



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 2 EPISODE 11 (late-NOV 2020)

PUB ROCK – NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY

Joanna Gilmour - Curator

Tim:

Now to the Pub Rock Exhibition, it's open at the National Portrait Gallery in Canberra. Curated by Joanna Gilmour. But the story behind putting the exhibition together is a tale within itself. And the curator is on the phone to tell us all about it. Joanna, thanks for joining us on the podcast.

Joanna Gilmour:

My pleasure, Tim.

Tim:

Did you have this exhibition underway and then you got caught behind the border in Tasmania? What happened here and how did it all work out?

Joanna Gilmour:

No, it's sort of the other way around. So it was the very strange experience whereby I was curating an exhibition without actually being in the art gallery, in the Portrait Gallery spaces.

Tim:

So where were you?

Joanna Gilmour:

I went to Tasmania to go bush walking with my brother who lives down there. And we were out in the middle of nowhere, in a wilderness area sort of for about a week. And during that week, the whole COVID-19 situation went from bad to worse. And so, when we got back to civilisation we discovered that the borders are closed, and my flight back to the main land had been cancelled, and I was in limbo, really. I had to stay in Tasmania.

Joanna Gilmour:

And my brother's place is at a place called Cradoc, which is between Huonville and Cygnet, in the Huon Valley, so about 50 K's, South of Hobart. Yeah. And luckily he's got enough space on his property for me to have had a little sort of cabin to myself. And I worked there. It was ended up being seven months that I was in Tasmania and working remotely from Tasmania, including pulling together this exhibition, Pub Rock, which it's such a product of its times in so many different ways. And I had the bizarre experience of actually seeing an exhibition that I'd curated.

Tim:

Finally.

Tim:

It's probably not one the most furthest remote working stories I've heard, but it's certainly up there. The whole idea of pub rock, now I understand it was an exhibition that you guys were going to do anyway, but you brought that forward.

Joanna Gilmour:

That's right. So, it was an exhibition, an idea that actually has been kicking around for a long time and a little bit earlier this year, we sort of made a concerted effort to actually make it happen, I guess. But initially what we thought was, what we would do is develop it primarily as an exhibition that would tour two regional galleries.

Joanna Gilmour:

But then, when we had to sort of shut down, and when we initially shut down at the end of March, we were all expecting that would be a sort of a six month kind of timeframe and everything that we were working on was just shelved. And we thought, "Okay, this is an opportunity to work on some other projects that we don't get to work on ordinarily." Some research and writing projects.

Joanna Gilmour:

And then of course the gallery, we got to reopen much earlier than a six months sort of closure, which was great in one way, but not so great in that it means that we had to sort of pull together an exhibition program in very, very short space of time.

Tim:

Yes.

Joanna Gilmour:

And Pub Rock, being an exhibition that's primarily based in our collection, it was one that was kind of brought forward a long way, so it was brought forward, not just in terms of timeframe, but elevated from being something that we were thinking of touring primarily to something that would actually be premiered here before it goes on the road.

Tim:

Before it travels. Yeah.

Joanna Gilmour:

Yeah. So, I guess, the challenge was not just the timing, but then sort of having to do this kind of very intensive sort of survey of the collection in terms... Sort of just to establish what it was that we had to work with.

Tim:

And remotely.

Joanna Gilmour:

Yeah, doing that remotely and not sort of... And people think that curating an exhibition, it's just a question of deciding on a list of stuff. But people, I don't think who are outside the industry don't necessarily realise, you actually have to see things, in the flesh.

Tim:

Yeah. You have to create a journey. You have to create a story that reflects-

Joanna Gilmour:

Exactly.

Tim:

... in between each of the individual items so they kind of all figuratively talk to each other.

Joanna Gilmour:

Exactly. And had we had more time for this show, had we had this sort of 12 or 18 months that we were sort of initially thinking of, this is a really sort of significant factor, I think, as well in terms of the final product, is that we would have had the option of talking to other collections and going to libraries and archives and other galleries and museums and looking through their collections to see what works they had that might be relevant to the theme and then loaning those for our show to sort of supplement what we had in our own collection.

Joanna Gilmour:

And of course, that was off limits, partly because we couldn't physically go to visit artists or to visit other galleries and see their collections. And even if we could have done that, we wouldn't have been able to borrow things from other collections in such a sort of short timeframe.

Tim:

Yes.

Joanna Gilmour:

So, having done this kind of trawl through our own collection with this particular kind of lens, this sort of pub rock lens, we were able to establish that our collection, surprisingly... Well, perhaps not surprisingly, but it gave us a really sort of solid kind of chronological backbone, I suppose. But what was missing was the sort of the muscle and the flesh, if you like.

Joanna Gilmour:

And there were a lot of sort of notable absences, I guess, in terms of that theme, a lot of notable absences from our collection that, had we had more time, we would have been able to address, say, learning from other institutions, but because we didn't have the time to do that, or the capacity to do that in sort of working in shut down and all of us working remotely, what we decided to do was reach out to artists who we've dealt with previously, artists who we've got a relationship with, and artists who we know were working in this kind of space in the period that we're looking at, the '70s and '80s primarily.

Joanna Gilmour:

And we sort of had to do this incredible, incredible task of sort of trawling through their collections remotely, identifying what we wanted from them to contribute to the exhibition. And then of course having to get scans and transparencies and stuff physically to the gallery so that our photographer, Mark, could print them to the photographers specifications just to sort of fill out the sort of gaps, so to speak, in the timeframe that had been established by the gallery zoned collection.

Joanna Gilmour:

So yeah, incredibly short space of time. And as you can imagine too, an incredibly sort of complex project in terms of commissions. We were very sort of strong at the outset is that we wanted to utilize sort of... We've got sort of two spaces in the gallery that are designated spaces for the display of audio visual works. And we wanted to utilise those to screen video clips from the period, just to sort of get visitors in the mood, I suppose, for the rest of the exhibition.

Joanna Gilmour:

So, in addition to, I guess, the complexities of sourcing all of this material remotely, working with the artists remotely, printing all of the work and getting it all matted and framed, et cetera, in a very sort of tight timeframe, there was also this additional sort of rights and permissions complexity on top of it.

Joanna Gilmour:

And the other thing is just all of us, like I say, not just me in Tasmania, but everyone sort of scattered all around Canberra and having these kind of crazy Zoom meetings where we're trying to select an exhibition, people screen sharing. I look at it now and it's absolutely astonishing that we did it because, I mean, the show is fantastic. Our designer, Aaron, who's done an absolutely amazing job.

Joanna Gilmour:

The space, and this is another pun here, but the space is really singing, it just looks fantastic. Visitors are really engaging with it. Yeah, I just can't believe that we pulled it off.

Tim:

The pub rock history of Australia now has great nostalgia. People have tremendous memories, and I noticed online as well that you actually refer to those sorts of things, the sort of things that would remind you of that time. But in terms of your curatorial career now, and you've talked about how there was limits that you had to work within in putting this exhibition together.

Joanna Gilmour:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Tim:

Will this reflect as a unique project for you, one that perhaps you're not necessarily entirely proud of because you don't have all the content that you wanted, or one that you are significantly proud of because of the way it had to come together.

Joanna Gilmour:

I think the latter. I guess it represents something that is very different to the way the Portrait Gallery has done things in the past. And as it happens, as you're probably aware, we have a new director and the gallery is going in some sort of very new and interesting directions. And we're rethinking the way we use individual gallery spaces and all sorts of things, we're sort of rethinking, I guess, everything that impacts on our collection development and on our exhibitions, sort of going forward.

Joanna Gilmour:

And so, it's almost as if COVID-19 sort of forced our hand a little bit. So we were going to have to rethink and get creative and sort of re-imagine the way we do certain things anyway, not everything that we do,

but specific sort of projects we were thinking, "Oh, let's kind of mix it up a bit and try something a little bit different".

Joanna Gilmour:

And that's the other really interesting thing about sort of creating this exhibition in lockdown. I mean, there's been kind of thematic impacts in that we didn't want to create an exhibition that was a really sort of serious kind of scholarly, A to Z of Australian rock music.

Tim:

There probably are PhDs you can get in pub rock.

Joanna Gilmour:

Well, yeah, we just sort of felt, visitors they're going to have been locked up in their houses for a few months. There's a lot of stress. There's a lot of uncertainty. There's a lot of sadness in the world at the moment and people maybe just wanted to come to the gallery for a bit of respite and a bit of sanctuary, and just to sort of celebrate a bit and lighten up a bit. And so, that aspect of nostalgia, I think, is really, really important. We didn't necessarily want people to be coming to an exhibition and being fed information and feel as if they had to respond to what was on the wall in a very sort of conventional art gallery way, we wanted them to feel, and to remember, and to dance, or sing or whatever sort of takes the mood.

Joanna Gilmour:

And I think the other thing that's really sort of come through, for me, personally, in the exhibition as well is the way that music and artists and musicians and writers, they're the people that help us remember the good times, but also remember the bad times as well, and they're the people who help us make sense of what's going on around us. And so, the exhibition's very much a product of that kind of moment in time, I guess you'd say.

Joanna Gilmour:

And then, there are all sorts of things that people wouldn't necessarily think about in terms of social distancing within the gallery and laying the works out so that people aren't kind of congregated, there's not 10 people congregated around the one kind of painting at any one time.

Tim:

All that, yeah.

Joanna Gilmour:

So in terms of whether I'm proud of it, yeah. Sort of getting back to what your initial question... It is because it's shown that we can do this, we can rethink the way we think about our own collection. And like I say, COVID-19 sort of forced our hand, but it's been really refreshing to work with the collection in this sort of different way. And no, it's not how we would have chosen to do it, but it's been, I guess, quite exhilarating. So yeah, I'm proud of it, certainly from that perspective.

Tim:

A few quick questions before I let you go. Roughly the number of items you have in the exhibition?

Joanna Gilmour:

Don't quote me, but there's a roundabout 130.

Tim:

Okay. More than 100?

Joanna Gilmour:

Yeah, so over 100.

Tim:

More than a hundred items in the exhibition?

Joanna Gilmour:

Yeah.

Tim:

Do you have a favourite piece?

Joanna Gilmour:

Yes. Well, I've got three favourites.

Tim:

Mm-hmm (affirmative)?

Joanna Gilmour:

All works from The Portrait Gallery's collection. One of them is a painting by Jenny Watson of Robert Forster, Lindy Morrison, and Grant McLennan, these three little individual works. And they're paintings that she made for the album cover of The Go-Betweens first album, *Send Me a Lullaby*, in 1981. They're work so that we acquired for the collection that's... I mean, I'm just a absolute Go-Betweens fanatic and that sort of...

Tim:

That's very good.

Joanna Gilmour:

One of the wonderful things about researching this exhibition, and one of the reasons why I think it's been so enjoyable is that it's given me an excuse to spend a lot of time on Spotify and on YouTube revisiting all of these bands that kind of shaped my formative years. So, the painting by Jenny Watson of The Go-Betweens is one.

Joanna Gilmour:

The other two works, of course... Well, you're probably familiar with Nick Cave's portrait by Howard Arkley, which is one of the first two works that we commissioned for the National Portrait Gallery's collection in 1999. It's an icon of the collection for all sorts of reasons, including the most obvious ones.

And once again, Nick Cave's one of those incredibly just breathtakingly talented and fascinating individuals and thinking about the portrait as a way to sort of, once again, revisit Nick Cave and his music and his incredible output in all sorts of formats, not just music, has been a really wonderful experience and it's giving me a kind of heightened appreciation of that work, I think.

Tim:

And he has that famous quote about Canberra, that thinking that Canberra is its own bubble and very sterile, but he said something like he didn't like it because there's-

Joanna Gilmour:

There's too many punks. Yeah.

Tim:

Yes. And that third piece you like?

Joanna Gilmour:

The third piece is, once again, another work that was commissioned for the National Portrait Gallery's collection, and it's a portrait by eX de Medici of Midnight Oil.

Tim:

Oh yes.

Joanna Gilmour:

Called Nothing's As Precious As a Hole In the Ground. And it's just the most astonishing sort of multilayered work. The work in itself is... And it just sort of says so much, not just about Midnight Oil, but about eX and about that sort of whole moment and all of those very sort of powerful messages and issues that Midnight Oil were being outspoken about in their music, I guess. So once again, it's a work that really sort of captures something, a portrait that captures so much beyond the portrait itself.

Tim:

And the last question is, was there anything about putting this exhibition together that surprised you?

Joanna Gilmour:

Well, one of the things that came out of this process was, we were trying to be as national as possible, I suppose. So make sure that all states and territories and so forth were sort of represented. And I was kind of, one of those people that thought, "Oh, what's Canberra got to offer?" Being an outsider, I'm not a Canberran, I moved here for work. But one of the things that we did with the exhibition was we reached out to the woman who manages the archive of a Canberra photographer named Pling. Kevin Prideaux is his real name, but his stage name, I suppose you'd say, was Pling, who documented all sorts of venues and bands who played in Canberra all throughout the '70s and '80s, and not just sort of the big name bands who were stopping off in Canberra on route to either Sydney or Melbourne, but the local scene as well.

Joanna Gilmour:

And that has just been... It's been such a revelation in terms of the way, not just the photos themselves, but specifically how this aspect of the exhibition and Pling's work is in a way this sort of... It mirrors outsiders attitudes of Canberra, I mean, everyone sort of thinks of Canberra as just being a boring old place full of public servants and politicians and, sort of dull and bland and not a lot going on here. Whereas in fact, Pling's photographs demonstrate a completely different story.

Joanna Gilmour:

And even sort of in himself, he was sort of a public servant by day and edgy photographer by night kind of deal. He'd go around to all of these venues at the ANU and the Hellenic Club in Woden, and all sorts of places where you wouldn't necessarily expect to see bands in Canberra. And where people like the Ramones played at the Hellenic Club in Woden. And if you're familiar with Canberra and familiar with the Hellenic Club in Woden, you would absolutely staggered to think that the Ramones played there.

Tim:

Yes, I think Woden, for many years, was often referred to as Nappy Valley, because it was full of young families. Yeah.

Joanna Gilmour:

Yes. Yeah. But the Pling section, the Canberra section, two walls of one of the galleries are full of these wonderfully energetic sort of edgy photos, like I say, not just other big name bands that were travelling through here often midweek because they were on their way to gigs in Sydney or Melbourne on a Friday or Saturday night so if you wanted to see INXS in Canberra, chances are it would be a Tuesday or a Wednesday. So not just the big bands, like I say, but all of these artists who originated in Canberra and bands that originated in Canberra too.

Joanna Gilmour:

And even people like Peter Garrett, he was a law student at the ANU and he sort of first became a musician. And he talks about how... That Canberra was a really fantastic sort of training ground for him as a young muso, because you might only be playing to six or seven people in some bar at the ANU, but they were six or seven people who were really, really into what you were doing.

Joanna Gilmour:

Yeah, it's been the crucible for a lot of really significant rock acts. And of course, it had this incredible sort of thriving scene, not just of its own, but a thriving scene as a venue for better known performers as well.

Tim:

Joanna, thank you so much for sharing your time and your thoughts and your experience in putting this show together on Inside The Gallery.

Joanna Gilmour:

My pleasure, Tim.

Tim:

Joanna Gilmour there, the curator of the National Portrait Gallery's Pub Rock exhibition. A great exhibition, a remarkable story too about how the team pulled all of that together pretty much all in isolation. And if you want to learn more about the exhibition or make some plans to visit the exhibition in Canberra, head to the gallery's website at [www.portrait.gov.au](http://www.portrait.gov.au). It's a great exhibition, no doubt about it. Plenty of memories there.