

FEM-aFFINITY #1: Catherine Bell on inclusion and collaboration

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INTRODUCTION

Hello and welcome to the *Art Guide Australia* podcast with Tiarney Miekus. This episode is the first of a three-part series on feminism, contemporary art and disability. We're focusing on a nationally touring exhibition called *FEM-aFFINITY*, which is a collaborative female-led show. It features a series of collaborations between seven female artists who practice from Melbourne's Arts Project Australia, a studio and gallery for artists with an intellectual disability, and seven female contemporary artists, including the likes of Yvette Coppersmith and Prudence Flint. In this episode, we hear from artist, curator and academic Catherine Bell, who not only curated the exhibition but made the collaborations happen.

Catherine and I talk about the process behind the show, as well as the subjective nature of feminism and what the word means to her. We discuss how she first became familiar with Arts Project Australia, and what it means to break down art world structures and give voice to marginalised artists.

And before we get started a kind thank you to our sponsors for this series, NETS Victoria, who are nationally touring *FEM-aFFINITY*, assisted by the Australian government, through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.

TIARNEY MIEKUS

You've curated an exhibition on feminism and collaboration. And as an artist and academic I know they've always held an important place in your work, but do you remember when you first started to become aware of feminism?

CATHERINE BELL

Well, I think feminism for me as a topic was introduced probably at university. I did a women's literature unit as an undergraduate at the university of Queensland and the lecturer that took that unit was a staunch first wave feminist. So she would often use the F-word in classes, and was quite open about her experiences as a female academic. And I guess the books that we were reading in that undergrad unit too, introduce me to feminism and feminism as a topic, as a social movement. But I think earlier than that, before I knew what feminism was, I have a really strong memory of when I was 13 and about to start high school. And I had an assignment in art where I had to write about an artist and I was really grappling which artist I would choose. And it was a Sunday and my dad had *The Australian* newspaper and there was a memorial to an artist called Daphne Mayo, who was a Brisbane sculptor. And he suggested I do my assignment on Daphne Mayo.

And I just remember seeing this image: she was under 5 ft, she was about 4 ft 7" I think, and she was carving the frieze of the Brisbane Museum. And I just, I think I had a feminist epiphany at that moment when I saw her carving that frieze, and you know, this tiny woman on a scaffold, and then reading about her, her story. Her art took her around the world and she studied in London and in Europe. And she contributed so much to Brisbane in terms of, you know, starting up the state library. And she was a real, real force. And that really inspired me cause through writing that assignment when I was 13 and learning about her life and her lived experience and knowing that she was born in Brisbane and had done all of that was a real influence on me. So I feel like that was my feminist epiphany: learning about her and her work and knowing that it was possible to make art and make a living as an artist.

TM

And having those female role models can be so important when you're growing up. Where you getting that from the women in your family?

CB

Well, all the women in my family—my aunts, my mother, my grandmother—they all worked. I guess my grandmother was a strong influence in that she, she had a really civic sensibility. She did a lot of handicrafts that she would make for the church, and they would sell those handicrafts to fundraise for different charities.

And so she would be making dolls and, you know, crocheting coat hanger covers and doilies. And, you know, she was non-stop doing that. And, you know, that also was really influential because it showed that she had a sense of social justice and, you know, wanting to help others and doing it in the best means that she could, which was handicrafts, which is creative expression. And so I would sit there and watch her sew these dolls, and she taught me how to knit and crochet. And I still have coat hangers in my wardrobe that she made these beautiful crocheted covers for. And when I look at them, I just think, wow, you know, she was formidable with wanting to help others through her creativity.

And all my aunts were teachers at school, and there was a real pressure after I finished high school to go into teaching. But I sort of resisted that for a while. And I sneakily signed up to go to art school after I did an art history degree.

TM

So, you would have been studying to be an artist in the early 90s in Brisbane. What was that experience like in terms of being a woman, being at art school, and I understand you also worked jobs in aged care?

CB

I mean, art schools are always full of politics. And when I went through art school, it was a real 2D-3dD conflict. Like I remember my sculpture teacher calling painting the flat arts. And there was a real hands-off approach to art school when I went through where you were just sort of shown a space and then you just worked, worked there autonomously. And I had zero money at the time, even though I worked part-time jobs, but, you know, I used a lot recycled materials, hard rubbish. I worked with a lot of white goods that I would cut up. I'd pull washing machines and dryers off the front lawns of people's homes and drag them up to the studio and then start cutting them up, and just using them as, you know, recycling them as a medium to make work.

And the first body of work I made when I left art school used that medium to sort of critique domestic violence and what happens in domestic spaces. So, yeah, it sort of led to this idea of inserting, I guess, the sort of social justice within the artwork. I was really interested in those sort of issues and the jobs that I was working in at the time: like I worked in aged care for many years as an artist in Brisbane, in all different roles. And I was also a volunteer at the Queensland AIDS Council. And so you would do volunteer works in the homes of AIDS patients looking after them bathing them, cooking them dinner. I remember those times as being very, quite intense because I was constantly working in aged care and doing that volunteer work and doing my studies. So all of those influence sort of infuse.

TM

Well, it sounds like it was a lot of emotional labour.

CB

It's a lot of emotional labour, and it really draws your attention to wanting to raise awareness of issues affecting other people. Because the nursing was very interesting, there were two different communities I was working with: sort of elderly women in aged care and young men who were dying of AIDS, and both of those communities are facing death on a daily basis. So I was constantly surrounded by death and I was like a teenager, 18, 19. And I'm looking at bodies that are deteriorating through illness and I'm caring for those bodies.

TM

So having that quite emotional labor in both art and life, it does bring up that feminism is of course a subjective thing in many ways. And there's been changes in how feminism has been conceived in the last 30 years, but have you felt your understanding of feminism has changed over time too?

CB

Definitely, definitely changed. And if I sort of rewind to when I first came out as an emerging artist, I was taken on by a commercial gallery at an early stage as well. So I was also dealing with that sort of structure as a young woman, trying to navigate being in a quite male dominated art world as well. And thinking about feminism, I remember that sort of led onto a trajectory of the 'bad girls' art world feminist movement: of the 'bad girls' and how that use of irreverence in art and then that naughtiness and that use of humour being so important to be able to express yourself as a female artist, to use that as a strategy. I think that suited my personality in terms of wanting to explore feminism in my art practice.

And I followed that for quite a long time, but in terms of feminism evolving

and my understanding of feminism through working with Cathy [Staughton] at Art Projects Australia, I have a much better understanding of intersectional feminism and the importance of that and the importance of understanding that the intersectionality of sort of interlocking experiences of oppressions, that cross not just gender, but, race, class, disability, ethnicity, sexuality. I have a more nuanced understanding of what feminism is and acknowledging your white privilege within that. And how can you use that privilege to help others?

TM

Let's backtrack a little bit to your ongoing collaboration with Cathy Staughton. So Cathy is a very vibrant painter who practices from Arts Project Australia, and you two have been collaborating for years and Cathy has painted your portrait many times, and you've created work documenting your collaboration together. I imagine it would have been kind of an eye-opening thing for you at first, particularly when artists with an intellectual disability are still so maligned by the art world at large.

CB

It was completely transformative in terms of really understanding the experiences of disability identity and wanting to know more and just feeling like this is meaningful to me and my practice, and I just was addicted. I just wanted to do more, understand more, and collaborating with Cathy the experience of that—it was both intimate and expansive because when you're working with somebody very closely with somebody, you form a bond, a really trusted bond [and] that sort of support really encourages creating something else. And you're doing that creating of something else together.

TM

And when you have a neurodiverse collaboration, I imagine there may be some interesting ethical questions or learning curves that arise. So how did you approach the collaboration going in?

CB

The ethical questions are there, but I see collaboration actually as like a feminist model of production. So if you think about it from a feminist standpoint, when you go into the collaboration and you're thinking about feminist ethics, about reciprocity, it's non-hierarchical, it's not competitive. It's about shared knowledge. Like we're going in this to learn from each other. It's a reciprocity, and it's a very personal exchange and a very privileged exchange. And I think because Cathy enjoys painting portraits even more so, and I think because we've started through the portrait exchange, there's a familiarity there with painting me as a sitter. And when you're in the position of a sitter too, you become, when you're sitting for Cathy's portrait, you become an active listener. You're not... you're not passive in that role as a sitter because Cathy's painting you, as well as constantly talking to you, and she's sharing her inner frustrations, she's, you know, she's talking to you about things that are troubling her as she's painting you. So you get to learn a lot about Cathy when you are her sitter. And you're also getting the privilege of seeing her process and how she paints, how she makes those decisions.

And this has been a sustained relationship now. So I don't see it just as a collaborator. I see Cathy as my friend and we're in constant contact. It's a very demystifying process because it's not like you go in with a list of ethics that you're going to conform to when you are involved in a neurodiverse relationship. It's a continual learning process. And I really believe collaborating with Cathy has raised my political consciousness. I really want to advocate for artists with disability to be included more, which is, I mean, *FEM-aFFINITY* was really a response to... That's just the positive and meaningful experience of collaborating with Cathy. I wanted the other artists involved in that show [*FEM-aFFINITY*] to have that experience of collaborating with artists at Arts Project Australia.

TM

And so that model of you collaborating with Cathy and that becoming the kind of inspiration for *FEM-aFFINITY* and you bringing together seven contemporary artists, external from Arts Project with seven artists who practice from Arts Project, and having them collaborate together in a variety of ways, what are the challenges, but also the benefits in curating a show in that way?

CB

I think the artists in *FEM-aFFINITY*, some of them found it challenging because they hadn't collaborated with another artist before. And it's not like the fact that the artists in *FEM-aFFINITY* having a disability made it more difficult—I think going to

an unfamiliar open plan, social studio, if you're an artist, watching artists beavering away in that space is quite confronting for anyone to go, 'Right, now we want you to make work with this person.' So, it wasn't something that was a one size fits all for all the participants involved. And it was really easing the artists into that experience, firstly through sharing artwork—and as a really hands-on curator I facilitated those meetings and documented those meetings, and it was for them to find the common ground. And I think it made the artists—the external artists—a little bit more introspective and reflective because they could just observe and think about the differences between the social studio that the Arts Project artists were working in and how different that was to their art school experience.

TM

Yes. And there is that sense at Arts Project where the disability is secondary and it is about the act of creation and being an artist.

CB

Exactly, exactly. I mean that joyous moment of the making and being uninhibited by those external structures, that you're trying to, I don't know, almost second guess what's going on and why and what you have to do to be accepted. It's sort of strange because the art world isn't inclusive. The art world is historically marginalising and omitting whole constituencies out of the history of art. And again, *FEM-aFFINITY* was about redressing that imbalance. It was about, I guess, a revisionist approach to the artists that have been omitted from that master narrative, the cannon of even feminism, you know. If we want to go back to feminism, disability has been excluded from feminism as well.

You know, *FEM-aFFINITY* wasn't about really focusing on feminism. It was about looking at collaboration as a feminist mode of production to help rectify that imbalance, cause I'm such an advocate for collaboration for those principles that it instills: that connectivity, that inclusiveness. It's such a powerful way to address exclusion and issues about diversity and sort of recognising the lived experience, because you're working so closely with someone and that shared knowledge and that getting to understand someone through their practice, it's a real privilege. You get to see someone's lived experience through their work. That's what I think.

TM

And it's probably worth mentioning that Arts Project Australia was started by a woman, Myra Hilgendorf in 1974, and it was so her daughter had a place in which to practice art. I imagine that story would have weighed on your mind to some extent when creating *FEM-aFFINITY*?

CB

Yes. I really saw the connection between what Myra Hilgendorf had done with Arts Project. This very activist stance of wanting to advocate for her daughter and her daughter's creativity and facilitating that for others; expanding that experience for other people with disabilities to explore their creativity. And I see that as a feminist act, and it really made me reflect on this idea of people use the term feminism, but this idea of doing feminism really resonated with me.

But doing feminism is an action. It's, 'How do we do feminism?' Well, we do feminism by curating a show called *FEM-aFFINITY* that is about looking at inclusion. It's looking at the interlocking experiences of oppression, and providing an understanding of that through the lived experience, which is then reflected through the artworks. You know, the show wasn't about trying to look for the artists at Arts Project Australia who were exploring overtly feminist subject matter, because we don't know whether the subject matter... the artists can't often express that their work is exploring feminism. But the curatorial rationale of putting past works in the show, [and] new works that are collaborated upon, sets up a premise that these artists have been practicing for a really long time. And these visual inquiries that they've been investigating and exploring span, you know, 10, 20, 30 years. Okay. So that then says that these artists have been practicing artists for that period of time and being a practicing artist these days, a woman practicing art for 30 years at Arts Project, is for me a feminist act. It shows resilience, it shows longevity, it shows commitment to practice. It really does.

TM

It really does show all of those things. And I mean, there's so many artists that Arts Project Australia, but also elsewhere, who have a disability and have had great artistic careers. But why do you think the art world has been so marginalising and so hesitant in truly looking at the work of artists with an intellectual disability?

CB

Ignorance.

TM

Yep okay.

CB

Ignorance. Because I believe those people stepped into Arts Project... They have a preconceived idea what art and disability looks like.

TM

So as if the practice isn't that rigorous or something.

CB

Yep. And I think as soon as that is demystified by walking through the door at Arts Project and seeing the studio, seeing the level of professionalism, seeing the exhibitions, the quality of work that's produced—it will just blow them away. It's those preconceived ideas about what artwork looks like if it's made by disabled artist. And what I think is really interesting—I had an epiphany when I was looking through the stock room of work there, that the artworks aren't dependent on a disability narrative. Even though that's part of their lived experience, their work is so expansive. Like Wendy is an abstract painter.

TM

So that's Wendy Dawson from Arts Project.

CB

Her pattern... her obsessive mark-making; that spans years. The commitment to that mark-making. It's just absolutely mesmerising looking at her work. And I have some of her works at home and I still just stop and just I'm in awe of just how beautiful her work is.

TM

So what do institutions need to be doing then?

CB

I think it needs to be redressed in terms of much more of a commitment to showing the history of the work. Like a retrospective of Cathy Staunton at the NGV. A retrospective of Dorothy Berry at the NGV. These are exhibitions that should be in these spaces. And it's such a triumph to know that *FEM-aFFINITY* is currently touring around Australia and people are getting to see the work. And one of the great things I think about the show is that the Art Projects Australia artists aren't othered in that show. It's an equal footing. You look at the work and, as I've said before, people come up to me and they go, you can't tell which artists has the disability and that's the point. They shouldn't be showing or having a retrospective at the NGV because they are an artist with a disability. It should be purely on the quality of the work. And just that longevity of that visual inquiry. It's just very inspiring and it's very profound.

CONCLUSION

And that was Catherine Bell for this first episode of our mini-series looking at contemporary art, feminism, and disability, and focusing on the show *FEM-aFFINITY*. Stay tuned for episodes two and three. You can subscribe to the Art Guide podcast on iTunes and Spotify or otherwise listen at Art Guide online, where you can keep up to date with art related features and interviews from across the country.

Find the full audio of this podcast episode here: <https://artguide.com.au/fem-affinity-1-catherine-bell-on-inclusion-and-collaboration/>

CREDITS

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