

NAVA: in conversation, Episode 24

[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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Esther Anatolitis: Hi, this is Esther Anatolitis, I'm the Executive Director of NAVA and as part of our In Conversation series, today we get to have a nice, long conversation with Erica Green from the Adelaide Biennial. Erica, hi and thank you for being here

Erica Green: Hi Esther, it's lovely to get to chat today.

Esther Anatolitis: Well the Biennial has been open for a while now, and like many, or I think, many of our listeners haven't had the chance to visit yet and I will be there soon and I'm really looking forward to it. So, tell us first of all, how is Adelaide responding, how is the city, how are the people feeling about this year's Biennial?

Erica Green: I think there's been a terrific response to the Adelaide Biennial, it is certainly a key feature in Adelaide and it generates a huge amount of publicity both locally and nationally, and the Biennial coincides with the Adelaide Festival, it opens on the 3rd March which was the first Friday of the Adelaide Festival, and indeed the Adelaide Festival Artistic Directors Rachel Healy and Neil Armfield spoke at the launch of the Biennial. And of course as you know the Adelaide Festival is a huge cultural event in Adelaide and it's wonderful that the Biennial can continue beyond the Adelaide Festival.

Esther Anatolitis: It is such a massive time, it's something that Adelaide so proudly opened itself up to and welcomed people from around Australia and from around the world, showcases artists and artistic performances, exhibitions, experiences, in so many different ways. And I guess the Biennial is unique in Australia but also in that Adelaide context, in that internationally welcoming context, in being a Biennial of Australian art, tell us how important it is to be able to identify those artists in Australia at any given time, whose voices and whose work we need to see in such a showcase I guess of Australian art, as the Adelaide Biennial's focus.

Erica Green: The Biennial is one of the key national events that does profile as you said, Australian art. And I think one of the really good aspects of the Biennial is that it is now presented just before the Sydney Biennale and a consequence of that is that there are a number of international visitors who come to Australia and they can then see the international Sydney Biennale and then fly down to Adelaide for a day and have a look at the Adelaide Biennial which is a focus on Australian Art and artists. And at the moment the Adelaide Biennial along with The National are the only sort of two major exhibitions that really look at what is happening in Australian contemporary art practice, now, in a very

ambitious way. And I think that's extremely important to provide showcases of what is happening in contemporary art practice at any particular place and time. And that was certainly something I was very focused on in the development of the Adelaide Biennial, was looking at those ideas of recognising that the Adelaide Biennial is presented in Adelaide, at the particular place that's Adelaide and at a particular time, and also the fact that the Biennial is presented as part of the Adelaide Festival.

Esther Anatolitis: It's absolutely critical as you say, that we take these moments, not just these reflective moments but these big rigorous opportunities to reflect on Australian art now, on artists now, and what artists are thinking and doing and making as individuals and then the ways we might characterise Australian art at the moment. And in titling the Biennial *Divided Worlds*, you've already given a bit of an in, to really think about a proposition I guess that artists are opposing. In framing that, tell us a bit about, I guess, about rigour, that focus on how you even start to approach what you want to say as the Artistic Director about the state of the arts right now?

Erica Green: Look, that's a very good question and I think it's a key challenge for anyone really approaching an Adelaide Biennial, I guess there's two parts to that. One, is really looking at the idea of or perhaps shaping a thematic for the Biennial and that sort of brings into play, are you going to be commenting on what is happening in contemporary art practice today? And I think it's extremely important both for artists and participating in a big exhibition like an Adelaide Biennial is hugely important to artists in terms of their career and their practice. And you know, it does represent an important time in their practice and as a time when artists, and I know this very particularly for the Adelaide Biennial is that many of the artists who are invited to participate in the Biennial will see this as a huge opportunity for me and my practice, and I'm just going to put everything into the work that I'm making for the Biennial. Other comments were, you know, that, this kind of opportunity represents sort of the culmination of the last 10, 20, 30 years of my practice and I want to make a really strong statement about that. So, yes, the Biennial is hugely important, and I think you are very conscious of looking at all of those sorts of ideas in terms of how you frame the Biennial and what you say about contemporary art today.

Esther Anatolitis: That brings out that twin commitment, exactly as the way you just put that, the way artists pride the importance, the opportunity, there's that sense in your role of what you're offering and the commitment that is made to honour the importance that each artist places on that. That, you know, is reflecting on artists as individuals and what they are going to offer and then zooming out to the exhibition as a whole, or the Biennial as a whole, it's a big challenge I think, it's a tantalising challenge for any Artistic Director.

Erica Green: Look, absolutely. It's very daunting, so you do sort of feel the weight and the responsibility upon you. And also, it's not only a key event for the artists and curator obviously, it's also important for the participating venues. And for the 2018's Biennial there was the Art Gallery of South Australia of course which, hosts the Biennial, as well there are a number of presenting partners, the JamFactory, Samstag Museum of Art, and also the Adelaide Botanic Garden. And in 2018, for the first time, we partnered with the Mercury Cinema to present a film program that was drawn on films that had influenced participating artists in their practice and also played on the ideas around the exhibition around the idea of divided worlds. The other thing, I should perhaps mention too, that is a huge consideration too, is the other world of the visitors that come to the exhibition and really looking at making the Biennial something that people coming to the exhibition, will find engaging and will say something to them about contemporary art and furthermore, one of my objectives was to give

everyone who came to the Biennial something that would engage them, be them a young person, an old person, a seasoned art veteran or someone who is having their first encounter with contemporary visual art.

Esther Anatolitis: And that's one of the extraordinary things about a festival in general but in particular a Biennial, that there are so many people making that encounter for the first time, possibly, hopefully visiting Adelaide for the first time. But also, I think this is one of the thrilling things about a Biennial is that you create a first-time experience for people who've lived in Adelaide for a long, long time so all the venues you've just described, they're extraordinary opportunities to reframe that sense of place, that sense of traversing through a city and that sense of what an institution makes possible. Whether it's a museum or a garden, the Santos Museum of Economic Botany, the whole range of places. I imagine that must have informed your thinking in some really exciting ways

Erica Green: Oh, it is, and you know, I think all the participants in the Biennial were all putting their best foot forward. And you know, Adelaide is an ideal city for a multivenue art exhibition. It's flat for a start.

Esther Anatolitis: You can get on your bike!

Erica Green: Yes, very easy to ride a bike, all the streets go north/ south or east/ west so it's very easy to navigate. And it wasn't quite ready for the 2018 Adelaide Festival, but it should be up and running for the next festival, because the tram will be running the full length of North Terrace which means you can jump on the tram and Samstag and then hop off at the Art Gallery of South Australia which is almost like the heart for the exhibition and then continue down to the east end of North Terrace which is the Adelaide Botanic Gardens. So, you know, in terms of a multivenue art exhibition it's very, very easy to sort of navigate and the geography actually connects all the different partners in a very sort of close way. And that makes it quite easy to curate an exhibition for a big biennial exhibition that's across a number of venues. And I think that's an advantage over say, Sydney where it's much more hilly. And I suppose the other thing that's worth noting with the Adelaide Biennial, and particularly at this point in time, is that the Art Gallery of South Australia is embarking on a new Adelaide contemporary museum to be built, and making sure that the visual arts have a high profile at this time and particularly with the change of government here, that's extremely important for contemporary art practice here in Adelaide. I think, to really position the visual arts as a very, very strong and dynamic cultural contributor to the fabric of Adelaide and South Australia

Esther Anatolitis: That's really going to shift the conversation and have some of these conversations be more here, and I think that's one of the great things about the festival's focus in Adelaide has done has to stimulate so much great artistic thinking and collaboration with audiences in mind but to really stretch that out in ways well beyond that festival time. Which kind of, brings into other ways of thinking about divided worlds, as you've framed this as troubled times, as the ways in which we can experience an alternative dimension. And then there's also divisions in space and time, the ways that you can get around Adelaide so much easier than Sydney or many other cities, is a great way to experience a biennial. And then it also, gives you perhaps a very different sense of Adelaide during a festival period and then not, and that kind of division. How conscious are you of your curatorial decisions around I guess work and venues and audience trajectories are going to rethink the way people think about their city or the old city? A kind of remaking of Adelaide as a city.

Erica Green: I was also very conscious of that and I know that was probably one of the starting points for the Biennial, I didn't really start off with the thematic of the exhibition. My starting point really was to start thinking about artists I thought were saying something about the times that we live in and then really starting a conversation with those artists about ideas around place and history, which are very common refrains in our milieu. And from that, the discussion with the artists sort of grew and developed and that led to ideas of inviting other artists, and then really the way the Biennial came about was through the discussions with artists and I suppose those ideas and discussions began to coalesce so all the ideas for the exhibition around that idea of divided worlds and what that might mean. And, I think in terms of place that was something very important, I was very conscious that Adelaide is not located on the east coast. If you sort of think about where Adelaide is positioned within the world it's sort of south down in Australia but it's west of the south and you know, I guess there is that separation between a lot of art activity in the east coast and then if you look over in the northern hemisphere as well. So, there is that degree of separation, but I think particularly ideas around place was looking at the venues and that was something I really wanted to draw out in some of the artist selections for the Biennial. For example, The JamFactory has made a huge contribution to the development of craft practice here in Adelaide, but nationally and I think the craft practitioners that are here based in Adelaide at the moment, are looking back in history and have been extremely influential, for example, quite a number of craft based practitioners here in Adelaide exhibit regularly overseas, they're represented by Adrian Sassoon and that is really as a consequence or can be traced back to the fact that there has been a very long and sustained investment made in The JamFactory going on almost 50 years now. And so, I wanted to reflect that quality or that aspect of what that venue was about in the selection and placement of artists so that's why the South Australian artist Kirsten Coelho has got a major installation in The JamFactory art gallery one. In the same way, the Art Gallery of South Australia, I think, has one of the finest collections of art. It really is one of the most beautiful collections here in Australia, particularly colonial Australian art and that was sort of part of my thinking was selecting Patrick Powell who draws from that collection or the various art galleries collection is drawn from their Asian collection, the colonial collections, the contemporary collections to produce this marvellous work called *The Point of Everything* where he's drawn works from the collection that relate to the ideas around the point, pointing, a vanishing point and just a wonderful play on different points of view and all of those sorts of ideas are embedded in his work using works he has selected from AGSA's collection. And in the same way the Adelaide Botanic Gardens, the Gardens have actually never commissioned an artist to actually work in the physical space of the garden. So, we invited Tamara Dean whose work is on the cover the Biennial catalogue to undertake a photo essay over the various seasons of the gallery to develop her work for the Biennial. Which she's exhibited down at the Museum of Economics Botany. And in the same way the Samsteg Museum of Art has had a very strong tradition of presenting very cutting edge, new media work. And work that is sort of edgy with a lot of idea about current society. So, at Samsteg we have a wonderful video work by Angelica Mesiti called *Mother Tongue* and a new work by the indigenous artist Douglas Watkins called *A Thin Black Line* and a slightly older work by Amos Gebhardt called *The Lovers* which compliments a new work he did called *Evanescence* that's at the Art Gallery of South Australia.

Esther Anatolitis: That's just tremendous, just the way you've put all of that up. I'm just astounded at I guess the ambition that every artist has been invited to draw upon and to see Kirsten Coelho's work at Jam Factory, there is just a sense of beauty and sensitivity to her work and to see it at that scale of ambition is going to be really important that quiet still ceramic compared to the world that you inhabit when you step into a Patrick Powell

experience, which is just absolutely stunning. And then you mentioned Angelica Mesiti's work and that got me to thinking about, I guess the place of women and established female artists in Australia and also Patricia Piccinini with her work at the AGSA which I'm also just intrigued to see of course. Patricia also at the moment also has a big follow up show at OAGOMA in Brisbane. But the range of her work that we would not have had the chance to see together, but work at scale and also work that is smaller, more curious, the way it shifts the way we see our bodies and experience her work. And of course Angelica who will represent Australia at Venice next year, which I think will be really exciting. And I'm reminded, something that I had the good fortune of being at an event at the VCA a couple of weeks ago that Patricia co-convoked and it was really all about the state of the arts and the state of practice and sustainability and what makes practice sustainable, what makes artists resilient? And she gave an extraordinary account of I guess her trajectory from collaborating and starting artist run spaces and to sit in the space really quietly and wondering why no one came as they're building up and investing and investing that time and creating work with others and creating work herself. To be at the point now, where she feels like having achieved a blockbuster show at one of the state galleries, she feels excited but also there's a pessimism that being a female artist within Australia, she simply won't secure another opportunity like Adelaide Biennial or like GOMA for probably 10 years and looking at Angelica and sort of wondering now, what comes next? And if we reflect on divided worlds and the way we consider the gender disparities in the way artists of different genders presented in different exhibitions and festivals and represented in collections, but what are your thoughts in what is changing for female identifying and gender queer artists can expect in terms of how those opportunities are going to be transformed and I guess also your role in championing a great diversity of artists through divided worlds.

Erica Green: That's a good question, well now I'll probably reveal my age, I started working in the visual arts when there were a lot of quotas you know with exhibitions, I was at the Australia Council and we were always looking at quotas to make sure there was always good representation of women artists in exhibitions and in funded exhibitions, certainly that was one of the critiques of the early Biennales of Sydney about the participation and the number of women that were included. And it was interesting with the Biennial when I set out, you know you're always conscious of ideas of gender and having worked in the visual arts, yet I've come across discrimination, well not really discrimination, that's probably unfair I guess, you know the other example I could give is, when I first started working in University art museums sort of 15 years ago or so, when I started the Samstag Museum I was the only female director, whereas now, I think they're nearly all females a part from a few token males, no I shouldn't say that. And the same with the Biennial, I think when I was looking at that, the first couple of artists, there was an emphasis towards men and I thought "oh". But then as I went along it just naturally grew and there were far more women artists in the Adelaide Biennial than there are male artists, and the number of female writers far exceed the male writers, 2-1 I think. And that wasn't by design, that's just the way the cards fell and I think that for me, was extremely heartening to see that was the natural way of things, the exhibition does feature a lot of women artists a lot of women have written for the catalogue. And we've also been looking at other areas of gender, I think that's one of the underlying ideas behind Amos Gebhardt's work, it's about gender diversity. And that's a wonderful thing to see and it's very much about our time now and accepting the population is very broad, you know, it is beyond just those two binaries of male and female, you know there's a lot more about and it is about difference and diversity and that is indeed at the heart of what *Divided Worlds* exhibition is all about. Rather than just looking at binary polarities it is about our differences and I think the exhibition and many of the works in the exhibition, they show us that difference is the way things are in the world and it's always has been. And I think

difference is the natural order of the world. My sense is, if our complex civilisation is going to find a way forward, it will be by understanding our differences and coming to terms with them and really respecting them and embracing that idea of difference.

Esther Anatolitis: It's such a good way of putting it because absolutely difference is the natural order, and as you say if something is strange it should be something to be celebrated, difference is generative. We know when we work together as artists, when we collaborate across any context it's the generative tensions that create the new and they are absolutely premised on difference, and perhaps, politically, when we find ourselves recognising any kind of divided world situation or scenario, if we look at global politics, if we look at how disappointing and easy it is sometimes for politicians or other people in power to cast different groups against each other as though that oppositional, as though a recognition of difference is a negative and about excluding others instead of thinking about what is productive, what is generative, how difference allows discourse to reflect on our own identity, because without difference, in fact, there is no identity.

Erica Green: Absolutely, and I think you've summarised it. They are many of the ideas that a lot of the artists in the exhibition are really looking at and I guess that's very much the case if you look at Angelica Mesiti's work, *Mother Tongue*, it really is about embracing differences where she's looking at various different communities that have all come to live in a housing estate in Denmark called Aarhus in Gellerup, and you know, she's looking at ways of cultural practices and particularly through music and song. But while they are all different coming from all different parts of the world and she's also looking at the impact of the huge migration from the Middle East to Europe that's having huge social and political consequences and sort of saying, well we need to look at that, well how do we all live together and play the one song, or you know not necessarily play the one song, but we can all look out and contribute in our own special and individual way.

Esther Anatolitis: And I think that's often the provocation that an artist makes to us, you know, here is the contribution I have made, what will your response be? I think that's one of the really invigorating experiences simply visiting a gallery or exploring a work in public space, but when you've chosen to go on that adventure, I think to explore a Biennial it's also very much about your response, I think as an audience member. And this of course, thinking about artists and audiences has been part of your work for many years, you've worked in a range of different contexts in the arts, in government, directing galleries, museums, curating many, many, many exhibitions here and around the world. Tell us about, I guess, in coming to the point of being a Samstag, a founding director of the Samstag Museum of Art since 2007 is also in the context of a university which is, I think increasingly, and I've been very pleased to see this more and more, increasingly universities are recognising their role to foster rigorous discussion between thinkers and researchers and the public. And, your work of course has been about doing that in so many different ways, largely with a focus on curation and in supporting and orientating artists to think about fostering those rigorous conversations. Tell us, are there particular points of generative tension across your career that you were really delighted to invest and reflect upon and be reflected in the Biennial? Because of all the reasons we've discussed because the Biennial is just an extraordinary undertaking and one that positions itself as articulating *Divided Worlds* is also ambitious and provocative. So, what has been I guess the career reflection learnings and insights for you in approaching this in particular?

Erica Green: Oh look, I've got a lot of lessons to take away and probably, reflecting on that point you made earlier about Patricia Piccinini that it might be another 10 years before she

gets an opportunity to exhibit in the state gallery or will participate in a major exhibition I guess it's the same for curatorial practice as well. You know, while we're all drawn to visual arts is sort of, I think of all the different art forms, visual arts is the art form that really is about sort of about difference and constantly reinventing itself and the visual arts, as an art form, do take in a lot of other influences and practices and you know I think that was something that came out with the Biennial, is that, a number of artists are working on that liminal edge between what we would traditionally call visual arts practice and say, film making, that's really the background of Amos Gebhardt and Douglas Watkins and sort of pushing the boundaries between art and theatre, or art and film and you know, visual art and craft practice and constantly testing all of those sort of areas. Even though artists like Maria Fernanda Cardoso who is looking at, you know, that intersection between art and science and nature. And you know, visual artists are incredibly inquisitive and imaginative and they think the Biennial is as much a celebration of imagination and that is something that all the artists bring to the table and now thinking deep visual arts and I think that was something I was really hoping to tap into was, just to take stock and to take a moment to celebrate that idea of imagination.

Esther Anatolitis: I think that word imagination is not one we hear often enough in the arts these days, I mean there's imagination in what we foster, there's curiosity, but I think that's a terribly important point that you make. Because something that we want to sustain throughout our own careers you know, not knowing what comes next as you were saying, but to sustain that as something that's valuable to us it's so important.

Erica Green: Absolutely, imagination really is at the heart of it, it's what really makes us human. That's really what, sort of what I guess, distinguishes us from other animals, while we are very connected, and I think we've lost a lot of our connection between ourselves and nature and where we come from, you know, imagination is something that humans have this incredible ability to do, to think, to project about the future, to think about the past, to think about yes another world, and that's really for me what is so wonderful about art and that's why art and culture is so important to our societies and really for civilisation I think, in terms of moving forward is that ability to conceive of another world, to conceive of a future and to then to be imaginative in the way you think of, well how are we going to sort of realise this. And hopefully we're, you know, we're looking to project ourselves to you know a wonderful, a better world. You know at the moment, at the moment civilisation hovered between all that is good but also then Armageddon is always very close by as well.

Esther Anatolitis: Yes, that is a rousing and foreboding reason for us get over to Adelaide before 3rd June and explore the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, I think that is what is expansive and what is also increasingly terrifying about global politics at the moment makes *Divided Worlds* incredibly timely. And what you're saying about imagination and nature and the way we understand ourselves of being part of not just a divided world but as one big complex ecosystem and we have that opportunity to experience work that artists are presenting in gardens, in the world as well as in spaces that are conventional and unconventional. So, Erica, thank you so much for talking with me today, I can't wait to go next year to the Biennial.

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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.