



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 2 EPISODE 7 (July 2020)

Transcript of interviews:

JANE CAVANOUGH – URBAN SCULPTURE ARTIST

TRAVIS DE VRIES – FIRST NATIONS ARTIST

JANE CAVANOUGH – URBAN SCULPTURE ARTIST

Tim Stackpool:

First, let's hear from Jane Cavanough. Jane has just recently been awarded to New South Wales Landscape Architecture Awards for her artistry work and also won the 2013 Register of Military Monuments of National Significance Award. Her work is very extensive and is diverse. Jane, thanks for joining us on Inside the Gallery.

Jane Cavanough:

Pleasure, Tim.

Tim Stackpool:

First of all, there's bound to be division in the community regarding the significance or note worthiness of monuments over time, but what position as an artist do you think we should take when it comes to statues that represent oppression or the exploitation of certain sections of the community?

Jane Cavanough:

Well, my view is that we have all walked past statues and monuments and never given them a thought because after all they're pretty boring. There are points in time though when social actions do create a tipping point, and this is one. What it clearly shows is that we are all a part of our history, white and black, and that the history of the powerful and the abused is very alive and current. It doesn't really go away. Defacing monuments as part of the Black Lives Matter movement, I think, has given them a new life. I don't think that monuments do need to last forever, but I do strongly believe that new work should be commissioned to tell the counterpoint stories. That's an opportunity to look forward to.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. What do you think of the idea of just changing the narrative around statues and monuments? We have certain plaques, let's say, on the Captain Cook monument that said, he discovered Australia, all that talk. If we merely just change that narrative, can we leave these monuments where they are, do you think?

Jane Cavanough:

Look, I think there's options for both. Sometimes it is good to do interventions that create a little bit of noise because it's important that we understand where we've all come from. I think repositioning is okay. I also think that leaving them there is okay. I think the important thing, though, is to create works that address what is important today and that's racism, but that also needs to be addressed at a political and policy level across society. It's not just through public monuments and plaques, although I do think it's incredibly interesting that monuments and statues have been the target of creating a louder voice for it.

Tim Stackpool:

In particular, rather than, do you mean just regular political discourse?

Jane Cavanaugh:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

It actually reminds me very much of a work by David Goldblatt, a South African photographer called, Rhodes Must Fall. It's a picture of the statue of Cecil Rhodes that he took, which was in the Cape Town university grounds. Over time, of course, Cecil Rhodes has come to represent everything bad about imperialism and the students there pretty much lobbied to have that statue removed. There's a great photo that David Goldblatt took of the statue being removed and all the students taking a photo of that statue being removed.

Jane Cavanaugh:

Yes. That will become more powerful-

Tim Stackpool:

He was-

Jane Cavanaugh:

... than the statue.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes, that's right and it certainly has. It almost looks like there's a praise or a worship going on with everyone holding their phones in the air, taking the picture. Probably a worship of the statue being removed rather than of the statue, of course, is the message, but he was very much of the view that the end of apartheid meant the liberation of those that have been oppressed for so long, and yet those who had been oppressed for so long were now oppressing the expression of those that came before them, if you know what I mean. He felt that was very disappointing that this liberation had meant a new type of oppression.

Jane Cavanaugh:

Well, that's how history rolls, isn't it? Really, when you look back in history, it really is the vanquished and how the powerful have kept rising. It just keeps repeating itself.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes, but I think there's also a matter of perspective. The difference between a war criminal and a war hero depends on who won the war. I think very much to the images I remember from the Iraq conflict and when the allied troops went into Baghdad, they pulled down that statue of Saddam Hussein, if you remember those amazing pictures. I wonder whether statue should have remained as a symbol of his oppression in the past, rather than the pulling down of the statue being a symbol of the victory of those who had invaded the city.

Jane Cavanaugh:

Yes. Well, these are all moments in time and passions do arise and actions are taken. It says a lot about what's happening at that time for those people.

Tim Stackpool:

I just wonder with your work and your work is very extensive, as I indicated in the introduction, over the passage of time, could you ever imagine your own work coming under scrutiny for whatever it might be seen to represent?

Jane Cavanough:

Well, I was involved in the design of the Boer War Memorial, which is located on the Anzac Parade in Canberra. We won that design in a national competition. The history of it is quite interesting because Australia supplied many of the horses. There was a special breed called, The Wailer, which has been an important war horse and export for us. In that war, 60% of them died compared to 3% of the men who were killed. They were falling like flies. They died from starvation and exhaustion in what was a very grubby war of British imperialism. Our design showed half buried skeletal horses. It was far more expressionistic than the final result. The committee of retired military personnel were very clear that we could only win the job if we change the horses to a more or less like depiction.

Tim Stackpool:

Right.

Jane Cavanough:

Personally, for me, this was hugely disappointing. Although it is a beautiful memorial, I think the depiction can be critiqued with reason. After all, I think that war was over 120 years ago. If we can't stand back with a critical eye, that's a little bit difficult, but it really showed me how important it is for a working public space as to who the commissioning agent is and what their experience is bringing to the project. It is just so important.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. That's something that I think I've discussed with other sculptors of public works before on this podcast is how you have to adapt your mindset to the commercial reality of what art can achieve for you in terms of a profession. I don't know whether you'd call that a compromise or a commercial understanding when you have to do that.

Jane Cavanough:

I felt very compromised in that project. I was happy to walk away from it, but the people I was working with who they're a firm of landscape architects, they'd invested a lot of money into it. In the end, it did become a commercial decision. From that perspective, when you're working in a team, a design team of design professionals, it does become more complicated.

Tim Stackpool:

Colonised Australia, has a very short history compared to the rest of the world. You particularly point in some of your essays to what the work the Germans have done, especially monuments in Berlin, looking back at their history. Do you think we're immature when compared to something like that?

Jane Cavanough:

I think that there has been, from a political point of view, an active discouragement to look at our history. That started 10, 20 years ago with John Howard, with his reluctance to engage with indigenous

history. We're really not mature enough to be able to sit back and critique what white Australians have done. I was particularly inspired when I went to Germany to see what the Germans have achieved in the last 20 years. My experience was, really, only in Berlin, but the Holocaust Museum, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, they've got this amazing Gestapo museum, a Memorial to the Murdered Homosexuals. There's a real effort that has been made to look at what the Nazi regime did and how can we openly face up to it in the most amazing way. It was so moving.

Jane Cavanough:

Rather than looking at the really large and monumental, there's an amazing project. It's the Stolperstein Project. It's a project devised by an artist who still makes all these cobblestones. They're brass cobblestones. They indicate where and how the Jews or people who were homosexual - they indicate where they were taken from, where they were sent to, and when they died and from right outside of where this happened. Those cobblestones are just everywhere in Berlin, which so discreetly shows how widespread this form of terror was. It's terribly moving and so discreet.

Tim Stackpool:

Does art have a place in uncovering the unpleasant side of culture, of life? We've talked a lot about politics as well. Is that, perhaps, an underlying core need in terms of what art should do?

Jane Cavanough:

I think art has a very important role in that. I think that's something where art in the public realm could really move towards. Again, it comes back to how brave the commissioning agents are because you've got to come back to who pays for it. That's where the Germans have been so incredible in what they have done to explain something so horrific and widespread.

Tim Stackpool:

It's tough, I think, when it comes to war memorials in particular, and especially when you're talking about the specifications of the commission that you receive as an artist, but moving on from all of that, are you allowed to have a favourite when it comes to a particular project or a piece of work that you've done? Is this something you're particularly proud of?

Jane Cavanough:

Well, I'm very pleased with my latest work, which is Latin for Born from Fire. It's located in the forecourt of a new multi-dwelling development in Alexandria that is really quite superb. It's a sustainable piece of architecture by DKO and Breathe architects that's getting a lot of publicity at the moment. The building facade is all recycled bricks. It's not only used as the building material because it's sustainable, it's also referencing the Sydney brickworks, which are in Sydney part just opposite the building. My sculpture is a grouping of three large corten, which is rusty steel, tapering conical forms. Two are standing vertically and one is horizontal. They're inspired by the Sydney brickwork smoke stacks. Some of the cone apertures encase with glass and they're internally lit. I'm particularly pleased with it. Not only because it's just being part of an award with the Institute of Landscape Architects, but I'm really pleased with the context it has to the building, with the materials and also the composition.

Jane Cavanough:

It was a great project. I have an amazing fabricator who makes the work look incredibly simple, but in fact, the forms were very difficult to make. It's a very pleasing result for me.

Tim Stackpool:

I'm pleased you're very happy with it because it is a striking piece. I think it does reflect well in the environment that it's in. Just before we finish, I just want to ask you, because you're so prolific with what you do, there's a feeling in the broader arts community that it's a sector that's being forgotten. Public art and installations, they're significant. What do you think public art brings to a space in a community? Do we need it? Is it an essential part of our urban landscape?

Jane Cavanough:

Well, look, is art essential? It's the same debate. For me, I'm particularly interested in the relationship between art sculpture and community. I used to be a landscape architect. This is how I got into the field of making urban sculpture.

Tim Stackpool:

Right.

Jane Cavanough:

It was a progression that seemed fairly clear to me. I wanted to make a living as an artist. That was really important. I couldn't see when I was using sump oil, gas and ice when I was making work for galleries. That was not going to make a living for me. That's how I progressed into making public art. I guess, being interested in urban design, landscape design, to me, the inclusion of art is such a benefit to the finished outcome. That's because I think public art is an opportunity to reinvigorate space and it's an opportunity to remember or engage with. It can be glorious and humorous. I'm thinking there of Niki de Saint Phalle sculpture in the main railway station. She's a large, beautiful busty woman with wings hanging above the people. It's marvelous.

Tim Stackpool:

In which railway station is this?

Jane Cavanough:

Zurich.

Tim Stackpool:

In Zurich. Okay.

Jane Cavanough:

Yes. Yes. It can be iconic or it can be large and hidden and temporary or permanent. It's got so much potential. When it's really well done, that's often a result of working in design teams where the artist is bought on right at the beginning. It just makes such a difference.

Tim Stackpool:

Well, Jane, look, it's been lovely to speak to you and get your perspective on so many issues that we've covered in the podcast today. I thank you for your time.

Jane Cavanough:

Thank you, Tim.

Tim Stackpool:

Jane Cavanough there giving us an urban spaces and sculptures perspective on the tearing down of monuments and a bit of an insight into her own work and philosophy. To take a look at her work, head to www.janecavanough.com.au.

TRAVIS DE VRIES – FIRST NATIONS ARTIST

Tim:

So now to the First Nation's perspective, wrapped up in the view from an artist, Travis De Vries is a Gamilaroi man. He specialises in the delivery of culturally diverse projects and events across venues and artistic disciplines. He began his professional career as a performer for Bangarra Dance Theatre. And today he is a visual artist, a writer, and a creator of dark fiction, drawing on his Gamilaroi cultural heritage, and his connection to Europe via his grandfather. We're going to discuss his work *Cook Falling, Tear it Down*, which depicts a scene in Hyde Park in Sydney, where a group of Aborigines have tied a rope around the iconic yet sometimes polarising statue of Captain Cook. And they've begun to unseat it from its podium. Travis, thanks for taking the time to chat with us on the podcast.

Travis De Vries:

No problem. Thanks for having me.

Tim:

Now, we've been talking through this podcast about monuments and artworks being torn down, because they represent some type of oppression or exploitation to certain sections of the community. What's your position on that?

Travis De Vries:

Obviously I've done a quite evocative piece of artwork that speaks to that. But in terms of the idea of statues and monuments being taken down, I think that this deification of certain people who have done certain things, is problematic in itself as well. Monuments are a part of worship as well. Like we're choosing as a society who we hold above, as like, this is our greatest person. And so as soon as they become tarnished in our eyes, it's like, well why are we continuing to deify them? I totally see, particularly in Australia, monuments as being part of this narrative of repression, and continued narrative of holding up the systems of oppression.

Travis De Vries:

Obviously my work, *Cook Falling, Tear it Down*, is looking at a very particular statue of Captain Cook, who was part of the impetus for the colonisation of Australia. And the fact that he is deified in a place of importance within the city, and in the cityscape of Sydney is like ... I walk past there a couple of times a week, and I have this like overlord, white person staring down at me. What does that say to me? It says to me something very different than it does to say, if Scott Morrison's walking past it.

Tim:

Yeah, and you talked about the evocative works that you've created, that particularly speak to this issue. But how about, over the passage of time, our perspective changes on these things, but could you see, or have you ever thought about perhaps any of your work being removed or tarnished, because over time it may be seen as being inappropriate. How is your perspective on that?

Travis De Vries:

Absolutely. And I would assume that by that time I'll be long gone and won't, you know... Captain Cook doesn't care, and yes, I have self-censored some of my works, because I've explored that for myself. But it's not necessarily a public piece of art. And I guess in terms of, a lot of my works are not public pieces of art, they're in private collections. And so, private collections can do what they want with those works. If my work's become part of the public realm, which some of them are, and if during my lifetime there is debate around whether they are acceptable, I quite welcome it really. I find that, that's an interesting thing, is this idea of, Oh no, once something is made and it's in the public realm, it needs to be in the public realm forever. We can never have any conversation around whether we still want it to exist. To compare it to something else, why are we not having Mein Kampf taught in every class in Australia? Because the ideas expressed in it are inappropriate and horrific.

Tim:

Yes. And this is mentioned in the previous interview with Jane Cavanaugh as well in this podcast, a statue of Saddam Hussein being pulled down during the fall of Baghdad, by the coalition of the willing at the time, of course didn't raise any eyebrows at all. Because he was seen as a tirade, as we would, perhaps statues of Hitler. You talked about Mein Kampf, and Stalin too. The other side of this though, I think, and I want to talk about art in this respect, Travis, is that these sculptures are also works of art.

Travis De Vries:

Yeah, absolutely.

Tim:

And how torn do we get as artists, or those who appreciate art, that yes, perhaps it's a representation of something that we do find insulting or oppressive, but at the same time, it is somebody's piece of art. And to what extent do we have the right to decide that it's not worthy anymore as a work of art?

Travis De Vries:

I think that we as a community or as a society, have every right to decide that a piece of art is no longer ... Especially one in the public arena, is no longer something that we want to celebrate as being part of it. And I couldn't tell you who the artist is that made most of these monuments. I don't think most people could. They're not a Picasso, and not to laugh it off and say that anyone who's not a Picasso should be up for debate. At every point, if someone's art in somewhat is glorifying something that's no longer representative of our morals as a society, I think there's room to always have that conversation.

Tim:

Yeah.

Travis De Vries:

It seems so strange to me that people are like, "We need to save this." Art on one level is ephemeral as well. And eventually everything goes away. So a state of change for an art piece is not a bad thing. It's us saying as a society that we want to change this and put something else in its place, that's better representative of our goals and morals and what we want to do now.

Tim:

As a society as a whole, it's not cut and dry though. And this is where I think the difficulty is, is do we say that any effigy that represents a level of oppression or conquering, is inappropriate and it has to go? Do we have to draw a line like that?

Travis De Vries:

Yeah, but I don't think anyone's ever saying that. I don't know, there's this conversation around monuments and statues. And I think a whole lot of other issues get conflated into that conversation, and pulled on by anyone trying to detract from that debate. Often, because we see these statues and monuments being pulled down, they're being pulled down in the heat of the moment, it might be a long running campaign. But it seems like the debate around them is never actually entered into by either side. We've not seen it on Q&A, a debate about the statues, or we've not seen it in parliament, a debate about the statues. It's just a hard line no. And then the people who are going to tear it down, just come in and do it anyway, because at some point that's the will of society being enacted.

Tim:

Yeah. Do you think there's merit in relocation rather than straight out destruction?

Travis De Vries:

Yeah, absolutely. If we're talking about interpretation, and I think one of the best arguments that people make for not tearing things down, and not destroying these monuments, is that we need to learn from the past. And we'll like, okay, well, we're not actually learning anything from the past by having this glorification of colonialism. Because we're not. There's no interpretive messaging alongside the statue. Alongside most statues, there's a very simple plaque or message. And there's very little taken from that. If you were to relocate something into a museum and alongside that have really detailed notes, it's a very different conversation. And that's an argument that people who are on the, let's keep the statues, side of the debate are using, but they're not using it very well.

Tim:

Yeah. But you will always come up against the politics of it saying, "Well, this is part of our heritage. This is part of our culture. This is part of the Australia that we live in now. And there's no reason to remove it." That's the attitude that the counter argument comes up against, isn't it really?

Travis De Vries:

Yeah. And it is. And then you see the same people very quiet when a First Nations' sacred site is just quietly bulldozed or destroyed by a mining company. So what's the more important piece, a sacred site that's tens of thousands of years old, with a real connection to this land and our current society, and our traditional society, or one person who did one thing who ... Talking particularly about Captain Cook, discovered Australia, there was already people here!

Tim:

Yeah. You mentioned First Nations there, and we haven't really in the very brief chat that we've had, been able to talk about your culture and your heritage. But I was interested to read after I'd asked you to do this interview, the piece you wrote in Arts Hub, about what I refer to as the accidental, or unintentional racism in the arts. And you feel that there is a fundamental racism that still exists within the arts. In that, for instance, when you were working at the Opera House, you were pretty much seconded into roles that met with your indigenous heritage, and other such examples of that. The arts

seems to be trying to do what it can to improve and increase diversity, and indeed tries to be at the forefront of that in society, I think, but you don't see it that way.

Travis De Vries:

No, I absolutely do agree with you that the arts tries to do exactly what you say, it does try to be at the forefront of diversity. But I think it's a big conversation, but the arts, the way it's currently in Australia, and a lot of places around the world, it is again, a systemic product of the colonial machine, the way it works. And so it has no choice, but to be a racist structure.

Tim:

It was a very interesting piece, because your article did take a sharp turn when I read that. And I thought that I've fallen into that same trap by getting you to talk about this.

Travis De Vries:

No, but as have I. I'm also part of the problem, and I totally recognised that. That I'm not out there drawing necessarily all of the things that interests me, or painting all of the things that interest me, I'm still painting First Nations works, because I need to. And the more that we shine a light on that within the industry and within ourselves, and question that, the better we all are.

Tim:

Yeah. Well, one would hope so.

Travis De Vries:

Yeah. Well, I think my truth and the way I've grown up, and my perspective, is there a different from someone who's grown up in a right wing household. And we're all stuck in our own truths. And so to see these other sides of that, we're only going to grow as a society for it, and grow hopefully stronger.

Tim:

Now we haven't spoken much about your art at the moment. I think you're just wrapping up a exhibition at the Bankstown Arts Centre. What have you got coming up next?

Travis De Vries:

Actually, I'm working on a graphic novel, which comes from The Cook, Tear It Down piece, was just a study for the style and content of it. And it was just a scene, a speculative scene for the graphic novel.

Tim:

Right.

Travis De Vries:

So I'm a little bit locked away working on that, and I'm putting together my Archibald entry.

Tim:

As well? Wow. Okay. So quite busy.

Travis De Vries:

I tend to be a little bit busy. I also run the podcast Broriginals.

Tim:

Yes. With your brother that's right, with your brother?

Travis De Vries:

Yeah, with my brother. And the podcast network platform, Awesome Black. So I'm burning the candle at both ends.

Tim:

Yeah, very much so. Now let me just get back to your graphic novel for a moment. Are you illustrating and writing that as well?

Travis De Vries:

Yeah, very much in the spirit of collaboration.

Tim:

Very much in the spirit of isolation and lockdown really.

Travis De Vries:

Yeah, in amongst a few sourdoughs.

Tim:

Yes. It's very much like that. Look, Travis, I really do appreciate your time talking to us about this. It can be very highly charged and a very highly emotional issue. You seem to be taking a very rational perspective on how to move forward with this. And I really appreciate your time on the podcast.

Travis De Vries:

Thanks, Tim. And thanks for having me on. And I definitely invite people to have more conversations about this, because I really think it's important to continue to have rational, and I guess, well thought through discussions about how we actually do move forward as a society within this space.

Tim:

Yeah. Thank you again.

Travis De Vries:

No problem. Thanks Tim.

Tim:

That's artist and writer, Travis De Vries there, giving us his perspective on the current debate around memorials, and how we should approach the times and behaviours that they represent. And you can learn and see more of his work at travisdevries.com.