



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST NOV 2019

Transcript of interviews:

Sue Cramer – *Heide*

Geoff Todd AM, Alan Duffy – *Artwork for "Too Soon To Be Late"*

Geraldine Barlow – *QAGOMA*

SUE CRAMER - HEIDE

- Tim: And we're hearing from the Heide Museum in Melbourne first up, where with their pioneering use of virtual reality, artists Jess Johnson and Simon Ward, have created an immersive installation in which Jess's drawings are combined with Simon's vision of a mysterious universe, all through the use of virtual reality. Now the exhibition called Terminus is touring nationally. It's commissioned by the NGA, curated there by Jaklyn Babington, but it's currently at the Heide Museum of Modern Art where Sue Cramer is curator. Sue, thanks for joining us on the podcast.
- Sue Cramer: It's a pleasure. Thanks for inviting me.
- Tim: Now, this exhibition originally came from another gallery, but why was it that you considered bringing it into Heide?
- Sue Cramer: Well, we were very excited by the prospect of, well firstly, working with Jess Johnson and Simon Ward, who are two leading Australian, well actually they're New Zealanders but, New Zealand born, but they do have a history of exhibiting and working in Australia, and in fact they met in Melbourne. Jess now lives in New York and Simon in New Zealand. But we were very thrilled to be able to show their work, and we were very excited by the prospect of showing the virtual reality project that they'd been collaborating on, because it's such a new and exciting medium. And I'd seen the exhibition in Canberra, I went up with my colleague from Heide to see it, and we were totally blown away by the experience of putting on those virtual reality masks and being taken away on this journey into other worlds.
- Sue Cramer: It's a medium that is really at its beginning in a way, even though it's so high tech, who knows where it might go in the future, and we thought that it would appeal to a wide range of audiences, as indeed it has done. Not just young and tech savvy audiences, but also older, wide ranges of people, and we've felt that it was cutting edge and we wanted to show it.
- Tim: Now you spoke about it transporting you to another world.
- Sue Cramer: Absolutely.
- Tim: This particular exhibition really does have an alien theme to it, but in terms of VR in general, do you think it really only lends itself to that particular sort of other-worldly type of work, or do you think it could be extended into further types of work?
- Sue Cramer: Look, I think VR in itself, it's a tool that can be used in any number of ways. I guess you could say there's a natural affinity, in the case of Jess and Simon's work, there's a natural affinity between VR and the kinds of science fiction fantastical themes that they explore. But as a medium in itself, it can be anything. It can be hyperreal, or extremely realistic. It can be based on real or imagined worlds. There's really no limit to the kind of computer generated world that it creates. So for the viewer who puts the headset on,

you are going to have, in a sense it will be other worldly, because you as a viewer feel disembodied.

Sue Cramer: You're not really aware of your physical surrounds anymore. You are in a different world, it's an alternate reality. So it is by its very nature otherworldly, it's a parallel universe, but the nature of that universe is open to the artist to create. And any number of artists will create it in a wide range of ways. So the worlds that Simon and Jess have created are very specific to them, and that's what's so unique and wonderful about it.

Tim: But in terms of this type of art, I mean it's quite isolating, in a way. Anyone that saw Shaun Gladwell's work at the MCA recently, Pacific Undertow, there was a VR component of that, and watching people take part in that, you really do focus in, as you say, on that alternate reality. Do you think developing VR art is just a progression of how we are in society and our being isolated, being very screen focused?

Sue Cramer: Well look, I mean, yes. In one way I think that's true, for sure, and sometimes that's posed as a criticism, that sort of one on one experience, but you might think, well it's not that different from reading a book, which is a very entering into your own imaginative world via a vehicle, of sorts. The other thing that we observe in the galleries is that people talk about it once they take the headsets off, they share their experiences, and many gut conversations are overheard, where because it's so wondrous, and it's so different from what people experience in their day to day life, that they really want to articulate it to each other. So it's actually a very shared experience in that respect.

Tim: Yes, funnily enough.

Sue Cramer: Yes. I think people are very excited by it, and they want to talk about it. And at the same time, the good thing about the one-on-one experience is that you get a great intensity whilst you are experiencing it. And each of the five different roles that you experience when you come to the Heide exhibition, each one is five minutes long, is that for the time you've got the headset on, you are without any other distractions. So it's kind of unique. You can't see anything else. You're not hearing, you're really immersed in that world. And that's really quite special. So I mean, as Jess Johnson has said that VR is perhaps the most effective conduit from one brain to another, that she's ever discovered. And that for her as an artist, that is extremely exciting.

Tim: The other thing I love about VR, Sue, is that separate to this exhibition, if you are stuck at home, if you are housebound for whatever reason, if you can't travel, then you can do a virtual tour of the Tate, or the Guggenheim, anywhere from wherever you are in the world, and really do get that gallery experience anyway, which is completely separate to what we're talking about today. But I think VR has opportunities in that area.

Sue Cramer: Definitely. Yep.

Tim: But in terms of more exhibitions regarding VR, I mean, do you see this as something that artists may embrace even further in order to do that brain to brain communication?

Sue Cramer: I think so, yes. I think so. I think that there are a number of very high profile, well known artists, even people like the performance artist, Marina Abramovic, who has very much based her whole career on the presence of the artist. The physical presence of the artist vis-a-vis an audience. Well she has now done her first virtual reality work, which is based on a work that uses an avatar of her. And so she is exploring this as one possible avenue of her making an artwork.

Sue Cramer: I think that it's something that, it's a tool that many artists will use into the future. I don't think it will replace the other mediums, by any means, because I mean, Jess herself, so she's the one who provides the imagery for the Terminus exhibition through her drawings. And Simon is the one who translates it into the fourth dimensional realm of VR. But she will never stop doing drawings. Her work is very much based in that traditional medium. So it's not ever going to replace the handcrafted art object of her drawings.

Tim: No. In a similar way that video or television presentation won't ever replace a painting on the wall.

Sue Cramer: No, that's right. So all these things can coexist. It's part of the plurality of contemporary art. And who knows in what way virtual reality will extend into the future, and we may have a situation in the future where people can actually view virtual reality together, and experience it together, somehow. So it might not be a solo experience anymore.

Tim: And in terms of the other work that you're talking about Jess does with her drawing, some of her textile work and indeed work that she's undertaken with her mother, is included in this.

Sue Cramer: In terms of the handcrafted element of the exhibition, because the drawings are the basis of the virtual reality works. We've also extended the exhibition beyond the core of what came to us from the National Gallery in Canberra to include a number of her quilts that she's made collaboratively with her mother. And they had the idea to work together, and Jess's drawings have been digitally transferred onto quilting material, which her mother has then made into quilts. And adding her own decorative border. So these are very beautifully handcrafted works that also speak to that tradition of women's craft over the generations, and it's also a lovely handing down of tradition from mother to daughter and back the other way as well from daughter to mother. It's a lovely exchange across the generations, and it really brings another dimension to the exhibition. They are very beautiful objects and very strange at the same time, in the best possible way.

Sue Cramer: We do also have a number of beautiful haute couture garments on display that are a collaboration between Jess Johnson and the Sydney Fashion House Romance Was Born.

Tim: Ah, yes.

Sue Cramer: Very, very glamorous evening gowns. It speaks on the one hand to the theme of collaboration, but it's another example of Jess collaborating, this time with fashion

designers, and they were inspired by the detail and the fantasy and the retro-futuristic elements in her drawing. And they were inspired to make their spring summer collection called *Mysteria Wisteria*, and included a number of extremely glamorous evening gowns that took from a number of designs that Jess had done pieced together from her drawings. And so there's really a quite a fantasy element to these very elaborate garments, and we've displayed them in the exhibition, where they take on almost a narrative element within the context of the show.

Tim: Yep. So I just want to ask you on that note, as a curator and not necessarily related to this particular show, but in contemporary art, and you have experience with this, with artists coming through and they have so many different aspects to their craft with what they create. And we're talking about here, Jess, with her textiles, with her fashion design, and with her three D virtual reality work, what sort of a challenge does that present to you as a curator, trying to create a story or a thread through all these different platforms that they use, and then presenting that to the public? Over time, I mean, this has become more common. Have you found it more challenging to curate work like this?

Sue Cramer: Not really. It just becomes more and more exciting. Yeah. All the time. As a curator, every project is different and that's what keeps it so exciting and alive, is that every artist, every project presents new challenges, new ways of looking at things. And so there's always new possibilities, new ways of bringing things together. And yes, there are things you have to leave out in order to make sense of the things that you leave in. And that's the task of the curator, really, but always working in collaboration with the artists to work out what's going to make sense as a group, and what will fit well within the gallery space. And yeah, it's just becomes more and more fun, really. I've always really enjoyed the kind of multidisciplinary nature of contemporary art. The cross connections between the different mediums is what I think is one of the most interesting things. It brings a lot to an exhibition when you can show the connections between different mediums.

Tim: It does sound lovely, Sue, and if anyone did miss it in Canberra, they can get the opportunity to see it at Heide, and Sue, we really appreciate your time on the podcast.

Sue Cramer: That's an absolute pleasure. Thank you very much for inviting me.

Tim: That's Sue Cramer at the Heide Museum of Modern Art. *Terminus* is showing there until the 1st of March, and it's worth taking a look. Visit www.heide.com.au for more details.

GEOFF TODD AM, ALAN DUFFY – TOO SOON TO BE LATE

- Tim: And let's talk about the art that illustrates the book of poems by Stewart Levitt. Now the collection is called Too Soon To Be Late. It's highly unlikely that a book of poetry would normally be featured in this podcast, but two artists provide illustrations to accompany some of the pieces. The poet, Stewart Levitt, firstly, he's a human rights lawyer, probably best known for being the successful litigator behind the Palm Island class action in 2004, the Storm Financial class action in 2015 and the 7-Eleven underpayment and deportation scandal in the same year. This book, which has been in the works for over 20 years, turns Stewart's experiences as a lawyer into a compilation of poems covering everything from social issues, human rights, and indigenous suffering, as you can well imagine. The art is done by Geoff Todd, who this year received an OAM for his contribution to the arts, and Alan Duffy an architect by trade. So it's equally visually beautiful as it is written. And at the launch I was able to speak to both artists and I began by asking Geoff Todd how it came about him being one of the illustrators.
- Geoff Todd: Well it's interesting and it's probably close to 20 years ago that I met Stewart and Adelia. Stewart was talking about me providing images rather than illustrating a book and because I'm one of those precious artist sort of guys, a fine artist, I liked that idea because I didn't want to become an illustrator, expansion branding. Anyway, Stewart then went on to say what he's looking for is visual analogies to go with each poetry and that led to me and him discussing the truly hundreds of paintings and images of mine that I'd done over the years and the alert people that are looking at the details in the book will say that some of the artwork was done years before the poetry was written. And that was a wonderful way to add visual imagery to the book.
- Tim: And tell me in terms of inspiration for the original drawings in the book. Did that come easily for you reading the poetry or was there a bit of discussion regardless that as well?
- Geoff Todd: Admittedly there are some that are inspired by the poetry. But the others, and I think this is why Stewart and I got together, he's working in the law from a point of view of a human rights lawyer. I found myself after going to Arnhem land in 1984 sort of swimming around in the same sorts of circumstances that Stewart was feeling. And I'm not quite sure, I think it was through a charity that was Stewart set up that I contributed to the Errol Wyles Justice Foundation that we met and we're raising money together for indigenous rights, especially within the legal system. We've been mates ever since.
- Tim: And did you find a great satisfaction in taking on this project?
- Geoff Todd: I've got to say I really did. It was a long journey, but it was very inspirational because Stewart was interested in all those ideals, that affected me over the years. I'm sort of honoured to be on the journey with Stewart, but I loved it. It was first class.
- Tim: And would you take on a project like this again?

Geoff Todd: I would only because, and Stewart wasn't saying, "Here's a poem, illustrate it." He was saying, "Here's a poem. What images does that bring to mind to you?" And sometimes I did new ones. Other times I found one that was 30 years old.

Tim: I also had the chance to chat with Alan Duffy about his art that's included with the poems. I asked him about this being such a departure from his core business of being an architect.

Alan Duffy: It was a great privilege at first and foremost because it's always great to work with a fellow artists, whether that be within literature, painting, sculpture or indeed architecture. And as one of the famous architects said, Frank Lloyd Wright, "Architecture is another art." And I have firsthand experience of trying to integrate all of the arts together through buildings, which I think is a great thing to do. But in terms of the book it was something quite different for me. And so in trying to interpret someone's thoughts in word format and then representing that in visual format. So I found that a great challenge and a great opportunity to express art in a way I haven't done before.

Tim: And what's your connection with Stewart?

Alan Duffy: Stewart I met through my partner. So it was through a friendly sort of acquaintance if you like. He saw some of my arts, which I have online and he liked it. So he was drawn to that for some reason. So he asked me then to illustrate some of his artwork.

Tim: Where did you draw your inspiration from for each of the pieces? Do you ponder over the poems for a while? Or did you base it on previous work that you've done?

Alan Duffy: All of the artwork that I have represented in the book today is all original work based on Stewart's poems. So none of it has been applied afterwards. So it's a representation, true representation of my interpretation of the words themselves. So I have original artworks, but none of those were used for the book.

Tim: Now very satisfying opportunity I guess, was it?

Alan Duffy: Absolutely. I mean I often say, and I just said to Geoff earlier this evening that I often say to people, "I'm an artist masquerading as an architect." Which I believe is very true in my case, but at least I get to apply the artistic tools in my day to day work, which I'm very honoured to be able to do.

Tim: So looking ahead then, will we see more work from you perhaps just from an artistic perspective?

Alan Duffy: Absolutely. I think this is a great springboard for me to get noticed in the art world and I'm very grateful to Stewart for giving me that platform and I couldn't think a more interesting and nicer guy to give me that opportunity. He's a fabulous guy to know and a very easy person to work with.

Tim:

Alan Duffy there, an architect and artist whose work along with Geoff Todd's is included in Stewart Levitt's Too Soon To Be Late collection of poems. And you can see a collection of the artwork at www.toosontobelate.com.

GERALDINE BARLOW - QAGOMA

Tim: Geraldine Barlow is the Curatorial Manager of international art at QAGOMA and the curator of Water, which features a snowman along with many other works by leading international and Australian artists. It's a major exhibition that explores the cultural, ecological and political significance of one of life's most vital elements, water itself. And Geraldine joins us on Inside the Gallery.

Geraldine: That's a pleasure, Tim. Lovely to be talking with you.

Tim: Geraldine, it seems remarkable you have this exhibition with the snowman, and we know Queensland. It's bright, it's sunny, it's warm during winter. This is a real contrast. How does the snowman appear, and how does it fit within the gallery?

Geraldine: The snowman will be coming to us from Switzerland, and he basically looks out at us from a freezer with a glass door. So something I really liked about this artwork is it's quite a humorous way of reminding us how much we rely upon refrigeration, air conditioning, cooling, all these kinds of systems to keep us comfortable. But in a way it's those same systems that are also causing the warming of the planet, the melting of ice, and bringing many creatures more than the Snowman into peril.

Tim: He's kind of like a cold climate or climate change refugee in a way, isn't he?

Geraldine: He is. He's a kind of advanced ambassador of all sorts of global change. And I think in Brisbane, there's just about never snow in Queensland. There's a few special spots where it occasionally occurs, but a lot of the people of Brisbane wouldn't have had a chance to see a snowman without travelling a little way. So he looks pretty cute. Every few days our team will be actually remaking his smile and his eyes. So just really wiping those on with a finger, because he keeps frosting up so he constantly changes. He doesn't just reach his very white optimal peak. He keeps pushing out a little bit more frostiness so sometimes he looks quite happy with where he is and other times you see the frost really hemming him in a bit, and he starts to look a little bit scared. Sometimes he looks a little diabolical in his smile when little details change. So lots of personality.

Tim: Now you said he's coming from Europe, but along with that you have a number of artists in this exhibition who are showing for the first time here in the Southern hemisphere.

Geraldine: We do. Julian Charriere, it's the premiere of his work in Australia. We've got two fantastic images, which Julian has made tracing one of his journeys. He's quite an adventurer up into the polar areas from off Greenland, and we can see him taking out a blowtorch to have a shot at melting an iceberg. So they're pretty

dramatic images, and it's something of a futile exercise. He looks a little bit like a kind of a black clad ninja up there with the bright flare of his blowtorch. And yeah, I was thinking at the time that it can be tricky to really put together cause and effect in terms of climate change. But I think sadly it's all becoming much clearer for everyone at the moment with all the extreme weather events we've been having.

Tim: Yes. This whole exhibition called water, it does reflect a lot in terms of what you just mentioned when it comes to climate change. I mean, do you see a great deal of work by artists today reflect the state of the world, the state of the climate and the debate?

Geraldine: I think that there's always been a passion for the environment, whether it's taking joy in the details of the beautiful landscapes and seascapes that are around us. That's something that I think artists have always really enjoyed, and there are a lot of different modes of engaging with that. So sometimes I think you see much more activist works. So say Julian's work I think has more of that kind of activist guise. Something that I wanted to make sure that we did with this exhibition was not to really preach to the converted or tell people, show a lot of graphs and things and just repeat the information that was already in circulation. I felt that finding an emotional ground was quite important.

Geraldine: I think the politics in Australia unfortunately have been quite divisive. So what I thought was the challenge was to try and represent where artists are at, but also deliver an exhibition that can really bring people together and remind us of what we share so that maybe families, people who come from somewhat different political positions can really go back to something and think, well, you know, we all enjoy swimming in the water. We all want that sense of refreshment, and maybe join in that and then work it through from there.

Tim: And given the nature of the debate, not just in Australia but around the world, how prepared are you for any type of criticism or deprecating comment that might arise towards the exhibition if there is going to be any?

Geraldine: I think that something that we have to deal with as a big gallery and museum institution is the movement of artworks around the world and also the resources that we use to build exhibitions. So those things are real factors. We're trying to look at them in quite a clear sense and be careful about where we make those commitments and to reduce things around our energy use. So we look at the lights that we use. We're looking at things like the temperature settings on the buildings and shifting how we set those. But we're a big slow moving ship in some ways but then we try to be a little radical in others. And so a work like Olafur Eliasson's Riverbed is quite a large scale work that uses a lot of resources to bring into place.

Tim: Yeah. There's something like 110 tons of rock in that installation I understand.

Geraldine: There are. Yeah. So that's layered up through from fine sand and gravel to smaller rocks and larger rocks. And most of them come from relatively nearby. So that's a way that we can show a really interesting international artist, Olafur Eliasson, who's recently been appointed a UN ambassador in relation to climate change, and somewhat lower the footprint and impact of that work. But we have to acknowledge as well there's the substrate structure to that. We have water hydraulic systems that will create the little stream that wells up in the work, and that'll be almost the effect of the landslide of rock having come into the gallery.

Geraldine: So it's a work where you get the sense of our familiar built environment, but suddenly nature is crashing into the space and then this little stream is welling up and wending its way through the landscapes. So it looks like the first river at the beginning of time, and it also looks like perhaps there was once a really great big river there and that that river's almost dried up and now just reduced to a small stream. So I felt that this was a work that was very relevant for Australia but also a work that makes us think about the history of life emerging from water.

Tim: It sounds just spectacular, Geraldine. And similarly in terms of scale, Heritage, it's another installation, that has representations of something like 45 animals.

Geraldine: Yes, yes. So this is a work by the Chinese-born New York based artist Cai Guo-Qiang. These 45 animals include Australian animals. They include animals such as a panda, tiger. So animals from all around the world and they're in this beautiful white space at the centre of which is a blue lake. And that was inspired by Cai's visit to Minjerribah, or Stradbroke Island here in Queensland. That incredibly beautiful natural environment, and as he says a lot of people from around the world think of Australia as this beautiful place of last retreat. So he imagines all these animals coming together here, gathering around the one pool of water. So it's a very dream-like ideal situation. But as you look at them, you kind of think, Oh, is this like a frozen moment? Like what happens next? What will the tiger do with the little wallaby across the way? And how do the instincts of these animals unfold, and what does this have to say about us as well, as human beings?

Tim: Geraldine, as we take a look at these works and art as an observer ... just let me digress into this because it's really good that I've actually got the opportunity to speak to you. As an observer art is contemplative. It's meditative. It's a very thoughtful experience. But you as a curator, we, and I'm speaking generally as humans, are we lacking more and more the opportunity to do that? Do we need to be more reflective and should we be looking at installations such as Water that you have as an opportunity to do so?

Geraldine: I hope the art gallery can be a space of reflection. It's something that I think we've spoken about Riverbed as a place to sit and reflect, to almost hear the water. That's an artwork where people like to come and perhaps make a little tower of rocks and almost open your mind and take it out into the world and go

back to the world feeling differently. I mean we love to offer a space of reflection at the gallery, but also something I wanted to do with this exhibition is try and make it a space for action but action in a way that can rewire how we think about moving together.

Geraldine: So we've got a great work by William Forsythe, the dancer and choreographer, who also makes sculptural and installation works. This piece is called *The Fact of Matter*, and it's an installation of hanging gymnasium rings. He asks us to try and cross from one side to another, and it's a really difficult task of just lifting yourself up and moving through the space just using the rings. For me it seemed like a really interesting way to think about the impact of climate change and rising waters. Having to lift our bodies, lift our society to another level and watch each other and learn from how we each move and work out how we look out for each other and move together in new ways.

Tim: Wow, that really sounds spectacular Geraldine. And of course, much of what you do and other galleries around the country, they're able to do this by the generosity of benefactors and corporate support and individuals too. And I want to make mention particularly with you of Tim Fairfax who has helped you quite a bit.

Geraldine: Yeah, Tim Fairfax has been a really long running fantastic benefactor of the gallery. So the *Snowman* was a really ambitious work for us to look at trying to bring to Brisbane. And we're really thrilled to have the support of Tim Fairfax once again to acquire this work. So the *Snowman* will arrive for *Water*, but stay on in Brisbane. And Tim's really been a great supporter of the gallery and our children's programs. He and his wife Gina, they just love energizing the gallery and bringing a whole lot of people in here. So we're really grateful for their support.

Tim: Yes indeed. People like that certainly help across the arts and achieving the type of things that perhaps might not otherwise make it to the gallery.

Geraldine: Yeah. And taking a risk, taking a chance. Because I think the hope is always that art can perhaps contribute to rewiring the debate in a way. And we have an artwork by the photographer Peter Dombrovskis, which was at the centre of the campaign to save the Franklin River in Tasmania from damming called *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*. That artwork really became an icon of that campaign. I certainly see with many artists the passion for the environment, but they don't always have the opportunity for their work to be taken up into the world with that same kind of recognition. So I wanted to remind people that it is possible, and the perspective of artists I think is really important and beautiful as we try and energize each other to tackle these big challenges.

Tim: Absolutely, absolutely. Geraldine. It's been an absolute pleasure hearing from you on the podcast, and I really appreciate your time.

Geraldine: That's a pleasure. Thank you.

Tim: That's Geraldine Barlow, the curator of Water at QAGOMA running from the 7th of December through until the 26th of April next year.