being weird. I had to take initiative with only 3 Airbnbs left. But they’re also DJing for me, so I’m not just a Good Samaritan.

LOREN: Anything else you want to mention about the show that I didn’t ask?

BULL: We should talk about the stairwell painting. The museum commissioned a work for their stairwell, up for a year. Usually people do wallpaper, but I wanted to do a massively tall painting. It’s 39-foot tall, divided into three panels, just like the other paintings but really tall. My studio has 15-foot ceilings, so this is a three-story painting. It was a brain-teaser to make, but I work well at large scale. It forces me to be looser and uninhibited. You never want to get too comfortable with one size or you start imitating yourself. It’s important to play with proportion. I’ve gotten interested in a panoramic format lately. Shifting the axis vertically was compelling—you get a foreshortened view and can look at it from the bottom up and top down. I’ve never scaled a painting like that vertically before.

LOREN: I saw the photos you sent. It looks really beautiful.

BULL: It's in an enclosed stairwell, so you can't really step back and see it entirely. You move with it walking up the stairs and can peer up. The installation was terrifying to watch – scaffolding with a small gap to drop the panels down, catching and screwing them in close to the edge. But it makes me want to keep working at this scale, maybe horizontally for easier showing. I've learned that 14 feet for a single panel feels really good. That's the max I can do since I move paintings around the studio myself, crawling and propelling them onto walls. I'm learning the limitations. 14-foot paintings are hard to rotate alone without risking damage. They're so heavy they could fall and slit the linen edges. But I like the challenge of scale. It forces a different approach. With the verticality, I had to decide to give it a vertical motion to fuse it together visually across the three panels. But I worked on it horizontally, like with my head tilted. I'd rotate the canvases to make sure it functioned vertically. If you work horizontally, the painting turns horizontal. I had to fight that natural progression since they're not planned in advance. It's all process-driven, building in layers until it comes into being.

