



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 5 EPISODE 5

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Transcript of interview:

SOPHIE VANDER – GALLERIST, CURATORIAL+CO

Sophie Vander:

Tim, thank you for having me.

Tim Stackpool:

The first question is of course, is why the move to Woolloomooloo?

Sophie Vander:

Well sometimes great opportunities are thrust upon you, and I think these is one of them. We've been in our Redfern gallery now for nearly three years, and unfortunately the big bad developers have moved in and decided to pull down our gorgeous warehouse building. The building, in fact the whole block and the next building over, were all purchased not long after I took the lease. So I'm pretty sure there was some intention there all along and I found out about it later on. But some things happen for a reason, and we've actually loved the time we've had in our Redfern space, and it was a bit of a Aladdin's cave and that you kind of had to ring the bell and come in and all the glories inside presented themselves. But with the move to Woolloomooloo, which actually kind of came about by accident as well, I just went to look at a different property and it wasn't right.

And I got talking to the agent and he's like, "Leave it with me. I've got an idea." And he went back and presented our gallery to Terrace Tower Group who were the owners of 80 Williams Street. And they were like, we need someone like Curatorial+Co in the space to bring another level of culture, sophistication, art, whatever, to Williams Street, into their building. And then it all just kind of happened very quickly from there. So I feel very, very lucky that we've been invited into this really gorgeous space, which is no longer an Aladdin's cave. It is out and proud right there on the corner of Riley and Williams for all to see

Tim Stackpool:

You're coming from what you're talking about, the Aladdin's Cave. And this new space is very open and clean. There's a lot of natural light, very much public if you like, because you can see straight into the space. It's a very fresh kind of feel.

Sophie Vander:

You're exactly right. And I had to think about how my brand would be projected from now on with this kind of space. And I think I couldn't have had this kind of space three years ago because like you said, I kind of jumped to that online world and quite a curated online space to Redfern which was a baby steps to be able to show works in a bricks and mortar space, but still have that some little bit of anonymity in that you could invite people in and now there's this huge leap. So I don't think I could have been that kind of retail gallery space three years ago. I don't think I had it in me yet. So I feel like I've put my big girl pants on and now I've kind of grown up and now we're all on show. And it absolutely changes your brand and it absolutely changes the way you work, the way I work and way we're going to have to work.

And I'm saying to my team "I don't know how we're going to work. I don't know how this will feel. So we're all just kind of going to dive in and go, okay, well this is how it's going to work and you are on the front desk today and this is what's going to happen when someone comes through the door." So there's a whole lot of logistics that go along with having a space that is so exposed and becomes a retail environment.

Tim Stackpool:

It's a blank canvas, although it's an art cliché, but it truly is. How are you going to fit this out or how have you fitted this out?

Sophie Vander:

Well, the beautiful thing about Redfern, and now I'm translating that to William Street, is that all of the walls within the space are movable. So there's only one big wall that's five and a half meters high and I think it's about 10 meters long, that doesn't move. And everything else moves within the space. And that was the joy of Redfern as well. We could make little areas and little nooks and crannies and little niches where people can move through the work. And I fully intend to do that with this space as well. So even though it has this vast ceilings and feels very open and clean, I'm still very mindful of what people love about our gallery in that it's intimate and has little moments in it that you can take and pause and take it all in. And we'll have seating in there so you can sit down and ponder the work.

So I'm very mindful about creating little moments for our artists and for our visitors so that it doesn't feel overwhelming and exposed. And I don't want it to feel like this kind of white wall fluorescent space. That's just not me. And it's never been me, it's never been our brand. So yes, with all that glorious ceiling height and natural light, I'm very mindful about still creating those little spaces and moments for everybody that visits. And I haven't actually done it yet, but I know I will.

Tim Stackpool:

I think sometimes it can be a little bit intimidating in a commercial gallery space when perhaps you are the only person as a visitor walking in there. And so all the attention that the staff have is on you when you walk around. And that unfortunately can stop people from actually pushing that door open to come through. That's a challenge I guess you recognise. Do you have any ideas as to how to get over that?

Sophie Vander:

Look, I think it's just being really welcoming. We've, right from the beginning, whoever walks through our door, whoever it is, we'll like, "Hi, come in, how are you? How is your day? Would you like a glass of water? Come sit down, spend some time. Can I get you a cup of tea?" Literally, it's like coming into someone's home and I hope we can continue that in this space. I know we will. So for me, it's just about treating everyone that comes through that door as an individual and finding out who they are and why they're there. A lot of the times people are there just to look, happy to leave them alone. We know very quickly that that's the case. Or others who want to have a chat and know about the work and hear about the artist and maybe the artist is there and we can introduce them and that dialogue happens.

So for me, I really want to continue that very welcoming space that's accessible and open to everybody. And that right from the get-go, from launching online, that was always my intention, that art is for everybody. And to kind of break down that stark white wall gallery, fluorescent light kind of vibe and really make it somewhere that people want to come and spend time with us.

Tim Stackpool:

And I think anyone who knows you and has had contact with you in the past, knows that that's going to happen. I think that's an easy expectation.

Sophie Vander:

Thank you.

Tim Stackpool:

When I was growing up in Sydney, Paddington along Oxford Street there, it was gallery after gallery after gallery. Has William Street now become Art Central?

Sophie Vander:

I think it's Creative Central for sure. I think there's such diversity there of the types of art and creativity and it has this beautiful commercial and public art spaces. So we're lucky enough to sit on the corner of Riley Street that obviously goes straight up to Art Gallery, New South Wales and Sydney Modern. Right over the road we've got beautiful King on William and Randy and her team that are just absolute legends in the art world. Chalk Horse, of course, and Jericho Contemporary, kind of young guns. But then you've got First Draft that has an extraordinary lineup and directorship there of works that are coming through that are experimental and immersive. COMA gallery in Stanley Street. So there's that real hub, and the Australian Design Centre as well and the museum. So I think it's not just Art Central, I think if you go down to Trumper Park, that still feels very established art gallery feel and vibe there.

But I think with William Street and Darlinghurst, Woolloomooloo, I think there's a bit more edge, a bit more vibrancy, a bit more like what's next? What's coming? People with a finger on the pulse or willing to experiment. And yeah, I think it's the future. I really do. And I'm so lucky to be plonked there for the foreseeable future because I'm really excited to see then what comes from that. And I think people or companies like Terrace Tower Group that have actively sought out a commercial yet creative business to be involved in their building, I think says a lot too. So I think that whole strip is going to change. Yeah, I really hope so. And I think there's so much activity that's going on around there and I'm very, very excited to feel a part of that.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. I wonder what you think of this Sophie. Sydney has a great focus on business, and I wonder if the building of culture, as you've just talked about, is the new point of difference. We've been so focused on lockdowns with COVID, economic difficulties, now we're entering another period of focusing on being

frugal. Do you think that the building of an arts culture as you've just described, is that thing that people are seeking and searching for, is it economic evolution perhaps? What do you think?

Sophie Vander:

I think it has to be. I think we can't continue how we've gone on in just in excess. And I think art can be a part of your life in the most minute way or in the most extreme way. So I think if we are entering a world of being frugal and counting our pennies and watching everything we do because we don't know where the world's going, I think you can still immerse yourself in art in completely free ways. And I think if there's institutions that continue to show that, every commercial gallery is free, you don't have to go in there and buy something. And people maybe forget that. They feel like maybe there's an expectation that if you go into a commercial gallery that you're going to have to buy something. That's absolutely not the case. Certainly not the case with us. We want you to come in and just sit down and be with the work. We are happy to talk about the work.

So I think art has always, and no matter the economic times that our centuries and have been through, art has always been there because it can be free and it is egalitarian, it is for everybody. And you can find it anywhere: on the street, in an establishment, in an institution, in a commercial gallery, you can find it. You step out into the street and you can see the graffiti, the street art, performance art, all of that. It's all there for the taking. And I think people can immerse themselves in that no matter what state of the economy.

Tim Stackpool:

It could also be a little bit in a response to those years of lockout laws that we had, where actually getting out and having a good time was held back from us to a certain extent. I mean, not everyone needs to party on after 2:00 AM in the morning admittedly, but so many people just saw that as a restriction on enjoying themselves. And for that reason, we saw so many businesses go under, perhaps the release from that is to see this visual art in places as you've just spoken about. I just wonder Sophie though, whether in this period of economic concentration, is this a good time for a gallerist such as you to be expanding your business?

Sophie Vander:

Probably not Tim, but you know what? I've never done anything the way it's supposed to be done my entire life. Tell me no, and I'll do it anyway. I opened my first bricks and mortars ... I took the lease in April 2020, and I was like, what? Do I keep going? What do I do? That real moment was like, what do I do? And I was like, nah, just keep going Soph. Just keep going. And I did. And although we couldn't actually open until August, and then even when we opened, we were allowed five, 10 people in the space at once. And then most of our exhibitions had to become virtual. So we did wonderful three-dimensional virtual interactive exhibit. It taught me to do things differently, to still engage in audience. And my great team who had all these skills I didn't even know they had. Suddenly it all came out and we got through, and not only did we get through, we got through really well and we were able to support our artists and all our beautiful collectors were able to do that too.

Now, the fact that this space, because I was like, okay, I have to find another space, where is that going to be? Oh, my hand was forced. I had no intention to leave, but when a space like this comes available,

you just got to grab it. So as I was taught growing up by my mother, say yes and work it out later. So I've had many a moment where I'm gone, is this the right thing to do? But you just got to keep going.

Tim Stackpool:

And you're particularly in a good position because the landlord definitely wants you there.

Sophie Vander:

Which is delightful. I just couldn't believe it. They actually came and it was almost like I was being interviewed for the role rather than anything else. They came to visit the gallery and see the artists. And so they were genuinely interested in the type of space I was going to make there. And they have been like, I cannot fault how they've worked with me. It's been divine. And the space that was there before, were actually two spaces, everyone kind of knew the iconic Fitbiz space that was the punching bag and treadmill, and then the Mailbox Center that was next door, the printer.

Tim Stackpool:

I know the one, yeah.

Sophie Vander:

Yeah, it was like hot pink and lime green and purple and mailboxes. So I also have a way where I can walk into a space and have a vision, and I walked into there and I couldn't see the hot pink walls and purple and lime. I saw my gallery and I'm not sure they knew I could see it, but just being in that space, I was like, I know how to make this work and it's going to be beautiful. I'm very grateful to the landlords for sure. Not many people say that, Hey.

Tim Stackpool:

No, it's an excellent situation you'll in. And you've talked a little bit about your history there, being an online gallerist. This is your second bricks and mortar iteration. It sounds like a fairytale, but there have been tough moments I'm guessing.

Sophie Vander:

Oh, yeah. Pandemic, right? Yes. It was not being able to show the works. I had this great vision of, oh wow, I'm finally going to, and I was doing, when I was online, I had a small space up on the North Shore where I live, and I had pop-ups that I did all around Sydney. And that was great fun, but I really had a vision of what I wanted to do and to do the right thing by my artists, to give them a proper exhibition program and properly show their works and connect them to the buyers that I had. So I felt really sad that I wasn't able to do that properly in that first year, year and a half in particular. Virtual reality was fantastic. We made all sorts of wonderful things happen and creating contact. So I actually come from a magazine background, so making content for me was key in that I could try and do video work and interviews and all of that stuff with my artists to connect them to people who were sitting at home scrolling in lockdown.

So it made me get out and challenge all of that was supposed to be, that a gallery was supposed to be. But because I was already set up online, I was also many steps ahead already of other galleries that didn't have an online presence. So that was an accidental bonus. I don't think there's a month that's gone by when it hasn't been a challenge. I think every gallerist will tell you that.

Tim Stackpool:

And that's a nice honest perspective, that one Sophie. Yes. Let me get down to what we can expect from you. You have a focus on emerging and mid-career artists, right?

Sophie Vander:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

And why is that?

Sophie Vander:

I think it comes down to why I started the online gallery to begin with. Because I really saw a gap in the market where this kind of new wave or new generation of emerging collectors were coming through. So people who were, like we were saying, a bit scared to walk into a white wall gallery or an established gallery, and I don't know if I'm, am I wearing the right thing? Am I going to ask the right questions? Can I ask how much that is? Those kind of people that were ready to buy art, that wanted to make their spaces beautiful, wanted to start a collection but didn't know how. So starting the online gallery meant that it was, I had all of the artist bios, all their CVs, all their interviews up there, every price out, and there, they could see exactly what was what. So I think that was just a continuation of that and finding the connection between the emerging artist and the emerging collector, putting them together and letting them grow.

And we, it's really worked in so many ways that we've got collectors that had never bought a piece before, fell in love with one of our artists who's emerging, and now they've not only bought multiple pieces by the artist, but now they're growing up with them. So they might have started off with a small paperwork, they've gone on to a larger canvas, now they've got a major work on their wall. And that kind of beautiful continuum will keep going, and that relationship will keep going for as long as that artist is making work. So I love building that connection between emerging artists and emerging collector and watching them thrive together.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, you are obviously excited about the new space, but give us a bit of a shopping list about what you've got planned over the coming months.

Sophie Vander:

Oh wow! So we are launching with the fantastic Susie Dureau, painting, and Aleisa Miksad, ceramics. So Susie does these beautiful large scale seascape works that really kind of draw on 15th century European oil painting techniques, but kind of brings in contemporary technologies and bringing in spectographs and all sorts of wonderful things. So she's really taken her practice to next level. She has just shown up the Tweed Gallery after her winning the prize for the Tweed Prize at her masters at the National Arts School. She's been with me since the beginning too. So I feel like this is a beautiful kind of thank you to Susie also for being a part of it right from the beginning. And now this is a kind of big showcase of her work. And then in contrast to that, Aleisa Miksad, who's only been with me for a short time, but just showed a collection of work at Shepparton Art Gallery in Victoria, whose ceramic works take inspiration from the Greeks and Etruscans and kind of those ancient forms. But she's made them spiky and coiley and wonderfully tactile. So she'll be showing with us as well.

And then coming up after that, in end of May, June will be Morgan Stokes, who we showed at Sydney Contemporary last year with. This is his third solo with us, and very different artist to Susie. Totally stripped back, talks to the painting as an object and the materiality of the painting rather than paint. Very considered, minimalist artist and very excited to show his work before he takes off overseas to a number of residencies he is doing in Europe. So we're very lucky to have him just before he takes off. And who knows what will come after that.

And then in June/July will be Katrina O'Brien, another just fabulous emerging artist who does large scale paperworks, although she's telling me she's trying a hand at some canvases, so that's exciting too. So Katrina moves with her hands on the paper. It's quite a dance. In fact, when we did her first solo at Redfern, we had a beautiful dancer called Maeve from the London Ballet come over. She had to come over during lockdown and she danced in amongst Katrina's paper paintings that were suspended from the ceiling. And I think we'll probably continue that kind of love that Katrina has of dance and music and her work, all in an immersive collection so that there'll be multiple levels of creativity going on there, which is very exciting.

Then Ingrid Daniell will be coming up. She's from Jan Juc, landscape paintings. And then the wonderful Belinda Street, who's our latest artist we've just brought on. She won the Paddington Prize in 2019 And she's from Newcastle and very, very, very excited for Belinda's Kosciuszko series to be showing in the gallery and keep going.

Tim Stackpool:

That's an insane timetable Sophie. Boy oh boy. Anyone who's listening to the podcast after your opening, there's plenty going on, but I just wonder, what's your turnaround between hangs?

Sophie Vander:

For the first few, we are doing about three weeks, but after that it's more like two weeks. And I have a lot of questions asked me about why so quick. And the simple answer was COVID, because what was happening, everyone's attention spans were very short, so we couldn't have people in. So we would hang up for 10 days, do our video work, got in the handful of people we were allowed. Oh, okay and next one. So it became quite a quick turnover. I do things my way and maybe they're not the way that it's been done, and I can't imagine having a show up for four weeks. I get bored very easily, and I think



audiences get bored very easily. And so we sell most of our works before they get hung for a start, and those who want to come will make time to come.

So particularly with someone like William Street where you've got the same people driving and walking past every day, it's a lot, but we're going to keep it fresh. So it'll be every two weeks after that as well. But initially, because we're going to be exhausted, we've got that the first six months is predominantly three week shows that we've got going on.

Tim Stackpool:

And to be honest, I mean it's nice to have various perspectives within so many different galleries around Sydney. I think that kind of really creates a level of diversity for those who actually do love hopping from gallery to gallery. Quite often it's the weekend thing. So that's going to work out. Before we finish up, I just want to talk about you a little bit, if that's okay Sophie. You're a graduate in art theory at the University of New South Wales, now you're a gallerist. Do those two things kind of fit together or was there a bit of a evolutionary trail to follow?

Sophie Vander:

Oh, there was not just an evolutionary trail, but a giant leap. So yes, I studied to be a curator, art writer, at COFA, studying art theory. I just don't think I'm a terribly good theorist. I'm more an action kind of girl. But in saying that, I did, in the early nineties, I grew up in Brisbane, didn't know anyone in Sydney, graduated from COFA not knowing anyone. Volunteered my backside off for several years at multiple different places and just couldn't get my leg in. I just couldn't break into that. And I think in the early nineties in Sydney, it was very much a closed shop. And so accidentally ended up as a magazine editor for nearly 20 years, which took me overseas for 10 of those. And most recently was in Singapore. And I was like, what am I doing? I just need to get back to doing what I was supposed to do all along.

And had an epiphany, came home, got an ABN, got a website done, started, and just started. A giant leap, would probably be it. But it's funny, I feel like being a curator, gallery owner, whatever, but it's not dissimilar to being a magazine editor. You are working in content, you're working in storytelling, you're working with multiple personalities and theories, and your reader is your buyer and your writers and photographers are your artists, and you're putting it all together in this kind of melting pot. So I don't think I could have done what I'm doing now without all of that, even though I've never worked in a commercial gallery, it's also been advantageous to me because I am just doing it my way and it's really just intrinsic in kind of gut that I'm going on. So there's probably things, there's absolutely things I'm doing wrong and there's absolutely things I shouldn't be doing. And there's absolutely things that aren't done the way it's supposed to be done, but that's also part of the fun.

Tim Stackpool:

That's entrepreneurial spirit too. I think as a business owner that has to be recognised.

Sophie Vander:

Well, thank you. I have never thought of myself as entrepreneur, but I guess you could say that.

Tim Stackpool:

You talked about working overseas and of course not necessarily in the arts capacity, but it still gives you a perspective there. I just wonder whether you see that in Australia we have this, a bit of a parochial attitude as to how operating in the arts has to be undertaken. Whereas internationally, I find that there's a greater level of confidence in being involved in the arts and talking about the arts and working in the arts.

Sophie Vander:

I think Australians absolutely are parochial when it comes to the arts. And I think we do it twofold. I mean, obviously geographically it's very difficult to get out, send works, bring works in. That puts a barrier for us. And I think we like to support Australian and support Australian artists and buy Australian. And that's been kind of molded into us for so long, which is wonderful. But when I started this, knowing what was out there and what was overseas, so I was not so much Europe, but I was predominantly in America and Asia, initially a lot of the artists I brought on board were from overseas. And then that kind of dissipated. And now I'm mostly sticking within Australia. But I think Australians are scared to get out and doing that. And when artists are looking for representation overseas, I don't think they fully understand how to do it, who to approach.

And there's only when there's another Australian connection overseas that they feel comfortable doing that. I think First Nations art is having a huge time right now over in America and in the UK, but I think there's obviously galleries that have outposts in the US or in Asia or in Europe have that connection, but there's so few of them. And I look forward to actually doing things like art fairs in Asia and in America. I'm a bit scared of Europe, don't know why, but because I know America quite well. So I'm looking forward to taking our Australian artists onto that world stage. And now I want them to have representation overseas. I want them to have that experience. So I'm really excited to do that. I think, I don't know why we're so scared to do it. I really don't.

Tim Stackpool:

The difficulty is that the conduits for representation overseas are not clear and Australian artists perhaps don't have the resources available to them in order to find their way when it comes to international representation or international sales. Apart from bunging stuff up on the internet. I mean, look, we do have great state driven representation, Creative Australia, all that sort of stuff. But I think compared to places, and let me talk about Europe, mean you can go to your local car mechanic in a small village in Italy and the guy will have an opinion on art. And we don't have that culture in Australia. And that unfortunately just feeds into the fact that we don't have that conduits to the rest of the world. But I think you're right. I think isolation is a big part of that too.

Sophie Vander:

And I think obviously the internet has brought that closer to us. And even over the pandemic, I loved going all the galleries around the world had their own little videos that you could do and go through the galleries. And I hope that triggered something in some people that, oh, okay, the world really is a small place and I have a place there. But yeah, short of going over and putting your work in front of them, I don't know how artists do get that. And I think they're also expected to live there. I think if you go there,

a bit like Hollywood, you know? You got to go there, live there, immerse yourself in there and then you might get talking. But I have no problem working with overseas artists here. And I really look forward to actually taking on some more overseas art, international artists into the gallery.

I think that's very exciting because we can't always find what we need here either. So it's exciting to look further afield and I do hope more Australian artists get out and get over there and really find representation and like Morgan's doing with his international residency. So the more international residencies artists do, I think that's super important as well, that they immerse themselves in those environments and get a totally different perspective than what we have here, which is quite closed in.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, I don't suggest that there's no opportunity to do so, but I think the people that actually take the path least trodden Sophie, they seem to find a unique success. Look, it's been terrific talking to you. I've had you on the phone here now for 30 minutes or so, a terrific chat. You have this amazing commanding position now on William Street. I hope the gallery goes well and we should talk again soon in the future to see how everything's going.

Sophie Vander:

I would love that. And please do come and visit.