

NAVA: in conversation, Episode Eight

[Introduction music]

Voiceover: The National Association for the Visual Arts is the peak body protecting and promoting the professional interests of the Australian visual arts. NAVA in conversation is a series exploring the issues and challenges of working in the sector. We speak with artists, curators and administrators to gain insight into the experiences of contemporary practice and seek to propose ideas for change, progress and resilience in both local and global contexts.

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Anneke Jaspers: My name is Anneke Jaspers, I'm the Curator of Contemporary Art the Art Gallery of NSW. I've worked here for the past seven years and the focus of my role in that time has been on working with living artists to commission new artworks across a very broad range of medium. Generally, I would say the focus of my own practice is around socially engaged art and also interdisciplinary work. The curatorial group for this first iteration was interested in responding to the framework of a national survey quite reflexively, to think of it as a kind of provocation, and we were interested in that sense to work with practices or bring together a group of works that would unsettle dominant narratives around the politics of place. And we also wanted to think about Australia's relationship to the rest of the world historically and in the present. So, in the section of the exhibition that's here at the Gallery, you'll see there's a great diversity of cultural perspectives and also many of the works connect art to other places and that's true for instance Taloi Havini's work, and there are a few different threads that run through the show here. For instance, many of the works reflect on the question of sovereignty, the legacies of colonialism, perspectives onto land, also environmental change and gender. Each of the works does this in its own very particular way and of course each work is exploring its own specific historical narrative or trajectory. But I'd say what that means is when they come together in the space here, those works have something to tell us collectively about how histories are made, how they're constructed, including the role of institutions like the Gallery in those processes. And in the end, I feel like the dialogue between here provides some kind of commentary not necessarily a didactic one but maybe a more speculative one on historical perspective. How historical perspective changes over time, in relation to the politics of the day and certain cultural values and what that has to tell us about our understanding of progress. Curatorially, at the Gallery, the focus of our early research was on this tendency in recent practice for many artists to look back to the past and to engage with history as a way of thinking about the present, but also about the future, and some of the tendencies in those practices are to retrieve historical narratives to work with archival material or to build connections between different time periods.

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Taloi Havini: My name is Taloi Havini and I'm an artist. The work is called *Habitat*, it's a three channel multi-screen video installation with sound. For me, *Habitat*, this is the second version of the one before called *Habitat: Konawiru* so for me it's an ongoing investigation, like a series, and this particular iteration for me was about covering an area of Bougainville, where I was born, from the west coast all the way to the centre of the island. And just traversing the problematic, I guess you could say, terrain. For me, *Habitat* was really about

wondering why Bougainville has this problematic history in the Pacific and also how I even came to be in Australia because of the civil war and it was all about mining really and still to this day it remains unresolved. I've made other works before, however, I really wanted to make something quite epic in terms of looking at the way the land is represented. There's a lot of historical references in this work and I'm not quite sure if it makes sense to a lot of people, but for me it was a way to explore how the West looks at land and use archival material and even sound and make it very immersive. I'm really interested in documenting history and Bougainville's mining history is really tied up with Australian colonial history and so for me walking the land back then, photographing it, you know, making a work about it, I realised I wanted to do video, so I went back. And one year I took a GoPro and I went to the west coast and friends told me you should go to this toxic swamp, so I went there, and it was this unfolding experience of just being baffled by all this destruction and yet no one really knows about it, how would they? This is a very far flung part of the Pacific. So, I thought how I could represent this landscape in a way that sort of challenged previous perceptions of how idyllic Pacific Islands are and really it's not the case. So, every year I'd go back with a different type of camera, so one year I decided I really needed an aerial perspective, so I went back with a drone and that was important because in Bougainville and Papua New Guinea, I guess you could say, that first contact between the West and Islanders or indigenous people was often through hearing the buzz of the helicopter blades because we're in such remote island or mountainous regions. Whereas I found in the indigenous Australian experience you see, you hear stories of first contact being by ship or boat, you know Captain Cook coming into these waters. So, for us in Papua New Guinea and Bougainville the West came, Australian geologists would come in helicopters, so I thought the drone was a really really appropriate tool to use to also involve that experience in the work. So, *Habitat* also really references Panguna Mine which started in the late '60s and early '70s and Panguna Mine really began as a way to fund independence for Papua New Guinea and during 1975 when Papua New Guinea got their independence from the Whitlam Government, Australian Government, this was the period of my father's generation when Bougainville honestly thought we would become independent and self-determining and yet what actually happened was the local indigenous land owners rebelled against the mining so, for a period of ten years there was quite a lot of money going out, Australian mining companies such as Rio Tinto, they were involved as being the main mining company as well, so, it's a very complex history between Australia, Papua New Guinea and Bougainville. At the time I was eight years old and as I grew up I saw all of this industrialisation and all these towns come and you wonder why? What's the problem? And women were actually protesting against the mine. And so, I've always known it's been quite interesting to that politically it was such an empowering aspect for not just to women but for the whole of the Bougainville community, that there were these underling problems of how mining came to Bougainville. And so, today it still remains unresolved, where mining still wants to come back, these multi-national companies want to come back, and yet the women are protesting against how they come back. So, the work was really talking about all this complex status quo and how women have a presence there and you'll see women going through their daily routines in the video and yet you're unsure why, what are they doing.

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Anneke Jaspers: Visually, the video takes you on a journey through the Bougainville landscape where you encounter the pit of the mine, but you also travel through lower and middle lower table sections of the site. The mine was an enormous enterprise, it was, as I understand it, one of the largest open cut mines in the world at the time and it was a mine for copper and gold, and you mentioned that Australia was commercially implicated in that, in

the establishment of the mine, in that the company that ran it Bougainville Copper Limited was a subsidiary of Rio Tinto, which was part owned by Australia. Can you talk about the scale of the operation in relation to the landscape and what you see visually in the film?

Taloi Havini: The operation was enormous, like as you said, and during the '60s and '70s it was so large that one point the PNG Kina, the currency of Papua New Guinea and Bougainville was stronger than the Australian dollar. When I read that and looked through history a lot, and I've read a lot, and not only do you live it, but you read annual reports of the mining company and you just think 'oh my goodness, it was huge'. And so that issue for Bougainville people was that so much money was going out, what was actually staying for the island or for the people? The operation was so large that the pit itself, mining, Panguna Mine is quite huge, but then usually mines create dams to put their waste but because we live in a tectonic area where earthquakes happen quite a lot, they didn't build a dam because of the issues that the dam might break. So basically, they just drenched all the waste along the west coast to where communities live and have lived for thousands of years and pushed them out onto the margins and just relocated whole villages. And there would be compensation for, okay so how much is a tree worth? Or how much is your plantation going to cost and they might give a few shillings or pounds for that. That was pre-mining and then, post-mining there would be little bits of compensation. Yeah, so the scale was not only environmental, but it cut through people's traditional lands, they couldn't farm anymore or fish, and so basically, they were living right on the edge of the mining operation. So the scale was environmental, it was social, and it really impacted them and then later with the civil war and the fighting, there were actually 10,000 lives lost during that whole time. Which is more than any other tragic event in the Pacific. So, you know since World War II. So, 10,000 lives is a lot just for one island and it sort of feels like this history has been swept under the carpet in many ways. So, there's also the human rights impact, if you talk about scale, you could just go on and on and on about that.

Anneke Jaspers: You mentioned the displacement of traditional land owners during the time the mine was built and also the impact on their lifestyle in the '70s and '80s in terms of changes to agricultural practices and the ways their lifestyles were sustained through different economies, I suppose. But what you see in the video is the enduring impact on their lives now, could you talk a little about that?

Taloi Havini: Yeah sure, I mean at one point, Agata, which we're not really introduced to, but I call her Agata because I know her, but the woman who walks all across three screens and it's just barren, and she's sort of walking away and she's just walking quite slowly, and she's just quite aimless, you know, and I just thought it was important was well to highlight that, as much as women are central to Bougainville's perception on land because as matrilineal concept is explained, the land is actually passed through the female line, and yet these women are actually caught in really problematic situations. Yeah so, why is she washing dirt? Well that's what she does every day, she's washing dirt looking for gold, her ancestors never used to do that, her ancestors would be farming the land looking for sweet potato to feed her family, and now in that same landscape because of mining, she's stuck with nothing but to find that because that's the economy that she's in.

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Brianna Munting: You mentioned before this idea of Australia being part of the big mine to begin with and I wanted to ask the question on accountability and how we hold companies or governments accountable as well and the relationship. Do you see your work playing in a role

like that? Because it's been so hidden in some ways and brushed over and you're bringing that to the forefront.

Taloi Havini: I guess I'm really interested in stories, this is an ongoing story that involves, you know Bougainville isn't just this island in the Pacific suffering on its own, it actually has an Australian history. And as an artist, who is an Australian artist, I studied here, I share Australian heritage as well as Bougainville heritage as well as being born there, I feel Australia is very much implicated. And so yeah, I just feel that making work about ourselves is really important and even though this feels like it's about mining and companies and governments, it's actually about people at the end of the day and will implicate it. So whatever impact that has, you don't really think about that when you're making as an artist it just comes from inside

Brianna Munting: What does it mean to be an artist in contemporary Australia now?

Taloi Havini: I think now is a really great time to be an artist. You know I just spent six months overseas on a residency in Paris, and I'm actually really happy to be back and catch *The National*. Being part of the exhibition, the first of them, and being surrounded by such amazing artists has really made me aware that being an artist, or an Australian contemporary artist, they're really important discussions. I guess my practice is really around how to communicate ideas in new and interesting ways. For me and an islander, Pacific Islander, who also is indigenous, I'm also interested in getting out of these boxes, and I think most other artists who are contemporary indigenous artists understand that we don't like being boxed as what is traditional. So, to be asked by Anneke from international art, I was like, okay great! I want to be in these global discussions around everything like, land, identity, politics, rather than 15, 20 years ago when I was studying art and even just coming back from Europe you see there are traditional ways of boxing people in, you know, what is primitive art? Or Oceanic art? I'm much more interested in the future in global and international art I guess.

Anneke Jaspers: So, my specialism is definitely contemporary Australian art, of course that art circulates within erratically globalised economy, but that's not a democratic space, and as much as dialogues around centre and periphery feel quite hackneyed, I think there's still a necessity to consider the hierarchies and the spatial dynamics and the power dynamics that structure the way that Australian art circulates within the world at large. I'm especially committed to working with here, I think the practice that is made here is incredibly rich, incredibly sophisticated and important and my commitment as a curator is to work with the artists and particularly the artists of my generation, my peers, who are making work in this place. And one of the things that I think with the selection of works in the gallery for *The National* shows is that artists, despite this intense period of globalisation that we've all lived through, are very interested in the particularities of place and locality. And many of the works draw out deep narratives that are about particular locations and the historical events that have shaped those places, both in terms of the landscape itself but also lives of the people who live there.

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Anneke Jaspers: So, the research process for the exhibition was quite broad, I travelled around the country, as my colleagues from the MCA and Carriageworks, and I was able through that process to discover many artists and practices that I had not been exposed to, they were new to me, and that was an incredibly exciting dimension to me of the project. Taloi's work I was familiar with through prior exhibitions but we hadn't met before, it's been

incredibly rich and sustaining to develop these new relationships and new conversations with artist like Taloi through the project, that I imagine, that I hope, will have a much longer life beyond the show. I was particularly interested in Taloi's work because she brings an embedded perspective to these questions around the geo-political relationship between Australia and the Pacific that incorporates indigenous knowledge, the lived experience growing up in Bougainville, but also now being based between there and Australia, and the particular way in which she is envisioning that landscape through her work using video. One of the ambitions for *The National* is to be able to support artists to make major new works through a commissioning process, and that's not the case with our relationship with every artist, for Taloi's project we were able to support her to travel back to Bougainville on quite an extensive film shoot with crew which enabled her to imagine this work in a particularly ambitious way.

Taloi Havini: Yeah the commissioning aspect, I was able to say, 'this is where I want to take it' I would like to take Mandy and Fabio who I work with, Amanda King and Fabio Cavadini, who I've known since I was quite young and they've made *Evergreen Island* as well. And then later, I also asked look, I've haven't made anything this epic before, and I thought, I need a good crew, so I was able to, within that commissioning budget, put aside for sound, so I was able to get sound designer Michael Toisuta and it was just fantastic to work with a crew and it just really enriched my whole experience in how to make, for me, I felt quite high-end work. So, I don't know what else I could say, it was just a perfect opportunity to extend and build on that practice.

Anneke Jaspers: The idea as you mentioned, was to invest in and support and facilitate artists to think at a certain scale and to be ambitious in the concept of their work as much as the realisation. So, while there are works that are scaled, epically scaled, I supposed, there are also works that are quite modest in that regard for instance Khaled Sabsabi's series of painted photographs. But we were interested in enabling a kind of depth and rigour in artistic process by bringing the resources of an institution like the Gallery those artists' practices.

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Anneke Jaspers: I worked really closely here at the Gallery Wayne Tunnicliffe, the Head of Australian Art, and we worked with our peers from the MCA and Carriageworks, Blair French at MCA, Nina Miall and Lisa Havilah at Carriageworks. And it was such a pleasure to engage and sustain dialogue with them over a period of about 18 months, that was more intensive in the developmental phase where we were sharing aspects of our conversations with artists, collectively working through the different ideas that were emerging from the practice that we felt could cohere into particular strands within the exhibition that might make connections across venues. And then of course, in the final stages of the show, we were each responsible for executing the logistics of making an exhibition within our own venues.

Brianna Munting: With this particular work that's here, in *The National*, because this has been a sustained process of making, I want to ask, how do you think that work will evolve next? And is this documentation and research in history something you'll continue to undertake?

Taloi Havini: Yeah that's definitely the idea, I don't really know. I think it's a lot about feeling and I'll go back this year. So, documenting is really just about being around and seeing things change and deciding how you feel about it and how you present that change. So, we'll see, I don't know the answer to that and so I've got to keep it completely open.

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.