

NAVA: in conversation, Episode Six

[Introduction music]

Voice over: 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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Nina Miall: My name is Nina Miall and I'm a curator here at Carriageworks and I am one of the five curators involved in *The National*, with my colleague here Carriageworks Director Lisa Havilah, Wayne Tunnicliffe and Anneke Jaspers from the Art Gallery of NSW, and Blair French from the MCA. The discussions about collaborating on *The National* originated between the three directors of the institutions and I think firstly there was a willingness to do something together. Traditionally, there hasn't been much collaboration certainly between the institutions here in Sydney and I think there was a willingness to do something there. I think secondly, there was a recognition that while Sydney was very well served by the Biennale of Sydney in terms of show casing international art to a Sydney audience, there wasn't really an exhibition that was a kind of broad survey of Australian art here in Sydney. And, so they were the kind of the founding ideas for *The National*. And the three directions in their conversations arrived at a frame work for a six-year project with three editions in 2017, 2019 and 2021. So, there was no overarching thematic or curatorial premise to the 2017 edition of *The National*. Rather we were interested in showing the most urgent, dynamic and ambitious art being made in Australia today. Obviously, across all states, across generations and artists working across media, as well as those Australian artists based overseas. And in terms of arriving at the 50 or artists who are in this show, each of the five curators had their own research interest, their own lines of enquiry they had been perusing. We started meeting regularly about 18 months ago sharing those ideas, comparing notes on studio visits we'd done with artists around the country, then sharing the artists lists we were working with, discussing those lists, comparing them, and then gradually streamlined them and brought that down to a core group of 50 artists. And in terms of where those artists are housed across the three sites of the exhibition, we tried to do that in a way which really acknowledged the existing DNA of those institutions, we have very different spaces, we have very different characters, different demographics in terms of the audience and different priorities in terms of our programming. So here at Carriageworks, what that means is that a lot of the artists here have a performative dimension to their practice, we're a multidisciplinary arts institution that has a strong commitment to performance of various types and that is really evident in the selection of artists we have here. We also have a strong representation of Indigenous artists, which again speaks to Carriageworks' position within Redfern, a traditionally Indigenous community here. And we have a strong focus on programming and commissioning Indigenous work. I think the title is something everyone is quite interested in and we deliberated about it at length. It is intended as a provocation, it's certainly not intended, or we are not intending to kind of define or delineate any sort of national tendencies or a national identity in art, I think rather, we were interested in the fact that a lot of the artists seem to be working with quite contested or quite contradictory notions of site

and of place and there was quite a lot of ambivalence in their relationship to their homeland or adopted country. And so, we were particularly interested in those artists who were kind of challenging notions of the nation state or nationalisms and kind of unpicking those, so it's a deliberately provocative title.

[Music]

Nina Miall: So I'm sitting here with Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran who is one of the 17 artists we have here at Carriageworks. Lisa and I were quite sure from fairly early on in the process that Ramesh was an artist whose work we were interested in, Lisa has quite a long association with Ramesh and the question was really, what we did with him.

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: [Laughs]

Nina Miall: How we kind of shaped that commission. Ramesh had just had a really fantastic show at the National Gallery of Australia that was very resolved and quite classical I guess in its presentation. And so, from our earliest discussions Ramesh was certainly interested in kind of doing something radically different to that and was quite inspired from the Carriageworks basis, I hope I'm not putting words in your mouth.

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: No, no this is exactly right.

Nina Miall: So, the first thing we did was really to look at the space and then give Ramesh free reign to do whatever he wanted, and I don't know if you can tell us a little bit about how you responded.

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: Well I think speaking about it from a personal, anecdotal level is actually quite revealing because I actually remember the options of the space and I think when I saw the one it was in, I thought, yep that's it. I think what I really responded to was, I looked up and there was the industrial remanence of this crane. I had just exhibited at the National Gallery of Australia which was this kind of severe brutalist architectural context and coming here there was this real kind of grunge factor that kind of appealed to me. And the other thing was, from the perspective of an artist who just had a couple of big museum shows, working in a space like Carriageworks that wasn't concerned with housing and maintaining a collection from a conservation perspective, I kind of understood I could do some things I perhaps wouldn't be able to do at the previous venues I showed at. Which I kind of saw as an opportunity to push the work rather than, I guess, restate a previous sentiment in Sydney. So, what I really dwelled upon was thinking about what I could do in Carriageworks that I couldn't do in any other space in Sydney. So, the things that struck me initially were, scale, lighting and this idea of immersion and more of an experiential, I guess, approach to making the work, or an experiential way for the audience to perceive the work. And I guess the other thing from seeing other things at Carriageworks, from a sculptural perspective, there's always a sense of large scale sculptural installations, so I kind of got the sense that we'd be able to install something pretty whacky and big fairly smoothly. So, I kind of started from the ceiling down, I said okay I want the key site-line to be up there, and it was kind of in the roof [laughs] so then I just started scribbling essentially and coming up with some kind of visual schema to work from.

Nina Miall: And what Ramesh arrived at was this incredible installation called *The Cave* which incorporated three of the totemic mud-men sculptures that had come from the National Gallery of Australia show, but which Ramesh kind of grunged up I guess for the

purposes of the presentation here at Carriageworks. And then, in the centre he constructed this extraordinary six metre high I think...

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: 7.2 metre.

Nina Miall: 7.2 metre high site-specific work called *Dirt Deity* which involved pressing wet clay into chicken mesh to this amazing mutant figure with big polystyrene heads.

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: Because what I thought was interesting to me at the moment was going on from the previous show at the National Gallery and the Ian Potter Museum, it was really engaging with scale and this idea of permanency, thinking about monuments, thinking about institutional collections, thinking about the role that collecting institutions play in preserving, maintaining and giving value to culture. So, on some level I really wanted to have this giant monument that was completely ephemeral in lots of ways or something that wouldn't necessarily withstand the elements you know, water, wind, fire, so I thought about having this dialogue with earth and unfired clay so to make something of scale. Which in lots of ways was also kind of thinking about architecture and that was really one of the key things I was thinking about in terms of designing that fairly geometric pyramid structure that is the body of this deity. But the other thing I was think of was, which was something I hadn't really thought about, was this idea of electricity as a theme almost. Because I worked with Mark Dyson, a lighting designer on the lighting for this, so it has I think there's 58 metres of neon flex, sequenced, and they flash at different, with an irregular sequential pattern. We've also programmed theatre lights, we, well *he*, I don't know how to do that [laughs] but things basically flash and come on at different points to give this sense of inconsistency. Because I think the other think I was really concerned with was this question of, how do you actually work collaboratively with a builder, a designer, a fabricator but still make it completely low-fi? So, I kind of had to be quite present in lots of stages to make sure things weren't symmetrical and consistent and neat. But going on from electricity, I really wanted to kind of have this dialogue with urban space which I think Carriageworks specifically, as a venue, has this key kind of relationship with given its history and also the kind of events that take place here. So I thought neon flex, kind of, high coloured lighting was this really obvious sign of a metropolitan region if you think about advertising, city scapes, or whatever, so I wanted to use that in a sculptural and expressive sense.

Nina Miall: Yeah, and it is an interesting aesthetic counterpoint to the earthy, potentially kind of, raw nature of clay.

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: And I guess from a material perspective I was thinking about the tensions between, like natural/artificial, permanent/ impermanent, and with clay I was always thinking about its relationship with polystyrene, because in my head polystyrene is perhaps the most artificial material you can get or it's kind of a material that's opposed to nature. It makes like 100 million years to degrade so...however, I used a recyclable polystyrene.

Nina Miall: Oh good, I feel so much better.

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: [Laughs] So, there were lots of kinds of considerations that I think were urban-specific in making this work and designing this work.

Nina Miall: And it's interesting to note that the central work *Dirt Deity* will be destroyed at the end of the exhibition.

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: Yeah, so I can actually recycle most of those components and I think that was the other thing. I think as an artist, working with large scale sculpture, if institutions don't acquire them, you've kind of got to consider its narrative of existence, where do the things go? What impact does that have from an environmental perspective, financial perspective, and all of those kinds of things. So, having something made from things that can be reused was quite appealing to me in that respect.

[Music]

Nina Miall: I think we've had a really fantastic response I think that fact that the exhibition is a single exhibition developed collectively and triangulated over the three sites means there's been, we've certainly had people coming through the exhibition here at Carriageworks that hadn't been to Carriageworks before and that's really interesting for us. I hope the Art Gallery has had audiences through there that perhaps haven't been to the Art Gallery before. So, I think that's been a really critical thing. I've taken a number of groups through, you know art students, groups for seniors and pensioners, we've had a program of visiting international curators and media who have come through and met with a number of the artists and there's been coverage in international art journals, so I think it has had quite a big impact.

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: I guess if I speak from more of a micro level of audience engagement, I think the key thing I was always thinking about was, what are the limits of representation in a central space which people couldn't necessarily avoid, to witness the whole exhibition? And I guess working through my time with perhaps gender specific or sexually loaded imagery or culturally loaded imagery, these conversations always kind of need to happen and I think what I've realised is, if there's no narrative element to the representation, so if they seem to be less concerning to lots of people. So I really wanted to have this ejaculating penis, kind of as this central point of the install because I've never really worked with narrative before like, the sculptures are there, they're not doing anything, they're not engaging with any explicit behaviour, so I really wanted to think about this idea of artist as this creator and this kind of self-parading, self-portrait which gestured towards this ridiculous machismo of the scale of the work. But I think what I noticed is, the moving image of the neon of this phallus with this ambiguous droplet flashing has got lots of Instagram traction, which I think it was for in lots of ways, I was actually thinking about the internet when I was making that kind of work, thinking about the things people want to photograph, thinking about the things that circulate, thinking about what makes an image punchy. And I think working as an artist in this technological and cultural climate, I'm always considering how screen-based image and internet culture actually, what role that plays in activating work or adding different dimensions to it. So really in some ways that's a gesture to audience participation in the cyber world.

Brianna Munting: How do you create those relationships or movements of audiences between say Ramesh's work, to Claudia's, to the other exhibition spaces?

Nina Miall: I think that's really where our respective marketing teams come in and collaboration is always a kind of thorny process and you hope that ultimately it is a productive one, and I certainly feel that about *The National*. In terms of the curatorial dialogue, I know we've all really, really enjoyed the exchange of ideas and you can feel a little siloed as a curator producing exhibitions for the same space and perhaps working with those artists that the institution is interested in championing, rather than kind of, which we've kind of broadened that, which is great. But obviously for a show of this scale, all the other

departments of the institution also have to work together and knit together and that just means juggling their respective timelines and budgets and processes. I think each institution recognised their strengths and played to those, so the publication of the book was managed by the MCA who have a design studio and are probably best positioned to manage the operation of that. The digital was led by the Art Gallery in terms of the delivery of the website.

Brianna Munting: In terms of, also your work specifically in the context of the other works then, was it a conscious relationship because I feel like when you walk through the spaces there is a beautiful narrative that is created that pushes back against this idea of *The National* and it creates or shows this contested space really well. Was that a conscious effort by the curatorial team?

Nina Miall: I would love to say it was and I'm delighted that it reads that way. It's always a fine balance between creating an argument, a curatorial argument or a conceptual argument and the sense of a journey through the exhibition, and balancing that against very boring and tedious, pragmatic concerns. There's a further layer of complication with an exhibition where the majority of the work is commissioned. So, I think 15 of the 17 artists in the show were commissioned to make new work specifically for *The National*. Commissioning is an extremely rewarding process, it's the one moment when the curator gets to slightly flex their creative muscles as well, but also there's only so much you can do in terms of, you aren't necessarily sure what the finished work is going to look like often till quite late in the day. So, there can be quite an anxiety about not really being able to plot out an exhibition until very late in the day. That said, while there's no overarching kind of theme to the biannual, there are certain interconnected threads and lines of enquiry across the three sites and also at Carriageworks we were interested in what we talked about as the anxieties of identity. So, the idea of identity not as a kind of discrete and resolved construct but instead as something fraught and fractured, run through with fault lines and endlessly contested and evolving and fluid I guess. So, I do think *The National* here at Carriageworks is quite successful in terms of how it did create an argument or a narrative or journey through the exhibition, while also kind of respecting what the works needed and placing them in a way that made sense spatially. And sometimes that just works really nicely and other times you've got to do a bit of juggling.

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: Well as an artist I can probably testify to the fact that you, I don't even know what it's going to look like till very late in the day as well. Especially when making a work that has an element of site specificity. Because things like placement angles, viewpoints, site-lines, especially when you're working with a key figure that's something like 7.5 metres tall. There were lots of opening doors, closing doors, walking around, pushing things, you know, like these 200 kilo plinths inches just to get it just right. So I find that process generally exciting but I try make sure it not so cumbersome on the proceedings of the whole installation process, but I don't really like to work with a rigid plan and then arrive and here's the exhibition, you know I don't do those CAD files or do foam core models, you know that's not me, mainly because I wouldn't know how to do that [laughs]. But I tend to be a bit more about design principles so contrast, tension, a-symmetry, think about how to make a dynamic viewing experience, and I think a lot of that comes from being in the space with the objects, getting a sense of things like negative space as well, it kind of needs to happen in the space thinking about a more phenomenological relationship between viewers and works. You've got to get a sense of movement which in lots of ways can't be planned in the studio environment.

[Music]

Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran: I think the work for *The National* was positioned in a way where if we want to talk in very basic terms it's probably the largest thing I've done to date and also in some ways, the most collaborative exhibition I've produced, in that I haven't worked that closely with a designer to work on an expressive element before which was the lighting. So, I think what it's kind of given me is a sense of where I'd like to go I guess, because I think before there were very specific parameters around what I was doing and who I was working it with. But I think what I really want to get a sense of is working with kinetic components so things that move, you know they don't have to be spinning or flying, I'm kind of interested in, I've always wanted to make a really big fountain, so that's what I'm working on for a show in February.

Nina Miall: Speaking personally, it was a really great project for me because I've spent most of my professional life outside Australia and returned about four and a half years ago, and for most of the time I've been at Carriageworks. I'd been working with international artists as I was when I was based in London and so it really gave me an opportunity to immerse myself in the Australian art scene and get up to speed, I guess I'd been away for 12 years so I feel like I learnt a lot and grew a lot and added to that knowledge bank that you have as a curator. And I think it was probably helpful as well as in terms of the balance of curatorial expertise that we had for this show, the other four curators had had long and very illustrious careers in the Australian art world and between them knew more or less every artist working. So, I think I did bring a slightly sort of more external or outsider perspective. And I think we all recognised just in the course of our dialogue that we probably did have institutional blind spots as well, so it was interesting to address those, and it was such a monumental effort getting it delivered in a relatively short time frame. We have a date in the diary for the five curators to have dinner in about three weeks' time, which is a sort of debrief on *The National* and then after that we will start looking ahead to the next one, but I think it's safe to say that probably none of the curators involved this time will be involved next time and we may even look at alternative models inviting an external curator or really just to explore different curatorial models.

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