

NAVA: in conversation, Episode 27

[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, Executive Director of NAVA and I have the great fun of sitting here right next to Abdul-Rahman Abdullah, hello.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Hi Esther, really great to meet you, finally.

Esther Anatolitis: Good to meet you finally, we got to hang out, we hung out a bit last night at *Khalas* which was really great just to see so many people but now we get to properly talk which is super nice.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yeah it was really nice, the opening last night was really great. It's funny, I mean I haven't really been thinking about it a lot, you know I'm just participating as an artist and I get there, it's massive. I know UNSW Galleries is a really institutional space, but to get in there and see how vast the shows were, it was fantastic. Downstairs Christian's show, it's just a little bit overwhelming almost, so many Christian Thompsons in one room, it's amazing. I loved it.

Esther Anatolitis: I was quite overwhelmed too, I wasn't really familiar with the whole breath of his work. I had certainly seen the kind of, you know the self portrait images where he inserts himself into those really colonial Australian kinds of...

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Absolutely there are some iconic images. I remember doing presentations on those images when I was at Uni [laughs] and I was really, I have met Christian, but it was really nice to re-meet him.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah for sure.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: And he can sing! [Laughs]

Esther Anatolitis: Very impressive, oh my goodness. And there is even a kind of, when you know an artist and you know their work there is always a sort of re-meeting when you see their work in a gallery but also when you are in show together.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yeah it's a nice feeling. I'm still a fairly new artist, this is my sixth year, I guess since I graduate. I'm emerging in some ways and to go in there and be showing in the same space, with someone like Christian Thompson. Mind you there were some artists

in the show *Khalas*, Khalid Sabsabi, Khadim Ali, people like this, you know they have always been heroes of mine and it's so nice to be showing alongside them.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah that's an honour.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: I feel like a peer which is a really good important thing as an artist.

Esther Anatolitis Yeah, tell me more about that. That difference between feeling like a peer and emerging. There's probably real strength and power in both. Like there's a certain license that you have when emerging because, hey I'm putting this out there and people have got a sense of an artist at a particular early stage of career, they expect a certain kind of, I don't know, there's newness and the risk and so on, the emerging...

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: I think those labels you know, emerging, mid career, established and so on and so forth, they are actually, you can leverage off them in a way. I guess you can use them to your advantage. When I first graduated I really, I took pains to frame myself as an emerging artist because I was a mature aged student, I was 35 when I started my career I guess. So I really wanted to sort of let people know that I was at the beginning of my career. I don't know, I just felt it was important to me and also you know I hadn't earned anything beyond that. And I always describe myself as an emerging artist and at the time for funding applications and that sort of thing, you need to, and you need to I guess reinforce that but when I did the Adelaide Biennial, my brother rang me up, told me off for calling myself an emerging artist [Esther laughs] and said 'no one thinks you are emerging anymore' [laughs] so fair enough. So I took it off my website.

Esther Anatolitis: How did that feel?

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: It was a good feeling, but you know, I guess coming from my brother we always, we are constantly talking about art and trajectories and etcetera. It was like I guess you just feel like a peer with whatever artist you meet and that's a big deal for an artist.

Esther Anatolitis: Totally. Because like you say there's people you have admired, there's people you've seen their work and you wouldn't necessarily have the chance or have the thought that you might get to meet, discuss and get to work together and then suddenly that happens. That must be a thrill but also intimidating and wonderful.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Absolutely. So many people I meet I'm chatting to just blah blah blah and I'm going 'I hope they don't think I'm dumb!' [Laughs] Art is full of those people, so many brains, seriously.

Esther Anatolitis: There are a lot of brains. But a lot of brainy people probably think that they're going to come across dumb as well.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Well they don't. Whenever I'm doing panels, everyone is a doctor, I'm looking around going well there's half a million dollars of HECS debt right here [Esther laughs] and I've got my little undergrad and you know maybe later on. I do find that kind of fun, such an overeducated field which is amazing.

Esther Anatolitis: I can't remember who said this, possibly Ben Eltham, who has written about how artists in Australia, and possibly elsewhere in the world, but particularly Australia, artists are the most overeducated underclass.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Absolutely, you would never get minimum wage after eight, ten years of uni. But artists are so incredible articulate. Probably as a result of education, but I think more as a result of just working the creative industries, whether it is writing or speaking or whatever it is, people just become articulate whether they want to or not. You know people who resist it, you will become articulate.

Esther Anatolitis: It's true, there is just so much call upon you to I guess talk about your work and in art schools from almost as soon as people start it's you know 'what's your artist statement? What's your sort of definitive, how do you define yourself in the world and...'

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: And get thrown in the deep end from day one. Which is a good and a bad thing too.

Esther Anatolitis: Well it's kind of, you're about to embark on this incredibly risky extraordinary thing as an artist and then having to almost define but also defend why you are going to be an artist, and what does that even mean.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yeah, yeah it's one of those, it is quite hard to talk about describe art school to people outside art, people who have never gone to art school and it's always funny thing I remember like sitting there at Uni and wondering this whole universe around where people are learning to save lives, build buildings you know make bridges that don't fall down and we have been discussing a bucket for four hours or something [laughs] and it is a very intense conversation, makes you go hmm, a little bit of perspective but this is important, this is culture.

Esther Anatolitis: I've never thought of it that way, it is a kind of microcosm, this campus that you are on and just hundreds of metres from you there is the world's problems being addressed.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: I like to think, but then you wonder outside and go oh my god I want nothing to do with the rest of this, bring me back to that little arts end of the Uni.

Esther Anatolitis: So tell us which arts school you went to, and what was it like.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Well I graduated in 2012 but over my life I think I went to five different art schools. When I finished high school, I went to, at the time it was called Perth Tech which is now Centre of TAFE and now it's called something else, and did a first year there, dropped out of that, went to Curtin Uni, did a first year there, dropped out of that, went to Edith Cowan Uni a couple years later, started a second year, dropped out of that.

Esther Anatolitis: Good work.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: So I had a good degree worth of first years. And then I worked for a good 15 years doing all sorts of shit kicking until I ended up being an illustrator and Christmas designer for a while. I used to design and build animal enclosures for Perth Zoo and as a commercial sculptor, a model maker, art department stuff, but the biggest focus was

zoo stuff, animal sculptures for the zoo, habitat sculptures for the zoo, had no background in designing and building stuff like that.

Esther Anatolitis: Amazing, how did that connect up?

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: They took very pretty visuals that got the tenders and wind our way through it and it is amazing what you can do with concrete [laughs]. So I did that for like eight years or so. And then the Christmas designer, all of that was contract working. But I always knew I was going to come back to art.

Esther Anatolitis: It is something you just know isn't it.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Oh yeah cause from high school when I was a kid art was going to be the future, but I didn't know what an artist was for such a long time. And it took my brother Abdul Abdullah, 'til he went to art school and I was living with him at the time and I just knew once he finished, it was time for me to go back. Especially once he started kicking along into a career, it's like, he's the younger brother and here's the older brother, cause really sort of paved a bit of the way and this was the catalyst. He graduated 2008 and 2010 I went back and did another first year, this time at VCA and then I dropped out of that and went back to Curtin Uni. [Laughs] So after all of that Curtin Uni was the first time I had spent two years consecutively in one art school, but I did it [laughs].

Esther Anatolitis: You were saying just a moment ago that there was a sense through that of just not quite knowing what an artist was. What do you think an artist is?

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Oh god. I know what they are not.

Esther Anatolitis: Tell us what they are not.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: [Laughs] What an artist is, I'm going to go back to what they are. I guess they're cultural producers of some sort and I must admit I will focus on being a visual artist because that is my world, so many corners to the arts, and everyone is an artist in that respect. I guess a visual artist is someone who document a lived culture and creates artefacts of that lived culture, I guess is the way I describe it. And it's very broad how that might articulate itself.

Esther Anatolitis: I like that though because there is a sense of cultural production being about, you know there are things that make up our culture and culture being I guess the practices, the gestures, the objects, the works that make us who we are. Where we contest our identity, we make ourselves who we are, where we make meaning and also where we kind of connect with each other and ourselves around what we enjoy and what startles us, what makes us curious and so then to document that.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: To document or communicate it in some way shape or form. It goes from the very tangible to the very completely ephemeral art. That's what I love about art. I always think of artists as superheroes with a very broad variety of very minor powers.

[Laughs]

Esther Anatolitis: That is brilliant.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: We're the lesser X-people.

[Laughs]

Esther Anatolitis: Maybe you can bring a few of them together and they each have minor powers that are complementary.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Or they end up scrapping out.

[Laughs]

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: I mean you look through what artists do, and you know some people have the power to make some beautiful little things in ceramics. And some people have the power to perform something in an insane way that I would never occur to me. Don't know how it is going to fight crime [Laughs] or the little powers to bring to the table.

Esther Anatolitis: Fight crime, what would the super power be? It is kind of fighting all sorts of things like public bullshit, there's a real honesty to art, there is a cut through.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Fight the cultural crime.

Esther Anatolitis: Yes, yes. It is fighting crimes against culture.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Or committing them.

Esther Anatolitis: Well yeah documenting but there is also a telling the future or showing an alternative like documenting something that doesn't exist.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yes definitely.

Esther Anatolitis: Like a beautiful gold triceratops.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Oh yes this is true. It does exist, I've seen one at UNSW what are you talking about? [Laughs]. That was great, that was actually my graduate work from Curtin Uni so it was really nice to actually bring it back to life, I haven't really shown it much recently. That was a fun one. That was really drawing on my pre-art days of model making and that sort of I guess studio skills you don't learn at art school and exhausting in a way for an art outcome, a nice little transition.

Esther Anatolitis: Well as a work it is superbly crafted and beautiful, you sort of...

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Thank you.

Esther Anatolitis: Particularly in that space, with the way that it has been lit you just want to be near it. But it also makes you think of idols and false idols.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yeah, I guess I was, I suppose you learn how, you are constantly learning about why you do what you do etcetera. At the time I was sort of creating that idol of childhood kind of thing. It is hard to think why you make things and wonder is this a valid exploration of this? Is this the content that art can be? I was quite literally making a triceratops as a dog sized thing as a pet that you could walk down the street with and I guess

there is simplicity in that idea but then you overlay it with a whole bunch of other things but that was the basis of it, you know, imagine having a pet triceratops this big [laughs]. Nice little Labrador sized one, it would be a real shin breaker but with the horns.

Esther Anatolitis: Well there goes the furniture. The thing with people with cats and dogs and why we domesticate animals, like why do we do that, and they look after us a bit and we look after them but imagine domesticating a dinosaur.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: A little one. A little bite sized one.

Esther Anatolitis: It would probably growl at you, and make you think about the depth of time.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Leave dinosaur poops all over the lawn.

[Laughs]

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: It's funny, I do so many animals in my work, but I'm not really that much of an animal person. Now I'm surrounded by them where I live, but I don't know. It is always something I've, not struggled with, but I've always wonder why I articulate ideas with animals so much.

Esther Anatolitis: That is intriguing, so you are not kind of, do you have, so you are on a property with lots of cattle, but do you have a pet of any kind?

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: I have a pet goat, Trevor.

Esther Anatolitis: Tell us about Trevor.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Trevor was a little feral goat who we ended up adopting because his mother was killed by a dog, so we took him in, he was like a month old or something. A very cute little guy.

Esther Anatolitis: Goats are ridiculously cute that age. They jump around and twist.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Oh, when he gets excited he does a little jump and a buck, now he does a fair bit of head butting [laughs] when he gets a little bit agro.

Esther Anatolitis: Imagine the triceratops head butting you just to say hello.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: There's the shin break [laughs]. Yeah, it's funny, I haven't, I love cats, but I haven't wanted one for a very long time, now I live on farm I've come to the conclusion that I can't own one because I'm surrounded by little birds, little blue wrens and so just 'oh damn it my hopes and dreams of owning a cat again' dashed.

Esther Anatolitis: Maybe the animals in your work is about, we think about our own humanity, we think about time in different ways.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Ah yeah. Well what I do like is, generally the animals I do use are very domestic, very mundane, suburban, I grew up in the middle of the city, now I live sort in a rural environment but that's a very new thing. But I guess there's a strategy to it in some

way because everyone has got some sort of relationship at least with the idea of these animals, cats, dogs, snakes, sheep, baby camel not so much but there it is. Yeah animals like that where everyone has encountered them or has some understanding of what they are and they all bring their own sort of mythology I guess. And a few birds as well, pigeons actually so far. But pigeons and crows, things that are wild but not wild right.

Esther Anatolitis: Wild and not wild.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Cats, crows, pigeons. Things that are such common encounters, they are part of the visual vernacular I guess in the suburbs, so ordinary but still a wild animal. Even a cat, let's not pretend that cats have ever been really domesticated.

Esther Anatolitis: Well when they are domesticated we're really their pets. I remember an old friend telling me a long time ago who was involved in having to go out and catch feral cats because of obviously the destruction of the environment, this amazing thing of which I was reminded when I saw the triceratops but also thinking about the depiction of wild and not wild animals, cats when they go and run away they grow rather quickly, their, talons, I don't know about big in size but their claws and other things and muscles grow rather quickly to the point where the cat can be unrecognisable and that makes them quite hard to find. So there is that sense of it was domestic but put it in a different context.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Overnight it would turn so wild [laughs] it's always there. Although I have met some cats who would probably really struggle.

Esther Anatolitis: Depending on how well looked after they had been.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yes they tend to go very plump and happy in the right environment.

[Laughs]

Esther Anatolitis: So tell me about being in *Khalas*, which of course means 'enough', and there must have been a couple of dozen artists involved.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: There's up to about 20 odd.

Esther Anatolitis: What was that process like of I guess being curated in but getting to have those conversations with each other because the work in the space is very much having a conversation with each other, you can't help but

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: It is quite a busy space after all of that, some of the works are quite introspective and quiet but there is a lot of work and there's a lot of quite loud work as well. I guess the show was curated Philip George and Nur Shkemi and I mean I know them both, particular Nur, we have worked together quite a lot.

Esther Anatolitis: She is amazing.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Oh she is a powerhouse. And we worked together as part of the Eleven collective which is a collective of Muslim Australian artists, but this show has a lot of people from that collective, but it's got just as many Muslim artists from just the community as well. It's funny cause we all tend to know each other, we spot a name a mile off and there

is always a sort of, almost sort of familial relationship, you already in some sense know who each other is and there are not that many Muslim artists, there really is cause we are constantly on the look out for who's around. Most of them are in Sydney, western Sydney.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah exactly. This was a really wonderful welcome thing coming back to Sydney after quite some time and I was saying to a few of us last night I have always had this radar of where are the wogs.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Oh yeah you just see our own and again it's the name. Spot them a mile away. Usually the names are this long, either way.

Esther Anatolitis: And so you want to draw that connection going 'How did you? What made you choose this? How did you?' Cause there are all sorts of, what's the word, barriers or we weren't necessarily, it wasn't the most welcome thing for us to choose artistic careers, so you want to know what happened and what inspired people.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Well every one of them just about will have some reason, other than they always had an understanding of what art is, cause when I grew up I didn't know what an artist was, what art was. We used to go to the state gallery which was amazing, but I didn't really ever consider that people could own art or people could be a professional artist, let alone a writer or a musician or a singer or any of these sorts of creative pursuits. Among Muslim families and kids, it's just not a thing. I guess it's, everyone was kind of poor and art was a rich person's thing and it just. I had never been to someone's house and they had actual art. Seen plenty of things on walls but never art.

Esther Anatolitis: There are these things in wog houses that I feel like everyone has got, certain paintings, certain mass-produced things, the curtains, the few things. But then the bizarre thing is that in the Greek tradition also in the Islamic tradition, so rich and so long, like you were saying before about documenting a culture, there is such a tradition of making, crafting and yet, I don't know, is it the migrant experience, our families are anxious about us not doing money making things, there is just, you would think that our culture would push us towards that kind of creative work.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: The funny thing I guess when you say culture in Muslims there is definitely a Muslim culture and lots of commonalities, but they are so tied into different ethnicities and ethnic groups and that is such a big part of our identity and quite often it overlaps a lot and it is hard to tell the difference between what is a cultural thing and what is actually from being a Muslim, especially when you are a kid, we were, Mum's Malay and Dad's Australian so we were mixed and so many people we knew were same sorts of mixed half Malay, half Australian, Indonesian, Christmas Islanders, Cocos Islanders, all mixed families like that so it was a real mishmash. And the other side of it too, Perth was quite a small community so then you get all Arabs and Africans and everyone else we would all cling together because there was not that many Muslims at the time, so it was a really mashup which I guess when I come to Sydney, it's not a surprise because I do have an understanding of Sydney, but how big the communities are here, so there's giant Lebanese communities, there's giant now Somalis and Sudanese, there's enough of them to have their own communities then there is a bit less of a mashup even though we are all Muslims, but I really like that, I think it influenced me a lot as a kid, this complete mashup of Australian, Malay, Muslim and everything else just sort of squished in together and not really I guess platforming anything above the other, and that's sort of what I want to do in my works, bring all these different things together like Hoda said last night is micronarratives and so seeing

what comes of that, I never felt obligated to a particular community myself because I was just a mashup.

Esther Anatolitis: And the kind of strength of that kind of mashup and thinking of all those micronarratives is I guess in some ways it means that whether we're an artist or not we are constantly thinking about identity and place and all the, you can't not, like how do I relate to whatever the dominant culture is supposed to be and then what about what I make.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Whatever it is it's just not you, right. You know that from day one.

Esther Anatolitis: Penelope, Holly and I were having a conversation a while ago, and Claudia, about is there a mainstream? Is there an Australian mainstream? Then we thought well yes there is, but it is not us. Whatever it is, we are not sure what it is, it's just not us.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Well all we have to do is go overseas and come back on a plane full of Australians, and then you know [laughs]. Hello real world, I'm back.

Esther Anatolitis: I guess thinking about whatever that mainstream is, particularly in our contemporary really really bullshit political times there's this sort of what it means to be Muslim is then, it's not enough it seems for some people to just appreciate and enjoy that there is the richness and the tension and this mashup and that actually is what Australia is. There's this kind of nonsense fear or just trying get people to, you know, not even think about the richness of culture.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Quite often it seems to really bug people when someone like me pops up and I don't fit their idea of what a Muslim is and it's like, and they want to push back and question. Having said that it comes from other Muslims as well occasionally when I've been questioned on that 'ok are you really a Muslim?' and it's like why would I make that up? [laughs] 'Yes I am' and I might not fit their expectations of what a fellow Muslim should be and sound like so it comes from both ways but there are a hell of a lot more Muslim who think like that. I guess I've always had the privilege of not having to take it on board that much and part of that is being a man, I'm a lot less recognisable, Muslim women will cop a lot more abuse, people who will do that, they just, they are racists, quite often misogynists, can't spell, all of these things. It is just part of what makes it so vile, they will attack who they perceive as soft targets I guess, you won't get the abuse if you are man, just because people who are going to do that are like, that's the way they think. But it does make you very angry because Mum has coped so much abuse, she's been here since 1970 and when she came there were very few Asian people here. And she coped so much abuse, it was the middle of Vietnam war and she got all this abuse for that and it has never really stopped, just the reasons why have slightly shifted but it has never stopped, she has always been, I mean we live in a very divisive and sort of there is so much racist rhetoric and that sort of thing, but I remember as a kid in the '80s in some ways all there was was racist rhetoric, we didn't have language to describe other ethnicities that wasn't derogatory and it was all you know, and all these terminologies and people keep complaining about adding letters to LGBTQI and stuff like that but the reality is that in the past their wasn't the terminology to even describe how people identify themselves so it all fell into derogatory language, and we have been through the '80s and the '90s and the whole idea of politically correct language but it came about for a reason and none of it is bad, the more language we have, the more vocabulary we've got to describe people and that is so important.

Esther Anatolitis: And also, for everyone to have the right to identify themselves the way that makes sense for them. I think it is part of Australian culture and human nature in general, that sense that somehow, and this just feels bizarre to say because I just can't relate to this in any way, but there a lot of people who feel like some else's identity somehow affects theirs.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: That it takes something away from them, you know. Yeah.

Esther Anatolitis: Which is mind boggling.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yes. The main culprits are the straight white men of the world, let's not beat around the bush.

Esther Anatolitis: That you could have that much power and feel like it's being taken away from you.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Everything is taken personally, like it is somehow going to dip into their pocket. Their lifestyle, take a little something when the reality is everything only adds. And it's not even adding something, it is just recognising something which is already there and has always been there. A little recognition somehow takes away from somebody else. I think that's just insanity.

Esther Anatolitis: It is a kind of insanity, it's actually a very strange kind of neurosis.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: It is not even a sort of up for discussion, what are you going to discuss the pros and cons of this? There are no cons.

Esther Anatolitis: Do you ever consciously make work for those kinds of people? Because there's a certain sense when you see a work in a gallery and its either of a human form in some way or an animal form in some way that you do do that kind of like how does this relate to me and my humanity.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yeah but I guess do I make work for those people who I don't really want to have any other interaction with? Not really no. I like to make works for my own in some sense and we do exist in quite a rarefied field 'art' I guess. We do preach to the choir a lot and the reality is those other people are very unlikely to wander in to an art space and go 'I am moved by this work', you know. And that's ok, mainly if they hate stuff online then I am happy, they are on the right thing. I don't make work for them. Why? They have the whole rest of the world, they have everything else, being spoon-fed to them.

Esther Anatolitis: And the more work that we make and the more work that in particular artists like yourself make for the people that you want to connect with and inspire, that is expansive that makes more world and more space. And that being a finite world and takes space away from those other kinds of destructive voices, it's a way of saying that art can be political without being defiant or without being explicitly political.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yeah that's right, in the panel discussion last night, Christian Thompson talked about that quite a lot. And I was running through a lot of what he said and trying to remember it cause he was really articulate, man these turns of phrase, I've got to commit some of these. But that idea of this is not an educational moment, he's been viewed as an Aboriginal man or if I'm being perceived a Muslim slash whatever else. I'm not out there to instruct anyone or educate anyone, tell them, say 'I'm ok, I'm alright, I'm not violent,

I'm not oppressive, I'm a human being'. Some ways I feel like a bit of a political activist, disregard that, I know what I'm not, and I'm not going to give any oxygen to any thoughts otherwise. Yeah so cause the works always going to be kind of framed politically and quite often all that takes as a non-Anglo name of any description or a recognisably Indigenous name or anything like that, it is always perceived as the 'other'. Or judged in proximity to normalness, to whiteness, to in this case Anglo-centric whiteness which is, and I mean that not necessarily as a colour, but an outlook, a perspective. But I don't really see it as explicitly political. I want to make things that are much more experiential I guess, and it's probably a dirty word but, poetic [laughs].

Esther Anatolitis: It's not a dirty word, tell me what you mean by poetic because it is such an evocative word and is so important I think for artistic practice as a process for works.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yeah, I guess poetic is, I guess it is taking into account an aesthetic experience or subjective experience. And not playing to it, using it as a strategy, poetic moment as a thought or I guess seductive qualities. I mean that is one of things I love about art, it can be beautiful, and I don't think there is anything wrong with trying to add some beautiful things to the world. I suppose it is one of the ways people have described what I do, so it's like I can embrace that.

Esther Anatolitis: Well I can see why cause if you think about the poetic in relation to the beautiful, if we think about what is beautiful abstractly and not in relation to your work we often think about just a very clean formal aesthetic, we think of beauty as a state of perfection or something that is sublime but then the poetic is almost something that makes you stop, there's a moment of awe or of something that has just provoked in you an insight or its putting you in two different places or three different places and its introspective, its intimate, its seductive.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yeah certainly it can sort of transport you even for a second, something for you to pause on I guess. I suppose as an artist that is all you ever want from audience is to get a pause out of them, to let people sit with something for slightly longer than, you know, than scrolling a feed or something like that, just to pause on something.

Esther Anatolitis: And speaking of pause, tell me about your other work in *Khalas*.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: There were three different works in there, that dinosaur *Everything is True*, from 2012, there is a bit of a spread, there was a work from 2014 which I did after I did a residency with Campbelltown Art Centre, me and my brother worked with a group of kids at Eaglevale High School, and it's pretty much a wooden TV which I burnt black and in the front it's got dark letters in resin saying 'we know who did it' and that was, we did two weeks with these guys and they were all Samoan boys who were the naughty kids apparently but when we went out there we did all these research, we were looking up cause this was the first time I had really done a residency, I was only a couple of years out of Uni and just looking up the area, what it is like out there and all you get from the news is how terrible it is, so much crime and so little opportunity, and yes all of that is true, but when you are out there with them, these kids are just at high school not thinking in those terms, it is just their world and they see it as family and all their family and friends and that is the area, that is actually the heart and soul of it and all the statistics and what you get in the newspaper is as you would expect only focused on the sellable points, but one thing that did come up was that someone bad burnt down part of the school [laughs] as you do, and one of the first thing that came up with these kids, cause I brought it up cause it was just a thing I had read about, and

they just said 'we know who did it' and that was it. There was a real solidarity around that and I just thought that described this polarity between the kids and the authorities, the teachers and the authorities at large, and they were just so happy and comfortable in the knowledge that they knew, but they were never going to tell, that is beautiful, that is awesome.

Esther Anatolitis: And there is a real power in that, there is solidarity in that.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: It was just, it was a defiance but almost just a, it would never occur to them to not and I really liked that.

Esther Anatolitis: And that kind of, as you say friends, family, that familial, kind of like there is an honour in that solidarity. And that work as you came into the gallery, where it was positioned, that's why I mentioned the pause, it is like a screen on pause, but then it's a screen and it's up on bricks and it's like ok, and then you come closer and you realise that it has been burnt and you wonder what it is made of and then you are like ok, there is just so much of the material and the story and so on and you are almost, you know, trying to piece together this crime because someone knows who did it, just so much is happening right there.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: I remember when they said that I was like I'm not going to press them, I'm not going to ask who did it because who am I, I've just stepped in from the outside, I'm just going to celebrate the fact that there's an empowerment in them knowing and the others not, and I'll be a part of the not cause I'm not from here. That's fine with me. It's really actually good too, what actually helped with that whole thing was that my brother and I come in as brothers cause there is something very relatable about that, all the kids we were working with they are all cousins with each other, they're family, they all understood family and so that really helped, and I kind of just look like an uncle to them. My brother can be the cool young one who relates and I am just the old friendly uncle.

Esther Anatolitis: He's got that kind of cheeky, oh yep yep, you did it and then you've got the wisdom.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: [Laughs] a grey beard is not actually wisdom.

Esther Anatolitis: No I reckon it is. I reckon instead of emerging and established there should just be like grey beard, not grey.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: You've got to earn your beard.

[Laughs]

Esther Anatolitis: And what was the third work in the show?

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: The third work in the show was one from 2017, they're quite varied the works, people always looks for links and that but there is a real diversity in the whole show. The last work is one called *The Boy Who Couldn't Sleep* and that's from a show last year I did in Melbourne, a solo show. That one's just actually looking back at nightmares, and again my works point to different family members, and this one was actually, I mean it's a self-portrait of me as a little kid, but it points to my sister Rabia, from her describing

nightmares to me which would just haunt me. We grew up in a very haunted house so that didn't help.

Esther Anatolitis: Did you get nightmares too?

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Not that much, I was a fairly nightmare free kid. I had my ways and means.

Esther Anatolitis: And your house was haunted?

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Oh very haunted.

Esther Anatolitis: So you were absorbing her nightmares...

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: Yeah, a big part of how I like to rationalise nightmares and sort of deal with being terrified, cause you know, a kid at night you can just be so shit scared. But I would always imagine myself as the creature in the nightmare, become the monster and that way you just sort of negate the fear in some sense, sort of try and own it, become the monstrous figure. Little did I know that a little Muslim kid was going to be the monstrous other anyway. I was just prepping myself.

[Laughs]

Esther Anatolitis: It is important that we prepare ourselves for our roles in Australian life.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: But apart from that I sort of, the boy who couldn't sleep is, one half of it is that idea that you can't sleep out of terror and the other half is that insomnia is a symptom of the presence of the supernatural that's just one of those things that happens. Yeah so that's that work, a sort of very introspective I guess. And then I just love putting that boy in a space, so he's sitting there just glaring out and keeping watch on that space. If you look closely and he's just got black eyes and he's the little horned figure, this little demon child.

Esther Anatolitis: He does look demonic, you are drawn to it and you want to kind of like, hmm what's going on? What's he going to do to us? There's this sense that he's...

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: He's the little monster.

Esther Anatolitis: And I can't help but drawing it back to this, but as you were saying about becoming that creature and that animal, I draw that back to the golden triceratops and the animals and how that's developed in your work in ways that you have surprised by. How much of that is maybe inhabiting this other way of being?

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: I don't know. I guess there are a few of my works where I kind of cross over, I guess not anthropomorphising animals but looking for something in between. When there is this sort of, not a wild nature to being a human being but sort of recognising that we are creatures, we are messy organic creatures in every sense of the word. Yeah, I'm not sure how to describe that. Cause I would never think of it as wildness or animalistic, but I don't see animalistic as out of control, it's almost recognising your own organic basis in some way.

Esther Anatolitis: Yeah and for me those kinds of things are always about instinct. The sense that we just, I think this is one of the really compelling things about being an artist is understanding how to draw on your own instincts and like you were saying what's valid and what's not to make works from but then we sort of again that mainstream where there is the sense of distinguishing ourselves from animals as those that's a different world that we can master, or we can control. Well actually we are animal creatures.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: I have always been resistant to that of being intuitive as an artist. I've never liked that idea, I've always felt that you've got to have a reason, got to have an objective, cold hard reason to everything you do and maybe that's something in the future I'll become more comfortable with cause it is clearly a thing which I might have to recognise. But I suppose the other side the way I make work is pretty, not clinical, but it is like there is not a lot of intuition or freedom, experimentation, I'm carving something that I want to look like a certain thing. I mean there is always links you make in your mind as you go and that's just part of it, but it really feels like a process, a very fun process, I love it, it's very much a process.

Esther Anatolitis: Intuition kind of sounds more like the sort of the opposite of judgement. But when I think of instinct I think of conviction, the things...

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: That's a good way of thinking about it.

Esther Anatolitis: And how you become certain of, like you were saying before about what's an artist or what isn't an artist and then there comes a point where you are no longer, you take emerging away there's a whole set of convictions. It is about I am now adding to what it means to be an artist.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: I guess at some point you do feel like that, and that is when you feel like you are a peer. You're adding something, you are contributing, and you are like this is cool cause you know people will recognise that and they will let you know rather than you feel it yourself. You almost have to be convinced by everyone else. Every artist is like that, I am sure they're so unsure, but the world is telling them that what they are doing is awesome. But even like some of the best artists you meet, it is amazing how unsure they are still. And part of it is like oh my god maybe I'll never be sure [laughs]. I guess I'm comfortable with that and I hate to be too sure of myself.

Esther Anatolitis: You've got to, that openness is everything really. That's what drives us.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: I kind of like to think that most artists fluctuate, and this is by the minute or by the second, from being completely assured going this is the greatest thing every and at the same time going this is the worst thing ever, everyone is going to hate me for this and it is constant, you just got to try and end on a high. Cause that deadline will just come. And hopefully it lands on a high, but I think it just an up and a down, everyone must be like that, I'm assuming.

Esther Anatolitis: We let's just end it right there.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: On a high!

Esther Anatolitis: So if we have this kind of conversation in a week it would be totally different which is just amazing, but Abdul-Rahman thanks so much for talking with us.

Abdul-Rahman Abdullah: No worries, thank you.

Esther Anatolitis: So much to think about.

[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.