



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 4 EPISODE 5 (mid-August 2022)

BARRY KELDOULIS - CEO

SYDNEY CONTEMPORARY

Tim Stackpool:

Joining us on the phone and to tell us more is the CEO and director of Sydney Contemporary, Barry Keldoulis.

Barry Keldoulis:

Great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Tim Stackpool:

This is the fair's sixth edition, the first physical edition since 2019, I'm guessing it's great to be back.

Barry Keldoulis:

Yes, that's right. It started in 2013 in '15, '17, and then we went annual, so it was '18, '19. And of course, due to unforeseen circumstances, we haven't been able to have it since 2019. There is palpable excitement on the street and in the galleries and in the studios, of course, as well, because it is the artist's Christmas, as they say.

Barry Keldoulis:

And yeah, it's interesting I think, one of the aspects of not having had the fair for a couple of years is that I think people not only are missing seeing good art in the flesh, but also that sense of community that the art fair has, where it brings everyone together under one roof.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. That's right. Now, you were talking about how there's a palpable sense of excitement. Has there been greater pressure to introduce this a bit sooner than what's coming up?

Barry Keldoulis:

It wouldn't really be possible to do it because the slot is booked in at the venue and they have all sorts of other things available. And in fact, last year when we looked at postponing it for a few months, it was very difficult to actually find a spot where it was possible.

Tim Stackpool:

Sure, sure.

Barry Keldoulis:

I think people, certainly all the exhibitors realized that although they were very keen for it to be probably as soon as possible, they've realised it was going to be September this year.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Barry, look, I have so much information regarding Sydney Contemporary coming from the publicist sitting in front of me, reams and reams of information.

Barry Keldoulis:

Sure.

Tim Stackpool:

It's just incredible how much you have lined up for this year. I'll get to the art pieces in a moment, but a significant performing arts component as well.

Barry Keldoulis:

Yeah. Performance art I would say rather than performing arts. Performance art is that category of visual artists who use their body as part of their connection to the visual landscape. As opposed to say the performing arts, which is opera and ballet and theatre. We're actually one of probably the few art fairs in the world that really connects with this aspect of the visual arts. I think partly because most fairs are very much commercial affairs, which we are of course, but we like to think of ourselves as a pretty much a whole of scene affair.

Barry Keldoulis:

And the performance artists are very much a resurgence in the last few years. Interest in performance art is gaining momentum. We have a number of quite significant performances this year working with performance space. We've got four artists, WieZen Ho, who works with her body is actually creating a series called Stories From the Body. And will perform at dusk, right at sunset as part of her performance.

Barry Keldoulis:

Rakini Devi, who's got a work called The Reliquary Body, where she's looked at different ways across both Eastern and Western cultures of sanctifying the body itself. And that will be an installation that she then inhabits and brings to life at various points throughout the fair. Salote Tawale, who's an islander performance artist, who is fantastic. And Alli Sebastian Wolf and a troop of her colleagues who get dressed up in these outlandish costumes, I think based around that national icon, the frill-necked lizard this year.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. I see they've got their collective called Deep Sea Astronauts they're known as. Now, if people want to see this, I just noticed that there's information in the media kit that talks about opening night and the Friday night art night. But do we see any of this performance art at other times during the fair?

Barry Keldoulis:

Yes. The Alli Sebastian Wolf will perform at various points throughout the fair as does Rakini Devi. And her installation can be seen at any time and is brought to life at certain times. But certainly, the preponderance of performance is on the Thursday and the Friday night.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. We should get opening tickets really, shouldn't we, Barry, if we're going along?

Barry Keldoulis:

Yeah, I think that, and well, the Friday night's fantastic as well with performance throughout the night. Then opening night is probably the biggest night with the most things happening. And there'll be a performance by the wonderful Justine Williams from Brisbane, doing a performance she's created especially for the fair commissioned by Australia Council called She Predicted the Weather, which will be fantastic.

Barry Keldoulis:

And then also on the opening night, Glenfiddich is sponsoring a performance by Michaela Gleave, who's known for her celestial choirs. And this time, she's doing a work that engages with different ideas of time and space. And again, there's these performative costumes and these professional musicians exploring four different ways of describing time, if I think I can put it like that, which will be fantastic. Yeah, loads to see and listen to.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, in that respect coming back out of the virtual editions, plenty of foot traffic as well. Give us an idea of the diversity of what you are presenting and really, what we shouldn't miss.

Barry Keldoulis:

Well, it's very easy to get wrapped up in a lot of these ancillary activities, which are fantastic and very much part of that whole of scene fair that we like to be. But it's worth not forgetting that the booth presentations themselves by the 90 or so galleries that we have presenting. It's interesting and an interesting aspect or example really of the globalization of the art world that this year, because it's a lift and shift from the fear we would've had last year, it's only Australian and New Zealand galleries. But have work by artists from over 34 countries I think.

Barry Keldoulis:

That's the basis of the fair of course, is those booth presentations by the galleries. There's various sectors. Important not to miss the future section, which is always created really for young galleries, often representing emerging artists, but not exclusively emerging artists. And also, it's morphed a little bit into project presentations as well. Gertrude Street from Melbourne will be coming up, celebrating their history of, well, I think for 20 years now they've produced artist editions, edition prints that they use, I think really as a fundraiser. But they've got the whole 20 there on exhibition.

Barry Keldoulis:

And then, Formas Books will be part of future as well this year. And that's a publishing outfit that doesn't really produce books about artists, but books by artists. The books themselves are really artworks,

Tim Stackpool:

Incredible stuff, but also in the list, you have to include your panel discussions. There's the opportunity to actually get guided tours through the art, which is always helpful. The workshops too, and you have the VIP program as well. There's so many aspects to this. I always wonder whether, like you say, this is the artist's Christmas. It really is the celebration of visual art in Australia. This is what your event has pretty much evolved into.

Barry Keldoulis:

Yeah, absolutely. It's really celebrating, well, I guess you said, the length and the breadth and the heights and the depths of what visual artists are creating these days. And there's so much to do, to talk about, to experience. There's really, there's too much for anyone to do really, in any one day or any one iteration of the fair, which is why people keep coming back. There'll always be more again next year.

Barry Keldoulis:

Think important to remember as well that it is very contemporary. The work that's exhibited, apart from a number of secondary market galleries. The work from that most of the galleries is, of course, completely fresh. It's great to go to the museums and see contemporary exhibitions at the museums, but they take years to put together and produce. Whereas everything at the fair is very much now.

Tim Stackpool:

Almost never seen before, you could say.

Barry Keldoulis:

Well, precisely. In fact, that's a requirement, that the work has not been seen previously.

Tim Stackpool:

You had virtual editions. I think the last time we spoke, we were talking about the virtual edition for Sydney Contemporary. I mean, nothing stacks up to being there in the flesh though. But has it been tough, Barry? I mean, I don't want to keep going over old COVID lines and we've talked about it for two years now.

Barry Keldoulis:

Yeah, we're not allowed to say the C word.

Tim Stackpool:

No, no. But just give us a sense of how tough you've seen galleries doing it. If tough at all. What's your impression?

Barry Keldoulis:

It's a really mixed bag. And some galleries have actually had some of their best years ever and others have found it very difficult. There were galleries, I think that were more prepared with their online presentations, when COVID struck. And they were in a better position to take advantage of it.

Barry Keldoulis:

And it was also, I think, noticeable that the galleries did very well. It was mainly artists who already had waiting lists and were very well known to the public. I think for emerging artists and young galleries, it was much harder. But some galleries actually did quite well. And I think that was because there was a lot of people stuck at home, not being able to spend their money elsewhere. And either looking at bare walls or thinking they needed a refresh.

Barry Keldoulis:

And actually some, I think went out and bought new homes in different places and had to put art on their walls there as well. Some galleries actually did quite well, but it was difficult for some. And it was actually very difficult for the artists, of course, because so many of them in various places where they were restricted, the movement was restricted, they often found themselves incapable of getting to their studios.

Barry Keldoulis:

And you might find even at the fair walking around, might be an interesting way to look and see how artists' production has changed over the last couple of years. I know that certainly last year, a lot had to produce work domestically. The scale of their work shrank. I think mostly this year, you'll find that been able to get back in their studios and that won't be such an issue. But it'll be interesting to see if there's a current running underneath of the way that artists have changed their practice over the last few years.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, absolutely. And talking as you did before, about the 90 galleries, something like 450 artists, 34 countries, you said. Is your show as big as it can get now, do you think?

Barry Keldoulis:

Yes, we can't expand the footprint of Carriageworks and we take up, we're the only event, in fact, that takes up the whole footprint of Carriageworks. We can't really grow, but we can probably keep on improving in terms of our presentation and the quality.

Barry Keldoulis:

The presentation will constantly change. And I think that's something that we as organisers have to manage because, of course, this year, as I said, it's only Australian and New Zealand galleries, but next year, we will have an influx again from Asia and from South Africa and various other places.

Barry Keldoulis:

It's something that we have to manage expectation where galleries will want more and more space, but we perhaps just can't give it to them. They'll have to improve their quality of their presentations perhaps instead.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And how do you? I mean a tip for next year, Barry, for anyone who's listening. I mean, is it about first in, best dressed?

Barry Keldoulis:

Yes and no, because one of the ways of dealing with the lack of extra space, if I can put it that way, is that the galleries will sometimes change the presentations a number of times during the fair. As works sell, they will often replace them with a different work by the same artist in the first couple of days. But then sometimes, they will change their whole exhibition schedule on say the Friday night so the weekend presentation is different. Yeah.

Tim Stackpool:

Which is a great reason to come back day after day, Barry.

Barry Keldoulis:

Absolutely.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. I want to ask you also about Annika's work. There's some special information in front of me here regarding Amplify, which is described as your most ambitious and diverse installation program. Can you give us a bit of an idea of what this is?

Barry Keldoulis:

Yeah. Amplify is what we're calling the old installation contemporary this year. Amplify, we chose Amplify because, of course, installation contemporary is an opportunity for artists to create and exhibit work, large scale work that normally, the gallery wouldn't have the capacity and certainly perhaps not in their booth have the capacity to show these works.

Barry Keldoulis:

It's a real opportunity for artists to create works that are of a scale that would be more likely to be of interest to museums, cultural institutions, and probably sort of corporate collections, rather than the domestic scale works. There's not a lot of opportunities for artists in Australia to exhibit a large scale work. It's very enthusiastically engaged with. And we have, I think 15 works this year, scattered throughout the floor plan of Carriageworks of these works. Yeah, it's one of the highlights of the fair.

Tim Stackpool:

There's quite a few, the names here are Peta Clancy, Mikala Dwyer, Claire Healy's in there as well. Vincent Namatjira. And as we expect from these artists, all huge pieces. Looking through the documentation here, they do all look like large installation pieces. No doubt about that.

Barry Keldoulis:

Yeah. Mostly they're large scale. I mean we have had ones before that were quite tiny and intricate and hidden in various spots. And in fact, some of the Tony Alberts that are in the fair are not necessarily large scale. There's three works actually in this corridor that he's going to occupy. And a couple of those are actually not huge in scale, but they suit the peculiar environment of Carriageworks.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And how do you curate such things, Barry? I mean, you have to look at it from a commercial perspective as well. Do you look and say, "Yeah, I can see that piece being bought"? Or "No, I think that piece is rubbish." How do you balance that up in your head?

Barry Keldoulis:

I think you have to trust that people are imaginative in the way they spend their money. They're engaging and they're adventurous. It's not necessarily... It's hard to tell how to know until something's exhibited, if it will sell. But you're not going to know if you don't try.

Barry Keldoulis:

And to a certain extent why we have Amplify because also, on the collector side, the people who might purchase it again, if they don't get the opportunity to see these sorts of works, then they're never going to be inspired to buy them. Yeah, it's a, I guess, chicken and egg, or cat and mouse type of experiment. But it's usually very expensive. And the piece itself may not sell, but it may inspire somebody to commission a piece, a large scale piece by a particular artist.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. I guess I ask because, and this draws on your years of experience as well, but like any trade show, whether it's in the arts or not, you also have to deliver for the footfall. And if those individuals have a lesser than inspiring year, then irrespective of what the trade show is, they say, "Well, it's not worth coming back next year because last year it was not engaging."

Tim Stackpool:

You have two jobs to do. One is to make sure that you provide space and footfall for the galleries who are buying space from you. And then secondly, you've got to make sure that those who are exhibiting actually do inspire and engage those who come through as well. I'm in your head, I mean, you could be approached by galleries who represent artists, which perhaps aren't engaging or artists who are too emerging, if I can put it that way.

Tim Stackpool:

And then you've got a toss up in your head, well, will I actually make floor space available to these people? Will I offer them the privilege, I guess, in a way of letting them exhibit at my show?

Barry Keldoulis:

Yeah. Well, that's one of the reasons why we work with a selection committee so that it's not just one person's idea, but also, once the gallery has been accepted into the fair, then we will work with them with their presentation. Particularly if we think their presentation is for example, they're trying to fit too many artists into the space.

Barry Keldoulis:

They do have to stick with what they have put forward. Often though, for unforeseen circumstances, they'll have to change that. They can get back to us with some ideas to change the presentation. And usually, that works out well. But we do insist on a certain calibre of presentation.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, I know that you're not allowed to have favourites, but is there any particular works or galleries that you're actually really looking forward to seeing on display this year?

Barry Keldoulis:

Oh, all of them.

Tim Stackpool:

That's far too diplomatic, Barry.

Barry Keldoulis:

Paul Nash, who comes from Gisbon, pretty much a gallery at the end of the world. He's on the East Coast of New Zealand and the north island there, but he always has really interesting presentations. And I know that this year we had to get the okay from Carriageworks for one of his artists to actually carve into the walls.

Tim Stackpool:

Gosh.

Barry Keldoulis:

Of bay 21.

Tim Stackpool:

Gosh.

Barry Keldoulis:

And that will be a really interesting presentation. Alongside another artist that he's working with, who does works, that are deceiving to the eye in terms of you have to work out what it is that you're looking at. He's always a good one.

Barry Keldoulis:

I mean, like you say, it's very hard. I mean, Vincent Namatjira is having a solar presentation with This is No Fantasy from Melbourne. And I always enjoy seeing his work. You might remember he won the Archibald a couple of years ago, which I think it shocked perhaps a lot of people because he is a very, for want of a better term, naive style of painting.

Barry Keldoulis:

But one of the reasons why I think it was a significant win is because his self-portraiture is not just of himself, but he includes other people as a way of defining his personality. And so he, his presentations are always, I find quite fantastic and fascinating and quite funny usually as well. Gee, there's so much and you've caught me slightly off guard even though I should have prepared better.

Tim Stackpool:

No, no, no. That's quite all. It's a question without notice.

Barry Keldoulis:

And there's significant indigenous present, apart from Vincent Namatjira, of course. There's a lot of other really interesting presentations. I know that Utopia Art Sydney is doing a wonderful presentation celebrating 50 years of Papunya Tula. that will be fantastic as well. There's so much on now Caston and always does a good presentation as well.

Barry Keldoulis:

It's difficult to pick favourites really, but there's the major galleries, of course, across Australia and New Zealand always put their best foot forward. And the artists are very much aware that their work is going to be seen by all of the institutional directors and curators as well as the top collectors and as well as thousands and thousands of the general public.

Barry Keldoulis:

It's really hard to pinpoint or highlight, but it's worth noting that it's very hard to go around the fair and not see a lot of work that you like. And of course, a lot of work that you don't like as well, which will often mean that it may not be the work for you, but it's probably a good work if it elicits emotion.

Tim Stackpool:

Correct. Always the way. You run through a aspirational shopping list there, Barry. At the other end of the scale though, any, in your opinion, emerging artists, we should perhaps keep an eye out for?

Barry Keldoulis:

Yes, definitely check out the future section. And the National Arts School has a presentation of graduates or recent graduates, or I think sometimes they include some of their students that are still studying. They're always worth having a look at. I'm not sure who they're presenting yet this year, but they're certainly worth checking out. And that is very much a first come, first serve basis because they usually sell out within a few hours of the opening. And I think that they will refresh their booth over time as well.

Barry Keldoulis:

If you're interested in emerging artists, it's interesting to watch what Art Bank buy. Art bank will do a presentation this year of works that they buy at the fair. And a big wall at the entrance to bay 21. But it's the only government department to ever have made money because really, their ambit is to buy emerging artists. And that's their curator's speciality really, is to be able to pick artists that are going to be in it for the long run.

Tim Stackpool:

That's actually a great tip. A very good tip. Now, before I let you go, I just need your opinion on, you mentioned a little bit how perhaps sitting around during COVID, we developed a greater appreciation of art, what to do with the works on our walls or whether we need new walls or new artworks for those walls, that sort of thing.

Tim Stackpool:

The appreciation of art in Australia, and I've asked you this question two times now in the past on previous discussions we've had on the podcast. Do you think the hiatus in our mobility, not just locally, but internationally, do you think that's developed a greater appreciation of art in this country or has it set us back?

Barry Keldoulis:

I certainly don't think it set us back. I think that you are right, that there has been probably a greater appreciation of community in general and our creative community in particular. I think it's well known that most of their creatives have found it very difficult, obviously particularly in the performing arts. But also, to a certain extent, visual artists are performers in that they put their work out there to be seen in

exhibition. And they feed on the feedback from not just critics and admirers, but also from the general public.

Barry Keldoulis:

That aspect has been missing from their lives. And I think people have perhaps developed a greater appreciation of our creative people and hopefully, that will translate into better support. Because we love to travel overseas and see these old cultures. Go to Italy or Greece. And I think people realised that we are a young country that houses the oldest civilizations on earth. And to be a part of that, you can support an artist simply by buying their work. And that's a way of taking part in the creation of what will be our culture.

Tim Stackpool:

Well, Barry, it's great to have Sydney Contemporary back. I know it's a very huge job. And I wish you all the very best for a very successful fair.

Barry Keldoulis:

It's going to be fantastic. And I look forward to seeing you there.