

Episode 37: Ku Arts Symposium in Port Augusta with Penelope Benton

Intro: 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 in global contexts.

Penelope Benton: So I'd like to start, um, by acknowledging the traditional owners of this country and pay my respects to the elders; past, present, and emerging. I acknowledge all first nations peoples listening to this podcast. There are 40 Aboriginal groups and cultures that make up Port Augusta, the regional centre where I currently am in South Australia. It is the largest Aboriginal community outside of Adelaide, and I'm here for the Ku Arts symposium.

My name is Penelope Benton. I am the General Manager of the National Association For The Visual Arts, and I am joined here by artist Allison Carroll, who is the chair of Ernabella Arts in the APY lands, the oldest art centre in the country. Mr. David Miller, the chair of Ku Arts and Ninuku Arts in APY lands. I'm here with Lavene Ngatokorua, an independent artist here in Port Augusta and board member of Ku Arts, and Marie Falcinella, the CEO of Ku Arts. Thank you for joining me.

Marie Falcinella: Thanks for having us here, Penelope.

Penelope Benton: Thank you. So Lavene will be hosting her First Nations photographic mentorship program in Devonport. Can you tell us about that program?

Lavene Ngatokorua: Yes. I'm, I'm with ... Along side of, um, the person by the name of Dave Laslett who's a, um, photographic, um, illustrator, creative administrator, yeah, and, um, he's been working with us at the, the community but, um, also ... So it's not only Devonport, it's Port Augusta.

Penelope Benton: Right.

Lavene Ngatokorua: Um, and we've been going on for ... Our first come up with a concept in 2015, uh, but it ran in August 2016 and we had an exhibition that, um ... In early this year-

Penelope Benton: Great.

Lavene Ngatokorua: Called limitless. So it ran, uh, it ran all the two years, but, um, all up, we probably would've had over 40 people participate, um, from community, and it was all about the, um, aboriginal community, um, but we saw it as an opportunity if we've got a, um, a renowned award winning, uh, photographer in our midst one already.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: Um, so that's been a part of the journey, and I'm, I'm really , I do art, um, so I do a lot of painting, but I'm always, um, traveling in my own Jaco which is ... Um, when I say Jaco, that's country for our people of the Flinders ranges. So when I'm traveling through my grandfather's country, I'm always looking at the landscape and, you know, my father and my grandmother ... My father speak of the country and I was a ... I don't know what the Uras did, that's a, that's a ... When I say Uras is Aboriginal.

And you know, what were they think and what was they doing because their landscape is their storybook. So, um, I wanted to do something and create a, create ... Um, using a different medium and also photography, um, and I wanted to, um, tell a story like that. So, I worked through, um, painting, but through, um, photography, so looking at it in a different way and I could tell the story, but they also took me back to a place of importance. So, you know, we think of mining companies, mining companies can come in. And I said, "I will take away that hill, I will take away that tree." But that's part of our story, you take away that, the story is no more.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: You can't tell your young ... You can't tell your grandkids or that ... You can't tell her nothing because, um, that tree is taken or that hill has being changed. So it's, it's really important that what I see now we capture that. Um, and then the story goes on. It's always there-

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: ... But it's something that I feel inside and, and I'm, I'm always asking my, um, my grandmother was born in a place called Bloods Creek, which is that the other side of Oodnadatta, and she was part of the stolen generations, um, and she, she was moved down here and she met my grandfather, my grandfather, um, yeah, he's from the Flinders. So it's ... I've got a lot of connection, um, through, through, uh, um, the other side of Oodnadatta but also to Uluru because that's where my grandmother ... Um, my great grandmother come from. Um, but, uh, you know, when I go through my mother's side, they are people from the Simpson desert. So I've got a bit of a really interesting background of where I come from, but, uh, I just wanna try a different ... Like I said, different medium. And I think that taking it to, to, um, other people in the community, giving them a chance is something that has really worked.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: And, and I think that Aboriginal people taking photos, um, and being in control of the camera rather than someone else trying to take it for us-

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: ... Because I had a connection. The other day, I was looking at my auntie. And I said the story yesterday.

Penelope Benton: I would hoping you would share this story.

Lavene Ngatokorua: Yeah. But I was looking through the camera and ... coz I'm really close like that and I'm looking her eyes and my eyes connected, and I almost really dropped the camera because she looked straight at me. Um, and it really was just this one-on-one, but I could see, like, right through. Um, and she asked me, she said, "Am I supposed ... What do you want me to do, pose or do this?" And I said, "Nah, just look at me and also just be you." But because I knew her, and we've got a relationship with my ... And she's my Auntie, she just, she just let everything go and she just looked at me, and I saw a lot of things, like, it shocked me-

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: Um, and I never realized that's what you had that really intimate relationship with a person, but through that lens. Um, but I've been lucky, I suppose, um, that, that I've ... Since then, I've, um, done another exhibition and, and it was um, um, down at Red Poles in McLaren Vale, um, and put that up. And that journey there, I had to do six images. And because I was brought up at Umeewarra mission, uh, at a ... Which is a children's home, which over 400 children went through, um, it sort of ... Um, one of my pieces was a bad ... I mean it was about my mother and father getting together and how they coming back, um, um, and it showed the church and a little girl running up to the church, but then I rememb- the second one I did was my grandfather and they used to walk up to the mission to the, uh, to the, uh, children's home and he'd visit every ... It'd be every week or when he get his pay and he'd bring cold drinks, chips and lolly from the shop, and he'd come out and then sit down with me and my other sister, who was only about six or seven.

And he would say ... He would say to us, you know ... And me being the older one at that time, he would say, "You look over there." And he was looking at the hills and we call the hills Bambarra that's the hills in our language. "The hills over there." He said, "That's your home. You come from over there." He said, "This place, you're a visitor, but you come from over there. You'll go back there one day." And as a little kid, I remember saying that, "I wanna go there."

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: And I just needed to travel there. And I know every time I got back on the country, I'm home. It's something that's really deep inside. I just think that, you know, with the, with a photographic, um, you know, mentoring ... Uh, with, with ... In terms of photos, um, it's a new form and I think that Aboriginal people have been portrayed poorly. Um, you know, most of the photos I've seen early Australians were people getting m-measured how, you know, how wide their head is or their legs, and

it's pure black and white images. But with Aboriginal people being in control of the camera, you see a lot different. And I think it's a, it's a beautiful medium to use that captures a story, um, from long ago using a modern tool.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

[Music]

Penelope Benton: You won the 2018 NAIDOC, uh, lifetime achievement award in Port Augusta, can you tell me about, um, about winning that and what that meant to you, and, and how, how did that come about?

Lavene Ngatokorua: It was quite a shock. Um, and, you know, you work in community, never looking for any recognition, you just go about your work. And I think that for me it was, um, you know, I really appreciated the acknowledgement, um, uh, for the work that I do in community. Um, and you know, I do a lot of the volunteering, um, things around community, uh, which we see last night with the, um, the, uh, Aboriginal sports, um, doing the catering and, you know, we're just a group of volunteers that get together and, uh, we try and, um, we know that some of the um, uh, you know, when people are doing catering or things like that, we wanna run it and then the money goes back into this fund and then we help young people participate in sport-

Penelope Benton: That's great.

Lavene Ngatokorua: ... Or, or, or to go, um, to do things that they wanna be able to do that is not necessarily funded-

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: ... So we support the parents who go and support their children-

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: Um, in going to various state or national, um, events but also local. Um, but, you know, that, that's just one of the things, but, you know, run the ... With the community, um, of Davenport, which is just outside of Port Augusta as every little community. So, um, we run the NAIDOC events this year. So we hosted 18 events for the community of Port Augusta, um, over five days. And it was the largest NAIDOC, I believe, events run around the nation for one town.

Penelope Benton: Wow.

Lavene Ngatokorua: And that, that consisted of a culture day, um, and we're blessed in Port Augusta to have over 40 Aboriginal cultural groups, uh, like you said earlier in the introduction. But, um, then we, you know ... I think it's about putting yourself out there, hearing people. One of the things I've learned in my journey is to listen and sometimes just be quiet, let other

people talk, and then you find out there's a lot of people that have so much to, to give and ... But they don't know how to put that into action. And it's people like, um, you know, like me, in positions where you can put those into action for people and you bring them on the journey.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: So it's still things belong to them.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: And, you know, that's one of the ways I've been operating all my life.

Penelope Benton: So great. Thank you.

Lavene Ngatokorua: A lot of people do welcome the countries and they do a minute of silence and respect of our loved ones that passed away. And I was thinking, um, "How could I do something different, um, for the delegates coming to the symposium?" And, um, I wanted the, the delegates to be able to see me Port Augusta as it once was, the way I look at the landscape when I'm traveling through country. And, you know, Port Augusta was covered with what they call the native pine. And in my language we call it "Vimba". And there's places around South Australia that's called Kimba and Pimba, but, you know, that's it, Vimba.

So, um, yeah, just to ... With Port Augusta being the meeting place where Aboriginal people and the trading where, you know, people came in with Ochres and, um wood, and different things from their areas, and bringing it to Port Augusta and trading, I wanted people to get a sense of what that would have been, because we're all meeting here, and we all come in with our stories. So once you close your eyes, then you'd take a minute to just really think about it. You can actually hear people talking of the first language that was spoken. You hear the noises, you will smell the smoke of the fire, and just to take that and see the land in its full, how beautiful that is. And I think we all got a sense of that yesterday.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: And I wanted the people to share what, uh ... Or, or, or, um, have a little piece of what I see-

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: ... Um, when I'm traveling through country. Just, you know, for anyone who's traveling around in Australia, anywhere you go-

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: ... When you pull up in the country along that road, take a moment to reflect.

Penelope Benton: And even in the city, right?

Lavene Ngatokorua: Yeah. You can close off all the noise-

Penelope Benton: Yeah, yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: ... And imagine-

Penelope Benton: Imagine what it was.

Lavene Ngatokorua: ... Just imagine.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: It'll take you. So you can silence out the busy street traffic-

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Lavene Ngatokorua: Quiet it all down, and it's actually peaceful, the birds, the sounds.

Penelope Benton: Yeah. It is.

Lavene Ngatokorua: Yeah.

[Music]

Allison Carroll: I'm Allison Carroll, and I'm from Ernabella. Ernabella is in APY land. And Ernabella Arts, it started in ... It-it's the oldest arts centre. It started in 1948.

Penelope Benton: Wow.

Allison Carroll: And it used to be, you know, missionaries were there, but now it's ... When Ernabella started, Ernabella Arts, but before it was only women working in art center ... Not Art Centre, but craft, but now when craft started, we asked men to come in and started to work in Art Centre. And there were quite a lot of men and women, and young people working in Art Centre, but Ernabella Arts, it was started long time ago. I think it started in a creek.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Allison Carroll: No, no building, we were in a creek. And they started making like, they used to sit and they started spinning, spinning the wall to make rocks, raw rocks, and sometimes they make cards, you know not canvas, only cards, Christmas cards. And that's, that was happening before, but now, we're doing lots of things there like paintings and canvas and its all a mix but before it was weaving, wall arts. All those things were happening before, but now, batiks, it used to be working in batik.

Penelope Benton: hmmm batik

Allison Carroll: I used to go to Art Centre when I was a school girl on school, school holidays. We always go to the craft room to learn with, the older ladies like my mother, grandmothers, and elders of all ages. We learn from them working, making rocks, canvas ... Not canvas, floor rugs, paintings, weaving. We did all those things.

David Miller: I'm the chair of Ninuku and also Ku Arts, and I like doing, uh, painting in the art centre. Cos I talk to the government that we need a building, and as I mentioned yesterday, I was talking about how our building is made of mud and is falling apart and it's happening around the floor. Um, I'd like to talk about my background. Um, before, I didn't know nothing about painting, working anywher as a stockman, when I was younger I wanted to move away from community and work at a station near Oodnadatta and I learn all this mustering business and fencing and that, and I went back home and I worked and built the community back up, building the water pipes, rotting houses, building a shade for the older people to sit out to do our work.

Penelope Benton: You, you, you made the shed?

David Miller: Now we ... All the young fellows, we make ... We cut a tree and bring all the timbers in and built the shade for people, that must be ours. And I've done every work around the community. Before community and now's community, and I started painting back in 2006 which is like yesterday, and I learned that and doing the painting, showing all the uncles, my grandson, my son, my daughter and that's how it goes. When Mrs Carrol was saying that that building, Ernabella building, we used to call it school that building. When we all spread out looking for a job, come back, making friends and raising family. And now there's a lot of things happening in Ninaku, there's more young girls and theres more young ones coming in and stretching out canvas. Working, some working on making rugs like this for old people. Getting all the spinning and weaving Tjampi. Making little lizards and all that. Spear, making spears. I've learnt my grandson to make spear with everybody, going out in the bush and showing the young ones to see the country and also the rock art, the old people have been living on that time. Bush Tucker, yeah. I used to do a painting for my father, and it's there, and one day he might see it. You know passing on the knowledge ... Passing knowledge to the young people, you know, go ahead and show their kids, and it's like a step-by-step learning our young ones to keep for them, and it's everywhere, from old people or the young people, future, so they can carry on.

David Miller speaking in traditional language.

Penelope Benton: So Marie, Ku Arts was formed by a group of women in in the APY lands in 1998. Uh, it is the only Aboriginal support agency that works with both art centres and artists working outside the art centrr model. Can you explain about who Ku Arts is and does?

Marie Falcinella: Yeah, sure. So as Allison, uh, was saying before, Ku Arts started in the APY lands, and it was a group of women that got together and they recognize that their art ... Their craft centres with their craft rooms that were ... They're just starting out, that there was such potential in those and that they were becoming really important, um, hubs in the community. So the women banded together, they lobbied government, they travelled to Canberra, they travelled through other communities and they worked to establish, um, art centers in seven, in seven in total in the APYlands. Um, from that history ... And I guess going back to what, like, uh, Allison was just saying about how Ernabella, the oldest art centre in Australia, it started 70 years ago in a creek.

You know, this is one of the first ARIs in Australia to put it in whitefella terms.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Marie Falcinella: Um, these are the oldest and most successful ARISs in the country that aren't really, you know, considered like that, they're all aboriginal owned and operated.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Marie Falcinella: Um, so starting in, in circumstances like that, I mean, it's very, sort of, um, under resource, there's no infrastructure, but it's about artists getting together and, uh, and creating something really special. So Ku arts started 20 years ago as you, as you said, um, and about 12 years ago, the artists in the APY lands recognized, you know ... Seeing all this incredible stuff happened through their, um, community art centres. And we started ... They started looking outwards, and through that, as Allison was saying, travelling around to other communities, um, throughout regional South Australia and talking to artists about what they needed. And from that, the SICAD program, Statewide Indigenous Community Arts Development Program was formed. Um, so that's a program that we're funded by through art South Australia, and it's really to provide support services, creative workshops, professional development workshops to artists, um, living outside of the APY region, recognizing that typically in those regions there's, there's not an aboriginal owned and operated art centre where they can access materials and support with their career.

Um, so that's really where SICAD started. Um, and so we do work in the two models, art centre support, through the arts centre model, and then SICAD. And I guess that's what brings us here today as well. Um, I came on board with Ku at the beginning of last year and just trying to work out well, who are the artists? And how am I connecting with communities in this new space? And recognizing that there was still ... Particularly for artists working independently, they weren't accessing mainstream, so call it opportunities and organizations like NAVA that are working on a national level.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Marie Falcinella: Um, so we're really here to be a conduit to that and to, to find out how we can better be supporting, um, artists working in regions.

Penelope Benton: So great. And you, you listed off a bunch of places where people have come from to be here today. Can you share that

Marie Falcinella: Yes, sure. So we do have artists here from the APY fantastic chair and a few others that have come, um, along for the day. We've got artists from Cooper Pedy, from Oodnadatta, Ceduna, um, I think Port Lincoln, um, and the local Port Augusta community as well. I've probably forgotten, uh, a whole number of, um, of, of locations there, but it's just been so fantastic. And we, we have actually received funding support from Tarnarhi festival, which is, um, supported by BHP and South Australia's annual, uh, festival for aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Contemporary Art. Um, so that supported the artist travel, which is why we've been able to bring so many people together here today.

Also, the Australia Council For The Arts have supported this event. Um, Lydia Miller, is about to do her consultation around NICA, the formation of a National Indigenous Cultural Authority, uh, which is gonna be really exciting conversation this afternoon if yesterday's, um, workshops and sessions were anything to go by. There was a lot of really robust dialogue that has just started, and people are really, really talking and really thinking. So this afternoon's going to be really interesting.

Penelope Benton: So Mr. Miller and Marie, you both came, uh, to NAVA's future forward event in Canberra where we launched our strategic plan and focus on a major revision of the Code of Practice over the next few years. What do you think should be changed or added, um, to the code of practice that would be of benefit to art centres and artists, uh, First Nations artists around the country?

Marie Falcinella: Well, this is, sort of, um, very much an extension of what was discussed this afternoon in the consultation around the NICA and the forming of that, um, overarching cultural authority on a national level. And, you know, I can speak for the conversation that arose in that room and, and at the heart of it was culture first, you know, respecting and protecting culture, and that is really the highest thing on the agenda for our artists and for art centres, um, and also putting Aboriginal people and Strait islander people in, in positions where they can be making influence at a, at a government level and at a policy level. You know, they shouldn't be, um, funding agencies that are making big decisions about Aboriginal organizations, Aboriginal communities without Aboriginal Torres Strait islander people there, making those decisions and guiding those outcomes. So really, they're the two key-

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Marie Falcinella: ... Big things.

Penelope Benton: Yeah.

Marie Falcinella: Yeah. On top of actually establishing those guidelines, it's around the way that those guidelines are also communicated, and the way that they can be made accessible to, um, you know, to artists from right across different language groups. And I think that that's a key thing that we're coming across as well, particularly working in our SICAD program space where we're working with independent artists who, uh, don't have the support of an art centre, um, guiding them through all this really tricky stuff, uh, that they need to, to progress their careers, and, you know, it is that, that way of communicating which is so vital. So making it relevant and accessible is one of the key things.

Penelope Benton: Thank you so much for your time.

Marie Falcinella: It's an absolute pleasure. Thank you so much for being here in Port Augusta with us.

Penelope Benton: Yay.

Outro: 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 organizations.