



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 5 EPISODE 6 (February 2023)

TARRAWARRA BIENNIAL. CURATOR: LÉULI ESHRĀGHI

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Thank you. It's really nice to be here.

Tim Stackpool:

This is quite the collection and the exhibition. How long have you been working on this?

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Thank you. It's actually been about two and a half years that I've been working on this exhibition. I think I've had a bit longer than curators usually have with a few of the delays with the pandemic. It's definitely kind of an unparalleled opportunity because I feel like in my bread and butter jobs, you have less than six months to put an exhibition together.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And going back further with that history with you, you hail from Sāmoa. What's your journey been to this point?

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Yeah, it's a great question. Thank you. So I was born in Yuwi country and grew up in different First Nations territories across the east coast of Australia and also in our lands in Sāmoa. And my family's Sāmoan, Persian, Cantonese and European. And, so I think from going to Steiner school in Northern South Wales in Bundjalung Country to learning different languages and studying Indigenous studies at university, being engaged in the independent and ARI scene in Brisbane and Melbourne, I really came up through Blak Dot gallery with the local and global Indigenous arts community around that space, which used to be in Brunswick East and then in Brunswick.

So having an intergenerational intercultural community, which mentored me and continues to support lots of artists and curators, writers coming up, has really been my kind of conceptual background. And, of course I also trained as an arts worker, studied Indigenous arts management and also worked on a PhD in curatorial practice at Monash University. So I've had a formal training but also been really lucky to develop exhibitions as a guest curator in different institutions across Australia, also New Zealand and Canada. And then also been an advisor for some project overseas in the last few years, which has been a way to scale up some of the dreaming, some of the thinking and working with artists with better budgets. Yeah, it's been really great.

Tim Stackpool:

So quite the trip then?

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Yes, yes, definitely. And I've kind of been very privileged to go from residency to exhibition to performance to conference for over a year now. Been on the road since February last year. So, really undoing all of the staying home of the pandemic where I was living in Tasmania, also in Central Australia and Arnhem Land for most of the pandemic and the closed borders. So working online like many people to then being able to travel for exhibitions, for talks and for projects, residencies. So yeah, it's definitely, I work as mostly as a curator and writer and researcher and maybe 10, 20% of the year as a visual artist as well.

Tim Stackpool:

You made a couple of mentions of the pandemic there and the amount of time you've had to put this particular exhibition together. And I do try to avoid COVID talk because we've talked about it so much, Doctor, but I just wonder, did you suffer a level of frustration over those two and a half, three years?

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Definitely. I mean, I'm very privileged to have come out of it with large amount of work, but I began it with everything being cancelled and not having any work for almost six months. And it was very hard and I kind of was realising, "Oh, I can't actually become a farmer because I don't know how to farm, so I might as well pivot and think about other ways of working in the arts." And I think some of those projects were, or some of the things that I passed my time with were things that I'd always wanted to do but never had the time and suddenly we had a lot of time. So spending time looking at digitised collections of backcloths made by ancestor artists from across the Sāmoan archipelago, which are held in British, American, French, German and other collections overseas and kind of connecting with those.

And that time, I spent about two weeks pouring over all the different digitised collections and that has resulted in a new series that I've been working on. And the fourth in that series is what I'm showing at the national, at the MCA. So that's a little plug for that. But I think it's that time of where everybody was broken and remade of course has impacted me, like many others. I think also as a curator and as an artist, I worked on a few exhibitions which I never saw, curated two exhibitions of Sāmoan digital art and video work spanning 1995 to 2021 for imagineNATIVE Film and Media Arts Festival at A Space Gallery in Toronto. Both exhibitions I didn't see. That was in 2020 and 2021. And then also worked on a show with John Hampton called Pasapedjinawong about the changes that languages, visual, spoken, verbal, signed, undergo through different forms of colonisation or just through different kind of historical processes.

And that was really work from across Australia, the wider Great Ocean region, Canada, North American context in an art museum where John is now the director, the MacKenzie Art Gallery in Regina, Saskatchewan. And another project of two years that I didn't get to see at all because Australia's borders were closed when a lot of the world was opening up, still beginning to opening up. I think that kind of remote curating, I'm sure many people would have had the experience of installing as an artist remotely or working with artists. But I think when an entire project as a curator you haven't seen, and you only get to see the documentation or somebody walking through the space with a mask on and showing you a video call. It's frustrating, but also that's the world that we were living in.

Tim Stackpool:

Absolutely crazy stuff, but we need to talk about this business at Tarrawarra, the works and the artists, to pull it all together. It's always a challenge. Why did you choose these particular 15 for this show?

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Great question. And to kind of summarise, to answer that I would say that I really was living in Mparntwer Alice Springs for the time that I was conceiving of this exhibition. I really wanted to think about artists who had connections across the country, who may be living across the country, and also who had connections across Asia and Oceania. So I was looking for that kind of work to kind of undo and challenge the state territory based border mongering that we were having at the time. And a lot of fear about the other, even though the other might just be from across a made up border from 1901. And so, I spent a lot of time doing Zoom, studio visits with artists thinking through. Had a very, very long, long list.

And even Australian artists who were living overseas was like, "Okay, well will they be able to come back in time? How much would freight cost? Can freight even happen anymore?" So those kinds of practicalities really impacted on who I was thinking about and I thought a lot about. And something that I've worked on in collective curatorial practices before is to really centre on investing in the artists. I really didn't want to have many more than 15 artists or artist groups in this exhibition. Less is always more. So more time, more space, more capacity for growth for those artists. And obviously production fees and artist fees as well.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. All right. So give us a bit of a rundown as to who you have selected and the type of works that you've included in the show.

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Yeah, so there's artists who I've worked with for many years and others who, this is the first time I'm working with them. So mother and daughter duo Sonja Carmichael and Elisa Jane Carmichael are part of a family, Ngugi Quandamooka family living between Minjerribah/North Stradbroke Island and Brisbane who are responsible for working to revive the gulayi basket weave. Particular kind of basket from their country that they have engaged with a few examples of in museum collections and the last five years have revived that practice and sharing that across their community. And so, we are really honoured to have a few gulayi in the exhibition as well as fabrics that have been dyed with mangroves or cottonwood on their country as well as a large installation of driftwood.

And so, mumpi, or home is a meditation and an ode to connections to country and particularly inspired by the late great Noonuccal [inaudible 00:08:29] poet and educator, Oodgeroo Noonuccal or Auntie Kath Walker and her connections between poetry, home and ideas of future and community. So that's one work I really recommend everybody spend some time with. Elyas Alavi, who's a Hazara artist and has made this incredible work titled Cheshme-jaan. It means like Dear Eyes, but in his translation it's The Spring Sings, Springs are Singing. And that is work that looks at the heritage of Afghan cameleers, which also came from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Kashmir, and their interactions and long-standing relationships and collaborations with First Nations communities across Central Australia.

And so for some of this work, he has obtained some of the old sleepers from a few of the routes of the Ghan railway lines that are no longer running, particularly between Adelaide and Alice Springs, and has created rehals or book rests, which are often used to have poetry books on them or the Quran. And that's inspired from some of his research with descendants of the Afghan cameleers and the First Nations communities across central Australia, Marree, Alice Springs, Broken Hill, Adelaide, and other communities in that area.

And so, there's blue neon with poetry from Mawlana or Rumi that are set on these book rests as well as photographic collages of some of these sites that he's been working with. So this is the first iteration of an ongoing research project really looking at situating some of these really lesser known histories of connection between folks from South Asia and First Nations communities of Australia, another work An Ocean by Sancintya Mohini Simpson looks at some of the complexities of migration, matrilineal memory, trauma as a descendant of folks who were Indian workers who were taken and put on and rendered into slavery on the plantations in South Africa. But this practice across the British empire also happened in Queensland, also happened in Fiji, in Guyana, the Caribbean colonies where after the abolition of slavery, the end of the trans-Atlantic slave trade from Africa, then cheap labour or what was seen as cheap labour from lower caste peoples of South Asia where they were transported to work on plantations and this kind of space around.

So, I think in really looking at this work, An Ocean is a kind of meditation on some of the intangible components or elements around memory, and particularly when there's a lot of unspoken things, a lot of trauma related to how people suffered, died in plantations in the past. And so, this is a very beautiful installation. It's a circular installation of ceramic vessels that are in black or very dark ceramic material as well as they're sitting on a bed of ash made from sugar cane mulch that has been burnt down. So it's very evocative. There's also deep exhalations that are playing as you approach this work. And I wouldn't say it's a memorial necessarily, but it's definitely a meditation on some of these darker chapters of human history.

I can think also in Auntie Vicki West's work, who's a Trawlwoolway artist who lives in Launceston and I think she was the first artist I was able to actually spend time with after some of the borders reopened. And I was living in Tasmania actually at the time. So her work is looking at, it's titled Kalikina Brayly, which means bull kelp forest. And that work is a large chandelier, or I guess I think of it as a chandelier that she's woven of kalikina bull kelp strands as well as others that are surrounding it with a projection that starts at the surface of the sea and then with the drone footage kind of rises above looking at a healthy bull kelp forest not far off the coast of Lutruwita, Tasmania. So whilst seas are warming, the currents are changing. We've just come out of our third La Nina summer, hopefully things can stabilise a little bit.

There are quite a lot of degraded bull kelp forests around the island of Tasmania, Lutruwita, but also there are some that are still in good health. And so, Auntie Vicki worked with marine biologists to identify some of these and she often very carefully obtained some of the strands to create this installation. It's a beautiful immersive installation looking at the decline in the health of kelp forests, but also looking at the strength of the connections between local First Nations peoples and these bull kelp forests which hold a lot of carbon. And I've learned a lot in the last few years that near to shore and further out to shore the intertidal zones, tidal zones, seagrass meadows, mangroves, bull kelp, they hold a lot more carbon than on land forests can. So they sequester a lot of the carbon into the seabed. And so it's very important that we do our part.

And finally David Sequeira has an incredible installation titled We're Like Diamonds in the Sky after Rihanna, is one of a number of works in this exhibition, which channel humility towards stellar bodies. And so we have a large installation of screen-printed fabric with the Jantar Mantar, which is a complex used to observe the passage of the sun, the moon, and other planets in the solar system, which is located in Jaipur. But there are also others in New Delhi and other parts of northern India which were commissioned by the Maharaja Jai Singh II between 1724 and 1735. I've actually visited the two complexes in Delhi and in Jaipur, maybe 10 years ago. And they're very beautiful and are still used to observe the passage of astrological bodies. Set onto this incredible large wall we have portraits in the Persian miniature or Rajput miniature style, which David has been working on for over 25 years with miniaturists based in Rajasthan.

And so, they have this back and forth of the canvases going there and coming back and it's his way of connecting the kind of representation of queer relationships with his partner, Ben. And they're both wearing turbans. And in this really beautiful, finely painted style, there are these portraits right across the wall. And so there's individuals where it's each of them with their astrological signs, zodiac sign above them, above the figures in Swarovski crystals. And then some of the portraits are both of them together. And it's those two signs combining. So very mesmerising installation and very beautiful installation as well.

Tim Stackpool:

The whole thing is very comprehensive, Doctor. I'm not surprised this is a two-year project for you leading up to this.

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Yes. Definitely.

Tim Stackpool:

Fair dinkum.

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Saved my life.

Tim Stackpool:

Gosh, two questions. First of all, am I right in thinking there's kind of a colonial and pre-colonial bite to this?

Léuli Eshrāghi:

There's definitely a look at... I think we're all bringing a critical lens to history, but I think for me, I really want audiences and I would like the sector communities locally and nationally to feel pride and deeper understanding of our place in the world and the histories that we're part of, the practices that are continuing today. So, of course colonialism is a structure, it's a kind of overarching experience for society today. But I really feel like there's more, I guess the main point of this exhibition for me is that the choosing to be better neighbours, to be good neighbours is perhaps... Sometimes it feels harder, but ultimately it's the one that's going to bring us all together and lead happier, healthier lives.

Tim Stackpool:

There's always the question we talk about on the podcast about all the great things, the wonderful things that you love about your exhibition, but considering the intense description that you've given us, is there anywhere that it falls short? Anything that you would've loved to have put in but you just couldn't get it over the line?

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Thank you. It's a great question. Perhaps just being able to bring everybody together, which is not really possible if few artists weren't able to come for install due to being sick with COVID or with other things and other commitments, families, et cetera, ceremony. So I think the desire to bring people together, which really just demands a whole lot of resources that are less and less available. But this has been a very well-funded exhibition, so I'm really, really happy with what we've been able to achieve.

And also, I think the artists are very happy with what they've been able to be supported to create and to explore. I think I just really hope that people engage with the exhibition and come and see the work, experience the work, spend some time. It is a destination, it's an hour northeast of central Melbourne. So that is actually an advantage I think, because you might pop into a big city art museum for 20 minutes and then go somewhere else. Whereas if you've already driven into a beautiful idyllic setting in Wurundjeri country, you might spend some more time engaging with the work and then go to a winery or whatever it is.

Tim Stackpool:

Before they do that though, what do you hope visitors will leave with after experiencing this?

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Thank you. I really hope that visitors leave with a better sense of our place in the world. Some of the incredible practices that are enlivened and activated by living artists, working and living today. I really think that particularly having spent a lot of time overseas last year, I feel like we're still a little embarrassed by how great the work that is made in Australia actually is. And I'd love to see a bit more pride, a bit more championing of the work that is made here today. I'm really just overjoyed with the work that has been created for this exhibition and hoping that people live with a better sense of who are our neighbours, who is in our neighbourhood.

Tim Stackpool:

And you have the most marvellous history and experience. Is there anything new that you've learned from this? Anything that you'll take away from this experience?

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Absolutely. I've learned so much about history, so much about culture, so much about language and visuality from each of these artists. And, I guess one thing I'd say is that just having a deeper sense of the joy of living. And I don't know if that really is... it's a bit of a wishy-washy kind of response, but I just feel like I feel more affirmed in living and working in this way from spending time with the artists and from learning as they're creating.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, of course you don't stand still, you've never stood still. What is next for you before I let you go?

Léuli Eshrāghi:

I'm also working. I work as curator research and residence at University of Queensland Art Museum for the last year and a half. And we have an exhibition looking at relationships to water country, sea country titled *Mare Amoris, Sea of Love*, which will open end of July in Brisbane and run through till January, 2024. And this is looking particularly at *mare nullius* and so that the sea expansion of *terra nullius* and then also a lot of the activism through art making from [inaudible 00:20:01] communities through two communities further out in the world to reassert some of those connections and responsibilities to see spaces. So yeah, that's the next thing off the rank.

Tim Stackpool:

Gosh. All right, well look, I think we could talk for at least another hour or so, but I will let you go. I really hope that the exhibition meets all of your expectations and I really appreciate your time on the podcast.

Léuli Eshrāghi:

Thank you so much for having me.