



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 5 EPISODE 11 (Late Nov 2023)

RURAL UTOPIAS AT ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Tim Stackpool:

SPACED Rural Utopias' curator is Miranda Johnson, and she joins us on the phone from Perth. Miranda, thanks for joining us on Inside the Gallery.

Miranda Johnson:

Thanks for having me.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, I'm not really sure how to describe this. It's kind of like a collaboration between the Art Gallery of Western Australia and SPACED. How does that work?

Miranda Johnson:

It is absolutely a collaboration. So, SPACED has been running for 25 years, and residencies is really what we do. We partner with institutions for many of our projects, so SPACED manages all of the residencies, and then the institution presents the outcomes in an exhibition. So, it's a really good way to kind of showcase the experiences of the residencies to a wider audience, but it also ensures that SPACED manages that first presentation of the work in the community where it was created.

The residencies are quite long and they require a lot of community support. So, SPACED has a lot of relationships with regional host organisations, so they support the artist on the ground. I was kind of the go-between between SPACED and AGWA. So I worked for SPACED but I was based at AGWA. I worked really closely with Soula Veyradier and Marco Marcon, who are the Program Manager and Artistic Director at SPACED.

So, I liaised with them, kept in touch with the artists, but then also worked with the AGWA team to think about how to present the works at AGWA and what collection artworks the artists wanted to work with.

Tim Stackpool:

And in that sense, was there a common foundation, just to give us a sense of how all of this came together?

Miranda Johnson:

That's a tricky one, because I think in many ways, I think of each artist project as a mini solo exhibition, because that's really what it was when they initially presented it to the community. Context-responsive art is the brief that is given to the artists, so each residency is really specific to the context and the community, and the artwork is so specific. So, how we framed it, we framed it as a collection of rich and varied stories from communities across WA and a way for audiences to learn more about their lives and their unique perspectives. It's a way for all of those really specific stories to come together.

I think that when people walk through the exhibition, they'll see common themes that definitely arise. There's very specific rural interests like climate change, farming practices, the importance of aboriginal culture and knowledge, mining and resources, and also the feeling of being an outsider in a new place. So, that's a lot of the kind of common threads.

Tim Stackpool:

How did the collaboration come about? Did you propose it to the gallery or did the gallery come to you? I just want to understand the mechanics of that.

Miranda Johnson:

So, the project was proposed by SPACED. That's the core of what we do as an organisation, so we run these socially engaged, context-responsive residencies in regional WA. Each one has a different theme or focus, and then we will partner with Perth-based institutions who host the exhibition outcome. So, this is the fourth cycle of residencies that's SPACED has run. And before that, we ran a number of other residency-based projects out of our gallery in Kellerberrin in WA.

And we've worked with AGWA before. This is before my time, but in 2018 we presented a residency project, an exhibition called North by Southwest, which was a residency exchange between regional WA and the Nordic countries. And so, we kind of had that relationship with AGWA already, so we pitched it to them again in the hopes we could work together. I think it was also an attractive project to AGWA because it gives the state art collection and the gallery a presence in the regions during the residencies.

Tim Stackpool:

I may be a little bit naive, but is this a unique relationship that you have with the gallery?

Miranda Johnson:

I think SPACED is a pretty unique project. It's one of the only kind of residency-based organisations of its kind that I know of. I mean, haven't worked for SPACED for very long, but whenever I talk about it to other people, they're like, "Oh wow, I've heard of SPACED. What you guys are doing is really interesting." So, I think it is quite unique in that way.

Tim Stackpool:

You have common goals but come from different unique perspectives, I guess. Was there a dovetailing of roles between you both? Do you complement each other?

Miranda Johnson:

Yeah, totally. Constantly. I mean, AGWA has been really supportive of the project and that's been really great. But I think the way that SPACED runs is very ... We're a very small, quite a nimble organisation, there's only a handful of staff members. And I think that's why we're so well-placed to be able to run these residencies, where there's a lot of travel, there's a lot of connection with regional organisations, a lot of things happen really quickly.

And I think that's quite different to the pace at which a larger state institution runs and how it has to run; there's a huge staff, they've got a lot of work to do, there's collection management on top of exhibitions. So, it actually worked really well in that way because we were able to deliver the residencies in a way that AGWA doesn't really have the resources to do. But what they do have the resources for is supporting exhibition outcomes, and so that's been a really great benefit for us.

Tim Stackpool:

And so, I have to ask you, do you think they're happy with the work you've done?

Miranda Johnson:

I think so, yeah. It took a lot of work, I guess kind of explaining what it is, and not just to AGWA, to anyone. Because as you've said, it's a very unique sort of relationship and a unique organisation. So, I've done a lot of talking about the exhibition. And I think the works were still being made up until quite recently, so it was kind of hard to communicate what was happening, communicate what it was, when

you actually still don't really know what it's going to look like in the end. So yeah, there's been a lot of explaining, a lot of questions, which has been really great.

Tim Stackpool:

AGWA is a state institution. You've come in from an outside organisation, that being SPACED, but from your perspective, when it comes to your career, was this the type of work you expected to do?

Miranda Johnson:

That's a great question. I've been aware of SPACED for many years and I've always really admired the work that they do, so for that reason, I was really excited to be approached about this. And I should also mention as well, I came on board as curator sort of halfway through this project, so I want to acknowledge the work of Dunja Rmandic, who was the curator at AGWA who did a lot of the groundwork for this exhibition. She was really supportive in kind of passing the project onto me, I was extremely grateful to her for that.

And yeah, it's very different work to what I've done before, but it's also not in many ways. I've never worked with a collection before, so it was a great opportunity for me to expand my skills in that area. But I think in terms of working with quite a small organisation, commissioning new works, there's a lot of moving parts. That's something that I'm quite accustomed to. So, I was on the board of an artist-run space called Cool Change for many years. And so, there was a lot of quick, responsive kind of turnaround. Everyone just throws in and gets the work done kind of situation there.

And then also my other job, I work at PICA, Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts, which is, again, we don't have a collection, we're commissioning a lot of new work. And I just completed a three-year curatorial fellowship with PICA, so I feel like I was quite well-placed to then come into this.

Tim Stackpool:

A very fresh approach and a perspective that you can bring to it. The other great thing about it, I think, is it demonstrates how, as a curator, you don't necessarily just have to aim to be working at an institution of substance. There's so many other opportunities.

Miranda Johnson:

Oh, yeah, totally. It's been such a great opportunity to really expand my skills and think outside the box. I feel like I kind of got the best of both worlds in a lot of ways because I learned a lot from working at AGWA, at a state institution. But then, I'm also not necessarily tied to that way of working.

Tim Stackpool:

I think sometimes people say if you've worked at a state-run institution, a state-run gallery, you can pretty much work anywhere after that experience.

Miranda Johnson:

Yeah.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, let's go back to this exhibition. You talked about the various stories that the various artists can bring, but is there a foundation story that you're trying or needing to tell here?

Miranda Johnson:

I think on a very basic level, it's the stories of regional and remote WA as a base level story, but I think there are so many other stories within that. What happens when artists are immersed in different contexts to their own and they're asked to make work responsive to that context. And then there's the added element of, how is the state art collection considered, thought of or relevant to the lives of regional West Australians?

And a lot of artists, they really latched onto that idea and that came through in their work. So, how can this collection, which lives in Perth but is owned by the people of WA, be more accessible to regional areas? So, there's a lot of little stories within a broader story, I think.

Tim Stackpool:

And how well do you think you've told those stories?

Miranda Johnson:

I think it can be really challenging for the artists to capture all of the richness of their residency experience and the lives that they were living in these communities in one sort of exhibition outcome. And in many ways, I think that's one of the fundamental challenges of what SPACED does, which is sending artists on these once in a lifetime experiences really, and then being like, "Okay, now make an artwork about it."

And a lot of the artists are like, "It's too much. I can't possibly capture it all," which I think is really fair. So, I think in some ways, this is a really great snapshot of all of those residencies and tells a lot of stories, but in other ways, I think that the residency experiences are ones that artists will be reflecting on and carrying with them for much longer than just this exhibition period.

Tim Stackpool:

And that's kind of outside of what the visitor to the exhibition probably feels. But I just wonder, did you have trouble with the eclectic nature of this coming together?

Miranda Johnson:

Oh, totally. I mean, there's so many moving parts. Each work is very specific to the context, which I talked about a bit before. But then there's also the added challenge of working with the collection and each artist choosing a work from the collection, in conversation with me, but then that's very specific to their practice or their experience. And so, then you've got this sort of selection of works from the collection that doesn't really have a relationship with each other either. So, from a curatorial perspective, that was extremely challenging.

Tim Stackpool:

How long did you spend on this project?

Miranda Johnson:

A really long time. I've actually lost track of time. Let me think about it. Yeah, I mean, I guess I should also mention that it was delayed multiple times for various different reasons. So, Rural Utopias, the residencies actually began in 2019, and then obviously there was a long delay because of COVID. And then I came on board, it would've been the end of 2021

It was originally going to be one five-person exhibition in November 2022 and then a second exhibition in November 2023, and then there were some delays with the gallery as well, so it kind of ended being a 10-artist group show in November 2023. It's been quite a protracted experience for me, which has been great for a lot of reasons, including ... I have multiple jobs, and so managing all of that has been helpful, sort of drawing it out a little bit.

Tim Stackpool:

In saying that, and it has transformed basically from the original concept that, I guess, that you were presented with, into something completely different. But going back to what you talked about with your background in other areas, do you think there's one specific point in your history where, during putting this show together, did you think, "Boy, I'm so glad I suffered through perhaps a past experience," because it prepared you, in a way, for any particular challenges with this project?

Miranda Johnson:

I mean, I don't know if there's any one particular moment, but it's come up quite a lot that I've been like, "God, I'm really glad that I've worked with a lot of artists who are ..." A lot of the artists in Rural Utopias are mid-career, but my experience during my fellowship has been working with emerging artists. And I think my experience lends itself well to supporting artists throughout the duration of a project, particularly when there are challenges.

In this example, there's a lot of delays and a lot of challenges working with the gallery. Artists have been making their work over a long period of time. And I think that my experience in supporting artists from the beginning to the end of a project lends itself really well to a project where there's been a lot of stopping and starting.

Tim Stackpool:

Going back to the collection though, who are the artists and what can we expect to see?

Miranda Johnson:

So the artists are a combination of WA, interstate and one internationally-based artist who's from Perth originally. Some are based in regional areas and others in metropolitan areas, which I think is really important because it doesn't sort of lean into this dichotomy of sending an artist from the city to live in the country; it's not that simple.

So, the artists are Jacky Cheng, who's a Broome-based artist; Alana Hunt, who until recently was based in Kununurra in WA; Georgie Mattingley, who's based in Alice Springs; Nathan Gray, who's from WA originally but lives in Berlin; Tina Stefanou and Ana Tiquia, who are both Melbourne-based; Bennett Miller, Elizabeth Pedler and Jo Derbyshire who are all Perth-based; and Sarah Rodigari, Sydney-based.

So, in terms of what you can expect to see, you will see a very broad range of works, and I think there's a lot of different ways in which artists have responded to the brief of Rural Utopias and to the state art collection. Some artists, so Jo Derbyshire and Jacky Cheng, have collaborated with local artists, Andrea Williams and Salvatore Caruso and Nigel Smith. So, there's a lot of installations that really bring together multiple artists' works. Nathan Gray has also collaborated with his hosts, Juluwarlu Art Centre and Ngaarda Media up in Roebourne, and they're retelling Yindjibarndi ghost stories.

So I think in general, there's some humour, a lot of reflection and some really uplifting works that consider utopian values of community building, giving and sharing. But then there's also other works that are very critical of this idea of utopia, because it's fundamentally quite a problematic idea when

considering the history of colonization on this continent. So, there's been a lot of conversation about that as well.

And every artist brings their own background to the stories as well and form some really unique relationships with community members and local artists. So I think, yeah, it is truly a collaboration between the community and the artist, and there's some very unique stories that come out of that. I mean, there's obviously common themes as well. Some artists will really lean into the farming aesthetic, but it's broader than that as well.

Tim Stackpool:

And what about in terms of working with the gallery's current collection? Was that of advantage to you, or did you find having to use that restrictive?

Miranda Johnson:

It was really challenging. In some ways, it was very restrictive, and in other ways it was very extensive, because the collection is huge. A lot of it is not digitized, so that's something that AGWA is actively working to remedy.

But I think the artists, particularly those who weren't from WA, they were only passing through Perth for a few days on their way to and from the residency location, so that wasn't really enough time to organise for them to view the works that they were interested in. Additionally, the exhibition was initially planned to tour regionally, and that really limited the works they could choose from the collection, because most regional galleries don't have the right conditions to show state art collection works, which is kind of ironic when considering the fact that this is an exhibition about regional locations.

And I think the artists felt quite overwhelmed with the scope of the collection and they didn't really know where to start. And this process of kind of whittling down the selection was very slow in comparison to the speed at which the artists were making their own works. This idea of having a really process-focused engagement with works from the collection that would influence the original works didn't really happen, because the speed of the institution is very slow compared to the speed of an independent artist.

But I think one of the positive things is that the artists and I had a lot of really great conversations with AGWA staff about these challenges, and it's something that they're very aware of and they're very keen to increase access in the future.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. I think that's a challenge for curators in general, when the collection is so huge, what do you pick? And even more difficult is, what do you leave out can be the biggest challenge, unfortunately.

Miranda Johnson:

Yeah. And I think also, it was challenging from a curatorial perspective because the works that each artist chose to include ... And that was very clear in the brief, it's not me curating a collection in response to the artist's works, it's the artists working with a curator to select an artwork that is meaningful to them. And so, in terms of the works that they chose, there wasn't really a common theme, or a style, or a time period. So, that was quite hard to sort of bring it all together into one cohesive kind of narrative.

Tim Stackpool:

And they're not curators either.

Miranda Johnson:

No. And the reasons that they chose the works that they did were all so different. So yeah, I've kind of just leaned into that, but I think we want to make it clear to audiences why each work is there and what its connection is with each artist's practice.

So, the way that we've decided to do that is to include first person artist-written statements about the collection work, what they connected with, why it resonated with them. And that will hopefully give a bit more insight into this relationship between the collection works and the new commissions.

Tim Stackpool:

There's no doubt it's resulted in a diverse and very dynamic presentation.

Miranda Johnson:

Yeah, totally. It's very broad. And I think, again, that's why I do, in many ways, think about it as very little solo exhibitions, because the connection is very strong, but it's different for each artist. And that's been really fascinating to watch and to discuss.

Tim Stackpool:

You talked there about collaboration, but there's an incredible sense of isolation when you think about Western Australia as well. Do you think that creates works of art which are very unique to the state?

Miranda Johnson:

That's a great question. I mean, it's hard to say, because I've only ever worked in WA. I would love to hear from other curators who are working regionally in other states to get more of an idea.

I think for me, there is a lot of isolation, but that also brings a lot of connection, and the artists really lean into that. So, I don't get a sense of working in complete isolation from any of the works, but what I do definitely get is the artists feeling sometimes very out of place, in a different community, and very aware of their difference to the people who live there. So, maybe that's isolation.

And I think the artists have a real sense of responsibility to tell stories in a way that doesn't just centre their own experiences. So, they can refer to the fact that they are aware that they're politically or socially different to the other people in the community, but that doesn't mean that they're separate from them. There is a real sense of sitting with that comfortability.

Tim Stackpool:

Did any of the works particularly surprise you?

Miranda Johnson:

I don't know that I was surprised by any of it. I think some of the communities might've been a bit surprised by some of the work that was made. For example, there was one artist who, when they presented their work in the community, they got a combination of feedback, the majority of which was really strong, but there were also some negative comments from community members that they'd been working with.



And I think that is kind of unavoidable when contemporary artists are working in regional areas where the audiences are different, the tastes are different, the expectations of what an artwork might look like can be different. And that's all kind of a part of working in a different context, really, is receiving different feedback on your work. So, yeah, I think sometimes there were a few sort of challenges like that. But yeah, it didn't surprise me.

Tim Stackpool:

What's the nature of the work that you have hanging in the exhibition?

Miranda Johnson:

Oh, it's so broad. There's a really incredible work that one of the artists, Tina Stefanou, made in collaboration with the community of Carnamah, which is a giant sheep fleece, which, in her performance that she did in the residency, they formed this sheep fleece to the shape of a tractor. And this tractor, dressed as a sheep, is featured in the video that she makes. But about halfway through her residency, she said to me, "Do you think we can also show the sheep fleece?" And I was like, "Oh." One of the challenges is that a lot of the artists wanted to show work with organic materials in it, which, from a conservation perspective, is a challenge when you're also showing works from the state art collection. And so, to sort of talk to the team at AGWA and say, "Oh, so you've got this giant, heavy sheep fleece that's probably still got some dags and some binds in it and hasn't been cleaned. Can we show that in the gallery alongside these incredibly valuable artworks?" But AGWA have been really open to it, and they have processes that we can go through to make sure the works are shown. But yeah, there's a lot of organic materials.

Tim Stackpool:

There are quite a number of regional partners in this project, a lot of moving parts if you like, perhaps beyond anything you've been educated for in the past. I mean, the spreadsheet, it must be huge. How did you handle all that?

Miranda Johnson:

Well, look. I mean, I have to say that SPACED Program Manager, Soula Veyradier, did the bulk of the work. She was really the person who liaised with all of the regional communities and set up these partnerships, and she was just fabulous at it. So, in the beginning, it was quite easy for me because Soula had done a lot of that groundwork and was really there actively managing those partnerships and could introduce me to the regional communities and the artists who were working there.

So, she left the role at the beginning of the year, and then I took over those communications, but I think it was a little bit more manageable at that point because most of the artists had completed their residencies, so it was a smaller number of locations. And it was also just a massive perk of the job for me, because I don't live regionally, I live in Perth. I was really excited to connect with these organisations, and I got the opportunity to travel to a few of them as well and meet people and meet the local artists who are working there. That was just fantastic. That was one of the highlights for me.

The bulk of the work on the ground is done by these regional organisations, and we were lucky that we got some funding to pay for an extra producer to work with the artists. So, it was just really great to be able to meet these people who are so wonderful to work with, who really just were able to take the project and run with it.

Tim Stackpool:

Each regional partner would have their own processes though. Did you have to perhaps be tolerant of those different processes?

Miranda Johnson:

Yeah. I mean, there's a definite tolerance, but I think it's also about trust, trusting that these organisations have their own way of running things that work for their audience and their communities. And as long as you're communicating and you're sort of aware of what everyone's doing, then by and large, SPACED is happy for the organisations to run their own presentation of the works in the way that suits them. As long as we know what's happening, then yeah, we're happy for people to run with it.

Tim Stackpool:

We're talking pretty much half of Australia when we speak about Western Australia. Do you think those regional organisations serve their arts communities well from what you've seen?

Miranda Johnson:

Oh, absolutely. Yeah, totally. I think they do a lot of hard work, and I think that they're really listening to their audiences and their communities. And I think for me, it's been a fantastic learning opportunity, as someone who works in the city, to have a better understanding of the needs of regional artists and regional organisations who are doing so much work and really running it on not very much money, and trying really hard to support their community. So, yeah, I think they're doing a fabulous job.

Tim Stackpool:

Back talking about the exhibition, Rural Utopias, how many pieces are in the exhibition?

Miranda Johnson:

I mean, it's hard to say because a lot of the works are installations that have a lot of components, but you count of them as one work. There's 10 artists and three other collaborators. I'd say there's probably around 40 individual works in the exhibition.

Tim Stackpool:

So then, does the exhibition tell the story that you hoped it would? Is it restricted in any way, or do you think you've actually nailed this?

Miranda Johnson:

I think it tells the story. I don't think it tells the complete story; as we talked about before, there's just so much that you can't capture. But I'm really happy with the way it's come together, and I think that it is ... It's been kind of chaotic and there's been so many moving parts, as we've talked about, and so many different stories that I've kind of just leaned into the chaos. And I'm really happy with the outcome of that.

Tim Stackpool:

I'm sure it's not a chaotic exhibition, though.

Miranda Johnson:

No, it won't be a chaotic exhibition. The process has been chaotic. I think the exhibition outcome hopefully won't show a lot of that chaos.

Tim Stackpool:

I mean, perhaps from your perspective, it's been a chaotic process. But really, you've probably just managed the smorgasbord of the calendar changes and all that sort of thing very well, and you've come up with an excellent result.

Miranda Johnson:

Yeah, thank you. I mean, I hope so. When I say chaotic, I don't necessarily mean that as a bad thing. I think these projects have so many things going on, often all at once, and it's just been such a rich experience.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, and lovely for all the artists and those who are involved. But in terms of the audience, what do you hope they leave with?

Miranda Johnson:

I think it depends on who the audience is. And I'm very aware that the exhibition is being shown in a metropolitan context, and it's about regional stories. So, yeah, I mean, I guess for metropolitan or international tourist audiences, I hope they can leave with a deeper understanding or interest in regional and remote WA and the lives of the people that live there.

But I think for regional audiences, I hope they can leave feeling seen and that their interests and lives are represented. But I also hope all audiences can leave thinking about how residencies and context-responsive art can challenge people, but it can also bring different perspectives together to sit alongside each other. I think of Rural Utopias and the whole theme really as more of a provocation to artists and to audiences to think about what that might mean. I don't think about that people will come away thinking, "Well, regional life is so utopian."

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Some of these places are challenging to live in.

Miranda Johnson:

Yeah, definitely. And some works in the show, they really do make that clear.

Tim Stackpool:

And that's an important point to make, easy.

Miranda Johnson:

Yeah, totally. In fact, I remember one of the artists I was speaking with said to me that it was the hardest residency that they had ever undertaken.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow. And was that because of the isolation, the strangeness, the feeling of being alone?

Miranda Johnson:

Yeah, all of that. Yeah, and just this sense of feeling very different to the people in the community. Even though they were able to forge these really meaningful relationships, there is a separation there.

But I think also in terms of everything we talked about, it's hard work, socially engaged art, connecting with people. It takes a lot of energy. You have to work really hard at it, so that can be challenging. And then also, having this experience and then being asked to create a work that kind of wraps everything neatly up is also pretty much an impossible challenge.

Tim Stackpool:

And let me ask you one more question about the artists. Do you think this experience may have changed their perspective on their art forever?

Miranda Johnson:

Yeah, I think so. I think we'll definitely see their experiences continuing to come out in the works they make in the future beyond this project.

Tim Stackpool:

Maybe you presented a life-changing experience to some of these people.

Miranda Johnson:

Oh, I hope so. Absolutely. I also hope that it's led to them having friendships and creating these relationships that will be ongoing into the future.

Tim Stackpool:

Just one other thing, regarding you being in Perth, we talked about the isolation. Do you feel you have to deliver something beyond greater expectation because you are in Perth, because you're not on the East Coast, because you are so far from everybody else?

Miranda Johnson:

Honestly, no. I don't really feel like that. I feel like the arts community here is really supportive of the work that people are doing, and I'm just really excited to show it to those people who are living in Perth and in WA. Honestly, I'm not really thinking about the East Coast when I'm working on this exhibition.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. I will let everybody know how long the exhibition is running for, but let's just talk about you for a sec. What's next on your agenda?

Miranda Johnson:

Well, I've been working on setting up the next SPACED project, which is going to be another cycle of residencies with a different theme and a different exhibition partner. So, that's been really exciting, because as I said, I came on to Rural Utopias when it was halfway through, so kind of working on a project from the beginning has been really satisfying. We're applying for funding for that, so I'm really crossing my fingers that that can happen.

I'm also planning on having a rest, just taking some time off and enjoying the summer, and then returning to my role at PICA. So, I manage the residency program there as well. That's really exciting because I think it'll be a fun challenge to find ways to kind of synthesize what I've learned with this exhibition and this residency project in the work I do in the future.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, well, you've come to the finale of this exhibition, Rural Utopias. I think you've done a marvellous job pulling it together, and the method of pulling it together is quite remarkable, Miranda. And I thank you so much for your time on the podcast.

Miranda Johnson:

Thanks so much, Tim.