

CONVERSATIONS – John Buckley Gallery exhibition interview

When I view an artwork, I often find myself wondering about the life of the artist that made it. How did it all come about? For our final exhibition of 2011, I asked our seven women gallery artists a series of questions investigating their early beginnings, families and influences. Their insightful answers proved to be fascinating entry-points into the works they are making today. - Lucas Grogan 2011

Do you remember the first work you ever made? Where is it and what happened to it?

Katherine Hattam – *My first drawings were pencil on a Basildon Bond writing pad of family life. They were all burnt on Ash Wednesday bushfires in the Adelaide hills, about two hundred of them.*

Jennifer Goodman - *The first work I ever made that had significance to me was a semi-abstract still life painted when I was in grade 4. It won 1st prize in a school art competition judged by Sir William Dargie. I think it's in a folio somewhere in storage.***Christine Healy** - *I remember lots of art making from childhood from kindergarten onwards. The first that I would identify as a 'work of art' was a seascape at sunrise painted when I was 11. It was the first time I painted in layers, wiping off parts to reveal the underpainting. It meant taking a risk and trusting that the process would work. I recall my surprise at how exposing the less defined under-layers gave an unexpected luminosity to the picture.***Emma van Leest**- *No idea – although I still have a plate with a transfer of a picture I drew at kindergarten. It's a drawing of a girl outside a house with a tree, butterfly, flowers and a big sun. In the foreground there is a boy fishing in a pond. This would have been my older brother – my family is fishing-mad.*

Did you grow up surrounded by art?

Lesley Dumbrell- *My father was an architect so art was a presence in my childhood. There were reproductions of Vermeer and Van de Hooch hanging in our house, and from an early age I thought the Vermeers were wonderful, long before I knew Vermeer's place in history. By the age of 9 I knew that I wanted to be a painter. I think I have been lucky to know what I wanted to do so early in life.***JG** - *We had some modernist art of varying quality in our*

modernist style home. My parents came to Australia from Europe in 1949 and brought with them an appreciation of the decorative arts so we always had aesthetically nice things in the home. What I do remember is regularly going with my father to art auctions. I think they were at Leonard Joel. Anyway, each lot was held up and identified before going under the hammer. This worked very much like flash cards and gave me a good education in identifying work of different artists. **KH** - I grew up not just with art on the walls but very good and contemporary work much of which is now in the NGA, such as Fred William's Steep Road that hung over the sitting room fireplace and John Perceval's black cockatoo flying upstream. There were works by Fairweather, Blackman, Boyd, Nolan, Hickey, Senbergs - all bought well before their time. **EVL** - No, not really, we had a few bits and pieces around the house, mainly prints and so forth, including Russell Drysdale's Sofala, which I remember not liking, and other Australian art. Perhaps most unusually, they had (and still have) a Brueghel print above their bed, which I was fascinated by. **CH** - My grandmother and great aunt were painters, and we had one original painting hanging at home - a flower study of blue hydrangeas on white glass. It was a simple and textural piece. My first cousins had many paintings done by my grandmother or great aunt. They were landscapes and still lifes. I was intrigued by the surfaces and the way that colours would change with light. My father used to sketch with pencil and he was also a keen photographer. In our family it seemed natural to make art although there was no clear career path

Were your parents supportive of your artistic talents?

EVL - Yes, they were – although perhaps not to the extent that they would have been if they were artists themselves. Mum happily supplied me with books and materials, and booked me into craft and ceramics classes. She also taught me how to sew, which started my love of handiwork as a medium. **Hilarie Mais** - I think they really did not know where I was heading or what it was, luckily they just let me get on with it, which in fact was very supportive.

Do you remember the first artwork or artist that really made an impact on you?

KH – Year 10 & 11 got up early at 530 am and drew large charcoal drawings

hung all round my bedroom on wires; family friend Arthur Boyd saw them, told my parents to take me out of school so I could get on with being an artist but John Brack (also family friend) in a general remark i.e not shown the drawings nor that kind of man, said 'many are called few are chosen'. My parents had also seen up close how difficult life as an artist was and encouraged university not art school. I was academic, won a Commonwealth scholarship, spent four extremely happy, satisfying, challenging and successful years studying English Literature and Political Science which was really a cover for the study of psychoanalytic theory. These areas reappear in my later Bookwork pictures where the actual books are recycled as are their subjects. **EVL** - I had one little print of a Victorian era fashion plate (2 ladies and a little girl in their finery walking in the park) which I was obsessed with and still have today. I'm unsure why it had such an impact; perhaps I used to imagine being one those ladies and thinking how wonderful it would be to wear such clothes. **JG** - I remember going on a school excursion to the NGV to see an exhibition of international art. I'm not sure exactly how old I was but it would have been in the early 70's. Anyway, what I remember was seeing a Matisse painting that may have been *The Red Room* or probably more likely *The Red Studio*. I had always loved Matisse's work but was only familiar with reproductions. What struck me was the thinness of the paint and the fact that it was transparent in places. It wasn't nearly as polished as I had expected. So seeing it changed my understanding of what an amazing painting actually looked like.

Most artists have had to do the odd jobs to survive, what sort of work did you do to support yourself early on?

HM- Many and varied. It was always to do with what gives you the daytime, studio time. They were always part-time, as jobs can so easily take over your life and direction. Some of them were fun and some laborious and boring.

How did you find attending art school?

KH - At university I had been taught modernism: how to read a text, that there was one way to do so. Twenty years later we were taught postmodernism, plurality of meanings, the significance and role of the viewer, intentionality etc. I had to rethink everything and I resisted every week, making the classes more interesting for everyone including me.

EVL - It was weird; I had come straight from high school and had very little life

experience. I started at uni doing abstract landscape works, I had no style of my own. It took a lot of time and work to find my groove at uni.

Did you have any particularly influential lecturers or peers during this time that made an effect on your work?

HM- *I attended several Art Schools, in Britain and America, Bradford, Winchester, the Slade, then as a Fellow at the New York Studio School, all of which had a constantly varied flow of remarkable part-time artist-tutors and lecturers, so I approached this time more as a kind of smorgasbord of influences or not ...? As a student you are constantly being challenged while also gaining reaffirmation, so a constant state of self-criticism and reflection ensues; a healthy practice*
KH - *I first went to art school to do an MFA at the VCA when Gareth Sansom was Dean; Robyn McKenzie taught art theory; it was a wonderful and mind-changing two years even though with three children aged 6 to 18 I had little time to "hang out".*

EVL - *Andy Thomson was the third year coordinator at RMIT at that time and he was the first person to say to me 'you should really do something with this'. It was the first time someone had really mentored me in any way and showed faith and confidence in my ability to be a 'real artist'. Greg Moncrieff was also very supportive and helpful and gave a lot of his time to his students.*

Were you treated any differently being a woman in your early career?

HM- *Training as a sculptor obviously involves physical strength and ability, so there were personal issues there. I do like to work within a scale and weight I can handle alone.*
Su Baker - *I grew up in a progressive familiar with my father as an artist and my mother the main breadwinner, and manager of business! I was also encouraged in being an artist, in fact it seemed to be expected. It's hard to know whether being a second-generation artist is better or worse. It might be easier and that in itself might not be good, as the urgency and discovery isn't your own. Anyway, feminism was an assumed position at home. I was of course an activist from an early age. It was a part of my work as an artist in relation to the history of painting and the critical issues in the post-post painterly abstraction era, which was linked in a way to cultural shifts in the nature of the artist and the type of work being made. There is a lot that could be said about that.*

However, outside the family context, at that time, in the 70s, girl artists were often seen as potential girlfriends rather than fellow artists, although I went out with rock and roll musicians and so I am not sure I can really know that! Never went out with an artist! I think the social relationships are where the gender issues were felt, and how much support women artists got from their nearest and dearest. I think this is much better now, although no less important. Behind each successful artist is someone helping!!

I hope things have changed and I think the evidence is there to see young women being equally successful, and young men are different these days. I also think the art world itself has changed as a consequence and as a result there is more diversity and intimacy in the work. This is perhaps an effect of feminism, and sexual diversity in all its forms. Art schools are different places now. Almost over feminized in some cases! If that is possible!

Being an artist is hard for anyone and so the needs are the same whoever we are. We all need love!

!Did you have any women artists you looked up to when you first began your art career?

CH - *I don't recall learning about women artists until after secondary school. I do remember thinking that when I first heard of Joan Miro I thought it was a famous woman artist - wow! I was around 12 years old and I was disappointed when I learned that Joan was not a she.***HM**- *I was lucky enough to meet Agnes Martin and Louise Bourgeois as a young artist in New York. They were inspirational in their work and person. On moving to Australia thirty years ago what impressed me was the number of good female artists practicing and making interesting work, all of whom, to their credit, are still active and continuing to develop. Though I do remember a female artist, a now very well respected Australian sculptor who recounted the story of how as a student she was told by her heavy metal male tutor that it would be better for her to go home and have babies. Fortunately this level of antediluvian barbarity now seems to be more the exception than the rule*

.How did the feminist movement influence or affect you and your practice?

HM- *It enabled or maybe inspired me to deal with personal female narrative in my work, and of course a renewed respect for the so-called female craft practices. This was the first time these had been reintroduced into mainstream art practice since the time of the Russian Constructivists. My last body of work realised and shown in New York, the Weapon Series, was certainly a product of this, as was New Friends, my very first body of work realised in Australia in the early eighties.*

KH - *My first exhibition was at the George Paton & Ewing Gallery at Melbourne University - there were two artists, me and Helen Frankenthaler. The work sold well and the Hamilton Art Gallery bought. This was 1978 and Kiffy Rubbo was director. The next director was Juliana Engberg who very sensibly set up a record with slides of shows. At the time I was married to a farmer and living on a property on the SA border with two small sons; somehow I did not get into that record. This says something about me and Feminism - a feminist in life but not in work. I see art as being about bigger and more profound things than politics and of course there are things like colour; literature with books like Virginia Woolf's 'To The Lighthouse' and a range of psychoanalytic theory starting with Freud have been and continue to be influences, leading inevitably to feminist approaches.*

If you had not have become an artist, what sort of career do you imagine you would have pursued?

JG - *I always had an interest in architecture and could imagine myself there. Or possibly art conservation.*

LD- *I have been fortunate to manage to consistently make work all my adult life. Every day I enjoy the moment I walk into the studio, and start to immerse myself in my private world, the work doesn't always go smoothly but the journey is what keeps me going.*

Did having children affect or influence your practice at all?

KH- *Whilst studying at the VCA, I had three children aged between 6 – 18 to care for meaning I had little time to 'hang out' with my peers*

HM- *To have children in your life is wonderful and enriching. They do impact obviously on the practicalities of one's daily life and studio practice in logistical terms. I have two daughters and for me they have become part of the personal narrative that runs through my work. When one of them becomes an artist in*

her own right like my daughter Jessica then that becomes a form of additional dialogue and enrichment, on many levels.

JG - *Combining family and work was very demanding and did mean that I put my practice on hold for a while.*

Tell me about your first exhibition, how was the work received?**KH**- *My first exhibition was at the George Paton and Ewing Gallery at the University of Melbourne where there were two artists, Helen Frankenthaler and I. Hamilton Art Gallery purchased a work which was great. HM* - *I was very fortunate to have been invited at an early age to have my first ever solo exhibition. It was at the Betty Cuninghame Gallery in New York. It was the mid-seventies and I was only 25 at the time and still a student at the Slade in London. I had visited New York for a couple of months prior to moving there permanently and had produced quite a good body of works in a studio at the New York Studio School. Betty had been brought to see my work by the British artist John Walker and immediately offered to represent me in New York, with a solo show a few months later. Fortunately it went really well critically and Betty made numerous sales, so it was a great start; the first of a number of exhibitions I held at Betty's gallery prior to moving to Australia in 1981.*

How important or essential are the titles of your works?

JG - *My titles are an important end product to my work. The title gives the work its independence and allows the work to stand on its own. A recent example of how I named a painting comes to mind. Virginia was a painting in my last show. My thought processes went like this... I looked at the finished work and thought, although totally abstract, it looked like a room. Then, in association to my most important room, my studio, I started thinking of Virginia Woolf's A Room of One's Own. From there my painting got its name.*