



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 3 HOTA

Home of the Arts (Gold Coast)

Transcript of interview:

TRACY COOPER-LAVERY

Gallery and Visual Arts Director

## TRACY COOPER-LAVERY

Tim Stackpool:

Tracy Cooper-Lavery is the gallery and visual arts director there and Tracy I might ask by starting, first of all, for people who are not aware of HOTA, what actually is it, and how did it come to be?

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

HOTA is essentially the new name or the more recent name for the Gold Coast Cultural Precinct. So HOTA stands for Home of the Arts on the Gold Coast, and we are partway through a cultural precinct master plan, and with that in place on the one site, we have three buildings now.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

So we have the original art centre, which really is what you consider a traditional regional arts centre, so like a theatre with performing arts capabilities. It had two small gallery spaces. We have cinemas and some F&B outlets. So we have that building and so that's now HOTA central, we call that. We also have our outdoor stage which opened in 2019, and that now gives us the capability to do larger outdoor performances up to around three and a half thousand people. For example, we've had Tim Minchin, Neil Finn, Laurie Anderson. We've had some fantastic performances out on that outdoor stage, and then the next part of the master plan: HOTA Gallery. So that's the \$60.5 million project, which is really exciting and yeah, we're scheduled to just completely transform what the arts is for the Gold Coast.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

I guess, as I said, HOTA central, the original building does have quite a history. It's just over 30 years old. It opened in 1986 and as I said, the Gold Coast City Gallery was very much part of that and has been part of that up until May 2019, when we closed the doors to the former gallery so that we could start the huge amount of work getting us to where we are now, but interestingly, the gallery's collection or the city's collection has a much longer history than the infrastructure. So the city collection actually started in 1968 through the Gold Coast Art Prize. It was pretty much homeless up until 1986 when the original building opened.

Tim Stackpool:

There is a history of the gallery of sorts prior to this opening but going back to what you said when you closed down, it's almost as if COVID came along at the right time for this project because you were closed already.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Yeah, it's been a really interesting time, particularly for the gallery staff in that we were already working behind the scenes. We didn't have that front-facing capacity before COVID hit. It's obviously hit HOTA and the arts and our local artists quite heavily, but that small percentage of the team that works within the gallery were already working with no front-facing capacity. So yeah, it has been an interesting time, I

guess, for us, and I think too, we're so not used to working with the art on a daily basis and seeing it on the walls. It's been an interesting time, almost working figuratively speaking off-site.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes. I'm guessing it feels like you're not quite working in a gallery, you're working in the business, but you actually don't have any art to show for it at the time until you get to reopen again.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

We have made sure that throughout that time that we have had opportunities to still work with artists and to have a presence, I guess, onsite. We've still been doing small displays in the original building, in HOTA central, but we've also been working on commissions with local artists.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

So for the last couple of years, for example, we do a Christmas commission that works with the local artists to produce something interesting and different, and quirky as a response to your standard Christmas decorations. So we've done that over the last couple of years, working with local artists. We've also done commissions. We have a wall commission that we do inside HOTA central, where we offer up one of our really large wall spaces for artists to paint directly onto the walls.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, as part of your opening back in early May, you had commissioned work from two significant artists as part of that. Tell us why those artists were so important to have been included.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

You're right. We've got two nationally profiled artists that produced two new outdoor artworks to herald I suppose the two main entry points for the gallery. But I might also say as well as part of our opening exhibition program, 19 other groups as well, that produced new work for the opening exhibition, which I'm sure we'll come to as well-

Tim Stackpool:

Yes, a lot going on.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

... but you're right. So the two works that are outside are a work that we've commissioned in partnership with the Melbourne Art Foundation who are aligned obviously with the Melbourne Art Fair, which is a new work by Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran, and it's the first time that he's actually created a major outdoor piece. It's about six metres high. Has neon, bronze, a number of different materials as part of that work, which is a really fun, interesting piece to welcome visitors at our lower ground entrance.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Then Judy Watson, who's a Queensland-based indigenous artist who would be very familiar to a lot of people in terms of her practice generally, but she has quite a strong career in outdoor public artwork, and so we've worked with her, and she's also, with two locally based artists, Libby Harward and Elisa Jane Carmichael, to create the pieces that form a bigger piece of work under Judy's leadership, I guess.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

It's a major sculptural piece that incorporates four main elements, I guess, that look at a dilly bag, a Piccabeen basket, some feathers from an eagle, so one of the local birds that are in this area, and then all tied together through this beautiful path that represents our local river, the Nerang River. So it's very much a site-specific work that speaks to this site and to the people of this region, the traditional owners of the region, and welcome people as they come to the main entry point of the gallery that overlooks our outdoor stage.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, lovely. The work that you described between Judy and Ramesh, there's quite a bit of contrast there. Is that deliberate or is it just the way that it evolved?

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Look, I think it's probably a happy, positive coincidence. One of the things that I really wanted to do with these projects was ensure that we were acknowledging our traditional owners and the people of the land that HOTA sits on and the fact that this work is so site-specific and the basket and the dilly bag that are part of the makeup of this work. The original objects that the sculptures are made from were all created on South Stradbroke Island as part of one of the South Stradbroke indigenous artist camps, so there's this really close connection to place, which I think is really important.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Then obviously Ramesh's work is almost like a counter balance to that in a way. I mean, it still has a very strong spiritual idea that underpins all of his work. This idea of how, throughout history, monumental buildings and places always have strong sculptural representations and monuments, I guess, that herald openings. So that kind of idea is very much underpinned in the work, but it comes with a much brighter and an interesting take, I guess, on that concept which runs through all of Ramesh's work.

Tim Stackpool:

Speaking about South Stradbroke Island and Queensland's Gold Coast in general, it is a major tourist centre for Australia. Suffering through tough times, like so many other places have over the past year or so, but is the HOTA Gallery do you think designed to perhaps change or expand the perception of what people can experience on the Gold Coast, or do you think it exists in response to what people are expecting when they come to visit your part of the world?

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

I hope it's a bit of both. I'm from the Gold Coast many, many years ago, and I've always known that there's been a strong grassroots visual arts or arts generally... There's been a very strong arts community. It's probably just never really had the exposure that it deserves because nationally and internationally, the Gold Coast is the holiday playground. It's where you come to the beach. It's where you go to the theme parks. That's very much been the focus, but there's always been this strong, artistic, creative group of people that have passed the baton on throughout the decades, I guess, to some of the people that we're working with now.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

It's always been there, but I don't think it's ever strongly been the focus of why you would come to the Gold Coast, but I think that there's always been this knowledge that it's there, but now it's time to bring it to the forefront. I think generally people come away on holidays for different reasons and I think that cultural tourism is becoming such a strong part of the market. The Gold Coast has so much to offer in terms of cultural tourism and a cultural offer that, to be honest, we just haven't had the capacity, particularly in the visual arts area, in terms of the art gallery, we haven't had the ability to really promote it in a strong way, because we haven't had the space.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

We haven't had the space to bring lots of people to see what's happening and to see the city's collection so this for the first time really gives us that opportunity to just actually show people what we have and to the degree that we want to. We have the capacity now to really show it to its full extent.

Tim Stackpool:

It can create a cultural focus that the Gold Coast hasn't necessarily enjoyed before, and I don't mean that as a put-down, but we know it so well, like you say, as the place of beaches and surfing and caravan parks and holiday homes, theme parks, putt-putt golf, all that sort of stuff.

Tim Stackpool:

Great times I must say and great memories from childhood is all there, but this is creating a whole, I don't want to say it's creating a whole new dimension for the Gold Coast because that dimension has already been there as you talked about and in previous podcasts we've certainly had conversations with gallery operators in the past who have talked about the struggles that they have in getting recognition for what they're trying to achieve on the Gold Coast as well.

Tim Stackpool:

From your perspective in general, and from the focus that you've had and the experience that you've had over the years, does art or fine art help determine a cultural focus for any location where you are? Is a city devoid of part of its soul if it doesn't have a cultural centre like HOTA?

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

I think that if a city doesn't have art, it does feel a little bit soulless. I think the opportunity that the Gold Coast has now, it feels like we're going through what Criena, my boss, the CEO, said to me a little while back was, "It feels like we're going through the teenage years and that we've got this opportunity to show everybody that we're starting to grow up and that we're finding our feet and that we've got our own opinions, and we've got our own ideas and that we're ready, and we've got the opportunity to show that to people." So I thought it was a really nice way to explain where we're at, I guess, as a city, culturally.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

If you think about the Gold Coast, I think we're something like the sixth-largest city in Australia and it feels like we now have a facility that really backs that up, that for so long we haven't had a facility that represented the size of the city and the number of people that come here. Pre-COVID, we had something like 12 million visitors to the Gold Coast so it feels like now we're maturing and we've grown up and now we've actually got something really fantastic that is going to be able to showcase what we've got.

Tim Stackpool:

Given that experience, do you think that the way you approach curating and management of the gallery is a little bit differently to perhaps what you might have to do working at a major capital city gallery? Do you find you have a little more agility or perhaps less so because you are dealing with a city council rather than perhaps like with a state government?

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

In some ways. It's interesting, as you know, I used to work at Bendigo Art Gallery. We used to find there as well, and I think it will be the same here that somehow we don't fit anywhere. Obviously, we're very fortunate in that we feel a little bit like we're beyond a regional gallery, but we're not quite at the size of a state institution, so we're somewhere in between the two. If someone ever comes up with a great tagline for that kind of sized organisation, let me know, because we haven't come up with it yet.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

But in all the years that I've worked in regional galleries, I've always felt that I had more opportunity to be a little bit risky and take... It's considered risk in terms of the way that we're programmed and absolutely you have to align with what you believe and what you understand your community wants as well. The Gold Coast isn't necessarily the place where you would expect to see old masters so that type of programming is not something that I feel has the right fit for the Gold Coast. So we obviously have to look at who's coming here and our local community, but also who our visitors are and what they want to see.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

As we've talked about, most people come to the Gold Coast because they're on holidays, and it's about recreation. So to a point, we want to make sure that the programming that we're doing here does have a message, but it also has that aspect of a little bit of recreation, a little bit of entertainment, but also

that idea that you come away thinking, "Wow, I didn't expect I was going to see that on the Gold Coast. That's not what I thought I'd get here."

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, but considering it wouldn't be a place where you'd expect to see old masters, could you see yourself on the itinerary of major touring shows?

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Yes. We are in the process of working with some very exciting national and international partners on shows, but of course, very much looking to handpick the types of projects that we might work on that we think will be a really good fit for the Gold Coast. Also, where we can, looking at things that we can have as exclusives here as well so that we can really ensure that we get the visitation that we need.

Tim Stackpool:

So apart from that opening show now underway, what have you got in store for us leading through until the end of the year?

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Because of COVID and the fact that we had to do a reshuffle of our program, it actually provided a great opportunity for us to now open as you know, with an exhibition solely focused on the Gold Coast and about the city, which seems to make so much more sense than opening with an international project.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

So we opened with Solid Gold, which is artists from Paradise, artists from the Gold Coast. That then leads us into a nationally profiled exhibition called Lyrical Landscapes and the Art of William Robinson. Many people would know William Robinson as an artist, but may not be aware that he and Shirley, his wife actually lived on the Gold Coast for a number of years up in the hinterland and so this exhibition is an opportunity for us to really celebrate the works that he produced while he lived in our region in particular, the Creation Series, which you know, is arguably seen as probably his master works, a group of works that were produced over 16 years and have never been shown together and Bill's never seen them all together.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Yeah, so those works were predominantly created right at our doorstep, I guess you can say, in the hinterland behind the Gold Coast. So we're really thrilled that we can bring those works together for the first time for that exhibition, so that's going to be a real treat, I think, for people to see that. Then we round out the year with our first international project, which is a world exclusive. We've been working

directly with one of the big private collections based in New York that belongs to the Mugar family and so that exhibition, I think, is going to again, blow people away with that notion of, "I would never expect to see that on the Gold Coast."

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Sounds great.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Yeah. So Warhol, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Richard Prince, Jeff Koons, a number of very high profile artists and works that will become a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity I think to see those right here at the Gold Coast.

Tim Stackpool:

Thinking about your experience and this is more about your perspective on stuff, you've had experience in places like Rockhampton and Bendigo. Do you change your perspective on what your role is depending on where you are? Do you think you'll be fitting out the gallery over time with work that reflects the Gold Coast more so?

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

I guess so. I'm always very mindful of what's come before me. I don't see the point, particularly in terms of collecting, in terms of the city collection and the collections that I've worked with previously, I don't see merit in doing a complete U-turn in terms of the type of works that you might collect. It's obviously about doing research into what's come before, what's been acquired, and then looking at what some of the strengths are in the collection and then building on those.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Like for example, Rockhampton... I very strongly believe that Rockhampton has one of the best regional collections in Australia. I know that when I moved up there... Rocky had always been this place where everybody talked about the collection and that it was this incredible collection, but nobody ever got to see it, so one of the first things I did when I started in Rockhampton was starting to walk through that collection store to see if all the rumours were true, and they were, and then some.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

It was just this amazing story about the way that particular collection was developed, again, in a similar way to what we're going through here at the Gold Coast, by a man who had a vision, who was really driven to see culture become part of the fabric of the city, but it was Rex Pilbeam in the '70s in Rockhampton. So it's this driven steam that that's what we need to make this city whole, and to give that heart and soul, I guess, to the city.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

That was one of the things with Rockhampton, but it's been the same here at the Gold Coast. The Gold Coast has a really interesting collection, as I said. The collection was without a home for close to a couple of decades before the original gallery opened so in a way, the collection was essentially built through an art prize to start off with, which is not an unusual story for a lot of regional collections and then has had some very strong champions throughout the years. Patrick Corrigan has been an incredible, incredible asset to the Gold Coast and to the city's collection through multiple, multiple donations of works as well as other very generous donors that have donated works throughout the city's collection's history.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

But one of the things I found with this collection was that there's these pockets of really interesting work, but for me, other than a handful of works I wouldn't say that there were a lot of individual standout pieces, but we've got these great pockets that tell interesting stories about art movements.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

For example, as I said, the collection started in 1968 around about the time that The Field exhibition had happened at the NGV, and you have all these young artists that are very focused on abstraction and colour field, and they started entering these prizes. So we have this incredible collection. It's a small collection, but it's an incredible collection of work by a number of those artists, many of who were in The Field at the NGV and so for me, that's a really interesting story to say that this at the time would have been quite a challenging group of work has ended up on the Gold Coast.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Again, who would think that you'd see some of Australia's best abstraction here, so there's these really interesting stories that are part of the collection that obviously I want to celebrate, and I also want to keep developing. So we have that. We have a very strong photography collection, particularly 21st-century photography that has again had its starting point through an art prize, through the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award but again has been built on through previous directors and myself looking at that photography collection as a way to grow the collection.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

We've also got a really interesting collection of indigenous work so quite a broad collection as well that is quite contemporary from the early 1990s onwards, but again, some really fantastic representation of indigenous artists from across Australia. There's some of the key areas that we have in this collection and also another area that I'm very keen to continue to develop is our Gold Coast collection. Again, it's a very site-specific collection, I guess you'd say, from historic watercolors from the late 1800s right through to contemporary artists that still find interest and new ideas in work that focuses on the city.

Tim Stackpool:

Now you've been given, well, not you personally, but you have \$60 million, a bit more than that actually. Is it enough?

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Well, it's enough for now. I can always have more. Everybody can always have more.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

I've started giving a couple of tours to some of our very special donors and people that have been supporting the project. I think the thing for me that's been so exciting because I've been living and breathing this now for the last five years, so sometimes I do feel like I gloss over things, but to take someone through the building now for the very first time who hasn't been on that journey and to just see that audible gasp when they see how big and significant this space is compared to what we had, I think is the thing that makes you think, "Yeah, okay, this is good. This is really exciting. People are going to be excited when they come inside and see this building and see this collection and see these exhibitions."

Tim Stackpool:

I think too, the other spinoff is, is that when such an institution comes together like HOTA Gallery, it also does great things for the smaller galleries up and down the Gold Coast.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Absolutely. The Gold Coast is an interesting place in that I've heard it described as almost like a strand of pearls where you've got this very long linear space that has these pockets of really interesting things that happen all the way along the coastline as well as back into the hinterland as well.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

But yeah, look, one of the things that we're very keen to do and support is that the visual arts and art and culture generally is happening across the Gold Coast not just at HOTA, but hopefully, by bringing more people here who want to have a cultural experience, it is going to help everybody. It's going to help all of our artists and makers across the coast.

Tim Stackpool:

Tracy, it's great to have been able to talk to you now, after such a long period of time. I know you've been anticipating the opening of the gallery for so long, and it's finally here. You've been open for a little while now. All settled in I hope to a certain extent. I am heading to take a look at HOTA in the next few weeks, pending any COVID lockdowns, of course. I certainly look forward to seeing that exhibition and so much more, which is taking place at HOTA. Thank you so much again.

Tracy Cooper-Lavery:

Thanks, Tim. Take care.