



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 7 EPISODE 4 (APRIL 2025)

KEN UNSWORTH
“LOVE IS THE SWEETEST THING”

Macquarie University Senior Curator: Rhonda Davis
Exhibition Curator: Brad Buckley

RHONDA DAVIS: The collection began when the university began in 1964. It's growing exponentially over the last decade. We're supplementing or enriching the collection with contemporary artworks, but the collection base is really, the core collection is colour field paintings and part edge from the sixties and seventies.

And. That really reflects the spirit of the university at that point in time. It was the modern university. And so the collection in a sense reflects the identity of the university. And we've got probably now around 4,000 artworks including a Pacific Island collection.

TIM STACKPOOL: One thing that I notice looking around here in the grounds and my memories of the university as well, is that the works are not just exhibited as you mentioned, like in the gallery. They're right throughout the university. The collection has spread throughout the buildings and the grounds.

RHONDA DAVIS: That's right, Tim. We believe that well, we referred to it as the democratization of the collection. That the collection is owned by staff students, the wider public.

It's part of the national estate. We want it out and about. It saves on storage costs. It gives particularly staff a sense of ownership so that internal loan system. Is the core of what we do. So it services the whole campus. It's trying to break down those silos again, that sense of ownership is so seriously taken because when we do take an artwork down for some particular reason, we get lots of emails say are where's our artwork.

So it's high in demand.

TIM STACKPOOL: University galleries are very different to public galleries and even commercial galleries, but what makes what you do here so unique?

RHONDA DAVIS: Well, I think Tim, it's the way we work in a multidisciplinary fashion. We invite the academics to co curate exhibitions. We use the co curatorial model.

So there's no one single voice. It's unusual that we do use the one single voice curator. So there's three curators. Myself, my colleague Leonard, and Professor Tom Murray from the creative Research Documentary Centre. So we've all got different angles, perspectives, so it unfolds and encapsulates.

A range of ideas and perspectives. It's a way of bringing these exhibitions, museum quality exhibitions to the public, to the on-campus communities that have some relevance to our society.

TIM STACKPOOL: Talking now about this Ken Unsworth exhibition, why did you go in this direction?

RHONDA DAVIS: Wow. This was our big blockbuster of the decade.

So actually I must thank Kon Gouriotis from Artist Profile, the editor. And he, I was talking to him about Ken's work. We had one of Ken's drawings in an exhibition, vibrations in Australian drawing, and the drawing was well, was a. A sketch of a sculpture that never got realized. He mentioned to me that Ken had a vast repertoire of drawings and I've got a great interest in drawings.

And so somehow we got connected. So Ken came out to the gallery and we had a discussion over a nice very nice coffee and croissants, and Ken loved the gallery, given his status. This was a big moment for us. And so we actually took the plunge and invested in re configuring the space. Ken started as studying architecture, so he actually drew up the sketches for how he wanted the rooms to be built.

We are very fortunate that we have, a first class fabricator and installation team, and they put that new look at the gallery over a three month period, so it was the biggest installation that we've ever done. We felt that this would diversify our audience base and bring in new people and new interests to sculpture here in this country.

He's a very good age. He's 93. He's very fit, and those works are all made handmade for this exhibition.

TIM STACKPOOL: We'll talk to the curator, Brad Buckley shortly in the podcast. But how did he come to curate this exhibition?

RHONDA DAVIS: Because Brad was there at Ken's early performance work at the Institute of Contemporary Art that was in Central Street, Sydney in the 1970s.

Brad was witness to those performance works. He's had a long standing relationship professional with Ken. I felt he was the ideal curator to put this together for us, so it's really good to get in those senior guest curators. Brad is also a writer, researcher and an artist himself. So Brad was in constant dialogue with Ken.

So over the last year, 12 months this exhibition has taken shape.

TIM STACKPOOL: Are you immensely pleased with the result?

RHONDA DAVIS: Oh, we are so pleased. Tim I can't begin to tell you how busy we've been. I've been on the floor for the last six weeks. I'm taking tours for the legal team here at Macquarie, even human resources.

Ken dropped in when I was doing that tour and he said, howdy. And he said, "oh, have you got any work for me here?" And then we've got finance booked coming up. So engaging staff, on campus' staff is just as vital as our students. And we've had the students through a good flow of traffic daily, so it has actually not only diversified our audience, but increased it.

TIM STACKPOOL: That senior curator at Macquarie University's art gallery, Rhonda Davis, talking about the Ken Unsworth exhibition currently underway and on the line right now is the curator of the exhibition itself. Brad Buckley, thanks for joining us as well on the podcast.

BRAD BUCKLEY: My pleasure, Tim,

TIM STACKPOOL: Brad, Rhonda gave us an idea of how connected the various practicalities of this exhibition are. How did that evolve for you?

BRAD BUCKLEY: Well, actually I've known Ken since 1974. We actually first met at the Sculpture Center, which was a artist run space in the Rocks, and I actually went along to see his first series of

performances in 1975, which I think were called The Five Particular Settings for Sculpture and as Ritual and the Burial Piece, which was actually the Institute of Contemporary Art in Sydney.

That's generally considered to be Ken's coming out, if you like, as a serious contemporary artist. We've had a very long relationship between two artists, so it's, that's, so we have this sort of symbiotic relationship, I guess is one way to put it. Tim,

TIM STACKPOOL: How did you then go about putting this show together for a university art gallery?

BRAD BUCKLEY: Well, actually I was actually approached by Rhonda Davis, who's the senior curator at the gallery, and she actually approached me and asked whether I was interested. In curating a show of Ken Unsworth's work. Now, we did have a discussion about when this would be, and originally she was said, oh look, the program, we could program this in two years' time.

I said, Ken's 93. And I said, while he is in excellent health, I said, no one goes on forever. So we did sit down and we had a long discussion about rescheduling the exhibition program at the gallery. Most galleries, do things about two years out. So she bumped the show that was due to open at the beginning of this year, and we dropped Ken in.

So that's really how it came about. I think.

TIM STACKPOOL: I wonder, Brad, whether there's a specific challenge when putting together a show with a living artist pretty much looking over your shoulder, figuratively and literally. Do you second guess yourself at all? Is there a negotiation of sorts that goes on between you as the curator and the artist?

BRAD BUCKLEY: Well, look, we, the way it began is after we sat down with, I, Ken Unsworth and I and Rhonda sat down and had this discussion about how we frame the exhibition. So we started off by asking Ken, well, should we do it as a survey show given you, you're in your nineties? And he was pretty emphatic that he really wanted to show new work.

There was some negotiations around that. In the end, we decided that we would show select five works. That had been made over the last two or three years. He's very active. Of the five installation pieces, none of them have never been shown, with the exception of memory, which is an installation that has nine life-sized figures now that had only been shown.

Ken had a sort of exhibition space in his studio in Alexandria. So outside of that, none of this work has been seen. So I suppose, for most artists. There's a drive always to show new work. Really, unless you are, unless it's, a major museum show that you know is going to survey your whole career.

There were issues around installing this in a gallery in the university. It does have certain limitations because it's actually not a museum.

TIM STACKPOOL: We'll come back to that, but I'm rather astonished at the extensive nature and the grandeur, if you like, in a way, the size of these works new works from an artist of significant years.

BRAD BUCKLEY: Well, there's a number of. In a way there's a number of reasons for that. When we were installing the work at the gallery, I mean he, he was there, he was collected by one of the assistants every morning at nine o'clock, driven out from Balmain to the gallery and he was there until at least three every day.

While he, he wasn't running up and down the ladders. He was certainly extremely involved with the minutiae of how he installed the work. Obviously very complicated 'cause they use sound. And it's a lot of mechanical moving parts in these installations, Tim.

TIM STACKPOOL: But even Brad, his work becomes stronger with age.

BRAD BUCKLEY: I think there's no dwindling.

There is something, there is something about the work that he, I don't know if you know this, but he, his stepson, John died of the brain cancer and he was a neurosurgeon. So there's a terrible irony there. But I think you can see in Ken's work after that, there is a darkness.

BRAD BUCKLEY: In the work. In fact, I've said all about his work that I think in Australia. He collaborating with his late wife, Elizabeth Unsworth. I think together they was, even though Ken doesn't see it as a collaboration, clearly, know, if they were a more contemporary couple, I think they would've been seen as collaborators because she was a classically trained musician and I think had a tremendous influence on Ken, over their very long marriage.

But I think once John died, I think there was a darkness that is really apparent in the work. This sort of, for referencing, an obsession with death. The reoccurring skeleton, lifecycle is one way to put it.

TIM STACKPOOL: Your perspective is interesting. In this case, as the curator of the show, was there ever a point when you're putting this show together where perhaps there wasn't a meeting of minds between you and Ken?

BRAD BUCKLEY: No. Really. I suppose the thing, Tim, is because we've known each other for such a long time, I. There was a sort of, there's a innate trust, if you like, and so in many ways, it was more, more a collaboration. And in fact, it goes back. I, when I went to graduate school in the States, I went to Rhode Island School of Design, and when I was there in the early eighties, Ken was doing an artist residency in Paris, and one of the graduate projects was to interview an artist from your own country.

So I interviewed Ken by phone. And then he, in the old days before there was, he could send files, he sent me a slide sheet in the mail. So I did this presentation of his work from the seventies, early seventies and into the eighties. And after I finished talking about his work, their professor said, I thought your Australians well, I thought you people weren't very shy.

I thought you people were all about being outside. Why? Why is the guy wearing underpants? And this came up again because in the body cast. That are in the, in these two of the installations, which are body cast of Ken, he's wearing these briefs again. So this story, I remember this thing about modesty came through somewhere, so there is some, which no one's really written about or explored really with Ken, but there is a strange and modesty that also runs through the work.

TIM STACKPOOL: But Brad, there's also overt depictions of a phallus in the work.

BRAD BUCKLEY: Yes. The large, the, well, there's two interesting works. There's the music lover, which is a grand piano with a, with an octopus sitting on top of it. And that of course, is very interesting because Ken actually told me he didn't actually know about.

The Japanese famous printmaker, Hokusai and Hokusai actually made a series of prints where a woman is ravished by an octopus and became essential theme in Japanese culture. It's called tentacle erotica, and so it's also now in mainstream Japanese sort of horror shows. Now Ken says he didn't know about that, but there is some strange erotic engagement with this octopus wrapping itself around the piano.

And then you know, the work you are, you're referring to with the skeleton, with the phallus, which looks like the piano's about to be ravished by this very large skeleton. There are different ways you could read that because just going back to his relationship with Elizabeth, much of the music that was central to a lot of the installations.

Often they chose pieces by Mahler. I think this whole thing, this eroticism around the piano, I think these are to do with this long relationship with Elizabeth. It was really the only love of his life and the shared, I think the shared love of music. There's different ways to read it when you know the artist, and you don't necessarily have to know this, but I think this is something that, which I have talked about, I think this sort of shared love of Mahler manifested itself.

In a lot of these works, so it is sexual, but there's a sort of a, there's an erotic love in a lot of these works, and I think it's, the piano in a way is a sort of standing, if you like, for Elizabeth.

TIM STACKPOOL: Would Ken Concur with your position on that? Brad?

BRAD BUCKLEY: He, Ken likes to, like most artists, including myself, and I'm talking about my own work.

The thing is to leave often the question open so that there's a sort of, there's an opportunity for the audience or the reader. I. To ensure the work. The difference I suppose, between art and design. Design has a predetermined outcome. If you're a designer and I say, can I please have a glass?

Well, I expect a glass that I can, drink out the art has no predetermined outcome and it's often about a series of questions and I think that's very much the way Ken sees the work. They're open-ended, and you could read into them many things, but I suppose. When you are the person curating a show or you are thinking about the work and writing about it, there are these different ways in which you can understand the work because you've also known the artist and there's cultural reading, the Hokusai side print is very influential because it runs through contemporary Japanese culture. But it's was also Roger Corman used this sort of the octopus ravishing women in, in a number of his B grade films, for instance. So pop pops up in popular culture

TIM STACKPOOL: Alluding to your practice just then, when you are curating though, you need to put your art, creative thoughts and prejudices aside, right, and put on the objective curator hat, is that tough?

BRAD BUCKLEY: Because I'm not a curator in an institution. There is a tradition of artist curators and primarily I'm an artist and I sometimes write, and sometimes occasionally curate, but the curation projects tend to be in some way tied. To this larger interest I have as an artist.

So the curation, the curated projects or the writing and the making of art, they're really one project for me. They're not a series. It's not like there's a series of different activity. They're integrated or if use theory into textual, inter textual ideas. And so that's why. You nearly, the projects I've done as a curator, they nearly, they're nearly all tied to artists that I have some, relationship with or that I have some particular interest in the work they're making because there, there are some parallels to my own interests.

So you, and 'cause you're never really objective anyway. So certainly with Ken, I'd see really the curation of this show was really collaborative. Because with Ken, he's got a long relationship with his couple of his studio assistants who, all engage in a dialogue around what he's making.

Which happens with artists quite often. There's a show I curated with my partner that we called Couplings about in 2018, where we looked at artists, couples who didn't necessarily have it make work, which was collaborative, but we looked at the sort of personal or pillow talk of the interaction between artists in private and how that impacts on each other's work.

And so in the exhibition, we just chose the worksheet. Each artist and we hung the right next to each other. Couples who had, who were recently coupled as we called it, who were obviously madly in love, we put the work very close together and couples who had been together for a long time, we put them further apart and we allowed people to make their own reading of whatever influence flow between the two people.

And it was pretty obvious when you put the work up in the gallery. In coming to work with someone like Ken, because I've known him really since the seventies. There was this sort of trust between us. So a lot of the things I suggested, some things couldn't happen because of the limitations of that gallery.

With installations there are always limitations. There's scale, there's size, there's things like oh and s, there are issues about fire. So Ken originally wanted to put in. A work, which was a seat and Buddha, but in the studio was fine. But when we thought about putting it into Macquarie Gallery, it had opened flames in it.

Now obviously for oh and s in that setting, it wasn't going to work. Tim, particularly as the gallery is beneath the office of the Vice Chancellor which has already posed a few problems because of the sound levels.

TIM STACKPOOL: Ah, right, because audio does play a part in this show. And when speaking with Rhonda, earlier, she talked about how Ken himself came up with the architectural changes required of the space.

BRAD BUCKLEY: Yes. We actually, so that was really the initial discussion where we actually sat down and we, because Macquarie University Art Gallery is really, it's a sort of open, rectangular space and with installations that require management of light and sound. Right from the beginning we said to Ron,

well, you would probably, you'd probably have to, in some way think about building some enclosed spaces.

Once we decided we were gonna do that, that's a huge financial investment for a gallery that it was not a museum. So we designed, there are actually three complete rooms that are actually, that were built. So there was a team of builders that went in the middle of January. And started building.

The timber frame walls with, plasterboard. So the gallery, it was partly reconfigured, including one space has a full floor that houses the machine, like the 12 volt meters that run in one of the, one of the components that one of the installations. It was a real commitment on many levels from Rhonda Davies and the team there to actually do this show, which is probably in terms of its financial investment and the scale is probably at the more ambitious end of what they've done.

TIM STACKPOOL: I do like how in the exhibition it's as if there are hidden corners. You turn a corner and you're confronted with yet another imposing work and the scale of the works is part of that because the rooms, the spaces. That any particular work is placed in, they're not particularly huge. So an individual work can appear even further amplified because of that.

You're almost thrust upon the work in some places because the walls of the space can be so tight towards the work.

BRAD BUCKLEY: Well, it is when you are, I mean it's particularly with installations, that is part of the whole strategy. And when you're sitting down to think about the size of the installation.

How are you going to design the space? So you know, if you are lucky to be in a situation where they can actually build the rooms, that's great. Otherwise, if you're making installations, sometimes you have to work around a bit given architectural space that's available. But in this case, I think Ken had a couple of experiences previously where the show was offered, but there was no commitment to building the spaces and therefore, the works didn't operate in the way that he wanted them to.

I mean, so the piece, that Grohman House installation, which is the doll sitting on the mechanical chair, that's a very interesting work because Ken and I were in a show in Poland in Łódź Poland in 1993, and he'd been in a couple of other iterations of that exhibition. And so he discovered this house in March.

I don't know if you know Łódź has a terrible history because it was the first town in Poland where the Nazis used their mobile gas chambers, and that's where they eliminated the Jewish population from Łódź, and so it, at the time, it was the largest textile manufacturing city in Poland. So mainly the Jewish families would build these mansions and then there'd be a wall.

And behind the wall was the textile factory. And so when the Nazis invaded Poland, 'cause the owner who owned Grohman House was in Auschwitz, and so the house was stripped. But then when the communists arrived to take over Poland, they turned it into a children's infirmary. And so Ken was wandering around the first time he went there having a look at all these derelict and stripped out buildings, and he found the Grohman Palace and it was full of these children's cots all stacked up in rooms.

So there is something in, in he, he gravitates towards this sort of darkness, I think Tim. And you know that the crying child, the laughing child, and the doll. You could read this in many ways, but it is, it does have darkness to it.

TIM STACKPOOL: Yes. And the longer you stay with the work, the soundtrack changes.

So it's like an artwork that evolves as you spend more time with it.

BRAD BUCKLEY: The reason I was talking about the Grohman House, that was in a way I, Ken responding to the exhibition construction in process, they invite a hundred, it's like a biennale, they invite a hundred artists and you go for two weeks before you get there, you can discuss what sort of space you'd like to use. There, there were gallery spaces, but many artists, including Ken and myself, chose existing spaces. And because then as an artist, you're also working with the architectural context and I suppose the atmosphere and the history of the space you're actually operating on.

And so with Ken, I think Grohman House has been an influence. He, I know he's thought about this a lot in terms of previous works.

TIM STACKPOOL: What story do we take from this, Brad? What do we take away after experiencing this show?

BRAD BUCKLEY: Look with Ken, I think there's a great quote. There's a British scholar called Martin Esslin that he wrote a wonderful book in the sixties called *The Theatre of the Absurd*.

And I think this is an interesting quote and I think in a way that, that it sums up actually what Ken has been striving to do really for the last three decades, and so the quote is. The theatre of the absurd strives to express its sense of senselessness, of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought.

And I think that thing, the abandonment of rational devices and discursive thoughts, I actually think that sums Ken's work up. He's not trying to be literal, he's not trying to be rational. He's not trying to create a linear timeframe. And I think these are the sort of the underpinnings of Unsworth's desire to make these installations.

TIM STACKPOOL: And that the quote Brad, I think it sums it up well not that I think it's wise to impart any particular interpretation, particularly before anyone gets to visit the show.

BRAD BUCKLEY: Just one more thing I might add, Tim, there's an issue here about Australian culture because I think if Ken was an artist in Germany or the US, and he was 90 with the same sort of equivalent standing, there would've been major museum shows of his work. And while we're all very grateful for Rhonda Davis committing to do the show at the university, really the MCA or the Art Gallery of New South Wales really should have done a major survey show.

And I really think this is, part of the ongoing cultural cringe in Australia that we're not, we still don't really celebrate our own culture.

TIM STACKPOOL: Yes, that's a discussion that we have quite a bit on this podcast, and I've certainly been known to make commentary in a similar fashion for whatever my opinion might be worth.

But sometimes I fear that we, being those concerned considerably within the arts, living in that self-focused bubble, living and working in it purely by the nature of it and the opportunity of real significant appreciation of the arts, appreciation of the arts properly is never realised, if you're outside that bubble.

BRAD BUCKLEY: Well, I do know a good friend of mine has just left, I won't say which state gallery. He's a, relatively young, curator, but very good. And he's just so disillusioned because what you said, when you go to these meetings now and you sit around the table and you're proposing an exhibition, the marketing people, the people who run the cafe and the restaurants.

They say, well, how many people will this bring in every week to, in terms of income from the cafes and the restaurants and the bookshop, how many people will we get through the door? Who, if it's a ticketed event? And he goes, well, it's just so disheartening because obviously if you want to build a culture, you can't do it on numbers at the cafe.

It's a whole other story, Tim, but I think it feeds into, the cultural cringe because really, I'd said this when Ken turned 80, I was very surprised that the Art Gallery or the MCA actually didn't do a show over two floors because they have done other exhibitions of other artists that are imported.

So anyway, these are tangential arguments.