



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 3 (2021)

SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS REGIONAL GALLERY

Transcript of interview:

MEGAN MONTE

Gallery Director

Tim Stackpool:

Meaning "belonging" in the traditional language of the Gundungurra First Nation people, Ngununggula is a heritage sensitive gallery capturing the cultural vibrancy of the region through a dynamic curatorial program and community-minded approach, creating engaging ways for the local community to connect with artists and their ideas is at the core of Ngununggula's philosophy. The inaugural director of the gallery is Megan Monte. Her previous roles include director at Cement Fondu and Curator of Contemporary Art at Campbelltown Art Centre. And she joins us now via telephone. Megan, thanks for your time.

Megan Monte:

Oh no, thank you very much for having me.

Tim Stackpool:

Now. There's no doubt that you come to establishing this gallery at a very challenging time. I just wonder, when you took the job, did you have any idea that it would get as challenging as it has?

Megan Monte:

I think coming from Cement Fondu, the previous gallery that I worked at, where I established a gallery and a business from the ground up with my co-director, I did come to this with some expectations and some understanding to what I would expect and what I would be taking on. But, of course, every new project in any sense is its own beast, dare I say? So there has been a number of challenges from COVID restrictions and impacts to delays in various ways with our construction and development. We have a really dedicated and supportive team and community here. That's really almost made it easy to get through things. And we're now at the tail end of the project and looking back, I think there has been a number of various different challenges, but if anything, it's made the project and the gallery stronger.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. And in terms of the milestones, looking back over the Gantt chart, did you have to push yourself out very far because of the ever-changing situation over the last 20 months or so?

Megan Monte:

Yeah, of course. We're lucky being in the region, we're outside of greater Sydney, so the bigger impacts I think, where it felt far stronger in those areas than here. Yes and no I want to say to that. I think we've all had to extend ourselves for this project. I came on board right at the tail end of negotiations. We had the funding locked in, we had our strong partners locked in, we had a negotiation lease with the National Trust. So I really came in at a point where things were ready to go. We had a great architect on board. Our builders were on board. So I feel really lucky to have come in at that point. But this gallery, Ngununggula has been 30 years in the making. We've have a huge amount of community support here. And really, I guess the idea of it, as I said, 30 years ago, was established by the supporters of Southern Highlands Regional Gallery, a small not-for-profit group of art enthusiasts that live locally, who had a really strong belief in and want to create a regional gallery for the Southern Highlands.

Megan Monte:

So I feel like it's many minds and many dedicated spirits that have gotten me to this point and gotten the gallery to this point. So I feel very lucky to have come in at the tail end of it, to bring it into its future.

Tim Stackpool:

Two points on that. One is, others in your position often indicate that they wish they were brought into the project earlier.

Megan Monte:

Yeah, well, I think, as I mentioned, there's a bigger group of people that are working in the background towards this of experts in gallery design, in gallery management, in architecture, in building, who have really contributed to this project from the design brief and ensuring that the gallery was built to museum standards to ensure that we could house world-class exhibitions, to looking at funding and support structures and building and growing strategies there. And the network, particularly in funding and in fundraising and donations, it was already in the works and developed. So like I mentioned, there's a lot of minds at play in getting Ngununggula to the point that it was when I stepped in. And I really came into a point that the gallery was ready to develop its program. So essentially I feel like I've almost come in at the fun part.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah, all that painstaking detail has already been taken care of and you can actually get on with almost running a gallery. The second question I had out of your original comment was that the Southern Highlands is no stranger to artisans and smaller galleries. Is there any sense that the small galleries that have been running for, like you say, 30 years or so, is there any resentment there that now you have come in and perhaps taken some of the market away?

Megan Monte:

As I said, being a project that's been an idea in the making for so long, I think generally there was an excitement for the gallery being built. Generally the community and residents are really excited about it, but in thinking about the organisations and the galleries and the studios that exist here, I think they've really carved out really dedicated audiences and participants that really support what they're doing. And I think we're really not taking away from that, we're complementing that, we're sharing those audiences, but we're also in a capacity, just because of the scale and the ambition of our program, we'll be able to attract other audiences and other groups of people from outside of the region. And if anything, we're going to build, I guess, the traffic or the audiences into that.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes, and I think in all honesty, when an establishment such as yours, an institution such as yours comes along and focuses the opportunity of experiencing such things in the Southern Highlands, then that actually is of advantage to everyone who is in associated disciplines or associated businesses around the institution such as yours.

Megan Monte:

Yeah, exactly. And our bigger part of what we're wanting to do here and our vision is to be, and the centre for arts and culture for the Southern Highlands, and part of being that centre is by being collaborative and by bringing our audiences to the broader arts community here in the Southern Highlands also. So it really is very much so a collaborative and a complementary effort that we're putting

in here. And like I said, there's a huge history of creative pursuits that are happening in the Highlands across visual arts, but also within music and festivals and even going further into our food and wine. There's a big interest here from the community, there's a craving for culture and the Southern Highlands do it really well. And I think Ngununggula is really going to add another offering for people to take up, whether that's local residents or visitors coming through.

Tim Stackpool:

Now before we get into the nuts and bolts of the gallery and what might be coming up, some people listening are probably very aware of your history, say with the Campbelltown Art Centre a little while ago.

Megan Monte:

Yes.

Tim Stackpool:

Can you just explain to us how different your role is currently with this gallery compared to what you're probably known for in the past?

Megan Monte:

Of course. So I was the Curator of Contemporary Art in the final years of my position at Campbelltown Art Centre, and stepping into the director role Ngununggula, I definitely feel like the number of hats that I wear has expanded. I was there as the curator. I really looked at exhibition management and working with artists. It was much more a hands-on role. And now my role has expanded to also include more strategic, operational and bigger programming pursuits really. So it's definitely expanded and it's been a huge learning curve to get to this point. In my previous role at Cement Fondu really gave me those building blocks and those expectations of what to consider when building something from the ground up. So I feel like I was prepared somewhat there, but it's very different. And I do feel I'm very lucky in this position as Director of Ngununggula to still be able to work closely on the program. We have a incredibly small team at the moment of myself and an Assistant Director, Milena Stojanovska. So we worked really collaboratively on that program. So I feel like I'm not missing out on that side of working in the arts. However, it does definitely expand to many more hats.

Tim Stackpool:

So who's supporting you in terms of managing the books or taking care of the legals?

Megan Monte:

We have just appointed a new Board of Directors. So we are a not-for-profit company, limited by guarantee. And previous to this, we had an incredible group of people that formed a working committee, who range from accountants to community members to people that were experts in governance and legal matters. So there's always been this circle of people that have offered advice and guidance. But as I said, now we've established inaugural Board of Directors who incredibly are well-established in their various fields from construction to business management to media to legal services. So we've got just about everything covered.

Tim Stackpool:

And good to hear, too, and good for your own mental health as well, I'm guessing, to have that support behind you.

Megan Monte:

Yes, definitely is.

Tim Stackpool:

Let me ask you the question. Megan, now judging by what I can hear over the phone, it sounds as though you're right in the thick of what's going on there. Have you still got construction happening around you?

Megan Monte:

Yes we do. At the moment I'm sitting in the grounds of Retford Park actually, next to an emu enclosure currently, whilst we're at the tail end of construction. So we have, at the moment, the final seal of the road happening and our landscape is in planting pretty furiously all around the property at Ngununggula.

Tim Stackpool:

And do you reckon you're going to open, the press release says September 25. Is that still on the cards?

Megan Monte:

Yes. We're tracking to open it on the 25th of September. Of course, this is pending any upcoming COVID restrictions and current lockdowns. However, the construction is due to finish in the coming weeks and we are ready to install artworks as soon as we're able to.

Tim Stackpool:

Okay. So before we get into the exhibitions that are coming up, can you paint a picture for us a little bit about the history, how you got to this point, who did your design, all that sort of stuff?

Megan Monte:

Of course. So we are located in Retford Park, a property of the National Trust New South Wales. We're located in the dairy and we have repurposed the dairy building to become a state of the art regional galleries, architects TZG Tonkin Zulaikha Greer, and our builders are Richard Crookes Construction. So they have been working pretty tirelessly to get to this point, but what is quite beautiful about the building, they've been really sensitive to the heritage, which was a requirement for us to be able to utilize that building with the National Trust. And there's some incredible features that they've retained. Essentially they've put a new box within an old box, if I can describe it that way, but they want to, I guess, look at as a guiding principle and they're really wanting visitors to be able to interpret this space as it originally was used for.

Megan Monte:

So as I mentioned, it was a functioning dairy for a number of years. And when you do walk into the space, there's nods to that history. So there's some original Lead Lighting switches. There's also the incredible rendered walls that you can see the various different layers of paints and the transitions it's had over the various years. In the central gallery space, which is our Gallery Three that we're calling it,

that was actually where the hay was kept upstairs on a second level. And we still got the original hatch in the ceiling where the hay will drop down into these trolleys. And it would be pulling into two separate spaces, which is our Gallery Two and Four to feed the cows as they were getting milked. And what we've done to retain that narrative, we've got these beautiful brass plates where the trolleys would have moved up and down to feed the cows. So there's these nods to the history there and the nods to the use. The designers were really looking at how we could complement the space, how we could merge old and new together without it clashing. And they've done a really beautiful job there.

Megan Monte:

So in addition to our dairy building and that repurposed building, we also have an entry pavilion, which is a purpose built new structure on the site, and that's our entry, that's our front entryway. And we've dedicated to artworks. We have a dedicated education space and an outdoor education space and an office for our small and dedicated team to work from. So it's a pleasure to work here and be in the space. And we're, as I mentioned, surrounded by the grounds of Retford Park. So we're looking to become as the centre of arts and culture in the region, but we're also really excited to collaborate with Retford Park to really create a precinct here. They do incredible programs and incredible events here as it is, and we're excited to combine our forces essentially, and be a destination for people in the Highlands.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Dealing with the National Trust, you raised that a couple of times, were there any particular compromises, I'll put it that way, that you had to consider because it is a listed location?

Megan Monte:

Oh yeah, of course. So retaining the heritage of the building is first and foremost a priority. And there was a lot of negotiations between our architects and our builders and the experts at the National Trust in conservation and heritage who worked tirelessly to get various different plans through. But essentially we've created a gallery. We've placed a new box within an old box. And when we leave, on the occasion that we would, we can pull everything out and the original infrastructure is there as it was.

Tim Stackpool:

All right. So let's talk about September 25th, all going well, what sort of exhibitions can we look forward to seeing?

Megan Monte:

So our inaugural exhibition is Hi-Jinks in the Hydrangeas by photographer Tamara Dean, who has worked over the last 18 months to do a entire series of new works that capture her body within the various different landscapes between her home, down just past Kangaroo Valley and the Southern Highlands. So she's worked in various different private and public gardens and spaces to capture this incredible narrative that takes, I guess, as a focus point, our collective experience of isolation, to the point of letting and allowing us to look at the impacts and the changes in landscape over a period of time. So you essentially see the shift of the landscape within seasons, and you can really see the colour changes, the pattern, the flowers coming into bloom, especially around springtime and the really cold bitterness of winter that you feel down here. She's really captured the energy of the seasons throughout her photographs.

Tim Stackpool:

I've often thought that compared to Sydney or Melbourne or even Brisbane, we don't necessarily feel the seasons so much, but when you hit the Southern Highlands of New South Wales, especially in autumn, you really do see the season turn. You see the leaves turn. It's a vast contrast in the Southern Highlands compared to the more temperate, I guess, coastal cities.

Megan Monte:

It is. It is. And she's really, really captured that. And previously, Tamara's really known well for capturing multiple bodies in often sometimes peculiar or spectacular situations. And in this case and for Hi-Jinks in the Hydrangeas, she's used herself. So she's really challenged herself. She's really had to shift the way she works to be responsive to the climate that we find ourselves in at the moment. So it's a beautiful exhibition to step into. There's incredible narratives that can be pulled and threaded throughout the works, but also it's really accessible for audiences. People stepping in are going to recognize gardens. They're going to recognize those public spaces, especially Retford Park. Tamara did a number of photo shoots here. So I think there's a nice way that we're connecting with our audiences locally through this exhibition.

Tim Stackpool:

Excellent. Now you have various spaces though. Is Tamara's exhibition the only one that's going to launch?

Megan Monte:

So Tamara is within our gallery spaces. We're also going to launch our inaugural entry pavilion commission projects that engages an indigenous artist to create a site-specific work that will welcome our visitors into the space. It's also a collaborative opportunity for that artist to work with our indigenous community. Also and our inaugural artist is Megan Cope.

Tim Stackpool:

And beyond your launch exhibitions, looking at your website, the timetable is full. What can we expect after your launch exhibitions?

Megan Monte:

We go straight into the Dingo Project that was curated by local acclaimed curator, John Mundane, who has invited 15 indigenous artists to create works that look at dingoes in the region. We have a solar exhibition and a partnership exhibition with the National Art School called Goya's Dog. And that's with John Olsen, celebrated local artist. We then step into a new commission project with Abdullah Abdullah and Abdul-Rahman Abdullah. And we've actually paired them with their art` heroes, which is their [inaudible 00:19:12], Tracey Moffatt. We then move into Ken Done and Rosie Deacon, which will be an exhibition that will capture the hearts of young people and children, bursting with colour and full of immersive experiences, play and costume. And then we wrap up the year with Macquarie Galleries, looking at a particular period from 1939 to '62, including over 70 works from that period of artists who are represented by the Macquarie Galleries.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes. Now I was going to ask about that. Why is there such a focus? Why have you decided Macquarie Galleries there?

Megan Monte:

So we've decided to go with a Macquarie Gallery show in our inaugural year, because a number of the artists that were represented by Macquarie Galleries, actually spent a lot of time in the Highlands or travelled through here often and created a number of works that depicted the landscape here, so from Alison Rehfisch to Elioth Gruner, Grace Cossington Smith, also Roy de Maistre also presented at Macquarie Galleries and actually have significant works that depict the Southern Highlands over the years. And I think that's a really important connection here to represent the region, but also it's a way that we can bring in significant works for our audiences to see what the Highlands look like in a past life.

Tim Stackpool:

There's a great diversity in that schedule that you have, but is the Southern Highlands your common bond? I'm just trying to work out where the philosophy is in terms of that list.

Megan Monte:

Of course. So we're really trying to capture the hearts and minds of our residents here with our first year of programming, from new commission works by contemporary progressive artists to looking back at artists who created more traditional depictions of landscapes and still lifes and portraiture. We're looking at that spectrum of what the visual arts stands for. And we're wanting to offer an accessible way for our audiences to engage with it and to build a love for it. So in our first year, we're really looking at the Southern Highlands as a starting point, but we're also looking at how we can attract our audiences to engage with art. We have a particular focus on our indigenous community here. So we really have a focus on indigenous-led programming, and we're also wanting to engage young people. There's 42 schools, actually over 42 schools in the region that haven't had a regional gallery of their own to travel to. Some students potentially haven't even had access to art galleries through their schooling here in the region. And we really want to create a space that is dedicated to bringing in young audiences, but also for us to be able to offer some really high-quality artists and work to schools in the region.

Tim Stackpool:

I wonder too, whether it would have been impossible to establish a gallery such as this without, how can I put it, the increase in gentrification of the Southern Highlands? Can I put it that way?

Megan Monte:

Yeah, definitely. I think that would play a role in the infrastructure here in the region, but I definitely, I do feel that the regional art gallery for the Highlands has been a pursuit for a number of years, but it's also very much so a passion that's brought it to this point and the passion of many people who have brought it to this point. And with the ever-changing landscape here and the shifting of, I guess, our populations, wherein they're going to complement that, and also adding arts and culture into any community I think is, it's crucial. It's important

Tim Stackpool:

Before we wrap up, I just want to ask you about the life of the gallery. You spoke about there will come a time when you have to vacate the premises and it's built so that you can do that without having too much of an impact on the heritage of the site. How long is your lease?

Megan Monte:

We have a 25-year lease with the National Trust. So we won't be going anywhere anytime soon.

Tim Stackpool:

Very good. So we can plan, as soon as we're allowed to travel again or in between travel restrictions, we can still plan a picnic at least on your property?

Megan Monte:

Yeah, and we welcome that.

Tim Stackpool:

Megan, it's been great to talk to you. I know you're very busy. I want to let you get back to the bulldozers, but well done on getting this gallery to the position that it is now. We wish you all the very best to get open on September 25th. And then whenever we can, we'll come and visit.

Megan Monte:

Thank you very much. It's a long time coming and we can't wait to invite everyone down.