

Episode 15: Australian Design Centre

Intro The National Association for the Visual Arts is the peak body protecting and promoting the professional interests of the Australian visual arts. NAVA in Conversation is a series exploring the issues and challenges of working in the sector. We speak with artists, curators and administrators to gain insight into the experiences of contemporary practice and seek to propose ideas for change, progress and resilience in both local and global contexts.

Lisa Cahill: I'm Lisa Cahill. I'm the CEO and artistic director of the Australian Design Centre, which is located in William Street in Darlinghurst, in Sydney. Uh, I have been, um, in this role for eighteen months and it's, um, it's you know, been a fantastic journey, uh, over that period, um, to really look at how, you know, we can continue to better support craft and design in Australia.

We moved into this space around the time that I started with the organization in 2015, so we've only been in William street in Darlinghurst for two years, uh prior to that in Bourke street in Surry Hills and so this couple of years has really been a fantastic opportunity to, um, reimagine the organization and reimagine us in a different location, reimagine us in a ... in a different space. Uh, you know, a gallery space is a completely different to what we had in the previous location and so, this has been a fantastic chance to kind of go, 'We're here in Darlinghurst. How can we really make this work?'. And one of the best features that we have, uh, is our windows. And, uh, you know, we're right on the street, people are driving and walking past all day and all night and these windows in these spaces have given us a great opportunity to animate the street.

Penny Craswell: My name is Penny Craswell and I'm the Creative Strategy Associate at the Australian Design Centre. I started here in April this year and it's been a really exciting time to join the organization. Um, my background is in design magazines and as a writer, so I bring those skills to it, um, but I'm also really excited to be working on, um, the forward plan, planning for the organization and also, um, Sydney Craft Week. I think it was my first day in the job that Lisa called me in the office and said, 'I have an idea', and Sydney Craft Week was it. Um, and, uh, I said, 'Yes, let's do it'. So, um, it's been a great, exciting journey.

Sydney Craft Week has been about celebrating all the craft that is actually happening in Sydney anyway. There's a huge range of makers, from jewellers to ceramists, to, um, textiles artists and all sorts of different mediums and they work, you know, day in, day out, creating, selling, sharing skills and I think, this was an opportunity to bring everyone together and tell everyone what the others are doing and, um, give the wider public an opportunity to get involved, to, um, learn a new skill or buy handmade goods. So, it's been a fantastic, um, event, I think.

Lisa Cahill: As an organization we noticed that this resurgence of interest in handmade and craft. And, you know, while it's been something that we have

supported and showcased for more than 50 years as an organization, we really felt that it was time to go back to those roots and to, to celebrate the makers and to, um, capitalize, if you like, on, on the, uh, on the, this resurgence of interest in the handmade and making, both from the perspective of the professional maker and the amateur, who really just want to, to do something with their hands.

So, we, um, uh, it, through that, sort of, trajectory, that's how our programming is starting to evolve, and, you know, I think about a year ago I wrote down in my, in my iPhone notes, 'Sydney Craft Week', and then, um, it was, uh, in April when Penny took on the role of Creative Strategy Associate that I thought, uh, I think now is the time. (laughs) I think now is the time that, where we can actually say put Sydney Craft Week out there as an opportunity for people, for organizations, for makers, for, uh, galleries, for retail stores, to kind of, you know, say how about this, how about we do something and put something in the cultural calendar of Sydney that is about craft and about, you know, building what is, is for craft, supporting makers and designers, um, really, kind of, encouraging people to get involved in making again and you know, while there is that underlying resurgence of interest, it needed something, I think, like a Sydney Craft Week to elevate that interest and to give it the umbrella and almost give, um, give crafts people the permission to be on the city stage, if you like.

We put a call out for expressions of interest and we weren't really sure how many people we'd get. We, we guessed that we would get from, really some of the big institutions and universities involved and we hoped that we'd also get lots of small organizations and shops and collectives and makers involved. And we were just absolutely thrilled with the response. Um, and, we got everything we wanted and more. And, um, we were really excited when all of the proposals starting coming in. Um, and in the end we had, um, over 80 organizations, um, sending things in and over 100 events. Uh, so it was a fantastic response from the community.

Prior to, um, putting out the call for expressions of interest, we had a focus group. We, we called in some key people in the sector. Um, some people from some of the professional associations and the guilds and the galleries, and, you know, we said to them, 'what do you guys think of the idea of Sydney Craft Week? 'Cause it's about you, you know, it's not about the ADC, it's about the broader craft community'. And, you know, they were on the one hand, excited but on the other hand a bit trepidatious. And, I think, you know, the, the early comments were, 'well, oh, you mean 2018?'. And we said, 'oh, no, no, no. We mean 2017. You know we're gonna do it this year.'

Um, and, I think many people were kind of, a little bit, uh, scared of that. Like, scared of doing something quickly without proper planning and, uh, you know, we kind of said, 'well, that's the way we work here at the Australian Design Centre. We want to try things. We want to pilot things. We want to not be afraid of failing'. And, I think, uh, that by telling, by demonstrating to people that, you know, we weren't afraid to put ourselves out there, I think others, kind of went, 'okay, well we'll go along with this'.

And even for ourselves, you know, we had already set our program for 2017 and, so, you know, when we, when we set the dates we didn't have the luxury of saying, 'okay, this is what we're gonna do in Sydney Craft Week'. We already had that pre-planned. So, thankfully, you know, there were two craft exhi... craft related exhibitions on in our program, in our gallery space. So that worked really well, um, for us.

And other just went, we just went to them, 'okay, well, what have you got on during that time of the year?'. Just that's it, that's your Sydney Craft Week event, you know, it's about promoting that and it's about elevating the promotion of that under the umbrella of a broader, um, city-wide, greater Sydney wide, cultural event.

Penny Craswell:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)

The other thing we had was a huge number of workshops. So I think we had, um, forty organizations offering workshops and many of those offering more than one. Um, several organizations offered six or more workshops. So there was fantastic, um, sense of passing on skills, um, of people learning something new or refining what they already knew. Um, and that was exactly what we wanted.

Myself, personally I went to the pussy hat making workshop. Which was fantastic. Um, so, it was a group of women. It was led by, um, Shared Threads, which is a collective who are interested in knitting and activism. Um, and would, I, a beginner, so I, I was learning how to do knit two, pearl 2. Um, and, uh, to make my pussy hat, which is now finished and only has one small hole. Um, and, um, yeah it was fascinating and, um, Megan Callusi gave a really interesting talk about activism and knitting and we talked about the health benefits of craft and, uh, it was really fascinating to learn about how, um, there are communities all around the world who are using things like knitting circles to really connect again in a low-tech way with community and just feel really, um, you know.

I think life is so fast now. And we're so addicted to those screens and scrolling, scrolling, scrolling. And, um, it's really nice to be able to just sit in a group and do something physical and make something with your hands. Uh, I think it's really good for the spirit.

Lisa Cahill:

Traditionally, um, craft has been something that has encouraged community. So it might be around the kitchen table, you know, it might be, it's all of those traditional things that we think of when we think of craft, mainly textile craft, you know, um, embroidery, and sewing, and knitting, and crocheting, and, and it's generation, it's passing down of skills, through generations, it's, you know, grandmothers teaching granddaughters and grandsons to knit, mainly granddaughters probably in those days to knit and to crochet and to sew. And, I think, you know, that it's developed community, it's developed family, um.

Penny Craswell:

Men's Sheds is another example of how communities can come together through craft and in this case men coming together to make things out of

wood and chat. It's a fantastic thing and, um, craft is also something that you can do on your own. And that gives you that sense of mindfulness and, uh, of, concentrating on one thing only, and it has a very meditative quality to it. Um, and you know, I think people are, need that in their lives, um, at the moment. And, so, um, people love rediscovering these old skills in a new way.

Lisa Cahill:

Craft is really about the hand. It's about the skilled, skilled make, making really. And I think we're finding more and more visual artists right across that spectrum actually learning making skills and folding that into their conceptual ideas for, you know, making contemporary, contemporary visual art. So, I think, there, there less and less, uh, I think the silos, are really no longer important, you know, there isn't craft, visual art, design. I think you'll find design is crafts people, artists, are all employing the thinking, the manual skill, the, um, you know, in their practice, in multifarious kinds of ways.

And, you know I had this conversation with Oliver Smith who was our board member from Sydney College of the Arts. And, you know, he said, he, he, he, he, he, uh, is the head of the undergraduate studies area, and he, he says that, um, the students coming through don't care about any of those old silos anymore. You know, they're not interested in whether they're a designer or a craftsperson. They're an artist and they, you know, they may employ, they may, uh, go off and learn jewelry making and they may employ that in a major installation, you know, outdoor installation. Or you know, they might look at doing, um, ceramics and then that may form, um, some kind of mural making or 2D exploration as opposed to a 3D object, uh, you know, taking an object based discipline and turning that into, you know, a visual art practice.

So, um, I, I, I just think no longer are there those silos and that's really interesting and that's really affecting our thinking about what our programming is too. Um, that it's not necessarily about an exhibition on jewellery or an exhibition on ceramics, you know, we're often finding that many of our exhibitions traverse all of those boundaries and, and, um, and, and incorporate people who perhaps themselves have seen themselves as, as visual artists, as opposed to makers.

Penny Craswell:

In terms of interior design and styling trends, I think, um, there's been a move towards and aesthetic that is less perfect. That's, um, that beauty of the imperfect idea and I think that's, um, really, um, allowed the crafts to shine. So, um, where before maybe you were buying your dinner sets of beautiful ceramics made from moulds in an industrial, um, uh, process, now you're much more interested in buying, the sort of, asymmetrical mug that was made by a local maker and I think, um, you know it's a trend that fashion houses are also interested in.

The big fashion houses are looking at traditional handy crafts all around the world and taking some of those skills and collaborating with those people to create, um, garments that are not, they don't have that perfection of an industrial quality. They have the handmade imperfection. Um, so, I think

that that trend has fed the craft industry in a really nice way. And, um, we all want to make and now we feel like, um, or buy something made by someone that's local, something handmade, where you can meet the person who actually made the thing. I think there's something really beautiful about that and people are recognizing the attraction that that brings.

Lisa Cahill:

And I think it's also about story. You know, there is, there's a story behind the maker who made the cup that you're using. There's a story behind, you know, restaurateurs, uh, uh, you know filling their restaurants with tableware that is made by local makers, you know, as opposed to the industrial process that, that you mentioned Penny. And there's a real story there for the restaurant that they worked with, you know, ex-ceramicist to make this beautiful tableware. And I think, um, I think, you know diners really respond to that and that helps to then, you know, further this resurgence and appreciation for handmade work.

Penny Craswell:

I think the other trend as well is that crafts people are increasingly using technology in creative ways. So, the exhibition that we had at the Australian Design Centre during Sydney Craft Week, one of the two was, um, by biotextology by, um, Professor Melissa Tate. And essentially, her, she's an engineer and she's looking at, um, how cells in the body can actually inspire smart fabrics. So, I mean this is really cutting edge stuff. You know, um, uh, and I think it's happening all over the world that people are using 3D printing, they're using other technologies, they're, you know, science meets craft, craft meets science. And, um, that's a really exciting trend.

The fabrics that Melissa is, uh, developing respond to the movement in the body and they respond to, um, moisture and, um, those sorts of things to make them, um, even more comfortable, hard-wearing, and, uh, to give better performance.

Lisa Cahill:

I, I think that design is all around us. You know, it's, in, in everything that we use, um, and I think, there's so much potential for, um, design and making within appreciation by, uh, a, a broader, you know, larger number of people in what craft and design can actually do. And, I think it's the, really it's the fire of innovation and it's the, the, the thought that goes into, um, innovations that actually then, you know, solve bigger issues.

Designers and makers, and creative people are always thinking. You know, they're always asking questions. They're always thinking, 'how could we make things better?'. You know, how can we... and, and, that can go right from the very small, you know, individual, wanting to make something better for themselves. You know, maybe that is about their health and wanting to make in order to, to, um, wanting to make in order to make them feel better, you know, give them something to do, give them something to focus on and think about. Um, and it can also be at the other end of the spectrum.

You know, designers looking for ways in which we can better, um, solve issues such as homelessness or, you know, how can we make our hospitals

system better. How can we design our hospitals better for our, the patients. So, you know it goes from, right from the individual, individual health concerns right up to, you know, health concerns for the broader population. I think we've all got a social responsibility. And so I, I think that I think keenly. Creative people take on that, that's a social responsibility. Um, as something that, that they, that they find is really important.

We have another exhibition in the gallery at the moment. Um.

Penny Craswell: Mm-hmm (affirmative)- Go.

Lisa Cahill: ... has been on through Sydney Craft Week. And, that's an exhibition of work, um, by, I think, 40 jewellers, um, based in Eura-Carla, in Arnhem, north-east Arnhem land. And, uh, that project came about, um, through the work of Emily McCulloch Childs, who, who's, who's, um, under the banner of the Indigenous Jewellery project. Um, she took to jewellers to Eura-Carla to sit down and work with the artists and teach them how to, uh, teach them techniques for improving their jewellery practice. And then teach them new ways to express, uh, their, um, to, to express their art through, uh, through metal jewellery, which they hadn't used before, using resin, all sorts of things.

Um, but really simple stuff too. You know, just like, um, using the beautiful shells and shark cartilage and, um, seeds, um, that they string and, uh, instead of stringing them using fishing line they taught them to string them using silk thread. And, you know, and, and, uh, ways, and, and techniques to, to make the jewellery more robust. And, um, and, and then of course, of, of higher value too. So, um, it's a way of, um, creating skills in that community, bringing that community income through the sale of work and, um, and just enabling them to create, uh, the most beautiful work. That really resonates for all of us and, and continue to tell the stories of that community.

Penny Craswell: I think that exhibition was really, a really great example of community... bringing community together. And, um, it was really interesting. Emily McCulloch Childs was telling us that, um, that through the workshops where the makers were making jewellery and learning new skills they also, um, spoke about language and about, um, the words for jewellery in tradition, the traditional, um, Yolngu language there. And, um, that was really fascinating to me, to hear that, um, through those kinds of community opportunities the language is being learnt and strengthened and shared in such a fantastic way.

Lisa Cahill: Part of our responsibility at the Australian Design Centre, is to create opportunities and platforms for makers and designers.

We do that through exhibitions. Through events. So exhibitions of artists' work. Through events. Through providing retail opportunities. Through, um, helping creators to find markets for their work. Um, and, and, you know, we do that through, um, markets and other retail type events and, um, really just making connections between audiences and artists who... And then

creating that, um, environment and ecology and growing that ecology, I guess. And growing that market for the work. So I don't know that it's any, really any different to any other art market. I think, you know, at, and, also I think we're finding, um, makers and designers using technology to just really sell their work. I mean, there's so many digital opportunities through social media, through Instagram, to grow followings for their work. And then that leads to commercial opportunities.

Um, we're seeing platforms like, uh, that have been around for a little while now, but I think it's growing and continuing in popularity. The Etsy platform sample, which is a marketplace. And other sorts of online marketplaces. And just as it becomes easier for artists to equip themselves with digital, digital tools and platforms, their own websites, their own social media platforms. You know, they're creating markets for themselves.

Penny Craswell: Yeah, and I think...

Lisa Cahill: And, it, those platforms provide, um, ways for makers to find, um, a, to connect with other, other designers. Like Penny talked before about, um, brands, you know, finding makers and working with makers. You know, those platforms are providing incredible opportunities for linking and connecting different types of, um, different types of people wanting to grow their own practice and wanting to incorporate a handmade element into that.

Penny Craswell: Yeah. I think, uh, if you were a maker 20 years ago, you would sell your work in the market. And you'd probably get some cards made. And, and um, you know, hand them out. Um, but, you, your audience really would be so limited compared to now when you can be on Etsy, you can be on Instagram, you can have your own website. And that's all easily accessible. And I think that's bringing craft, crafts people together and, um, allowing them to, not only to connect and, um, learn from each other but simply to be inspired by each other. To see what your peers are doing and to, um, you know, bounce your ideas off their work. Um, and it's a really, um, rich community these days.

Lisa Cahill: We've been working on a project for a little while. It started off as the power of making. And it kind of, has now become, um, this opportunity to look inside the minds of makers. We're calling it 'obsessed, compelled to make'. It's 13 artists. Uh, it's a touring exhibition. It will start here at the Australian Design Center in February, 2018. And then we'll, we will travel around the country over the next, um, three years to 15 other venues. Um, and, the, the makers themselves are, we've selected these makers because they have really interesting stories to tell about what inspires them and why they make. Um, what their process is. You know, how, how they, um, think about their work. And, you know, what, what, what made them take up making as a professional practice.

And so we have, um, people who, uh, we have some furniture, people who work in furniture. Jon Goulder, Laura McCusker from Tasmania. Jon Goulder from South Australia. We have, um, ceramicists, um. Vipoo Srivilasa from

Victoria. And Honor Freeman from South Australia. Um, we have a weaver, Liz Williamson, who of course is, um, one of the Australian Design Centre's Living treasures, Master's of Australian Craft in the show. Um, we have, um, metal smith, Oliver Smith who I mentioned earlier. Um, he'll be creating an incredible new range of jewellery based on his, you know, really interesting, um, academic, um, research. We will, we have the work of the jumpy desert weaver, artist, uh, Tjunkaya Tapaya. Um, who is creating a woven self-portrait, um, for the show.

And, yeah it, it's really been a fascinating process to interview these makers in a different way. We're less interested in their work in this exhibition, perhaps. Although, you know, there will be some amazing work in the exhibition, we're more interested in, in, what, what compels them to make.

And so, there will be a series of video portraits which will sit alongside each of the works. And, um, they're being made at the moment. And, and a book as well, um, to accompany, the exhibition. So, we're really looking forward to that next year. We think it's a really powerful show. And, as Penny said earlier, you know, at the Australian Design Centre, we, um, look to, um, working with makers and designers and artists who, um, have been working at the top end of their practice right through to, um, those that are just starting out and emerging. So, it's a, a big responsibility, I think, to be able to showcase Australian craft and design in that context.

Outro

Head to our website visualarts.net.au for more information on Nava's advocacy and campaigns for improving the working environment for Australian artists and arts organizations.