

NAVA: in conversation, Episode 20

[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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Pippa Dickson: I'm Pippa Dickson I'm the Chair of Design Tasmania and I'm based here in Hobart, although Launceston is the hub of Design Tasmania. We're not necessary an advocacy organisation as such, Design Tasmania, we're not a membership based organisation either. But our vision is to, is that design makes a difference to individuals, communities and enterprises really our mission is to promote the reputation and profile of Tasmanian design and designers nationally and internationally. We do that through a number of different avenues, we have an exhibition facility in Launceston and also retail hub there too. Which means that we have the capacity to show new work, to tour exhibitions, bring exhibitions in and also develop what we have, very unique to Design Tasmania, is Wood Design Collection, our Tasmanian Wood Design Collection, that's over 70 pieces that's been acquired over more than 25 years. So it's fairly comprehensive I guess across exhibition, collection and retail. Tasmania has been leading in design for a long time so I wouldn't say that necessarily it's a new thing. There's been some ebbs and flows I think with all trajectories and in all areas, you know not just the creative arts and craft, design sectors but all sectors that happens, it's natural attrition and growth. So I moved to Tasmania more than 20 years ago to study design, because at the time it was one of the best art schools in Australia to offer a design course, and then I stayed and continued on and completed a PhD at the University of Tasmania here and at that time it was the foremost location apart from possibly Canberra to be studying in this discipline. So what's I guess a little bit concerning now is that we're seeing a flow in the opposite direction with courses and educational attainments changing and the disciplines that being offered declining I guess in terms of craft and design practice. I think it's been unique for me personally because I did study design in what is a fine arts school so I've never really, sort of I guess, differentiated between a craft, a design and a fine art practice. I have a PhD in fine arts yet I'm a designer. So I think it's really critical because more and more we're collaborating, it's cross disciplinary practice. So I think one of the things that categorises design here because we don't have, we do have some industry for manufacture of product and it's starting to grow a little bit, but it seems to have been the size and scale of an industry here has meant that practice is very one off and customised rather than mass produced so that's probably an identifying factor about design in Tasmania. And our living treasures here, you know your Lola Greeno's, Kevin Perkins', there's Les Blakebrough, he's moved away mostly now, but people who established their practices here were living here because access to materials was a core part of their practice, so the fine timbers, specialised timbers and mariner shells for people like Lola, it's a big part of what draws them and keeps them here. The culture of design and how it's developing here, I think it's an ongoing process. I can't say that necessarily there has been a major shift in the last 10 years, but what we are doing, and I guess in relationship to place, we're capitalising on that significantly. So in the early 2000s I started a series of design retreats and camps in remote areas in Tasmania and that lasted for about six years, that then no longer happened and we are revitalising that at the moment, because we can see that that is a core

attribute and a kind of difference for Tasmania, that we have access to remote places much more readily and that acknowledgement that they are core to practice and thinking, and really I think by bringing people into contact with these very raw, remote, sometimes wilderness sometimes not areas we can activate much more intense conversation and dialogue which, you know, inspires new work. Brodie Neil is a great example of that recently, he's a Tasmanian designer, he went here to the to the Tasmanian Art School, we studied together, he now has an international career based in London and represented Australia at the London Biennale, first design biennale last year, and that work was conceived out a Burnie Island Design Camp last year which was a partnership with the NGV. So I think that also a really important part is how we look to the landscape in Australia and other organisations. We're not reinventing the wheel but collaborating and partnering to create some inspiring new programs and directions.

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Pippa Dickson: The position of design within the visual arts, craft sectors is critical, as I previously said, having come from training within an arts school I've never seen a clear differentiation between these boundaries. In other countries there are, I mean I've just come back from South Korea where craft is seen as very much a particular style of practice, a very traditional craft style of practice but I don't see it like that and you know, some people do and some people don't. There is definitely an issue I think in regard to how government agencies view design within a fine art or an art remit, and you know it's very difficult for designers who want to create new work and be risky in much the same way that visual artists or other artists want to take risks, to get the support and the funding required to do that because there is a prejudice that the work is commercially focused. So there's no difference in my opinion at all towards, you know, an individual trying to take a risk and do something new in any particular practice. Why do these differentiations persist? We should ask that of anything. Why are we prejudiced against anything? Why do we like categories? Why do we put people in a particular sexual orientation? Or you know, gender orientation, or whatever it might be. I think we like to categorise things because it makes bureaucracy much easier to be able to tick a box. I just think we have to work harder to be open minded and inclusive and it's a challenge ourselves, to reconsider why we are doing... talking recently about the Women in Design program that we run as a core part of our program at Design Tas, we've run it consecutively three years in a row now, it's very popular, it sells out, it's very intimate, we only have women speakers and contributors but its open to anyone. Do men come? No. Why? Because they see 'women in design', they think that they are excluded from it. We do that because it's a male dominated sector and it's time that women felt confident to share and to talk about their practices in a safe environment and able to do that, so it's a nurturing type thing. People come away transformed and reinvigorated and inspired and connected in different ways nationally, you know, with other people practicing and you have to keep pushing and when the men say you're prejudicing against men you have to say 'Are you serious? Are you actually serious?' That's how you create change. The design sector I think yeah male dominated as we said, probably white as you say, but I think you know we have to do a lot to, again, work at breaking down those barriers and it's just cultural change and I think it's exciting, it's difficult and challenging and you know you get push back from different sectors, but everyone is I think is looking at the same outcome which is greater inclusivity and better work, we wouldn't be doing any of this if we weren't interested in creating better work.

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Pippa Dickson: I think there just needs to be a lot more policy in regard to arts and creativity full stop in this country and it needs to start with government leadership on increasing

peoples understanding, general public understanding of what the role of arts and creativity is, and increasing the vocabulary for it, so starting in the early years in education, right through so that we can change the value that people attribute to arts and creativity full stop. So do I think there needs to be policy change for design? Well of course, but that's just within the umbrella of all of the other arts, and cultural activity too, not just creative activity but cultural activity in this country. Am I optimistic about change? I'm generally pretty optimistic person but I'm also pretty cynical about things because you know we're working our whole lives to create change and its slow. But I'm seeing it, you know like I'm seeing it, I think that and organisation like Design Tasmania for instance turned 40 last year, we're still going, there is growth actually I'm interested, as our founder as Garry Cleveland is, in the differentiation between progress and growth. Actually, I would say I'm much more interested in progress rather than growth necessarily. Do I think we need more staff, do I think we need more resources? Yes, that would be really nice, but I'm more interested in how we progress as an organisation in terms of our ideas, our community, our audience, how we're achieving what we are doing, how we're building more love for design in Tasmania and nationally. Design and social change are inextricably linked I think, our CEO Karina Clarke she's amazing thinker and doer, our last Women in Design was centred around these principles of design and social change and of course being women in design I think there is really interesting question about whether women are more interested in these topics too as a sort of cultural question. So design for social change, I think we have to ask ourselves about why we do something. People do things for different motivations. I know it's not a popular term 'art for art's sake' but I also believe in that. I think we should have the freedom and capacity to create what we want because we have an innate drive or passion to do so without having to articulate the need for something. What's wrong with the desire and the want as being a need. I'm really interested in these sort of classifications too. But yeah, social change, if you want to have a real purpose in life, if you want to create a better community around you. I've always said to people that my role in creating, or sorry, contributing to arts and design thinking and practices and organisations in my voluntary capacities is because I am innately selfish. You know, I want to improve the place in which I live in and if I can contribute to that in a pro bono way through time and money then I'll do that. So yes, I think social change is important if we want to be social beings and proactive in the community.

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Pippa Dickson: There's so much great work going on everywhere around the world. I think I'm terribly inspired by other organisations in Australia. I think the Australia Design Centre in Sydney are doing great work with the recent Craft Week, Month? Week? and you know the JamFactory continue to inspire because they offer real training and practical experiences for designers. We had an exhibition at Design Tasmania early this year which was very interesting because it was really outside the box of what we would normally do. We took the whole Wood Design Collection out which was a pretty unpopular thing to do because it's a reason for visiting. It's the first time it's ever happened, the Wood Design Collection went AWOL it was actually in another beautiful location at Clarendon Vale Historic Trust building which looked amazing as well, but we invited Kirsha Kaechele, David Walsh's wife, to have a solo exhibition and we thought that would be fairly contained, we had an idea, she curates and commissions a lot of crafts people and designers to create cutlery and plates and tables and environments, really immersive environments, for some quite spectacular events at MONA which of course only a very small percentage of people get to see. So I wanted to, sort of, reveal that to a bigger audience, to showcase her, because often she's not recognised for her creative artistic capabilities and reputation which is international as well. So we invited Kirsha and she is an incredibly expansive thinker, remarkably expansive thinker, so what we thought would happen was shot out of the water within about 30 seconds and she had

conceived this whole other exhibition which included the fabrication of whole outdoor kitchen which was designed and made with her input with Pete Mattila a blacksmith here who's incredibly skilled, incredible maker, and there was a series of lunches which were curated. Ok so it expands, expands, expands, expands on an on, but then it was a partnership with the local high school, Newstead High School which have a lot of students at risk, there was a big picture school initiative as well, TAFE Tasmania came on board. So suddenly this little exhibition of Kirsha's commissioned things became an immersive environment that was participatory. So every Friday they hosted lunches which were a performance, the students wore costumes, they designed their own performance, the chefs from MONA came to Launceston and worked with the Drysdale TAFE students. There was an exhibition inside which was completely overtook the gallery spaces, all five gallery spaces had one long table weaving within them, coloured salt and coloured ceramics and everything, you know incredible, really beautiful project. But the outcomes for that, I mean it was visually beautiful, but the outcomes were unanticipated in the way that it changed some of those people's lives, they were transformational experiences of young people dressing up, performing, living this immersive environment, living and breathing it, and Kirsha's motto is 'life is art' it's her Foundation name and it was embodied in that exhibition. So that then inspired us an entity, Design Tasmania, to carry forward some of those elements into our everyday thinking too because they were so engaged by and taken up by the community up in Launceston and further afield in Tasmania. So we recently received a donation from Claudio Alcorso Foundation to commission our own kitchen which Kirsha is going to work with us on, on designing as well, so one that we can keep up there. So the outcomes of those sort of things are fabulous so that's going to improve our capacity to reach the community because we can continue to have food and drink experiences which I think everyone would agree become core to our ability to connect with others, to break bread so to speak. You know to drink the wine and to share in that environment, so I've been really inspired that this year and really proud to have been within this organisation at this time that these sort of critical changes are happening but you know that's just one, and we were very lucky because MONA presented and supported that, there was no way as a small entity we could have done that on our own. But everyday there are interesting exhibitions by Tasmanian designers and we tour shows from interstate as well, so yeah, lots of very interesting things happening. At Design Tasmania we're really interested in creating professional opportunities for Tasmanian designers and enhancing their ability to make a livelihood from their practice and we don't necessarily say you have to be a product designer or, you know, it's about industry per se, it's about a multitude of different opportunities for people to make a living. The shop retail space is integral to that, so the commissioning of new product, the selling of, you know, a range of things, putting that alongside national and internationally wares is important, commissioning new pieces for the Tasmania Wood Design Collection, you know which is the purchasing of people's work which is very important, but more than that, you know, it's important to pay people, we talk about this all the time, but at the same time it's also important to promote in the right way, to the right audience, and to grow their market, so we're interested in that nationally and internationally. In the past there have been international tours of the Wood Design Collection and presentation of it in different modalities that are outside a gallery, that might be corporate foyers or what have you, so just putting it in places were places where people are going to see it, engage with the work and then bring curators down and other thinkers and doers and writers, photographers, Design Island used to bring down journalists from interstate who are freelance journalists to write and drip stories all year long in mainstream media outlets just from one week or weekend in Tasmania. So you have to think about those relationships, where they exist and how we can promote Tasmanian design, yeah, and so that's core to what we do.

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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.