

Faraway, so close #2: Parenting and creating with Tai Snaith and Ross Coulter

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TAI SNAITH [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]

And it sorta made me think maybe what I do is something I can share with the kids and we can make that part of the school thing. So I was starting to feel a bit like how do I juggle all the things and have my practice and have the kids at home. And then I think I just went through a phase of thinking, “Okay, I’ve got to try and combine them somehow.”

TIARNEY MIEKUS [INTRODUCTION]

Raising children, having an art practice and making it through isolation. How do you do it in a way that works for everyone in the family? This is Faraway, so close a new podcast from Art Guide Australia with Tiarney Miekus. In this series, we’re taking a personal approach to consider the experiences, anxieties and opportunities emerging in the arts and our new Covid-19 world. And for this episode, we’re looking at parenting and creating with artists Tai Snaith and Ross Coulter. I’ll admit that I don’t have children, but I of course know people who do. And I wondered how they were handling what’s been a huge life upheaval right now. How are people, and creatives in particular, working while also looking after children? Since Tai Snaith has long interrogated the links between motherhood and creating art, both as part of her practice and throughout her great podcast, A world of one’s own, I wanted to know if she was able to be fully present as an artist and as parent right now. And if so, how she was doing it.

TAI SNAITH

I was just trying to think about whether there’s even a theory to it. I think you just go with what, you know, really, like you just kind of work it out. You know, everyone’s just working it out as they go along. But I think I went through a phase where I was feeling really a bit depressed and lost and didn’t know what was going on because everything I had on got canceled and I had a couple of shows coming up and I had a heap of workshops, which is how I make most of my income. And so I think like everyone else, I just felt a bit unsure. And then I just went into homeschooling. So, cause that’s been so full on, my two kids are at home and they’re primary school age and they’re in two different age groups. So grade one and grade four. So it’s quite different what they’re meant to learn.

So you just become this kind of facilitator. And also, I don’t really like doing things at arm’s reach. So I didn’t want to just put them on a computer and that’s not really how we parent anyway. So I’ve been quite involved in the whole schooling thing. And to be honest, there’s been quite a lot of silver linings to it. You know, even within the first week, my eldest son who’s nine asked me if I could teach him how to sew, just out of the blue.

TM

That’s so nice.

TS

Oh, so gorgeous. And it was really, yeah, it was really lovely for me to just sort of think, “Wow, there are these things that maybe wouldn’t have happened if this situation hadn’t have come along.” So I taught him how to sew and it sort of made me think maybe what I do is something I can share with the kids and we can make that part of the school thing.

So I was starting to feel a bit like how do I juggle all the things and have my practice and have the kids at home. And then I think I just went through a phase of thinking, “okay, I’ve got to try and combine them somehow” and you do it naturally, anyway. I mean, I’m relatively creative at home with everything I do anyway. And I, my studio is at home, so that helps. But I really, I think I consciously just took a bit of pressure off myself and just transferred it onto working with the kids. So the creativity you realize pretty quickly just finds a new home and it’s really just the shame or the sort of ideology that you’ve got to change in that for the short amount of time, I’m going to apply those creative ideas to my kids rather than, you know, my projects

or my exhibitions or my writing or whatever, and not feel bad about that.

Because as a feminist and as someone that's worked through a lot of hardships and having, you know, coming from a working-class family and, you know, I worked really hard. And also having had two young kids, you get through this difficult stage when they're little and you get back into your practice and then you really love it. And they go to school and you've got all this time and you make work. And so to be thrown back into that, almost like baby land where you've got them both at home, it's pretty full on. It's really confronting. Like you don't have any time to do exercise or get dressed or like—and also you're doing still all the other domestic labor that I've always done, which is okay. But it's not when you're also teaching and you know. So everything just sort of evaporates and you go back to that. I call it the cave, which you're just all in together. But I feel, I feel like what I've learned maybe since they've been babies—I used to feel really depressed and sad about the whole situation of not having enough time for my own work—is that you can, it comes back. And I feel like this time has taught me that you can actually just focus that creative energy for a while on different aspects of your life.

TM

Yeah. But do you feel like there's going to become a point where, um, instead of, I guess, conflating your art practice with parenthood and, you know, finding ways to make it work or just reigning back what you're doing—there will be a point where you'll be like, "No, I need to be there equally as a parent and equally as an artist for myself."

TS

Yeah. But I do think that I do think that we're starting to see art in a slightly different way. And through this—I mean, we've lost real spaces pretty quickly. Like we've lost theaters and we've lost exhibition spaces. We've lost anything that's in, in real life pretty quickly. Right. So we're starting to sort of think about—and I've noticed it a lot more—is people starting to think about how art is part of their lives more maybe than before. So people talking about doing more things at home or having to work from home and that maybe not necessarily being a bad thing. And you know, if you think back to like how our great grandparents lived, really not even my grandparents, but our great grandparents lived in the—I know that a lot of women's work in terms of creative work, wasn't recognized as their artwork, which I don't think is great. But I do think that it was integrated, um, pretty well back then. And I do think that there's an opportunity for us to maybe just integrate our work a bit more into our lives. Like we, we segregate a lot of stuff in our practices.

TM

So you think it's more of a chance to actually just rethink how we see art and how we create art more generally.

TS

Yeah. And maybe like a chance to make it in some aspects a bit more relevant. Now, you know, there's a whole lot of society—I love art and I love high-end art and I love theater and I love dance—but I also recognize that there's a whole lot of people out there that don't even get it. Like they don't even ever have those opportunities. And I feel like this is a chance for us to a little bit, maybe, to start to reinstate how art is in our lives. And how, you know, the boundaries that we've worked for so many years to break down, like the division between art and craft or art and design or fashion, why have we been breaking them down, you know. Like it's so that we can actually utilize stuff in our lives. And I feel like this parenting at home thing has made it pretty clear to me that creativity is really quite adaptable. And it's something that as humans we'd be better off if we learned how to adapt it into our lives.

TM

Yeah. Absolutely. Have you children been taking to that adaptation well in handling isolation well?

TS

Yeah, they're pretty good. I mean, they're sort of used to me anyway. But they're, they're really good. They're really good boys. Like they're... we've got fairly strict, well, not strict, that's not the right word, but we've got strong and clear boundaries in our family. So, you know, we're really strict on screen usage. So we don't ever use screens during the day. I feel like that that has been useful for me. And I've been really grateful that we've done that since they were kids and not to be like, you know, um, what's the word, like preachy or whatever, I've just always known that that's been important. And in those first few weeks I was like, "oh, thank God we did that" because

it just made it just so much easier to make that work. So yeah, the boys are pretty good and they're really both quite crafty. So once we finish the school stuff, they're both into... Like one of them's into carving things. So at the moment he's carving some drumsticks out of Oak, which is pretty cute. And then one's really into dance and music. So they love it. I reckon they've, they've actually probably progressed more than they would at school anyway. Not to... Maybe not. I dunno. Maybe in some aspects and maybe in others, like maths. I don't know. I'm not very good at maths.

TM

Yeah. No, it's a different kind of life at the moment, I guess.

TS

Yeah. And it's kind of beautiful in some ways. Like we'll look back on it and just think, "Wow, what a weird, you know, 10 weeks or whatever, it's going to be of time together." And quite lovely when they're this young, I feel really lucky they're not teenagers.

TM

True. Could we wind back a little bit to a time pre Covid just for a second, because I know you've long thought about that link between being a mother or caregiver and having an art practice. And it was something that really kept coming up in your podcast series, A world of one's own where you talked to many artists about it. And often the balance between being maternal and having a practice was something that did keep coming up. What were some of the things you noticed about that link before we were in isolation? And have you had any new thoughts on the link between parenting and creating in our current period?

TS

I think it's just become pretty clear to me that, um, mothers particularly—well, particularly creative mothers—do a lot. So I think women that managed to have kids and have a practice through that time, it's pretty amazing. And I do feel like, I know it's gendered, but at the same time it's the majority of cases is women, you know, doing that extra load on top of a creative practice. And there's some really good examples of men that do it and have an art practice and do the main care giving. But it's, it's a lot of women do it. And it has made me just see what's happening at the moment. Like a lot of people sort of saying, "Oh, we're going back to the 1950s. And all of a sudden I'm doing everything again." And I kind of feel like that a little bit myself. But in some ways it makes me realize how strong a lot of us need to be to maintain that practice through that time.

And it's not for everyone. And I realised that doing the podcast. I mean, I had lots of really interesting feedback of people saying they felt, I dunno, alienated, or they felt like I was too hardcore in saying that women should continue a practice through having children. But I mean, that's just my, yeah... And I had lots of really varied feedback from women, particularly. But for me, that's just my experience: is that in order for me to not feel invisible and for my practice to not die, I needed to keep doing that. And for me to have like a publisher and have books published during that time was essential because one of the things that when you're a young mother and you just become that, you feel like you're invisible. And you just, especially in the art world, you, you know, you can't go to openings and you just feel a bit like you drop out of the loop.

So for me, having a practice was essential and some kind of public foothold, I guess you would call it. But a lot of women... Yeah. A lot of the response I got was also that that was a huge pressure that I shouldn't have been putting on people. Um, and I also, I recognize that. I get that. I get that some women want to just focus on motherhood and that's cool, but my experience was not. But yeah, this, this weird time has made it pretty clear that there's some incredible women out there doing more than both, you know, running a business as well as having a practice as well as being a mother. But we've always done that. I think women have always done that. And as I said before, it's just that it wasn't recognized as an art practice back when our great-grandmothers did it. Or, you know, when they made the doll's house by hand or they made all their clothes and built part of their garden and landscapes. You know, all that kind of stuff, just wasn't considered a practice back then. It was just like either a hobby or something they did. But it was of course was a practice. It's just that the way we see creative work now is, is different. And I think that women now, and men, can stand up for those different types of practices and say, "Hey, this is also an art practice."

TM

Yeah, of course. And then to be honest, until you even just said that I never even

thought about the fact that COVID could be a time where you could, you know, even further reclaim those, you know, what are seen as, I guess, like you said, hobbies, or like things that women do for their children or domestic activities and reclaim them, you know, as an aesthetic experience or as art. I mean that's pretty positive to me. Do you feel positive about what's happening right now?

TS

I do because it fits with me. But I mean, I know a lot of people who have a studio that they can't go to at the moment and that's really inhibiting for them. And I get that that would be very hard. I'm in a very fortuitous, privileged situation where not much has changed for me. You know, I run my... I've always run my, well, not always, but since having children I've run my studio from home and I've had the space to do that. But for me, not much has changed. If anything, it's just established what I believed in and what I was already doing in my life. But weirdly I was feeling a little bit ashamed about that, you know, before. Whereas now I feel kind of, um, now I feel quite proud that I have a resilient practice that can withstand this kind of time, you know? And, and yes, I do support my partner in a lot of ways, but the fact that we can both work from home in creative practices and not be stressed out right now and be kind of happy and make it work is, is quite cool. Like it's quite optimistic for me.

TM

Since historically it was seen as a hobby for a woman to apply her creativity within her family life, it was interesting to hear how Tai was working through this and how she was managing to maintain a semblance of a practice within her family life. But I was curious as to how other parents were faring, whether full-time parenting was full of opportunity or stress. And so I spoke to Ross Coulter to see how he and his wife, the artist Meredith Turnbull, were going with isolation and looking after a little one.

RC

It's been quite tricky, my wife Meredith Turnbull, she works at Monash. So she's got a full-time load. And that includes two days research, which is studio time, which is terrific. We've got a five-year-old daughter who's started prep this year. And you know, for the first time I was like, "Ah, our human's going off to school. And we go off to work / off to the studio. It's a new beginning and a new life.

TM

And then two months later, you're all home together.

RC

It's like, "Oh, we're home!" One way to think about it, it was like, "Oh, this is like an, you know, an artist in residency program that we're all participating on." I was like, "No, that's not what it is for us at all." So yeah. So the first, I guess the first thing was, you know, the, the financial implications of working from home and how are we going to survive financially? Yeah. Then homeschooling, I was like, "Oh, this would be great." You know experience having a daughter at home. She could be like doing her writing and I'll be working on a little project on the side. I've got this project, coloring in my audience book. I've just got like a black and white copy—the audience book is black and white photographs and reproduced in a book from the audience series. And I was going, "Oh, just color these." This would be a little nice little coloring project.

TM

How did that turn out for you?

RC

Well, as it turns out Tiarney, the prep needs a lot of attention and, um, a lot of support and guidance with their work. And I'm not really sure that I am the best person for that for all the time. And, uh, you know, there's been a lot of reports in the media about how, you know, the parents can really appreciate, you know, began to really appreciate the job that the teachers do for them, with their students. I think it's really, you know, it's, it's a great realization for people to come to. I think just the, yeah, sort of, it's tricky to, um, I feel like you you're confronted by your own learning abilities or inabilities or blockages or stumbling points. So in a way it's been, I keep saying opportunity! It's been an opportunity. You know, for kind of growth and sort of development and for understanding myself through the process of my daughter's kind of education. But I guess it's funny saying the word opportunity, because like I have found it quite, it has been kind of quite difficult.

RC

We've got like a, we've got a timetable that we've followed fairly rigidly. And then we've kept weekends—and we started doing this a little while yet ago—we've kept

weekends just as for family time and not try to let too much of art stuff encroach on the kind of family time. Like the family, you know, we do family activities where we might go to a gallery or an opening, or... Not to say, like, if you're having a free weekend... But yeah, we're not inclined to make that a priority I guess, and, and try to do... And, you know, the realities of exhibitions and keeping kind of connected to our community means that, you know, we do do stuff on the weekends art-related. But yeah, we just try to kind of steer it towards more family and friends. Like ultimately we don't want to put our daughter off art, you know. You kind of hear of some like art children going like, "you know, I just I was dragged to all these galleries and I just can't stand art now." And that's the last thing you want is to turn people off art.

TM

Do you find at the moment you're having time for your creative practice?

RC

Uh, it's tricky. Little bit, little bit, yeah. The, I guess the promise of kind of solitude and a quiet space to work from, where you're sort of dedicated and focused on your practice. It's not what's available to me at the moment. And you know what, I'm not even sure that that's my practice anyway. There's parts of that where you're kind of, you're sort of immersed and lost, but I guess I've got a, quite a social practice where I like to, I like to bump into people or go to, you know, trip around to galleries, having little snippets of conversations. Or catching up or intentionally catching up with people, discussing projects as a way to kind of help me kind of further the pro—the artwork or for the art projects.

TM

When I was talking with Tai Snaith for this podcast, she mentioned how there's a binary between family and art, which isn't really the tension that she feels it's made out to be. And she's found ways, especially recently, where she feels like she's really brought her art practice into her family life. Have you had that experience at all?

RC

I have had, yeah. There have been opportunities for both Meredith and I are to bring Roma into our art practice. There was a project that Meredith undertook recently with Roma where they made little sculpture vases together and sort of painted those up and I was like "oh, actually these are, these are quite good." And Roma you know, went to the garden at Shakespeare Grove Artists Studios where Meredith currently has a studio and they'd like gathered flowers for the sculptures that they'd made, these little sculptural vases. And I think maybe in 2015, Claire Needham curated Meredith into a show called 'Mum' and Meredith and Roma made works for the show, large sheets of paper. And last year I had a show with Roma, called Roma and Ross at Musee Destrip that Matthew Ware runs, which is a, a temporary mobile gallery that, you know, that Matthew puts up in a variety of different locations. Mostly outside of the gallery, like traditional gallery spaces.

RC

Like there's a nature, a bit of a nature strip in Carlton that he's quite fond of. So Roma and I, uh, worked collaboratively and it kind of both curated works from our archives for an exhibition. So I guess there's been, you know, at times it's been quite... Both Meredith and I've consciously brought Roma into projects. And yeah, I kind of look forward to the other kind of more seeping, when the activity is of the child and the parents kind of just sink more unconsciously into the work. That's the sort of next thing that I'm looking forward to seeing how that kind of eventuates. Or when she starts to initiate projects, as opposed to just... You don't want to feel like your parents are dragging you into something.

TM

Do you think your parenting and your art practice will be influenced by this period?

RC

I do think my parenting and practice yeah is being shaped and influenced. But sometimes I don't really know how that happens until down the track. It's like sometimes you make work and then, you know, you make the connections or even your friends or family or your art buddies make the connections to you, or for you, and with you later. You know, in terms of the education of our daughter, that's having a major impact of, you know, just about thinking about how to best to support her. And I would love to be like a little fly on the wall in her classroom to see how her teacher, just to see the dynamic in the room and, uh, how the teacher kind of guides and how she's supported through the teacher, by her really terrific teacher, Mr. Pike. And also the, the dynamic of the group, how that works to sort of shape and influence her

and support her.

Yeah, because at home, I sort of feel like you can not be the supportive parent so much. Sort of like don't drop your clothes in the middle of the hallway, pop them in the laundry. You know, just the kind of thing that you know, which my parents have said to me, you know, for years "don't drop your bag, put it in the, put it in, in your room." You know, even the way you kind of phrase that, that instruction or request or whatever that, that might be. In that learning context, I guess the question for me is like, how can I best support her, encourage her to try her best and you know, not for it to be like a directive or the authority, the authority parent figure coming down. You know, "My parents always telling me what to, you know, what to do." This is really going into like more of a, you know, kind of parenting conversation, but it's yeah, it's quite, it's, it's interesting, you know, it's interesting. Yeah. Yeah.

TM

I mean, you've kind of, you've got to discipline, but you want to do that in a way that's gives a person as much agency as possible, but also a kid's got to put their laundry in the laundry basket.

RC

Tiarney, I think you'd make a good parent.

TM

We'll see. It seems that some people are enjoying isolation and the connection that's brought with their work and their family, and others have just found it completely stressful. How do you feel about it?

RC

I felt pretty you know, I felt pretty stressed. And I guess, like, it's been a big, you know, the last 18 months there's been a lot of sort of changes occurring. Like it's with my art practice, but also with my, primarily with my work. And I feel like I'm at a point where as much as I've enjoyed being a sessional staff member at university, and there's been a lot of opportunities because of the flexibility of that work that I guess now I'm looking for something a bit more stable and just trying to work out how to sort of transition into something that doesn't impact too greatly upon my art practice. So I'd been getting some things in mind for that, and it was a bit, yeah... It's been a difficult period where I feel like I haven't been able to concentrate on what the new steps are for me to take in terms of beginning of getting paid work. Let alone that enjoyment and pleasure and the challenge of working in the studio.

So, yeah, it has really, it has been, it's been quite difficult. And you know what, towards the end of last year, I started meditating, which has, you know, greatly helped. And like, something I've noticed is like, as soon as I have a change in circumstances—like you know, "Oh, I don't need a shower today." I mean, I did a residency with Jeremy Bakker and Angela Pye in 2012. And I remember I went to Japan, I was like, great. And for the first three days I was like, "You know what, I don't need a shower. This is awesome. And they were like, "Hmm maybe a shower might be good."

TM

I could imagine you really indulged in isolation then if that was just your thinking for going to Japan.

RC

[Laughing]. "Oh, it'll be fine!" I'm really into this vibe, not showering. And sort of the same thing as like, you know, "Oh, going outside is really good." I was like, "Oh, outside. I'm inside, I can look out, you know. I'm in the kitchen, I can see outside the window, there's outside." But actually going outside Ross, you feel a lot better. It's so foolish really. It's sort of, you know, you kind of forget... It's like I've got no self awareness of the, the creature and what my needs are. You know, you actually need to see people's faces, you need to need to walk outside and at least have, you know, a tiny bit exercise. Yeah. So I guess those have been good too. And also, you know, speaking to someone as well, like, you know, professional counselor type person, I found that quite beneficial as well to kind of, you know, sort through sift through like, you know, the variety of issues, you know. The variety of issues, whether it's the precarious nature of my employment or the, the challenges of, I was going to say frustrations, but they are the frustrations at times, the frustrations and challenges of homeschooling.

And yeah, so... And I guess it's that, the thing of like, you know, taking one day at a time. And I guess it's like the same with your art practice, you know. Like some days you go like, "ah, this is great. You know, this is like, this is a terrific!" And the next day you go, "oh, what was I thinking, I'm not so sure about this at all." And the third day, I

was like, "this is terrible. What am I, you know?" And then someone says, "oh, I really liked a picture posted on InstaPoop or something." And you go, "Oh yeah. Maybe it's not so bad, you know." Like, yeah, you kind of, I guess creativity is... At times, you know, you're sort of, you're feeling a bit up and down about how you think your work is or what you might feel about it. So, yeah, it has been, it has been challenging. We had, we played a four square with our neighbours that we live in an apartment block in St Kilda and there's apartment block next to us and our neighbor said, "let's get some Foursquare going." So we socially distanced with like eight people and different people came in and it was great to just do something social, uh, a little bit physical. That was totally fun. And, um, you know, quite embarrassing and all those terrific things.

TM

Ross and Tai were both making it work. And just as Ross talked through how he was handling the stress, I asked Tai whether she was stressed and what her advice was for getting through it.

TS

Oh no, I think if anything, I need to make it clear that I'm not, I'm not perfect and I'm definitely craving... I'm so craving, like, dancing weirdly. I never realized it was such a big part of me just every week or so going out and just trying to find strangers to dance with. Like, I really miss that thing. But I think with the kids, for me, it just helped for me to just turn my perspective around a little bit. And it always helps me to think about how quickly they're growing up and to think about, um, how soon it's going to be, that they won't even be here. And how soon it will be that I'll be feeling lonely and I'll miss them. And so just to, it just helps me to remember that perspective and to think, well, this is a chance, a really unusual chance to have them back at home with me to, you know, share what they're going through at this age, rather than just preschool age.

And it's quite unusual, you know, to have this time where we can sleep in, in the mornings, if we want. We can listen to a podcast together. Just, I think if any advice is just to sort of relax a bit into it and to trust what, you know you all like. Like you're a family, they came out of you. They're not that different from you. And I think that if you force any, any kind of education that's forced is not, it's never gonna work like there's friction there. So for me, it just helped to, to sort of sit down and think about what my kids are actually into. And I feel extremely thankful and lucky that my parents let me follow exactly what I was into from young age. And I was a pretty bossy, forthright kid, and I knew what I was into, but it helped that they, they never stood in my path. And if anything, they encouraged me, um, with whatever I chose. And so for me, it's just helped to sit back and think, "Well, what are my" kids into? And it might not be what I'm into, but I can always support in whatever creative way I can think of what they're into. And it's really lovely to sort of have spent the last few weeks, watching them, um, flourish in that way and follow their things. And actually iron out a few difficulties that we had before, because we were quite fragmented. You know, there was a lot of picking things, picking up and dropping off and going to swimming. And, you know, I was stressed out and over caffeinated or hungover or whatever. And there's a lot less of that because, you know, we're not going out of the house basically. Or we're just going out for a walk every day. And when we walk together, we talk about what we're thinking. And yeah, I feel like it's just focusing on the positive things rather than the negative things. And it is, it is hard. It's really, you do feel a bit trapped. I feel a bit trapped, but at the same time, it's really helped me to just when I'm feeling a bit trapped just to turn to my work. And I've been writing a lot more, which is weird, but writing daily. And, um, I wasn't doing that before and just making as an outlet, which is helpful. And it makes you appreciate what your practice is actually for.

TM

And that's it for this second edition of Faraway, so close. We'll be regularly following up one aspect of COVID-19 in the arts in the coming weeks. And you can keep up to date with new episodes via iTunes and Spotify. And through Art Guide Australia online.