



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – JULY 2019

Transcript of interviews:

Gill Nicol – Museum of Contemporary Art - Sydney (Censorship)

Erin Coates – Fremantle Arts Centre (Other Suns)

GILL NICOL – Museum of Contemporary Art (Censorship)

- Tim Stackpool: Can galleries cross the line? And if so, what action should be taken by the authorities? Gill Nicol is the Director of Audience Engagement at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. She's worked for numerous organisations across the UK including Engage, which is the National Association of Gallery Education over there, the Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, Tate Liverpool, Spike Print Studio and others. At the MCA she investigates what access, diversity and inclusion means to the museum and for its many audiences. And she's committed to making contemporary art accessible in as many ways as possible and for as many people as possible. I can vouch for that because, and for the sake of journalistic transparency, yes, I am sometimes on the payroll at the MCA and actually in Gill's department, but that has allowed me the chance to have a one on one catch up with Gill about whether galleries should be bound by a code of practice when it comes to what is considered morally decent. I began by asking Gill whether galleries around the world have a formal or informal set of guidelines when it comes to things like exhibiting nudes, for example.
- Gill Nicol: Not really, Tim. There's an implicit understanding that it's fine to show nudes in the gallery and museum. We've done it for years and years and years. The whole point of people showing the body was that it's a moment of celebration, of beauty. Using religious icons like San Sebastian and having tiny little veil over his genitalia was done by a Dominican monk years and years ago in Florence and caused women to faint at the altar, so they had to remove it. Total nudity has only fairly recently been seen as part of contemporary art practice. That kind of historical nude always has a veil over genitalia, but that in itself becomes an incredibly eroticised image.
- Tim Stackpool: Artists have been painting nudes, as you say, for centuries and they've been hanging for centuries. But in the world today, people are easily offended. Political correctness is very much to the fore. Do we need to reconsider or rethink those sorts of things or are we compromising what art is about if we start to let those sorts of ideas creep in?
- Gill Nicol: So, I've worked in museums and galleries for over 30 years and I've always been really delighted and proud and happy to work in spaces where it is one of the few places left where you can talk about taboo subjects. So it's not just nudity, is it? It's about race, it's about abuse, all sorts of things. Political ethics, religion, all the stuff that we're all a bit too scared to speak about. And I think in the last five, ten years there is a shift towards the far right. I think it is harder for museums to totally feel comfortable in showing really difficult work, but for me that is our role. This is one of the very few ways in which the world can come into a space and see something which you can't usually discuss in a public arena.
- Gill Nicol: Nudity and the nude, nakedness, in my experience, has never actually been something that people have really complained about. I mean, I come from the UK where I think people feel embarrassed. They come across as prudish and

they don't want to be seen as prudish. I remember when I worked at Ikon Gallery in Birmingham, we had a show of Araki, and Araki is just essentially pornography. Beautiful, young Japanese women tied up with no clothes on. I personally found it really hard to walk through that gallery every day. As you know, with an MA in feminism under my belt, it was actually really difficult. So there was lots of things that I had to read about and sort out for myself, let alone for the public around a Western perspective, an Eastern perspective, context about hiding stuff under the carpet. Araki's work is around sex, nudity, the body. It's the same as eating, sleeping, breathing. It's all part of being a human being so let's show it like that. Which is fine.

Gill Nicol: We had a way for the audience to (provide) feedback at Ikon and we had hardly any. We had hardly any response in six weeks to it. But when we had a show of work by conceptual artist, Ceal Floyer, which is an amazing show, but really hard to get. So, one work is called White Till Receipt and it is literally a white till receipt on the wall. It's not framed, it's just stuck on the wall. I remember I just started working at the gallery and I was doing the Saturday talk and 20 people standing there and we'd got to the till receipt and this man was in front of me and he was so upset, he was shaking. He was almost crying. And he got out his wallet and he got out a receipt and said, "This is my till receipt. Why isn't this on the wall?" And I was, "Give me a minute and I'll explain why." And he just walked off. And the feedback for that show were five or six books of anger, frustration, vitriol. "I paid five pounds for a parking ticket to see this rubbish." So that says a lot to me around what different context, different cultural context, different things really affect people.

Gill Nicol: In my experience, nudity is not being that. It's been more things about being made to feel stupid, which is what that was about. Conceptual art has the capacity for an audience to think, "I don't know what this means. I feel stupid. I don't want to feel stupid."

Tim Stackpool: We've seen in the past where police have been called to galleries. Bill Henson's work, very much so many years ago. Do you think there's ... Because of the changes of people's perception, will you be forced ... And you are a visitor experience professional ... Will you be forced to consider these things when exhibitions are put together? Will you have to consider putting warnings up? Like ratings, warnings, signage in the gallery before people enter?

Gill Nicol: I would say if there's one thing that's standard, that there is always warnings. The idea is that if you have a warning, the audience has the choice. They have the understanding that there is something that they're going to walk into that might offend them. I don't ever want us to be in a position where we have to censor for a public, but I really do also think that people need to have the choice to enter the gallery or not. To not confront something that they weren't expecting which might be really shocking.

Gill Nicol: Michael Armitage show (at the MCA) opened and it's really busy. Everyone loves it and there are some works in there which show nudity and we have had one

complaint where someone was really, really unhappy and indeed said to me on the phone, "The next time you see me, I'll be there with the police." And I said, "Good luck with that." Hoping that the police would understand that these are paintings, that the history of the nude goes back a really long way. It's really tricky, isn't it?

Tim Stackpool: Over history as regimes and people's perceptions have changed or have been forced to have been changed or imprinted on society there's been book burning, there's been outlawing of certain artists' work. Are we seeing the tip of that, do you think? I mean, is this the last bastion of the freedom of expression in an art gallery for reasons of the fact that this is 'art'?

Gill Nicol: No. I want to believe and understand that we will continue. Museum and gallery sectors will continue to be the place where we will always see work which is potentially of a difficult nature. Well, working with artists. What is the artist's role? What do artists do? Many of them respond to the society around us. I often think we get the work we deserve. I mean, we own an artwork by Stuart Ringholt which is essentially a nude tour. And that in itself is interesting where the emphasis is thrown back onto the visitor themselves to have the experience of being naked within the gallery space, within the museum.

Gill Nicol: Looking at our collection, now I found that fascinating. When I first arrived here, we'd just bought the work and I heard Stuart talking about it really eloquently about what it is like to be stripped bare. Literally. You don't have your phone, you don't have shoes, you don't have bags. It's just you and your skin. He is naked doing the tour and everyone else is naked. And so it's about the light reflecting on your body, what skin looks like around artworks, but what it's like to have that communal experience. So myself and a board member, who was just leaving who collects Stuart's work, we went on one of Stuart's tours and then since then I've led two tours on behalf of Stuart and the work. I've done them both for women, not necessarily because I feel uncomfortable doing it for a mixed group, but I did one for International Women's Day of our collection and then I did one for our Pipilotti Rist show last year because that was about embracing the feminine. Pipilotti's work is so joyous. Just felt like a gift to be with a group of women with no clothes on, lying on beds and laughing and enjoying the experience.

Gill Nicol: I mean, Pipilotti Rist show had some nudity in it. And I do remember a teacher coming in with a group of boys from Catholic boys high school and she was very anxious and said to me, "Is there nudity in this show?" And I said, "Well, there is. It's in a video at the end of the show. It's about five minutes in and Pipilotti is there jumping up and down naked. So you might see some breast action for about six seconds." And she didn't take them in. I think the fear ... We are led by fear. What are we afraid of? Is this coming from a religious position? I mean, for me, going on a new tour, delivering a new tour, is when we're actually all naked, you go, "So what? Oh, look, there's some breasts and there's some penises and there's some bottoms." And that's it. It becomes really familiar and in fact, part of that artwork is that you go up and have a glass of wine, or if it's breakfast, up

on our level four space outside. By then everyone's running around going, "Yeah, it's brilliant. This is how we should all be, running around naked." I think that in a way it's the idea of it, that erotic thing, which is more difficult for people.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. I think, I mean, in terms of that eroticism you're talking about, I mean, we in society equate nakedness with eroticism. However, there are many cultures that don't. And I think about even Western Scandinavian cultures who will spend time as a family and friends in the sauna completely naked, but there's nothing sexual about it. So, I think part of it is the imprinting of that eroticism notion on us, so that when we see something which is naked, we see genitalia in artwork then automatically sensuality and eroticism springs to mind, when sometimes that's not the goal of the artist.

Gill Nicol: That's right. I mean, yeah, I think that's a really good point about making the link between the body and sexuality as opposed to the bodies we just inhabit. I mean, Liz Ann, Director of the MCA, she sits on a number of key committees which look at this stuff globally. I know that. And I know in the last few years there's been lots of discussions about ethics and about directors having to take work down, pressure from the public. I think that is a different thing from just censoring yourself from doing it in the first place. I think we have a commitment to showing a broader range of work about a broader range of things as possible and then seeing what happens.

Tim Stackpool: Controversy always surrounds art. This is just yet another one to consider with every exhibition that comes up. And Gill, thank you so much for talking to us.

Gill Nicol: Thank you so much. It's been great chatting to you.

Tim Stackpool: And that's Gill Nicol from the Museum of Contemporary Art, talking about classification and censorship of artwork in galleries and whether galleries should be subject to the same type of classification as films, video games and books are.

Tim Stackpool: You can go to the website, www.MCA.com.au to take a look and see what, I have to admit, are some remarkable exhibitions taking place at the gallery right now.

ERIN COATES – Fremantle Art Centre (Other Suns)

- Tim Stackpool: And we're heading to Western Australia where the Fremantle Art Centre is presenting local, national, and international artists who embrace the science fictional imagination.
- Tim Stackpool: Other Suns is the name of the exhibition focusing on the less familiar underbellies of science fiction, the hybrid, the noisy, the forbidden, the vernacular. Other Suns probes the human imagination unveiled on digital screens, in junkyard sculptures, and at all points in between. It's interesting for another reason, as well, because the Revelation Perth International Film Festival, forms part of the exhibition as well.
- Tim Stackpool: Erin Coates is the curator of the show at the Fremantle Arts Centre. Erin, thanks for joining us on Inside the Gallery.
- Erin Coates: Thanks for having me.
- Tim Stackpool: Now, Other Suns, how did this come about? What's the history, Erin?
- Erin Coates: Other Suns really came about over the past year through conversations that I've been having with some of the artists in the exhibition.
- Tim Stackpool: uh-huh
- Erin Coates: And also with Jack Sergeant who's the program director of Revelation Film Festival, which is a great festival that we have here in Perth every winter. And we, Fremantle Arts Centre, have been collaborating with them over the past couple of years, putting on exhibitions that are connected to the film festival, and we wanted to continue that this year by, actually, Jack and I co-curating a show.
- Erin Coates: I guess why cult science fiction, cinema and art, it's really based on my own love of science fiction, I guess you could say, and Jack's as well, so our shared interest, particularly weird, cult, fringy cinema, so how science fiction is sort of explored in the underbellies of kind of cult cinema and also looking at new-wave fiction in print form from the '60s and '70s and sort of our real interest in how experimental the form became then and the diversity of voices that started to come through in the new-wave, so looking at black queer women authors, people like Octavia Butler and Ursula Le Guin.
- Erin Coates: This was the sort of a foundation of our ideas, is that we wanted to look at alternate voices in science fiction and kind of the underbellies of sci-fi.

Tim Stackpool: How'd you go about curating this together, the films and the gallery pieces? Did one come before the other or did you take a film and then try to find pieces that may have inspired further thought? What was the process?

Erin Coates: They kind of evolved simultaneously. We knew that we wanted to have films in the film festival that were running as a series and we selected kind of older classic and cult science fiction films to screen. Then we knew that we wanted a whole series of works in the exhibition that weren't just moving image, but were also working with sculpture installation, paintings, and we've produced a book to go with the show, which has both sort of prose and kind of critical essays. I guess we're really trying to cover all bases and they all evolved simultaneously.

Tim Stackpool: Right. How about describing some of the pieces you have in the gallery for this exhibition?

Erin Coates: It's local, national and international artists in the exhibition and we have some new commissioned work by local artists.

Erin Coates: So Jess Day and Joanne Richardson, who are Perth artists, building their own spaceship of desire inside the main gallery, which is kind of a geodesic dome. It's really looking at pulling apart historic notions of space exploration as being a white, masculine undertaking that's about another form of colonisation, and it's sort of a very technocratic undertaking. This is sort of a chaotic and whimsical journey that the spaceship is meant to undertake and it's really based on notions of the derive and of daydreaming. It's a really big and fun work.

Tim Stackpool: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Erin Coates: We have a work by Neil Aldum that's exploring the moon landing. He's looking back at that particular time. He's making a new installation work that is using actual newspapers from the day of the moon landing, from 1969 that he's purchased, and working into an installation with a structure above it. It's really about looking back at this time that was all about looking forward. And the optimism captured in that moment and notions of where we might be now, so this real belief that we have a lunar base, we have manned missions to Mars soon following, and pulling apart some of the expectations and the optimism of that and trying to think about where we are now and where we think we're going now.

Tim Stackpool: Sure.

Erin Coates: Matthew Bradley, he's another work from Adelaide. He does these extraordinary cast metal vessels, which he's been making in his backyard. He created his own furnace and taught himself how to cast metal, which is a really intense and difficult process. It's like the photos. It's like a mini sun being born basically.

Erin Coates: He started this process of making vessels and they have a really extraordinary quality to them. They look like they could be detritus from a failed space mission or that they're objects, you know, from an alien world.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah.

Erin Coates: He's made some new vessels for this exhibition, which we're really excited to be able to show, and it's part of an ongoing work that he makes.

Erin Coates: And we have another local artist, Dan Bourke, who's looking at... who's got a collection of new-wave science fiction novels, vintage ones from Jack's collection, and he's been working with the typography and the illustrations on the covers of these books and responding by making a new work, which is actually taking the form of a series of t-shirts which will be integrated into a terrarium. It's quite a complex installation.

Tim Stackpool: Now, would you have considered this as a standalone exhibition without the opportunity to combine it with a film festival?

Erin Coates: Yes, we would, but it's just better being able to connect it with the festival. I really enjoy working with Jack Sergeant and the whole team at Revelation Film Festival, and I think there's a really nice support between our two organisations, that we've worked together a few times now, and we don't labour over memorandums of understanding or agreements, we just sort of.. we get into great fun projects and we work together, we cross promote them. It's a really.. it's really nice, kind of free way of working. I think we'll probably keep doing it as well.

Tim Stackpool: While I have you here, I wonder if I might ask about the challenges of being a curator in Fremantle in Perth, being quite the distance from the rest of the Australian population. And in Fremantle, it does have a culture and a presence all of its own. Are there frustrations for you to suffer being isolated in a way, if that's the right word?

Erin Coates: Yeah, you know, in space no one can hear you scream. I guess you just have to embrace the isolation we have here. It's something.. I grew up here, I spent a lot of time overseas so I've come back again.

Tim Stackpool: Right.

Erin Coates: I think it's actually, you have to work with as an advantage, and the fact that we are demographically very isolated means that I think artists have become more supportive of one another, they know that their peer-ship and their support of one another is the most important thing. They are not going to be assured to have audiences interstate. I really enjoy working here and Fremantle is a part of greater Perth.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah.

Erin Coates:

It's not tiny, there's enough happening here that the ideas stay fresh. There's always new work being made and new work to see. For me it's a real privilege to get to curate here, to get to put together a show like this. It's a real challenge.. comes I guess when you're looking at trying to bring over interstate or international work. It's that cost of freighting and also if we have a lot of interstate artists in an exhibition, it's that really difficult choice of deciding who we.. you know which ones we invite to come over for the show. Because obviously the cost of bringing everybody over is a bit prohibitive. So that's probably the biggest challenge. But I don't find actually working in Perth, in Fremantle, challenging. I find it a real advantage actually, I think. It's great what we've got going on here.

Tim Stackpool:

And you can speak from an artist's perspective as well, it was in 2017, if I remember correctly. Your work was featured in The National on the east coast. Some people might remember the photos of you, you climbed the outside of the Museum of Contemporary Art. Because you are actually a climber, you are a person of quite strong character, and physically as well. Do you get the same exhilaration in creating art as you do being a climber, literally reaching the summit of those things you're physically climbing?

Erin Coates:

Yeah, definitely. I mean I think it's taken me a long time to realise this, but I think.. you know the endurance that you need to keep being creative, it's not just.. it's not just something you draw on mentally, I think physically you have to have stamina to keep being an artist year after year. You have to find a way of maintaining your endurance in every sense. And for me climbing is a great way of doing that. It's sort of a metronome, it keeps me.. it keeps my mind free; I don't feel too pulled down with things when I'm climbing. It's always a free space. When I started making work about climbing, I complicated things a little. But it was inevitable, something that I'm so passionate about was going to find its way into my work eventually.

Tim Stackpool:

On a similar note, are you able to work on the demarcation between artist in you and the curator in you when you're curating somebody else's work?

Erin Coates:

I don't know that I can articulate that, I guess I found a method for doing it? And I bring it back to remembering that I'm not just curating for myself, that we have an audience here. I'm really sort of mindful as well of our audience's engagement with these shows and how that whole show is going to be experienced by them. I think that helps to pull me back from being too indulgent in how I'm working with artists and remembering that it's about them and it's about our audience as well. It's not just about what I kind of see in the work and what I want to get from it.

Tim Stackpool:

Erin, thanks so much for speaking with us. I hope Other Suns at the Fremantle Art Centre goes very well.

Erin Coates:

Aww, look thanks for having me; it's been a joy. Thanks a lot, bye!

Tim Stackpool:

That's Erin Coates talking about Other Suns at the Fremantle Art Centre. It runs through until the 14th of September and you can learn more about it by visiting the art centre's website at: www.fac.org.au