



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 6 EPISODE 8 (late May 2024)

MULTIFUTURES – BANKSTOWN ARTS CENTRE

Curator: Rachael Kiang

Tim Stackpool:

Rachael, thanks for joining us here on Inside the Gallery.

Rachael Kiang:

Thank you. My pleasure.

Tim Stackpool:

First of all, the exhibition, how did it come about? It's a very unique perspective on looking into the future. Multifutures, of course, is the name of the exhibition. Where did the concept come from?

Rachael Kiang:

Well, so I am a little bit of a futurist myself. I would begin with that and definitely a keen interest in the intersection of media arts, technology and sci-fi as a cultural mode, if you like. But what really drove the thinking behind this exhibition is the idea of what the futures or, plural, tomorrows could look like from the perspectives of very diverse and very different peoples and cultures. And I think that's something that is not being really reflected upon or presented enough in mainstream cultures. We have obviously over time a number of sci-fi exhibitions, projects, films, but they tend to be of a particular trope, often narrated or considered or framed in a way that privileges a worldview that might be a bit exclusionary. So the purpose of this exhibition is to really open up the conversation and introduce the idea that futurist perspectives and views of imaginations of the future could look very different depending on a creative's or an individual's cultural background.

Tim Stackpool:

In the introduction, I talked about how the influence of ecological and economic crises can influence the work. Do you think from what you've seen and what you've pulled together, there is a dire outlook for the future, even though it's being brought to us from very different cultural perspectives?

Rachael Kiang:

I don't think so necessarily. It's about addressing what the current looks like and ways we can avert economic or environmental disasters. For example, in the works of one of the artists in the exhibition, to her, futures looks like being able to engage more equitably with community, both within her own community and other communities. Being respectful of the environment and being mindful of that, addressing all this future possibilities from the point of view of how the situation is like in these different areas of society at present. So I wouldn't say it's a negative outlook as such. It's more about what can we do together collectively from this point in time and how things can be different in the future.

Tim Stackpool:

There is, as you say, a diverse range of artists in this exhibition. Are you motivated by the diversity of nationalities that are in the LGA, the local government area that you work in?

Rachael Kiang:

Absolutely. So Canterbury Bankstown, it's a local government area of some 129 nationalities, very many languages being spoken and represented. It's a little bit of a microcosm of what modern day Australia's like and indeed the world. And yet I would say for instance, if you were to go to the movies and if you were to even look at online libraries of sci-fi movies, it would be predominantly, I would say, informed

by Anglo-Saxon or European perspective. And even with storylines where the main character might be Asian in origin, the role could be taken up by an actor who was actually not culturally diverse.

So it's quite interesting therefore to, like I said, switch up the conversation a little and bring into focus what sort of roles culturally diverse peoples might play in the future, what the perspective of time and space might be. Are there other ways of considering social constructs and futures? How would they consider leisure for instance? So it's quite a broad spectrum. Of course in the exhibition there are also discussions and points of origin that's motivated by political situations in certain areas of the world and how that can sometimes be skewed by mainstream media. And it's trying to refocus that narrative and introduce other perspectives that might sometimes be intentionally or unintentionally excluded.

Tim Stackpool:

Let's talk about some of the backgrounds that the artists have come from. We're talking about Nepalese, we're talking about Yemeni. Where are some of the other places that the artists have come from?

Rachael Kiang:

And so in terms of the international artists, we have Subash Thebe Limbu who's Nepalese Yakthung Nation artist based in the UK. We have Alia Ali who is showing in Australia for the first time, so it's really exciting. Alia is Yemeni Bosnian-American. And we have Black Quantum Futurism. So there are African-American collective based in the US.

Tim Stackpool:

How did you come about bringing such international artists into what is this microcosm of Australia into Bankstown? How did you come about that?

Rachael Kiang:

I would say it started from looking at what modern-day futurism looks like in various art movements. So from the point of view of visual arts, Asian futurism has been on the rise, and there is an Asian population and Asian futurism being reflected in the practices of artists in Australia and certainly some of the artists in multi-futures. And then from there, looking at the relationship between Asian futurism and the other types of futurism. So indigenous futurism is also a broad movement that's sweeping across the globe, certainly in Australia and certainly in Sydney. It's actually more active in the field of literature as opposed to visual arts in Sydney anyway. And how that notion of indigeneity and imagining what the future is like from a First Nations people's perspective, I think that's really important.

And from that point, obviously looking at the practitioners in Sydney, it sort of expanded to include interstate artists who are more active in the field who reference that sort of frame of thinking. So we've got Edwina Green from Melbourne from Narrm. But then also how does indigenous futurism look like outside of Australia? And that's how in my research I stumbled across the work of Subash Thebe Limbu.

Subash's work is informed by indigenous futurism. However, he is also influenced by Afrofuturism in his work. So that led me to further research into Afrofuturism and artists who create works from that philosophy if you like or thinking. And of course Black Quantum Futurism comes to the fore. Black Quantum Futurism is a very interesting collective because they work across different mediums from music to sound to performance to visual arts, and it's a transmedial approach to narrative and to rewriting history and considering futures with that practice specifically from that focal point of time. That is quite interesting as a counterpoint to the way Afrofuturism is being explored by Western Sydney artists, so Attafuaah. Her's is one that is very focused on the visual arts through digital mediums, but also music as well, not represented in this exhibition, but with the Afrofuturist framework as well.

Tim Stackpool:

Speaking of that then, is the next step perhaps what you might call inclusive futurism?

Rachael Kiang:

Oh indeed. And I'm very pleased you brought that up, Tim. That is an emerging area of thinking. The idea behind thinking about the future is that it's everybody's right to not just contemplate but contribute to what the future might be and might look. And that takes also not just technical expertise of different people with different skills like from the sciences, from the arts, a wide range of fields, but also a broad range of cultures.

Tim Stackpool:

If I could ask you to single out, and I don't necessarily want you to single out a particular artist, but Alia Ali's work and also coming from a Yemeni background too, that's fairly unique, but she hasn't exhibited here before as well. What is it that engaged you about her work to bring her work to this exhibition?

Rachael Kiang:

So when looking at and surveying the different futurisms across the globe and across cultures, one area of consideration geographically of course is the Middle East. Some time ago, there is certainly an academic literature. What was circulated and popular at a particular point in time was Gulf Futurism, but also the term Arab Futurism. My research started going down that path. But interestingly in so doing, I came across the work of Alia Ali who was very specific in her approach.

She is a pioneer of Yemeni Futurism. And because that was very specific to a particular country, I approached her and she was interested in the project. We started these interesting conversations about how quite a number of artists have actually moved away from that term and the notion of Arab Futurism because it is politically charged with meaning. It does reference certain areas of the region. It doesn't actually necessarily represent the stories or the struggles of particular countries in the Middle East and what they hope their futures might be. That was quite, for me, even as a curator, educational and the fact that it is interesting because all the other futurisms that are referred to are quite broad and can sort of encompass very many different geographies under a bigger umbrella term, whereas her approach was specific to a culture, a country. And the reason for that is there is really a distinction between, for instance, the Yemeni experience and what might be an Emirati experience and the fact that they were different enough such that the futures they imagine are not necessarily the same.

Tim Stackpool:

One thing, an overarching thing that strikes me about the concept of this exhibition is that when we are talking about indigenous works, oftentimes it is very much painted as looking into the past, irrespective of where the indigenous culture comes from. So picking up the traditional works and looking at how perhaps they were exhibited and portrayed over centuries past, whereas this one actually turns that on its head. It says, "What if you take that culture now and then project it into the future?" And everywhere you turn into the exhibit, you are taking that concept of an indigenous culture, an indigenous understanding and turning it around and pushing it forward fiercely and perhaps in a way looking into a crystal ball. Do you think that was challenging for the artist to actually project what they see in their future?

Rachael Kiang:

I don't think it's as challenging for the artist necessarily as it might be for some audiences because it is looking at, broadly speaking, various decolonial perspectives. Now, the idea of colonialism is prevalent in many parts of the world and there are many cultures that have been colonised. The impact of being past colony has had its imprints on various diverse cultures. And thinking about that colonialism is how some of these cultures really have that on quite distinct histories. And so for some of the artists in looking into the future, in a way they are attempting to rewrite the past if it makes sense. And it also comes back to the trope of time and temporality and space and using time as a way to put forth specific cultural identities and views of the future that might have been not considered previously that in popular culture might be sidelined as something that is exotic, something that is a little bit of a sideshow if you like.

Tim Stackpool:

Not wanting to homogenise any sort of message that is coming from the individual pieces, do you have hope for a message that perhaps visitors to the exhibition may leave with or do you want them to leave with more questions than they had from when they first walked in?

Rachael Kiang:

I would say both. The best way to think about future is to be able to be in a position to ask questions because asking questions is a start of thinking about how both the present and the future could be different from current ways of doing and thinking about anything really.

There are some messages I would love for the visitors to take away with. Number one, the future is everyone's. And so it is important to think about futurism as a inclusive exercise that there are always multiple perspectives that can coexist. It is quite reductive to think about the future as being in a particular way or you have option A and B. Actually the options are a lot more than that. And the second message is I would love for visitors to also reflect upon what they can contribute to the future from a point of view of an individual and how they see themselves as part of the broader social fabric because the status quo is there for a reason, but it is important as we progress for the downtime to think about alternatives.

Tim Stackpool:

I always ask this question, you have an exhibition in place, you've finally got it across the line. Is there anything that you would've loved to have included that you couldn't get in there either for space or because it was unavailable? Does this exhibition tell all the messages, tell all the stories that you hoped it would?

Rachael Kiang:

I think by and large the exhibition has achieved pretty much what I set out to do. And obviously, if we had more budget or space, we would love to expand upon that discussion and bring in more artists perhaps or different types of technologies that might be available. But as we know, anything that is media arts-focused and requires new technology would be a little bit more expensive to produce.

Tim Stackpool:

There's plenty of projections in the show. There's augmented reality as well. There's an AI generated companion which is very compelling but also a little bit embarrassing I think for a male plugging in various prompts to see what this perfect companion may end up being too. So quite interactive as well. As a curator who is looking to the future to bringing, I guess, cutting edge and relevant art to the area and along with your love of obvious science fiction that I've picked up in this conversation, do you see

such technology, digital technology, really being an obligation on art curators going forward to introduce into their shows?

Rachael Kiang:

I wouldn't say it's necessarily an obligation. Digital technology like any material is a tool. So I would say the way I approach it would be looking at the message rather than the medium because it's very much the case that the concept, the message, and the thinking behind the art should be the primary. And whatever medium and material delivers that, the secondary. The only exception being if it's a particular art practice or body of work where the material is the focus and is intertwined as with the message or is the message. That would be the only exception I would say.

Tim Stackpool:

So if I can just digress for a moment and talk about the work you're doing here at the Bankstown Art Centre as curator and also as director, when it comes to the owner of this facility, the city of Canterbury Bankstown, the local council, is perhaps what you want to try and achieve here governed by how you need to reflect what it is that council want to achieve? And is that part of your role as director and curator to ensure you deliver that?

Rachael Kiang:

There is certainly an aspect of the role of programming and curating to make sure that the community is considered and that indeed we look at the broader objectives of the local government. However, it is very important as a contemporary art curator to also be able to present current practices and thinking of creators and to also perhaps challenge the local community and audience to look at art and the various types of social messages in different ways, because ultimately that's what the experience would be if you were to visit a larger state arts institution. Part of our remit is also to create opportunities for creatives as well as visitors alike for them to interact and intersect with practices and artists who are outside of this community.

Tim Stackpool:

And with that, Rachael, how important are Western Sydney artists, your focus here?

Rachael Kiang:

I would say very much so because a key part of our mission is to foreground and incubate talent from Canterbury Bankstown, and also more broadly, Western Sydney, which is why you'll find in this exhibition there are Western Sydney artists being represented. So we have got Kalanjay Dhir, we've got Serwah Attafua, we've got Jane Fan, and also the duo, Lawrence Liang and Christina Lam, both of whom actually are local to the Canterbury Bankstown LGA.

Tim Stackpool:

That's quite the collaboration looking at their work, particularly they come from two different cultural backgrounds. And I think it's a phenomenal work. If you come to see it, push the curtain aside and that futuristic look at a landscape diorama, it is quite something.

Rachael Kiang:

Yes, it actually consists of five scenes. And although they do come from different but complementary cultural backgrounds, it is informed by Confucius thinking. Without giving too much away, I would encourage listeners to come by the Bankstown Arts Centre and experience it for yourself.

Tim Stackpool:

We're sitting here in the black box theatre at the Bankstown Arts Centre. It holds about 120 or so people just by looking around at the chairs. Multifutures is making use of this space as well, not just your exhibition space.

Rachael Kiang:

Indeed, that's correct. So we are having two additional screenings on top of what was on opening night of time-based artworks and film works by the three international artists. And the presentation is done in a very intentional way that is separate from a gallery sitting so they can experience it as a film work, so to speak, as opposed to a video projection work in relation to the other works in the gallery. If you miss the screening on opening night, you can catch the films on the 1st of June and another time on the 29th of June.

Tim Stackpool:

I did see the presentations on opening night. I can verify that the projection is beautiful. The actual presentation of the work is stunning to see. In terms of more that's coming up at Bankstown Arts Centre, what have we got to look forward to?

Rachael Kiang:

There's plenty. So as a multi-arts platform, the programming might be visual arts-led, but we often have public program events as well as other curator or partner events that crosses over into different art forms and practices. So for instance, you can expect probably a curated day of shorts from the Lebanese Film Festival coming up sometime in August. There would be also likely a world music performance that is coming up in September in the black box theatre. And further ahead we are going to be presenting our Bankstown Biennale, which would involve more than visual arts, and that's happening from November all the way to January next year.

Tim Stackpool:

Excellent. Look, Rachael, it's been a delight to actually have a conversation with you. We didn't get too much of a chance to catch up on opening night. It was a very busy evening. And terrific to see so many people turn up, even international artists turn up to see your opening, which was incredible to be part of. And I thank you very much for your time on the podcast.

Rachael Kiang:

Thank you very much.