

Conversations with Curators: David Hurlston on curating Australian art

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TIARNEY MIKEUS [INTRODUCTION]

Hello, and welcome to the Art Guide Australia podcast with Tiarney Miekus. This episode marks the final of a four-part Conversations With Curators series, where we talk with four curators about the processes, ideas, and stories behind their curatorial work. For this fourth and final episode, I spoke with David Hurlston. Since 1993, David has worked in a number of curatorial roles at the National Gallery of Victoria. His current role is senior curator, Australian painting sculpture and decorative arts to 1980. And during his 25 years at NGV he's curated group exhibitions, as well as survey shows on well-known artists, including Ron Mueck, David Hockney, Debra Halpern, Ian Strange and many more. David and I talk about how he came to curating, and the changes he's noticed from when he first began curating, to his practice today. We also talk about the process of curating large survey shows of artists who are both alive and have passed, what the label of curator of Australian art means today, and the push and pull between curating shows that entertain as much as inform and compel viewers.

TM

So we're currently sitting in your office at NGV. I was hoping maybe you could start by talking about what your role involves at a day-to-day level?

DH

Well, my role currently as senior curator of Australian art means that I'm responsible for a team of curators. Uh, there are four in the team in total, and we look after the permanent collection and the display of the permanent collection, which as you'd probably be aware is presented at NGV Australia at Federation Square. But also we're responsible for developing and delivering an exhibition program of exhibitions of Australian art.

TM

The room we're sitting in right now is filled with boards that are filled with little cut-outs of artworks and artwork captions. Maybe you could just talk through what it is that I'm seeing and how it actually helps your process.

DH

Yeah, it's actually, we refer to as our storyboards. And as a sort of, I dunno, probably not the first stage, it's probably the third stage in exhibition development. You know the concept is sort of hatched and then developed into a proposal that then gets presented to, in our case, we have an exhibitions and planning subcommittee here at the gallery. And then when that's given the sort of the go ahead, then we start to develop it further. And what we're looking at here, as I said the storyboards. So they're like our wishlist in a way, you know, they begin with the world is your oyster, what would you choose for the exhibition? And then as the project develops, that becomes more fine tuned. So in some cases, some works may not be available for loan. Uh, in other cases, we decide that we might have found a better work or that it's not quite needed. So gradually that it becomes more, it becomes tightened up. Then I suppose we start to wave a curatorial wand over it and it becomes, you know, more thematic perhaps, you know. Generally we begin just with the chronology. So we start with the earliest work we finished with the latest, if it was say an artist retrospective, and similarly with a more thematic exhibition.

TM

To backtrack a little bit, you've been at NGV since 1990. What were you doing before you were at NGV?

DH

It's an interesting one to sort of reflect on. You know, I mean, I had to think about it when I knew you were coming in. I began with the practical art training. So I went to art school and I'd grown up without—my mother was an art teacher and it was just something she used still, she's still alive, refers to the NGV as a second home. So as a, as a young person, I was always coming here. So it just seemed like the logical thing to do, you know, and I ended up in a career, or ended up studying art. And then while

I was at RMIT, I became involved in the exhibition program that was held at the Story Hall. It's quite different now, it's proper gallery space, but at the time it was really just a big open room. And I worked with an artist, actually, George Johnson, and together we would put the exhibitions together.

DH

So that was my first experience with exhibition presentation and I really enjoyed doing it. And then for my final year of study, I presented an exhibition, but it was really not so much an exhibition of art. It was more an exhibition of an exhibition. So it was sort of an interesting, I just became really sort of interested in this idea of presentation, uh, interpretation, you know, the whole process, really. And so from there, I went to what's now City of Glenn Eira. It was City of Caulfield at the time. And I was curator of their art collection and looked after their exhibition space and performance space. And then for a period of time, I had a shop where I sold antiques and bric-a-brac and stuff like that, did that for a few years. That was my sort of my early retirement; I'd promised myself I would do it.

And then I went to what's now Monash Gallery of Art out at Wheeler's Hill and worked there as a contractor curator until 1992, when I decided that in fact, I did want to be a curator. So then I enrolled at Melbourne University in the post-grad causing curatorial studies. And when I finished that, I started at the gallery here at the NGV, first of all, working in conservation. And then, and then I went to Monash University for a year and worked as a studio and gallery coordinator, and then came back here and in 1993, started here as the assistant curator in the access gallery. And I've remained here since that time, but worked in lots of different areas, curatorial program delivery, and things like that.

TM

When you were studying curating back then, it was obviously a fairly new field of study. And today it's almost a prerequisite for being a curator. And even then, it's not a guarantee. What was the aura or the feeling around being a curator when you were studying to what it's like now?

DH

Yeah, it's an interesting question because I think now people have a much clearer idea of what a curator might do. At the time it was still a bit sort of, you know, they were basing it on European model. And the earlier form of curatorship was really like a keeper of a collection. You know, if you look back at the history. And so what was sort of interesting, I think for me at that time, was that it was around then that we really started to see curatorship become more leaning towards the sort of entertainment side of exhibition presentation. So most of my colleagues at that time that were studying with me, had done a university fine arts course where they had studied the theory. And so they were coming from a particular perspective. And I think what was good about that program was that it really gave people a sort of an inside view of the other side to curating, which is really about making things understandable and tangible to a wider audience. And that's where I think, you know, things have changed. And when I think about when I first started here, the roles changed significantly and, you know, a really important requisite of any of the, any of the exhibitions we do is that they be able to be understood by a wide audience. That they potentially draw in new audience or new, you know, new visitors and that there is an aspect of, you know, revelation about them.

TM

So it sounds like you think a lot about the viewer when you're curating.

DH

Oh, I think it's really important. You know, I think the days of curators, you know, quietly coming up with wonderful ideas that they've thought about for a long time have gone, you know, I think it's now, you know, we're a lot more accountable to an audience. And I think that in that regard, I think that's, that's good. As I said, I grew up with the gallery as my place. My mother used to call it a second home. And so I had this early experience of how art can have a positive, positive impact on your life. And I think that's part of what I see as my role as a curator to try and provide that experience for others.

TM

And so was working in a major institution, something that, that was your goal? Or you sort of fell into it?

DH

I think I probably fell into it. You know, there are times where I think I'm not quite

sure what I want to do when I grow up. I still enjoy this and there's still, but there's still other aspects about, and it's sort of all related about the, sort of the field of art and exhibition and events and all those sorts of things that I really enjoy, but it wasn't that I sort of set out on his sort of definite career path or anything like that. It just sort of evolved in a way.

TM

Your current title, it's a bit of a long one, is senior curator, Australian painting sculpture and decorative arts to 1980. Why the cutoff year of 1980?

DH

I know it's a really funny one, isn't it? And why the great long description? Because, you know, when I first started in this department, it was simply Australian art. Well, firstly, the reason why it's so long is that it was important that we, because at the NGV we have, uh, a department that looks after Australian Indigenous art. And so we had to make it clear that the positions that we hold didn't include Australian Indigenous arts. So that's why we were quite specific about the media. And to 1980 is an odd one because from there, it goes to our colleagues in contemporary art. So contemporary art at the NGV is 1980 to the present day. And I think for a lot of people, they would question 1980 or 1981 as being contemporary. You know, it feels like a long time ago, but it's an interesting cutoff. And I think it's still recognised internationally as a point where contemporary art sort of begins. But look, to be honest, we work in an environment where, while it says 1980, we are forever crossing over and our colleagues are crossing back. There's no real hard and fast line. Of course there are artists still living that were practicing in the 70s or even the 60s that we're dealing with. So we are regularly working across that divide and also more and more with our permanent collection displays. We try and, you know, blur that line.

TM

In your time at NGV, you've curated a lot of surveying, retrospective exhibitions, very established artists, including Ron Mueck, John Olsen, Debra Halpern, Hugh Williamson Jeffrey Bartlett and Ian Strange. And there's many more names I could add to that. When you're curating an exhibition with an artist who has a stature and a career of great significance, how do you go about finding the curatorial narrative or the pathway into the show?

DH

Yeah, that's an interesting question. I think the great thing about working with living artists is from my point of view is that you work with them. So an exhibition with a living artist is really a collaboration. And so the point that I always begin with is spending time with the artist, just talking about what it is that they would like to do. I mean, I suppose I have an advantage in that I've had experience putting exhibitions together. And so I can bring that side of things to the discussion, but the really important thing always is that the artist is part of that process and that the artist's voice is not lost in that process. And it doesn't matter who it is. You know what I mean? I've worked with artists, as you say, like John Olsen, you know, who's probably, you know, one of Australia's most senior and certainly one of our most respected senior artist and he was an absolute delight to work with.

We hit it off from the beginning and just had such a great time. And my first curatorial role here at the NGV was working in the Access gallery. And that was a sort of, I suppose, more of a community art space. So you were often working with artists, and we always refer to them as artists, who had never exhibited before. They might be, it might've come together because they were part of the Kurdish artists group or they were artists from Arts Project Australia or from various sort of sectors from within the community. I mean, it was a fantastic program from my point of view because it really opened the gallery up in a really meaningful way to a new audience and made it accessible. And also sort of embraced this bigger picture of what contemporary art is in, uh, in Australia. So yeah, it is an interesting one. I mean, often we have sort of ideas as curators. You'd sort of, you've done it enough that there's a sort of a rough formula, but everyone is different, you know, and it so depends on the artists, the work the artists does, where their particular interest and direction takes them.

I had this great experience with Ron, we got on really well, which I was very, um, pleased. But I remember I visited him. Uh, I went to London and to talk about the exhibition with his gallery dealer, went out to visit him at the studio and talked to him about what ideas I had for the exhibition and for a publication. And he was completely stone faced and said, "I'm not interested in a publication. No, one's interested

in hearing my story or no one would want to read it or no one would be interested.” He’s very self-effacing. And I remember I walked back cause I’d had, I had a week in London and I was going to spend the time interviewing him and preparing for this publication. And, uh, I went back to my hotel and I remember I’ve probably still got it. I opened my notebook and I wrote, what am I going to do?

And, uh, anyway, I called him and I said, “Have you got time? Can I just call past the studio?” Anyway, we got on really well. And so for the next week, I just, you know, we just hung out, you know. While he was working, we were just chatting about stuff. And I said, “Look, just give me a, give me a go.” You know, he was really adamant. He didn’t want a publication. I said, “Just let me have a go. And if you don’t think it’s any good, I’m happy that we don’t proceed with it.” Then I came up with this idea that the exhibition itself was in fact only 12 works. And so what I decided was that, I mean, there’s something about Ron’s work, and I think everyone’s familiar with that experience, where you sort of, some of his work you just engage with in this sort of quite surprising, and very personal way.

And so I picked a range of interesting and unusual authors in the sense that there was a poet, there was a, there were a couple of curators, but there was, there was a historian. There are all these different voices and got them to write about each of the works. I showed it to Ron and heard nothing. I’d sent him everything. I’d sent him all the texts. And then I sent him my essay, and didn’t hear anything. And then I called him two weeks later and he said, “Oh look, it’s all right.” So we printed it. And two weeks into the exhibition, we were reprinting. It was just, uh, just was walking out the door, got reprinted four times. It’s now reprinted by Yale University Press. I was in New York in the Museum of Modern Art bookshop and it was sitting on the shelf there. And I was thinking, you know, wow. When I think about how at the start of this process, how unlikely that would have seemed. But, you know, working with artists takes many different forms. There are other people like John Olsen who had very clear ideas and he had no problem about publication or anything like that. We did a long interview and I use a lot of that in the publication.

TM

So it sounds like you need good negotiation skills being a curator?

DH

Yeah, possibly. I think you need to be able to listen. And to, look, I think for me, I feel in a way, while it was an odd route in one way, because I began as a practicing artist, but I think it requires some sort of sensitivity or understanding and being able to listen. And yeah, I suppose negotiate is a good, good way of describing that too, because there are some times where you do need to go back after, you know we had talked before about these storyboards, as the start of the process, as the project develops, we, we then could show you a model of one that I’m working on at the moment where we actually work on a scale model with little cutouts, a little bit like playing Sims or something like that, where you’re actually placing the objects in the space. And that’s when it’s really nice bringing the artist in. And you often have to negotiate areas because the experience that we bring to the, to any project is—or the sort of, I suppose, what we bring to it is that experience of having seen how audiences move through exhibitions or how they read exhibitions. So, often there’s that sort of process, you know, look, these, this group of paintings might actually work better on this side here because there’s a better sort of circulation path. People can stop, look, ponder, then move on to this group here sort of thing.

TM

So you’re thinking about that spatial aspect right from the beginning?

DH

Yeah I suppose yeah, thinking about it actually, that’s true. I suppose there’s sort of theoretical, there’s this sort of the concept for the exhibition. But very early on, I find I’m already in that sort of three-dimensional space thinking about how it’s going to work. Because in the end, that’s what it’s about. I think what curators do isn’t rocket science, it’s really just about making a really tangible and interesting and entertaining and educative experience. And I think that happens in the real world, in the real space, so you know, I think it has to succeed.

TM

Do you ever get situations where you bring the artwork into the space and suddenly it’s not sitting right, or it’s not working well?

DH

Absolutely. So, you know, all the modeling that we do, you know, and we do these

renders where you can have it all on the computer and you can do fly throughs and walk into the space and all that sort of stuff. But nothing replaces on the day on the floor, in the space. We can lay an exhibition out in a model. And the reality is I would think probably at least a quarter would be shuffled around and probably more like a half would be shuffled around, by the time you get to the actual installation process.

TM

You've worked with a lot of artists who are living and you've also curated exhibitions on artists who've passed away. And a good example would be, you've got, um, an exhibition coming up on the modernist artist, Roger Kemp. What's the difference in process?

DH

It's an interesting one because in many ways your responsibility, as a curator, working with an artist who is deceased or is no longer around, the responsibilities, even greater. Because you sort of have to almost go back— this is how I find, anyway—I've got to go back into their head space to sort of understand completely how they were thinking and working to make sure that in interpreting their work and presenting it, that you're doing it in a way that they would approve of or represented them well. In the case of Roger Kemp, I'm fortunate in the sense that I'm working closely with his estate. So his daughter, Michelle, I've been working closely with her. So it's a vicarious process in a way, but I still feel like I can have a check from them to make sure that things are okay.

TM

And you talked about getting into their head space. How do you do that?

DH

Well, in the case of Roger Kemp, that's a good example. It's reading everything that's written, that he's written. Reading any transcripts of interviews, viewing any multi-media type material. It's really looking closely at his work and looking at his development as an artist. I think that's, what's been really interesting because looking at his practice, it's quite a clear trajectory and it's sort of like a series of chapters in a way. And then just tracing those stories and trying to work out where the threads are.

TM

There are hundreds or probably even thousands of Australian artists that you could curate before 1980. How do you get to decide who to curate? And is that a choice that you make or that NGV makes?

DH

Well, we're in the lucky position that we can propose ideas. It sort of begins with us. The decision of course, is made at a higher level as to what goes ahead. And there's a whole lot of factors that influence what the final exhibition program includes. Because, you know, there has to be a balance and obviously somebody needs to monitor all of that. But look, you're right. There's so many artists you could choose from, you know, and there's all those sort of obvious ones. But there's a whole lot of others that I think are incredibly worthy of an exhibition. For example, when, as I said before, you know, when I was working in the Access gallery, a lot of those artists were not widely known and yet their stories were incredibly compelling. And I think their art was amazing, you know, and I think it's hard to sort of try and identify exactly how one goes through that process because it would depend on it. Sorry, the process of selecting, who you might want to mount an exhibition about, because it would depend on what angle or position you were coming from.

TM

Changing topic—can we talk about that category of Australian art in your job title, especially now we're in a moment where labels like Australian art are being interrogated and rethought in a number of exhibitions, has that prompted you to think about what being a curator of Australian art means?

DH

Yeah it's sort of one of those—I always feel it's a fairly, you know, a fairly loose title in a way because to separate Australian art out of international art, for example, is sort of wrong. I mean, we're part of a big picture of what happens throughout the world. So I suppose in that regard, but also there are much wider issues. We're increasingly including international art in our permanent collection displays, just to be able to provide that sort of fuller context of 'things weren't happening, happening in isolation in Australia'. And, you know, in the 1880s, for example, there were artists traveling abroad and also they were aware of what was going on. And the whole, I suppose, the whole idea, going back to the Access gallery, you know, what it

means to be Australian anyway. There's people that are Australian and they're living here that are painting, that are making ceramics, that are making sculpture, that didn't grow up in the sort of tradition that mainstream, or what we might think of traditional Australian artists might've grown through. So yeah, it's a, it's a funny, it's a funny thing. Sometimes I wonder, you know, separating—even having Australian art at Federation Square NGV Australia, which the public like, and tourists really love, because it's a way for them to understand, if they're from another country, you know, the culture of this country and the history, et cetera, et cetera. But I do still feel like it's important not to forget that Australian art is part of international art, that it is part of this bigger picture.

TM

And even though you curated more marginalised or emerging artists in the access gallery and through NGV studio, when I was researching you, the thing that your name kept getting associated with was the big white male blockbuster shows.

DH

I know it's true, isn't it? And yet some of the shows I feel most proud of, you know, look, I feel proud of many of them. You know, I think what you're identifying there is that the big white males are the ones that the media tend to swoop on, but some of the really rewarding exhibitions that I've done have been ones that haven't necessarily attracted that same media attention. We did a tattoo exhibition one time. This was quite funny. In fact, I, in order to do it, cause we had a functioning tattoo studio. I had to be registered as a tattoo studio proprietor effectively. Cause we had to get health department approval. We had to have a permit to do it. It was really full on. It was a great exhibition that actually looked at the tradition of tattoo art and body marking, but to have a functioning tattoo studio was something, you know, quite amazing.

I've done two tattoo shows, but that was a really, a really interesting one because we had it really working as a tattoo studio. And then other shows that—there's a wonderful exhibition that I curated that's on at NGV Australia at the moment, which is on potter John Dermer. He works as a studio potter in Yackandandah in Northeastern Victoria. And he has been a potter all his life. He finished his training and went to London, worked at Wedgewood where he was artist in residence, returned to Australia, set up his studio, and he has lived through the things he's made just with his hands since that time. And that was since the 1970s. And that's an exhibition, that's a survey exhibition. And I feel really proud of that because it's telling a story that otherwise people wouldn't know, may not know. There'd be—he's well regarded amongst ceramics collectors, but for an average gallery visitor to really, to learn more about how some particularly in the crafts, because often artists tend to be, they tend to be elevated I suppose, but craftspeople that just, you know, just with his hands, he's made this living.

TM

You've been doing this for 26 years at NGV. What has curating come to mean to you now, and has that meaning changed over time?

DH

Well, I think it has changed a bit. I think I touched on before, you know, I think it's—we're held much more to account. In other words, that we have to be able to work towards creating an exhibition that I suppose is sort of probably it would have some technical term, you'd probably say performance indicators or something like that. It's to do with, obviously scholarship is important. There is a sort of educative role that we must never lose. And that's both on a fairly obvious level, but also in a more detailed way. You know, we have a team of education officers here and also guides that we work with, that they help by working with the public and, and help them to understand the exhibition. So, you know, certainly those are important factors. You know, there is the entertainment side of things. It has to look good. The audience expects more now. I think the average gallery visitor wouldn't be satisfied walking into a room and just seeing paintings on the wall. You know, they would like to see extended labels, didactic text, perhaps some elements of, we call it decorative arts. I hate that term, but you know, other elements from the collection that contextualise and paintings, and there may be multimedia. And as a curator, you're sort of involved in all of that. It's not just a matter of putting together a checklist of paintings for an exhibition and then saying, you know, just hanging them in order from youngest to oldest.

TM

That entertainment aspect—that's something that not just NGV, but other large art institutions around the country do get criticised for sometimes...

DH

It's a fine line. I think, you know, we must never lose sight of the fact that well we're custodians of a collection, but also that there has to be scholarship behind what we do. And I think that's really important. And to lose that, that just becomes a theme park. And I think it is also really important that we do make the visitor experience, as I said, you know, people expect more. So it has to be something more than just straight out scholarship. But I think the sort of merging of the two in a successful exhibition is the perfect balance.

TM

So it would've been your 25th year at NGV last year. Did you get anything special?

DH

We used to get a book voucher after every, every I think it was every 10 years or something like that. No, it's funny actually, no, the days of gold watches and stuff are gone. I don't need those sort of things. You know, I really enjoy it. And I feel sort of blessed in a way that I sort of fell into this profession. Yeah. While it's 26 years here, it's a lot longer than that, that I've been associated with delivering exhibitions. You know, I think, um, the reward's in the job.

TM

Can you ever imagine moving on from NGV?

DH

I've worked here for a long time and I really enjoy working here. I don't know that I'm necessarily going to give this up for another job. There are other things I'd like to pursue. I don't want it to be like, I'm gonna, you know, they're gonna find me curled up on a chair in my office dead someday, you know, just through old age. You know, I mean, I won't be here forever, but I'm not, not about to sort of leap out and go to another institution or anything like that. I have a strong commitment and that goes back a very long way.

TM

If there were younger curators listening and it's their aim, I guess, to get to a senior position like yours, what would your advice be?

DH

It's a really important role for the industry. That's a funny, sort of, not really the right word—but for the, the, you know, the curatorial—I suppose it is an industry—to assist in succession planning. So, for example, in my department, we have a new position, which is a curatorial project officer and that person is more or less just out of post-grad curatorial studies, has done a little bit of work. So, we're working very closely with her and it sort of, it's almost like a traineeship, you know, it's a mentorship or something like that. I think the advice that I could offer anyone in this sort of field: I think, first of all, you've got to be in it because you like, you enjoy what you do. And I think we're fortunate in the sense... It's not, you know, it'd be naive to think that every day is perfect.

It's not like that at all. We have crap days too. But you've got to feel like you're committed. It's what you want to do. And then I think it's just a matter of following that passion and just taking up opportunities whenever they exist. And not everything about what we do is glamorous at all. You know? And I think there's the mundane and the routine and all those sort of things. But I think that they, you know, that's all part of a sort of well-rounded experience in a way, you know. It makes the good bits sort of, I suppose, more enjoyable or something. The main thing I think really is just, you've got to be passionate about it and just work hard and make sure you're noticed. It's a, it's a difficult field. I appreciate how, you know, I was fortunate because I'd worked as a curator before I studied. And it was at a time when qualifications meant something, but experience also meant something. So, you know, I had a certain advantage. It would be very difficult now I appreciate for a lot of young curators to sort of, you know, to get a job working in a, particularly a sort of major institution. So it's opportunities to volunteer, to do work experience, to develop projects, even independently of institutions. You know, curate shows and offer them, you know, or look for sort of funding opportunities to support exhibition projects.

TM [CONCLUSION]

And that was David Hurlston discussing his curatorial practice. We hope you've enjoyed this fourth and final episode of our Conversations With Curator series. You can listen to the first episode with Anna Davis curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art. The second episode with Nici Cumpston, Curator of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art at the Art Gallery of South Australia, and the third with Andy Butler, an independent curator.,