

NAVA: in conversation, Episode 19

[Introduction Music]

Voiceover: 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.

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Laura Pike: For this episode we are in Bathurst at the Girrawaa Art Centre at the Bathurst Correctional Facility. My name is Laura, I'm from NAVA and I'm here with Tasman Munro, a social designer who has worked a number of creative projects in corrective services. The Arts Centre, established in 1998, is an initiative for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander inmates to develop their art practice and sell their work. Girrawaa also has a commercial framing unit, that's run through Corrective Services Industries, which provides vocational training. We speak to the centre manager Bryan Reiri about the role of art in Corrections and one of the current participants about his experience.

Tasman Munro: The artists in the program have exhibited in regional galleries in the area and continue to make work after their release. Interestingly, from the conversations, the art making was spoken about as more than just building technical art skills, but as providing the opportunity for cultural development, sharing and connection amongst inmates. It also provides a chance for the wider public to engage with, and celebrate the inmates experience and arts practice.

Laura Pike: The Art Centre is open to the public and works are available for purchase, you can find more information via the Corrections website.

[Music]

Bryan Reiri: So I've been here since, pretty much 2000, and during that time I've seen a lot of the guys come and go but during that time we have also had a lot of successes, you know, working with the guys with their art programs and we've run various art programs over the years. We did an art program at NSW State Parliament and we had about 40 pictures, so we had quite a successful exhibition. The Archibald's always come through here at some stage and always great to go and have a look at. One year we had the opportunity to co exhibit with the Archibald and at opening night there was a lot of people in Bathurst Regional Gallery, and we got a mention alongside top artists, you know so, we got a lot of exposure and sales, you know, the guys were happy to sell some of their art there, you know so...

Laura Pike: Thinking about those two different approaches to art being next to each other in the same place.

Bryan Reiri: Yeah I know, we were really, really fortunate to be able to, you know, co exhibit with them and receive that exposure as well.

Laura Pike: Yeah totally.

Bryan Reiri: And the guys got to sell most of their art, about 80 percent of the artwork sold.

[Music]

Bryan Reiri: But the guys that get to come here, they are minimum security, we are on the outside of the jail, of Bathurst jail. We're here from, I'd say about half past eight to about two o'clock in the afternoon. And while they are here the guys get to, you know, paint towards, whether big contract stuff or their own portfolios.

Laura Pike: Had you been an artist before, or how do you...?

Bryan Reiri: No, no, I can't sing, I can't play an instrument, can't draw, but I have really good ideas. You like if I see something and I know that these guys will be able to replicate it, whether it is on stone, wood, canvas, glass, I give them the opportunity to do that. We usually get TAFE teachers in to whether it's glass, or art, just drawing or painting or something like that. So, you know we get to work with the mediums so the guys get a varied, a varied...

Laura Pike: Skills.

Bryan Reiri: Skills yeah, to different.

Laura Pike: Why do you think programs like this, or cultural centres, or art centres are important part of Corrections?

Bryan Reiri: You know, I've been in this unit for 17 years, now over that time, you know, the guys that come here, some of them, you know, have never ever picked up a paint brush before, but they have this, you know, in built sort of cultural streak in them, not streak, but as an artist, a natural artist streak. Whether it's playing footy or sitting down and doing art, it's just natural for them and as you look around and see the styles and the quality of the work that's done here. I think, you know, in the correctional environment I think it's a, probably escape's a bad word but, you know, it's somewhere for them to come and, you know, get away from the jail scene and they are quite relaxed up here, you know, it's a relaxed environment, you know, we don't paint to some timeline, some ridiculous time line, so the boys get a lot of freedom, but when we do have contract stuff, you know like, the boys are ready to step in and fill the gap. You know I think they get a lot of self satisfaction from seeing completed artworks especially if its framed, if it is on glass you know, whether screen printing, you know, something like that, they get a real sense of ownership value out of it. You know I encourage the guys to stay in contact with me, you know, they ring the unit and we just have a chat, you know catch up, I'm interested in what they are doing. Given their lack of education I guess, you know there's not a lot of opportunities for them, you know, they usually go back to smaller communities and it's tough for them to get jobs. I guess it's easy for them to just stay on the dole and go fishing rather than, you know, look for something a little bit better or more stable, but you know I guess they get some value out of, you know, connecting with their own culture, they may not do it outside, but you know, they know it's part of them when they come here.

[Music]

Bryan Reiri: And then out here in the main work area is where the guys do all of their portfolio stuff, they work towards painting so when they get out they actually take the product with them. We actually frame, they get an opportunity to frame their stuff as well. We also have pen sets, we have miniature weapons which are framed, which are just miniatures of bigger boomerangs, we have coasters, and plus we have our varying sizes of artwork that we do to order as well. And we do a lot of contract stuff for a wholesaler in Sydney who delivers to the likes of International Airport and some of our product, which is a lot of this stuff, we buy the little artefacts in, and the boys paint it, and then the boys get to frame it as well, so you know that's from scratch. The boys have fun doing this.

Laura Pike: And how does the, kind of, skills development work? You said that you bring in people TAFE and is that kind of formal training, or you do workshops?

Bryan Reiri: Yeah, we run Certificate courses, Aboriginal Art, we have TAFE come in. Actually, she's in now but she's working on the inside of the jail. Usually she would come here, and we would work on a program for 10 weeks up until the end of Christmas, as we are nearing Christmas now. She would work on some sort of specific art program for the boys and it goes towards a Certificate program for them, whether its glass or wood or picture framing, you know, it's all those skills sets that they would not normally have.

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Tasman Munro: Do you know how the centre started, how it came to exist and who designed it?

Bryan Reiri: Well I think from the Royal Wood Commission into, investigations into black deaths in custody, it came about that there should be cultural designated centre and Bathurst was chosen as it because it was the furthest west. The building was actually designed in the shape of a goanna which is the Girrawaa, meaning a long tailed goanna or lizard, and an inmate was working here at the time, well actually before it was built, was asked to do some drawings and they went to an architect and they sketched the building, you know, a year later it was up. I think, you know, the Department has made a genuine effort to provide a centre like this. There's probably another centre in Goulburn which is not as, you know, open and easy access to a lot of things, like people can come out from the public, but in Goulburn it's quite confined. But you know, the guys get, you know, a lot satisfaction of what they do.

Laura Pike: Yeah, do you think it has an impact on recidivism?

Bryan Reiri: Does it have an impact? You know over the years I'd like to say yes, but you know, I've seen a lot of these guys, and a lot of them are kids basically. They come in between 25 and 35, so they are young, and they start to settle down afterwards, but you know, a lot of them seem to get in that sort of rut, so and it's the only thing they know, whether its living on the dole, or not having a job, or relationships, you know that sort of thing, so you know I've seen it over the years and I don't know what the solution is, but they just keep coming back.

Laura Pike: It's just one part of the solution I guess. So there is a similar program in Goulburn, do you think that programs or centres like this should kind of be in all jails?

Bryan Reiri: I think it would be a help, you know, if each centre had sort of had a cultural centre where the guys could you know, somewhere they could go. But you know if we carry on doing what we are doing I think we just filling a vital role for the guys to, you know, just to connect with their art basically, their culture.

Laura Pike: Yeah.

Bryan Reiri: And I think that's enough.

Laura Pike: I mean its everything that you kind of don't imagine prison to be, we are kind of, it's outside, there's a beautiful view, all the doors are open, everyone is kind of free to walk around, you cook food together, so it's kind of, yeah, challenging all of those ideas that you have of inmates.

Bryan Reiri: You know I think I have the best job in the jail, where we come, and we have a good time, the guys enjoy being here, they look forward to coming. They get a little bit disappointed when I have days off. So they can't, because then they're stuck inside the jail, so they look forward to coming here and getting away from that institutional vibe.

[Music]

Inmate: I'm in the Correctional Centre in Bathurst jail, here we do a lot of Aboriginal culture. I've been here for six months this time and Bryan's got me, we've got a few of the boys that

are doing some Aboriginal art and I frame all their artwork. Cut the frames, glass, put in perspective where it's supposed to go to and then send them off.

Laura Pike: Did you learn a lot of the skills here, or you had them before you came?

Inmate: The only thing that I've learn here with Bryan working is making the frames, and that's a great big help to this culture. I know a lot about Aboriginal art, I've done a lot of it myself and I still do it at home every now and then when I feel like it. But here is easy for me to just ask the boys about how they are coping with the work, any hard parts about it, you just have a look at some of the designs, they are sort of cross culture some of the designs that they do. It's easier, they enjoy it, mind simulating, it takes bit of stress away from you. Been getting tired of the jail anyway. Some of the boys here come from Bourke, some come from Nowra, some come from, most of the boys are in the Wiradjuri mob, I originally come from Kamilaroi people, that's way out west from here, and you get some blokes from the city that come out. And we got rid of, two or three went home about a month ago. They are all cultures in here really, you get some blokes that doing, eastern mobs are doing sea perspective of what they do with their art and we do ours where we come from, it's good. The boys used to like to cross culture, it's good yeah. Where I come from, the first week in May, or April - May, that's when they lay emu eggs and there's 13 foul eggs and one emu egg, baker's dozen they call it, I've carved them, I've painted on them, it's just, they can't get them here, they have to go way out west to get them. There's a jail out at Brewarrina they call it Yetta, it's a big property and that's where a lot the boys do it out there, that's where we get the digeridoos from, out there, we enjoy it.

Tasman Munro: So how does it actually work on a day to day basis, is it mostly teaching workshops or is it all more self driven?

Inmate: No, it's more self driven really, if the boys want to come out here, they come out here but they've got to get a Section 6.2 done. When they come up here they, just say they want to get 10 boomerangs done and the boys look at what different patterns they are going to put on them, and they can do five in one day, some of the boys can do 10 in one day and they all just combine together three or four and it will be all done, and then all we have to do is wait for them to dry and make the frames the next day and get them sent off. There's some framed work in there look, mad hey?

Laura Pike: Yeah the work's beautiful.

[Music]

Laura Pike: And how does the payment system work?

Inmate: We get paid through the jail, it all depends on what you are on, some of the boys get paid when they start here its 38 bucks off the bat. That's a good wage being in jail. As you go along you might get a bonus, top it up to about \$45 a week and that's a good wage. Some of the boys that are inside only get \$15.70 I think it is, just sitting inside the jail. Some of the boys on grounds maintenance get \$17.50 a week, they do all the lawns and all the other gardens. So I reckon this is the best part of the jail, I reckon. We get a lot of the officers that come up and they want things done to. And Bryan, certain size frame or whatever, changes then so much and it's good, the boys enjoy it.

[Music]

Inmate: The crime you committed, when you are inside, you don't really think about it. Until you come outside the jail, and you work here at the cultural centre and it makes you think, and you see people coming in from the outside, and they want this or they want that, or I want this done, I want that done, and you think "why the fucking hell did I fuck up with the law?" I could be outside doing this of my own free will. And that's what a lot of the boys think

about, there's a lot of the paintings in there that lot of the buys have done and left behind here, and they just take the ones they want to take home with them, and when people come it's good to sit and have a yarn to them and explain to them what goes on with it.

Laura Pike: Do you think when you leave here, or have you seen it with other inmates, that they keep going with their art after they leave?

Inmate: Well me being the delegate one I used to say to them; when you get out why don't you stop doing yourself with the drugs and alcohol and all this, because I went through the same process, now I'm getting old it makes me realise I shouldn't have done it all. When you think back and you say to a lot of the boys why can't you keep going with your culture, you know, keep painting or doing whatever you want to do. I'd say 35 percent of the blokes I've ask four years they've stayed doing artwork and some of them will still sell it. There's a place in Orange, can't remember the name of the place, there's a place somewhere in Bathurst too and a place in Lithgow, have Aboriginal culture, you know, it's good, and it sort of gives them more stability in life, more stable. Instead of worrying about going and doing this, or going and doing that, but yeah they enjoy it more.

Tasman Munro: Do you think this program sort of helped in any way to build that confidence to make them stick at it?

Inmate: Yeah it does, because Bryan says to them do what you want to do, do your artwork, and they do their own thing, no one torments them, no one says nothing at all. When it comes to the last week of their sentence, that's when I start having a yarn to them saying don't do this, you don't need to keep doing this and keep doing that. And they say "oh yeah" and this and that and they thank Bryan at the end of it. I've seen it often enough working in this culture centre. I think it puts a high on Bryan too I think, I think he misses a few of the boys from here too when they go.

Laura Pike: Yeah I bet.

Inmate: He's an easy going person Bryan, he likes to have a lot of the boys up here too and we joke around with him a lot and he's pretty level, he's even, you couldn't get a better officer than him in the jail. He tells us where we stand, what we have to do right, and what not to do, and we just abide by the rules so we're right.

[Music]

Inmate: It takes a lot of stress away from being inside and the fact that you are locked in a jail, cause you've got to have a Section 6.2 to walk outside of a jail, and I get Section 6.2 to work off complex, I can go anywhere around the perimeter like another town out here at Blaney or whatever. The boys like to come up here to get away from the inside of the jail, take them away from the stress and do their culture work that they have to do, and they like it. The worst part about it when they know they've got to go back, that's when the level comes back into it, they feel depressed about going back inside. I don't because I live over at the Honner House and we only get locked in the perimeter, that's it. Not like the boys inside that get locked in the cells, and the boys take some of the paint brushes and the paints back from here, and canvas, and they do their work in their cells, they get locked down a terrible lot here, got to do something to occupy your mind.

Laura Pike: How important do you think cultural centres are in...?

Inmate: In the system there should be more cultural centres, like this here at Girrawaa, it's the only one that I know of that's in the system. There should be one in Lithgow, but it's not inside with education, you can only do so much, one up in Kempsey, that would be another good one too, in Kempsey to have one of these here up there. It's like bringing them together with their culture and the artwork and see how they develop with it, and this is not right and that's not right you know, blokes might make mistakes, and just have a yarn. They open up more cultural centres like this here they could do a whole lot more. In Brewarrina, like I was

saying, they collect their own emu eggs and their own didgeridoos, make their own spears and their own boomerangs, and if you put one of these out at Yetta, you would be surprised how many people would go to it, out in the western region, so yeah it would do alright I reckon.

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Voice over: 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 organisations.