

Artist Lucy Sparrow is beloved by the A-list for her quirky fabric food. The irony is that anorexia almost killed her



Polly Dunbar discovers why – after a lifetime's struggle against the disease and a year on from treatment – she's ready to open up

PHOTOGRAPH: ALUN CALLENDER

On artist Lucy Sparrow's left wrist, beneath a huge, diamanté-studded imitation Rolex crafted from felt, is a tattoo that reads: 'Don't forget to eat your lunch and make some trouble.'

The 38-year-old had it done after leaving the Promis Hay Farm clinic in Kent last year, where she was treated for anorexia so severe she came close to losing her life. Now, it serves as a daily reminder to her: 'To make your art, you need energy,' she says.

Quirky, joyful and wildly ambitious, Sparrow's work has made her a leading light of a new generation of British artists. Her immersive installations, built to look like real shops and filled with thousands of everyday items, from baked beans and McCain oven chips to Rimmel make-up, all painstakingly hand-stitched from felt, have won rave reviews from critics and audiences alike.

At Buckingham Palace, where she installed a felt picnic spread to mark the late Queen's Platinum Jubilee, King Charles, no less, asked her how she made her salt and vinegar crisps so realistic. (She replied she hand-painted each one with PVA glue and then let them dry outside in the sun.) In the US, celebrity admirers include Drew Barrymore and Mark Ruffalo, the latter even queueing patiently for her exhibition at New York's Rockefeller Center to tell her how much he loved it.

Yet behind her soaring career, Sparrow was hiding the eating disorder she'd been battling for decades. 'I've been through periods of recovery in my life, where it's been secondary to other things, but it's always been there in the background,' she says. 'Then last year, I stopped being able to eat altogether'

Today, she's curled up with her felt replica banana, which she named Sebastian. Wearing a pinafore dress and white tights, Sparrow appears childlike. Which seems appropriate for the maker of soft, fuzzy, nostalgia-infused pop art. But she's also both smart and brave, speaking with candour about her ordeal.

'I want to tell my story,' Sparrow says. 'There's a saying in the support meetings I go to: "Secrets grow in the dark and shrink in the light." The more we bring them out, the less power they have. I've hidden it for so long, but I don't want to be ashamed of it any more.'

Sparrow grew up in Bath, where her mum



FROM TOP, LUCY'S MEAT INSTALLATION AT THE STANDARD HOTEL, LOS ANGELES, 2018. 'SCOTCH EGGS', PLATINUM JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS, LONDON, 2022. EXHIBITING AT ART BASEL MIAMI, 2024



taught her to sew at four and bought her felt to make her own toys. 'I was instantly obsessed with making replicas of objects,' she says. 'I knew from when I was tiny that I wanted to be an artist.'

Academically gifted, she won a scholarship to a prestigious private school, but in its high-pressured environment her mental-health struggles began. 'It was an extremely privileged world, and I was looked down upon,' she says. 'But I was also very grateful to be there and worked really hard, so it was incredibly intense.'

First, her anxiety manifested as obsessive-compulsive disorder, or OCD. 'I was terrified of germs, and I'd bleach my hands and boil my toothbrush,' she says. By the age of 13, this was spilling over into restricting the food she ate, including 'meat, eggs, anything that could make me sick.'

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When she noticed herself losing weight, 'I started falling down into this abyss,' she says. 'It was nothing to do with how I looked; with anorexia, all you want to do is destroy yourself, to disappear.'

As her weight plummeted, the school instigated regular weigh-ins, which she cheated with stones in her pockets and by downing litres of water. She attended an eating disorder clinic as an outpatient and underwent weekly NHS therapy with her family. She describes the approach back then as, 'Very accusatory. "This is all your fault, you must not want to get better." It made me feel so alone, because I wasn't doing it on purpose. The closest thing I can liken it to is being possessed by a demon.'

Eventually, at 16, she weighed just 4st 7lb and doctors at the clinic where she was an outpatient told her she might have as little as two weeks to live. If she dropped even the tiniest amount more, she would be sectioned and force-fed. 'I knew I didn't want to die,' she says. Instead, she dropped out of school, enrolled at the local tech college to study art and slowly, gradually, began to eat again.

'My weight was restored, but mentally →

I was still ill,' she says. 'I was running on manic energy, my OCD was off the charts and self-harming became my outlet.' She managed six months at University Arts Bournemouth before realising that she couldn't continue.

Then, knowing she wanted to make art full time, she took a radical step to earn enough to support herself: for five years, she worked as a stripper in nightclubs in Brighton and London. She called herself Roxy and looked 'very alternative, with my glasses on', chatting to customers between dances. It had another, unexpected, benefit: 'It actually stopped me self-harming and starving myself, because I had to show my body.'

In 2014, she broke through as an artist with *The Cornershop*, which began as a Kickstarter campaign and went viral after opening in an abandoned shop in London's East End. Each of the 4,000 felt items on the shelves were for sale, with prices starting at £1 for a lottery ticket and Sparrow herself staffing the till. 'I couldn't believe there were queues around the block,' she says. 'I sold the shop 40 times over.'

Since then, her projects have included a faux sex shop in London's Soho in 2015 titled *Madame Roxy's Erotic Emporium*; in 2019, *Lucy's Delicatessen* at New York's Rockefeller Center; and, in 2021, a fully stocked pharmacy, *The Bourdon Street Chemist*, at London gallery Lyndsey Ingram. Sparrow describes making her art as 'escapism, Prozac-like: a wonderful gentle hug'. It has always been the one thing capable of calming her busy mind. Last year, however, her refuge contributed to her relapse. She was working 18-hour days and travelling a lot; then, when her two-year relationship with a restaurateur ended, she isolated herself.

'Almost overnight, I thought, "I'm going to go fully back into my eating disorder, because I have no one to stay normal for," she says. 'I didn't have proper treatment as a teenager, and the relapse was a long time coming. It was always going to happen when a major life event tipped it over the edge.'

Sparrow quickly lost a dangerous amount of weight, terrifying her loved ones. 'I could normally shake myself out of it and force myself to eat, but I lay in bed, my heart racing, and I realised I'd completely lost all control,' she says. 'It had me by the neck.'



KING CHARLES AND QUEEN CAMILLA WITH LUCY AND ONE OF HER WORKS DURING THE PLATINUM JUBILEE CELEBRATIONS, LONDON 2022. BELOW, LUCY WITH SEBASTIAN, HER EMOTIONAL SUPPORT BANANA



She found the private clinic Promis Hay Farm online and checked in, a decision that would save her life. For ten weeks, Sparrow had intense therapy, funded by the success of her art. 'So many pieces of the puzzle fell into place,' she says. 'There's a strong history of mental illness in my family, so there was trauma that I had never dealt with.'

I realised it wasn't my fault, and that it was a form of addiction, but that I also needed to take responsibility. How I moved forward was my choice.'

Addressing the deeply ingrained, obsessive behaviours that had allowed her anorexia to flourish was a major step. Another turning point was when she realised the link between her eating disorder and the theme she returns to most often in her work: food. 'My art had become an elaborate coping mechanism to mask difficult emotions,' she says. 'I was so avoidant of food, so hungry, I'd become obsessed with it. I realised that with my art, I was feeding myself food that wasn't real, and that's how I managed to starve myself for so long.'

'MY GOAL IS TO BE SO RECOVERED THAT I CAN TELL PEOPLE GOING THROUGH THIS HELL THAT THERE IS A WAY OUT'

Sparrow now has a team of six full-time staff working with her at her Felt Cave studio in Sudbury, Suffolk. Next month her new installation, *The Bourdon Street Chippy*, an immersive fish and chip shop comprising more than 65,000 pieces, opens back at the Lyndsey Ingram gallery in Mayfair. Each item will be available to buy, with prices as reasonable as ever – although pieces from her previous collections sell for tens of thousands at auction.

Her recovery has been steady, but Sparrow will never take it for granted. 'I'm not saying it's easy or enjoyable,' she says. 'But my goal is to be so recovered that I can tell people going through this level of hell that there is a way out.'

The Bourdon Street Chippy can be seen at Lyndsey Ingram (lyndseyingram.com) between 1 August and 14 September