

NAVA: in conversation, Episode 25

[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.

[Music]

Esther Anatolitis: It's Esther Anatolitis here, the Executive Director of NAVA and here with us at NAVA HQ today is Sarah Goffman. It is so great to be able to get to spend some time with you.

Sarah Goffman: Thank you for having me Esther, it's a pleasure being here.

Esther Anatolitis: You're very lovely! There is so much to talk about, there is so much to ask you about your work, there is so much to ask you about the political and the commercial and the kind of consumerist environment in which it sits. And I guess also the work that you're making lately. So let's start at the very very end and tell me what you're working on right now and then let's just kind of draw out from there because I know we're going to have lots to talk about.

Sarah Goffman: Well I have just this endless obsession with plastics and I can't stop collecting them. The pollution that's on my doorstep is a big issue and I do call it vandalism because it upsets order. It going to go into the storm water drain so that's sitting on my doorstep and I guess people get out of their cars and whatever they have consumed just sort of drops out, maybe they're rushing to save their babies or some heroic act.

Esther Anatolitis: Let's hope there is some heroic reason this for this cavalier vandalism.

Sarah Goffman: It's really common though. I don't think I'm going to save the world in just cleaning up my street, however I think that there something significant about it. It's doing my duty, my duty of care for what's around me. So there's those Clean Up Australia Days and all of those ideas, whereas I think it is my occupation over time to just try and make the world a better place, leave it a bit better than how you found it and I think that ideology should be actually really more commonly practiced. So in my studio I've got this endless array of plastic bottles and people are always proffering, someone texted me this morning did I want some of her coloured shampoo bottles that she had finished with and I was like 'oh yeah baby! I sure do!' If I could I would travel the world or have people send me their empty bottles, and maybe this is a call for those things. I want big ones and I know I've seen TV shows in America and they are drinking vodka in car parks out of enormous, they must be industrial...

Esther Anatolitis: Everything is bigger there.

Sarah Goffman: I don't know what it is, I've asked a few friends, I haven't gone to America in a long time, I've asked them can you just bring me back some empty bottles. I don't want the

contents I just want that vessel. It's the symbolism of the vessel, over time it's been used in, you know, so many artworks and I think it symbolises consumption. This is what that vessel holds, single use plastics hold those nutritious drinks and whatever sort of energy or calories are in there. So it's not all bad, so I'm not glorifying plastics but I'm critical of this mass production and the huge pollution, but I'm also celebrating it because it is miraculous material. And I'm a materialist, I'm a child born in the '60s, pop culture and all of that, we grew up having many plastic things in the house, I think my father loved plastic.

Esther Anatolitis: And it must have been miraculous at time when suddenly it just seemed possible to make anything in plastic, give it any texture, any colour, that notion of the artist as someone who can create something that didn't previously exist, that goes back to classical Greek times of being distrustful or resentful of the poet, the imitator, the person who could artfully lie and then suddenly it's within our power to make all sorts of plastic things, to print in 3D and to create objects, as you say the vessel. If we think about the vessel in art, we can think of rarefied objects depicted in still life or beautiful ceramics that last for hundreds of years and yet the vessel today is almost more disposable than what it's containing.

Sarah Goffman: But what's funny is that plastic has a shelf life of thousands of years, it's affected by sunlight and there are disposable, biodegradable plastics. But I joke with my friends about the fact that as global warming, the sea levels rise, well, all of you with your bronze and marble that's going to be sinking to the bottom, my stuff just going to be floating on top. [Laughs] So you know the cream always rises to the top. I don't know, there is definitely an irony in sort of appropriating these plastics and then converting them into Ming and very precious antiquities, and that's what's on my desk, there's an obsession with it and fascination and I do sort of mine the Silk Road and all of those decorative pattern styles from India through to Japan, because it fascinates me how one decorative idea comes from the Middle East and it gets converted and sort of changed along the Silk Road and it's that old, the children's game of Chinese whispers and things get distorted. My own hand distorts as well because I'm not a machine, I try and copy the fleur de lis for instance and I never get it right, your breath changes that action of the permanent marker.

Esther Anatolitis: Now see that is a fascinating, just imagining that shift, that evolution in pattern along the Silk Road, but also in the way that creating and applying a pattern changes not just meaning in terms of language, meaning and sophistication, but adds value to something that we have previously not valued. The fleur de lis was the mark of certain houses of French aristocracy and then we think about what are the elements of the coats of arms of British aristocracy or the ways in which the depiction of tools and hand tools in totalitarian cultures in public spaces, on the edges of buildings and the way we embellish things and the way that we draw the particular lines, the patterns we create on something, absolutely change its meaning. But then what you're doing with the plastics is drawing on, using the other meaning of drawing, drawing on the form, the heritage, what it seems to evoke and then applying patterns that are entirely misplaced for the material in terms of the plastic, but so apt when you think about what you're just saying in that these things are going to last for many many hundreds if not thousands of years.

Sarah Goffman: I think remember actually seeing vodka they were having artists design their bottles and then, maybe it was Perignon, one Christmas I went to someone's house and they had a special Christmas Perignon bottle that had some sort of decorative pattern on it that was made specifically for consumers at Christmas, they love their Perignon and they have a very pretty bottle and I think that was the seed of the idea of what I went on to do, plus the thousands of other artists in world who are making amazing things, but I am always trying to

get to the bottom of things, and where the penny dropped, and where I thought 'oh I can make a difference here, I can personalise something' and people now days they do all the diamantes and the glitter things and you know Louis Vuitton. And I think Louis Vuitton was having artists sort of graffiti their handbags as a permanent thing and those sorts of things, when status, those status symbols are sort of turned around. And as an artist that's my job, to look at things and then turn them around, make them slightly uncomfortable. Like I saw a Louis Vuitton garbage can on the internet the other day, somebody had silk screened or stencilled their Otto bin with Louis Vuitton and then the joke line was this was Kim Kardashian's bin, and the irony of doing that and there's such an obsession with status and money and you go to any country where people are not so rich and there's even more Gucci and Louis Vuitton, the fakes and these sorts of giant watches and jewellery, and plastics have sort of served this purpose in making the fake pearls and costume jewellery all of the fake ivory. Like I'm obsessed with it, I don't want people to be killing elephants for their tusks.

Esther Anatolitis: Well no.

Sarah Goffman: If you're going to make plastic ivory ornaments, please be my guest, just do it in an environmental way, don't pollute. My Dad used to have one of those ivory trinkets, it was like a ball that was craved inside other balls and it would fascinate me let alone the fact it was made of ivory, maybe bone from some animal, I don't know. I mean art is around us and I guess we're always looking at it and seeing how it sits with us. I don't just sit with and object take it for granted, like I really look at it and try to break it down and see, I guess I've been doing art for a long time so I'm always thinking what more art can I do? How can I convert this moment into art, it's a bit tiring Esther.

Esther Anatolitis: It must also be deeply energising.

Sarah Goffman: I'm joking.

Esther Anatolitis: Art is a way of seeing and thinking, particularly when we think about artistic process as a kind of orientation to the world I think must be particularly extraordinarily heightened in you because if you're always so conscious and aware of things that are discarded and seeing those as being something that has a life and an environmental residue, but also something that is there to be endowed with a different kind of meaning. That must be quite an exhausting sense of a heightened perception that you have.

Sarah Goffman: I think its connecting and story telling, so you know they have designated uses and I remember in Sydney there used to be those duty free shops, Downtown Duty Free.

Esther Anatolitis: I think they are still around.

Sarah Goffman: I don't know maybe they are, but they used to have an orange and green bag and I thought about those words 'duty free' I was like what a great concept, duty being a financial thing, but your duty, and what is the designated duty of object but also of us. And I made a work to do with those duty free bags and tried to explore it, did some paintings, went into it and I still feel it's the basis of my operating system [laughs]. Also as an artist we are free to work with anything we want and you build up a lexicon over time of what you work with and I've always had the plastic fascination since I was a teenager and my parents would bring home the shopping in these heavy duty bags and then use them for the trash and I thought how could you be throwing away, this is really strong, this is the same material my raincoat is made out of and just spend \$100 buying a raincoat why not convert this. I think I

was an artist from a young age even though I didn't know it when I was young, I was always loving ornaments and collecting things, I did make things, I didn't see it as my calling and luckily in my 20s I went to art school and realised 'oh this is a world that gets my brain going' and gives me a job, actually a real job, not a paid job but an occupation that will be lifetime there is no retiring is looking at the world. I was in Tasmania once I did a residency down there and in Queenstown actually the most devastated part of Tasmania, which was glad to see actually nature was reclaiming, I mean they had some atrocious, the acid rain had decimated some parts, but in other parts I don't know if it was mining company or if it was simply mother nature coming back in and dealing with what was there. Anyway, there no garbage, there wasn't Coke cans or Mount Franklin bottles. So over in my residency I collected rocks, Esther I love anything that's on the ground obviously. I collected rocks that spoke to me and I filled my room with rocks. So it's a gleaner, I think it's really elemental in me, I am going to find decorative or something aesthetic in our environment. I mean the Coke can, yeah you could say is that decorative. Well if you break it down and cut it up, you can do, I tell my students, you just need to look in the trash can even if that trash can is empty there is still inspiration in there. There is a whole world, I mean, I'm into philosophy, I read a lot and so I have an active imagination luckily cause if were to go to prison I would not be bored [laughs].

Esther Anatolitis: Let's hope work doesn't take you there. How fascinating would that be, now thinking about you know prison trays and objects circulate in the prison and what people have before them and then you compare that to the ubiquitous Mount Franklin bottle or the Coke can or the things that we haven't necessarily chosen to make an intrinsic part of our lives the objects that we use every day, the way that we touch them and handle them, the tools that we use, the way we understand where they came from, you know, these are the parameters of our lives. Yet when we have a relationship with those objects which isn't about connecting them to what's unique about ourselves but rather just us being, you could imagine ourselves the mode of distribution for the disposable, each one of us are just passing on these objects that are actually quite similar.

Sarah Goffman: Well it's such a grand scale, you got to Westfield and you see the garbage containers in the food court and it's just being emptied twelve times a day maybe more, it's on such a huge epic scale, unquestioning. There's a lot of people that have the zero garbage, there's a lot more awareness of it, and since making my work maybe in 2005 I was collecting plastic bags for an exhibition and I'd door knock in my area and people would come out either Jeans West and all those heavy duty coloured plastic bags which I collected and used. Whereas now days those are far fewer, its gone into brown paper, a lot which I don't know if it's that much better, but the corporations have listened to an extent. It's the single use bags that will worsen, you are buying a two litre bottle of milk, why do you need a bag it's already in it, when they package a banana, come on.

Esther Anatolitis: It's such a mind set that we have to get out of and I think that's when you walk into a space and see your work and there's that first perception that this must be a precious material and you realise that it's plastic and then you closely at the work and the detail, that's surely a way of shifting that mindset.

Sarah Goffman: It does for me, the labour, first I have to clean the vessel and I sort of getting those sticky labels off is sometimes, you know, it's hours of my fingers picking away but also, it's my duty is a sort of way of meditating on what design it's going to be and the whole process, it really slows things down. It's not instant gratification, even though that's what I

want, it forces me to take that care and give it that attention and I feel like there is some sort of spiritual energy that I am confluent with, is that a word?

Esther Anatolitis: Absolutely.

Sarah Goffman: I mean an old hippy I used to know, she used to say that there was an energy that came out of artists when they are working.

Esther Anatolitis: I think that makes a lot of sense. I mean confluence as in things come together, but then congruence in the sense that there is almost this alignment and I think that spiritual aspect, I mean, spiritualism or spirituality can be about quietness and mediation but I can also be about actively making values or transforming values or having an experience where something that had seemed everyday becomes a ritual, maybe alone as a mediation maybe with others and so there something that you know, there is a change, there's a value that expressed and the way that you describe the time that you spend with each vessel, even when deliberately seeing it as a vessel and calling it a vessel, something that had a purpose, that was a container, that wasn't just, it's not rubbish, it's not plastic, this is something that continues to be a vessel and yet your work gives it force and value in a very different way

Sarah Goffman: Well I hope so, those Buddhist masters sit there preparing their inks for the calligraphy, and I mean I worship that ideology and that mode of slowing down and not taking everything for granted, not just consuming for the sake it, conspicuous consumption, I mean I'm a big consumer and I feel guilty about it. So maybe it's my way of repairing that sort of guilt, that white western guilt, being too fat and eating too much and it's not unquestioning, like I've got a good brain, there is something that I'm seeking and we're not going to psychoanalyse me [laughs] there's a fulfilment I get in the studio which is looking myself in the mirror very closely and say well this is it, this is the food I eat. Sometimes I buy stuff in the supermarket merely for the packaging, like I'll eat it and then I'll paint it, or I'll transform it. But that idea of transformation and alchemy to convert something into old age you know I think been done since the beginning I mean the ancestors in the aboriginal dreaming and doing the cave art, you know it's like a menu sometimes of what's available, what we eat, you are what you eat and those things and those packaged drinks and things that might have all sort of chemicals that your body isn't prepared or is now having to ingest and the ramifications of processed foods, there is a lot awareness about it. I'm not going lecture about it, but I think about those things. Sugar and the slave trade go hand in hand and so I think on that. Yeah, those energy drinks, you know, they come at a cost and yet they are consumed so readily, and I think well am I countering it by putting my Ming pattern on it? I don't know, it might make a few people question the packaging they're buying in the supermarket and sort of say no to it. It's a big problem.

Esther Anatolitis: It's an enormous problem and the making of the work in the way that you do, but also that whole process, that slowing down, I think that is something that when we think about what it means to be artists, the great risk of just embarking on the project of sustaining across a lifetime that the possibility of making work but then also what it means in practice in the doing of practice to be an artist which is that focus and that rigour and the dedication to craft but also that you are willing to devote so much time and patience to individual things.

Sarah Goffman: Oh Esther, it is compulsion. It is actually, I mean, I guess I'm greedy for entertainment so make work, I don't mind, if it takes along, it takes a long time. Sometimes I

want to rush it but that never gets me anywhere. But taking time and making something, converting something into something else and then being able to wake up the next day and see that fills me with joy. It's that there's something different in this world, I simply have the tools and now the knowledge of how to make those things and it's very fulfilling. I'm addicted to working hard, and I think you don't get anywhere if you don't work hard, I mean sure these are ideas they're banding about in graduate school of management all the time, but it really is true on a personal level, if you don't please yourself then how can you sleep with yourself. I have to tire myself somehow and actually sitting down and doing the work is not very tiring except my hands. I have to stretch them out, I've got all these yoga exercises just for my hands and for my eyes, I used to have fantastic vision, now I'm on 2.5 like magnifiers. But I mean it's good, this is my job, like I have a role which when I was in my 20s, before I went to art school, yeah I was into art and always went to galleries and stuff but I really didn't, we have to have something to live for and making art is the thing that I live for. It's connecting and of course that story that's told, but that can be conceptual gymnastics and having something delicious in the brain to sort of feed on that has infinite possibilities. I've got to say sometimes I have an opinion about an art work, because I've just glanced at it and I think I know everything about it, and 10 years later and somebody tells me something about it or I read about it and my opinion changes, and that's a really exciting thing, to actually have a belief, there's an opinion, but a belief alter, that's transformation and I think humans have this amazing potential, we've got these big brains to transform our thinking and to see things in other ways and your opinion about something will inform mine. In art it seems much more specific, the artist's intention and then this whole world of what their motivation is and where their sources come from, it's very beautiful, this big dance that we are all complicit in, if we would only all participate.

[Laughs]

Esther Anatolitis: Well I think it's something more and more of us need and desire and want to participate in, more and more of us are realising just what is at stake you know artistically, ethically but also politically we do and if we don't participate and you've just given us so many different ways to think about what art is and mean and what practice means and what compels us. Enormous thanks to you Sarah to get to talk.

Sarah Goffman: Oh Esther thank you. I don't know where I'm going with my brain.

Esther Anatolitis: I think that is a great place to be.

Sarah Goffman: I'm getting goose bumps just thinking about. Thank you very much for having me.

[Music]

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.