



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 6 EPISODE 11 (Mid November 2024)

Adam Stone – LON Gallery
Devi Seetharam - Artist
in conversation with
Pedram Khosronejad

Adam Stone: I went through art school so I have a background as a practicing artist.

Still have a practice, but it's just taken a bit of a sidestep at the moment whilst I focus on the gallery. The gallery started in 2016 as a kind of non-profit project space that was a little bit of sidestepping of the traditional trajectory which was really championed in Melbourne at the time, which was you showed it to certain artist run spaces you might get a show at Gertrude Contemporary, then you might get commercial representation, and then you might end up with a museum show.

I feel like that wasn't a one size fits all model. And after doing some residencies overseas, I was really inspired by the smaller project spaces, which took a bit more kind of agency and actively tried to cultivate opportunities for the artists that they were showing, even though it was done with a real artist run ethos.

Started off as a six-month project. turned into one year, turned into two years and then at kind of 2018, 2019 it made sense that to have more meaningful relationships with the artists and to be able to foster their careers, it made more sense to shift to, a traditional dealer gallery model.

And I started representing four artists and I now represent 15 artists. Wow.

Pedram Khosronejad: Can you let us know how you connect with your artists, how you find them and how you select, what's your criteria for the artist that you are 15, you said, working with?

Adam Stone: I think that's a challenging question because I think it is largely intuitive.

The thing that is most important to me, is to work with artists who are committed and engaged to their practice and have a kind of distinctive vision. I'm not particularly interested in trends or interested in artists that I feel are I don't know, hard to articulate, but people who I really can feel through their work, their commitment and engagement to their practice.

So they're across different mediums. They're across different positions in their career, but there's something in them, their commitment that really resonates with me and I want to partner with them to work together to do great things.

Pedram Khosronejad: So as a Australian based gallery, are you in search of mostly Australian artists or non-Australian artists?

Adam Stone: Again, I think there's less kind of overt strategy. Again, it's a little bit more intuitive and what I've been around. So when I started off it made sense that I was working with artists who were, similar age.

So I went through the art schools. I went through to the Victorian College of the Arts. So a lot of people in my wider networks were the artists that I was exposed to. So there were some of the first artists that I started working with. But as the gallery grew, so did my kind of scope and my vision.

Which connected me with more senior artists, artists from interstate. I work with an artist who's originally from New Zealand. And then that scope has continued to grow as the gallery has been exposed to yeah, to more artists. And I think as the gallery grows, I'm able to service more artists from a wider audience.

if that makes sense. Whereas when there was maybe limited infrastructure, there's not capacity to work with international artists because there's just, yeah, not the budget for freight and things like that.

Pedram Khosronejad: So who is the artist that you represent in Sydney Contemporary 2024?

Adam Stone: Devi Seetharam, who is a early career artist.

I was first introduced to her work through another artist that I represent who curated her work into a group exhibition at Caves Gallery in 2022. And we connected then online after that. I was just completely taken. by her work. And I could tell that there was such a distinct vision. And the ideas that was, she was able to communicate were particularly engaging and arresting.

So I made that connection. Unfortunately I had just missed her. She'd been living in Melbourne for five years. But she had since relocated to Bangalore. So we continued that conversation. She went on to show at the Kochi Biennale where her work received critical acclaim. And we continued that conversation and it seemed like a perfect opportunity to invite her to come to Sydney Contemporary where there was more of an international focus and a wider audience, yeah, to share her work with Sydney and that kind of Australasian, yeah.

Pedram Khosronejad: We should consider this exhibition her first solo exhibition of the artist.

Adam Stone: Yeah, that's right. So it's her first solo exhibition in Australia. And it's my first time presenting a solo exhibition of her work. It's from her acclaimed brothers, fathers and uncle series, which depicts men occupying a public space in her native India.

Pedram Khosronejad: So how was the reception . Of her works?

Adam Stone: Yeah, look, I'm really pleased to say that people see the same magic and that same kind of distinct vision and articulation of ideas behind her work.

In her paintings, as I do, and has been a really strong and really enthusiastic response to her paintings. . So again, that really just it affirms her position as, yeah, a key emerging voice in the region.

Pedram Khosronejad: What is your vision for her, where she's going next? And because, our podcast name is Inside the Gallery, and we are very interested to, talk more to the directors of galleries, how somehow they are guiding their artists.

What's your vision, how you guide her, what you want to give her as advice for short and long term strategy.

Adam Stone: Yeah. She's an incredible, incredibly professional artist. She's already off to a great start in that regard. One of the key kind of goals would be to continue to place her work in key institutional collections.

The fact that there's interest here in Australia makes me think that there will also be interest in other countries as well. So that may be a bit more of a middle kind of term goal. But yeah, institutional opportunities definitely is a strong focus for this artist. But of course, placement in key private and also corporate collections as well.

She is already in a corporate collection in India and there has been interest from corporate collections here in Australia as well. So yeah, I think there'll be a bit of a multi-pronged approach. She's quite a slow painter, a slow worker. Which, I think is a great thing.

And, the fact that there now is a waiting list for her work continues to buoy her market. So yeah, I would just encourage her to keep working and then we can continue to strategize. But look, the key thing is that the work is really strong and people can see that when they see the work.

And that's just going to lead to more opportunities.

Pedram Khosronejad (to Devi Seetharam) : Thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it. That was, so can you let us know your name, your background, where you began to work in as an artist? Please. First.

Devi Seetharam: Um, My father was an Indian diplomat and therefore we moved countries every two to three years. Which meant that I grew up living in about 11 countries. I started off in China, Cambodia, South Africa, India, Switzerland, Thailand, Taiwan, Singapore, Mauritius, United Arab Emirates, Australia, and now India again.

So this obviously shaped my outlook towards art and my practice. But also along the way I had many artistic influences of private teachers while I was going through school. And so namely there was Madame Chichine in Geneva followed by Russel Fodavi in Thailand, and then I had Jan Langsheng in Taiwan, and then I went to college at LaSalle where I, yeah, did my Bachelor's in Fine Arts.

But I think also having moved countries, my body of works kept shifting based on the new environments. It was me responding to my new setting. And so this current body of work was born when I moved to Australia in 2016. And that was me trying to figure out what to paint next, what to respond to, what meant, what mattered to me.

And That's for the first time where I reached inwards towards where I came from originally and what has been a constant in my life, and that is Kerala, India. And as while I was looking at my relationship to my community one thing that stood on the surface was this discomfort that I felt with patriarchy.

And then began this journey of trying to unpack that and also visually present that. And I think that's That is what I have tried to do with the series.

Pedram Khosronejad: How your gallerist found you, what was the beginning, and how you collaborated since when, and how you find today this collaboration together?

Devi Seetharam: So with Adam, who owns, , LON Gallery it's quite beautiful. In 2019, another artist, who is one of his artists today Jeremy Eaton, reached out to me after having seen my works, I think at Mars Gallery and he reached out saying that he's been thinking about textile and clothing and how it's.

I don't know, the role it plays in our lives. And he was curating a show for it. And so he reached out and then that show was finally realized in 2022. Once I'd already left Australia. And at the time, I hadn't, I didn't have any available works for the show. So he actually borrowed works from people in Australia to do that exhibition.

And then at CAVES in Melbourne. And then Adam saw the work at caves and then reached out immediately saying can we do something? Can we do a solo? And I agreed in 2022 to do a solo with Adam at lawn gallery. And a week later, I got invited to the Kochi Biennale. So then I reached out to Adam again saying I'm so sorry.

I really want to do this with you, but this has come along and I really would like to prioritize this. And he was fantastic about it. And then after that Adam's just been in touch and incredibly kind, communicative, which I think he really stands out as a gallerist. I've never experienced a relationship like this before with a gallery that's transparent, but also I feel like he's really He's put in so much groundwork for this exhibition to happen and even for the success of the show, I think it's really credited to how much he's done for it.

Versus in other experiences that I've had, it's been more passive. Yes, the shows have gone well, but the relationship has been a bit more of passive, versus I feel Adam's been really proactive. So yeah, he's followed up, and he's been incredibly generous and kind throughout, and After the Cochipinal, after me not being able to do the solo show, he was understanding and followed up with this as the next opportunity of how about Sydney Art Fair, would that intrigue you?

And he offered the entire booth, which I would never imagine in my life. So super stoked and excited and I've come here for the exhibition.

Pedram Khosronejad: So you came directly from India. Wow, it's a big, yes. What's your feeling since yesterday, the how was the reception? Who came to the booth?

Devi Seetharam: Sure. I remember when I walked in for the setup, I was like, my gosh, should I have come? I don't know. And then when the fair opened as well, I was just like, maybe everyone's going to skip this booth and maybe this is too, foreign or to I don't know, the context might be too removed for people to relate to, but it was an incredible reception.

I think the number of people who came through, the people who were interested in engaging with the work, hearing about it, curious about it was incredibly encouraging. And I think all sorts of people. It's actually a blur of, I don't know who I met, and all of that, because it was quite exciting.

But I think There's a sincerity in the interest, which is really humbling and encouraging to me. I think people are very intrigued by the technique that is employed and seem to value and appreciate the sort of pains that it takes to create visually what, how I've gone about it. And then besides that, to also have sensitivity to a visual that is, again, quite foreign, right?

It is speaking of another world, but the messaging, I think, that I believe and what was evident with the audience is that it permeates through to other societies as well,

Pedram Khosronejad: , do you have a title for your exhibition?

Devi Seetharam: So the title of the series is Brothers, Fathers, and Uncles. Yeah. And also the sort of relationships that they have amongst each other, as well as to each, as well as the relationship to, say, me, it is all men who are some, at some point associated with women, so they all have mothers or sisters or nieces or daughters, right?

That we are all responsible for. In this notion of patriarchy, I think that association is what I'm trying to remind people that, I don't know. We are all, I think, actively, not just one gender, perpetuating this notion of patriarchy as well. And so that's where the title was born or was trying to focus on.

Yes, it took me more than a year to actually fine tune this. at least get the original, the initial technique down. But basically it was me struggling with the canvas and how I stumbled across this technique. But basically it's acrylic paint layered. It has varied over the years, but currently it is about 10 to 12 coats of acrylic paint that I then sand.

down with sandpaper to arrive back at the prime canvas to create that gradient that you see in the folds of my fabric as well as that texture that runs through the entire work. But it is the fabric is achieved entirely by sanding. And then I go in after that with just paint and brush and acrylic paint again for the limbs and the flowers and the borders and the items or artifacts in their hands.

But yeah.

Pedram Khosronejad: One of the important things is the size and dimensions of your work. Why you go for such a big size? You wanted to just represent the same size of human figures?

Devi Seetharam: Initially I was very flexible with size. I worked much smaller. And when I say smaller, it's about 2 by 3 feet, or 3 by 3 feet.

And then I got an opportunity, which was quite large, where it was 267 artists from Kerala. But basically each of us were given enough space to do a solo exhibition. And so that's the first time I pushed myself with scale. And so I had 4 feet tall works, but the width was 11 feet, and again 4 feet, and 4 by 4, etc.

And so When I got to see my works at that scale, I thought that had a bigger impact and worked with my messaging a bit more. It had a bit, it was a bit more jarring to an audience. And then last year at the

finale I was advised to go as large as I can. And so I pushed myself in the very small window that I had to prepare for the show.

I pushed myself with six feet tall works. And one was 12 feet, 6 feet by 12 feet, 6 feet by 9 feet, like you see in today's exhibition. As well as 6 by 6 feet. And that was the first time I got to see my work at such scale and saw the impact of that. And now I would shy away from doing works of a full figure that is less than 4 feet.

Because I think that's where the maximum impact as well as the messaging comes through of that sort of dominance. And yeah, I think the work resonates a bit more with the scale.

Pedram Khosronejad: So something strikes me in your works is that you don't see any faces and many symbolism

Devi Seetharam: so firstly, as to why the paintings are cropped at the waist and we don't have more of the torso, is that I wanted to depict a section of society and other them, right? I did not want us to identify with each individual, but I wanted to look at them as a mass.

Hence, the skin tone is flat and similar, the same for everyone, but also more detailing. I didn't want us to, say, have the information of one person's features looking different from another because then you'd identify and relate and I just don't want that association to be happening besides recognizing them as a mass of when you see the body of work all together, it's just, they all blend into almost one organism, right?

And so that was quite a considered decision. But also I felt what I wanted to express in my work conceptually was already achieved from the bottom half of the painting. I felt any more information added to the painting is actually taking away or excess, excessive information. It's not adding to my messaging.

And so the entire composition has been very measured and very stripped down to the elements that I think communicate, add to my, what I'm trying to communicate to my audience. That's one. As for the color scheme in the works, so Kerala naturally is actually incredibly tropical and lush and vibrant, being a tropical state.

And most artists from my region do paint that. They do depict all that foliage and beauty and richness. Which is a very obvious path to it. I could have taken, but I thought that actually shows a sort of bountifulness or positivity, which I didn't want to bring into the works. I really wanted.

Instead, what I've taken from my environment is that since it's such a tropical place, everything is actually all the physical structures are really weathered. So yes, it's green and bountiful. But if you look at the buildings, it's always the paint is peeling and stained because it's always raining.

There's always this weathering and dilapidation that is happening over time. And just because of the environment, which is what I drew inspiration from. And so my colour palette is muddy, murky, earthy. And then the sanding also, why I sand my background is because I want that speckled, textured.

The way I do my layering of paint also it's not one solid colour of brown. It's quite varied and nuanced and gritty. And by doing the sanding on that as well, I think leans back into that notion of a weathered, tired space. And I thought that was important in my critique that it is a space that I am saying is a bit tired.

It's not a celebration of patriarchy. It is more I thought it was an emphasis on it being a critique and worn out. So why

Pedram Khosronejad: sanding? What's the relationship between sanding and your background that you choose? Thinking you're a female artist and sanding is quite a tough thing. But at the same time could be very minimalism and like lullabies.

Yeah. And talking to the surface of canvas. Touching, caressing, time consuming. Why sanding?

Devi Seetharam: Absolutely. Sanding, I stumbled across when I was grappling with the work, the first year of the series where I wanted to, I could paint this garment easily. But there are so many styles in which you could do it, and I was wondering how to tackle it.

And so as I was adding paint and removing paint and, scratching off, wiping off paint, is when I started also sanding to try and reveal layers from below. And so it was completely accidental how I came across the technique, but then I harnessed it, I think. And so if you look at 2008, 2018, sorry, till now, the work has really evolved.

It is technically it's taken root. It's far more detailed than you want today.

Compared to what it was. And I love the evolution of it. But then also it is incredibly meditative. I love it. I love that detail. I love the grain. I love it is physically painful every single day, but I still return to it because there's something about the process that I find value in.

And so whenever people do find out my technique, they're always trying to interject and suggest positively other methods in which I could say, reduce this element of my fingers aching at the end of every day of maybe using like tools, automated tools, things like that. And I have tried, but I'm not able to get the sort of gradient and nuance that I'm able to do with my hands.

And I have great pride for that. And so I continue.

Pedram Khosronejad: And the last question, I know you're very tired. How is it to be a successful female artist in India?

Devi Seetharam: Success I would say is very recent for me. It's really in the past two to three years that my work, that I have, I mean my work has been come to known.

as well as myself. So it's a really tiny bubble and a window that I'm incredibly grateful and fortunate for. Last year after the finale was like an avalanche but also catapulted me in a certain way.

Pedram Khosronejad: So the society, family, they really appreciate you as Yeah

Devi Seetharam: my, my family is incredibly supportive and have always been, whether I was without this recognition that I have, some amount of recognition that I have today, which is still little, but it means a lot to me.

And it's never, I've never been an ambitious person. So the fact that, My work was taken notice of and then given opportunities to and then to have been given platforms that they have been given for it to suddenly reach a much wider audience and then received by an audience is incredibly fortunate.

These aren't things that I have always just wanted to paint and hopefully pay rent every now and then is the extent of my ambition. But now it is surpassed things that I visualized for myself and now it's me suddenly getting opportunities and trying to honor them, trying to keep up with the sort of privilege that I have today with my work.

Pedram Khosronejad: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Devi Seetharam: Thank you.