FEM-aFFINITY #2: Janelle Low on creative relationships and otherness

art guide AUSTRALIA

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JANELLE LOW [INTRODUCTION QUOTE]
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INTRODUCTION
Hello and welcome to the Art Guide Australia podcast with Tiarney Miekus. This episode is the second of a three-part series on feminism, contemporary art and disability, that looks at the intersections between the three. It focuses on the nationally touring exhibition, *FEM-aFFINITY*.

FEM-aFFINITY 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 Janelle Low, one of the artists in *FEM-aFFINITY* who collaborated with Arts Project artist Eden Menta. Janelle is a photographer whose parents migrated from Singapore and her work explores a sense of otherness between her cultural heritage and her western upbringing. In a very honest conversation Janelle talks about this, as well as navigating the art world as a person of colour, her collaboration with Eden, and why disability isn't visible in contemporary art.

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
There's many elements of your practice I want to discuss, but I think it might be better to start with talking about where the art partly comes from. And you're the first person in your family to be born outside of Asia. And I wanted to know, especially because your heritage and your family I think informs so much of your work in many ways, what was your upbringing like?

JANELLE LOW
So I'm originally from Western Australia, grew up in Perth, in the 90s, very much in the shadow of, you know, Pauline Hanson and her not liking Asians very much. It was actually quite difficult now I reflect on it, when I think about it. It sounds strange to say it now, but like my mum would get refused service at the deli counter at Coles because she was Asian. So we'd be waiting there for, you know, 10, 15, 20 minutes while other people would come through and be served until she… She's a tiger lady. I love my mum. She set a really good example for me in terms of asserting herself, but she would have to, you know, make herself known in order to get service. And I guess I didn't really reflect on how that impacted me until probably more recently, if anything, sort of how I go about being really polite, how I make sure that when I step up to that counter, if I'm trying to order something at a shop, I'm like, 'My English at its best', you know? Even though English is my first language. And I think that sort of position of feeling like an outsider, maybe feeling not that welcome, I think that started really early and really does continue to inform my practice today, for sure.

TM
Was that something you and your mum talked about?

JL
Not really. I think I mentioned it to her. We have a great WhatsApp family chat that gets like 200 messages a day. I know what all the kids have eaten and that kind of thing. But I think I mentioned it to my mum cause I said, 'Do you remember?' And she said, 'Oh yeah.' But there's a joke that my mum's like a smiling assassin. So she's, you know, she'll smile at you while she's saying it, but she'll mean business. And she was like, 'Yeah, I told them!'

That's definitely sort of an early kind of memory. And, you know, that with school being somewhat segregated as well in the 90s in WA—it was worse for my brother and sister who were older than I am, but it still wasn't great. And I remember like being bullied for wanting to go between groups of friends: so going between like the Asian kids/anyone else who wasn't white in one group, and wanting to make friends with like the Aussie kids as they were known, and being kind of picked on by both sides for that, because it's like pick a side, you know. And that was, that was very interesting. And that sort of in-betweeneness, again, feeds into my practice too. Just not feeling like fully belonging, not feeling fully like I fit, I suppose.

TM

So that would have been happening when you were growing up, but at the same time, you obviously were interested in art and you're particularly interested in photography—how did that come about?

JL

The interest in photography started in high school purely from not wanting to be photographed. So I really hated having my photograph taken. I was having all kinds of, you know, body issue images at the time, not liking how I looked. A big part of growing up in WA was idolising people who didn't look like me: the sort of like the blonde hair, the beautiful blue eyes, especially WA surfer chick, all things I'm not. So when I saw pictures of myself, I was like, 'No!' So I picked up a camera and I was photographing my classmates and my friends. I was documenting events. People were like, 'Oh, I won't bring my camera. I'll ask Janelle for the pictures afterwards.' And that was kind of a nice way to relate to people as well, because I didn't, I didn't have very, I haven't had a lot of friends historically growing up because of not fitting in. So it was a really nice way to relate to people and realise that I was good at it.

TM

It's interesting what you say about the body, because I know for myself and for so many female friends, one of the first awarenesses that you have of your femaleness is you have a certain body and then you want another body.

JL

For sure. Grass is always greener, right. We're always sold that there's something better. It's taken time to come to, you know, it's definitely taken time to come to kind of an acceptance of my own body. And I think that I've been putting that into my work as well, deliberately putting myself forward in different ways. That self portrait of me, the nude self-portrait with the little koala.

TM

I think we should set the scene because it's, it's an amazing photograph. And you're sitting on this bed, you're kind of lit by this almost, it looks like a soft kind of golden light coming through a window, and you're smoking this cigarette and you have this koala over you genitals and it's such a powerful, striking image.

JL

It is one of my—it probably sounds narcissist to say, given it's a picture of me—but it's one of my favourite works I've produced, and it was a turning point for me. I mean, personally, it was a significant point in my life because I had just made a decision to leave like a really terrible abusive relationship. And it was sort of like a quite freeing moment, I suppose, a feeling of like putting myself forward.

TM

So if you started off by photographing other people, what was the moment then when you turned the camera on yourself?

JL

Yeah, that's an interesting thing that I haven't probably fully thought about. But turning the lens inward to self-portraiture was probably taking control of my own image and not letting other people kind of capture what they thought that I should look like. You know, particularly as like a person of colour representing myself in my own way, probably subconsciously at that point was something that was very important. And only now over time, have I really come to kind of realise more fully and more consciously.

TM

Did you always have this kind of impulse to document?

JL

I think so. Like, a lot of my work at the moment currently, and work that's going into my solo show that's coming up, is revolving around the family archive. And I think the love of documentation comes from going through our family albums.

There's a drawer at home in this really big old wooden cabinet, and every time I go home or my siblings go home, everyone pulls it out and everybody's flipping through. And to me it's almost like it's another world because most of the images are taken in Singapore, which is where my family is originally from. And so for me, it's sort of like exploring the family history that I'm not a part of because my siblings are significantly older than I am. It's almost like they had a whole different life before I then came along. And so that sort of love of documentation, I think comes from that because it gives me so much insight into like where they've been and what they did.

TM

You saying that reminds me of a photo series that you did *At your surface*, where there are these women in their bridal outfits, except you've kind of 'golded' their faces out. And I was wondering, are they from family photographs?

JL

They are family photographs. So it was really lucky, a couple of years ago I went home and my dad was just like, 'Oh, here's a USB.' My uncle sent a whole bunch of pictures, family pictures. And it was like—as an artist, I was like, 'Oh, I see this is what I'm going to be with for the next few years.' And I have. They're all my variously, like my great aunts who I never got to meet. I've heard a lot of really fun stories about, and I just sort of noticed as I was going through them that even though they got married at different times, there was this real pattern and repetition in the way they were being portrayed. And I was like, how much of this... And I don't know them personally, right? But like how much of the person is left in these images? Because they're very ornate, their decorative there's, you know...

TM

That was the reason I asked, because they're so perfect!

JL

For sure. Everything's sort of, you know, immaculately presented. And I just sorta realised, I was like that tiny face is kind of all that's left of the individual. Because, you know, dowries were still a thing when I was growing up. I remember my mum telling me like, 'Oh, don't worry, you'll at least get to pick the gemstone that your dowery can be. Like, you get to choose if you really like sapphires it could be sapphires.' And I'm like, 'Ah, Cool!' No interest in getting married at all! That series was a real reflection on my position around like, not wanting to be married, not wanting to be dowery-ed not wanting to... I guess not to sort of lose myself a little bit.

TM

Do you feel compelled to make art about these things and these questions?

JL

Yeah, I think so. I think that's something that's really important to me, and something that I've come into, and this is through wonderful encouragement from both, you know, people close to me, but also my gallerists as well, like to make work that truly I'm interested in making that is I'm invested in, that I'm interested in exploring. I definitely feel compelled to do that. And I enjoy that process as well. I think that's something that's really important. I think 'art for art's sake', which, you know, like I can appreciate it, I can respect it, but it's not for me. I think it really always has to come from quite a personal point of view and if other people connect to it great. But if they don't, that's also okay as well.

TM

You're still at the beginnings of your career in many ways, but you've had such success for being at the beginning of your career. And I always wonder when you're kind of dealing with this traumatic history and these personal events in your art, but you're art is successful at the same time, is that a weird position to be in?

JL

It is an odd position to be in. I mean, to be launched kind of into the spotlight—I was 23 when I won the National Photographic Portrait Prize.

TM

We should say you were the youngest person in Australia to ever win that prize. And the second woman.

JL

Yeah, that was obviously, it was a fantastic experience. It's changed the entire trajectory of my life, so much good has come out of it. But it was crippling at 23, being completely unknown, to suddenly be in the spotlight and to have people say, "Oh, you're a portrait photographer." I'm like, "Am I?" And it took quite a while to not be paralyzed with fear. I was suddenly also, you know... Very obviously I love being

represented my gallery. I really do. But I look at the other artists and I'm like, "Oh, am I supposed to win a major prize every year? How am I going to do that?" And yeah, it's taken a while to kind of unpack that and step back and kind of in terms of, you know, success around my work, I went back to study for fun while I was still working and exhibiting and freelancing, I was like, let's add, full-time study in on that. I didn't have, I never had the art school experience.

TM

Oh right. I didn't realise that.

JL

I went back and did a Bachelor of Fine Art just to see what it was like, because I'm commercially trained. I have a lot of technical training in photography, but I have no art training. And when I went back to art school, there was a very interesting insight into the art industry and the institution of art. There was one instance where I made a body of work that wasn't around cultural identity or anything related to that, or, you know, being a woman or like all that kind of stuff. I got marked down for it. And I got critiqued for it. I guess the feedback I got was like, "Oh, it's not as good as your cultural stuff."

TM

What did you think about that?

JL

I was pretty, pretty mad. I definitely left out of school with—I have mixed feelings and it took a while to recover, if that makes sense. And to give myself permission to make what I want again, and not have it kind of clouded by the institution of like, "You can't do this, you can't do that." I think it's not an uncommon experience. Unfortunately, I think for a lot of students going through, and I think for a lot of artists.

TM

You teach at university now yourself. And I mean, I guess you'd have students who are making work that deals with their cultural background and trying to also navigate the art world at the same time. What advice would you give to them?

JL

It's tough too, because I'm still the only person of colour as well. I've been the only person of colour basically on every staff, and that's a lot to represent if that makes sense. But you know, for my students, I think the most important thing I want to tell them is to give themselves permission and that a grade in this context, like, I'm really sorry to say it, it doesn't matter. You know? I think it's important that you're making work that feels true to you.

TM

What do your family think about your art?

JL

They, as of always and now, are not really involved. I know my parents are making some—or my mum I would say is making some effort to try and be a bit more encouraging, but they've never really got it. They've never really got it. And that's okay. I think I'm coming to peace with that. I think a really great piece of advice my psychologist said to me was, "Your parents are never going to be what you wish that they were." And that's laid in with the cultural distance and generational distance and all of that kind of thing as well. But she just said, "You're not going to get what you want from them and you have to be okay with that." And that was really important. It took a while for it to sink in, but that was really important. And I can very much accept that my, how I interact with my family and what I share with them, there's still plenty there, even if it's completely divorced from the art that I do.

TM

To change topic a little bit, you're in the *FEM-aFFINITY* show and you collaborated with Eden Menta who practices from Arts Project Australia—maybe talk through how you two bonded because you have a pretty close friendship now through that collaboration.

JL

We do. The way it started was we didn't know who each other, we didn't know each other at all. Basically like I got invited to collaborate and I was like, "Sure." And I walked up the stairs and saw Eden for the first time and Eden wasn't having a great day, but just kind of the bonding happened pretty immediately. I think we both looked at each other and really were like, "I like you." And then the process of finding out more about each other, I think the process of sharing a lot of what I've just talked about, actually, like a lot about bad ex's and relationship troubles and, you know,

figuring out your own self-worth and figuring out how you can put yourself forward. That was definitely a big thing that we bonded over. And feeling different, feeling, being bullied at school, you know, being an outsider with not very many friends, that was definitely something that we bonded instantly over.

I think this sort of vulnerability can cement your friendship pretty quick, a lot faster than just discussing, like what you enjoyed on Netflix the night before—although that's very important too. But like, you know, something else that has just recently kind of come about is Eden and I spent a bit of time discussing how both of us kind of neither felt like a boy or a girl, and that's Eden's quote as well. And it's really nice to know kind of like, I guess a year on now, or is it two years on, from the initial start of our collaboration for both of us to sort of be exploring our identities and exploring our gender identities and non-binary pronouns, and like all of that kind of stuff. It's nice to have that. It wasn't just a moment in time that we were collaborating, if that makes sense. I think it's been said a lot in things that have been written about us, like it's expanded beyond the Arts Project studio into our homes, into meeting families and close, you know, people close to us, [and] to support each other as we continue navigating through the arts.

TM

In terms of the work you two produced, they're photographs and they're quite large scale photographs, and they're very funny. Some are quite poignant, but some are very amusing.

JL

Yes. Anyone who's met Eden knows how much fun and how much joy I think Eden brings to any room that Eden's in. And there was so much room. It was really lovely thing about *FEM-aFFINITY* was leaving so much room for the collaborations to be whatever they wanted to be for each individual pairing. And we laughed a lot in the process of making our art. Also maybe potentially cried a bit sharing things with each other, and I guess the images and the product of it—it is like a documentation of our sort of collective journey together. And like, yeah, it's fun. And it's funny. And is there anything wrong with art if it's not deadpan serious, as well? You know, I see a lot of, it's interesting, with portrait photography, especially you see a split of like, "Oh, a smile. It can't be art. It's not serious enough to be art." But then a regular criticism I see on Facebook of the National Portrait Prize is like, "Nobody's cracking a smile." You know?

TM

Right, really?

JL

Yeah, quite a regularly. It happens every year. People kind of saying everybody looks too miserable. So it's a difficult balance to walk, I suppose, if you're worried about how people are perceiving it. But what it ended up, I'm really happy with how the works ended up. And I think Eden is as well.

TM

You're a person of colour and Eden has an intellectual disability, and you've been quite marginalised in the history of art. Was that something that you two talked about?

JL

Maybe a little, maybe a little. I think it was very exciting for Eden to see her work, see herself, I think as well. Like, you know, that talk about representation and being able to see yourself somewhere, literally Eden's seeing themselves 'big' in gallery spaces, [and] traveling inter-state—this is prior to Covid—traveling inter-state and giving an artist talk and sharing about ourselves, and other people coming to hear it and having a good time. It was all new. It was all very exciting and it's great, but I think, yeah, I think it's also...

To me anyway, when I'm reflecting on it, I think there is also a little bit of an element of sadness for that, because as you say, like, there's not that much representation of that sort of work out there. And the, you know, the gatekeeping is ground up when it comes to art institutions—in my point of view, anyway. You know, like, you look at who's on the board, who's making the decisions. And yeah, I feel like there's a cultural shift that's happening. I feel like people are looking out to try and represent marginalised voices in the arts better, but it's still not being done great.

And something that I felt—and I've discussed this with Sim from Arts Project as well—I got to a tipping point where I was really upset in the process of collaborating with Eden, because—I didn't realise this Sim had to sort of explain it. And she's like,

“You’ve been advocating this whole time”, because people would come to me as if I could make decisions for Eden. And were I collaborating with an artist who is neuro-typical, this wouldn’t be the case. They would go straight to the other person to ask them a question: “Are you interested in this? Are you comfortable with this?” Not going to someone else, who’s another entirely different individual and asking them to speak on behalf. And yeah, that was very frustrating.

TM

Yeah. And especially because Eden is very capable of answering for herself, and it shows the, yeah, just the, I guess it’s ignorance, really, with which people are approaching the entire field of art and disability.

JL

Yeah. I have to agree with you on that one. And yeah, I really got thrown in, and I’m glad I did. I think it was a really important experience and it was such a wonderful experience for me. I’ve had such a great time with everything I’ve done with Eden and with Arts Projects. And I just, yeah, I want, I want people to be more aware. I want people to, you know, make that effort to, I don’t know what the right phrase is... Like, I want art institutions, organisations, I want people to make curators, you know, I want them to make more of an effort to understand how to be better inclusive when they’re programming, when they’re asking artists to take part, to push it beyond a tokenistic, kind of like, “Oh yeah, we’ve got tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. We’ve got some boxes.” You know, we’ve got an artist who has an intellectual disability. Oh, we’ve got an artist who’s, you know, not white. It’s such a surface engagement and I’d love to see it pushed further and be better.

TM

When you’re in an exhibition under the banner of feminism, feminism obviously has a very white history and a very upper middle class history. Is that something that you have to grapple with?

JL

For sure. Absolutely. And part of going back to art school was running up against that in a very dramatic, blunt way. I was taking photographs of myself, experimental pictures of my body, sections of my body. So not like the whole, not without a face. And I got told by a particular lecturer that I’m not allowed to do that because it’s not feminist. And if you want to do that, if you want to gain permission to do that, you have to read this 200 page essay. And I did out of spite and I highlighted the only three lines that were even remotely relevant.

TM

So that idea of, I guess, tokenism in the art world—it seems like almost with disability, it’s somehow not even included sometimes at a tokenistic level, it’s just not included. What do you think is going on there? Why?

JL

My gut response to you saying that is you know, people think, “Oh, it’s too hard, it’s too hard to cater. It’s too hard to negotiate.” That’s what I guess, anyway, obviously, like that somehow the art won’t be as good, or the artist won’t be as like dedicated to what they’re doing, which is all completely incorrect. I guess that’s probably my gut instinct that it’s like, “Oh, effort.” You know, like with so many things, like learning people’s pronouns or all that sort of stuff, takes a little bit of extra effort, but like how much reward does that give, you know, in terms of making someone feel welcome, feel included, feel like they can operate at their best. I can tell based on the way it happens to me, the number of last minute invites I get as a person of colour where like international artists are confirmed, inter-state artists are confirmed, everything’s in place, and you go through the list and everyone’s white and the last minute invitation to you: “Oh, would you like to be involved? The deadline’s like today.”

TM

What do you think institutions need to do then? I mean, I don’t know how you, like, you foster genuineness?

JL

Yeah. It’s hard. Isn’t it? Unfortunately, and this is only in my very limited knowledge because I’m not, you know, like how much I engage, I suppose, without art institutions and organisations, the way they work is definitely less than some artists. But every time I hear about a curator of Asian art, who’s white, I’m like maybe it’s time that we make some space. You know, maybe it’s time we make some space to let people who really live with the content who engage, who live, breathe. And obviously I know that’s a controversial thing to say, and I’m not saying people should

just lose their jobs. That's not what I'm saying. But like open up a co-director-ship. Keep an eye on who you're employing. Like, unfortunately I think that institutions from the ground up have so many barriers to people who are marginalised getting involved. And I think because there's all those issues, there's just so many hurdles in the way. Like, I'm someone who doesn't think twice about things like diversity quotas or hiring, because there's so much imbalance, you know, something like that is just like a way that we can come in, and yeah, I don't know.

TM

Do you think things are improving?

JL

I hope so.

CONCLUSION

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

Find the full audio of this podcast episode here: https://artguide.com.au/fem-affinity-2-janelle-low-on-creative-relationships-and-otherness/

CREDITS

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