



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 2 EPISODE 6 (June 2020)

Transcript of interviews:

JACQUI TAFFEL - NAS

MARCUS WESTBURY OAM – COLLINGWOOD YARDS

SARAS RACHUPALLI – KOVET.ART

JACQUI TAFFEL - NAS

Tim Stackpool:

Jacqui Taffel is the media liaison with the National Art School, which despite the COVID lockdown has been busy over the past few months with quite a few projects, the Corona Quilt project, the On Stillness Insta exhibition, online short courses, and the school's centenary coming up in a couple of years time, Jacqui, it looks like it's full steam ahead, right?

Jacqui Taffel:

Yeah. It really is at the moment. Obviously coronavirus, we had to shut the campus for a while. It's just been so much going on. Students also have been really busy at home. So we've been featuring their work on our Instagram page as well. And then there's been these individual projects that have come up as well, that have been really rewarding. Actually, it's been really inspiring to see what people have done in such difficult circumstances.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. So, let's talk about some of those individual projects. First of all, that quilt project. Now I have seen a piece by Anna Mold. This is the Corona Quilt project. And her stitching is of the Ruby Princess, of course, which is what we've been talking about for months. There's more to it though than that. So what happens now?

Jacqui Taffel:

Well, also what I love about Anna's square of On The Ruby Princess is that she's done it on a sort of a CHUX cloth. So a cleaning cloth. So the Corona project came from two students who doing an art history and theory course about materiality. And they came to their lecturers and said, "We want to do this quilt project." Where, at that stage, everybody was in isolation that nobody was on campus, where students, at first it was just in their class would do quilting panels. And then in a reflection of their situation then, so someone else has done a panel saying, "Wash your hands." Other people have just ... someone else has done this really sort of meditative embroidery, just because that's the space that she found herself being. And then the idea is that at the end, when everybody's back on campus and together, and I guess when social distancing is over, that they gather and sew the quilt together with all these panels. And then the plan is to do that for Craft Week in October. So present the quilt as a material artifact of a strange time.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes, a great historical document, artifact, as you say, as it were of what we've been through and still are going through to a certain extent.

Jacqui Taffel:

That's right. And the nice thing about that project was it was also inspired by another quilt that ... it's a bit complicated. So one of our lecturers, Priya Vaughan, her mother Bronwyn made her a quilt. And Priya lectured about that quilt, a lecture about gifts. So the students were inspired by that lecture and now Bronwyn is now doing the course and she's one of Anna's students. So, she's done this in squares as

well. It's kind of a lovely sort of family connection as well. So, but Anna and Ronnie are the two students who came up with the idea.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, that'll be great to see in October. Just moving on now, the On Stillness Insta exhibition. Now that's not just a project for your school, is it? You've kind of reached out to a whole lot of other schools regarding that.

Jacqui Taffel:

Yeah, this was a really ... I think they've all been fantastic projects and the great thing is just keeping up these connections while we haven't been able to see each other. That's kind of huge thing, everywhere in the arts, the On Stillness exhibition came about with two of our gallery staff. So Olivia Sophia, curator and Scott Elliott, and they were talking to some of the other galleries and specifically Newcastle gallery. And they were saying, well, what can we do together? So they came up with this concept of the On Stillness, online exhibition. So a lot of galleries have just turned their exhibitions into online versions, so that you can see them online, but this is specifically targeted to Instagram. So the idea was that each institution would choose a work from their collection that illustrated the concept of stillness, it was looking at one of the things that coronavirus has given people, is time. Time that people haven't had and time to sit and reflect and be still.

Jacqui Taffel:

So, it was reflecting that idea of stillness. So it started off with Newcastle Art gallery and National Art school hosting, but they invited other regional galleries to join them. So, so far Orange, we've got Woolongong, Newcastle, Tweed, all those regional galleries and they're contributing. And it's such a beautiful page. And the variety of works is incredible. And a lot of the galleries are choosing local artists to represent that. And the other thing I guess with this is that there was no reason that we couldn't do this before, but this has just made people think in a different way of how we can make these connections while being in such different parts of the state.

Tim Stackpool:

That's right, it's been motivating in a remarkable sense, speaking to so many people over the last few months on the podcast, although it's been tough, it's been amazing how it has actually turned our minds in a different way.

Jacqui Taffel:

And I think a lot of artists that I've been speaking to thought that it was going to be something ... a lot of artists work in isolation anyway, but a lot of them that I've been speaking to have said, "I thought I was going to be really productive and it was going to be great to start on new projects." But actually when I spoke to Lucienne Rickard, who is one of our Biennale artists, she said she went into a torpor. She said for two weeks, she just couldn't do anything apart from walk the dog and think. But then from that comes other things. So, it's almost like a ... it's that break in your routine.

Tim Stackpool:

I still feel a little bit of isolation regretting that I haven't yet mastered the viola while we locked up. Your school as well, like so many has had to pivot to a lot of online stuff. And I know it's still early days, but I think those courses that you offered became fully subscribed, right?

Jacqui Taffel:

Yeah. So we offer lots of different courses, as well as our graduate courses and one of the very popular programs is our short course program. And that's been going for many years and happens on campus and it offers people from outside the degree programs, the opportunity to come in on campus, be taught by our teachers, but professional artists, across the whole range of disciplines. So that's always been really popular, but yeah, obviously we couldn't have people on campus. So, that shut down for the term one. So yeah, Dr. Ella Dreyfus, who runs those courses with some of her teachers who had experienced teaching online, came up with four courses to deliver by Zoom which is the first time the school has done this. And they really weren't sure what the response was going to be.

Jacqui Taffel:

But literally we launched it and within two days, some of the classes were full. They had people finding out from all over Australia and even for a couple from the U.S. One woman in New York, I think had met someone in Florence who told her about our courses. So these sort of global connections start going out into the ether. So it's been really positive to see that there's so much enthusiasm for the courses and trust, I guess that they're going to be good on online as well. But for us, it just makes ... the school is always trying to improve accessibility to actually making art, not just consuming up, but making it. So this, I think is a way that we'll keep doing this sort of thing so that we can provide access to people who can't make it into campus. So I think it's going to be, yeah, it's been really popular. So we're so happy about that.

Tim Stackpool:

And speaking of that outreach, you've got the centenary coming up. I know it's two years away, but considering the history of the college and how so many people have gone through, I guess you kind of wanting people's stories to come back, any artifacts or historical documents that they may have, which will be of interest to the school.

Jacqui Taffel:

2022 is our centenary. And we've got a very strong archives and collections section, Deborah Beck is the person who's in charge of that. And Isabel Hesketh works with her as well. There's a lot of stuff out there connected to that. It's been going for a long time and we've had so many students and alumni and staff or through. And it's one of those things that, again, sort of taking this opportunity to when people have a bit more time on their hands, it's sort of a perfect time to delve back into those boxes that you have in the back of the cupboard or find your old year books or anything to do with the school.

Jacqui Taffel:

And also to write down your memories. I find my grandmother went to the school and I only found out when I started working there, that she'd written all this stuff about her time there that was in the archives that I hadn't seen before. And it really brings back those times, those written memories are just as valuable as the artifacts. So at this stage, the archives are just asking people to take photos of anything they've got and send them in.

Tim Stackpool:

Okay, a little bit of time to lead up to that. But Deborah Beck is the one to get in touch with at the school, if anyone has any material. And Jacqui always great to speak with you. And thanks so much for taking time out to speak with us on the podcast.

Jacqui Taffel:

Thanks so much, Tim, absolute pleasure.

Tim Stackpool:

Jacqui Taffel there with the National Art School, perhaps best known by some, from my era as East Sydney Tech, it changed its name to the National Art School in 1996, although it has been operating in some form from as far back as the 1920s, hence the upcoming Centenary. And for more information, head online to nas.edu.au.

MARCUS WESTBURY OAM – COLLINGWOOD YARDS

Tim Stackpool:

Let's head to Melbourne now and the establishment of Collingwood Yards as an art precinct, built upon the site of a former technical college re-imagined as a very unique space. The transformation has taken a pretty significant effort. And the Contemporary Arts Precinct Limited is the organisation that has managed and developed the Collingwood Yards site since the Victorian government through Creative Victoria, designated the site as a creative hub. And Marcus Westbury is the CEO of Contemporary Arts Precinct.

Tim Stackpool:

Thanks for joining us on the podcast, Marcus.

Marcus Westbury:

Thank you.

Tim Stackpool:

You must be thrilled that the project has pretty much finally reached this point, putting COVID aside, I guess there have been a few other challenges along the way.

Marcus Westbury:

There have. And I should just say, I'm not quite thrilled at being at the finish line yet because there's this strange experience of getting halfway to the finish line every week or month, but never quite getting there. But no, we've made it a long way. I've been working on this project for four years now, and it's very exciting to finally have first tenants and first organisations moving into the building. We still have a bit of work to do in terms of fitting out spaces for some of the things and organisations and projects that are yet to come. But it will open up throughout this year. And it's nice to finally see, well give the public a chance to see what we've been doing.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, let's go back a few years, Marcus. You talked about you've been working on it for four years or so. How did all of this come about?

Marcus Westbury:

Look, I wasn't involved in the very embryonic stages, but the Collingwood TAFE site was closed circa 2005. My understanding is the state government looked at a number of options of what to do with that site and eventually decided circa 2010, that they'd like to be an arts precinct. One of the things that happened really immediately out of that was Circus Oz were able to get a great site and move into what is now next door to us.

Marcus Westbury:

And then there was a bit of a period, first half of last decade as it is now, where the state was looking for the right model to manage it and considered handing it all over to one arts organisation, considered running it as a state run facility. And eventually they decided to basically support an independent, not-for-profit entity, taking ownership of the site.

Marcus Westbury:

And I got involved around that time as the first employee of CAP, which is the organisation that has taken on the project over the last four years.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, that is a new organisation, right?

Marcus Westbury:

It is, it is. And so we've been established specifically around this project, but with a broader mission to provide affordable art space, recognising that there's a real challenge at the moment in the inner city of Melbourne and broadly across Australia for sustainable and affordable art spaces.

Tim Stackpool:

I think it's quite remarkable. And thinking about what happens in Sydney, for instance, a public site comes up for sale or becomes redundant and pretty much you can well expect the developers to move in and a new apartment block to go up. I think it's kind of unique that this former TAFE College, this technical college has now become a center of the arts, rather than a brand new set of apartment blocks.

Marcus Westbury:

It happens a lot in Victoria. It happens all around Australia. I have joked and have said, I have a lot of friends in New South Wales and I've lived and worked out there for quite some time. And every time I brought people through, whether it's interested onlookers or parliamentary delegations, or people who work with the arts, there is a bit of a, "I can't quite believe this happened."

Marcus Westbury:

We're really fortunate in Victoria. I think we've actually had the support of successive governments. The current government's been really supportive. I think there's a number of important reasons that this site is incredibly valuable to the local community. It's got a really rich history going right back to the 1920s and, and a whole other First Nations history before that. Because of the presence of the Keith Haring mural on the site, which is an amazing asset around which to build an arts precinct, it probably puts it, bumps it into a category of being a little bit special or a little bit unique. And I'm sure that went some way to informing the decision makers.

Marcus Westbury:

But I think also I think there's a real recognition. Melbourne builds so much its reputation about being a creative city, a livable city, all of those things. And if artists and arts organisations are squeezed out of the inner city, it's going to be a very different place.

Tim Stackpool:

The building itself, it's quite masculine in architecture, not brutalist, but very strong in its foundation there. What changes have you had to make to it to make it feel more like an inspiring art space rather than a hard and fast place of learning?

Marcus Westbury:

Yeah, look, there's actually three buildings on our site and they all sit around a central courtyard. And when we first started, one of the things that took me a little bit too long to realise was that the way the site was structured, you couldn't get out of any one building into any other building without leaving the site. And so, a big part of what we've been trying to do has been about opening the site up to the public. So creating new links, new ways of accessing the site that open up that courtyard and we've reorientated the three buildings.

Marcus Westbury:

So they look around a shared central courtyard space and open out onto that as opposed to a bit of a fortress I've described it as, that it used to be back in the days when it was a school.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes.

Marcus Westbury:

Keeping the kids in, and the public out was probably the way it was designed. So adding those connections, I think make a big difference. And they also give us a really interesting site and there's multiple different street entrances. There's different levels that you can come into. And so the place has quite a distinct feel depending on which arts organisation you're visiting or whether you're just coming out of curiosity or all the different ways you can discover it, I think are actually one of its great features now.

Tim Stackpool:

You talked about how Circus Oz is next door. You have some other tenants that have already signed up?

Marcus Westbury:

Look we're mostly full. We've got a few spaces that we're still working to find the best use for some of which are the more public facing spaces and more retail type spaces. That's proved to be a little bit of a challenge. But we've also got, we've also made a conscious decision to not lock the entire site up forever. So we have some short, medium and longer term tenancies in the mix. So we expect them to turn over, over time.

Tim Stackpool:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Marcus Westbury:

We've got 16 in the current configuration artist studios, some of which are being used as project spaces and we'll eventually swap out and have other artists coming to. So, I think one of the big risks when you build a cultural precinct organisation is that it's very easy to capture 2018 or whatever it was, the idea of what a cultural space is, and then come back five or 10 years later and realise that it's not as fresh and as vibrant as it used to be.

Marcus Westbury:

So we've been really conscious of making sure that we've always got something emerging, something more established, something growing and a really vibrant mix.

Tim Stackpool:

And in terms of what this means to the arts community itself and also to the greater Melbourne, when you create a hub like this, it tends to attract other types of auxiliary businesses around it. Do you really see the opportunity for the whole of perhaps the block that you're situated on to change its feel, its look because of the other types of businesses that may be attracted?

Marcus Westbury:

I think there'll be elements of that. I think part of it, of course, is just like keeping a toehold of some of the great spontaneous cultural activity that's been happening in Collingwood for a long time. And then we're very keen to work with and have been working with a lot of independent galleries, design businesses, artist's studios, and all that cluster of things that are already there, but will continue to grow up hopefully around the precinct.

Tim Stackpool:

Oftentimes on this podcast, we talk about how the public view art as being very unique, very niche and not necessarily for them. Do you have a philosophy in terms of how to make this accessible to so many people who perhaps don't have a connection with the arts directly?

Marcus Westbury:

Yeah and look, there's a few different things that feed into that. One is what I talked about before, which is about physically opening the site up. You can come into the site, you can sit in the middle of the beautiful courtyard on a warm day and you don't actually have to enter the building or go through an art gallery. We really physically opened it up.

Marcus Westbury:

The other thing is that I think a lot of people don't know much about art, but they know what they like. I think we've consciously got a very diverse creative community that ... Now the idea is that as you lay down these different layers and you bring these communities together, they open up to each other and create opportunities that wouldn't otherwise be there. And of course, we will also just ...It's a social space, it's a community space, we'll have hospitality, we'll have events or concerts, markets, all those things that we can do in a shared creative community. And I think that will also reach out to a lot of people who might not otherwise be engaged.

Tim Stackpool:

It certainly has tremendous appeal and people in other capital cities would be very jealous of seeing how this has evolved. Do you think this could become a blueprint for perhaps other opportunities in other states? Are you a good role model?

Marcus Westbury:

Whether we were a good role model or not probably remains to be seen. But I think the model is a good one. So, we're an independent, not-for-profit. We exist to provide affordable art space. We've designed approach around trying to be fairly lean, to operate affordable, to run, and be able to offer spaces affordably to the creative community that we want to support. But equally we've also designed to be self-sustaining from the rent and the income we expect to earn from this space. And so that balance is a challenge. And I think it will take a bit of time to get that right.

Marcus Westbury:

But the idea that those kinds of opportunities are out there. And look, I've learned very quickly that if I had probably 10, four and a half thousand square meters, if we had 10 times that amount, there's a creative community, very keen to fill it.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow.

Marcus Westbury:

And I think, there is definitely demand for more affordable creative spaces. And hopefully this model helps inform a few other places about what they could do.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, that would be lovely to see. Marcus, congratulations on getting this far, COVID notwithstanding. It's a great story. And thanks for speaking with us on Inside The Gallery.

Marcus Westbury:

Thanks so much.

Tim Stackpool:

Talking about Collingwood Yards in Melbourne. That's the CEO of Creative Arts Precinct Limited Marcus Westbury, OAM, actually. He received that Order of Australia Medal announced on the Queen's birthday long weekend this year. And we congratulate Marcus on receiving that honour as well.

Tim Stackpool:

More info on Collingwood Yards can be found online at collingwoodyards.org.

SARAS RACHUPALLI – KOVET.ART

Tim Stackpool:

Finally, we head to London where Saras Rachupalli has established Kovet Art. It's not COVID, but KOVET. It's a new artist incubator platform. Their first exhibition called Delineating Dreams is available to view now online. Saras is the granddaughter of PT Reddy, a key artist of his time who played a significant role in the evolution of the pivotal modern art movement of Europe in India and who in 1941 formed a group of Bombay contemporary India artists branded as the now prolific Young Turks, but Saras of course brings with her the technology of the 21st century, including the concept of using blockchain security as a means of enhancing the authentication of artwork. It is early days, but Saras joins us from London. Thanks for your time.

Saras Rachupalli:

Thank you so much for having me, Tim.

Tim Stackpool:

I just want to ask you what you're proposing is an art world ecosystem, which is backed by blockchain. Can you explain what that actually means?

Saras Rachupalli:

Absolutely. So I'm the founder of kovet.art, and what we do is we help you navigate the world of emerging art. So we present expertly curated works in exhibitions and also art advisory. And what we do is to increase the element of trust, we back the certificates of authenticity and provenance on blockchain. So what this means is that in the traditional gallery paradigm, you would go to a trusted friend or a gallerist to ensure that the artwork that you purchase is coming from the right sources. There's no forging involved. So therefore we are able to source the artworks right from the studio of the emerging artists, the top tier, and we therefore hope that they'll have an increasing amount of interest and a growing market in the contemporary art world, which means that their market and prices will change and increase hopefully, and what it means is that they can be a potential secondary market.

Saras Rachupalli:

So when I'm talking about the art ecosystem of the future, while technology is able to help back and push the boundaries of what can happen in the future, is that one, that's an element of trust in the artwork that you're purchasing. Be rest assured that it's coming from the right sources and your certificate is backed in a very strong, immutable record, which is therefore blockchain. Nobody can touch it or forge it. And then over time, once we are looking at various ways of engaging with art and selling and buying art and therefore creating a secondary market. You don't need to go to any auction houses anymore where they look at kind of authenticity and verify that. You can directly have this transaction because you can focus and you can actually ensure that the artwork that you have is authentic, and that is a new system that you can share.

Tim Stackpool:

Absolutely. And your history, as I mentioned in the introduction, is not surprising considering your family's background in the arts, but who came up with the idea of using blockchain for authenticity?

Saras Rachupalli:

You're absolutely right, Tim. My grandfather was an artist and I grew up in this environment of literally growing up in his studio. His studio was literally downstairs when we were growing up in the family home, and therefore I grew up with art. I then proceeded to study engineering. I'm an engineer, quite a bit of a tech geek myself, and then I worked in finance in the business world, and I studied at Sotheby's, understood the art and financial elements of the market, and then thought about what makes and creates an artist market? The element of trust. And because I'm a bit of a tech geek myself, I have been involved in the AI, so that's machine learning as well as DLT, distributed ledger technology or blockchain for a while now for a few years, and I've been tracking all the moves, regulatory and otherwise, and therefore, I knew that, I combined all three of my passions, which is art, technology, and business to think of this idea.

Tim Stackpool:

It's obvious, then, how what you're doing can certainly assist the collectors. But in terms of the artists, I mean, I think this makes a big difference when they're putting art out in public now because using blockchain, you can categorically say that this piece of work actually relates back to them. There's no chance of anything ever being identified or ever being passed off as a forgery.

Saras Rachupalli:

That is right, Tim. At the same time, I do want to clarify that just having some information or records on a blockchain is not enough. For example, there are a few companies out there as you would have known which allow you to just get online and get a blockchain-based certificate, so anybody in the world can log in and put in a picture of an artwork. It can be anybody's artwork and confirm that it's theirs. So that aspect of course doesn't work because there's no verification angle there. So therefore, what we have added on, which I believe right now nobody else is doing from a curated emerging art gallery space in the world, fingers crossed, is that we go directly to the artists and track the provenance and certificates of authenticity directly from the artist studio, so therefore we can assure you that it's coming right from the studio as opposed to anybody getting online and just submitting some information and it's on the blockchain, doesn't mean anything. So that's where we solidify that protection around data and trust.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, that's an excellent clarification there, but how do you choose which artists you're going to carry?

Saras Rachupalli:

What we do is we go directly to the university shows and we have doing that for the past year. We go to the degree shows of top universities. Of course I'm based out of London, so we are starting to go to the UK ones first and then we'll want to grow globally across the world. And so what we do is one, visit the fairs throughout the year, and now it's virtual, so it becomes a bit more easier, but also in a different way it's a bit of overwhelm. And the other one is we have a very stringent process of interviewing the artists as well as we look at the portfolio, we do a detailed portfolio review so all the artists that we choose for our platform, and who are a part of kovet.art cohort, they go through quite a stringent, meticulous process. And then we look at their voice, their technique, how they're pushing boundaries of what art is and meaningful and credible ways, and then we look at their ambition, of course, and if we think that they have what it takes to have a growing career and making the mark in the contemporary art world, and then we onboard them.

Saras Rachupalli:

Currently we have eight artists. So the idea is that we start small with this group of artists and we incubate them. So we do have a range of classes as well as guidance, bespoke mentorship, which really differentiates us from anything else that's out there in the market. There is no incubator-style gallery, which is looking at not only creating a market for themselves but teaching them the skills to sustain their market after the contract with the kovet.art is done. And also from a collector's point of view, the collectors can actually watch them grow and participate in the journey as well.

Tim Stackpool:

What you are offering is always going to be fresh and new and innovative and never seen before.

Saras Rachupalli:

Absolutely right, and therefore we think that that will give our collectors and the art lovers and the art curious an insight into the emerging art world, and therefore, we believe that what we bring to the market is a highly curated roster of artists and artworks, and we are incredibly excited to present them, not just as a collection of artworks, but have a curatorially presented show.

Saras Rachupalli:

We will have four curatorially presented shows in a year, always relevant to the zeitgeist. And therefore, our first show is on dreams and the power of dreams, especially while we are transcending the emotions of the pandemic into creating a new reality, the power of the subconscious, the unconscious, and thinking about the dystopian reality and the utopian future. So we always look at themes which are highly current and relevant in presenting these artworks.

Tim Stackpool:

While you've been focusing so much online and getting this happening, is there the possibility that you will have real world exhibitions at some point?

Saras Rachupalli:

Initially we, we thought of doing a beautiful popup show in central London. We have finalised all of that. It was in order. Of course, unfortunately, COVID-19 happened. We are very fortunate that we are able to move that show online, but absolutely yes, our model has always been to create a popup shows to launch an exhibition, hold the show for three to four days, and move the exhibition online. So that's always been our model even before COVID-19, and then this happened over the past few months, so it was very easy and quick for us to transition online anyways because we always believed in international access because in person is fantastic. But at the same time we want the rest of the world. I'm global, and we know we have global art lovers and audiences as well who we'd love for them to take part in and participate and therefore the online viewing room and also online virtual talks and panels.

Tim Stackpool:

I really love the international prospect as well, and you can certainly do that. And we've learned over the last few months about how big the world is, how big the opportunity is, but really how small the world is as well, Saras, And I really appreciate you taking the time to chat with us on the podcast.

Saras Rachupalli:

Thank you. Thank you so much, Tim.

Tim Stackpool:

Saras Rachupalli there, and you can learn more about Kovet at kovet.art. The exhibitions on the site do allow you to navigate around the space, head up and down the stairs to various levels of the gallery, and zoom into the artwork hanging on the walls. It's actually quite fun too. And you can check that out at kovet.art.