Breathing in art, breathing out poetry: Contemporary Australian art and artists as a source of inspiration for a collection of ekphrastic poems.

Erin Shiel

A thesis submitted in
fulfilment of requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (Research)

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences

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Abstract:

During the course of this Master of Arts (Research) program, I have written The Spirits of Birds, a collection of thirty-five ekphrastic poems relating to contemporary Australian art. The exegesis relating to this poetry collection is the result of my research and reflection on the process of writing these poems. At the outset, my writing responded to artworks viewed in galleries, in books and online. Following the initial writing period, I approached a number of artists and asked if I could interview them about their sources of inspiration and creative processes. Six artists agreed to be interviewed. The transcripts of these interviews were used in the writing of further poetry. The interviews also provided an insight into the creative processes of artists and how this might relate to the writing of poetry.

The exegesis explores this process of writing. It also examines the nature of ekphrasis, how this has changed historically and the type of ekphrastic poetry I have written in the poetry collection. In analysing the poems and how they related to the artworks and artists, I found there were four ways in which I was responding to the artworks: connecting to a symbolic device in the artwork, exploring the inspiration or creative process of the artist, drawing out a life experience or imagined narrative through the artwork and echoing the visual appearance of the artwork in the form of the poem. My exegesis considers these different forms and draws some links between the creative processes of the artists interviewed and the writing of poetry.

Acknowledgements:

The generosity of the artists who agreed to be interviewed about their sources of inspiration and creative processes is gratefully acknowledged. Rachel Carroll, Rox de Luca, Nic Folland, Claire Healy, Sean Cordeiro and Tom Carment, thank you for your time and for sharing your thoughts so freely.

To Judith Beveridge, thank you for your gentle guidance, wisdom and kindness at all stages of this project.

To Tanya Nakhl, thank you for patiently assisting me with formatting and transcripts.

To Robert Dick, thank you for continuing to believe.

Publications:

The following poems have been published during the writing of this collection and exegesis:
“Syaw” in Meanjin, Summer 2015;
“When the Wind Stopped” in Cordite, October 2015;
“Nacred” in Australian Love Poems, 2013;
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The Spirits of Birds

Erin Shiel

A collection of poems inspired by Australian contemporary artworks and artists.

The poems are intended to be independent of the artworks. However, a reference to a visual image of artworks relevant to each poem has been provided in the endnotes.
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The Spirits of Birds

Where are all the bodies of dead birds?
Where do they hide after their last migration? So many flying, yet
in the bush, no carcasses,
no skeletal remains.

Are they buried by a gathering
of their relatives, scraping
and scratching the earth
with feet and beaks to form
a shallow grave?

Maybe they wait in their nests
while they are dying, then decay
with their beaks pointing
to the heavens: funeral
pyres for a bushfire.

As birds die out their collection should
not be left to taxidermists. Artists
and singers should collect them
in glass cases not to represent
the first of their species
given a latin name, but in memory of the last
of their kind. Their elements will be distilled,
sulphur from the cockatoo’s crest,
carbon from the crow’s black Arrkk,
mercury from the eye

of a kingfisher. Silver from the bellbird’s call,
calcium from the bones that caught
the slipstream of the wind. Oxygen
from between the barbules
of feathers.
After a while we will use all the odd socks
from our laundries and cosset them,
one sock for every bird. We will
peg the socks on telegraph wires
a memorial to birds who have not been given
a fitting burial. They can hang there
in the breeze, to once again
view the territory below
and disdainfully
fly aloft leaving us to arch our necks
and wonder if they were never
birds, just spirits cloaked
in the elements
of earth.

After Janet Laurence, The matter of nature, 2005.¹

See note on Shelley and A.D. Hope²
Humble

I wave them off to school and turn to porridge bowls and dirty clothes. My eyes search for one sharp edge. The inside of the house shrinks, airless. I need flowers. I walk out on Mount Stromlo to look for native daisies, even bush pea. The field’s full of paddy melons. Then, a metal object, farm machinery, so honest against the horizon. No artifice, no motive like a flower. I keep searching for rusting detritus resting here and there. Far easier than drinking tea and tearing small pieces off iced buns avoiding talk about stain removal and childhood illnesses. It was dark before I came home with it. He’s not too sure about it yet. He works with stars, constellations of gas, distant bodies he can’t grasp. All moon dust to me. My stars are barbs on rusted rolls of fencing wire. Sharper than sky stars they twinkle with their last flecks of zinc. My stars hurt, can be held, lie in dirt, lie in wait. Too humble to shine or grant wishes. I bring together crates broken into chunks. Word shards move in swarms like insects chirring. Rain, sleet, wind, heat pummel surfaces humble. Remove the shellac, the slogan of the drink company. Yellow and black road signs used to giving orders and directions now bump together to form hills and valleys, curve into each other like a child’s jigsaw. See saw back to Auckland and the garden knee deep in michaelmas daisies.

Thank god my aunt painted the hydrangeas green.

After Rosalie Gascoigne, Monaro, 1989. 3

See note on biographical details. 4
Saffron thistle sticks bathed in shifting light create a pastoral patchwork, a peace to walk around.

Light shifts on saffron thistle sticks in shifting light create a pastoral patchwork, a peace to walk around.

Creating a pastoral patchwork of saffron thistle sticks in shifting light creates a pastoral patchwork, a peace to walk around.

Shifting thistle sticks bathed in saffron light create a pastoral patchwork, a peace to walk around.

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Saffron thistle sticks create a shifting patchwork bathed in pastoral light, a peace to walk around.

Light shifts on a pastoral patchwork of saffron thistle sticks create a pastoral patchwork, a peace to walk around.

Creating a pastoral patchwork of saffron thistle sticks in shifting light creates a pastoral patchwork, a peace to walk around.

After Rosalie Gascoigne, Piece to Walk Around, 1981
Night Dissolves

My toes grip the sand that squeaks
as I drag a stick to trace my path.
A lone bird bobs in the shallows searching
for a fish. Day never breaks in stolen space.

I am here to write my way home.

Is this brooding roof clear beyond the clouds?
The waves tipped with phosphorescence mirror
the cumulus. These inky dunes hide no one yet
my heart drums the skin that seals my ribs.

I am here to write my way home.

There are three lights on the prawners’ nets
that close in around the transparent ghosts
whose bristled swimmerets fail to move
them fast enough. I am not part of this triangle.

I am here to write my way home.

Though they may feel the sand that blows
from my shadow, they cannot hear my soughing
through the waves and wind, mourning for where
I come from, for soup, open doors, known faces.

I am here to write my way home.

The wind slaps my cheeks. The needling rain
swallows courage from a grown-up mist blowing
sideways. Giving in, I roll into a ball. My knees
rub my eyes but feel only socket and bone.

I am here to write my way home.

Day doesn’t break. Night dissolves in liquid light.

For Jack Hegarty

You do not have to be good
but when the longest day
sets it turns out it is better
to have been kind.
When Jack Hegarty died
and the skies were silent
with nostalgia and gliding
pelicans they lowered him
into the grave among
the rows of graves all flat
as the sea level earth.
No angels trumpeting
no crosses scratching
at the scurrying clouds.
Behind the mourners
a hunched man cried out

“God bless you Jack Hegarty you fed us when we were hungry.”

His voice blew like the wind
and scattered its small vision
on our heads. Looking
at the dug soil we all
saw you the same
in the corner store,
a tobacco paper stuck
to your lip, giving a nod
and a wave to the man
standing at the door
shifting weight from
one foot to another
clutching a paper bag
with one hand. The other
hand underneath
to keep it from breaking.


The italicised first line is from the Mary Oliver poem “Wild Geese”. 
### Postcards from Coogee

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mixing an antipasto of watercolours on a plate: artichoke, tomato, olive. No one notices he is a painter. More like he is crouching to tie his shoe.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As they ran across Arden Street laughing she felt the fender of a car brush her skirt. He pulled her down to the thick dark and the cool sand.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lying there, he wouldn’t stop looking at her. She felt wonderful and mortified all at once. His two year old brother woke up and giggled at her bra and undies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He will go back to the country with a story he might repeat around a campfire out droving. Or maybe he is too revolted to ever think of me again.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>At Wylie’s a Rabbi prepares on the deck: “I believe in God but this wind, these circling birds, this fragile, wooden structure, we will all be swept away!”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They nestled together like the curved fishing boats that no one seemed to own. Fumbling with clothes and hiding bare limbs before creeping into his flat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He bends to kiss me then feels my chin. Realises I am that freak, that bearded one, painted in yellow and red make up on the side of the circus wagon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She borrowed his jumper. Crept home before her Mum woke. He changed his brother’s nappy and got ready for school.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before the shops on Coogee Bay Road he held her up against a red brick wall still warm from the afternoon sun. For a moment she feared him.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He’ll know when he arrives at the Wirth’s Circus house that Daddy is a ringmaster and there’s an elephant chained up in the backyard.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On their wedding night, he cut her hair off. Years later she found the plait in a shoe box with a photo of her with the man she should have married.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the treatment his leathery legs barely carried him. Once he was past the mossy steps the water would nurse him. He craved the weightlessness.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In 1929 a brown eyed girl collected rent here door to door, avoiding the gaze of out of work men in singlets. She pursed her lips to look authoritative.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Creating the folds of Mary’s dress and veil, not to mention the petrol station carnations, prayers laminated and tied to the fence where she appeared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The waves pushed him into the oyster shells on Wedding Cake Island. The skin on his shoulder was in red ribbons when he climbed onto the rocks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking out to sea from the deck I wonder why a thousand gulls are flipping over and over in a circular formation. I can look nowhere else.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Cleaning an antipasto of watercolours from a plate: artichoke, tomato, olive. No one notices he is a painter. More like he is crouching to tie his shoe. |

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*After Tom Carment, Postcards from Coogee, 2008.*

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10
Syaw

It takes more than one day to weave a syaw to catch a prawn’s swimmerets, or the fin of a fish. Time finds the gaps we’ve tried to ignore.

Over and under, over and under, the net forms. Our mesh must be fine to trap a floating wish. It takes more than one day to weave a syaw.

Some years it’s easy to weave more and more, yet some years we struggle with one loose stitch. Time finds the gaps we’ve tried to ignore.

Some nets have patches and don’t hide their flaws. Other nets’ seams have been sutured to vanish. It takes more than one day to weave a syaw.

A net woven carelessly leaves an open door. It’s not just for fun, no net means no fish. Time finds the gaps we’ve tried to ignore.

We strip the pinbin bush to weave the core of days that form the years we cherish. It takes more than one day to weave a syaw. Time finds the gaps we’ve tried to ignore.

After Regina Wilson, Syaw (Fish Net), 2005.
Chandelier

If an icy orb grows at the centre of a chandelier will you think of an ostrich egg guarding a mosque from spiders? Will you think “That chandelier does not belong here.”? Will you think of Antarctic ice shelves or the lead content of crystal drops? Maybe you will revel in the glisten of the ice when the lights go on at dusk. If you have a guest she could break off an icicle to use in her martini as a swizzle stick. When dimmed the candles will burn like dying embers of a campfire or the warmth in the low sky at sunset when day’s blue is sucked to the moon.

*After Nicholas Folland, The Door is Open, 2007.*
In my childhood home, three bedrooms and the loungeroom had chandeliers. Not purchased in bulk from the coffers of a French noble, and lowered on feast night to be lit with a taper by servants scurrying before the guests arrived to drink claret, eat pheasant and suckling pig. Not made by Venetian artisans in island workshops blowing bulbs by mouth and twirling a rod in a hot oven until the glass dripped like amber sap. Our chandeliers were bought one by one with five dollars saved from each pay week for the best part of the year I turned seven. Chandeliers need flock wallpaper to accentuate their luxury so my father spent weekends lining up the patterns of one strip with the next. Some of the houses of the brickies he worked with were lined with opera house carpet, regent hotel tiles. Our chandeliers were bought from Grace Bros Miranda Fair lighting department. On Thursday night or Saturday morning we would visit the hot cave glittering not with seams of gold quartz crystal, or glow worms, but with chandeliers (and their poorer, colonial style cousins destined for country kitchens).

A thousand price tags dangled above our heads.

After Nicholas Folland, The Door is Open, 2007.
Magnolia

The chandelier of the garden is the magnolia. Bare elegant arms stretch to hold the lights. Finial not above like a waiting weapon but rooted in earth. Each cupped hand holds a pale green bobeche with a bulb not yet open. Purple outer sepals protect the luminous petals within. The magnolia chandelier could be hung in the ceiling of a pre-dawn spring night. Once bloomed the petals will drop leaving the stamen, an exposed filament, orange with pollen.

*After Nicholas Folland, The Door is Open, 2007.*
The Usefulness of a Chandelier in Antarctica

Our igloo had always been admired for being both solid and translucent. On summer evenings when we’d come home after ice fishing, the candles on the dinner table could be clearly seen. The crystals which formed on the ceiling after a slight melt hung like stalactites and could be broken off for ice in drinks. Guests from the north were thrilled by this when we entertained. One night we were woken by the unmistakeable crack of an ice floe breaking off. Mum threw her anorak over her pyjamas and opened the window hatch. “It’s not any old ice floe, we are the ice floe!” she exclaimed with an unsteady mix of excitement and fear. We could feel the movement now, as if we were on a barge. We clung to each other wondering how to approach this floating crisis. Our training in Antarctic survival had not covered “Igloo floats away as an ice floe”. Mum had a brainwave. Lighting a candle first, she disconnected the electricity. Climbing onto the rosewood table she yanked the chandelier from the ceiling and tied it around the supporting pier at the centre of the igloo. She swung the chandelier around her head like a lasso and threw it until it caught a passing ice boulder, candle arms sinking into the snow. The igloo ground to a halt. We were saved, secured to the mainland by an anchor in the shape of a chandelier. The crystal drops of the light fitting seemed at home with the snow and ice. Passing penguins stopped to consider the brass finial while we had hot toddies by candlelight watching our anchor. It was like being on a harbour cruise in Sydney in our pre-Antarctic days, our boat moored to a fairy lit harbour wharf.

After Nicholas Folland, Anchor, 2008.
When the Wind Stopped

Wolseley stands on the hill under
the scribbly gum looking over
the scrub, eyes flickering over burnt
bush. The trunks of the eucalypts
kneel on a cushion of new green,
dead arms extend up in praise,
lemon myrtle their incense.
He unrolls the paper and cuts
as though he’s releasing a chained
creature, sliding the scissors
through, feeling the smooth
incision, wincing at occasional
jags as the angle of the blade
shifts. Ahead burnt out scrub
follows the flow of the terrain,
heights of the trees varying,
limbs tracing the rise and fall
of the land so from above
it is a carpet of foliage.
He releases the sheets one by one.
They flap and fly over
the scrub like cumbersome
birds unaccustomed to catching
the breeze. Feathered ends flay,
unfurl power but the wind
drops and the flapping
settles into a glide until
the sheets are caught
by the reaching arms of the mallee.
The charcoal stipples and
scrapes a song on the sheets.
They struggle,
flapping then wrapping,
settling to swaddle low
burnt out baby bushes.
The pages caress and
smooth the hangnails of
petrified twigs.
They stretch a fraction
to scratch their song.

The charcoal song pleases
Wolseley still standing on the hill.

He taps one foot impatiently. Leans
to one sheet of paper then

another before he dances
through the mallee chasing

them one by one.
He calms their scrimmage,
detaching them from
snags and twigs.
He carries them out of the wind
on his two outstretched arms back
to a clearing and lays them tenderly
on a carpet of red dust.

He sings the song the charcoal
scrawls have composed

and stills them with his voice.
While they rest he considers the ring
necked parrots screeching above.
How will he entice them
to land on the scroll
that documents the mallee song?

*After John Wolseley, various works.*¹⁷
He arrives like a southerly. She ushers him in. Hungry as he always was. They have three hours. She hurries to lay a cloth on the table. She takes the butcher’s paper parcel from him noticing his ragged nails. Fingers with quicks pulled yet the thumb a perfect shape so wide across the hinge and square in the nail. They arrange plates with lettuce and lemon wedges. Oysters, viscous clouds sitting in the sea’s two faced serving dish. Ceramic white, jagged grey. The mollusc glistens and she remembers the ocean pool. The effervescence thrust beneath the surface by the curl and dump over the concrete edge. He opens the bottle of Riesling she hands over. Twist twist twist and pull. She knows nothing about him. The questions would burst like bubbles if she asked them. Sitting at the table the breeze through the kitchen window just cool enough to summon up goose bumps. She snaps a mental picture.

“I should drop a grain of sand in one and wait for a pearl.”

“It’s a parasite not a grain of sand. Irritates. Causes the nacre to form the pearl.”

They spend one hour eating, the other two in bed. White sheets muddled as a rip current. Glasses are empty. Oyster shells are bare. Lettuce wilted to seaweed. Outer membrane of the lemon wedges dessicated. He leaves and she sits staring at the remains.

One day.

*After Cressida Campbell, Oysters, 1994.* 18
Measuring silence

Rain falls onto the nasturtiums in the cool of evening. Raindrops roll over the waxed hairs of the leaves like quicksilver beads, then gather together magnetically, forming a diamond marble, polished but no facets cut, no points of sharpness. The marble magnifies the veins on the leaf, finding their meeting point in the centre.

Cradled in the shallow plates until a waft of breeze or even a sound leads the leaf to tremble. The quiet in the garden is so palpable that it could fill the rain gauge and be poured back into the pond drop by drop. Silence trickles from she-oak needles and hushes their whispering. Silence muffles each wave rolling up from the beach at king tide.

Silence waters stones embedded in the ground around the gum. The jirri jirri stops dancing to listen to quiet, his tiny heart a slowing metronome. Quiet quells each leaf. Each bird’s heart, each frog’s spawn rests again. The nasturtium’s diamond marbles sit motionless in their plates. The silence around each meets the surface tension of the water. Pushing, yet being pushed in return.
A measuring instrument: one sound will topple a marble from a plate.
Silence completes gaps between leaves, birds, strands in the birds’ nests.

If I stop to listen with my palms open, the weight of silence presses on my hands. I dare not move, afraid silence will fade to noise.

After Cressida Campbell, Nasturtiums 2002.
About the Stars

We must listen to the stars. True, they do not speak but they make us stop mouthing words like we are fish drowning in air. Some stars are corks on the bottles of the darker parts of night. Their black holes tunnel through the years of light or nothingness. Stars embody the ancient history of wishing: children craning out blinded windows or lovers lying on flattened grass. Others look to the stars before jumping from a bridge or tying a noose around a stretched neck. For them stars are death by a thousand pin pricks, reminders of light to which they are blind. Those pin pricks in night’s ceiling are still there in the bleached blue of morning. Without the dark we are unable to see them. To scoop up the shimmer what can we use? Would a thimble hold a star? Would a saucepan hold a constellation? Would a bath contain a galaxy?

If the night sky was scooped into a bucket I’d skim the milky way, like cream from the top and save it to quench my thirst. I’d cup the ink in my hands to splash my face and wet my hair. Then in the daylight I would not need the dark to show me the stars.

*After Alison Multa, Stars, 2005.*
On the deck at Austinmer

The teenagers stretch out on the benches to float in the dark’s ocean like surfers on long boards, hands hang down to paddle. The younger boys gambol like puppies and occasionally roll on their backs to focus on the stars. The dog waits for the possum to sprint across the pipe from the rain water tank and run up the pencil cedars. You watch me. You remark that I know so much about the stars. I know… I know nothing at all. Those pin pricks speak to us again. The sparks. The infinite dark. We draw patterns between them and… ancient myths, islander songs, scientific musings on black holes, nursery rhymes. In the city the night sky is an old backdrop pulled out for a schoolplay. Faded by time and light. Here, it is the seaspray turned into a firework. Firing and sprinkling us with cool energy as it slowly descends onto our faces and limbs like a calming blanket, so light we never feel its touch. The young boys stop moving the teenagers stop knowing the adults forget to analyse and the sky drifts down until the stars are just in front of our eyes.

We will never be like this again.

*After Alison Multa, Stars 2005.* 21

21
In Patricia Piccinini’s Workshop

It is late and she knows she should be home already as they were expecting her for an early dinner. Her car keys are in her hand but feeling the draught from under the workshop door she turns back, expecting an ambush or a party. The creatures are lying there quietly, cooing benevolently. She caresses each of them: their misplaced orifices, hair and crevices. But it is the hairy girl in the corner who she wanted to check on. She is the comforter and there are no limits to her love. She is glued to a glowing infant, an eyeless, earless, bonny baby with udders for hair. Patricia approaches cautiously and plays this little piggy went to market on the toes of the baby’s stumpy feet. The baby laughs curling her lips and the gurgles ring out across the concrete floors and walls of the workshop. The udders on her head bounce. The comforter doesn’t blink her synthetic eyelids but Patricia can tell from her calm demeanour that she is happy for the game to take place. It is clear from the girl’s awkwardly pigeon-toed feet that she has slid down the wall to play with the baby. The baby has had enough of little piggy and turns away from Patricia. The girl and the baby cuddle and coo to one another. Patricia feels superfluous. Even excluded. She has nothing extraordinary in her physical appearance and her mundane features are unable to attract the attention of the cuddling pair. She blows them a kiss good-bye and backs out, looking forward to retreating home, where they wait for her, watching the clock and tapping their fingers on the table. The pair are quiet while the door closes. They snigger a little, then turn back to each other.

Simryn Gill’s Pearls

“I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am.”

*Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar*²³

Take a copy of The Bell Jar. Tear the cover carefully from top to bottom like a zip. Skip the front pages until you arrive at the text: “It was a queer, sultry summer...” Rip each page so the entire text is a pile of thin paper strips. Take each strip and wind it. Watch the heat of your hands and the moisture in the air form it into a pearl. The words turn around each other, forget rhythm or grammar until they are reformed into a string of beads.

The winter I was breastfeeding my twins, I read The Bell Jar as it balanced on my knees with one baby pointing east and the other west. If I had hung Simryn’s pearls around my neck the text would surely have soaked into my skin instead of my eyes. The potent beads would have hung over my heart down between my breasts, babies and legs. The Bell Jar’s words are little round pebbles. The strings are not tied into a clasp, but lie loose, waiting to be finished.

*After Simryn Gill, Pearls, 2008.*²⁴
A Child’s First Memento Mori

Milk tooth
All mine
Part of my skull
Splinter of skeleton
Body part I sell for money

Milk tooth
Test strip
You measure lead
I have eaten from air
Since I was born five years ago

Milk tooth
You’re gone
There in my palm
I can’t replant your root
Like a gum on a nature strip.

Milk tooth
My gift
Chip of coral
Clipping of calcium
Clavier key for a fairy

The hole
That remains
Murky with blood and string
Will be filled with new tooth
Just once

My death
So far away
Now I know it is real
This fragment of marble angel
Tells me

After Ricky Swallow, Younger than Yesterday, 2006.
Sonnet for Hattah

At Hattah, all day by the Murray she sits to paint
where red gums crowd the banks of a stolen river.
She thinks of tomorrow’s canvas as evening shivers.
Colours drain into the ground until the brush is faint.

As the river shares its flow between the crops
the red gums wait for floods to float their seeds,
drop branches for snags where Blackfish breed.
She talks with her strokes, painting until night drops.

She arches her neck to see the tops of the trees
ribbons of bark peel and merge with her hair.
In her mind the crowns are scraping the sky’s girth
until looking down into the bank of the river she sees
the bony fingers of the gum’s roots are there
not reaching up but clinging to the diminishing earth.

After Rachel Carroll, Hattah, 2011.
Salty Mouth

You have come to me at the Coorong, where my Murray dances with your Southern Ocean. Your thousand tongues of current lap my silty flow. Salty Mouth you’re swimming upstream in my fresh water again. I’m weak against your current. Salty Mouth, feel your way up my bending reeds. You’ve gone too far this time. Did you feel that fish cross between us? Thrashing around, he doesn’t know where he belongs. Not sure where I’m going Salty Mouth. Not sure where I’m flowing. Just want to be mixing it with you. Here, only here, between the banks and the gums that shed their branches to make snags in our depths. Between the sky and the silt that clouds us when the fish swim and swish in our cleft souls. Salty Mouth, you and I are a love nest. We keep the snags in our depths for the fish to breed in. We make the birds croon their love calls, they are happy when we are here together. But you can’t keep me. You can’t steep me in your salt. There’s a limit to our love and it is here. I need to flow on my own through the rusting valleys and plains. Don’t follow me or the fish will float, Salty Mouth.

Saved

We would drive to Currarong in the Kingswood station wagon bumping along the old Princes Highway. I would sleep stretched out in the boot with a pillow, the back window wound down and the sun on my legs. There were bush ticks at Currarong, and oysters in jars, baby sharks in the rock pool and a long, pendulous, tyre swing. Opposite the store where Chiko Rolls, fishing bait and throw downs could be bought, an elderly couple ran a shell museum in a pink fibro house. I would nag my parents to buy a mouse, a motorbike or a love heart formed with the shells collected from Abraham’s Bosom beach and glued together with feathers, pipe cleaners and google eyes. A coat of varnish gave them a sheen so they had a wet look, unlike the ornaments.

I tried to make at home. Mum preferred the shells to stay on the beach. The visit to the shell museum was saved up for a rainy day after too many games of Monopoly.

Back in Sydney my father had a lamp made from barrier reef coral. Like a petrified, tropical fish, it sat on our sideboard until I broke a stalk. Then it was left on top of the kitchen cupboards.

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Feel but don’t touch. Hear but don’t listen. See but don’t look. Where are the shells now?

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Walk along the beach and imagine the sand ahead melted into glass by a meteor strike then cooled to a clear toffee. The waves now lap the surface like a tiger at a steel bowl. Along the waterline the glass is smooth but further up the beach where the rubbish has been washed it is a cassata impregnated with bits of blue and pink and green. Look into the crystal abyss. Even under the depths of the ocean the sand has vitrified as well. Fulgurites left by lightning form a stand of glazed stems.

Imagine the artist once collecting plastic pieces, preferring fragments: purposeless, broken, discarded.

Milk bottle caps of blue, yellow and red, dated clips for bags of bread, sunscreen bottle tops, plugs of rubber thongs, broken spoons for ice cream buckets, the red mouths of soy sauce fish.

Her hands sifted sand and retained the plastic bits in clawed fingers. She looked too groomed to be mad yet beachgoers working on tans gave her a wide berth, adjusted their towels when she came too close.

She formed a chain from the broken plastic, keeping the shape of each piece that had been aimless, sinking through layers of crushed sandcastles. A coral necklace for a rock platform: Neptune’s beads in polyethylene.

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Feel but don’t touch. Hear but don’t listen. See but don’t look. Where are the shells now?

*After Rox de Luca, Saved Series, 2012.*
Ode to a Container Ship

Lying on your deck we have envied your life. A workhorse among show ponies, you glide past ferries, cruisers and spindly yachts. At the dock we see you load lego boxes like a smuggler on speed. No champagne is broken over your bow

but you toil all year bearing goods that grubby hands grasp, hiding powdery substances in concealed chambers. Your loads are awaited by child and crim alike. We see the crew lavish affection on your sub-aqua

innards: paint them a colour (not grey) to conceal the clanging walls, decorate with posters of tits and furry bits, photos and sports fixtures from many ports. They know the comfort of your steely bowels, the rhythmic creaks of your iron rooms made safe by clank of bolt on hinge. Away, away so far away from feuds, debts, faces. You are in your metallic element past the heads, dividing the wind. Waiting outside Port Kembla you compare your height to the escarpment. High cliffs softened by bush a perfect vulva for your hardened bow. Keeper of the horizon, at dusk you are a minus sign in the equation of sea and sky. Reluctant advocate for refugees using plastic bags for pillows and night’s black velvet for a blanket, you have hidden us in your ’tween decks, let us pray in your vast boxes. You ignore borders we crave to cross. Our eyes scale your dizzying sides and our frantic quest tampers with your disconnection from rocks and soil, trees and territory. But, you ask no questions.

The Angst and Loneliness of a Pencil

The cedars wave in the wind, jubilant at avoiding being cut down to pencils. They dance like wild haired women, locks flying around as they boogie. Trunks are nude of vegetation then there’s an explosion of leaves at the top as if bunches of ideas are pouring from the ends.

They have escaped the angst of the pencil. Remember the smell of a new tin of coloured pencils? Fresh wood and pigments, a touch of glue. Gleaming, perfect points sharpened as they will never be sharpened again. No teeth marks or thoughts soaked through the end with saliva. Remember how Ricky Giordano stuck the boy next to him with a pointy one in the arm and the evil grey lead lodged there, Darren screaming and the teacher running for the first aid kit. Daydreams borrowed colours from pencils in a psychedelic reverie, arranged in graded shades from light to dark. Where did brown go? Next to orange or maroon? Some colours didn’t seem to have a comfortable place.

When the twelve were arranged there were jealous glances at the rich kid’s wooden box of seventy two pencils in every shade. Where do white pencils go when they die? They never worked. Useless as chokoes – even when you pressed hard they were abject failures like q’s in cursive.

The green pencil was always sharpened until it was shorter than a thumbnail. Pencils like to avoid skin colour. Yellow too sunny, pink too sunburnt, brown too dark. And white? Useless again. The electric sharpener shone like a lighthouse on the edge of the teacher’s desk. There was a powerful desire to push in every pencil from your tin and make them all sharp again. Lionel, feet twisted around the legs of his desk didn’t worry about the points of pencils. He clutched all of his pencils together and gazed at the honeycomb ends. They could become a piece of wood again, to be moulded into something less hollowed out and leadened. The angst and loneliness of a pencil could be overcome by taking it back to where it came from.

After Lionel Bawden, various works.10
Whirring

The lover circles
his own heart
-Rumi

He
peers
through
the crack
and sees only
a dark room but
hears the whirring.
He has been warned.
He bites a wet lip and enters.
Now he is a voyeur to the
dance without a dancer. Maybe a solo or maybe
a pas de deux, he cannot say. He fears the chirring
in his ears until he wants to become part of this trance,
this lovers’ dance. He feels his heart booming a rhythm that
melds with the blur and finds his feet following further into the room.
Circling the skirring silk. Watching for hours, finally he sees it for what it is.
A chance to escape the bewilderment of the days that remain.

I have never entered this room before. The air is damp and the walls have a crumbly feel, breaking
up beneath my fingertips. They told me not to look in here. There is a rushing sound and a sense of
desire winging by. I hear the caretaker running down the corridor and he rushes to my side.
Flustered he implores me “Look at the wall beyond. Use your peripheral vision.” The caretaker says
it was the instant of the winter solstice when they first fell in love and as time stood still they locked
together as a dance not dancers, love not lovers. When time ticked again they moved too fast to be
seen but should a poet visit time slows and they can be glimpsed. “Don’t look too close. You might
see their eyes.” I want to stay and drink in the coolness of the breeze their dance creates. The world
outside continues for a week, a month, a year. The caretaker reminds me daily that the longer I stay
the harder it will be to exit. I am unable to leave the room yet I am not part of their dance.

After Hossein Valamanesh, The Lover Circles his own Heart, 1993.
Lola Ryan’s Shellworked Harbour Bridge

The shells for Lola’s Harbour Bridges came from Kurnell in sugar bags tied at the neck with a knot and thrown over her father’s shoulder. Bridges formed on wooden frames. Decorated in glitter and watercolour paints at the kitchen table in La Perouse by girls sitting by their mothers and aunts. The girls listened to them talk, rolled their eyes and daydreamed as they worked. Lola may have had a story about the Harbour Bridge. Had she just looked at it from the quay when the bus pulled in or had she walked over it when she was making her own first Bridge? It’s a showstopper that Harbour Bridge - the paint glitter shining like melting tar, metallic rattles of the cars, rhythm of the trains in hip grinding beat and smells of dank corners underneath the pylons where the sun never touches the water and the oysters and barnacles grow on the banks. The cool of the granite against the small of a girl’s back when she is kissing her boyfriend. Looking into the depths below thoughts of bridge workers float to the surface their bodies hitting the water with a terminating slap. One worker dropped off his tool belt to break the surface tension and survived. Did he think to drop it in the seconds he had on the way down, or did he plan it every day as he worked up above just in case he fell? When Lola sold her Harbour Bridges on city streets or hanging around the wharves down at the Quay some people gave her a smile, others didn’t realise she had made them all by herself. It didn’t really matter as long as they sold before the last bus home. Did Lola have a bridge story? Or was her story about making bridges for people who needed a reminder of their own stories to hang on their wall or place on the mantelpiece? In Sydney or overseas, just a souvenir. Not made in China. Not made in a factory. Hand made. Everyone has a story they can’t share. Maybe it’s too secret, maybe the only person who cares is dead now. Maybe it hurts to talk about it.

Like an injury it must be tended anyway. To caress the glossed surface of a shellworked bridge with a fingertip might be a way of honouring a story untold.

Sustenance

It’s in the rain trapped on the ridge above the beach but below the escarpment.

It’s in the rain caught in the furrow when it blows in billows from the sea.

It’s in the way the rain looks from a distant cliff. Like curtains have been washed and hung from the clouds to dry in the flighty breeze. It’s in the sheets of rain played by zephyrs like a rumbling timpani, cracked like whips by wayward gusts. It’s in the rain rushing up to meet the arms of the land then settling like a sorry lover in the hollow to water the palms wet the parched throats of striped marsh frogs till they resume the toc toc of their ping pong. But it’s also in the rain resurrecting in waves to crash against the hot quartz sandstone of the escarpment then losing interest as it steams and slides back down to the beach like a beaten corpse.

*After Rosella Namok, Rain Series, 2005.*
Conversation Between Two Reclining Dogs in Elisabeth Cumming’s Studio

TRUTH: She’s always out there looking at the trees.

BEAUTY: Yes

TRUTH: It’s cold out there. And so windy. I don’t know why she does it.

BEAUTY: Yes.

TRUTH: There are only so many trees. What is there to look at?

BEAUTY: Yes.

TRUTH: *(exasperated)* Will you stop with the “Yes” all the time. What are you thinking? You never let me into your thoughts... Look at what she is painting now... Can you believe it? It doesn’t have a tree in it. Even we are in it and this room and all that crap she leaves lying around. Paint and turps and brushes and rags. It’s a wonder I have anywhere to lie my skinny arse at all.

BEAUTY: *(Long sigh)* Can you not see the trees? The trees are in everything she does. When she sits out there the bush descales her eyes so she can see the trees in everything. The leaves and the bark become part of her palette. The ants and other creatures give the painting movement. You can see the patterns of the scribbly worm in the brushstrokes she uses. The bush is in the studio with her.

*(Pause)*

TRUTH: Humph. You and I are the best things in that painting. Forget the trees and the bugs.

ELISABETH walks in, the wind rushing behind her. She pats TRUTH on the head. She makes a cup of tea and then sits at the canvas. The only sounds are her brushstrokes. The soft clicks of bubbles of paint bursting like twigs breaking underfoot. The smell of the oil is as intense as a lemon myrtle on a bushfire day. The door is still open and a swathe of bark falls from a gum and skates in across the floor. BEAUTY chases it playfully then picks it up mouthing it gently. He brings it over and places it at ELISABETH’S feet. She pats him absentmindedly.

TRUTH: Don’t be such a suck up!

BEAUTY: She loves the gums.

TRUTH: You’d be such a soppy dog if it wasn’t for me giving you a dose of reality.

BEAUTY: And you without me?

TRUTH: *(low growl)* I’d be nothing.

They rumble affectionately.

*After Elisabeth Cummings, Studio, 2000.*
In the beginning, the name is what I am told I am. Then I adopt it and it becomes part of my own shape, a form to roll around my mouth, a ball of clay smooth and cool. I grow, I learn, I say my name like it’s my own mantra. I take the name to school and throw it around the playground like a ball, to see if anyone will catch it, throw it back or hurl it into the bush behind the shed. It is comforting in its roundness and soothing in its marble cold. I have pimples. I drive too fast. I eat junk food late with friends. I get a job I hate, pay rent then get a mortgage on a house worse than the one I rented. I love I love I love sometimes I hate. I have a baby and I bring it home to the house and the one I love and sometimes hate. I give the child a name and say it to her over and over until she catches the ball too and I see her roll it around in her red play dough mouth enjoying the cool. One day when I am alone I go walking through a eucalypt forest. Cockatoos shriek and the ocean can be heard through the bush but not seen. Tiny finches flit too fast for the eye. I almost tread on a stick but midair I realise it is not a stick but a brown snake and hop over it. It slithers into the undergrowth flicking its body like a stockman’s whip. I walk deeper into the bush. A fog comes in from the sea. From the distance it looks like a shower curtain but it is too fine to fall into rain. The fog creeps in between the trees and bush. The finches have gone home to sit and wonder in their labyrinthine branches. The cockatoos are not shrieking anymore and I know this means the snake has gone home too. There is no creature here but me. I have a small torch. When I switch it on the fog turns into a cinema screen and I see it all: the house with the mortgage, the argument with a lover, the job I hate, the child I named, the friends who made me laugh then cry, the bills to pay, the unfixed crappy computer, the aunt I haven’t visited, the course I didn’t graduate from, the meal I loved on the table I bought for myself, the dress my father gave to me, the book unwritten, the swim I didn’t go for. I brush my skin off scraping back with my hands until there is just me and the fog, the torch still shining, the light bouncing off the fog as white as bedsheets. The bed I made. Then I hear my name just once, clearly. A bird calls it from within the fog. I am in there. I hear myself for the first time.

We are China

We are china, we can break.
One chip on the lip of a cup,
a hairline fracture through a plate.

Moulded by hands we’ve never seen,
placed on racks for oven firing,
our glazed faces remain serene.

We are china, we can break.
Our eyes are closed to avoid the pain
of the opening kiln door’s light blade.

We look inward to the valleys
inside the bust, the shaping
of faces by earth and water,

heat and the craft of those who
know about marks left by force.
Remember we are not gods, just us.

Our shell surface is strong, yet frail
if dropped onto a concrete floor.
Chains to birth and childhood fail
to hold us but we are already shaped.
Those before us have made our mould,
yet we are china, we can break.

After Ah Xian, China, China – Bust 28, 1999.37
Prayer in a Fish Trap

Prayers drift though skies like downy feathers rest occasionally on a leaf when they think someone is listening, then crestfallen, float away again. Some prayers drop from wind currents, fall to earth and are trodden into the mud. One prayer is unheard, though urgent. It floats across paddocks carpeted in bowing grasses, across oceans silvered with flying fish, over rock platforms powdered in red. It hovers in the breeze before a woman who is weaving a fish trap of pandanus palm. She pauses as she feels the air settle within the trap. The prayer, though unanswered, feels at peace and stays, expanding to fill the space within the trap. The woman ties a knot to finish the small mouth of the trap. The prayer has swollen with calm and resolution. Now it cannot leave the space within the trap. The weaver will catch many fish, each will be soothed by the prayer. The woman who first breathed the prayer is long dead. But far away her son feels a wave of peace and eats his bread sitting by a canal watching the pike swim between the reeds.

Inspired by the Fish Traps at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, woven by Lorna Jin-gubarrangunyja and Elizabeth Mipilanggurr of the Burarra people.
At the house on Rocky Point Road

In the glass and rosewood china cabinet were royal doulton figures I admired as a child, imagining myself doing the lambeth walk like the elegant woman in yellow with the basket of lavender or wondering whether my mother looked like the young girl in cerise that my nana bought on lay-by at david jones because she was named marie. I fancied the girl called marie lived in a zoo and looked after the animals. I would have looked after them with her but I was scared of the noise of the china legs brittle against the glass shelf. When we slept marie walked amongst the giraffes and horses. The baby giraffe was so sweet, legs even more spindly than the white porcelain pony, they would both eat from marie’s hand and on Saturdays the pony gave her a ride. The spaniels would be by her side as she did her rounds. Sometime she stopped to buy a balloon from the kindly old lady on drury lane. The yellow lady was her mother although she didn’t seem like the affectionate type. They were scared of a large fox that lived on the shelf above.

Gold leaf painted vases that had never held water were on the top shelf (sneak past the fox): the castles that my girl and her lambeth walking mother retreated to when they wanted tea and cake. The china cabinet was opened once a week for the dusting of the statues.

They were always there for me to look at on long school holidays, they were there to be dusted with a retired singlet, they were there as witnesses to a daily ritual, I guess, the putting on of stockings, the broken plates, the slow whistling, the cigarette rolling, the baked dinners. A captive audience, an opera party with box seats, glasses to their eyes but never a hiss or bravo.

After Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, Cordial Home Project 2003.
House Pallet


After Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, Cordial Home Project 2003.
Lesser Zimbabwe Ruins

We were driving in the lowveld outside Masvigo heading back to Harare after a visit to the Great Zimbabwe Ruins. The guide, a smiling and enthusiastic Mugabe supporter, suggested a detour: “We will go to the other Zimbabwe Ruins!”

My colleague shrugged his shoulders and agreed but I was tired and dreaming of a hot shower at the Meikles Hotel using the shampoo and shower gel and then a curry at the hotel restaurant. When I lied about a meeting with a rep from a sanitation NGO as an excuse, he raised his eyebrows and said “an old man has spent years building a monument for the likes of you – you do not take an hour to see it?” He made me feel very uncomfortable.

Three hours later we pulled up beside a group of huts. Children from outlying areas who slept in trees to go to school in the village clambered down and ran to us. Over the crest of a hill we saw the old man sitting on a large boulder next to glittering piles shaped like the walls of the Great Zimbabwe Ruins. His clothes were thin and torn but his pride held his back straight. “I love the Great Zimbabwe Ruins” he exclaimed as we shook hands. “They show what Zimbabwe can be.”
In the setting sun my eyes were dazzled by the shine on the walls which stretched for at least a hundred metres and were maybe three metres tall. Initially I thought they were made of soapstone like the tourist souvenirs at the Harare markets. This man could feed and educate his grandchildren with so much soapstone! Then I realised they were built from two materials: S22 baby formula tins and squashed Coca Cola cans, a tenuous brickwork construction. I gave him twenty dollars US when I left.

After Fiona Hall, Medicine Bundle for the Non-born Child, 1993-4.\textsuperscript{41}
When is a nest finished?

When does a bird start a nest?
Is it the angle of the sun at dawn?
Or the scent of field grass drying?
Before today the bird had no home.
But today she is collecting for a nest.
She flies from one source of material
to another. She chooses a crook in a tree
to leave the pieces she has found. One
strand at a time the fibres form a half
sphere, connected, melded to each other,
her weaving drawing them together.

Solid enough to feel secure
   Small enough to warm an egg
        Low enough to allow a view
                           High enough to keep a nestling settled

When is a nest finished?

A nest stands in the crook of a tree long
after the bird has bred, or migrated. Blown
onto the side of the road. Forlorn on the tar.

Eggless. Still a nest.
Birdless. Still a nest.
Treeless. Still a nest.

Pine needles, feathers, wool tugged from
a sheep’s back. Camouflaged from the outside.
Woven to fit a body. Pull one fibre, it slips apart.

A nest is a poem for a bird.
Make that nest in wire, in US
dollars, in words. Weave it
tenderly connecting the strands,
the shreds, the thoughts.
It is still a nest without a bird.

After Fiona Hall, Tender, 2003 – 2005.42
Endnotes

2 The Spirits of Birds is partially inspired by Percy Shelley’s “To a Skylark” and A.D. Hope’s “The Death of a Bird”.
4 The biographical details referred to in this poem owe a debt to the interview of Rosalie Gascoigne conducted by Robin Hunter for Screen Australia Digital Learning as part of the Australian Biography project. See online at http://www.australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/gascoigne/
7 Jack Hegarty was my grandfather and the owner of a corner store in Glebe which had been in the family for generations. Hegarty Street, Glebe is named after his family. It is said that he provided for many poor families in Glebe in hard times. A man from one of these families appeared at his funeral to pay his respects.
11 A Syaw is a fishing net in the language of the Ngangikurrungurr people. See in Appendix I or in R. Ian Lloyd and John McDonald, op. cit., p. 246.
12 Regina Wilson, Syaw (Fish Net), 2005, see image in Appendix I or in ibid., p. 247.
14 Nicholas Folland, ibid.
15 Nicholas Folland, ibid.
16 Nicholas Folland, Anchor, 2008 at Art Gallery of South Australia. See image in Appendix I or online at http://www.nicholasfolland.com.au/page7.htm
17 John Wolseley’s various works in Barry Hill and John Wolseley, Lines for Birds, University of Western Australia Publishing, 2011. See also photo of Wolseley creating his work in Appendix I.
18 Cressida Campbell, Oysters, 1994. See image in Appendix I and in Laura Murray Cree and Nevill Drury, Australian Painting Now, Craftsman House, Sydney, 2000, p. 86.
21 Alison Multa, ibid.
22 Patricia Piccinini, The Comforter, 2010 at Art Gallery of NSW. See image in Appendix I and in Patricia Piccinini and Helen McDonald, Patricia Piccinini, Nearly Beloved, Piper Press, Dawes Point, 2000, p.154-5.
Lionel Bawden, various sculptures made using thousands of pencils glued together. See image in Appendix I and online at http://www.lionelbawden.com/Work-world1.html

Rumi, J., “The Lover Circles his own Heart” is quoted in Mary Knights and Ian North, Hossein Valamanesh, Out of Nothingness, Wakefield Press, South Australia, 2011, p. 87.

Hossein Valamanesh, The Lover Circles his own Heart, 1993 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. See image in Appendix I and in ibid., p. 59.


Rosella Namok, Big Rain...we’re Aangkum, 2005. See image in Appendix I and in R. Ian Lloyd and John McDonald, op. cit., p. 135.


Lorna Jin-gubarrangunyyja and Elizabeth Mipilanggurr of the Burarra people, Fish Traps, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. See image in Appendix I.


Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, Cordial Home Project 2003, ibid.


Fiona Hall, Tender, 2003-5. See image in Appendix I and in Glenn Barkley (et al) op. cit., p. 287.
Breathing in art, breathing out poetry:
Contemporary Australian art and artists as a source of inspiration for a collection of ekphrastic poems.

To be read in conjunction with the Poetry Collection, *The Spirits of Birds*.

This exegesis relates to the writing of a collection of poems that are in various ways inspired by contemporary Australian artworks and artists. I have interviewed six Australian artists about their creative processes and sources of inspiration to inform the writing of my poems, as well as surveying written materials and galleries in relation to other artists about whom I have written. This exegesis will explore the nature of ekphrasis, how the writing of poetry might be stimulated by visual art, how I have used my research with these artists to write the collection and the ways in which the poems relate to the artworks.

Why Ekphrasis?

Philosopher Elaine Scarry tells us the appreciation of beauty hones our powers of perception and sense of empathy.¹ I have long pondered this and felt it acutely when standing in the High Court in Canberra looking up at a painting by Rosella Namok called *Today Now... We all got to go by the same laws*.² I thought about how it would be hard as a Judge to not preserve the rights of indigenous people in that Court building if one had contemplated the beauty and meaning of Namok’s painting on the way to the bench.

Ekphrasis for me is about the linking of the appreciation of beauty with the finding of good, life-giving aspects of daily existence. How does this happen through art and poetry? Poetry is the guardian of language, it defends words against reduction by commercialisation. Art is connection, communication. It’s what makes us talk to each other at a level above the grey mundanities. It lifts us to thought and to beauty. That’s my connection between art and acts of goodness – they both draw people together and lift them to be better, more whole, more authentic, and more mindful of time passing. It’s the capture of a moment and the making the most of it – that’s what art does, that’s what good, sincere acts do. Images in poetry help us to see connections, they make our brain work in ways that enable us to build bridges in communication.³ Ekphrasis also leads to a consideration of the ways in which the creative
journey of poets and artists vary. In the collection I have written, many of the poems are about the creative process for the artist, rather than the artwork itself.

**Tradition of Ekphrasis**

Literary critique relating to ekphrasis is extensive and critical responses to ekphrasis have changed over time, especially in relation to the definition and boundaries of ekphrasis. Within the scope of this exegesis, I will focus on how ekphrasis developed and provide some commentary on the types of responses poets have had to visual art, mainly to illustrate the various ways in which I have responded to artworks in my own ekphrastic attempts.

Ekphrasis has its roots in Ancient Greece, in the study of rhetoric, whereby students described a subject, which could be a person, place or event in order to bring an image to the mind’s eye of the audience. Aristotle in *Rhetoric* discussed the power of metaphor and the need to “make hearers see things”. Ekphrasis in this form was listed in Aphonios’ *Progymnasmata*, or rhetorical exercises, used by students of rhetoric. Paintings, sculptures and buildings became popular subjects of ekphrasis. A key early example of ekphrasis is the description of a decorated shield made for Achilles by Hephaestos in Homer’s *The Iliad*, which later gave rise to Auden’s ekphrastic poem, “The Shield of Achilles”. Key examples of poetry inspired by art include Keats’ “Ode on a Grecian Urn”, W.H. Auden’s “Musee de Beaux Arts”, John Berryman’s “Winter Landscape”, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “Hiram Power’s Greek Slave”, Wordsworth’s Elegiac Stanza on “Peel Castle in a Storm”, Shelley’s “On the Medusa of Leonardo da Vinci in the Florentine Gallery”, Allen Ginsberg’s “Cezanne’s Ports”, Nancy Sullivan’s “Number 1 by Jackson Pollock (1948)”, John Updike’s “Girl Before a Mirror” and numerous examples by William Carlos Williams. Brueghel, as an artist, would probably take the award for inspiring the most poems as many poets seem to have tried their hand at poems relating to Brueghel’s works. (William Carlos Williams alone wrote ten poems on paintings by Brueghel.) It is possible the narrative element in Brueghel’s paintings would lead to his work being used by writers. Interestingly, Brueghel was inspired by literary devices himself, with the painting *The Blue Cloak* virtually a visual encyclopaedia of Flemish proverbs with representations of more than 90 proverbs.
A stylistician examining poetry, Peter Verdonk, considers the range of meanings of ekphrasis. He argues a broader definition of ekphrasis derives from its original use in classical rhetoric as a “detailed description of any real or imagined object or scene, or of an abstract idea, mental image or state of emotion.” The more restricted meaning of ekphrasis is that of poetry pertaining to works of art: visual, sculptural, decorative, functional and architectural.\textsuperscript{11} Peter Verdonk\textsuperscript{12} describes Hollander’s\textsuperscript{13} distinction between actual and notional ekphrasis where actual is about particular and identifiable works of art or artefacts, while notional refers to fictional objects. Ruth Webb’s study of the ancient definition and role of ekphrasis highlights the difference between the ancient and modern interpretations. She argues for a renewed study of the ancient ekphrasis not to dispute the modern usage, but to add to our understanding of the field as the ancient ekphrasis with its “defining quality of enargeia (or vividness), and the role of the imagination...mean that this is almost as much a study of ancient psychology as of rhetoric.”\textsuperscript{14}

In considering how ekphrastic writing might be useful to creative writing students and their teachers, Genevieve Kaplan provides a history of the broadening definition of ekphrasis, which started with a description of a work of art but developed to include a narrative element (see also Heffernan).\textsuperscript{15} Using the example of Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror”, a poem based on Parmigianino’s painting of the same name, Kaplan argues contemporary works of ekphrasis now have a range of responses to an artwork. In her view, “ekphrastic poems may share how the artwork makes the speaker feel or what it reminds the speaker of; imagine and/or compare the poetic composition process to the painterly one; question the painting or painter; praise the painter and/or his artwork; or consider the literal or figurative relationship between the viewer and the painting.”\textsuperscript{16} Kaplan goes on to conclude: “Ekphrasis is not just descriptive; it is the poetic expression of the deep experience of art.” This is how I feel about writing my collection, I have immersed myself in the process, journey and creation of the artist. The poetry that results is the expression of that experience.

Krieger’s work on ekphrasis examines the limitation of language to do the job of art.\textsuperscript{17} On this topic, Heffernan describes ekphrasis as “a contest between rival modes of representation between the driving force of the narrating world and the stubborn resistance of the fixed image”.\textsuperscript{18} While the use of a device of conflict in critical studies of ekphrasis might be useful
to illuminate aspects of visual art and poetry, it is in some ways artificial: poets are not really pitting themselves and their skills against those of visual artists. I think it is more productive to consider the ways in which each art form inspires the other. The conflict argument is persistent though: Johnson describes the interaction between the poet and the visual artist in the following way: “the poet seeks to maintain the ascendancy, the fact remains that he (sic) is drawn again and again to painting. As inspiration, as subject, even as opponent, the lure of the image is powerful.”

Elizabeth Allen in her examination of the Icarus myth’s continuing influence on art and poetry, describes ekphrasis as a kind of “haunting” in the way the same myth can appear and reappear, translated and mutated in various poems. The Icarus myth has been revisited by artists such as Brueghel and poets such as Auden, William Carlos Williams and Rosemary Dobson.

Verdonk suggests using cognitive linguistics to explore the relationship between language and other cognitive abilities (such as emotion, memory, problem solving etc). This suggests ekphrasis might be about more than a “stylistic effect” but rather could be “a reflection of how people construe their knowledge and experience of the world around them”. Verdonk’s view of ekphrasis is that it “embodies a communicative triangle between the artist, the poet’s persona and the reader.” Verdonk focuses on the reader in this triangle, and certainly ekphrastic poems should be able to stand alone without the image according to ancient definitions of ekphrasis. However, for me ekphrasis provides a way into an artwork, a way to process that imagistic information and use it in a three way relationship between the poet, the artist and the viewer of the art, as well as being a way of inspiring poems that can be read independently of the visual artwork.

**Australian Ekphrasis**

There are many Australian poets who have explored ekphrasis in a small or large way. “Jonah” is a collection of poems published by Peter Porter with reproductions of Arthur Boyd’s paintings. Peter Steele’s extensive collection “Plenty” contains ekphrastic works on a wide variety of artworks both classical and modern. Ekphrastic offerings by John Kinsella, Martin Harrison, Judith Beveridge, Robert Adamson and Kate Fagan inter alia have been included on
the Newcastle Art Gallery website to form “Poets Paint Words”. A recent collaboration between artist John Wolseley and Barry Hill focuses on poems and artworks about birds. The DiVerse project is a group of poets who regularly give readings of ekphrastic poems. Sheryl Persson of the DiVerse group talks about ekphrasis as “a way to interpret visual art and make new meaning from works in various media that I was incapable of creating myself.”

**Forms of Ekphrasis**

Poet Peter Steele said that both art and poetry “trade in transformation – in the seizing of something that the artists know to be in large degree unseizable.” He notes that there would be, of course, innumerable poems that have been inspired by art but have not referred to their source of inspiration. Sometimes the poet sets out to make an ekphrastic poem, sometimes it just happens to turn out that way. Sometimes it is a direct address to that work of art, or it may spin into a narrative that the visual artist could never have anticipated. At times the poem may delve into the historic origins of the visual work. Steele says, “the ekphrastic pursuit has a wide span of ways it can go about its business.” While some of the poems I write are a response to the narrative in a painting, or a thought engendered by the experience of viewing, others endeavour to capture an element of the way in which the artist is inspired and a sense of the creative process unfurling. This is the purpose of conducting the interviews with the artists: to gain a sense of their own forms of inspiration and the way they arrive at their work with a view to creating a form of ekphrasis that expands on the act of creating rather than the object created.

Is this still ekphrasis? Ekphrastic poetry comes in various forms. Robert Kennedy, founder of the DiVerse group, proposes there are three types of ekphrastic poetry: Standard, Notional and Sectional. While standard and sectional refer to the response of the poet to an artwork as a whole or in part, notional refers to a writer expressing an inner or psychological element in an artwork. By expanding on the act of creating I hope to work in this realm: the psychology of creating, informed by the words of the artists themselves. As I will discuss later in the Results section, the poems I have written in the collection *The Spirits of Birds* fall into four categories that I have devised. There are poems that connect with the artwork by:
using symbolic devices in the artworks; exploring the inspiration or creative process of the artist; developing a life experience or imagined narrative; and echoing the visual appearance of the artwork. Using symbolic devices and echoing the visual appearance would relate to the standard ekphrastic process, while poems that explore the inspiration or creative process of the artist or develop a life experience or imagined narrative would be more in the realm of the notional ekphrastic response.

In my poems I seek to use language to mirror the techniques used by the artist in the creation of the work. For example, in “Syaw”31, a poem that relates to a painting of a fish net by Regina Wilson, I have chosen the villanelle form which uses a rhyme scheme and repeated refrain line: “It takes more than one day to weave a syaw” in order to mimic the under and over weaving of the fish net and how Wilson has captured this in her painting. As another example, in “Saffron Sticks,”32 a poem about the work by Rosalie Gascoigne titled A Piece to Walk Around, I have used a concrete poetry form, in order to use the appearance of the words on the page for impact.33 I have meticulously placed the words horizontally and vertically in exactly the pattern that Rosalie Gascoigne placed the squared piles of saffron sticks for her work. The words are repeated in the way the piles are repeated. The order of the words in each stanza shifts subtly in the way the placement of the sticks plays with perception and light to create a meditative effect when walking around the artwork. For example, “Saffron Thistle Sticks” changes to “Shifting Thistle Sticks” and “piece to walk around” alters to “peace to walk around” in repeated stanzas. This is the kind of arranging and rearranging that Gascoigne would have undertaken herself. Her only formal training was in Ikebana, the Japanese art of floral arrangement.34 I have tried to feel a little of what she might have been thinking when she was arranging the saffron sticks and arranged my words in the same way.35 As Peter Steele puts it, “a text is a kind of textile”.36 My poems try to incorporate some of the textile of the artwork into the poem.

Poets writing about the process of ekphrastic writing allude to their inability to create visual works. Keri Glastonbury in her wittily titled article “Shut up no one reads your poetry anyway” enters into a comparison of the work of an artist (Adam Cullen) and a poet (Nielsen) with some interest in their comparative levels of success.37 This suggests that the ability of the visual artist to have some financial success and also to be accepted more widely by society
may be a cause of jealousy amongst poets. Further, paradoxically, it might draw them into writing about art.

In some instances ekphrastic poetry could be a form of art criticism. Australian art critic Jacqueline Millner says “Thinking with an art object...is not, of course, a purely cognitive process; it invokes the emotions and the body’s full sensorium.” Art critics have to tussle between analysing a work, almost theoretically dismantling it, while allowing themselves to be taken in by the work at the same time. This is one way to open up a work to a viewer, perhaps ekphrasis is another, allowing the reader and viewer a way into a work through one interpretation, one narrative or even just a fragment of insight that allows a response whether it is one of dismissal i.e. “that is not what I saw in that visual work at all”, or of acceptance or reinterpretation, i.e. “I saw something completely different to what the poet saw.”

Indeed, writings on the practice of art criticism have much to offer the ekphrastic process. Millner claims “words will always fail...and yet at the same time they will also triumph”. They will fail as they will always fall short of the purity and immediacy of the visual image. However, as Millner points out and Carrier elucidates, words mediate most responses we ever have to a visual art work, whether they be the highly theory-laden and analytical words of an art critic through to the titles of artworks or the gallery descriptions next to the works. It is common to see visitors to art galleries reading the labels next to artworks, or listening to the carefully constructed text about the work through their earphones before they look at the work itself. Indeed, labelling in galleries might be considered a form of ekphrasis, being a verbal representation of a visual representation. Art writing, therefore, has a responsibility in terms of how an artwork is received. This raises a question about whether poets writing ekphrastically might also have a responsibility in how they respond to a work. Does the poet have a duty to consider how the poem might influence a response to an artwork? This might not be a major issue when the poem is being published in a journal remote from the physical artwork, but, for example, if a poet is reading the work in a gallery or is publishing a poem in connection with an exhibition, should the artist be shown the work first?

**Language of literature used to describe art**

The strong bond between art and poetry is alluded to as far back as Aristotle in the context of imitating reality. Critics often seem to use the language of literature to describe paintings.
A painting is described as narrative or lyrical. While this might grasp a little of the feeling of a painting, often a painting or group of paintings that are described as narrative do not literally tell a story. Interesting, then, how these words came to be used. The use of the words poetry or poetic seems to be common in the context of describing contemporary art. While the Oxford definition of poetry is “literary work in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm”, it does allow for a sub-definition of: “a quality of beauty and intensity of emotion regarded as characteristic of poems.”

In the Australian context, a recently released anthology of Australian contemporary artists described the work of artist Janet Laurence in the following way: “The veiling and layering of images, surfaces, shadows and reflections that have become defining features of her art infuse works such as Botanical residues with a poetic sensitivity.” Titles of art journal articles use poetic references such as Fred Williams: The Poetry of Paint. Gallery exhibitions often use the word poetry in their titles. For example, a blockbuster exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery was entitled “Surrealism: the Poetry of Dreams”. In the same year an exhibition of Pre-Raphaelite designs, studies and watercolours at the Art Gallery of NSW was called “The Poetry of Drawing”. Art historian Carol Ann Raphael has pointed out: “Often we praise an image by calling it poetic and compliment a poem for its visual imagery. We draw on the attributes of another medium to give value that transcends the confines of what a painting or drawing or a piece of writing can be.”

**Inspiration for poets and artists – conscious and unconscious**

In considering the writing of poetry about art and in particular the writing of poetry about the creative process it is important to contemplate inspiration for both poets and visual artists. A useful conceptualisation of inspiration is that of Thrash et al. in the field of social psychology, who propose that inspiration is comprised of transcendence, evocation and approach motivation. While there is a deep and wide body of literature on the topic of creativity from a psychological viewpoint, I found this definition useful as it is broad enough to apply to a range of creative fields and it also incorporates motivation which is often left out of the discussion of inspiration. Transcendence is the recognition of “possibilities that transcend the ordinary or mundane”, inspiration is “evoked and sustained by an illuminating stimulus
object” and then inspiration requires approach motivation “in which the individual strives to transmit, express or actualise the new idea or vision.”

It is important to acknowledge the difficulty of analysing creativity through a scientific lens. In his explorations of neuroscience and creativity, Brophy finds that looking to science for insights into creativity is illuminating. However, he cautions that we need to be careful of reducing creativity to “functional terms that miss the subtleties at the centre of the practice of art.”

In considering consciousness and creativity, Brophy explores the role of consciousness in learning, and in particular, theorises that it might be possible to support learning in the creative arts by making “particular uses of the permeable boundary between the conscious and the unconscious”. Brophy proposes that poetry and all the creative arts “require us to work against the normal flow of consciousness”, i.e. when in the process of creating, artists and poets exercise thinking outside of conscious awareness.

This proposal fits with Sue Woolfe’s description of thinking during the creative process. In her book The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady Woolfe explores creative writing through the lens of neuroscience. She describes two kinds of thinking: tight and loose construing, tight being the everyday kind of thought process, where loose construing is the thought process associated with creative activity. Loose construing is the type of neural activity that allows the brain to become chaotic, unfocused and bring up new ideas or fragments of memories. In Woolfe’s words: “I lose track of my physical whereabouts, my sense of time, my sense of myself and even my own name.” Maybe the viewing of art allows the poet to go into loose construing thought.

Janet Hawley, the journalist who has interviewed many Australian visual artists, speaks of the “intensely private, enthralling high, when a creative rush suddenly appears like a gift, and guides the work for you.” This seems to correlate with the requirements Thrash et al refer to – transcendence, evocation and motivation. Exploring this creative urge, and how it might be similar (or different) for visual artists (who can touch and manipulate the physical materials they work with) and poets (who need to rely on the symbols of language) is part of my motivation in this research.
Viewing of visual art unleashing creativity – getting into “the Zone”

In my interview with Rachel Carroll she talks about being in “the Zone”. This is where she stops thinking and the art just flows. In her words: “I tried like very hard to get back into that zone it was almost like someone else is painting through me. I know it sounds weird but it is almost like I was no longer there and a creative process had taken over.” In the process of writing this poetry collection I found art puts me in the “zone”. I find myself not analysing but flowing, not thinking but creating. Maybe it is hard to initially get into a daydreaming or creative zone with poetry because it can be such a finicky activity, considering meter, rhythm and rhyme, lineation and meaning. So for me, the first draft or the first fragments can be hard to unleash if you are concentrating on the technical aspects. Afterwards, the technical aspects of poetry are helpful. As creativity researcher Jonah Lehrer points out: “When a poet needs to find a rhyming word with exactly three syllables or an adjective that fits the iambic scheme, he (sic) ends up uncovering all sorts of unexpected connections; the difficulty of the task accelerates the insight process.”

In the same way art can help poets unleash their creativity, poetry is mentioned by many artists as a source of inspiration. Even amongst the artists that inspired this collection, many mention poets. For example, Aida Tomescu refers to the work of Paul Celan “entering” her work, the Hossein Valamanesh installation that I have written about is called The lover circles his own heart which is a quote from a Rumi poem and Nic Folland discussed the Ern Malley (James McAuley and Harold Stewart) poem Durer: Innsbruck, 1495, as a part of the process of inspiration relating to his exhibition Parallel Collisions. Tom Carment, one of the artists I interviewed, is both an artist and a writer. Journaling each day is part of his routine and he sometimes turns to writing when he has a block as a painter.

Research into creative processes for artists

I conducted a series of interviews with Australian contemporary artists in order to research their sources of inspiration and creative processes. Other interviews have been conducted with Australian contemporary artists exploring inspiration and creative processes, for example see Hawley, Murray-Cree and Drury, Lloyd and McDonald. However, the
interviews I have conducted are for the purpose of generating inspiration for my own ekphrastic poems.

Method

Initially it was intended that the interviews with the selected artists would be conducted before the poetry collection was written. I discussed this with two artists and upon reflection decided it would be better to start writing the poems about the artists selected first and then decide which artists to interview. The reasons for this shift were twofold: first, from my point of view I was concerned about the creative pressure of responding to an artist’s work after I had interviewed them in case I was unable to write anything worthwhile about their artwork. Second, from the artist’s point of view, if I was unknown to them and I as yet had not written anything about their artworks they might feel uneasy about agreeing to be involved in the interviews. Thus, the project started with the writing of a collection of poems responding to twenty three contemporary Australian artists. There were no boundaries on the selection of the artists. The poems resulted from time in galleries and looking at artworks online and in books. The artworks that I chose were the ones I felt I had a response to, the ones I came back to look at a second or third time. Sometimes I would have the kernel of an idea immediately after viewing them either online, in a book or at a gallery. Other times I might not have an idea straight away but I continued to want to look at the artworks. I might research the process by which they were created or I might sit and look at them for a longer period, writing some initial notes or free writing for a while in front of the artworks. They were artworks that caught my eye and my thoughts although I might not have any coherent plans for how to respond to them for some time.

Initial writing process

To start with, I would sit with a painting or an artwork for some time and see what emerged. I would write whatever came to me in a journal. For the most part the poems started with fragments written in response to the works. Once these fragments had started to form, I researched the creative process of the artist where possible. (Naturally this was more available for artists that enjoyed public recognition in the form of exhibitions, catalogues and
Sometimes in the free writing stage I found a word that captured me. For example, in writing “Syaw” in response to Regina Wilson’s series of paintings of fish nets, I was attracted to this word: “syaw”. Then it was just two lines that kept running around each other: “Time finds the gaps we try to ignore, it takes more than one day to weave a syaw”. I started to think about the form of the artwork and the weave of the net and I thought a formal framework might be appropriate to reflect the weaving in and out of the fibres. So I chose to use a villanelle, with the repetition woven through the poem to reflect the fish net structure. Sometimes the way artists spoke about beginning a new work gave me the impetus to start mine. For example, Regina Wilson is very pragmatic about getting on with the job of painting her intricate Syaw paintings. Asked about how she starts she says: “You start with the background”. My using
the classic form of the villanelle also reflected this commitment Wilson shows to using the skills and knowledge of your craft to get on with the job.

For other poems in my collection I became intrigued with the materials used and the process of creating. For example, in “Simryn Gill’s Pearls” I had been reading about how the artist Simryn Gill had taken strips of paper from books and rolled them into beads. The rolling of the beads becomes an image within the poem and generated the idea for the poem.

Form has had a significant impact on the writing of each poem. I would frequently shape the text or stanzas of a poem so that they somehow reflected the form of an artwork. This is evident in my poem “Whirring”, a response to Hossein Valamanesh’s installation at the Museum of Contemporary Art called The lover circles his own heart. The stanzas of the poem are formed on the page in the shape of the spinning silk, the shadow underneath the spinning silk and the light shining onto the work.

Sometimes the image of the artwork elicited a narrative response. For example, Cressida Campbell’s work Oysters resulted in a poem that told a story, albeit incomplete, in the same way the lino cut print of the oysters, empty plates and wilted salad is cropped at the edges, denying us the details of who the guests were at this table.

The initial period of writing resulted in twenty nine poems about the artworks of twenty three artists.

Selection for Interviews

The list of artists who I originally intended to interview changed after I began writing the poems. The body of work of some artists was easy to respond to, while others I found a struggle despite feeling that I understood and enjoyed their work. Thus it became apparent to me that my inspiration was not affected by my initial liking of particular artworks. This encouraged me to persist with artists whose work was not an immediate first choice for me. In terms of the interviews, I used a semi-structured protocol of open-ended questions. The first two artists I chose to interview were people I knew so that I could conduct a more casual interview and ask them for some feedback on the process. Thereafter I approached artists
that I really wanted to interview because their work particularly inspired me. Sometimes they were unavailable for interview or did not respond. However, six artists agreed to be interviewed: Rachel Carroll, Rox de Luca, Nic Folland, Tom Carment, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro. Healy and Cordeiro are a partnership so there is one interview discussing their joint work, primarily undertaken with Healy. The artists varied in terms of age, gender, creative approach and medium used. The only demographic restraint was that they had to be over eighteen.

I approached the galleries that represented the artists and asked them to pass on an email inviting them to participate (Appendix A). If I heard back from the artists, I then emailed them the Participant Information Statement (Appendix B) and the Consent Form (Appendix C) for them to consider. We arranged the interview time and place at their convenience.

The interview questions started with the extremely broad e.g. “Tell me about what inspires you artistically?” and gradually moved to more specific questions e.g. “Given this project is about writing poetry I am interested in any writing that has influenced you. Is text something you have used in your works? Has a book or a writer inspired you? Have you ever considered poetry as a stimulus?” The full questionnaire is in Appendix A. Appendices B and C contain the Invitation to participate which was sent to potential interviewees, the Participant Information Statement, and the Consent Form respectively. The interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed for analysis. The transcribed interviews were sent to the artists so they could remove any part of the interview with which they were not comfortable.

The data was generally analysed interview by interview, enabling me to respond creatively to each artist’s work in turn. The interviews were used to explore the nature of inspiration for visual artists and how this might relate to the creative process for writing poetry. The factors affecting the ease with which art can be responded to poetically were also considered. Material gathered in the interviews was used to stimulate the writing of further poems about art and artists in the moment of inspiration, and to further edit the poems that were already written.
Results

I will discuss the results firstly in terms of the poetry written, both before and after the interviews and then secondly I will discuss the outcomes from the interviews.

The initial period of writing resulted in twenty nine poems about the artworks of twenty three artists. Following the interviews, the original poems were revised and a further six poems were written. My response from artist to artist varied greatly from concentrating on the forms of inspiration and creative processes of the artists themselves, narrative poems that were based on my life experiences, poems picking up on some symbolic device of the artwork, or poems that in some way echoed the visual appearance of the artwork. Table 1 below documents the way the poems respond to artworks. Individual poems may have responded to the artworks in more than one way but the primary response is the one that I have used to categorise them. This is a schema I devised in order to consider the nature of my ekphrastic response, when I realised that ekphrasis can be more than a description of an artwork. I wanted to understand the various ways in which I was responding to the works. To develop this I considered each poem in turn and what the primary response was and as I went through the collection a pattern of four types of responses began to emerge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poem</th>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Artwork</th>
<th>Type of response</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Whirring</td>
<td>Hossein Valamanesh</td>
<td><em>The Lover Circles His own Heart</em> 1993</td>
<td>Echoing visual appearance</td>
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<td>3. Fog</td>
<td>Aida Tomescu</td>
<td><em>Obliqua</em> 1997</td>
<td>Echoing visual appearance</td>
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<td>4. Saved</td>
<td>Rox de Luca</td>
<td><em>Saved series</em> 2012</td>
<td>Life experience or imagined narrative</td>
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<td>5. Saffron Thistle Sticks</td>
<td>Rosalie Gascoigne</td>
<td><em>Piece to walk around</em> 1981</td>
<td>Echoing visual appearance</td>
</tr>
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<td>6. Humble</td>
<td>Rosalie Gascoigne</td>
<td><em>Monaro</em> 1989</td>
<td>Inspiration/creative process</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Night Dissolves</td>
<td>Philip Wolfhagen</td>
<td>Winter Nocturne III 2006</td>
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<td>Sustenance</td>
<td>Rosella Namok</td>
<td>Rain series 2005</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>For Jack Hegarty</td>
<td>Tom Carment</td>
<td>Waverley Cemetery 2010</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>The Usefulness of a Chandelier in Antarctica</td>
<td>Nic Folland</td>
<td>Anchor 2008</td>
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<td>Magnolia</td>
<td>Nic Folland</td>
<td>The Door is open 2007</td>
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<td>Grace Bros Miranda Fair Lighting Department</td>
<td>Nic Folland</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Chandelier</td>
<td>Nic Folland</td>
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<td>When the Wind Stopped</td>
<td>John Wolseley</td>
<td>Various works in book of ekphrasis 2011</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Syaw</td>
<td>Regina Wilson</td>
<td>Syaw (Fish Net) 2005</td>
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<td>Nacred</td>
<td>Cressida Campbell</td>
<td>Oysters 1994</td>
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<td>About the Stars</td>
<td>Alison Multa</td>
<td>Stars 2005</td>
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<td>In Piccinini’s Workshop</td>
<td>Patricia Piccinini</td>
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<td>Pearls 2008</td>
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<td>Ricky Swallow</td>
<td>Younger than Yesterday 2006</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>Sonnet for Hattah</td>
<td>Rachel Carroll</td>
<td>Hattah 2011</td>
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I will explain the four types of responses below.

**By using symbolic device** I mean I wrote the poem in connection to some visual symbol of the artwork such as in the poem “When is a nest finished?” written in response to Fiona Hall’s *Tender* series in which nests were made from Dollar notes.

**By inspiration or creative process** I mean the poem was about some aspect of the way the work was created. So in the case of John Wolseley, I am fascinated by the way he releases large sheets of paper into bushland after a bushfire. The paper is then scraped and stippled by the charcoal on the trees and scrub. The result is a sort of script, almost written by the bush itself. This led to the writing of the poem “When the wind stopped” which was the first poem I wrote that was directly concerned with the creative process of the artist.

**Life experience or imagined narrative** refers to poems where I have been reminded of a life experience by the visual work or at least imagined a situation as a result of interacting with the visual work which has led to a narrative poem such as in “Nacred” an imagined narrative.
triggered by the Cressida Campbell linocut *Oysters*. Initially I was tempted to put life experience and imagined narrative as separate categories but sometimes there was a cross over where I had started with life experience and then imaginary elements were introduced so it was impossible to separate these two types of poems.

**Echoing the visual appearance of the artwork** refers to poems that used some aspect of the way the artwork appears to form the poem, for example, as discussed earlier, in the poem “Saffron Thistle Sticks”. In this poem the stanzas are arranged in exactly the way the artist Rosalie Gascoigne arranged saffron thistle sticks in a patchwork pattern of horizontal and vertical lines in her work *A Piece to Walk Around*. Another example of this echoing of visual appearance is in the poem *House Pallet* which was a response to Healy and Cordeiro’s *Cordial Home Project*. In this artwork they deconstructed a house and stacked all of the materials from the house. In my corresponding poem I have described the contents of a house and layered the phrases to form a similar image on the page.

Using this schema to categorise the poems it emerges that three response types were fairly evenly used, that of Using symbolic device (10 poems), Inspiration or creative process (10 poems), Life experience or imagined narrative (10 poems). The fourth, that of Echoing the visual appearance of the artwork (5 poems), was a response type I had not anticipated and turned out to be the most satisfying to me as a poet, perhaps because it enabled that freeing up of creative thought while I looked for ways to connect the visual appearance of an artwork with the poem.

**And sometimes the writing did not come easily...**

The writing of poems about some artworks came very easily. For example, in response to Nic Folland’s work it was no effort to write four poems and the writing seemed to flow. By contrast, responding to some artists, such as Patricia Piccinini, was not quite so easy. Piccinini is an artist whose work I am quite familiar with and who was on my earliest list of artists I wanted to write about. Piccinini’s work is remarkable in the way it incorporates paradoxical proposals that cause us to think about issues such as the growth of technology and the impact this has on ourselves and our relations with others. Admittedly, it is strange and challenging work and her portfolio is extensive and varied in both subject and medium, so choosing where to start was also hard. I wondered whether this was because it is highly manufactured art,
remote from nature although paradoxically also about the contorting of nature. This is such a different field of inspiration from that which I am used to drawing upon. I initially rejected writing anything in response to Piccinini’s work, but felt I needed to push through and find a way. I spent hours looking at a sculpture by Piccinini, The Comforter, which was at the time on display at the AGNSW. I felt simultaneously moved and repulsed by The Comforter. The sculpture is that of a life-size, life-like (although very hairy) girl nursing a baby that is attractive in the way a baby generally is with chubby legs and soft skin, but it has been mutated so that it has no eyes, nose or ears for example, and is growing bizarre finger-like protrusions from its head. The girl is obviously caring for the baby and the baby seems content. At the gallery that day I responded with warmth towards to the way the girl is caring for the baby, with bewilderment at why the girl is so hairy and the baby is so mutated and with repulsion at the extreme mutation of the baby. Sitting with The Comforter and at the same time thinking about Piccinini’s relationship with her creations led me to write a prose poem called “In Patricia Piccinini’s Workshop”. The prose poem seemed an appropriate form for such powerfully unsettling work. More complex rhyming or stanzaic forms would be less suitable to deal with such strange material as the combination of the form and the content might be overwhelming. In my view, the prose poem is amenable to some absurd propositions as it is so simple in its structure.

It has been worthwhile to persist in writing about artworks that I initially felt unable to respond to. Writing ekphrastically does impose some boundaries on the free range of inspiration. There is a discipline required to find a connection with a particular artwork, even if a broad definition of ekphrasis is employed. When there is no straightforward connection it takes longer to get started and there seem to be more dead ends – I found myself starting in one direction but finding there is nowhere to go with it. Ultimately though, I found if I kept coming back to the work I would eventually find a way to write about it. Reading about the creative process of the artist was useful to me at these times.

**Interviews with the artists**

**Rachel Carroll**

Rachel Carroll’s work has almost exclusively focused on the Murray Darling River Basin. Each year she chooses a new location on the river to paint, drawing from groups within the local
communities on the river, from indigenous elders to farmers and loggers. This research has fuelled her passion for a historical and scientific understanding of Australia’s largest river system and the way art can translate this understanding. Underlying these artworks is a concern for the river’s survival. Her concern for the effect of a stressed river system on the birdlife that depends on it has led to her painting the birds as well.

Carroll sees art as one of our most powerful communication tools. She believes art can go straight to the heart of a message and leave a lasting impression. She has used this in lobbying for the protection of rivers and wetlands.81

I have been watching Carroll’s work for some time since I was driving past a gallery and saw her Coorong painting hanging in the window. There is something about the way she makes a landscape so familiar and yet almost abstract or alien to the extent that you feel the need to investigate it more closely. I bought the work and took it home thinking I was crazy as it was an impulse buy and it is so big that I thought I would tire of it. It is still in the same place and I find something refreshing in it each time I come down to breakfast.

I then kept an eye on Carroll’s adventures – and they are adventures – until we met up at another exhibition opening at which she had decided to have a poet read. We discussed my sitting in on the exhibition and writing. I sat and wrote at the Danks Street Waterloo gallery, with members of the public wandering in and out and commenting on various works. It was an opportunity to sit with the range of works in that series around me, considering how the works related to each other and discussing with her how the works developed as she travelled upstream. I was also able to witness the reactions of the public and observe her energy when speaking with them about her journeying up the river and painting. My interest in Carroll’s work is about her affair with the Murray river and her need to explore its every bend. I think I feel a type of envy that she goes out to the Murray and physically recreates it in some way, almost bringing it home. The passion she brings to her art also means she has tackled environmental issues for the Murray head on, asking Federal politicians to attend her exhibitions and using this as a way to alert them to the beauty and fragility of the river.

I like the way she responds to each section of the Murray differently, each time slightly altering her style to meet the needs of the landscape in front of her. The Coorong paintings
had that slightly other worldly quality, raising questions about the health of the environment. The Hattah series captures the gums almost as characters, portraits to engage us to think about their age compared to ours and how such a loss would be deplorable. And the source of the Murray paintings where Carroll went trekking with her husband to find the closest thing to the actual initial trickle, has an abstract quality that engenders a sense of respect for the “spirit” of the spring of the Murray.

Carroll also searches for the human response to nature. While her art is about the river and she grows to know it in more detail each time she chooses a new part to paint, she knows there are the people who interact with it every day. She meets and talks to people who know the river intimately. She has met with national park rangers, farmers who use it for irrigation, traditional owners, and environmental and agricultural policy makers. They each have different views on the use of the river and all love it in their own way. Carroll sees the potential of building bridges between these various groups and treats them all with respect.

I love the search for the twists and turns, the different ecologies of the river that have become part of Carroll’s creative process. I learnt a great deal about the creative process for artists listening to how Carroll starts on a fresh canvas if she is having a block.

“Yeah there are days that you do struggle but even so I put paint to canvas anyway even if I know it is not going to be the best day ever... So I guess yeah you choose your moods just know what you are going to work on and you are in a bad mood do not work on the one you loved the most because of the risk of stuffing it up and then not getting it back.”

It is worth noting the difference between this experience of struggling and that of my own. As a poet there is not the risk that you are going to ruin a poem forever, because, of course, you can always keep a copy of an old version. As an artist you can ruin an old version of a painting and it will be lost forever. But a poet can start on an old piece of poetry if feeling blocked, where an artist is more likely to work on a new canvas rather than trying to rework an old one, particularly if the mood feels wrong and therefore the prospect of destroying an existing work is higher.
Carroll’s work practice is to spend a concentrated period of three months painting each year. The rest of the year she juggles her curatorial work in a gallery with research on the river. Sometimes she takes field trips and sketches at the location she wants to focus on next. Once she gets into the studio she finds it is important “to get into the big one straight out.” “...it is not until you start putting down the marks and working over the marks again and again that you suddenly go hang on I know what I am trying to say now.”

This seems to be tied up with having the confidence to start: “it is almost this obsessive need to quickly get paint on canvas to get a painting done to remind myself I can paint.” The experience of staring at a blank page for a poet and a blank canvas for an artist have some similarities it seems. Once words start to go on a page however simple or bizarre they might be, it does allow the poet to gain momentum. Carroll then finds she will have a number of canvases starting to develop at once. By the end of the last three month period in studio, Carroll was working on twenty-seven canvases simultaneously. She likes to work this way as she wants the canvases to speak to each other not just work individually. Interestingly, when Carroll has a block, she sometimes finds it useful to start writing down what she is trying to do. She might write about the texture she is trying to create, or write a recap of what she has been doing so far and the words help her “re-visualise and get back into the zone.”

In the interview, Carroll was very articulate about the moment of inspiration, what she calls being “in the zone.” The following passage describes her experience in her last three months in her studio:

“Out of these 27 paintings there were three I did in one day, one after the other that flowed and you talked about having bad days and good days, inspired days and not inspired days and then there is something else and I cannot explain what that is and I tried like really hard to get back into that zone it was almost like someone else is painting through me. I know it sounds weird but it is almost like I was no longer there and a creative process had taken over ... It is bizarre...I started them and finished them all in one day... and they all worked together. ... It is almost like you are creating without thinking. There is no fear. It is all flow... and then when you go back and try and do it your brain gets involved and your brain is going do it like this, you are going to mix this colour, I mean your brain is telling you what to do and you are like –
no hang on, this did not happen last time. And if I start thinking about it too much I am only going to get really tight and analytical about the whole thing..." 85

This has a parallel with Lehrer’s writing on what he calls “the letting go.” One example that seems particularly relevant here is that of Yo Yo Ma, the cellist, who talks about the relief of making a mistake on stage, because after that “I am not thinking or worrying anymore. And it’s when I’m least conscious of what I’m doing, when I’m just lost in the emotion of the music, that I’m performing my best.” 86 Lehrer’s review of the field hypothesises that we need to practise letting go of inhibiting our impulses in order to maximise our ability to improvise, to create without too much thought or analysis. But what does this mean for the poet, who spends hours in painstaking searches for the right word or the perfect rhythm and rhyme? Carroll’s expression of getting in the zone might provide a clue: it’s not the letting go of everything, but maybe getting into a zone that is so focused on one element of creativity that other thought and distraction is blocked out. When Carroll gets in the zone, she doesn’t think about anything else but the canvases in front of her. In my experience this is the equivalent of having the time and learned skill to get focused on the poems in front of you, like the canvases standing around the walls in Carroll’s studio.

There are two poems in the collection relating to Carroll’s work. The first poem was in response to her work around the mouth of the Murray river at the Coorong in South Australia. “Salty Mouth” 87 takes the form of a love song between the fresh water and salt water that mix there. The levels of salt here have been rising due to the pollution and overuse of the river so the usual level is out of balance. The painting I have focused on portrays the beauty of the area but also has a sense of the precarious balance being threatened by the salt. The poem tries to capture a wistfulness in the way the two waters of the river relate with the fresh water feeling it is in a toxic embrace it cannot escape. The painting style was that of a traditional landscape, yet there was a sense of abstraction in the delivery and maybe in the grappling of what was happening to the river at this point. I felt a poem with a song-like quality in terms of repetition and rhythm would lend itself to this style.

A second poem, Sonnet for Hattah 88, relates to Carroll’s paintings of Hattah which is at a point on the Murray river where there is the largest population of red river gums in the world.
Carroll evoked the sense of age and grandeur of these trees by using the colours of the old masters, Vermeer and Monet. To reflect this classical reference I decided to use a sonnet form. The poem seeks to consider Carroll’s creative process of following the river, getting to know it intimately and being entwined in the narrative it has formed.

Rox de Luca

Rox de Luca’s work has appeared in solo and group exhibitions in Australia and Spain, where she worked for several years. She has worked in both painting and sculpture and her more recent works incorporate the skill of jewellery-making as well. In recent years she has worked primarily with found objects and in particular plastic rubbish collected from Bondi Beach where she lives and works. In 2013 her work was selected for Sculpture by the Sea.89

It was the interest in creative process that drew me to de Luca’s work. De Luca worked in two dimensional media for years, painting and working metal. She lives near the beach (Bondi) and when she was walking found herself collecting pieces of plastic in various shapes, sizes and colours. After experimenting for some time in ways to join them and sort them, she trained with a jewellery maker so she could join the pieces into elaborate garlands of coral like quality. These ropes of plastic beads and shards are then installed as coils on the floor, or draped from a wall, evoking conflicting thoughts of the beauty of the marine world and the destruction of this world by plastics. As one reviewer suggested: “The works read like rosaries that count out either the pleasures of summer days or the sins of environmental neglect.”90

The change from two to three dimensional work has given de Luca a challenge as has the need to be site specific with her work. For a recent installation in Sculpture by the Sea, de Luca wrapped a garland of white plastic shards, and especially take-away forks and spoons, around a rusty pipe on the coastal walkway between Bondi and Bronte. From a distance the effect is that of a seemingly organic patterned design, almost like thousands of lacy shells decorating the surface, but a closer examination reveals the source of the materials as rubbish discarded by beach goers. The result is evocative and dramatic.

I find it moving that the collecting on the beach enables de Luca to talk about her art with people. Some bystanders can’t help but ask her what she is doing and why, when they see her trawling the beach for plastic. Others end up following her and collecting rubbish...
themselves. A recent installation in the Sculpture by the Sea exhibition further enabled de Luca to talk about her work, and the environmental disaster of people discarding their plastic rubbish which then ends up in the sea. In de Luca’s words:

“I have had people coming up to me and saying ‘what are you doing?’ and ... it can be an older person or you know kids from the school, because the school is across the road and you know, they will keep picking up and helping me which is where they’re wonderful too so that (collecting) process has been...meditative as well as affirming and connecting with people in that way...”

The art has opened up a dialogue with a memorable image of the plastic forming a beautiful yet unsettling object.

De Luca spends hours sorting the plastics into colour schemes and patterns that work arranging and rearranging. When she first started this work she was using a candle and a pin to make holes in the plastic until she worked with a jeweller and learned jewellery making techniques. Now she drills tiny holes into the shards of plastic one by one before threading them onto marine wire. It is time-consuming, painstaking work that is hard on the hands. Sitting in de Luca’s studio, light pouring in over a table with mounds of captivating colour, I am fascinated by the difference in the inspiration process for work of this nature where there is a repetitive activity that takes place. Does it imbue the artwork with a meditative quality that a quickly inspired and executed artwork cannot have? How does the physical nature of the work affect her inspiration? She says “sometimes even the restrictions and things like the physical nature of the plastic you’re working with, you know, you’ve got to come up with ways to solve that problem. I think that triggers inspiration...”

My response to these works was to enter childhood recollections of beachcombing. The collecting of shells, of rubbish and of moments that formed a memory not shared but stored for future times. The poem “Saved” reflected the activity of collecting the rubbish on the beach in that a series of strange images are brought together. The process of collecting that de Luca used, along with the seemingly endless small pieces of detritus drew me to writing unrelated fragments of text and image. In “Saved”, which takes its title from a de Luca exhibition, the poem formed after these disparate images were arranged into twelve four line stanzas, connected by a two line refrain which is like a clasp on a necklace or a knot at the
end of the garland. The process of writing the poem was time-consuming, the images came to me one by one and like de Luca’s garlands, the pieces eventually formed a whole, various in shapes but similar in tone, and perhaps evoking the random nature of childhood memories in that what is forgotten and what is saved seems arbitrary and certainly not reflective of what is necessarily important or trivial.

Nic Folland

Nicholas Folland is an Adelaide-based artist. He is a Samstag Scholar and studied within the research program at the Piet Zwart Institute Rotterdam, where he pursued an interest in constructed landscapes and developed a fascination for early travel narratives. On his return to Australia, Folland created numerous sculptures and installations that referred to extreme locations within the landscape, often taking inspiration from tragic journals of failed exploration.

Folland is interested in the domestic interior, particularly in terms of the inherent references within our homes to natural environmental processes and landscapes.

In recent years, Folland has worked with found crystal and glassware. In 2009 he completed the monumental installation Floe for the exhibition Colliding Worlds at the Samstag Museum, in which approximately 2000 crystal items such as wine glasses, bowls and vases were individually suspended to form a floating and sublime island landscape. Folland’s work is held in the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide and the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, as well as at other university and regional galleries.

In the process of conducting research for the writing of my collection, I was in the Museum of Contemporary Art and was struck by Folland’s The Door was Open, a chandelier with a frozen icy orb at its core. I sat on the floor of the gallery and wrote pages and pages of fragments. These were by far and away the easiest poems to develop, maybe because the chandelier is an object I have long associated with my childhood, the saving up for a light fitting for each of the bedrooms and lounge room was a project that I remember clearly. The chandeliers were often admired, regularly cleaned with some degree of difficulty. They were dimmed for evening visitors, and the glint of sunlight on them in the daytime was a source of
pleasure to my mother, unless of course it was time for them to be cleaned again at which point their dustiness gave her grief. The chandelier tales flowed out, varied in narrative and form. The result is a suite of four poems. The two shorter poems are one stanza explorations of the chandelier, in the home and as a magnolia tree, subsumed into a natural environment. There is one longer prose poem “The Usefulness of a Chandelier in Antarctica” which will be further discussed later. Another poem, “Grace Bros Miranda Fair Lighting Department”, is a narrative poem that covers my childhood domestic scene and some social commentary of the 1970s reappearance of the chandelier in suburban homes:

“Not made by Venetian artisans
in island workshops blowing bulbs by
mouth and twirling a rod in a hot oven
until the glass dripped like amber sap.
Our chandeliers were bought one by one
with five dollars saved from each pay
week for the best part of the year
I turned seven.”

I had long admired other work by Folland, especially his Ice Floe work. Folland originally comes from a theatre design background and a sense of drama and storytelling adventure is evident in his work. The chandelier used as an anchor has a whole story dragging behind it. In his words he loves the idea that when we leave the perceived safety of our domestic environments, maybe the appliances and furniture in our homes will get up to all sorts of mischief. In the interview he explains:

“I try to get this implication this thing had just occurred in your absence and you suddenly come home and “Oh my God”, you know the freezer and or the chandelier have kind of embraced each other or ... something has happened here. You know, I guess in a playful way, I like to think that perhaps the whitegoods, do have a life, you know and we all have those occasions, rarely perhaps where there’s a moment in a place where you expect something to be one way and actually something has happened... a bird’s got inside and you know knocked
everything off the shelf or something like that and we have these moments where we can’t quite reconcile what’s going on…”

In the same way there is a sense of potential energy in his works, like when we leave the gallery they will take on a life of their own.

Folland responds to the restrictions of a controlled environment, for example, an exhibition space that has peculiarities, one in which a work has to fit carefully. Maybe this is a skill developed through needing to work in the confines of a theatrical performance space. This is a neat parallel to the discipline imposed when one works within a formal poem. Even if the constraints are ultimately discarded, the structure of the formal poem assists in the process of creativity. By needing to fit within the rules of rhyme or number of lines, a poet’s imagination is stretched until connections beyond the usual are made and words not often seen together are joined to make lines work. Jonah Lehrer summarises this neatly: “Unless poets are stumped by the form, unless they are forced to look beyond the obvious associations, they’ll never invent an original line…the difficulty of the task accelerates the insight process.” Folland talks about the importance of action-reflection when starting on a creative project. For him, the action is the importance of “playing in the studio” putting together materials and arranging them then sitting back and reflecting on where the project is going. This has a parallel in poetry writing for me when I play with some existing fragments of text, arranging and rearranging then sitting back or leaving some reflection time before writing again. He doesn’t seem to have moments when creativity is blocked, more times when he is reflecting. When he is in reflection mode, he has a strong belief that something will emerge. Folland makes some interesting comments about text and particularly reads travel writing as part of a yearning for getting lost anywhere. Some of his installations have been informed by his reading of Scott’s Antarctic diaries in which he found himself searching for “an astounding moment of text” and found it in the tragic last words spoken by Scott’s team member, Lawrence Oates “I’m just going outside and may be some time.”

Folland talks about his work as “theatre without actors” When writing the prose poem “The Usefulness of a Chandelier in Antarctica” I was struck by the theatrical absurd in Folland’s work while also fascinated by his creative processes involving reading travel journals of early
Australian explorers. The poem has a narrative element about a family in Antarctica, but the element of the chandelier being included gives it an absurd sense of how domestic appliances have become our natural environments. The poem also references Folland’s *Ice Floe* works and in particular explores his preoccupation with the juxtaposition of fire and ice. For example, the poem’s images include igloos, candles, crystal, ice for drinks, chandeliers, ice boulders and fairy lights. The absurd element of this poem is an attempt to capture what Folland describes as the “kind of search for something miraculous or you know, something astounding, something beyond the knowing world” which is what draws him to the writings of the early explorers.

In the same way as Folland believes in playing with materials, the action-reflection model of creativity, I applied this to my writing of these poems. I spent time finding words that related to chandeliers: bobeche, finial, Venetian and filament. Then, with the fragments of images that had flowed in my free writing at the Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition, I played with lines and stanzas. Finally, lineation and the breaking up of the writing into four poems gave me the suite.

Folland’s discussion of his work had many parallels for the writing of poetry. I was struck by his comment: “...for me that’s when work is successful, when people keep going back to it, keep seeing something new in it, keep trying to unravel that thing and its connection to their own existence...” This seemed so relevant to the writing of poetry, to the leaving enough ambiguity in the apparent meaning of a poem so that the reader can bring their own experience and perspective to a reading, and relate to the poem in a different way to another reader. Also, in terms of the creative process, Folland speaks of working with materials in a playful way, not making them “things that I have to focus on because they are those things that just exist, things that interest me primarily so I don’t have to focus on them. They’re just part of the way that I perceive the world. So I don’t have to be trying to imbue the works with this kind of understanding.” This is instructive for a poet as well, to play with words and be confident that the writing process may be far removed from a finished poem, the words don’t have to be immediately loaded with meaning, instead meaning may develop the more the words are worked on and moulded.
Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy

Currently based outside of Sydney in the Blue Mountains, Healy and Cordeiro have lead a nomadic lifestyle, travelling and undertaking residencies in numerous countries. Their collaborative works transform the residue of consumer society, re-imagining the forms and systems that surround us. Their work has employed deconstructed buildings, Lego, Ikea furniture and the entire belongings of individuals in unpacking what we are as people, symbolised by our material possessions. Their works are held in many major international galleries and their work has been shown at the Venice Biennale. In 2012 a major Museum survey of their work, called Stasis, was held at the Museum of Contemporary Art Sydney.¹⁰⁸

I have had several attempts at writing about Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy’s work. I decided that I would persist as I didn’t just want to include poems about art that had been easy to write. When I came across the Cordial Home Project photographs the poetry I had been labouring on flowed freely. In 2003 Cordeiro and Healy dismantled a house in suburban Sydney, and in the process untangled the “monetary value, the emotional value and the value or lack of value attributed to the house in the gentrified suburb.”¹⁰⁹ At the time I was researching this work, my grandmother’s house in Sans Souci, Sydney, which no longer belongs to the family, was progressively being deconstructed, in preparation for renovation. I formed my own deconstructed house pallet based on memories of her house.

From House Pallet:


The question that is raised by the deconstructed dwellings in Cordeiro and Healy’s art is what remains of life when a person gives up the place he or she lives in? The opportunity that Cordeiro and Healy’s work presented me with was to list everything that was in that house, from the toilet paper to the treasured figurines, through to the memories and emotions, good
and bad. I felt it necessary to fictionalise the memories and emotions, but however much I did this, the house still felt like it belonged to a member of my family, yet, paradoxically, also felt like it could have come from many houses of that era in Sydney. There is an unsettling similarity between the contents of houses that we leave behind when we go. The house in the Cordial Home Project was “dismantled and displayed in a rigidly stratified, geometric stack of plaster, brick, wood and tile”\textsuperscript{111}

There is a narrative element to Cordeiro and Healy’s work as well, which has been highlighted by art writer Jacqueline Millner in her survey of their work. Their installations often document the life of the materials they have used before they deconstruct them, whether that be the story of the previous owner of a farmhouse, suburban home or caravan that is about to be dismantled. Millner says “Cordeiro and Healy seem to imply that their interventions are but one stage in the life of these spaces and materials; that they are picking up a particular narrative thread only to leave off again in anticipation of the next ‘authorial’ intervention—be that by virtue of chance, neglect or intent.”\textsuperscript{112}

Cordeiro and Healy’s work has clever concepts behind it, but in addition to the conceptual dimension, in the same way as poets choose the arrangement of words carefully, they spend a great deal of time choosing the arrangement of the materials they use. This way the artwork is aesthetically pleasing as well as having a conceptual dimension. When working on the demolition of the house for the Cordial Home Project, Healy says: “Initially we were going to...sort each material into ... bags but then we realised that, you know, a lot of the aesthetics of it, the wood and everything would just be lost...so you’ve always got to consider aesthetic because that’s how you’re going to get your audience in.... sometimes people are really just conceptually hooked on to an idea but... it’s always nice if you can aesthetically think how you’re going to get someone in.”\textsuperscript{113}

Once again, the idea of letting go comes up in discussing inspiration. Healy says “It’s hard to say really. It’s a hot bath or a hot shower....usually it’s when I’m not thinking.”\textsuperscript{114} In Healy and Cordeiro’s case, there is the added complexity of collaboration. They have been collaborating for fifteen years and Healy comments in relation to inspiration: “it’s very hard to work in collaboration and be able to have that subconscious level emerge.”\textsuperscript{115} Their way of managing
this is to write ideas down in a journal, ideas that either of them have come up with, and keep them even if one of them is not interested, because they often come back to these ideas later.

Healy articulates a similar concern to Kevin Brophy regarding reducing creativity to functional terms\textsuperscript{116}, and indicates (while being very cooperative in her interview) that it can almost be invasive to ask about how it happens. Brophy warns that reducing creativity to a scientific explanation will not capture the subtleties of the art. Similarly, Healy says:

\textit{I think people always want to get to the bottom of how does this work. Well, it’s kind of private...I just do not know how you can breakdown, like, how inspiration happens because it just happens... It can be from reading or it can just be from pure exhaustion and just being outside of yourself in a sense... somehow you need to let go for it to come.}

\textbf{Tom Carment}

Tom Carment was born in Sydney in 1954 and studied at Julian Ashton’s Art School in 1973. Carment has been painting landscapes and portraits ever since. He is also a writer whose stories and essays have been published nationally.

\textit{Carment’s work features a reportage on his life, the external lived environment through his landscapes and the internal environment and friendships through his portraits. His body of work explores these themes through his choice of medium and sensitive interpretation of light. His pictures are painted and drawn from life.}

\textit{Carment’s work is held in public and private art collections in Australia and overseas including the Art Gallery of N.S.W., the State Library of N.S.W., and the City of Melbourne Art & Heritage Collection. He has been the recipient of many major prizes. Recently he has published a book with Michael Wee, a photographer, which chronicles in photographs, stories and watercolours seven walks they have taken together.}

Carment’s was the last interview I conducted. I chose Carment as an interviewee very early in the project, but had prevaricated about contacting him. It is illuminative to unpack why I had this reticence. Carment’s process appears very simple, although I actually think it is not. It is the combined body of Carment’s work that provides an insight into why his works are more than just simple capturing of a scene. Carment has often painted the same location many
times, sometimes over a period of years. One location he speaks about in our interview is Two Mile Paddock, on a property formerly owned by a friend in South Australia. He has visited this place to paint it almost every year for twenty years and although it has not changed at all, his paintings have. He says he has changed, his perceptions have changed and that is reflected in the paintings. Carment is not at all into describing his creative process or inspiration, dismissing these concepts as a bit “mystical”. This made me a little reticent about how the interview would unfurl, and whether the way he went about his work was really suited to this type of project. However, the more I reflected on it the more I thought it was important to engage with work that might not necessarily have a process that was easy to respond to. What I deduced was that Carment’s work as a painter and a writer paralleled with his walking. Reading his stories or accounts of bushwalking for example, is transportive in the way a bushwalk is, not in one hit, but in a slow unravelling and appreciation of the small incidents and scenic moments that occur along the way. There is the sense that while you are looking at one painting, reading one paragraph, like putting one foot in front of another on a bush walk there is an ordinariness, a familiarity about it. But when one has walked over a mountain or through a valley, or surveyed a number of paintings or read the full story, there is more. Hard to define, yet more than the sum of its parts. Carment says his inspiration is:

“Oh just everyday life really. Little things, I’m not really a big thing, a big ideas person but then I think the little things accumulate it’s like making a wall out of bricks with tiles or something, that’s the way I work.”

Again, to me the building a wall metaphor is like the bushwalk, one step at a time, yet it adds up to quite a journey.

Carment’s approach to use his words, is:

“to enhance the way we enjoy life, just the things around us, so it’s about celebrating things that I like the look of and sometimes...they’re not necessarily... conventionally beautiful things.”

Carment works en plein air and doesn’t do much changing once he gets back to the studio, as he says he gets timid, not bold enough to capture what he saw.
“I start to feel it’s going in reverse and when you’re painting and things go in reverse you have that dreadful sick feeling in your stomach, you’re thinking this painting was all right about half an hour ago but now it’s not and I know it and I’m trudging on with it and I should stop.”  

A response in Carment’s interview that interested me was when I asked him about first feeling moved to paint. He recalled a particular incident when he was young:

“I remember I did a painting and I thought that’s kind of really me, when I was about 19. It helped. I remember I had a job as a dishwasher at this Mexican restaurant and I started doing this painting and it was, not really like what I do now but um, I knew I wanted to keep painting it and I rang a friend who used to sometimes we used to swap jobs and he filled in for me that night and I finished the painting and I thought you know, I felt compelled to keep painting it till 2 o’clock in the morning or something. I’m not sure if it was a great painting but I felt like that painting, I felt you know, that isn’t anyone else, that’s just me.”

Carment’s work is interwoven with his life, he doesn’t paint for a block of time in studio, but paints most days and has done so for most of his adult life. Dropping and picking up his children from school formed “the bookends” of his working day. He says “a bit of adrenalin is good for the creative process and along with feeling kind of calm at the same time.”

I wrote a poem called “For Jack Hegarty” relating to Carment’s work prior to interviewing him. It was inspired by a painting Carment had done in Waverley Cemetery which triggered a poem about a scene that took place at my grandfather’s burial. After interviewing Carment, I wrote a poem called “Postcards from Coogee” after a group of small watercolours by the same name. The difference between the approach to these two poems is that the first poem is basically an imagined connection between the painting and a life experience of mine. The second painting incorporates more of a sense of how the artist works. Having more of an awareness about Carment’s painting practice, walking and cycling around then observing and painting similar scenes at different times and stages of life, I was able to describe tiny scenes generated by my own walking around and skimming details from Coogee lives. So Carment’s practice has inspired my writing rather than the artwork alone.
Discussion of writing about Artists not interviewed

Some artists I had trouble contacting and if I had been able to get in touch with them I would definitely have interviewed them. Others for practical reasons (mainly geographic and budgetary) were not approached. However, for some of these artists I have discussed the attraction to writing about their work.

Cressida Campbell

Cressida Campbell’s woodcut prints are not in the tradition of making prints to sell multiple editions of the same image to a wider audience. They are a journey to the making of an incredibly detailed, single image using a painstaking, multi-staged process. John McDonald describes the process as follows:

“*She begins with a sheet of plywood on which a design is carefully drawn. ‘If the drawing is wrong, then everything goes wrong’, she says; so this part of the process absorbs a great deal of time and concentration. Next, she carves out each line with a small engraving tool, and uses small brushes to apply watercolours to the separate segments. After several coats of paint, she freshens up the image with a spray of water and takes a single impression. The end result is one coloured block, and one print - its mirror image.*”

Her subject matter is often still life, or domestic scenes. The woodcut print I have responded to in my poem Nacred is *Oysters, 1994.* The cropped view of this table set with tablecloth, cutlery, plates of oysters on lettuce leaves and white wine in glasses takes me into narrative. I find myself writing freely about the room around the oyster shells, the linen tablecloth and the lettuce leaves, the detail of the picture that I can see spurs me to look for details in the parts of the room that are out of view. It reminds me of the value of a restricted view in a poem or in a painting. If we do not have the whole picture, sometimes our imagination is able to fill in the details more readily and a story forms. The poem, like the painting, does not give all the details: “He arrives like a Southerly. She ushers him in. Hungry as he always was.” The parts that are filled in by the viewer, or the reader are the key to the engagement between reader and poem, viewer and painting. The plates of oysters, some eaten, some not, the white wine half drunk, the suggestion is of a day not yet spent, a story not yet told. The poem emulates the woodcut of the table scene in that there is a contrast
between the detail of some parts, for example, the way his thumb is described: “a perfect shape so wide across/the hinge and square in the nail”. Such detail echoes the intricacies of the woodcut print. Yet the whole story is not told. We are left wondering in lines such as “The questions would burst like bubbles if she asked them.” In the same way as we are only shown a part of the table in the painting, we are only shown a part of the story in the poem.

**Rosella Namok**

Rosella Namok’s works seem so life giving, so deeply sustaining which seems consistent with her common subject of rain. She has many series of paintings on rain – the painting I initially chose to focus on is *Big Rain – we’re Aangkum*.\(^{128}\) Rain is considered in so many ways, at different times of the day, different places and when various activities are taking place. Rain is intermingled with daily life, fishing, swimming, watching the sun rise and set or sitting by the waterhole. It is never uniform, it could be cold or stinging or spitting. Her work seems to be imbued with a sense of joy, with happiness in the everyday. The experience of seeing her work in the High Court building in Canberra was also important to me, a subtle yet powerful reminder to the judges going into court and the people standing before them of the compromises necessary for indigenous and non-indigenous people to live together.\(^{129}\) Namok’s work has a technical skill and direct manner that gives her an authoritative voice, to which one feels compelled to listen. Writing about Namok’s work was so easy. It was a matter of considering the beauty of rain in the landscape at hand. “Sustenance”\(^{130}\) was the poem that resulted from considering the rain in the way it is painted in Namok’s rain series, sheets of water falling down to revive a tired land.

**John Wolseley**

Wolseley appeals to me in his crossing the boundaries between art forms and sciences in his contemplation of the bush. His journeys into the bush to document birdlife, insects and the movement of dunes appear to be the work of a scientist, yet he allows the bush to create its own art: letting his parchment fly to collect the charcoal marks of burnt bush, writing the notes of birdsong and painting maps of areas. His immersion into the bush and his attempt to understand it and explore it using many different forms of inquiry are what led me to write about Wolseley.\(^{131,132}\) I recall clearly seeing my first Wolseley painting. I was at the Ian Potter centre (Federation Square) Melbourne and stood for some time taking in the contrast within
the work of the biologically correct paintings of birds on the abstract background of charcoal stippled paper. It was like the bush was given a voice. In order to give the bush that voice Wolseley becomes part of the bush. His journeys into the bush are transformative. He devotes large amounts of time to his research and exploration and his works reflect his slowing to its time, his hearing and feeling it from within its own skin. The devotion of large tracts of time to studying some aspect of animal movements or changes in an ecology is part of Wolseley’s research. The time he devotes is of course, no sacrifice to him, once he gets into a rhythm with the bush he feels the energy and the light that moves through it, and his art seems to flow directly from that heightened experience.

This is how I first started to write ekphrastic poems, beginning with “When the Wind Stopped”133 which is about Wolseley releasing the sheets of paper into the bush and letting them be carried by the wind. The poem’s stanzas flit around on the page, emulating the sheets of paper blowing about and landing on burnt bushes here and there.

Since I first knew about Wolseley’s process of flying paper through the bush after bushfires I have been entranced by it. The technique seemed almost spiritual in nature, giving the bush a language to speak to us in, capturing a fragment of sacred text written directly by the bush. Likewise the way he has buried drawings in the bush, returning to use pieces of the worn works. It is Wolseley who sparked my fascination with the creative process, with the need to research and write about the way that artists perform physical acts (i.e. don’t just sit and contemplate) in order to grasp inspiration and translate it into creative work. Maybe, again, I find myself envying the physicality of the act of inspiration, out of the head and into the bush.

What has been learnt?

Throughout the interviews with the artists it has become apparent to me that the process of inspiration for poets and artists is similar on two counts in relation to the Thrash et al 134 definition of inspiration: that of transcendence and motivation. Both poets and artists recognise there is something out of the ordinary that they are trying to grapple with, and having been stimulated to capture this in words, in sculpture or on canvas they are both motivated to express it. The evocation component of the inspiration however, is different.
While both poets and artists might be inspired by similar external stimuli such as: music; nature; literature; the human condition, artists have an extra more visceral dimension, that of physically playing with their materials. Nic Folland speaks of playing with objects in his studio before anything emerges, Rox de Luca spends days digging in sand and retrieving bits of plastic then sorting them into colours, Rachel Carroll speaks of being a scientist in a studio, “blending colours and creating an artwork has scientific elements”. This is interesting if considered in the light of what Sue Woolfe describes as inspiration taking place not in the head but in some other part of the body. How does the physicality of making visual art play with that? Certainly poets can play with words on the page, but the sensual nature of touching your materials is lost. Another difference to be considered is how poets and artists cope with a block. This part of the creative process I think is harder for artists. Poets can always keep a copy of a poem before it was revised, but to continue to work on a sculpture or a painting could destroy it. Thus artists must often start on something new if they are blocked, where poets can use old work to get them started.

My journey in ekphrasis started with standing in front of a painting by John Wolseley about ten years ago. His work has continued to inspire me and I would like to borrow his words to complete this exegesis: During some correspondence about the way he works collaboratively with the bush, letting paper be marked by charcoal branches, he wrote to me:

“Rather intriguingly this way of working does seem to have curious correspondences with poets and poetry in ways I don’t quite understand.... These works trace my movement in response to the spacing and intervals of the trees and branches which were themselves moving back and forth with black fingers, dotting, pecking, scratching across the surface of the paper. I hope they are a visual record, a kind of fixing in carbon form of that exchange.” 135

Poetry makes us work to see connections between aspects of our world that we may not have seen before. Ekphrasis helps the poet build the connection by presenting an image we may not have considered before: a frozen chandelier in the case of Nic Folland or a coral garland made of plastic detritus from Rox de Luca. A broader definition of ekphrasis allows us to contemplate and respond to the creative process that forms these artworks, the shape that they take, the symbols they use and the narrative journey they can take us on. In the same way Wolseley’s paper records an exchange between himself and the bush, ekphrastic poems
can capture more than a mere description of an artwork, but the exchange between the artwork and the poet.

2 Rosella Namok, *Today Now...We all got to go by the same laws*. See hcourt.gov.au under other law themed artworks for the image and Rosella Namok’s description of the work, 22 September, 2015.
11 Verdonk, Peter, ibid., p. 125.
12 Verdonk, Peter, op cit. p. 125.
18 Heffernan, J.A. op. cit., p. 6.
21 Verdonk, P. op. cit., p. 128.
22 Verdonk, P. op. cit., p. 129.
26 Barry Hill and John Wolseley, *Lines for Birds*, University of Western Australia Publishing, 2011.
29 Ibid.
31 See poetry collection p.9.
32 See poetry collection p.5.
35 Gascoigne, R., ibid.
36 Steele, P. op. cit., p. 28.


Ibid. p. 201.


See Andrew Johnson, “Peter Boyle and the Art of Poetry”, Antipodes, June 2006, p. 75.

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See poetry collection, p. 41.

Fiona Hall, Tender, 2003-5. See image in Appendix I or in Ewen McDonald (et al), op. cit., p.287.


See poetry collection p. 16.

Cressida Campbell, Oysters, 1994. See image in Appendix I or in Laura Murray Cree and Nevill Drury, op.cit., p. 86.

See poetry collection p. 5.


See poetry collection p. 38.


Patricia Piccinini, *The Comforter*, 2010 at Art Gallery of NSW. See image in Appendix I and in Patricia Piccinini and Helen McDonald, ibid., p.154-5.


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124 See poetry collection p. 8.
126 See poetry collection, p. 16.
127 Cressida Campbell, Oysters, 1994. See image in Appendix I and in Laura Murray Cree and Nevill Drury, op. cit., p. 86.
128 Rosella Namok, Big Rain...we’re Aangkum, 2005. See image in Appendix I and in R. Ian Lloyd and John McDonald, op. cit., p. 135.
129 Rosella Namok, Today Now...We all got to go by the same laws. See http://hcourt.gov.au under other law themed artworks for the image and Rosella Namok’s description of the work.
130 See poetry collection p. 32.
132 Janet Hawley, op. cit. Chapter 17.
134 Thrash et al, op cit.
135 Email to Author, 21 November 2015.
Erin Shiel MA Research (Creative Writing)

Exegesis – A Poetic Response to Australian Contemporary Art

To be read in conjunction with the Poetry Collection *The Spirits of Birds*

Appendices

- Appendix A: Email inviting artists to participate in research project
- Appendix B: Participant Information Statement
- Appendix C: Consent Form
- Appendix D: Interview Transcript – Rachel Carroll
- Appendix E: Interview Transcript – Rox de Luca
- Appendix F: Interview Transcript – Nic Folland
- Appendix G: Interview Transcript – Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro
- Appendix H: Interview Transcript – Tom Carment
- Appendix I: Images of Artworks referred to in the Exegesis
Appendix A: Email inviting artists to participate in Research Project

Dear ..............................,

My name is Erin Shiel and I am a Masters of Arts Research Creative Writing student at the University of Sydney. I am writing to you to invite you to participate in a research project on inspiration for Australian artists. I am conducting a series of interviews with Australian artists to explore their sources of inspiration and creative processes. The results of these interviews will be used in the development of a collection of poems about the artists’ works and an accompanying exegesis on inspiration and creative processes in the art and in poetry. I have already written several poems relating to your artworks and if you could find an hour or two to participate in such an interview I would be most grateful. The timing and venue of the interview will be arranged to suit you, but would need to take place in the next four months.

Attached you will find the Participant Information Statement which outlines in more detail what is involved in the study. If you have any questions about any aspect of the study please let me know by return email or call me on 0409 463 747. If you are able to participate could you let me know by return email so we can arrange the interview time and venue. If you are unable to be involved please let me know by return email.

I hope you are able to be involved and thank you for your time in considering my request.

Yours sincerely,

Erin Shiel
Appendix B: Participant Information Statement
Interviews with Australian artists on sources of inspiration and creative processes

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT

What is the study about?

You are invited to participate in a study of sources of inspiration and creative processes in Australian art. The aim of this study is to explore these creative processes with a view to writing a collection of poems about contemporary Australian art. Some of these poems might be ekphrastic poems about your artworks, others might be inspired by the discussion you have in interviews with the researcher.

Who is carrying out the study?

The study is being conducted by Erin Shiel, who is undertaking a Masters of Arts (Research) Creative Writing at The University of Sydney under the supervision of myself, Judith Beveridge, Lecturer.

What does the study involve?

If you agree to participate you will be asked to:
- complete a consent form which is attached;
- meet with the research student for up to 2 hours at a time that is suitable to you, in your usual place of work or at another location that is convenient to you;
- discuss the questions relating to your sources of inspiration and creative processes and any other topics that may arise with the research student;
- have the interview recorded for transcription;
- read the interview transcript and remove any material with which you are not happy.

You may also be asked if it would be possible for the research student to sit in your studio while you work so she can write poetry about your art.

No risks are anticipated from participation in this study. If at any point you are uncomfortable with the direction the interview is taking you can tell the interviewer that you do not wish to continue with that line of discussion.

How much time will the study take?

The initial interview will take up to two hours. Reviewing the transcript will take up to an hour.

Can I withdraw from the study?
Being in this study is completely voluntary - you are not under any obligation to consent and - if you do consent - you can withdraw at any time without affecting your relationship with The University of Sydney.

You may stop the interview at any time if you do not wish to continue, the audio recording will be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study.

Will anyone else know the results?

After the interview the transcript may be used in the writing of poetry, quoted or referred to in an exegesis and/or quoted and referred to in the public domain. If, after the interview, there is any part of the transcript that you are not happy to have used in this way, you may remove that part of the transcript.

It is likely you will be identified by name in the poetry and exegesis emanating from the study.

Will the study benefit me?

We cannot and do not guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefits from the study.

Can I tell other people about the study?

Yes, at any time.

What if I require further information about the study or my involvement in it?

When you have read this information, Erin Shiel (the research student), will discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage, please feel free to contact Erin Shiel on 0409 463 747 or email eshiel@bigpond.net.au or Judith Beveridge (Chief Investigator) on 02 9351 5187 or email judith.beveridge@sydney.edu.au.

What if I have a complaint or any concerns?

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact The Manager, Human Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on +61 2 8627 8176 (Telephone); +61 2 8627 8177 (Facsimile) or ro.humanethics@sydney.edu.au (Email).

*This information sheet is for you to keep*
Appendix C: Consent Form for participating artists to complete
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

I, ..........................................................................................
[PRINT NAME], give consent to my participation in the research project

TITLE: Interviews with Australian artists on sources of inspiration and creative processes

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher/s.

I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary – I am not under any obligation to consent.

I understand that research data gathered from the results of the study may be: used in the writing of poetry; quoted or referred to in an exegesis; quoted or referred to in the public domain.
I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher(s) or the University of Sydney now or in the future.

I understand that I can stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, the audio recording will be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study.

I understand that it is likely I will be identified by name in the poetry and exegesis emanating from the study.

I consent to:

Audio-recording YES ☐ NO ☐ ☐

Reading the transcript YES ☐ NO ☐ ☐

Being identified by name in the poetry and exegesis emanating from the study YES ☐ NO ☐ ☐

Having the transcripts and tapes stored at the Art Gallery of NSW or the Museum of Contemporary Art after seven years YES ☐ NO ☐ ☐

OR

Having the transcripts destroyed after seven years YES ☐ NO ☐ ☐

.......................................................... ..........................................................
Signature

.......................................................... ..........................................................
Please PRINT name

.......................................................... ..........................................................
Date
Appendix D: Interview Transcript – Rachel Carroll

Interview with Rachel Carroll, Manly, 16 August 2013

ES: I am with Rachel Carroll in Manly, in her lovely apartment. Rachel, we are just going to start out with - maybe you just sharing with me a little bit about what inspires you artistically. Obviously the environment – I will leave that to you, maybe there are other things that you want to talk about.

RC: Wow. Inspiration. That it could go on for a few days so I will try and narrow it down for you. I guess I reflect on inspiration most recently that might simplify things for you. I mean, in general, as an artist I think you are always going to be inspired by other artists. I think that is a given. I work in a gallery I am meeting artists all the times so if there is a plethora of joy, of creative understanding in this area so that is very exciting as well as my own connections with the city and galleries and people I have gone to university with, we still stay in contact so that is pretty good as well.

In terms of my own personal research and I do call it research when I am – now I am embarking on a body of work. The landscape itself is definitely foremost in terms of where I am going and why and as you know since 2006 that has been the Murray-Darling basin as a whole. I have tried to go to a different location every single year and meet the local scientists or any that happened to be in the area, any indigenous and sometimes even politicians and for me meeting those people and hearing their stories and local inhabitants of course, people that live in the areas, that have grown up in the bush or loggers could have been there all their life for some many generations, for me that enhances the vision that I am trying to – I guess – encapsulate in an art work. I am trying to bring back the essence of the location and for me it helps to have that knowledge, to have that vision kind of locked in as I am painting. So being out there is a big part. So I sketch, I photograph, I meet people, almost conduct my own interviews really it becomes these stories that I – I guess I do not really use it in any way except for my own visual inspiration back in the studio trying to remember the location and feel and the people.
Most recently this has evolved a little more which I have not even had a chance to tell you about but I have kind of isolated my vision – not isolated – but I guess honed in my vision a little bit more where I have really narrowed it down to the most recent series to just water. Yeah, that was my last trip to Kosciuszko where I saw where the water started. It was almost like it is the peak near of going okay but where – you know, going to a molecular level if you like and wanting to get into the source of the source if you like and for me that brought back something that I had actually touched on as a concept when I was living in Scotland back in 2001 where I was really pushing ideas about that compared and contrast art and science and how they can coexist and benefit each other. I guess sometimes I had seen myself as rather than a scientist in a lab, a scientist in a studio sort of thing, the actual act of blending colours and creating an art work has scientific elements but I guess I wanted to take it back one step further and look at the molecular composition of water and understand it from a scientific point of view and try and translate that in a visual way.

ES: So did you study any science - is that your background?

RC: No. I actually loved biology at school but it is always hung in the back of my head and for whatever reason I have met a lot of scientists to my life so I have always been that 20-question kind of person saying how does this work?, why?, why not? yada yada.

ES: Yes.

RC: And even when I was back at uni – I went back and I had to do an extracurricular course, I think in first or second year, that ended up being science as well. So, I guess I have always kept it there in the back of my mind as something I really love and I have always seen it - to begin with I started as big no, no way, art and science cannot even come together and I am really having arguments with some mates who had scientifically trying, saying you cannot be an artist, there is no way. I really had it in my head that there were two separates scenes, two different sides of the brain there
was no overlapping world. It was almost like I was talking myself out of it so I can talk myself into it.

ES: Yes, yes.

RC: Because I have come full circle 13 years later and I have met scientists that are artists and sculptors and the whole gamut and then I have realised how my own fascination with science is now feeding my art even further to the point where I have got scientific texts to supplement what I have done.

ES: Have you?

RC: Yeah and it really spooked me out to begin with it because I was not sure how I was going to – I mean it still is evolving. I have completed a body of artwork, 27 pieces that pretty much say what I want to say for this first juncture but the spooky thing was I started painting and I have being obsessed with painting circles to represent the molecular logo of water.

ES: When that was starting to come out in the last series that you did where there were circle type bubbles almost like it is coming from the spring.

RC: Yes, exactly. Yes. But for me I felt they are unresolved and ungrounded like where was it coming from, why, and I thought it was just me oversimplifying, reflections or something, and then coincidentally I decided to start researching what a water molecule looks like and why and why not, yada yada and I was so excited that first week in the studio and I found out that if a water molecule existed outside of earth’s atmosphere it would be a perfect circle but because of our atmospheric pressure it is oval shaped.

ES: Okay.
RC: I have been painting that already without even knowing that and that just blew me away. So that was exciting. So in some ways, I am still putting into words this whole exploration.

ES: Because I have always had a sense with your Murray Darling exploration that you were always wanting to get back to the source of the Murray but to me it was almost like an analogy, analogous with your own artistic search as well so you are coming back to where it all comes from.

RC: Yes.

ES: It is a very tightly linked with this so it will be fascinating to me when you get to this molecular exhibition.

RC: Yes.

ES: Because it is almost like you are really getting to the innards of your artistic inspiration.

RC: Yes, that is how I feel. It is like really paring that and it has made me readdress some of the aspects of my own practice because today – I mean, as you know, my work has relied on the landscape of being the crutch of being that source of colour composition, the whole lot that is there in front of you. You draw it; you go home and paint it. And then to come back to set another new body of work I have to reassess my use of colour. I have to rely on my own design for composition and it really made me go, “hang on a second, it is not in a photo, it is not in a sketch book, I am going to have to make it happen and it was very challenging at first because I realised I am bit of a lazy paint mixer but then I also read that Monet was as well so that I think it is okay. I have read about how he was mixing on the canvas rather than mixing on the pallet.

ES: Okay, right.
RC: I thought that was quite exciting. So, yes, I have done a bit of that myself but – yeah, it is -

ES: No, no, that is good. I am so sorry, where were we. I think that’s exactly what I want to hear, it is fantastic. What I was going to – was that a bird?

RC: No, it is my phone (laughs).

ES: Okay. The next question was does the idea for a painting come to you in advance or slowly bit by bit or can you talk a bit about that process.

RC: Yes that notion scares me sometimes because I sometimes worry that one day I am going to get into the studio and not know what to paint or not know what I want to paint because it is very intuitive. I often have a vision and especially after being out in the landscape I definitely have a vision of what I want to do and how I want to do it but again, that can change when you get back in the studio for these recent series I had a rough finding of what I wanted that I really did not know what or how until I started doing it and this is often the case as many art works regardless of having that solid drawing of a landscape or that solid sense of colour of where you were it is not until you start putting down the marks and working over the marks again and again that you suddenly go hang on I know what I am trying to say now. I am not a pre-planner, I am not, I know there are some artists that do little mini ones and do a lot of small canvas or small sketches of studies. I usually do that at the end, believe it or not, I do. I have to get in to the big one straight up and then at the end I will do little studies of the big ones almost, it is bizarre.

ES: That is almost the reverse...

RC: Yes but it almost this obsessive need to quickly get paint on canvas to get a painting done to remind myself I can paint.
ES: It is weird. A little bit of confidence right there

RC: Yeah.

ES: If not can I do this.

RC: It is.

ES: And if you start doing it on the canvas it makes it feel -

RC: - a bit more secure. Yes, straight up. Yeah, I mean I guess artists have - they all have their little nervous streaks but – yeah and because I am not painting everyday and I’ve got part time jobs, there would be some artists that paint full time and they don’t have that worry but I have solid three-month blocks annually where I get stuff in. I have to produce the body of work nonstop and no interruptions and yes all 27 have to be completed together and yes they will all have to feed off each other.

ES: 27 pieces you did in this last time?

RC: Yeah. So I was nonstop. I was doing long hours. I do not eat much either. I just get in there, lots of tea and go.

ES: How much have you got on the go at once? So when you do 27, at the end of that three months so have you got five up in front of you...

RC: The whole 27 are in the room constantly, yeah, they are not always completely visible but they are all there and I usually start off with five or six by the next week it is 12 and it is kind of goes... because I do not even know how many I am going to paint sometimes either. I sometimes start with only three big ones that is a definite and then whatever else comes along.

ES: So they multiply in the room? They’re breeding!
RC: Yes, they are making – yes exactly and I need them to do that too because they need to speak to each other as well as stand individually. I think that is an important strength for it so yeah it was quite a challenge but it is the way I can do it.

ES: So when you got three at the outset do you find that those three then have three that comes from them and beyond like are there then three strains within that show?

RC: Not necessarily. No.

ES: They can all be quite different from -

RC: Yes and even the one I started at the beginning it could be the fifth that is better than that and I am going to go back to the first one and make a catch up sort of thing and that is quite an interesting – yeah and it is just leap of faith everything time. You just go okay, I am going to do this and you hope because I put a deadline on myself and I hope by the end of that three months that I have completed them all because I bought all the canvas and I bought all the paint and you paying for the space that is it. Well this time it was more pressure because I was paying per day for the space. Yeah you are just conscious of all those factors.

ES: Does that help? Is that good motivation or is it a negative?

RC: I don’t know. I think everyone would be different in responding to that and I think there would be a lot of others that would say no, but for me it worked, I like to say no I’ve got this time because it – no procrastination no mucking around. You know you don’t time to dilly-dally with this.

ES: No.

RC: You are going to get in there, get the job done and then some ways you did the job which I guess some times it can be slow and negative because you go okay I got to
go to studio gosh, and you do not always look forward to it but then when you get in there and you are in the zone you realise this is great, this is where I want to be.

ES: You have some days where you just do not get in the zone at all? Like you go in there and suddenly you do not want to be there?

RC: Yeah.

ES: You have to really hammer it some days?

RC: Yes definitely. Yeah there are days that you do struggle but even so I put paint to canvas anyway even if I know it is not going to be the best day ever. I have got to feel like I have made a mood and if sometimes or most days I probably start a whole new canvas just because you are not so precious and you feel like you are going to destroy anything so then you can just be loose and get the other painting up and running. So I guess yeah you choose your moods just know what you are going to work on and you are in a bad mood do not work on the one you loved the most because the risk of stuffing it up and then not getting it back. That is too great.

ES: That is an interesting point because one of the things I am interested in is – looking at the process for poets and for artists, and for me, if I am having a day like that where I really not in the mood starting I will go back to an old piece. You cannot destroy an old poem. You just keep a copy of the poem as it was and play with it, where you can really destroy a painting.

RC: Brush it.

ES: And then it is gone.

RC: It is. Yes.
ES: That will be one difference I can see in a way that a poet and an artist approach something that really – sometimes it is easy to get going on an older piece of work and play around with it and then you can start at a new piece that works for you.

RC: Yes.

ES: You do not want to do that on a day when you are -

RC: No.

ES: You are going to start on something fresh.

RC: Exactly. And funnily enough now that we talked about your process I think when I am having a bad day I will sit down and write. I will write about what I am looking at and -

ES: will you?

RC: Yes. I will start verbalising, I will talk about the texture that – it is almost like – I do keep a note of – in words what I am trying to do visually and it is almost like I’ll recap in writing what I have done and then I will by the end of the writing I will work out what I want to do next so that helps me re-visualise and get back in the zone.

ES: So journaling is important for you to create that link.

RC: Yes big time.

ES: That process - is that something that you always done, was that encouraged in you when you were studying?

RC: Yes, I think I have always been – I have always loved writing. I have always kept journals since I was young, I think since about 10 years of age something ridiculous
like that and then once you go through school of course – it is compulsory to have some visual diary and write and I love that. I could do that every day that was important for me and I have that even when I was travelling. You know there were some days; there was no time to draw so you would write instead it became – the visual writing.

ES: Okay. Think about one of your favourite works of your own, the process of creating that work so just have in mind that you just choose one that you felt very inspired by the process or was it hard to get into the zone for that work or was it one that just flowed off the brush?

RC: Okay. Yes. I can. Out of these 27 paintings there were three I did in one day, one after the other that flowed and you talked about having bad days and good days, inspired days and not inspired days and then there is something else and I cannot explain what that is and I tried like very hard to get back into that zone it was almost like someone else is painting through me. I know it sounds weird but it is almost like I was no longer there and a creative process had taken over. It makes me shiver now when I think about it and I knew as I was doing it, that I was loving it and I knew at the end of it that these were going to be my favourites straight away and that I could not rework them and I do not know how to explain it may be it is like a gift in a moment in time and it just flows from you. I did not even think about what I was mixing, I could not even tell you what colours I was using, I probably cannot recreate the colours again but yes, it is almost like a religious experience - it is bizarre.

ES: I think sometimes that is the reason why they create – people do what they do because of those moments when you have some other force that is working through you – a lot of different types of creatives, let us talk about that and I have been reading Jonah Lehrer looking at creativity and the brain and it is just like getting to another zone and all together in the brain.

RC: Yes.
ES: It is not an effort.

RC: No, it just flows and they were big pieces, a metre by a metre so it was physical as well but I started them and finished them all in one day, the three of them and they all worked together. I mean, and that is the other thing, sometimes when this happens to me it is not always the one that everyone else likes in terms of the general public but that is fine. It does not bother me because I will happily keep them forever but it is yes, it is that I can only explain a moment in time and it is – yes, there is no word for it but it is almost like that sense of amalgamation, the artwork is completely together – yeah, I cannot explain it.

ES: But there is something cohesive about it?

RC: Yes in every way, in terms of mark, in terms of colour, in terms of composition, it has all flowed, it all transcends that moment and I tried very hard the next, I am so excited – because when you have moments like that you rush back to this – the next day, you are there at six instead of seven and you like okay do it again, do your thing and it is kind of like you want to switch a button or something, it is something I can plug myself into, it was weird and I could not – and it was all – you know what it is too... It is almost like you are creating without thinking. There is no fear. It is all flow and then when you go back and try and do it your brain gets involved and your brain is going... do it like this, you are going to mix this colour, I mean your brain is telling you what to do and you are like – no hang on, this did not happened last time. And if I start thinking about it too much I am only going to get really tight and analytical about the whole thing and it was weird ... I did try to do a couple more paintings that were similar in colour but yes I don’t know. It will be interesting to get them out in the wall and let people comment because I don’t know -

ES: So when you did the three at the end of the day were you exhausted?
RC: Yes but exhilarated still at the same time. It is like – I guess sometimes you can speak to runners they have run a marathon but they are so pumped up I can do another even though their body physically couldn’t.

ES: Yes.

RC: I guess there’s that sense I guess that you have just won a small marathon and to bring it on when is the next.

ES: Yes.

RC: Yeah, but there is that sense of – okay, stop, leave the room, get out – you know, you have done that, that is okay but you know muck around with it and I knew that once I finished it as well that I cannot rework it. This is a moment in time and it can’t be touched again.

ES: I mean that is something – I was going to ask as well about when are you finished? When you have done a work like that how do you know when to stop, when do you know when to stop touching it?

RC: Yes that is a good question as well and for me it is always – I always have to come back the next day even if I think I am finished you want to come back the next day and look at them all again and I think it is only when you probably looked at them in three consecutive days and not made any changes that you think okay I think I’m there and that’s intuitive as well. There’s no way of saying – yes there was no way of saying exactly what makes you think they are finished. It is like a sense of – I guess there is an overall sense of balance and harmony that it’s complete and reached its point but also on an intellectual level you want to make sure the artwork’s responding the way you wanted to respond. It is saying what you wanted to say and I guess that almost comes back to that initial discussion about fear and getting in there and starting really quickly because that is another fear of going how do you
know when it is finished because there’s not always a definite but it is – all I can say is you get there and you go okay I need to stop there.

ES: Do you think that’s a learnt skill?

RC: Yes very much so.

ES: Yeah.

RC: Because when I was younger I would come back to a piece six months later that was never finished. I think even now you can’t say that the process is perfect because I think some artists will look back at work that they have done 20 years ago or 10 years ago and still see improvements because that is natural, you are human, you evolve, you grow, I think that is always going to happen to their work. I am sure that Lloyd Rees in his 70s looked back on stuff he did and went “gosh I should change that” a little bit to that and I think Fred Williams is like that, they have to hide his work and stop him repainting his work because you get to another stage where you see better or you see it in a new way – you don’t want the old way of seeing to hang around too long.

ES: No and may be the old way was perfect.

RC: It is ...I suppose... in that time.

ES: ... it is about evolving and being wiser and may be just taking them, absorbing more of the world so you’ve got a slightly different perspective.

RC: Exactly. Yes and that puts a whole new perspective on your sense of colour and composition and I guess that is why you can say no, you can never retire because the job is never done. You never were reaching that pinnacle.
ES: That is right. You never reached the top of the ladder if you like or whatever, it just always evolving.

RC: Exactly.

ES: So where do you do your inspired work? Do you have a spark that occurs outside the studio, that then you work slowly with later or can it actually happen that there is a first spark of inspiration that can happen in the studio?

RC: Yes.

ES: Even all the research that you do I am still thinking back on what you were saying about interviewing and photographing and drawing out in the landscape but then you come back to the studio do you think the spark has already happened out there and --

RC: I think it has been on an unconscious level but I think it is always completely conscious because I know there are some artists and writers that really visualise what they want to do before they do it even it never ends up that way and I think I used to do that a lot as well. I used to really visualise what I was hoping to achieve before I got into the studio but more and more I don’t think that’s the case. I think I do the visualisations evolve once I get into the space again so yeah, it is a constant process and again it goes back to that almost notion of fear, you do not know what you are going to do until you start doing it.

ES: Yes.

RC: Even if you have visualised it can totally change.

ES: And when you are out doing the research and your research is quite extensive compared to some artists and – what I really love is when you talked about
interviewing everyone so you are interviewing politicians and the locals and indigenous elders and everyone – you want the whole picture.

RC: Yes the broad spectrum.

ES: Yes, I think is inspiring itself that you do that, you are not just looking for one angle.

RC: Yes, no and it is those stories and those emotions that you remember but are very much about the location as well and I guess on a new level with the water that I am embarking on, I guess I see it, the essence of all this journeying around the country, around the river that we are talking about one resource – okay there’s logging involved and there’s people involved and there’s fish involved and there is other animals involved but essentially it is water we are really focusing on here and how important is water? and that is global. I guess that is where that next series has probably evolved to that it has got more of a universal appeal are not necessary just the local appeal so it is another chance to broaden my interactions again.

ES: When you said that the emotions, you mean of the people that you are interviewing? So something that someone says gives you a little insight into the river and -

RC: Yes and how important it is for individual communities and even to individuals, it is a part of their entire family, upbringing they’ve not knowing anything else and for them to know the forests around the river it is almost like they are the scientist even though they have got no degree, they know the lie of land, they know how to navigate that region so well because they have always been there and they have always looked and read and it is almost from an artist’s point of view you want to see how they see, you want to know those details and yeah, it is exciting.

ES: Do you have a particular story that comes to mind to you in relation to the water series that articulates that connection and -
Yes – I do not know. There are a few stories. I am just – one is not jumping to mind today though I have pictured that logger when I was at Barmah and he was such a passionate soul. He was very much grounded in that forest beside that river. It was his entire life. He would finish the day’s work in the forest and most people would run home and go back to the comfort and he would rush out with his little swag and he would be camping the night by the river. He did not want to leave that was his home and he said he did not always do it but he was just like he did not need to leave. He was at work and he was at home. So that was beautiful and he was very passionate and I guess the thing that stood out for me, in that trip because I always reflect upon is that we did go a little tour if you like with the local, paid and trained, I think she was a park ranger or she was – anyway science-based, and yet her own description of the river and its function was so very factual – there was no emotion at all and that really shocked me to the contrast between someone that worked there as opposed to someone that lived and worked there. She was ready at the end of the day to get off that boat and run home, she did not need to hang around. I could have asked another 20 questions but no, no she has finished work.

Yes.

And that was just showing to see that contrast, it reminds you of the reality of people that work the river and the people that live and love the river. It is two types you are dealing in between streams and I guess that is what the government deals with in trying to find the balance for everyone.

And potentially the decision to make of being there, about the people who clocked off but -

Yes, exactly they do not have that strong attachment even though they can see the importance of it.
ES: Okay. And the other story that comes to mind is you were talking about when you go and trying to find the initial spring at the Murray up in Kosciuszko and it was a hard job to do it like you end up finding a ranger or someone who -

RC: Yes, unfortunately I never got to the actual bubble out of the ground but it was freaky because I got there and I think the park ranger goes. I mean they found me entertaining but I think they thought I was pretty eccentric - why do you want to know this? but coincidentally they had just been there the week before and supposedly there was only one guide in the whole area that knows how to get there but it takes three days and you can’t drive you’ve got to walk. So he had taken out three park rangers, I think they are all female, the week before to see it, to get there, and so they were lovely, here I am with the park rangers and they were going through the photos with me and they got out the maps to show me where it was. It was just a joy to see it with my own eyes even though I knew I did not have the time to physically get there on that journey. I have to try because they said you really got to book it in and yada yada - the only one that knows it so they gave me all the details which is lovely so I got it all there for when I return. Yes, it was such a joy to see it and obviously because they have their own vision of what we were going to see and cascading water coming down the mountain yada yada and you realise it is a little hole in the ground that bubbles out in the middle of a field and it is like you could walk past it, you might not even have seen it.

ES: You would not even notice it.

RC: Yes but that was lovely as well and so what we ended up doing is getting to our closest point that you could to by car and that is where the river is actually is the border between Victoria and New South Wales. So we are on one side and then you could see people on the other side on the side of Victoria.

ES: Right.
RC: That was quite surreal as well when you realise that the river is used as a mapping device as well.

ES: An interesting metaphor as well that we are expecting some massive cascading waterfall or something and in fact it is actually something as you said that you could walk by and that is a bit – the way water is being treated at the moment.

RC: That is right. Yes.

ES: We just walk by and take it for granted and just assume it will always be there.

RC: Yes, you do not think about its properties or – why it exists or why it does not at different times.

ES: Yes. And when you get fired up politically about environmental issues, do you think that helps or can it be counter-productive or can you feel negative about it?

RC: No, I guess I tried to – yes, I know, I do like getting fired up about it because it makes me feel like there is another purpose behind what I do. I obviously do not want to turn myself into a politician and start protesting in every art show I have. But I have been to a few rallies and I was there when they brought out the Murray Darling Basin Plan and handed out the books in Goulburn Street and that was a really passionate thing to see as well but I guess I tried not to delve too much into the negative side of it. I am very much aware of the need to preserve it but also I need to use it so it is finding that balance. For me it was always – the individual locations, finding out what was going on and how you could help, how you could bring back that notion of help, that notion of hope for a location and not just – oh this is what’s left, it is nothing. For me, I was lucky I always turned up when there just have been a flood or there was a moment of reprieve or nature was fighting back if you like. Or people had agreed to go okay it is time to make this area more secure, protected more, let nature have a rest, take out the man-made aspects and that was what happened at Barmah so that was good. People do worry about their own livelihoods in relation to the
river but in chatting to some of the people down there, they realised that they can help rather than just use the area around the river so that was nice to have those discussions.

ES:  Okay.  Let’s explore a different angle, what senses are involved when you are inspired?  I am sort of thinking about – you have mentioned artists – are there visual stimuli or music or – is it the feel of the paint going on the canvas or the pencil sketching?  Which of your senses are involved in inspiration? What do you think?

RC:  Yeah that is a good question.  I always have music when I am producing work and I do often trying to get something new, something that is specific to that series which is quite interesting now that I think about it.  There is always -

ES:  What sort of music?

RC:  It is often quite high energy music so I guess I need to maintain my own sense of energy because it is very physical but there is nothing like Peter Garrett and protest music or anything like that.  It is all a rather mellow... When I think about it is probably quite emotive music so that it focuses my emotion.

ES:  Is there would be a musical artist that you have on when you are doing your water series for example?

RC:  Well I listened a little bit to Bon Iver so that was good and Angus and Julia Stone so quite melodious.

ES:  Yeah but as you say quite emotional.

RC:  Yeah, strong lyrics and often strong acoustics.  Florence and the Machine was another one.  Cloud Control was the last series and I even went so far as using some their lyrics as my titles and it is the first time I have ever done that but they had a lot of songs that are about water.
ES: Okay.

RC: So that was a nice connection for me and that was good and then this most recent series I think there was another song that touched on water – yes, one of Five’s songs it was about water – being in the water.

ES: It was Cloud Control, one of those as well?

RC: Yes that was last series. So that was really exciting. So without then really thinking about it I thought it would be okay to find a few musicians that deal specifically with songs about water and see if they trigger anything so that was a nice bonus and – yes, some music and then you said something about head space?

ES: I was thinking about physical things – is there anything about the actual paint or the smell or any sort of other senses that are involved.

RC: Yes, I think a lot especially when you have not been with oil for so long, when you come back into it that is exciting and you realised and specially the scale of the work in trying to really grasp all that in a hurry, it is always invigorating, yes that was exciting and even sometimes – yeah, definitely. And this time around, for whatever reason I have gone to ink on rice paper and that is creating a new level of inspiration not that my oils have any real relationship to it but it has been the stepping point and for whatever reason I have met a Chinese painter and he started giving me some of his workshop techniques. He is in his 70s and he’s beautiful but he had looked at my water work and said this would work on rice paper so it started that little bit of inspiration between us so I thought this is great. I never really thought of it before.

ES: And I think you said before obviously looking at other artists work and when you say that this fellow with his ink works, did they tend to be well-known artists? or people that you worked with locally?
RC: It can be bit of both but to be honest with this last series, I did hone in on one artist specifically and I guess to some it is going to be a little too obvious but for whatever reason I had a dream about it so I knew it was the right thing to do. Some people was going to say it is clichéd, it is whatever, whatever but Monet has become – he always has been but more so and it is interesting because I have got – just people I chatted to here and there, they always want to know what you are doing and where you are going and this series is very abstract for me. In itself that is a challenge but as the last series that was moving to more of the abstract and that shocked a lot of people and in some ways isolated me from a lot of people because a lot of people are used to a certain direction and it is almost liked -

ES: And they love your landscapes.

RC: Yes and now it was like – oh! Why did you change? This is not you. And I had to deal with that and that’s fine but I have just know in my own heart that I had to move in this new direction and I have been looking at Monet’s work for a very long time not realising that I am going to start – I wasn’t conscious – oh it is time to go abstract but I just knew that there was something pointing me in that direction, his mark making and his minimalism and it is fascinating to discuss too because it is amazing, with his universal appeal globally, everyone knows Monet, everyone loves Monet, I have never met a person that doesn’t and yet I had one – well customer the other day, they asked, “so what are you painting now” and I said, “I got into a couple of abstracts” “oh I can’t stand abstract, I cannot go there”. I said yes but do you like Monet and he goes oh yeah, I love Monet and I said well that’s abstraction and he is just like ohhh and it is interesting because -

ES: Challenging what people think of what is abstract. I think people will generally think of very contemporary abstract work but abstraction has actually been going on for a very long time.

RC: Exactly. You can go back to Turner and what you can see now in Canberra, a lot of those, some of his latest pieces, there is hardly anything on the canvas.
ES: That is right. Did you go down to the Turner?

RC: Well I did pop in when I was in London in December so I kind of cheated I saw it then yes but I have been to Monet in Melbourne this year and that was stunning. Totally fed me.

ES: How important is that is that going to those big exhibitions?

RC: Essential yes, crucial because it is almost – I look at the joy I’m gaining from hanging out with this Chinese guy and he is in his 70s and it is like you cannot get that anymore with anyone else because they are not here but to see their work is almost being in the room with them. It is as close as you can get to them.

ES: Because when you can see the continuity to see a range of their work from earlier to late.

RC: Yes that their mark is their mark all the way through.

ES: Yes that’s right and I was also going to say before take all the struggle with your change to a more abstract image it so identified with your work but you can see the continuity from your other works to the new ones.

RC: Yes still my brush marks, it is still my way I apply but it is what it is landing on is different.

ES: Yes, exactly. Do you think the process of arriving at a work has changed over the course of your working years so the way that you do all your research now is very intensive research and then you come in for your three months and hammer it away with a number of large pieces; did that change significantly since you first started?
RC: Yes. I definitely feel like I have got focused if you like which I guess it takes away the fear factor as you get on and you get used to your intensive routine and saying that is okay. I do not have a studio all the time. I got a little one here to do water based work but not oil and yes – it is not something I can indulge in all the time but when I do get that chance, those moments that I really knuckle down with and when I think about my young years when I was painting I did not really have much of a clue to what I was doing. In some regard, I was really relying on mentors and teachers at that time to say yes that one’s right and no, it is not. It took a long – it took a while for me to say okay this is my own mark and this is my own voice and be happy with it. And a lot of my earlier worker with purely emotive emotionally based, it had no mental stimulus at all and I was just a pure en plein air artist who would go outside and sketch and paint as much as I could outside and bring that back to the studio and that was it. I did not think about it again. It was just pure need to paint for whatever, there was no reason. I was just doing it and for me at that time it was these scapes my market to be on the city and then it was not until I hit like a juncture when I was overseas and I came back what am I doing, why am I doing this and that is when the research side kicked in so I said I wanted more from this, I want just not to paint what’s down the road and I wanted structure, I wanted ... that’s a little bit of the scientist in me. I wanted that – I would not call it a formula but I wanted that vision ready to go.

ES: What is the first memory you have of feeling moved artistically?

RC: Wow. Okay, well there’s a couple I can jump on, that jump to mind. This is fun actually the way history bombards you and you are asked to. When I was like seven years old I went to one of my father’s exhibitions and I just walked up and said I’ll have that done dad and I knew straight away you know at that young age that was the one I wanted and I guess at that young age it was purely colour and I recognised the tree from our yard.

ES: Did you pick the big one?
RC: Yes but not the biggest one but it was good I still think it’s good so that was a fun time because I’ve had that there as part of my life. But on my own academic level I think about a trip to Italy and I went and saw the work of Morandi and really loved his work minimal subdued pieces, still life really basic ideas and concepts but for me it was all about the beauty of it and then I read into that when I got back and started my degree.

ES: What did you see? I do not know his work.

RC: Oh. Still life - beautiful like greys and blues and browns really minimal colours, minimal forms almost minimal brush marks, they’re so poetic they are so yeah I guess for me at that time they sort of to be honest I was not painting really anything like it but he just stripped bare and so he did. He sat in his room and he painted he was living with his sister and it was an academic as well when he taught at the university but he never left Bologna and yet he was internationally recognised and ceramicists there were inspired by him to try and recreate what he painted. So yeah at that time for whatever reason he was definitely a key artist and had an Affect on me aesthetically and emotionally like I read the emotion into it. To me those still life objects in their clumsy awkward raw finish were almost human-like it was like I was looking at relationships on a table.

ES: There is something very human about a still life, a beautiful still life. I do not know what it is but it’s inspection of the item, the domestic, whatever it is but it touches a nerve with people, the simple form that can be in front of you and -

RC: Yes.

ES: The simple form that can be in front you.

RC: Yes. And to think it was bottles was so stunning and yet you could feel his relationship with those objects that it was very intimate.
ES: I didn’t know your father was an artist.

RC: Ah, yes.

ES: Okay.

RC: Okay. But yeah and it’s something I don’t go out of my way to bring up I remember talking to someone recently and they wanted to asked me questions about him I said well that’s fine but I said I have never... I mean I guess when I was really young he was the pinnacle for me and his advice and his contacts and everything that was okay this is a solution and then I got to the stage where I don’t want to mention it at all. He is there and he is still a very strong part of my life but I forged...

ES: You’ve got your own path.

RC: Yeah, exactly and I don’t need his name to be in that context. For me it is my artistic pursuit.

ES: ...and obviously introduced art into your life early...

RC: Oh gosh yeah, it has been essentially from the day dot... so I think we still have paintings from when we were two and then I was entered into the Easter Show at three, and it was good because it was nothing what was drilled to us but dad was always at home and the studio is next door so you know I guess we did have an unusual life, we came home from school and before we began homework we went in and did painting, you know, so it was nice to have all that there.

ES: Yeah, absolutely.

RC: Yeah.

ES: Before you had afternoon tea?
ES: How does your emotional state affect your inspiration?

RC: I think that’s a less of an issue. How do I say this... when you are a fiery teenager going into Uni early 20’s I think I was all emotion it was almost like I needed the emotion to paint, you know, if there was no emotion I can’t paint so it was always I mean... and life is turbulent at that age anyway so there was always something to be emotional about. So yeah, but as I have gotten older obviously... and I remember having arguments about this with people at Uni and stuff and I have few people that were into the emotional and I was like all you know, you don’t always need the emotion... I think I’m always going to be in the mood to paint regardless but the emotion as we discussed can now be from a song, you know, rather than something that I have to well up from my personal life so that is good. So I can respond to music and yeah and maintain that energy for like for me it’s more of energy now than an emotion. But yeah, I think I’ve always been an emotic painter and always will be. It’s yeah, it’s an emotional attachment to the landscape or to water and then it’s an emotional process to bring it out onto canvas.

ES: So the emotion is all tied up with the inspiration that’s you know, and the energy that comes from that rather than being you know in a hard time in your life or good time your in life affecting the inspiration as such.

RC: Yes, exactly and try not to let that be an issue yeah. Whereas I know some people that there is an emotion they can’t paint like emotive circumstance in their life or you know I guess obviously some who use painting as cathartic self-healing process if you like and I guess for a time there I probably did as well but then you get past that and you realised you know, your painting because you... the passion and the need...
ES: Yes... and the love and the need of it... And what about how inspiration affects your emotional state when you have a day when it’s not working, are you able to walk away and not worry about it or just that...

RC: Yeah, it’s getting easier. I mean, I’ve taken up running recently so that’s been a great emotional relief, that’s good. So yeah, so I guess I run through things and I mean having a partner now as well you are more aware of letting go of emotions because you don’t want to take it home. It’s almost like taking work home. So yes, so I’ll go for run and wait for tomorrow, I will worry about it then sort of thing, you can in terms of your inspiration you can become obsessive. You can almost forget, you know, I’ve gotten better as I have gotten older but there were different times in my life were I just had to get the painting done and everything else had to go by the wayside so yeah but it’s good. I can go to the studio and close the door, come home and go for a run and you know, it’s all in check.

ES: Yeah... those structures are helpful aren’t they? Being able to go for a run or close the door on the studio.

RC: You have to force yourself to switch off. But that doesn’t stop you dreaming about it.

ES: Absolutely, absolutely. What happens when you finished your serious three months of work? So you close the door on the studio and go back to normal whatever that is?

RC: Yeah. It’s a bit of a two-fold experience. There’s one part of you going I am glad that is done you know, job’s done, pack up, leave. And then there’s another part of you going oh.. I feel like I am just getting into it now... you know... why can’t I have this studio all the time. Why can’t I do that all the time, there’s more. But in the same breath I do prefer the discipline of going, no, get it done. You know have that block of intensity, because it is intense and I don’t think I could do that all the time you know, because I was doing seven days a week. I used to work my normal job four
days and then paint three and there was no break. You are up at seven every day and it was mentally and physically challenging and painting on that large scale you feel like you are going to the gym everyday. Yeah, so you’re really psyching yourself up for it.

ES: And just standing on your feet in a studio I imagine all day is arduous in itself.

RC: Yeah, exactly. I’d go for six hours and not sit down, yeah.

ES: Especially working with big canvases.

RC: Yeah very physical so there that other part of me saying I’m glad that is over I can have a rest. Yeah. And I’m sure other artists that do have a studio all the time do create those breaks for themselves anyway like you’d have to but because I am always on this time limit thing that I have force myself on but it’s good because if forces me to get that body of work together as we said get the volume of work there and get it all together and make it happen so yeah. That works for me, yeah.

ES: So when we talked about before you know when you are finished, it’s an intuitive thing and also probably a little bit learnt - getting a sense of when to leave it alone and that sort of thing and you close the door and you come back and then do you ever feel like I can’t let them go and you know when you are about to run an exhibition and you put all that work in there...

RC: Yes, exactly. No there’s always at least one or two you don’t want to sell and you just think, you know, because that you have gone through a journey with them and each one of them is almost like a different pages of a journal that sort of thing. But yeah, but there is that excitement of sharing as well and seeing who else is inspired by this and why and realising the risk of that sharing is losing them so as long I know where they are it’s okay... or if I have photos.
ES: Well my Coorong painting is in just about every family photo we have because it’s behind the dining room table. So when someone is blowing the candles out on their cake or giving a speech or toast - it’s become the backdrop of our lives.

RC: Well, that’s quite an honour.

ES: You mentioned this fellow who shared his ink and paper work... anyone else who affects the way you’re working at the moment or anyone that you feel has particularly over the years mentored you or...

RC: I think all my mentors have left a little mark. You know sometimes it’s just a single comment or you know and for some at Uni it was literally a walk down the corridor or say something and walk off sort of thing. But even those moments have stuck with me and yeah. Yeah, I guess I can’t say I had other than the solidness of my father throughout my early years and then that little dabble in Uni I haven’t had a lot of people that wanted to teach me something new, you know, unless I have sought it. I’ve done a bit of print-making in the last couple of years so that’s obviously taken on new angles but otherwise my own sense of evolution has come from my own explorations looking at other art going to exhibitions, constantly, as an artist you are always wanting to know what’s hanging on the wall and where and how and why and actually I can say I do have an artist friend in Scotland. She has probably acted like a mentor without even knowing it and she sends me catalogues from overseas at least three or four times a year saying I saw this exhibition I knew you would love it so that’s been...

ES: Is she an artist or just someone who...

RC: Yes. Yes. So we lived together in Scotland for a while and she has remained there but we had an exceptionally creative time together we could have talked art and life forever and we do but is hard she is so far away now. But yeah I often get this beautiful creative letters from her – books, catalogues and spookily enough one of the ones this year, just before I met or started working with this Chinese artist, was
a series of animals on rice paper sent by her from Scotland from an artist over there
and she said I thought you would really like this and I went this is spooky as I said,
I’ve just started doing this myself, working on rice paper so what are you doing,
reading my mind. So that was really uncanny.

ES: This often happens to you doesn’t it?

RC: Yes. Serendipitous...

ES: It seems like there is a good dose of serendipity that happens along the way with
Rachel’s art... Many times I’ve heard you mention well just the week that I go to see
where the source of the river is, the park ranger has been there, stars align to bring
it together...

RC: It is fortuitous. You never know what’s around the corner... but yeah I couldn’t ignore
it and then I had a dream about this Chinese guy and I guess I was being a bit lazy
and not following him up but he came looking for me and yeah and was like I had the
dream and was like okay I’ve got to go and find him. I’ve got to hear what he has to
say he is being persistent and yeah, but he is lovely and he has got this wealth of
knowledge that he obviously wants to share with people and you know he can see a
kindred spirit in me he is an environmentalist as well and very proactive and but yeah
but obviously very gentle about it. With his age and background he is a very quiet
and a little reserved but beautifully spoken and just again to see someone in their
70’s and they’re up painting every day, you know, there’s no stopping him. You know
and just as keen to keep showing people which is beautiful...

ES: Which is lovely, yeah. So did he come from somewhere where he was able to do
that before?

RC: I think he is always had it in him. He was telling me he has an auntie who became a
nun a tao nun and she was a painter as well but she said to him you know, never stop
but it was his parents who said get a real job first and then you can do what you want
with paint so he is internationally renowned now as well so yeah, it’s great. But yeah I think he went into economics for Uni.

ES: I guess your father could not tell you to get a real job could he?

RC: No, exactly. I have been saying that oddly enough he said are you sure don’t want a real job before I embarked on all this he’s like you know you could be wearing suits and a nice shoes not covered in overalls and I was like shut up dad, shut up. But funnily enough I am now doing both so....

ES: Still in the art world though, which is nice, to be able to marry that up...

RC: Yes, yes.

ES: Are there other art forms particularly that inspire you like, theatre, architecture, film?

RC: Yes, I have seen a bit of theatre lately... and yes it does. Yes, I think all art does. I do read a lot as well. I think anything that stimulates your imagination and to see how people think creatively as well. I recently went to the Wharf theatre and they have this special program which you know my sister was at acting school and she’s never pursued it but it has always been in her heart of hearts... she would be at theatre every month if she can help it if not more so I said I’ll come with you because, you know, I love the theatre and it is nice seeing a whole new dynamic and we went to this and I think it’s regularly occurring where they on a Wednesday night they’ll let you come in and almost watching the creative moment of a play being made. So the actress is still reading from the scripts but they’re sharing, you know, I mean it is also a torture as well because you don’t get to see the end of the play. I mean, you know, you’re engaged emotionally and then you went oh... that’s the end and can I come back next week and there’s like no, because the end of this play may never get made so yes, purely in process.
ES: Dramaturg, the actors, the director, the script.

RC: Yes, so they tell you what they have done so far and then they pretty much just give you a snippet of what they have come to and they tell you how they got there.

ES: And I guess there is a bit of an audience for them too?

RC: Yes, exactly. So but it was fascinating because this one project... Just excited me because I love hearing about intuition and creative thought and process regardless of what field it’s in and I guess you do it when you read a book too, you try to work it out how the writer put it together or why, but in this theatre production they actually made a point of saying the scriptwriter was there every day and they have 15 days and they had given them the scenario and they get them to improvise and then the scriptwriter would go back that night and write about the improvisation in order to create the script. So they are relying on a two-way flow, for them to give the actors the idea and then for the actors to give them a script basically on what they had interpreted and obviously the writer would tweak it to his preference but I think it was beautiful.

ES: It’s such a team environment too with lots of toing and froing that’s something I think you know a lot of writers struggle with, so as a scriptwriter it would be terrific to work with a team. Do you ever feel like that, like it is isolating or do you just enjoy it once you get in there on your own?

RC: Yeah, I do because I think when you think about our day to day lives and how busy our lives and I do not even have children so I don’t know how you do it. But I imagine even with children it’s harder, don’t have a second to yourself. So for me to have this creative outlet that takes me into a room of my own. Yeah, you enjoy it and I got to the stage for the first time ever with this series that I actually didn’t even need music. I was producing in silence and it was like..., and I was remembering songs like I, sometimes my internal music would kick in and you know the song I had heard the day before but it was the first time I have worked in complete silence and that
surprised me, you know I thought like okay maybe I’ve moved in a new direction to do that because before I think I was all using music to shut out my mind, you know, thoughts were interfering and yada, yada, and yes so....

ES: So does that mean you weren’t thinking while painting like do you get to a place where you are not actually thinking?

RC: If often oscillates between the two, so yes, depending on the moment, so yes but it was more so that I guess that my thoughts weren’t bothering me or they weren’t overpowering you know, I could still stay focused without the need for music. Yeah, so I guess you get into a meditative mode.

ES: So what I’m really interested in is that point which the inspiration changed something on the canvas and that we’ve talked about having this moments where thinking almost just goes away, is there anything else that you think of when you know when you’re at that point like is there any comment you’d like to make about when inspiration hits, like, it formulates for you or....?

RC: No. It’s from many different levels and so many different... and again it comes back to a kind of unconscious thing which is obviously frustrating from your point of view because there are no words for it but you can be doing things in your daily life and yeah, no it can come on any level, inspiration, you know, it can be a quick comment that people make and it’s not until you have started the artwork when you’re using the colours that your realise hang on a sec I saw that you know, and I did that with the big ones I did that I told you I did in in 30 seconds. I just suddenly had this urgency to work in purple and green and coincidentally that week someone left behind at our gallery a green jacket and a purple scarf and they had been wearing it together. So that, it sounds silly but for me it kind of reinforces or makes me look again, you know, I often find a detailed vision of the world and I guess it’s you know it’s always been drilled into me to pay attention to the details and drawing makes you do that, looking makes you do that, painting you makes you do that. There is something you are acutely aware of how something sits, how something lies and then if that kind of
transcends into life you’re suddenly aware of you know listening into pieces of conversation or noticing a paper that’s open to a particular page I mean it could be this all silly things to someone else but those little details intrigue me, you walk in to a room and then there is a book that you’ve never seen before, why is that book there and then you suddenly realise that could be very interesting. If they seem to turn up in life it’s back to the serendipity thing and I can’t explain that and to most people it doesn’t mean anything.

ES: Do you think it’s because you’re more attuned when you’re in that zone you are sort of, you’re almost hyper sensitive like you’re are more attuned to the physicality of the world or what gets plonked in front of you instead of walking past it...

RC: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, I take note of those little things, yeah the people you would normally walk past and I guess they argue that from a point of view from an artist that you’re out there and I remember I judged an art project at the school recently and that was the one quote I left them with and it’s one that dad gave me years ago and it has always rung true with me and I guess that moved into life as well and that is that the job of an artist is to paint the everyday, say something to see every day but in a whole new perspective. So you’re giving someone a tree or a bird but you want them to see as if they are seeing it for the first time they finally notice the wing, they finally notice the beak with the different shade of grey, and if there’s an artist who can do that, make people readdress their world or reengage with their world I think the job is done. That’s exciting and I guess when I’m living my life, it’s not that you want to feel that you got inspiration turned on 24/7. But I tried to see those details all the time, you know, in everything whether it is work or play. Yeah, it just gives you and I guess that you know, you would come back to science and you can come back to you know, being an investigator or something. It’s like you’re investigating life so much that nothing is left unturned, you know, everything is always interesting and you want to know more and yeah and whether that has come from painting or I’ve injected that into painting I do not know.
ES: So that’s quite beautiful because it also captures that appreciating what’s in front of you when you’re there.

RC: Yeah, that moment in time.

ES: Rather than just rushing through life constantly.

RC: Exactly trying to get the next post or the next whatever.

ES: Exactly.

RC: Yeah.

ES: How do you feel about talking about inspiration now that we have spent a fair bit of time doing it? Do you find that hard to articulate the thoughts on the process of inspiration or is it something that feels private or hard to access?

RC: Yes, I do feel like it’s private and I’m giving you a lot of information but at the same time it’s really exciting because I realised and I’ve done this with a few friends recently until you start talking about these things. You don’t always know what’s at the heart or the core of your practice and I guess I’m lucky because I do write a lot so I do try and get there a little bit myself independently but I do think questions that people throw at you engage you more, you know, really make you think about your inspiration and how and why, you know. I do sometimes take it for granted and/or you know, don’t think about it enough in terms of is it just intuitive or why is it intuitive or how and it is exciting to know those things are in. You know, I’ve got another mate going for a kind of interview as well and he tried to pre-prepare all the answers to the questions and I didn’t tell him I was having the chat with you today. And yeah, he rang me four times this morning going what do you think it is, and this and this. And also you got it covered, you got it, just be yourself, go in you know, you’re talking about your art, yourself, that’s okay. And I thought that with you,
should I be preparing and I thought oh, no it is in here and I believe it is going to turn on... and it does.

ES: And in a way I mean, I am really just wanting to get to the heart of what inspiration is for a poet and artist and where those things, those approaches might intersect and I am quite interested in that. I am interested in the process I think maybe because you know, share with you a little bit, maybe because almost feel a little bit of jealousy on the part of myself, you know, when you’re thrashing away with words I sort of think, wouldn’t be good to put up a big canvas and splash around and paint and see what comes out, you know? Well, yeah, good question. But it is the physicality I think of art that I love, the idea of you know, the physicality of it where poetry feels so nit-picky compared to splashing around on a canvas... rearranging words and changing drafts and keeping the last copy and going over and checking with where the line should end it feels so finicky...

RC: Reworking a painting can sometimes feel that finicky as well you’re changing all the colour again, you know, you’re reshaping that entire composition I guess. So you do there is a lot of correction and I remind myself because you can become precious as I imagine you do as a writer and you don’t want to lose some words or sentences. And I have to remind myself time and time again to lose is to gain and you know I have to force myself to rework it sometimes and you know really play with the layers, that’s where you get to the next level that’s where you evolve and then again I’m reminding myself don’t get too tight, don’t get too detailed, you know...

ES: Keep the energy going. Don’t overwork it.

RC: Yes.

ES: What about when you get your three month block and you’re not feeling inspired, and you go in, so you know, you said that maybe starting a new canvas, there’s something about that physical act that does it for you?
RC: That makes me start just doing it. Again, because I think lack of inspiration or blocks or whatever for me come from overthinking things, you know, and for good or bad sometimes I go into this zone where I go stop thinking. Don’t think about it, just do it and then you hope that through the acts then you can re-engage the mind and go okay. What have I got here? what am I doing now and you can step back from it but yeah, I think you sometimes just to have to take that leap of faith and just get in there and start going and know that you want to use these colours, you have a rough idea of the composition but unless you get paint on the canvas you know you’re not going through any block.

ES: So when you go in and you’ve got the canvas and they are standing around looking and staring at you do you have to pre-treat them or something like that?

RC: Some of them I did indulge this time and I got couple that were already gessoed so that was nice and I realised how easy it is to paint on other people’s workmanship rather than my own and I’ve been working on hemp a lot and it’s a really raw canvas and highly absorbent so it has to be gessoed a lot.

ES: What’s gesso?

RC: Primer. So in order to make the surface ready for work, you know you’re doing four or five layers before it’s ready and you think about and that sometimes can do your head in because the physicality of 1.5 by 1.5 and you haven’t even started with colour yet and you’ve already reached every corner of this canvass five times before you even start and that’s enough to make you pack up and go home!

ES: ... so nice to have a couple that are already primed that you can launch into?

RC: I’m sure as my success increases I will do that more...

ES: And then you go straight in with paint?
RC: Sometimes I’ll start with acrylic base that’s really loose often just one colour almost in the old school they used sepia to outline the composition before they’d go in with the heavier colours. I like that sense that there is an under painting - there’s something coming through underneath and it’s often in complete contrast to the colours I want to use in the end like it’s a bright orange or a big ochre colour and then I’m going to come back in with blue… So that’s a good way to get in and then once you’ve broken that whiteness, you know, it’s a free for all, it’s not so precious anymore and you know you’ve just got to get some paint on the surface.

ES: And what sort of brushes are you using?

RC: Wild boar hair (well I’m not sure about the wild part) because that’s the traditional brush yeah I have forked out a bit for brushes but big, little yeah, everything but on that big scale obviously the bigger you go … So I ended up getting a couple of big brushes cheap so I end up with more palettes. With the oils I try to keep a brush for each colour otherwise it gets too dirty so I had to get a couple more but it’s good. But yeah, a big brush with a big canvas is better.

ES: Okay. And then do you ever scratch it off or any other physical aspects of what you’re doing that….?

RC: Oh yeah. I mean, I never work thick enough to scratch it off I usually let it dry a bit and then work back over if I need to. I’m not quite the Ben Quilty although I love the thickness of impasto paint and I was sharing a studio with someone literally palettes half a tube onto the canvass regardless of the size. I don’t know where he gets his money from! Because you know one tube is $30 and I could go through one tube a day on 12 paintings he’s probably going through one a day so for me psychologically I can’t do that. I can’t spend that much money on paint even though I love the end result that these people have so for me the painting movement makes up for the lack of full on impasto but for me it’s still trying to go quite thick with layers but build it up gradually rather than one hit.
ES: And at the end does it have a finish on it or something?

RC: Not usually with oil I don’t worry. Sometimes I will with acrylic and sometimes at the end I’ll come through with some smaller brushes just to do, you know, just a couple of quick key aspects, you know, highlights.

ES: Okay, well I could talk about this just about all day really... given that what I am doing is about writing poetry I’m interested in any writing that has influenced you as well, we talked about your journal writing, the reflective process and I just wondered if there were any books or writers that inspire you at all, did you ever consider writing as a stimulus...

RC: Definitely, no I do more and more...

ES: I mean scientific writing, obviously that...?

RC: Yes. I have been reading a few scientific papers, yeah. So but again I guess that that is just for those lovely details I’m honing in on now with my abstractions. In a broad..., I do like to read about, I can show you what I am reading now – I’m really bad at remembering authors I’m sorry but this one is the Water Dreamers, this one is specifically about how they mapped our river system in Australia. Going back to Mitchell and all the explorers and yeah so that’s interesting now that you mention it, I have been searching. I haven’t got very far. I am always reading artist’s interviews and yeah historical aspects of art. I love reading artists’ statements as well about what other people say about their own work.

ES: That’s interesting.

RC: Yeah, that always feeds me. You know...

ES: I like those myself.
RC: Yes.

ES: And in fact I recently wrote one for myself and I found it really hard.

RC: They are difficult because you are trying to say so much in a small space because on the average they are no more than a page or two pages and you want to make them accessible not too wordy but yeah it is and that’s why I love this process because for me it is almost like it’s reaffirming what I’m thinking...I need to get a copy of this ... I can use it to write a statement because it is like you don’t always know your own language, your own words until you start verbalising it.

ES: That’s right.

RC: Yeah and even if you start writing....

ES: Things come out quite differently

RC: Exactly, yes. More structured or you know, more controlled and yes, but if you take these moments of verbalising it does get it out there and yeah hence the conversation with my mate this morning. He realised that he was getting to the essence of what he was trying to say by saying it rather than writing it and ....so we should interview each other all the time. It should be an annual event!

ES: I have read recently a long poem titled “Dart” by English writer Alice Oswald and it’s about the Dart river in England and I was just thinking about your river focus because it’s very interesting, it’s got all these voices, I was thinking about you interviewing people as you do your research because it’s all these voices that are connected to the river whether it’s someone who has lived by the river or someone who has died in the river, all these characters that are all part of the flow of the river. So it might be useful.
RC: Thank you. That’s where I feel like I am at now - I’ve dug out the Water Dreamers because I remembered I had bought that ages ago. I am surrounded by a plethora of books and I feel guilty because I never get to read them there’s always something else that takes it’s place.

ES: But maybe it’s a fragment that you pick up – your shelves are full of wildlife and environmental books so...?

RC: Exactly I’m loving every book on birds...

RC: So I can read, you know, I can buy a book everyday if I’m not careful.

ES: I know that problem!

RC: Yeah, exactly but then I have to control myself I have to remind myself I haven’t finished the one I have at home...

ES: But do you know what ... you have influenced me in this way I haven’t written about this particularly but I have written quite a bit about birds and you might remember when I first connected up with you I thought your paintings of birds were beautiful but I have never really been a bird person but now I have actually done quite a bit of writing about birds since then so I think that has triggered something... The birds have definitely entered the project.

ES: Look I think that’s really about all I was going to cover. I mean, we have done pretty well. I think.

RC: Yes, that’s fantastic.

ES: I feel like there’s another chapter... that I feel like ... I loved when we started... I’m always wanting to just recap a little bit on that, the molecular water that I’m not sure ...I’m feeling my way in there...
But we can always come back to it - if there’s gaps.

Well, that’s because it’s funny isn’t that sometimes how things come out but that really fascinates me that getting down to the essence of the water because before you’re on this journey on the river but taking that scientific connection that takes you somewhere quite different.

And I feel like it’s taken me a very long time to get here because as I mentioned, I started this whole exploration of science and art when I was back in Scotland so 1999 to 2001 and I’ve never felt the need to come to back to it and yet it’s come back this time and funnily enough every time I open up an art magazine there’s an article that talks about art and science - so it’s very now, very prominent. I just read recently Peter Sharpe and a group of artists being in a science lab and having to produce art from being in the lab and now it’s in London, they’re exhibiting it in London. So I think...

And you look at the work of Janet Laurence, she does those wonderful explorations of the environment with looking at the matter. The matter that goes into nature.

Yes. That’s right. I love her work as well.

Yes.

And I saw her show at Australian Galleries last year and with all the different rooms set up with all the different test tubes as if nature is our big experiment and you know.

So it’s taken a while but it seems like the right time to rediscover it and...

And when you’re in Scotland did you paint the landscape there?
RC: Yes, and cityscapes and I just started exploring the nature there I did live with believe it or not, a bird scientist.

ES: Oh really?! 

RC: Yeah, so that’s where that whole and at the time like I kick myself now because but it didn’t really, you know, and I went on a couple of trips with her as well like to count birds and things but at the time it didn’t really kick in, that oh this is interesting and I could be painting this. It was funny at how it has taken all this time to process and you know come full circle.

ES: That does happen a lot, doesn’t it - the matter of inspiration does come back to you quite a long time later.

RC: Yes.

ES: That’s why journals are so good to remind you of those moments.

RC: Exactly.

ES: Reminds you of those all moments. All right. Well, that’s all. Thank you so much. I really appreciate the time.

RC: No, no. That’s great.

END
Appendix E: Interview Transcript – Rox de Luca

Interview with Rox De Luca at Bondi

Date: Wednesday, 27 November 2013

ES: So Rox tell me about what inspires you artistically and I mean obviously you would have in your head what you are working on at the moment but you can relate it to other work you’ve done as well.

RDL: Well it is particularly about the beach and the plastics. I lived over in Madrid for three and a half years and I came back so while I was in Madrid I was working with more sort of intimate still-lives if you like, painting inside the flat in the city of Madrid and working on recycled old book covers.

ES: Okay.

RDL: Yes. I can show you some of those.

ES: Oh yes, now I have seen them.

RDL: You might have seen them.


RDL: And I came back and actually this work really just happened out of the blue. I mean I was walking down at the beach and just reconnecting with nature as one does in Sydney and how, like, I kept thinking how lucky we are that we have got such beautiful, natural environment, after living in inner city Madrid which has got, you know, it’s cultural beauty and history. I started to walk along the sand and I did start noticing the plastic and coincidentally a parent at the school, a mum at the school was putting together an exhibition about found objects. And I spoke with her and she said oh, come on what can you do, you know, can you do the book covers? And I said well, actually I noticed the plastic at the beach and she kind of said right - you could do plastics. I was like ohhh... and I thought “what”, you know, but it was actually a trigger to come and actually look closely at the plastics and to think, okay. Okay, why not, you know, and be open to that so it was just something that happened purely by you know co-incidence. And so that led to me actually starting to collect the plastics and then I had to think about how I would kind of, you know,
play with the material and one thing led to another and I connected with a jeweller one night at an opening (which I never go to), I went along reluctantly. And I met this jeweller Brenda Factor and she actually had set up a jewellery studio and access workshop in Newtown and it was great because I thought that’s what I need because by that point I was putting holes in the plastic by using a pin and a candle and being very toxic about it and it just clicked with me that she would know how to sort of use a Dremel and because I was essentially doing something that had a jewellery kind of technique approach to it. So I spoke to Brenda and I said can I come to your studio and use your facility and that was a lovely thing that happened because she actually reminded me of the OH&S aspects of working and she had a drill. She had a mask and the work is very manual.

ES: Very manual, repetitive work.

RDL: Yep. So she set me up and she made me think carefully about the safety aspects of that so I kind of basically from that moment as well I just started building up these “garlands” which is what Jacqueline Millner called them. So I started building up these threads and worked towards that first exhibition which included other found object artists down at Bondi Pavilion and it just kind of happened and I guess it was just about the memories that these materials hold and the beauty that they have, the dark side which kind of interested me and okay, working that way. And just playing with the forms in the space and at that time it was a really long wall that I had to manage so I’ve just started to think about flowing them down onto the floor... So in terms of back to the question, I guess the question, whoops ramble, ramble...

ES: No that’s good and it’s covering the next one...

RDL: Living in Madrid, being close to The Prado, looking at the old, you know, the beautiful works of the past and what can I say, you know, what they have, where do you stop in terms of inspiration...

ES: I mean, I’m quite interested in the fact that you were given quite a strong direction by that woman at the school and I’m interested in things like that triggering inspiration - you had to work within the confines of a particular material - do you think that helps?
RDL: Absolutely. It helped because it was narrowing it right down but also it was terrifying because I hadn’t worked in a three dimensional way before. Now I’ve been working in a two dimensional way so I think I was just feeling what the hell, I felt why not, why not because you know, making, creating, you know, using different forms why not expose myself to another way of working and the challenges of that because I think you know as artists we can often just repeat ourselves, become formulaic and it can get boring.

ES: And sometimes even the restrictions of things like the physical nature of the plastic you’re working with, you know, you’ve got to come up with ways to solve that problem. I think that triggers inspiration, you know. But that kind of feeds into the next question which is whether the idea for an installation comes to you in advance or slowly bit by bit...do you ever have that moment where you wake up and you think that’s what I’ve got to make?

RDL: Sometimes…but I guess the works over the recent years have been influenced by certain projects I’ve worked towards, yes. Well that’s been good because it’s just meant in terms of my, you know, all the dimensions in my life that it just focuses me on that project and just keeps me working.

ES: Yeah.

RDL: So that first show led to...the gallery director looking at it and then he said look I’m gonna give you a four by four wall so now you can play with that so then I started working further into the forms and just playing, you know. I think for me it was just okay, just start playing with the forms and see what they look like but the other thing that does influence me is the response of my close friends who happen to be artists...the feedback that I get from them helps me along the way too because I think we often lack the confidence to say “Do you think this works?”, you know, and I’ve done this with my friends, you know. Yes and sometimes, yeah and the positive response that kind of, yep, I’m on the right track if it makes sense to them and therefore I can keep going. And in terms of the forms I guess it’s just playing with them and leaving them too, giving myself the head space to walk away or have a holiday and then come back with oh, yes, this, I can work with this now. You know what I mean I think it will vary but having fresh eyes on it, yeah those fresh eyes can really help.
But thinking about one of your favourite works of your own, any work, could you talk about the process of creating that work and what was particular to that work that triggered the inspiration or whatever happened in the creative process?

Well maybe *Saved* is a good one to talk about so that's the site-specific one and it was the first site-specific work I have done so...

And this was Sculpture by the Sea?

Sculpture by the Sea was just a wonderful opportunity to be challenged by the space and the site because I walk around the coastal walk from Bondi to Bronte often and this rusty down pipe kind of spoke to me and I thought oh, yes, and that's the site the organisers chose that they wanted me to work with and so I...

Once again, a restriction that, you know, because having to work with that space and that rusty pipe you know.

I worked with it and what was nice was I guess I kind of thought logically I will just wrap this around and around, around, around, around, with all the garlands and I started to work on a really long one. (Which ended up being 7 metres long.) Luckily I’m so close to the site because I went down there many times and just measured things up so I had to measure it and then I did the drawings and I kept the drawings up here and I went down there just to see how it would work so I did it sort of in stages and so I did this 7-metre length and I went down there I and just tied it on the pipes and just really got the measurement I just had no sense of the extent of the amount of stuff I had to...

Yes...to have to put together...

Put together, yeah. So good thing I have the proximity - to be able to go down to the site, and I tried a few times and I was that oh, I don’t have enough stuff... it was over winter. So I’m going down there and you asked me before about you know how I collect things. I was just picking up as much white stuff as possible because I had narrowed it down to white. I wanted it...

Bondi Beach was cleared of white plastic last winter because of Rox de Luca...
RDL: But not only Bondi I actually went along to Bronte as well and then I even went to Camp Cove one day after a storm, oh, this is heaven, you know, terrible to say it, like come on bring on the rain because that’s when all the stuff comes out and because it was winter that’s right there wasn’t much stuff at the beach, you know, remarkably I can say yes I’d still pick stuff up. I felt like there wasn’t enough for me and you just have to get there everyday picking up the stuff so I was down there two or three hours everyday...

ES: I mean that in itself is very labour intensive then....

RDL: It was labour intensive.

ES: So now do you have a spark that occurs outside the studio that you work with slowly later or sometimes when you’re sitting here doing the repetitive work of putting it together does it come, does that you know it comes here’s the way you’re going to hang it or you know?

RDL: It’s probably a bit of both it will vary, and it might come back to me at three o’clock in the morning when I’m awake. When I wake up, you know, worrying about things where it might be a way of you know how the mind works so I’ve got that sort of mind that wants to solve things at that time...

ES: Yes. Yes. Sometimes because that’s the only time in the morning it has.

RDL: That’s right. And then I do little doodles in my drawing book, I mean I will fiddle with those sort of ideas visually and I’ve probably have done that less so...

ES: Have you done this?

RDL: No, that’s what I mean. So you know I’d like to, I think it’s a point of thought (?) to keep drawing. (Looking at sketch book for next few lines...) So like I’ve said I haven’t done, I feel like this is so three dimensional but these are where the ideas can happen too. So I will try and do that and that might help my process of understanding the forms but then if it’s working with the, you know, a space, I did this project for Waverley library which was about actually putting holes through books and playing with it onto a form which I’ve got downstairs. So you know, there was sort of playing.
Yes, playing with those ideas sometimes it’s writing you know and just seeing little things like that and...little sketches

ES: But what strikes me is that working with the three dimensional and the repetitive work that you would be doing with that all of the time. To my mind it would stop you getting blocked too much whereas if you’re working into a studio with blank canvasses ...so is that right, is that your experience?

RDL: Absolutely. Yeah. That’s what’s kept me going and in fact that’s kept me going mainly over the last 20 years of my making stuff because, well sometimes things have happened as I looked right back like when my father died and I was in my 20’s and when he died at 63, he died very young, I was doing self portraits around that time and then the whole body of portraits that came to the surface after he died was like, in retrospect was really a grieving process so that really was a trigger, so there’s some you know things in time that I can look back on and say, yes you know, they were triggers but I was so, well, at that time in my life I was represented by a gallery and I had an exhibition planned every 18 months or something so I worked towards presumably a cohesive body of work which often had some theme that emerged for one reason or another, you know. That’s if I look back that tends to be how things happened, like the very first show was for my father, I called it For my Father. And then a few years later while I was pregnant with my child I had an exhibition with my mother and she was still alive and so that was something that kind of happened because she kept nagging me “ why can’t I have one or two paintings in your exhibition” she was quite ah, you know...

ES: But what a wonderful thing that you’ve done that...

RDL: I know...I know... so that was a lovely exhibition and in fact you know working towards the subject matter logically was about my mother’s migration experiences and her relationship to me so that you know, actually now looking back at this it was quite a compact sort of theme that evolved...

ES: Sometimes you don’t see these themes until later on.

RDL: I know. Yeah. Yeah. The patterns that emerge... that happens. So this, so Saved the rusty pipe was what I working on this year 2013 and it certainly took up the good,
you know, most part of that and working on that and going down and walking past the rusty pipe, thinking okay, okay, okay and building up the materials and I went down like I said three times and kind of worked on it and after doing that 7-metre length I realised that I've just got to do individual ones so then I came back here and then I was, you know, re-threading them onto smaller lengths and also thinking of how to cover the space so that is why the cutlery came into it because I thought ah, there’s more length in this...

ES: Yes that’s a longer run there.

RDL: Yeah. And so that was a way of managing the length of the part because it was nearly 3 metres in height, so yes, so I am glad to say that’s over, that’s why I’ve got all the stuff now, so it made me think, well how am I going to work with this. You know I’m not going to just pack it away. It wasn’t for sale as such because it was presented as a site-specific work and the catalogue said you know if you want to, okay, you know the artist could configure something to adopt it to whatever. So now I’m thinking well how to utilise these materials, maybe into smaller lengths...You would need someone who had a really long, round place in their house. I know so that’s why that’s there because I kind of need something to wrap it around although it probably needs to be solid...I mean, that might lead to something else.

Yeah, and in fact well while I’m working on this I am also putting in another proposal for something called the Sawmiller’s exhibition which is at McMahon’s Point.

ES: Okay.

RDL: The woman that organises it has a sort of a community event and she saw the stuff at Sculpture by the Sea and I think she sent all the artists an invitation to submit for it. So that’s down at McMahon’s Point. I haven’t gone to see it yet but I’m going to put in to work with that space so that might lead to just being used in that context and that might be a project that I work towards then. But I don’t always want to be so site specific as such either it’s like well...but I like that... On the one hand I enjoy it and otherwise I feel like if I don’t have some sort of structure to my year or have a project after all can I just take the year off? ... and I feel like I fluff around and I may not, you know,
ES: I understand yes, same thing happens with me...

RDL: To have yeah, to have sort of something concrete to work on.

ES: That’s right. That’s right and a lot of other projects might come out of that you know. Okay.

RDL: That’s right, yeah.

So it is that thing about sometimes a little bit of structure... A little bit of boundary around the material you use or the time you’ve got or the site it’s going to be in, it can work sometimes, yeah. I mean I guess at other times it might be restrictive but I think it works.

ES: Do you think that the process at how you arrive at work has changed over the course of your working life your artistic life?

RDL: Certainly post child. Yes. And then maybe because of time.

RDL: Yes.

ES: So the logistics.

RDL: Logistics and time changes when you have a kid, right.

ES: Yeah.

RDL: You know the juggle of domestic existence. I mean, it’s just very different and I try to yeah, make the most of the time and...

ES: But you do make the most of it hey? Yeah. It can make us more productive.

RDL: Be more productive yes. Although I think that, you know, this is a beautiful studio but it’s the time just like I’ve got to really cut myself off from the domestic stuff. Oh, I’ve got to just stay up here, you know. Or I could just sneak down and pull something out of the freezer or...

ES: Oh, I know. I know.

RDL: So that’s influenced things a lot and then there’s my working life. So it’s just trying to slot it in and make the most of the time.
ES: What senses are involved when you’re inspired, so you know, music or something in your hands or you know?

RDL: I listen to radio…Radio National!

ES: Radio yes.

RDL: I like to listen to interviews about the person and about life and I mean I guess that’s it – it’s like the human condition. I mean that’s sounds….

ES: No that’s right go on…

RDL: It’s the human condition and reasons for living and how people live in the world and their emotional responses to things and their creativity and I guess that’s, you know, I hear a lot about that on Radio National you know from By-Design to, you know Rachel Kohn’s spiritual stuff and that inspires me and it keeps just ticking over and as well as looking at other artist’s work and reading about their work and I have subscriptions to a couple of art magazines so when I get those it’s like Christmas I just love flicking through them and seeing what people are making and some of them have really, you know, fantastic articles on creativity, on people making things and why and this year we were lucky enough to get to Venice to see the Biennale … to be inspired, it’s constant and I guess, you know you’re at the centre of this whole world of…To feel like you are a part of a bigger force of creativity, it’s just, you know, it’s exciting.

ES: Because…it was Simryn Gill at Biennale?

RDL: Simryn Gill was exhibiting at Biennale…yes…

ES: So something about your work around the pipe reminded me a little bit of her work…

RDL: …and she collects plastic, that she collects a lot of these things too that she had a whole wall out of these rings as well….I’ve got pictures I could show you…

ES: I’m thinking more of the stuff around trees.

RDL: Yeah, trees and text?
ES: Yes, I’m quite fascinated by that. So that’s interesting but seeing where your work relates to other artists and where they are going and just being part of that creative world.

RDL: The reality is I’m not getting enough of it. I tried to, I think it’s really important to get out there and see galleries but depending on the time constraints and the energy that those things take. It’s just that fine balance because, you know, there’s endless amounts of stuff one can see and that is why the Internet is great these days but no, it is important to go to these things too.

ES: Absolutely.

RDL: So it’s just the balancing …

ES: And for you that must have been such a massive change from when you were working with Artbank…

RDL: Yes. Oh I mean that’s unique…

ES: Well you would have been at things all the time like openings and…

RDL: Yeah, and travelling interstate for it too.

ES: Yes.

RDL: … that was an incredible source of inspiration, meeting people like in Townsville or WA and oh, it’s fantastic, you know and building relationships with those people too. Some of them that I have kept in touch with. Fantastic so now it’s like yeah one hones oneself right down and to okay, what is manageable in terms of seeing things you know. And taking time out to do that because it’s part of what an artist should be doing, in inverted commas...

ES: Yes. Yes.

RDL: But also this is it…time is precious.

ES: There’s a book called *The Sound of Paper* about your creative life and what you do each day and I’m just trying to remember the author’s name… But she talks about having a creative date with yourself. How often do you have a creative date and it doesn’t matter whether it’s an art gallery or you know going to listen to some
beautiful music, or going to the museum to look at a rare text or something as long as you make the time for yourself to have that input.

RDL: Absolutely.

ES: Yeah. Yeah.

RDL: Absolutely. And being around creative people too and in fact may be this year, more so than other years I kind of want to hang on... I've got an artist friend I write to Stephanie Radok and she actually, she edits a magazine called Artlink.

ES: Oh, yes.

RDL: And she’s also recently, she wrote a beautiful book last year which I really like and so I connect with her thinking, I think this year may be more than ever before I'm thinking of other strong female artists around me and one thing there kind of, you know, connect with them perhaps more than ever before as role models as inspiration as just having sort of affinities with them. So for Sculpture by the Sea I met my very...a very early art teacher of mine from Art School days who lives in Sydney. She is probably 80 now.

ES: Oh wow.

RDL: Pat Harry...And she was a very fierce teacher of mine in the painting department back in 81, 82 when I went to art school and I still, you know, still connect with her and I kind of, maybe not having my own mother anymore... She is incredible so it was just nice to spend a bit of time with her because she is still painting...

ES: And that’s the wonderful thing about creative life.

RDL: That you can keep going...

ES: And in fact sometimes it gets better you know, as you get time and wisdom and maturity and that’s one of the few things in life where it gets better, as you get older it seems to me...

RDL: Yeah. Yeah. I want to kind of keep connecting with her too...

ES: How inspiring to see someone in their 80’s.

RDL: Oh, I know. Oh, I know.
ES: Still creating and dynamic and giving to others as well.

RDL: Absolutely and that’s the other key thing too I think so because it can be very isolating.

ES: Absolutely. Sometimes I think artists are better, like you said before, at commenting on each other’s work... but it’s also everyone is juggling out there, everyone has got a different constraints whether it’s the economics or the family or whatever. It’s hard to get time to spend time doing it.

RDL: What kept me going in Sydney - I finished art school in Canberra in 84, 85 and I moved to Sydney and this was kind of a really pivotal moment in my life that I was looking for somewhere to live in Sydney fresh out of out school, fresh out of travelling to Europe and I looked for accommodation and I found a studio which was a live-in which was in Haymarket and it was with other artists and at the time Gary Shead, Jane Bennett, Wendy Sharpe and a few other people, established artists, were living in the space and I think if I had not moved into that space at that point in my life, my life would have been totally different because I would have just floated into something else. So these were much older artists and they were more established, and they were really inspiring and they were mentors for me. So I look back and think…

ES: Thank God for that damp studio in Haymarket!

RDL: Absolutely, absolutely.

ES: Oh wow, it’s great you had that...

RDL: And to be around other artists because I mean here this is the thing, you know, I have a studio in the domestic space and I miss...I know what it’s like to have a communal studio space. There are some out there but the logistics are hard for me, you know, it would cost more and mean travel time, would I get to it? And travel...

ES: time is a big deal...

RDL: It is...in Sydney, in Sydney when you have children...

RDL: So this makes sense for now... but I know for other people it works, you know, works for them. It would work, I miss that sort of contact with other people...
ES: ...and that everyday sort of contact. I think that you know daily or weekly or whatever that regular sort of walking in and out while you’re working... and have it moved here than, yeah rather than spasmodic one off contact...

RDL: Absolutely, which is what it is now because a friend of mine who had a baby after me which is great because its oh, good...

ES: ...I’ve got a friend!

RDL: But between the two of us...we hardly see each other...we text and we email but we hardly have that one on one time because... I just finished reading.... Did you read *The Woman Upstairs*, that book? That was reviewed on you know the Writers...The Book Club, You know, Jennifer Byrne?

ES: Yes.

RDL: It was a couple of months ago that it was reviewed and it’s about an artist, set in Boston and it’s about her turning forty you know, feeling how difficult that was so Jennifer Byrne and all the other women on that show ...

ES: For heaven’s sake get a life: Forty’s looking great!

RDL: They kind of put it down a lot because it’s an angry book. But it was actually interesting to read and it made me think I want to read this about an angry artist and the way her creativity worked was through this other family. She met this family. She was a teacher at an elementary school and she met the kid and had a of sort of relationship with the son and then the father and the mother. And she sort of falls in love with the three of them and I’m not going to give the game away but her creativity was kind of triggered by having connection with the family and the mother was an artist as well.

ES: Right.

RDL: So there’s an interesting look at, yes, creativity and domestic life and managing that because she just kind of, this is it, she ends up sharing the studio with the mother.

ES: Okay. Right. Right.

RDL: And endless having cups of tea, yeah, talking and making it work and...
Yes it’s often that everyday kind of contact that works creatively... We had another poet living at our place because she was studying here and her lease ran out and she had three months left in Sydney and she is a lovely woman and I said, move in... And it was fantastic just having that everyday contact, you know, even though we wouldn’t necessarily be writing everyday but to be able to discuss “Oh, I just read so and so, or could you have a look this verse for me” and there’s no way you would do that if you weren’t sharing a space.

You can do it, like I meet up with a writers group once a month, but it’s a very different feel to that everyday interaction.

That’s right. And in fact I had a 90 minute phone conversation with my Adelaide friend the other day.

(Laughter) Well, that’s good at least you’re doing it!

Yeah. I mean actually but sometimes what happens is I feel the sort of sense of isolation here. So I get out and I see some galleries. That’s good...

But even that’s isolating, walking into a space on your own...

I know, right...Well, we’re going to try and do that with my friends now. That’s the plan and maybe we will start from the beginning of next year because it’s nearly the end of this year. So actually say let’s go once a month, let’s do some galleries together and talk about the work, we see because that’s the thing...

Yeah. Yeah.

What I was going to say so about that isolation thing. I lost my train of thought...

Well, this leads back into these questions. One of my questions is how does your emotional state affect your inspirations? How does that isolation affect your work?

I think you just get used to it, you get used to it and look, like I said this year I kind of thought I want to kind of connect with some certain people a bit more and make the time for that to happen. Yeah but it’s the logistics really and I guess the empathy that I know a lot of other people are in the same place.

Yes. Yes.
RDL: Emotional state. Well, yeah. I mean it can actually get you down but I’m generally a positive person I think so I can just come in here and it feeds my soul this stuff and it does sort of make me snap out of it even though if I listen to Radio National well I go you know, terrible things happening in the world! You know what I mean like just that the reality of what’s going on.... Last night you see, you know, the devastation of the Philippines. You kind of yeah, it makes you put your things in perspective so I think that’s why listening to the radio can be good.

ES: Just it’s funny you say that about the Philippines because there was something I was thinking about your work driving here. I was thinking not just, you know, I looked at the Sculpture by the Sea images and I was thinking imagine the stuff in the Philippines floating around, you know. And I think that’s a little bit of a sense of what I get from Saved as well may be it is from Saved. But that idea of there just being these bits of debris in the world, you know and there’s something very evocative about looking at your pieces from a distance or online and how beautiful they are and then you get up close and you see the little bits of the caps from sunscreen and bits of plasticity, and there’s a real dissonance that you feel, a conflict of emotions between what you feel about the beauty of the objects and their confronting message about what we’re doing to the world.

RDL: That’s great, that’s where it needs to go so it...

ES: Anyway we are talking about emotional state, I got you off track then - so in turn how does, when you’re inspired or when you’re not inspired affect your emotional state?

RDL: Yes. The block or the, yeah look it’s, I guess I can’t focus too much on it because I’ve got all these other little juggles too, you know, so it kind of evens me out somewhat but I try to stay positive and I try to work through something and I, you know, try to think that you know, something good will emerge from an awkward moment in that practice still and you know, and that there’s gonna be bad days, you know, and there’s bad work, you know, it’s disastrous! you know straight away and... So it’s all just part of making and not expecting, not having great expectations that everything is going to be, you know, successful, not everything is and I think that’s the nature of who we are and...
ES: What happens when you’ve finished a work or series of works?

RDL: Well there’s a bit of flatness. There’s a bit of flatness after Saved and you know Sculpture by the Sea is only up for 18 days...

ES: Oh no

RDL: So the whole infrastructure around such a major event is amazing and you know I take my hat off to the organisers of this because they put so much into that 18 days so it’s a come down and you kind of get oh, a bit of a slump, you know, but once again that’s normal. It happens all the time, you know, like after the end because you’re kind of building yourself up to this moment and you have this fuss and public acknowledgment of the work and you kind of want to hide because you’re bumping into people and all that stuff happens which is really nice and then afterwards you come down and you feel...

ES: The high of that would be fantastic...

RDL: It was great.

ES: And it’s not in a little gallery that people who are particularly interested in art are going to. It’s real engagement with the public generally.

RDL: Absolutely and that’s what I ... look being down there with the masses on a Saturday afternoon. It made me realise just in terms of the profile of those people I reckon 90% would never walk into an art gallery, I would say. You know, and it’s people from all walks of life and from all areas, Sydney Metropolitan, Rural, I heard that people were coming down from, you know, the regions to see Sculpture by the Sea... that’s such a successful part of it and...

ES: You know there’s a bit of flatness after...

RDL: Yeah. But that’s fine. I mean it’s just what happens and you kind... of I feel like I deserve a bit of a pause now and it’s towards the end of the year so there’s other things that kind of building up for the end of the year stuff and I feel like I want to replenish my energy and kind of work on whatever happens next. It’s sort of actually the last couple of years I’ve had things that have happened in October so I’m sort of
used to there being a build up to October and then having a little break and then starting again so sort of cyclical like that.

ES: Yes. Yes. I’m thinking of Isabelle Allende and January the 6th...

RDL: That’s right. That’s right.

ES: She clears out her writing space and no one talks to her on that day and she lights the candle and begins the New Year...I like that idea of the cycle and sometimes it takes you a long time in life to find that cycle...

RDL: Yeah. Yeah.

ES: So other art forms that inspire you... we talked about other artists, visual artists

What about literature ...

RDL: I would love to read a lot more than I do. I feel like I’m the hopeless reader but I’m reading Walter Mosley now and I’d never read him before so look I would love to not be able to sleep, Erin.

ES: Yeah, I understand...

RDL: Because look I am embarrassed about the little literature I have read and I kind of say oh, what do I do with my life!!

ES: What about writing, do you journal yourself?

RDL: I do little bits, you know, a little bit but not, ...actually talking, thinking about maybe I could start a blog or do something like that, it’s discipline and maybe I will. Maybe the beginning of the year, I just sort of write sporadically in here and I write down, you know, what artists influence me or what I am listening to on the radio, you know, so not consistently no. So Walter Mosley, I will, you know, I walked into the library and I picked it up and I thought great, you know and I read the second one and really enjoyed it just cause it is about such an amazing time and then before that I read that book The Woman Upstairs. Yeah.

Look you know, I wish I could be a bigger reader!

RDL: I love it too. I mean it’s time.

ES: It’s time and
RDL: What was I going to say, I had my 18-year old niece to stay with us over the weekend. She just finished year 12 and she had with her, her best friend who’s kind of done a bit of acting work – she was in *The Turning*.

ES: Oh!

RDL: I heard you know the film producer man behind that on the radio and I thought what a lovely idea to have Tim Winton be so gracious about giving his book, you know,

ES: And also the way they screened it, how they did those.

RDL: I know.

ES: What a great idea.

RDL: I know. Not that I got there but..., so you know I listen to the makers or doers and I’m inspired by them even if I don’t get to see their movie.

ES: That’s what I really want to write more about which is why I was interested in you collecting, you know that whole process of collecting for me and the way you’re putting it together...You know does the collecting have a meditative feel to it?

RDL: Absolutely. Absolutely and being back down, being at the beach because of its beauty but at the same time the distressing, you know, volume of stuff that yes is down there but the affirming stuff as well - being affirmed by others around me acknowledging, you know, that I am picking up these little things and stopping me in my tracks... you get that. I have had people saying what are you doing and I say well, look at this plastic and it can be an older person or you know kids from the school, because the school is across the road and you know, they will keep picking up and helping me which is really wonderful too so that process is meditative as well as affirming and connecting with people in that way and then being here and drilling and spending time drilling, there is that sort of process, repetitive in nature, then when I’m threading it’s like you know the handicrafts of our parents, you know, and yeah that’s lovely and listening to the radio at the same time which is me time again, you know.
ES: Yeah, yeah. I am quite interested in that difference in the way you know it must be for some people with a blank canvas versus the craft element or skill element of just putting things together bringing out your creativity, I think that’s really interesting. I’m trying to with a lot of these interviews to get to the point at which the spark of inspiration of something translates into a thing, you know. So I think we’ve sort of talked around this and with your three dimensional type work is there a point where ...not so much where you had the site-specific installation but where you’re looking at one of cascading pieces is there a point at which you think right, that’s the form that it’s got to take? Or is it just a matter of playing with and playing with it and then it arrives...

RDL: ...it might be both, you know, like I, even something like this little one (pointing to sculpture) just leaving it, you know, leaving and saying oh, is that, yes, is that enough? Yes, it’s enough because you know some of the time I think no, it isn’t enough then go back another day and put more on there...

ES: It just feels like it’s enough and has quite a different feel stacked up against the background to the hanging down, you know. I like that.

RDL: And you know, just look playing with that and that might... I’m not sure about this but then a friend might come in and I’ll say I’m not sure about that, is that complete? oh yes, that looks complete...

ES: So that leads into my next question about when do you know that it’s finished?

RDL: Well, that’s the thing you know...

ES: When do you look at this piece over here the blue-green piece and say right, that’s enough?

RDL: Well. I guess it’s about the timing, leaving it and saying I feel it’s enough now but not blocking the opportunity to build onto it again if one decides. Well let’s see what happens next, you know... if I add to this maybe that will shift the dynamic and maybe it will do something else or maybe this is it now and look I’ve got enough material of this to say okay well maybe I will try another piece and I’ll make it longer, you know and then maybe that won’t give me the same thing as that one does.
ES: And see there’s a nice little analogy here with poetry because you can do that with poetry. You can go back to it and back to it, and where a canvas you can ruin, you like if you’ve got a piece that might be finished (on a canvas) you can ruin it, really.

RDL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

ES: With a poem you can cut and paste and keep the old version and in fact when you are blocked, often you will go back to an old piece to start again, to get going, which you can do with this sort of work but you can’t, you can’t on canvas.

RDL: And when I was working on a two dimensional surface that’s the thing you know. Often the very beginnings of a two dimensional work would be amazing or just sort of the early rush, everything and then you kind of start building and then, oh, you’ve wrecked it, it’s gone, you know, so yes it’s a different medium. And here also I might add that a lot of the material I’ve ever worked with is usually not precious in inverted commas, it’s not the, you know $200 piece of linen canvas and therefore I’ve felt that I have been able to play a lot more. Cause the metal stuff that I worked on, when I first started working on these, they were, I worked for a printer and these were offset printing plates that I used to use and that’s how I started painting on this.

ES: That’s great.

RDL: Again, these were just discards.

ES: So you’ve actually been using stuff that’s been discarded for a long time.

RDL: Before, yeah, pretty much right from the beginning and I think that I remember art school, the white canvas, the white piece of paper it’s, you know, kind of this preciousness around them and that might be something in that book that talked about that too and the creative urge with some people...

ES: Yes. Yes.

RDL: So yes, therefore what the heck is the attitude with art I mean, look at this stuff, it’s rubbish!!

ES: I know but it’s the way you put it together...

RDL: That’s what matters.
ES: Okay, we’ve sort of gone through a lot of these (questions) because we have talked about the physical act of creating and I mean what I love about your work is the process is so evident, you know. I mean I know how you arrived at this. I can see it when I look at the work. I can see where it’s come from and I love that about this work. So I’m just thinking is there anything I’ve missed. I hate it when I go home and I think oh, I should have asked that.

RDL: This is the woman that wrote the piece about my work.

ES: I have found, not that I have done a lot of reading about art but it’s really hard to get.

RDL: That’s right – like Joan Kerr’s book. It is worth you know $500 if you can find that anthology of woman’s work so yes, that’s one of the downsides but she is drifting out of that. She has actually just established a website and something that you might be interested in called Contemporary Art and Feminism and they are having a launch and they are building up towards in 2015 – might be an exhibition and it might be across art forms so I will tell you about that. Julie Rrap, you’ll recognise some other names...

ES: Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro and I’d like to interview them...

RDL: They might still be in Berlin.

ES: I think they’re back – I read something about them living in the Blue Mountains

RDL: Oh yeah, maybe.

ES: And I have written about Patricia Piccinini but I have found that really tricky...

RDL: Jacqueline Milner as well as other people – this is a great website they have just started...

ES: What artist would you sort of consider substantial influences for you? You mentioned Eva Hesse...

RDL: and Louise Bourgeois and there’s early Tony Cragg but he actually was doing stuff with plastics years ago as well and there’s an Australian called John Dahlsen that’s been making stuff with plastic too. He has done major stuff for years using plastics and he has been in Sculpture by the Sea. He did that big Bottle with the thongs and he has represented Australia overseas in environmental art.
ES: Right, right.

RDL: But as Jacqueline said when she saw my work oh but it’s different. So I am sort of aware of people doing things around the place but in terms of influences ...I like a lot of work! Yayoi Kusama you know the mad Japanese artist, I love her work – the spotty, dotty, artist.

END
Appendix F: Interview Transcript – Nic Folland

Interview with Nic Folland, AGNSW, 16 December 2013

ES: So tell me about generally what inspires you artistically. I know you’re into domestic items and imaginings of interactions with nature?

NF: Well I think that the domestic stuff comes about because when I went to school I studied interior architecture. So I think even though I ended up pulling out – I didn’t go on to finish that degree, that’s probably stuck with me quite closely. You know, in that course you spend a lot of time looking at furniture and lighting and spaces and really I did that because I was interested in working in theatre design - I have worked in theatre quite a bit over the years.

ES: Right. Right. So I didn’t know that. I haven’t come across that in whatever I’ve read. Yeah.

NF: Yeah. Yeah. So I think that it is also why some of my work is quite theatrical and I tend to use really controlled spaces and controlled lighting and all those elements. In fact, I often think of my work as kind of theatre without actors but I have produced performance works in the past (not that I performed in them). I have employed people to perform in elements of my work in the past. Something theatrical happening there, in terms of those things, an element of play in terms of materials and in terms of the structure of my work.

ES: So interiors and theatre itself like do you go to theatre and feel inspired by theatre itself artistically? Like going to another performance or...

NF: Yeah, not that I could name anything specifically that’s inspired me in that way. There’s something about those controlled spaces I really like them and you know staging is, the control with staging is really, really important to me when it come to the effect and all of those elements such as sound, vision and action and all of those things I find intriguing, how they can affect you through those different layers and somehow they kind of create a journey through it so instead of experiencing something static even if it’s moving something can be quite static through some kind of continuous steady kind of floating or something for example. But you can really,
you know, use music in particular you can kind of lift people and drop them and (something about relating to music).

ES: Have you done any video? I haven’t seen anything you have done in video.

NF: I was trying video work. I have produced some video works but not ever shown.

ES: No but you’ve done things like music and sounds and soundtracks. I’ve never actually seen something of yours with the music and the sound. The main works of yours I have managed to see in a gallery have been the chandelier series.

NF: Right. Yeah, they are the works that tend to get shown. A lot of the large installations are hard for galleries to collect. And they tend to be works that get built in the space and then broken down and that’s very hard for the galleries to install these works...

ES: The boat with the crystal in it, did that have music?

NF: There’s was no music in that but there was a work in that exhibition that was called Raft that was a bathroom scene and that had music.

ES: Oh yeah. That had music.

NF: That had music, that one piece of music by Grieg (Holberg Suite) a very mournful piece of music. I mean that had layers of sound as well because the flowing of the water, which was quite intense that was presented in a very contained blackened space so that was a very theatrical work using a single spot light that illuminated the bathroom within that pool of water and so there was that gushing of the water from every kind of tap and every possible...

ES: A lot of movement and a lot of sound with the water but with the music as well so I guess you would have been having to moderate one or the other at different times but the music...

NF: Well the music does really peak then drop and there is actually quite extended silent moments in the music. It’s the Holberg Suite - “Air” I think is the section that I used.

ES: Okay.

NF: I can certainly get you the details of that.

ES: Yeah. I think I might have read about that installation somewhere.
NF: There is a video recording of that - remind me to do that - I can certainly supply you with that. That’s been produced a couple of times initially in (?) Adelaide and then for (?) Canberra four or five years ago. In fact I dropped into the MCA yesterday about the possibility of them maybe exhibiting it some time in the future but they are planning seven years ahead...

ES: It’s very irritating when you miss something... like I had written a poem about the Valamanesh – the spinning silk - I went in three times to see it and it was malfunctioning and obviously it’s difficult to keep it working...

NF: Hossein was really disappointed with the installation there in that space the light wasn’t right...

ES: Okay. Right. Oh, that’s interesting.

NF: I mean it’s spectacular but again it was just – it was really disappointing.

ES: So was he happy with the installation in other places?

NF: It’s been shown a couple of times in the past and generally in very isolated spaces where there are no other works around it so there is no other light... that way it can really create a warm kind of glow.

ES: I’ll catch it one day... So the idea for an installation or sculpture, does that come to you in advance like or does it come very slowly, is there a sketch or...

NF: Look there is a whole range of things that inspire my work and... a range of materials. I read a lot of travellers’ narratives so in particular I like to read first hand journals that were written while people are travelling and particularly early Australian exploration narratives.

ES: Oh, yes. Ok. So I remember reading that you read one of the Antarctic explorer’s journals....

NF: Yeah. Yeah. From Scott’s journals they’re fantastic and you know, we all know that line when Oates says “I’m just going outside and might be sometime…”

ES: Yes. My son has recently read it and was blown away by it.
NF: I’m looking behind those moments in the narratives. I’m not interested in the whole narrative, I’m interested in those points where things occur where the language perhaps is deceptive or has other implications you know, I like that line. You wouldn’t step out of the tent for sometime and you wouldn’t allow people to do that unless you were in a very desperate situation, you know, they all going to die...

ES: Yes. Yes. It was a very clear subtext.

NF: Absolutely. And that narrative in particular is – look at those lines and one of my favourites is the very last line the journal, I think its about the last line that says we “have decided it will be natural” or something like it which I understand that people were quite puzzled by that line for some time and then they realised that what Scott was saying was that they were stuck in their tents, that they weren’t going to make it to their supplies. They knew that they were so close to actually making through but they weren’t going to make it, they were going to die. But they travelled with poison so they didn’t have to suffer and what that line is implying is that they weren’t going to take the poison and they were going to allow themselves to be frozen, be taken by nature because death should be natural and you know I just found that really, really beautiful.

ES: Oh, that’s incredible, isn’t it. And to be in that much pain and discomfort and still be able to make that decision is amazing...

NF: Well, how clearly they were making the decision...I don’t know... I mean that the text itself in the original document is barely legible like you can imagine he could barely write at that stage. But they would have known going into it, you know, the chance of dying along the way is as likely as the chance of making it through and that’s what I find intriguing about those narratives it’s that kind of search for something miraculous or you know, something astounding, something beyond the known world that they’re heading into and, of course, there is always a risk that whether you’re heading into space or whatever, canoeing from Australia to New Zealand or whatever, you still do this out of that experience.

ES: Yes, searching for that experience.
NF: And that experience is so extreme... So I’m really fascinated by that. Then I’m also fascinated by narratives that are more about having a desire for travelling to a lot of places but not actually leaving the home and understanding that when we travel there are problems and it’s never as romantic as it seemed. You know what I mean? The travel brochures are all beautiful to look at, you know, sand and surf and whatever cities that you are after but actually the reality is not. There’s always disappointment, there’s always tough times, there’s always risk, there’s always the unexpected and I’m of kind of frustrated by that too and the idea that possibly imagining the places and experiences is potentially more interesting at times than actually travelling. So a lot of my works are a little bit more about that, about imagining that ideal place rather than actually stepping into and facing the inevitable disappointments. But I’m also not interested...

ES: Any particular narrative that you can think of at the moment?

NF: You know, Huysman’s *Against Nature*? Look it has some very elongated, tedious narrative, but there are some really, really beautiful scenes where he actually kind of sets up his house like the environments he wants to experience so he discussed his travelling across the ocean so he gets salt water brought into his home and all of the ropes and canvases and all of these things and then sits back and kind of smells this water and just...

ES: Enjoys this from the comfort of his arm chair?

NF: That’s right and fantasises about being on that journey. He is talking about when he leaves the house, gets to a pub, sits as he drinks and decides that he is actually not going.

ES: That’s great.

NF: Yeah, I wouldn’t suggest that you read the entire narrative but if you did flick through you would probably find some of these beautiful snippets.

ES: Great. Okay, yeah.

NF: And again there’s also these beautiful themes where he kind of looks at parallels between the home and nature and that is something quite interesting
ES: Yeah. Yeah. So that obviously works.

NF: Yeah. Well, we bring so much nature into our home and it’s really controlled, lights we have, the stuff we have to make floors, we can bring this stuff inside in a really tamed and safe way and then the further we move from the home, the less safe it becomes. More particularly there is danger once you get out of the suburbs, you get to edge of the suburbs, you go out into the bush, the further you go the more chances that something is going to bite you and you will face some danger.

ES: I was so taken by your chandelier and I know it must be irritating to have people keep going back to that series of work but the ice orb in the chandelier, like I was actually not going to the MCA to write, I was just going through to look at some particular other work – I can’t remember what – then I ended up staying with your work for about an hour just sitting and writing and it’s always so powerful when a piece of art is both obtuse enough to engage you so that you bring your own interpretation to it but accessible enough as well like the meaning was - it was so clear that it was about nature and trying to bring that into the domestic space and our struggle with whether we want to be out there or inside, that was so apparent to me and yet it was completely obtuse as well. I was completely puzzled by why - and that’s when I started to look at your work.

NF: Yeah. So it’s certainly one of those things you want to happen with a work like that and you know, I don’t want illustrate bits in anyway(?) and I don’t want works to be pinned down like that, I think I kind of shuts the whole work really, really to a point...

ES: Totally and a big parallel with poetry - you want the approach to be accessible enough that people will not switch off but you also, you don’t want it to be transparent so that there is nothing to be gained or to be examined in it.

NF: And you know people will go back to these things, you know, and to look at them from another angle, and read them differently in another state of mind or something like that and for me that’s when work is successful, when people keep going back to it, keep seeing something new in it, keep trying to unravel that thing and its connection to their own existence.
ES: I’m good. Thank you very much. Yeah and... Nic’s not going to have anything, no, no. We’re good. Thank you very much. Great. Okay. You’re a cheap lunch partner. Well, I have to shout you another day how about that?

ES: Okay. Nic, can you think about one of your favourite works of your own and talk about the process of creating that work.

NF: Favourite work...

ES: Something you enjoyed working on...

NF: Yeah. It’s actually quite important to me that I like all of my works, you know, which not a lot of artists do – a lot of artists are kind of never happy with their works... but I don’t make a lot of work you know – I’m not very prolific. You know I’d be lucky to make 10 works in a year.

ES: That’s a lot.

NF: I mean I would like to make so many works.


NF: My favourite work, well, I guess one of the works I think is quite important to my practice and it’s the work that... ah, it’s not necessarily something that’s even a completely original idea but I think it says a lot about the types of things that I’m trying to describe but it’s the blank maps. Pacific Blue and Indian Blue. There are the maps of the two largest areas of ocean with no inhabitable land mass. So one of the maps is the ocean in the Indian Ocean and one maps the Pacific Ocean. And there’s something in that I like, it’s about getting lost, you know, that’s what those maps really are for me but also about a desire to get lost, having this blank map you’re going to follow a blank map...it’s a topic a lot of writers and artists have alluded to...it’s not that I’m the first person to do that but I’m intrigued by that and I think – connect it back to the earlier exploration narratives, so much of that work, so much of those travels were dealing with blank maps. They are heading into the blankness. Whether it’s on land or whether it’s dark heart of Africa, for example, or whether it’s heading off with the risk of falling off the edge of the earth or whatever else. We kind of we know these things and there’s again elements of fear in that because you’re
heading to the unknown. But I think a lot of people - there’s a security in that, a lot of what inspired people to do that, you know just read sea shanties for example. A lot of those sea shanties are all about actually going to another place, they’re about....

ES: Being out there.

NF: Yeah. Yeah. And I think for a lot of people and in my own experience in travel and that was interesting this came up in the discussions yesterday. And again it hooks back to that thing of what travel is about, that thing of whether you travel or not and what the desire is about. It’s kind of that desire to not be anywhere in particular.

ES: Yes. Yes.

NF: You know and that’s something I’ve struggled with a lot in my own life coming from Adelaide where as an artist for a long time I kind of thought I was at the most vacant creative space on earth and I spent a lot of time trying to get out of Adelaide, going to other places and really wanting to be in these other places but getting there and I kind of thinking, “No, I don’t really want to be here either”. I realised it was more of a case of anywhere but here, is what I kind of realised it was in the end. And even when I did head back to Adelaide I had no intention to stay there. I was living in Sydney for six months for a job then there was an opportunity in Adelaide with a nice job so I went back to do that job. Put all my stuff in storage here in Sydney intending to stay here, the job become a twelve month job and after that time I was actually settled then for the first time in about a decade. I was actually really happy to be there I kind of appreciated but that’s where my family was, my friends were, I think I’d also travelled enough that I had put enough networks down nationally, I had a gallery in Brisbane, works in the collections around the place so I didn’t actually have to be anywhere in particular and so that’s kind of working fine for me. But I spent a lot of time travelling to other places and really not wanting to be there, getting back home, back to Adelaide, not wanting to be there and it’s really is a dilemma. I ended up making quite a few works about that dilemma quite specifically so I guess those maps in a way, hook into that feeling that I get as well.

ES: Simryn Gill does work that taps into a similar feeling...
Yeah. Yeah. Well Simryn is always moving and she has connections to a lot of places, really quite emotional kinds of connections to places and people in those places. But for her own sanity she seems to like to keep moving.

Yeah. Yeah. I’m interested in its concept of this desire not to be anywhere in particular in the context of travel today like for - when I went off backpacking and you had no idea where you are going, there’s no way of contacting home, now I have this claustrophobic fear of what travel is becoming. You know I mean my son is in France at the moment and he is texting to me almost daily. Here’s your opportunity to “Go away” I’m telling him! So the world has moved on so much technologically where do you find those places now where you can go away...

Yeah, how do you get lost anyway, you know you can’t get lost, you just open your phone and push that button that tells you exactly where you are.

That’s right. That’s right.

And that is...

It’s very, it’s very in the moment that subject.

Yeah. But that is something else I search for is that opportunity to get lost and that’s something that I do enjoy travelling and it’s that travelling actually I enjoy much more than actually the destination to if I’m going back to those kind of sailor’s shanties for example, you know, they’re kind of saying goodbye to the earth and heading out not knowing where they are going but they just want to be out there and move around. So places like - I really enjoyed being in Venice because Venice you can just wander aimlessly through the streets. You don’t have to keep track of whether you’re turning left or right. You’re always going to find your way back. You know that sounds very safe and controlled...That’s something I found when I travel - I used to – when I first arrived in a new place I would do that thing I think a lot of people do, where you do a little circle around where you are staying then you do a slightly bigger circle and you slowly expand your knowledge about the place. But I have actually learned or I kind of try now to avoid to doing that, I have tried to actually just get out which you can do so much securely because, of course, I can track where I am at any time but if you can stand you know, three or four five hours just wondering aimlessly not
knowing where you are going, knowing that you might take a wrong turn, you might end up in a dodgy place but you know chances are you can discover places that you would not ever discovered if you will just look with the tourist group brochures or following those well-travelled paths and more often than not you find yourself back where you started anyway but just something more like walking in circles I think is the bottom line and you read that in a lot of travel narrative too you know Leichhardt, Leichhardt was renowned for travelling in circles you know, he couldn’t walk in a straight line and that seems to be a common dilemma. And you know they have shown it by blindfolding people and getting them to walk in a straight line that everyone will ultimately go in a circle.

ES: Go in a circle.

NF: It’s very, very difficult with your eyes closed to walk in a straight line, your body seems to automatically take you right back to that place or I think it actually works in a spiral...But that experience of getting lost that is just so rare in our world, to not know where you are, not know which direction to head.

ES: So when you go travelling, is that when some of your inspiration occurs like do you have a spark that sort of comes to you outside the studio. Do you have a studio? You work in...

NF: I have a studio. I have a studio at home. I think it’s always retrospective for me. I get immediate responses to places you know you need to cool to those responses to a place and it takes a little while to understand how they relate to all of those other things, that joy you may get from a place, that anxiety you get in a place they are really kind of immediate physical responses to a place. You can’t always respond rationally to those things on the spot because you are responding emotionally to that thing and when you’re responding emotionally, you know, you lose any rational kind of perspective. So it’s often only at some distance, you know, and that process is coming and going so when I travel I don’t really make work at all. You know I keep notes and collect stuff. Very rarely would I make work when I’m travelling even if I’m away for ... three months...

ES: It would be hard to do that ...
NF: Well, yeah. But even when I spend an extended period of time away I just don’t find it kind of conducive to making work. That’s not really what I’m after. I’m kind of just you know looking for those experiences and those many things...

ES: So it’s that need to go back to have time to settle with it...

NF: We need to settle off a little while and you know it’s when those experiences begin to kind of come into play with the materials that I gather around me and that’s not something that I do in a really logically methodical way that the play in my studio I’m not sitting there thinking about these experiences that I had but I know that they are influencing the things that I’m doing. I’m talking of that about that retrospective thing. It’s often not even when I have finished making the work but I know what that work is about, you know, the anchor work that just has been installed at the MCA that’s been installed three times now and every time I see it, I understand it better and the very first time I presented it I didn’t really understand it at all, you know, my own readings, have been really kind of literal readings of the chandeliers that have an anchor shape but I knew there was more going on than that and but I couldn’t find it and pin it down. ...They are not anchored to the earth but actually floating above the earth and particularly where it is installed now it is a reasonably glossy surface so you also get that reflection through so the surface becomes like a portal or something like that. But when I arrived here in Sydney few days ago, one of the cruise ships was in Circular Quay and I couldn’t help but immediately make, you know, I had this sudden understanding of the work because of this massive cruise ship there. You know if we think of the ship as a piece of earth that we are kind of taking with us, a piece of our home in fact, it’s not just a piece any earth it’s a piece of our own cultural understanding of the place that we come from. As soon as we anchor that thing again it’s suddenly connected back to the earth that becomes not just this floating thing but it becomes an island in itself. It’s in that ship heading to the harbour then to Circular Quay. I could see that that’s kind of what my work is doing if there’s a sense of movement in the work at the same time it’s kind of - whether it’s tethering the walls down to the floor or whatever it’s doing. There’s something about holding this thing that’s essentially only a temporary thing in space. And in a sense its kind of ...momentarily... this thing could actually take off again
which is what’s nice about the glossy floor … is it gives you that sense of movement and as you move around of course that reflection in the floor moves with you. So these kinds of experiences...

ES: Yes. Yes. So your perception of how the ground shifts with you...

NF: Yeah. Yeah. But a lot of the titling of my work is trying to detach us from that literal meaning as well… a lot of the time, I’m trying to suggest an absence so that the work or that something has happened without explanation or …it’s a hard thing to pin down… the work, the chandelier work, the ice work, the one that the MCA has is called The Door Was Open. It’s that thing, it’s as if someone suddenly came and appeared in your home and so how did you get in, this kind of thing. The first of those works is called I Think I Was Asleep so I try to get this implication this thing had just occurred in your absence and you suddenly come home and “Oh my God”, you know the freezer and or the chandelier have kind of embraced each other or … something has happened here. You know, I guess in a playful way, I like to think that perhaps the whitegoods, do have a life, you know and we all have those occasions, rarely perhaps where there’s a moment in a place where you expect something to be one way and actually something has happened… a bird’s got inside and you know knocked everything off the shelf or something like that and we have these moments where we can’t quite reconcile what’s going on because suddenly that familiar thing is ....

ES: And that controlled thing that we created and we thought we had control of – we actually don’t have control of it.


ES: It takes on a life of its own...

NF: And you know I mentioned things like the stone floor here and the fake wood and you know curtains or even clothing and things like that. We make these references to nature all the time, in a really controlled way but we all know that it’s actually quite fragile when it comes down to it, you know, there’s always a possibility that we’re going to come home and a pipe has burst and then we are walking into a flood you know so it goes from being a sanctuary, a secure sanctuary to being in this place
that’s chaos, it’s out of our control. You know those moments are, you know, potentially quite distressing for us. For all sorts of reasons, financial reasons, time wise, all of these reasons, this thing that we think that we – it kind of becomes that thing that anchors us to a place, can suddenly throw us out of place.

ES: Yeah. I had that experience the other morning when I was in the shower and the dog was going crazy and a bird had got in the house ...

NF: We’ve got a beach house and we’ve got a heater with a flue and the starlings and other little birds get in through the flue and if I haven’t been there for a week or a couple of weeks, they will get into the house and just go crazy inside the house because there’s a lot of windows and they just fly at the windows all the rice paper lanterns and things are all just destroyed and....

ES: You’d love that!

NF: In a way I kind of do.

ES: So what senses are involved when you’re inspired? Obviously music and music happens – it’s more like you’re using the music but do you use it to get inspiration as well? Do you have music playing while you’re thinking to create...

NF: I listen to a really wide range of music. My own music collection actually is incredibly poor. I tend to kind of surf radio depending on how I’m feeling and where I am and what I’m doing at different times. In my studio I generally like to listen to something fairly subdued but then when I’m moving I like to listen to something that’s actually really high paced and pumping. When I was in Barcelona or in the residency there, one of my greatest joys is to put my headphones in and I was there in October, November, December so throughout that Christmas period. And particularly mid-December when the streets were just packed day and night and you know you couldn’t move on the Ramblos and the main streets through Barcelona and I would just put my headphones in, pump the music out and then just go and join those crowds and be carried by those crowds and there was something about being in my own little kind of capsule - you know, I can’t speak any Spanish anyway....millions of tourists -
ES: One of my most memorable music and travel experiences was Barcelona and we’ve gone into the markets there at the Ramblos and I was having that away from home, I’ve being away a long time and I was broke, things are not good and the unromantic side of travel and they were pumping out the Divinyls and it was so emotive, that was my escape I wanted to be on that plane home in a second and just think it was a little bit – it was so loud that it took away everything else, the crowd and the noise.

NF: And something about you know losing yourself, allowing yourself to become saturated by music and then just allowing yourself to be carried by that movement of people... and again, it’s a little bit about, you know it’s not dissimilar to getting lost in a way although I kind of keep myself within the crowds. You know, you don’t really have that much control over where you’re going and how you move in those crowds.

ES: You don’t often get an opportunity to get lost...

NF: Absolutely and if you’re trying to get somewhere it’s a pain in the neck but actually if you’re not trying to get anywhere it’s a really interesting experience and I don’t think we would do that very often particularly in that Christmas rush, why would we do that for most of us it would be a completely insane thing.

ES: Being random atoms getting bounced around ....

NF: Absolutely, so it’s kind of extreme, just the general travel experience in a way because you’re always giving yourself over to another place, to another lifestyle, to another way of kind of being physical in space and you talked about emotion in Spain and the Spanish are incredibly emotional people, they’re the kind of people you can have a really intense argument with and then at the end of it you kind of kiss and everything is good and I really, really enjoyed that. You know a lot of other places I have been to that’s not the experience. I’ve been in China, you cannot have those kinds of arguments with people and expect everything to be okay. You know you have to go through the ceremony in front of someone and then you kind of get a bit intense but then at the end you need to make up too so you know...

ES: Sort of untangle yourself again.

NF: Yeah and in a lot of places people get quickly offended by it and I actually really love that in Spanish people, I find them much more in a way like the Australian
temperament and they have lots of little arguments I think that humour, you know, there’s a lot of that kind of – because Australians, for my experience, we kind of take the mickey out of one another as a way of endearing ourselves to one another. I kind of like that, that we can find - laugh at each other’s weaknesses in a way but in the understanding that we all have these weaknesses and that’s okay it’s kind of how we deal with that.

ES: And that’s why we connect.

NF: Yeah, but you know, even in the Netherlands it wasn’t like that at all. You have to be really careful because you can suddenly say something that’s putting people offside or you know this kind of strict adherence to political correctness, I found it quite problematic actually, you know they talked about tolerance in the Netherlands but I quickly discovered – I thought tolerance was - we’re all okay kind of thing but actually it’s not at all, it’s kind of you know, you can have the space over here and you can do whatever you want over here but there is this boundary.

ES: Yeah. You can’t cross it.

NF: That’s right. There is a place for everyone that actually we’re not going to interact which I’m generalising of course, but that is a really, really tricky thing, I found that every move I made was going to be assessed in terms of this kind of political correctness so it almost meant that you could hardly move anywhere and things become really stagnant and politically polite.

ES: I think it can be quite startling and especially with creativity because I mean even if you’ve got that political correct style running in your brain when you’re writing sometimes you’ve got to throw it out and let it go and then you might temper it later. You know because there is stuff that comes out that is not necessarily politically correct.

NF: Sure. Look you know and we all do it.

ES: You know switching the boundaries in creativity you have to have that.

NF: We all know that political correctness changes all the time too.

ES: That’s right.
Absolutely. Who has the authority, for sure, so you know I even live in an area that’s got a lot of Greeks and Italian and some Middle Eastern and now increasingly Asian and African people living in the area, very working class area and it’s kind of interesting on my street mixing with all of these people, I’m quite sociable with the people that I live around and they just refer to each other as wogs all the time. You know, you just kind of get into that, I mean they all know much better than I do exactly, you know, yes they are wogs but they are also Croatian, Serb, Italian or whatever, but I was with my family a couple of weeks ago, I made some comment about the wogs on my street and immediately they say that’s racist!, It’s about context isn’t it actually because if I was talking to the wogs on my street that’s fine! This is kind of beyond this thing of being political incorrect it’s been kind of claimed in a way. So it is a very, very fine line.

That’s right.

But I did laugh you know, thinking it was a racist term and they told me not to use it and it’s through this kind of being immersed in it but it loses that and it becomes actually an empowered term so these things are really, really slippery you know and it is about context ultimately.

Do you think the process of arriving at a work has changed over the course of your working years? What do you do, you sort of - you go travelling and you come back to studio and you’ve got an inkling of where you are going?

Probably not!

No. So you just start to put materials together, is it about putting – I mean like say Floe (which I am obsessed with) how did you get there? How did you get to hanging the crystal and …

Yeah, look, a lot of this comes about through the play in studio, it’s really important to me, you know.

The playing with the materials?

Yeah. Yeah. You know and I really try to focus on the studio being a place where I play. Where I am not seriously kind of developing concepts and then trying to find
ways to communicate that. I’m actually trying to make that a space... I guess what’s changed is that I have become comfortable knowing that the research is ongoing, you know, the reading is ongoing, the actual experience of these things is ongoing and so when I’m in studio these things are just there. They’re not things that I have to focus on because they are those things that just exist, things that interest me primarily so I don’t have to focus on them. They’re just part of the way that I perceive the world. So I don’t have to be trying to imbue the works with this kind of understanding.

ES: And what about the materials, are you looking for things all the time or you see something that you think, “oh, that would be great” or you just like the look of a type of material and bring into the studio and then start ...

NF: Yeah, more like that, you know I’m a collector of stuff. I mostly use things that already exist in the world. I could never be painter because I could never mix a colour and paint and that would seem too random to me. I need to find that thing that has that colour. And occasionally I do search for things. Many years ago, there was Jason recliner that sat off the wall – it was like a landscape. And I really wanted that kind of grass-green, Jason recliner and I searched and searched and searched. And eventually actually found one and the name of the colour which was printed on the label on the bottom of the chair (which is beautiful) - the name of the vinyl was Hunter Woodland Green and it was just perfect, you know. They are the little things I guess ultimately bring me to a decision

ES: Somewhere out there is someone with a triple barrelled name of Hunter Woodland Green...

NF: Hunter Woodland Green. It was lovely because it wasn’t just a flat color, it was a slightly varied in colour

ES: You are quite into words, is your title really important?

NF: Yeah. Yeah. And sometimes more so in the past the names of materials often would influence the names of the works, not in that case. But there was another work that was produced three years after that for example that was a table, a dining table that was set above the floor in the space that sat on the lean about 15 degrees and this
table sat on that and there was stack of crystal glasses that then built these
mountainscape on top of that table. You may not have seen this. But it became a
really fragile thing, they were sure it was going to collapse during the exhibition but
didn’t luckily but it was really, really precarious and the landscape was based on
some maps, some contour of maps I got in the Bohemia region.

ES: Oh that’s right, the Bohemia crystal.

NF: That’s right. The Bohemia crystal and the name of these goblets was Tosca. So there
just seems to be this really nice parallel between this thing that was about to fall and
you know with the narrative with Tosca, it kind of reboots you there so the work it
became Bohemia Tosca, that’s the name of the work. And even though you know the
work wasn’t about the opera, it was something that’s in most people’s
understanding of the world and of theatre and the performance and narratives, do
we know the full story? They probably know what is actually there, you know in an
emotional state. So these things just helped me to build that understanding about
work, it also loosened up in way and provided that opportunity for your own
understanding of these narratives and your own emotional kind of connections to
them to influence the way they can understand that work. The nice thing too about
using found materials is that they are generally already imbued with a history. So like
the works Floe and Jump Up which was more recently produced at the Art Gallery of
South Australia. It’s all found, all crystal items, you know, and that kind of...

ES: How did you find that much crystal? Where did you find that?

NF: Well, I started collecting it when I was living here in Sydney for Floe piece and then I
just kind of kept collecting it and then when I was asked to do a work for the Samstag
Museum which ended up being the Floe piece, I kind of wanted to work with crystal
– I knew the space very, very well and I was offered basically the end of the gallery
to produce any work in. I knew that they have these hanging points in that space so
I kind of thought about how I might suspend something in there.

ES: So for you, as someone who is looking at controlled environments and almost the
theatre type scenario, the site must be phenomenally important.
NF: For a lot of work, it is. I mean there were certainly other works, the more commercial works that ...

ES: That are less dependent on location...

NF: Yeah. Yeah. Although still I produce works by commission for people that are very, you know, dependent on the locations that they are going to. But I have to make a living too. So most people won’t pay for something like Floe in their home...

ES: I’d like to but...

NF: Just did one about - two months ago in Adelaide for some collectors down there, above their lounge room, they’ve got this space, it’s probably as high as this and it’s got windows high like that. They were away for a month, they have this engineer that installed it up in the ceiling and then suspended it, it’s actually Cloudscape. It’s quite beautiful but I think they are incredibly brave to take on the work like that, the maintenance of it and they’re serious collectors, it’s a house that’s just a salon hung with beautiful contemporary work, all the amazing artists you’ve ever heard of before from around the world. So you know, working for them made me anxious, it made them really anxious but I think there’s something about that anxiety too that inspires me.

ES: But the maintenance on a work like that would be substantial...

NF: Definitely. Yeah. Yeah. They have to blow it down and I made this blower for them and so they have to blow it down about every two months and then every 18 months to two years, they will have to take down all the work in this place and actually spray it down and pretty much hand wash it. So it’s a massive, massive exercise, they would have to take on because they love the work so much.

ES: That must been so gratifying that people love your work to that extent that they will -- I mean it’s quite a metaphor, isn’t it? You know, you’re back in a domestic space and people care for, these objects in the way that the crystal would have been put on display in the special cabinet and now its hanging in that different way but it’s something that still needs to be cared for.
Yeah. And the crystal, you know it’s quite a nice thing to work with because it’s a kind of historical item. It’s not something that people often have in their homes now. Although a large crystal kind of feature piece like a chandelier or something is very popular now, not when I started working with them but unfortunately it is now. The crystal used to be, you know, a wedding present, you know everyone got this for the wedding so my family did have some crystal at the back of the cupboard for special occasions, but those special occasions never occurred, you know.

No it would never come out.

Yeah. Yeah. So everyone knows the stuff whether you actually had some or not. People kind of appreciate its beauty but also its kitsch nature and we have this strange relationship with it in that we have the desire for it but we also don’t want be seeing to be engaging with what it suggests and what it represents.

That’s what I was trying to capture with the first poem - you know it was very precious to us to have chandeliers in our lounge room. We may have been uncertain why we wanted to have a chandelier because it wasn’t who we really were. We weren’t very glamorous or wealthy people and that’s what the chandelier represented.

Yeah. Yeah but it’s about desire, isn’t it. It’s a desire to have some grander lifestyle that you do. I didn’t grow up in that sort of home at all. The home I grew up in was an architect designed, very minimal house up in the hills.

Right.

But I think it was still desire for these things, you know, but even in the home now I don’t have one in my home. I mean, my home is two shops, I rent two shops. One of them I live in and the other one is my studio and as much as my studio slips into my home all time. I couldn’t hang a chandelier - I mean I might and look I have in the past but it’s not kind of — it’s part of the material I work with.

I find them quite absurd.

I think they are over the top.

I mean growing up I thought they were fabulous.
NF: But they have the nice elements of nature, you know it’s either water or its glass dripping off of them, you know, to have a flickering candle and flame, totally, yeah, yeah. You know the ceiling roses – I became really conscious of this looking at the anchor work, it’s that kind of filigree work and the kind of natural elements that are within the design of those things and they are quite beautiful, incredibly stylised and they’re all heavily, stylised items. But if they didn’t have that reference to nature, they wouldn’t have the appeal, you know, even though we kind of try to scrub that back and purify it. If there wasn’t that reference to a leaf in the ceiling rose it just becomes a design element and it’s much less desirable and if we can still have hints of that…. You can cut glass but it doesn’t have to look like a water drop because some chandeliers and cut glass don’t look like that but it’s important in those works that it does look like that, you know, that the candle has a flame, you don’t put any bulb in a chandelier - it has to have that reference back to fire. So you’ve got fire and ice within this one, beautiful item as well which I really, really like. And I guess while at first it seemed too obvious in connection when I first put the chandelier and the ice together I thought this isn’t going to work because I got this thing that represents ice and I got ice, you know, they’re going to negate each other surely, but actually the balance, I think, is just right because the ice is confounding too and most people don’t believe it’s ice. They say, “Oh, what is it?” and I go, “it’s ice” and they go, “yeah, but what it’s made of” and I said, “it’s ice” because we can’t fathom ice growing in a room that’s 23 degrees temperature, you know, how does that happen? And when you think about it, no. I mean, I don’t know about you but I had time in share houses, you got your refrigerators and ice flowing out of the freezer because the fridge door doesn’t shut and I refer to it as the glacier in your refrigerator. So we do know these things happen.

ES: You will be pleased to know that in our freezer there is a plastic polar bear. He arrived in there sometime around 1999 and he has become a permanent resident.

NF: Beautiful.

ES: And I don’t know why, no one ever knew how he got in there but I went to the freezer one night and he was in there and “why is he in here?” and everyone went I don’t know.
NF: I love it. Yeah. So there’s all these things and yet I am also inspired by the challenge to make something work, so that *Floe* work, for example, when I first built that in my studio I kind of built a small section of it, you know, I suspended a small section with terrible lighting and thought, okay I think this can work but when I went into the gallery I’d never built the work before, I only built this tiny little section. So there was this serious risk that it could fail really badly, it could look like crap. But I think I know my materials well enough that I can take those risks but there is always a risk and that keeps me going and keeps me excited by work and in fact once I’ve made one thing and it’s successful, I have no real desire to make many more lighting chandelier and ice works but I could happily have just made the one that ended up with the NGV collection but there’s a lot of demand for those works. I was never going to make another one of them, a gallery contacted me about showing one of those works and so I contacted the NGV and said can we arrange a loan of that work and the time span is too short to do that and they said just make another one, but I don’t want to make another one, you know, this one already exists but I did think about this so each one of these is slightly different. There’s about five of them I think but there’s a shift on each one and I have to do that for my own sanity, you know, to keep it interesting for me. I can’t make editions of work.

ES: When do you have a sense that a work is finished like - because I’m really pleased to hear you say that you don’t have favourites – that you are happy with all of your work...

NF: That may be a bit of exaggeration but -

ES: I like that. But when did you - when do you stop adding a bit or tinkering or – when do have a sense that you’re done because that’s something I’m really interested in, parallels with writing poetry because poets can keep tinkering and playing with a poem and suddenly they have overdone it...

NF: Sure. Yeah. Yeah. I can visualise that ... 

ES: Yeah. But with a poem you can go back to a previous draft. With a visual piece maybe you can’t go back, it’s hard sometimes.
NF: No. That’s sort of a bit of a dilemma. And I think you know I work with really a fairly small range of materials and I guess I try to get to know what those materials can do if I can. You can push them. But certainly I’m a big believer in pushing it over the edge. I mean you have to work out where that point is, where the thing kind of collapses and fails and I teach, I’ve been teaching for more than 15 years now and it’s something that I always encourage my students to do and I always stress to them that I much prefer to see them push up to that point that it fails and I’ll appreciate that much more and they’ll get much better grades for doing that than if they hold back, you know, I’m taking it this far because it’s right because you can never be sure and sometimes you have to push over that edge and then start again and push it over another edge and eventually you’ll find out how close you can take it to that. So it’s probably not that different to poetry, yes, sometimes you ruin a work and you can throw it away and start again but that’s not necessarily that hard.

ES: But sometimes we have to do that in order to realise what a good work is, what a good poem is, there are sometimes you just can’t actually see it’s not quite there if you haven’t pushed it over the edge and come back to it.

NF: That’s right. That’s kind of that risk I like too, you know, I guess trying to get it really close to that edge but then my work is seriously controlled, you know. I am a complete control freak, I want every element to be exactly right like with Floe and your suspended crystal works have to have a perfectly flat underside so that they really do look like they are floating on the surface. That’s really important to me, one piece of crystal drops and totally breaks that. The lighting that I used on those works is a particularly horrible light that you wouldn’t put in a natural environment, it makes your skin look green and I don’t use it galleries because it doesn’t make you feel comfortable but by putting it on that work in an enormous space, it kind of sets that work apart from everything else and makes it something other because it’s not normal light that we naturally exist with.

ES: You actually do the electricals by yourself. Like you said, a lot of your work has light in it...

NF: Yeah. Look for many years I did, increasingly, of course, I can’t do it because these things need to be approved. I work as much as I can in 12 volts. The first couple of
times that I played around with refrigerators, you know my first time, I was fairly convinced that I could do it. I just bought a couple of old fridges and pulled the motors and everything out of them and started just turning them on in air and of course they did go iced and then I started ringing around refrigeration mechanics, trying to get some people that I could work with and I kept speaking to these people but well most were not interested in working with me at all, like they kind of, we work to prevent that happening so the idea of actually making it happen for these people was just wrong and they actually had never thought about it and for them it just wasn’t their job to do that. You know so I ended up working with – I found a couple of young apprentices who were prepared to work with me.

ES: So you put them on the wrong path training them to ice up freezers?

NF: A little bit but they loved the challenge and I’m sure it was very educational for them and actually when I was in Sydney I did find a refrigerator repairer ironically called the Ice Man. It wouldn’t work here a couple of times here and in fact he re-gassed the work at the MCA before they hung up this time. He was a really lovely guy and went out of his way. I had trouble with the work one day just before an exhibition and he dropped this job that he was in the middle of and came out to get the work going then and he brought his whole extended family along to the opening, it was just beautiful. He was so proud of it and if you find the right people that take ownership of these things it’s really lovely. I’m really happy if people will do that because I rely on these people so much to do these things for me.

ES: Well some of these skills are really undervalued too...

NF: And the right people in those trades are looking for a way that they could do something more interesting than they do in their day-to-day life.

ES: Exactly. Because they’re interested in the technical aspects and applying them somewhere else.

NF: Yeah. Yeah. And you know it’s not easy to do those ice works that I make or even, you know, it took the MCA about three or four months to get that work to just flow to that point where it wasn’t going to be too big. You know because it is drawing
moisture out of the atmosphere every time you reinstall that work in a new space it has to be tweaked though it’s easy once you know how, you can set an on-off timer...

ES: Okay right.

NF: You know if you change your air-conditioning, when I was talking to them the other day and they just recently had a shift with the air-conditioning, for their summer air-conditioning cycle and very likely that’s going to change the growth of that ice in there. If you got a really, really busy day with lots of people in the gallery those subtle changes can really change the way that it grows but it is now pretty stable. They kept it frosted for about six months which is excellent you know and it’s very, very hard to manage it like that.

ES: Does it drip?

NF: Ideally it shouldn’t drip and it doesn’t drip anymore but when they first set it up they had a lot of problems with that and they were really paranoid about that because it was an OH&S risk. So they were defrosting it quite regularly by putting a bucket under it and just completely melting it down and then starting it up again and then just simply stopping the dripping by doing that and you know then we had a few conversations about how they could control that. It shouldn’t drip but again you get a pretty big crowd going in there standing near it about 10 minutes and that can be enough for the thing to start dripping. But that’s kind of nature and that’s all of that stuff that I’m interested in. But I think it’s important that I understand these technologies, that I understand something about electronics and I understand something about refrigeration so that I can communicate with these people.

NF: So that’s been an interesting learning curve and I actually almost sat in on some of the course for refrigeration and air-conditioning apprentices. I was invited to do that at one of the TAFES in Adelaide, I didn’t do it in the end, I didn’t think it was going to be worth it and I think that I had gained the skills that I needed at that point - doing that would just allow me to do more of the work myself. But on the other hand I’m happy to hand that over. It is something I quite enjoy and I’ve got particular people that I work with. It can be tricky, you know, sometimes they have lots of
creative ideas that they want to share with you. Other things they suggest could really work, you just have to cue them a little bit.

ES: Yeah, maybe you should try sometimes if that’s what you want.

NF: The younger refrigeration apprentices were like that they just have ideas all the time and things they should do. So you can help them on that.

ES: I cannot imagine this but, I’m about to ask about being blocked, do you get blocked? Because you don’t sound like...

NF: You mean like kind of ...

ES: You know in your inspiration...

NF: Not really. No. I mean there are...

ES: You don’t have any block about you...

NF: There are momentary anxieties I guess if I have a show in two months’ time and I actually don’t have anything that I think is finished then that would bring anxious moments about that.

ES: It’s more about having things finished.

NF: It’s generally, actually, when I’m probably anxious about other things that are going on, to be honest. You know at times you’re teaching for example - when you’re working closely with students, you know, that can take a lot of your time and a lot of headspace. So if you’ve got students or you know if I’m taking too much teaching something like that.

ES: So what years do you teach?

NF: Look, I teach a range of different years from undergraduate through to honours and there is a lot of one to one supervising of students.

ES: And what school?

NF: I’m in Adelaide Central School of Art which has been around in South Australia for a long time. It was quite traditional, it’s a skills based school as well so the students have to be drawing all the way through a degree for example which is very rare. Like the National Art School I guess.
ES: One of the artists I have done some collaborative work with went through the National Art School while we were working together so I am familiar with the teaching there.

NF: National Art School has been going through a lot changes in the last five to ten years and our school is too so it is really broadening what we do and increasing the staff skill level and I head up a department that is called contemporary studies which kind of bridges history, theory and studio. So helping students through from first year all the way through to understanding how studio really operates, how your own studio operates and what you do in studio that might be influenced by the history and theory and by that skill base and how these things come together through, I guess generally we talk in terms of an action reflection. You know it’s generally easy but the bigger ones that you go into studio and you do that stuff whatever that thing might or you make the plan, you do that stuff and then you kind of assess what you’ve done which is what I do in my studio. You know I go in there and I might have some stuff around me, I might decide I’m going to do something with that stuff, just to see what happens and then sit back and look at it, see whether there is anything that is worth pursuing a bit further, whether it has been a complete failure. And then you know maybe pursue a few of those things that look like they got potential and it’s that constant kind of process although I do ask my students to assess their work in terms of history and theory more than I’ve been consciously doing but they’re having to write papers about their work. They have to do that. I don’t.

ES: I feel their pain.

NF: Look, I do too. It’s the unfortunate nature of academia.

ES: That’s one thing I think I am probably jealous of the visual artist for – when they are blocked - because I think being physically active, being able to bring materials together would be great when you are blocked because I think you can get out of the cerebral - where as a poet when you are blocked words are very hard to get away from an intellectual process.

NF: That is also why I like the thing about my studio as a place of play. You know to not think about it as a place where I have to make serious decisions although I am making
serious decisions all time, of course, and these things are slowly being refined through that kind of action reflection but I just have to have faith that something will come out of that you know and they will always you know maybe I will experience that one day you know go through that kind of anxiety and I certainly go through anxieties at different times but it doesn’t tend to be in the studio it tends to be when I’m installing, you know, like I said before about not knowing how it’s going look in the end. Having this vision in my mind or about in drawing it up as much as I can and you know having the interior architect skills I’ve got so I rely a lot on like collage and photoshop and I tend to run things through all of this process. But like the work I just installed for this couple, I photoshopped up an image of what I thought it would look like and when I gave them that image they went, wow, that’s fantastic and I said you’ve got to realise this is a photoshop image. It won’t look exactly like this but this is what I’m aiming for and luckily they had faith that I could pull it off. But I was extremely anxious and you know I spent a week hanging the work and then I had to go to Brisbane for a show up there. When I finished that week of installing it I wasn’t happy with it at all. It just wasn’t right but it was kind of lucky that I had been going away for a week and I came back and I immediately knew what had to be done so I de-installed about a third of it and re-hung it and then I was happy with it.

ES: Oh Nic so much work.

NF: But that kind of anxiety of going away then - if it’s just not right and these people are spending a fortune on this work and they are coming home in two weeks and you know they want to see something that they desire, you know, that nice thing that I think occurred when I first set up Floe and then occurred with this work was that when I got it right it exceeded my own expectations and I know that it exceeded the client’s expectations. You know the Floe work that was the most fabulous thing, to get it finished, to put the lights on, to clear the space and then stand back and look up and go, it’s right. You know, because they are all elements that are important to me and you know we were talking about space before and that relationship to space and even if I’m setting up a commercial show in a gallery I keep going back to the entrance. It’s all about first impressions and then how you can take someone on the journey from that. So with that Floe work when you walk into the gallery you see
that as a single suspend of landscape but then as you begin to move around it you realised that actually that *Floe* is two islands that kind of interlink. There’s a sense that you could move between them but there’s not enough space, you know it’s only that much gap in the small areas so your mind will travel you through these spaces.…. 

**ES:** That is to do with desire I think too and wanting to do something that you can’t quite manage to actually do.

**NF:** Yeah. Yeah. That’s right, the impossible kind of dream. But it also animates the thing and I guess it’s a little bit like the chandeliers and the MCA too. I was talking about that reflection in the floor and how beautiful that was even though that’s not something I planned in the work but it just works beautifully and because it keeps the thing moving and keeps it active and activated, I guess, if that makes sense.

**ES:** Yeah, absolutely. Okay. Sorry, I’m thinking of what I haven’t…

**NF:** I know you had an article there that had a picture of one my little boats in the bottles. We haven’t talk about those works today. Do you want to know something about them?

**ES:** I do. I do. Yeah.

**NF:** Well, this particular image...

**ES:** That’s amazing that image. What is that actually?

**NF:** So what you are looking at there is you are looking down into a crystal decanter into a little model boat that I put in there. And that is...

**ES:** So that’s actually a photo, is it?

**NF:** That’s a photo of the work and that’s the best view can get of the boat because...

**ES:** It’s an amazing photo because it almost looks like it’s been painted. I could really - I was looking at it last night and trying to work out what’s going on. I can see now.

**NF:** So that’s a model of Baudin’s boat, in South Australia we have Encounter Bay which is where Baudin and Flinders, the French and the English were mapping Australia from different directions and they met in Encounter Bay - it’s a beautiful narrative.

**ES:** Now, did he go to Kangaroo Island?
NF: Well Encounter Bay is where Kangaroo Island is.

ES: Okay because I was down in Kangaroo Island doing some writing at some point. How do you spell Baudin?

NF: I have dyslexia too that’s the other thing I haven’t spoken about.

ES: I think I’ve read about Baudin because I was writing about lighthouses down in Kangaroo Island and I was doing some reading around the people who had mapped that area.

NF: So that’s the model of Baudin’s boat and actually that work is two big decanters, square decanters of heavily cut crystal lit from underneath. Each one has a boat - they’re not identified specifically as Flinders and Baudin’s boats but this one here you can see the French sail on it – that’s how I knew it was Baudin’s boat and the other one has got the English sail, the one with red cross. So they are the only things that identified them as things that might be in opposition or things from a different place. And then what that work was called it probably says that somewhere but generally these things aren’t named in a way that actually gives you much of indication of that too.

ES: I love that. Are you still doing this? Is that a one-off?

NF: Well, I started doing them - in about 2004 I did the first. Flinders and Baudin are both successful in their own right. There was quite - I mean the experience of these boats coming together it must have been amazing. Thinking that their countries were all mapping this country that they both wanted to claim from different directions, you know there’s something kind of really nice in all these elements and that. I like where I came to work with the locals so I often work with you know like Burke and Wills’ narratives, Flinder’s narratives.

ES: So that was in Encounter Bay.

NF: That’s why it’s called Encounter Bay because of the encounter that happened there. But last year from Melbourne Art Fair, I made about another eight or ten boats in bottles and they were all boats that had either vanished without trace off the coast of South Australia. I’m quite fascinated by that as well, partly because my own
ancestors were some of the very early settlers of South Australia. One of the reasons they came to Australia was because an uncle had been with the navy and the ship had vanished. And they were looking to see if he could still be alive because a lot of ships you know they just - got trouble with the ships so they ended up on an island, to try and repair the ship, things like that and in those early times, the ships weren’t recorded as lost. They were recorded as overdue so the ships were never lost because they might turn up again. So this is simply quite fascinating, I think, about ships that vanished, that never ever knowing what’s happened to those people or where they are or will they turn up, will the ship turn up? So I made a number of boats in bottles with those boats that vanished and some just little fishing boats, some of them were trader ships like those that vanished off around Kangaroo Island and Kingscote, that area. And another series were boats that had – hundreds - and so the others were wrecks actually, ships that had very tragic endings, major loss of life... So there’s two different elements that I’m quite fascinated by – so a whole stack of boats in bottles.

ES: I love it.

NF: So some are in the tiny little perfume bottles too which were some of my favourites.

ES: Yes, but once again it’s also that - I mean even if we don’t know all of the history that is fascinating itself but if you start containing something that should be out in the wild ocean in a highly decorative domestic element...

NF: But they are also elusive, you know, while we can see them in there, there’s no way that you can see that boat clearly and some of the more recent ones I have done, you can barely see the boat at all. You’re going to go take the stopper out and look in, there is a beautiful little boat in there. But you know I mentioned my dyslexia before and while I am a pretty confident writer, I’m a terrible reader. I read things incorrectly so I’m only aware of that because when if I read aloud people correct me, “oh no, that’s not what it says”, you know, the street signs, anything like that. I misread them all the time. I don’t really bother about too much, its part of the way that I am and I’m conscious that if I read a novel or anything, I’m quite likely reading a different story to whatever one else is reading. I’m actually, I often have to reread things if I can’t make sense of them, you know, true, because I completely misread it
and sometimes I read it back several times before I read it correctly and I feel I kind of go through very systematically. I think as a result of that, that’s kind of why I’m not interested in entire narratives, you know. I’m looking for these little gems so while I talk about these historical kind of narratives, I couldn’t lead you through someone’s narrative. I couldn’t tell you start to finish even if I bring the narrative what that was about, well I’m not interested in that. It’s the little points that have a resonance with that I’m interested in. So I think that influences a lot of the way that I work. I was diagnosed as having a specific learning difficulty when I was at school. But what specifically I don’t know. It hasn’t been detrimental to me.

ES: So your perspective of the reading you do could be quite different and everyone brings their own perspective. I always choose a book by opening it and reading at random pages. I would never look at the first page.

NF: And there are some writers I can’t read because of the way they construct their sentences and things like that, I find it very, very hard. If people are kind of describing an action and then describing a thing, I find it really hard to read that, you know, something about the arrangement of language so there are some authors who I really admire but I just can’t read their stuff.

ES: And how do you like poetry, do you read any?

NF: I don’t read a lot of poetry, I have to confess. It’s something I’m certainly curious about that creative use of language. I’m very, very curious but you know I guess it’s not something I’m exposed to.

NF: About the trophies – you know I guess they have a logical place in what I do and the kind of work that I make in terms of success and failure and that risk of failure and you know.

ES: And in the home like everyone has got trophies...

NF: Yeah. Somewhere you know not quite as many when I was a kid.

ES: No I didn’t have them either...

NF: So like you’re saying that – these days every kid has a trophy, every child play wins a prize kind of thing but some people will never receive trophy in their life even though
for them some of those small challenges that we’re talking about before of just waking up, stepping out of bed, you know, it can be a massive challenge for some people whereas some people it’s whether you get to the top of the mountain and things like that.

ES: That’s right. Yeah.

NF: So I had this idea that there was something about the trophy that had potential for quite some time. And I was in Canberra with a friend and she was working at the War Memorial and I dropped her off to work one morning and she said that I should come and have a look and I kind of, “War, not really interested”, and she said “no, just come in and have a little look”. I spend all day in there and I had to go back the next day with my camera because it just blew me away. I mean not just the artefacts particularly some of the trench art I have to say I really, really love but just the display and how they built the kind of heroes out of these narratives that often were fictional and the more we learn the more we know...

ES: Going as a child it was really dreary but it has taken on a new life.

NF: Ah, it’s amazing. But even the dioramas and things like that but while I was there, there was an exhibition on sport and war that just happened to be on at the time. And one of the things they had there was this crappy little trophy made out of ration tins from the trenches when they played a “World Cup” and they’d made this crappy little trophy and it was the most beautiful, beautiful thing and it kind of answered my questions about how I could express this thing about failure within an object because this was, you know, a trophy to success but the thing was just so fragile and pathetic, so it’s beautiful so then the first trophies I made were actually made out of crappy tin cans and things like that.

ES: Yes. I think I have seen medals also.

NF: I think medals as well. They are also made out of that stuff, they were perhaps less successful than the trophies and the trophies in particular with the small achievements, you know, make it through the day, getting out of bed, refusing to compete...this kind of thing.

ES: They’re very evocative...
NF: They work quite well and people related to them really, really nicely but then I had an opportunity...

ES: But there are people who, it really is a struggle, you know, for some children you know, getting to school deserves a trophy.

NF: Sure. Yeah. And I actually think for all of us at certain times in our life, the challenges that we face and the things that are most difficult for them, things that on any other day or for any other person you just do them without thinking about it.

ES: But people who for example have a mental illness, people will say to them, sort of pick yourself up and get going, but getting out of bed, you know, getting dressed can be a real struggle.

NF: Sure. Yet why get out of bed you know. Why bother to do that. So, yes, I made that set and then I was asked to be involved in a show up in Brisbane and they wanted to commission a new work so that was when that trophy work that you have a picture of was made so there’s about just several hundred trophies in that collection of trophies and so it becomes a really beautiful almost like a Rococo installation. And they look more like they are kind of dancing or celebrating than anything else when they are on display. There’s also this violence in it, they’ve all got bats and things – and once you stick them all together they’re kind of in this battle as well. You know so there are beautiful, beautiful elements to that work that I think people would relate to it too and the people that relate most of these works are people aren’t sports minded people although sports minded people too I’m sure appreciate it in their own way.

ES: Oh yeah well I mean my boys are totally sporty and they think it’s hilarious that I’ve never had a trophy in my life that...

NF: But commonly artists aren’t interested in sport, you know, some are for sure but generally you know typical thing going on.

ES: No, typically the ones on the sidelines wondering “why are they so worried about winning this thing?”
NF: Yeah. Yeah. They’re just not interested in this kind of physical thing, they’re more interested in and engaging with things and people. You know, I think artists kind of appreciate it in a different way too, you know, and people that aren’t sports minded.

ES: You say you’re not prolific but there are so many different works I’ve seen as well lots of different types of work?

NF: I try to keep it moving, you know and that’s just to keep myself sane in a way...

ES: I haven’t seen anything talking about the work with the footstools.

NF: Yeah. That was a really, really early work. I don’t know if, anything that is on the website.

ES: I couldn’t find it.

NF: I have a catalogue for you in my bag remind me to give it to you when you leave. Its a catalogue from the Melbourne Art Fair show which actually has some images in it of works you may or may not have seen and the text by Lisa Slade and Louise Martin-Chew so I’ll give that to you as well, just to give you a bit more info.

ES: Great. Excellent, I’m feeling like I’m getting there. I know it can be quite exhausting going through all this stuff.

NF: No. This is good. It’s nice to chat about this stuff.


NF: Much easier than just talking about one work which is what I had to do yesterday, when I had to talk for 15 minutes about Anchor.

ES: What happens when you finish, like a series of works, so how do you feel when that’s done, is that a good feeling, is it relief or is it an empty feeling?

NF: I think you go through all those things to be honest with you, there is certainly one point you know, like I was saying before when I get that work installed, that’s an incredibly satisfying state to be in and I’ll be on a high then for - you know, a couple of days. But there’s usually some kind of crash after that which is not, you know, necessarily a kind of lamenting or anything - there’s not something specific I can put my finger on but I think going through those anxieties particularly in that very end
stage where you’re having to make those final decisions and try something out. There are those anxieties and so I think once you actually achieve that thing that you’re happy with, you know, that is incredibly satisfying and you can feel really, really good about it. Whether anyone else cares about it or not doesn’t matter. I’m happy with it and that’s what ... You do then probably fracture a little bit after that...

ES: Yeah. A bit of an anti-climax... you couldn’t sort of go and launch yourself into another piece of work ....

NF: It’s something like that, you know, because in the lead up you know, you’re going to sleep with the work on your mind, you’re waking up with the work on your mind and I’m sure it’s likely lots of different kinds of occupations. So you’re waking up, what’s inside your mind, you do your morning things and then you’re straight into it you’re trying to resolve these issues and then suddenly you’re in a state where you’re not carrying any of those things. So you’re kind of like nothing going, oh well, what am I going to do today? I’ve done it, I’ve done everything that I need to do. I mean it doesn’t last very long, you just start just playing with stuff again or find yourself occupied in some other way. There’s always something else going on. It depends on what it is I’m doing and how important that is, or who else is invested in it, all of those kinds of expectations and agendas that come from outside.

ES: What about other artists, is there anyone particularly whose work has inspired you or that you connect with the work? People you work with?

NF: There was Dutch artist, Bas Jan Ader. He was an artist I came across when I was in the Netherlands that I had never heard of before. But he did a whole series of work that was called The Search for the Miraculous which was really interesting work and he was interested in a lot of the things that I’m interested in. It tied in really quite nicely although he was around – he might been in being late 70’s, early 80’s. But the work that he has left that speaks the strongest to me, there’s a lot of work about emotions, one of his work was a little post card and just a really simple piece, there’s a picture of him crying and on the back he had just written in his own handwriting “I’m too sad to tell you”. That kind of wasn’t - kind of directly saying anything but it was just about the state of mind and the capturing of it so a really beautiful gesture and something about that most of us can relate to it at some stage in our life whether
it’s a momentary or whether it’s kind of an extended period of depression or whatever. But his final work where he set out to sail from the Netherlands to the UK in a twelve foot yacht and that was - turned out to be the final in his series of the search for the miraculous works. So he set out in the Netherlands and it’s meant takes him a couple of days, several days something like that. And he had no communication and he vanished. He never turned up at the other side. There were several reports it was him, it was a set up, you know of course, he is searching for the miraculous. He is never going to turn up. But then about 12 months later his body washed up on the coast of the UK so he had drowned, well completely vanished. He never turned up. He was a teacher as well and you know all of his students just thought it was this construct but clearly it wasn’t because two decades later… he has never turned up anywhere.

ES: That’s amazing.

NF: Yeah. Yeah. So it’s something really, really beautiful in that, not that I’d put myself in that position but just to go through that, and leave such a beautiful and a emotive heritage, he is just incredible given the way he named the thing, you know, *The Search for the Miraculous*.

ES: The irony in it as well is that life is miraculous and he dies in the pursuit.

NF: So he’s probably one of my all time favourite artists. Very, very interesting.

ES: Okay. That’s great. That’s perfect.

NF: But generally I admire artists who do things that I couldn’t do. I think it’s the other thing, you know. I admire amazing painters and people who can achieve things that I wouldn’t think of or wouldn’t attempt to do -

ES: Okay. That’s pretty good. We talked about writing and something I’m particularly interested in, how do you feel about the interview? How do you feel about articulating your thoughts on the process of inspiration, is it something you find easy to speak about, I guess talking about your work is something you’re familiar with...

NF: Yeah. It’s something I do all the time when I’m doing artist talks. I feel like I’m just beginning to say the same thing so it’s actually nice probably to do it more like an
interview because I can respond to your questions rather than just give you my rave. Which is very standard I have to say, you know, I’ve thinking that every time I do my talk, yesterday, the one I was interviewed about the work, they reported that and then I have to stand in front of the work and talk about it and it’s just this constant kind of regurgitation that won’t stop, it sounds a bit tedious but you’ve...

ES: So I mean, my next question was is there something you feel is private or hard to access that feeling?

NF: Not really. It is something I have to encourage my students to do, as professionals you need to be able to communicate to our readers.

ES: I think poets can feel quite invaded if asked about their inspiration.

NF: Yeah. A lot of artists do too but I think it’s a necessary part of showing your business in a way, you know, and having to talk to curators all the time and having to connect with and kind of convince people that there’s value in what I’m doing, you know, so you really are – you sell yourself, you rely on other people to do that and you have to be your own first voice. You can’t let other people be talking for you all the time. And when I’m looking at artists, I’m always searching for the artist’s voice rather than reading something that the curator has written in the wall or the critics have written, so it is the artist’s voice that I’m always reaching for.

ES: I think that’s what I’ve noticed in the way that you articulate, you have such a strong voice about your work. Not everyone has that.

NF: No, probably not and some of them do shy away from it. It can be difficult to articulate these things because there’s no single idea. It’s like if people ask so what’s the work about, you can’t answer that question, I can tell you a little bit about how it came about and obviously like right now but that will change.

ES: But I love it, the dance around discussions, discussing creative works whether it is a poem or art it’s about or piece of music. You can’t grab it in a point.

NF: We were talking about this last week, when I went to art school, I had a lecturer who I greatly respected and he said this all the time, you know, always be suspicious about artists who talk around their work which I just don’t agree with at all. You know but
that was in the 90s the end of the kind of the conceptual art period where language very often was that thing that drove the work. In a conceptual sense the work didn’t exist. I think luckily we’ve got the idea of that now and we understand what diversity of understanding and meaning and the relationships that exist between things are.

ES: And what your audience brings to it.

NF: Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. That’s what makes the work in my mind. It’s not the work itself. It’s that interaction.

ES: I talked last night to my partner about that moment when you do a reading and you realise a line is wrong and you may have read it at home fifty times and it’s not actually anything that someone says to you or the way that they respond but the fact that you’re reading it. And suddenly before it even comes out of your mouth, you’re like, “what have I done here?” it’s the weirdest thing but it is what an audience brings to your work— even if they are not telling you, you know it, somehow it’s not quite right. Well, so that’s great. Thank you very much.

NF: My pleasure.

ES: I really enjoyed that.

NF: Good. But yeah that was great.
Appendix G: Interview Transcript – Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro

Interview with Claire Healy, Blackheath, 11 August 2014

ES: I am with Claire Healy in Blackheath and I can’t tell you what date it is. It is the 11 August. Alright, so Claire, generally I just start with, you know, inspiration on a more general level. I mean, I’ve read that your inspiration comes gradually - it’s not something that hits you like a thunder cloud one day when you are in studio.

CH: Oh, it does, it’s different for both Sean and I.

ES: Ok.

CH: It hits me like that.

ES: Does it?

CH: Yeah.

ES: So what inspires you in that way? Is there anything particular that makes that happen?

CH: It’s hard to say really. It’s a hot bath or a hot shower. It’s like, sometimes it’s — it’s really hard to say. Usually it’s when I’m not thinking. Often when I’m trying to force myself to come up with an idea, it is just not going to come and if, you know, I just forget about it or I’m not stressed or it’s actually when I finished a project. That’s like, you know I might be out celebrating, going oh my gosh yeah, that’s going to work and maybe you’ve read before Sean and I will come up with ideas often and we hate each other’s original idea.

ES: Oh right, no I haven’t come across that.

CH: Yeah. We don’t, like, discard it, we always keep ideas so we would just write it down and maybe revisit it. So often it’s space that will inform an idea as well because you know we often do work that is then site specific so an old idea that someone might have had might be revisited, you know, a few years later because a space has popped up that might have a relationship. But then even that original idea, is more, for you know, it changes. So it’s very hard to know who originally had the idea.

ES: Yes.

CH: But, I think living together helps that we find that as an artist a lot of ideas are not really verbal.

ES: Yes, yes.
CH: You know, they become about from a subconscious level and so it’s very hard to work in a collaboration and be able to have that subconscious level emerge. We’ve tried before in the past to just read exactly the same things at the same time but that has not worked because we read at very different speeds and at very different times of day. We have got a his and her library and they are identical but the bookmarks are in different places. So it’s not, that did not really become successful. Because we wanted to work on a level that was not really verbal so we could just subconsciously enter into things that hasn’t been that successful. (Hey Jonah, Jonah, please let me just concentrate on this okay?)

ES: Is that a sword, Jonah?

JONAH: Yeah.

ES: Or a Simitar?

JONAH: It’s a sword.

ES: A sword? Okay. I like that one.

ASTRID: Mummy, Jonah’s trying to be a baddy.

CH: Is he? Hey, guys, please will you leave me alone? If you need to ask, if you need to resolve something go and talk to your father. Come in here now. I am just going to put something on for them.

ES: Sure. That is fine. No problem. So you said before that you start, you and Sean sometimes don’t like each other’s initial ideas.

CH: No not often.

ES: And so does it take a long time to come to something that you can meet in the middle somewhere or is it when you get into a space and you think “Oh, hang on, but what about that idea you had?”

CH: Yeah. We often just go back to our book of ideas and just go, mmm, what could work. So that idea may not necessarily, you know, be the idea or it will be a beginning point.

ES: Okay. Okay. All right. And then moving along with it, is that something that has to be physical like is it when you are putting something together, materials physically together, or do you draw first? Or, what takes you to that next sort of step?

CH: I think we always plan ahead like to the very end point and then. One of my old lecturers used to say that, ideas are overrated, it’s actually seeing the whole idea through, you know, that is much better than at the beginning of an idea. No, it was
inspiration is overrated. I often think of that because I just think “Gosh, it’s so true” because it’s so hard to execute things like when you just have this vision or plan or idea, it’s like to get to the end point it’s always, you know, there are so many other steps in between.

ES: Absolutely. I like that.

CH: Often, you know, we’ll try a plan because it works this way, you know, like you’ll get offered a space or you have to propose something for a residency or they need the idea upfront. So even if that idea is submitted like, that body of work you just saw at the gallery, that wasn’t the original idea but it kind of grew.

ES: Yeah.

CH: It’s really hard to kind of pinpoint how it all shaped.

ES: Yes, yes.

CH: But I guess it, often there’s happy accidents to, like our, or not necessarily happy but the snake that was in our last exhibition we were sorting all the Lego and then it was just like an accident of pieces falling into a tub of white and I just thought oh, that’s got to be the next piece.

ES: Yes, yes.

CH: So that’s nice when that happens.

ES: Yes, yes.

CH: Because that just hit this like flecks of colour in this pool of white. But that rarely happens for us and I think that’s coming more from Sean. He’s my um, he’s a Virgo and he likes to work, he is very methodical and works in a very kind of planned way, whereas I think I work quite the opposite. And um, well my solo practice before we came together was very much you know, going with the flow with things and not really knowing what the outcome would be but I think now that we are working together and I think it’s because it’s a collaboration too, it’s kind of essential to work that way because you can’t really just go Oh, I’ll do this, and then.

ES: That’s right.

CH: Yet, as two people, it’s.

ES: It’s quite amazing, that you’re able to do it, like it’s really.

CH: Oh, well initially it was, you know, logistics and we were always helping each other with each other’s works and even just conversation, like each other’s ideas will come
up in each other’s work so it’s just like, we might as well just be collaborating, you know what I mean, like, it seemed like a very natural progression. Yeah.

ES: Yep, so thinking about one of your favourite works, I don’t really mind. Like, it would be good if it was a collaborative one.

CH: Oh yeah, I mean it’s so long ago that we had a solo paths. It’s like there’s no time left to do solo anymore.

ES: No, no, no.

CH: It might come in the future.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

CH: So it’s almost been 15 years that we’ve been collaborating.

ES: Yeah, yeah. So could you talk about the process of one work, like that was, you know, one of your works you really love or you know is important to you? Processes, how that came about?

CH: Okay so.

ES: I’m just going to turn my phone off. I forgot about that.

CH: Just try to pick your favourite work.

ES: Sure.

CH: Favourite work. I don’t know.

ES: It doesn’t have to be your absolute favourite. Just one and maybe it could be just one you’re thinking about, you’ve thought about it over the years or you’ve thought about recently.

CH: It’s not necessarily a favourite but I have been thinking about it Not Under My Roof which is the floor.

ES: Was that a farm house?

CH: Yeah, an old farm house at Millmerran.

ES: Where’s Millmerran?

CH: It is out of Toowoomba.

ES: Oh right, okay. Yep.

CH: Yeah, but it was a very strange, you want to talk about the process yeah?

ES: Yeah just sort of how did that happen? What was the start?

CH: Well the start was the invitation for a show in Brisbane called Optimism and we were commissioned to make a new work. So we just threw the idea at them that we’d
want because the atrium in the Gallery of Modern Art is just magnificent. It’s like about 24 metres high and they wanted us to propose something for that space so I just think having in mind that we worked in a special way.

ES: Yep, yep.
CH: And um, we thought okay, initially we wanted to get a house and skin it like a taxidermy, and remove its innards.
ES: Yes, yes.
CH: A house is massive when you do, that, like if, you know like a zebra skin, like the whole thing getting spread out. It’s more like a floor piece if you’re going to do that.
ES: Yes, yes.
CH: So we then thought, well maybe we need to just do it with the floor.
ES: Mmm, Mmm, Mmm
CH: So that progressed I guess from the initial inception to it becoming just the floor plan and I enjoyed it, um, you know, I’ll talk about the processes, I don’t know where to start and stop.
ES: No, no, no, that doesn’t really matter.
CH: Okay.
ES: However it works for you.
CH: It was a very strange process because here we were living in Berlin and we had a crew of people trying to source a house for us and in Brisbane it’s really a big business, um, to relocate
ES: Yes.
CH: Heritage houses.
ES: Right.
CH: You see them on some of...
ES: Like Queenslanders.
CH: Yeah and it’s possible to divide them up into three sections and then chop them out.
ES: Yep.
CH: It was looking like this project was going to be possible. I have no idea what the budget was but they must have had a lot of money to be able to acquire a house and then just do what we wanted to do with it and so they went to one of these big companies and just said this is what we are looking for. The floor plan needs to be
within 24 metres but something that’s close to that. So they took the crew out to about five different houses and so we were just receiving photographs of the houses and initially I just thought, oh my gosh, I can’t do this project because it means inevitably that we’re destroying a house that could be used.

ES: Yes, yes, yes. I thought about that. I thought about whether you’d had.

CH: Yeah I didn’t feel good about that, I said look, you know, I could perfectly live in any of those houses and I don’t feel right to be using it as an art work that will not have a future life.

ES: Yep, yep.

CH: And um, actually, the people that were dealing with it and the curator at the time assured me that the house that we most favoured, the one that ended up being on the wall hadn’t been lived in for like a decade. A lot of the farming practices mean that the farms amalgamate and people go and live in the towns, they no longer live in these houses, so a lot of them are abandoned. And, anyway we got in touch with the people that used to live in the house and they were invited to the opening of everything and

ES: Oh.

CH: I was really afraid, you know.

ES: Yes.

CH: To think oh, what will they think to see their house?

ES: Well they probably loved it.

CH: Yeah, like, she broke down in tears and just said “Oh, this is like a testament to the pioneers of our land. This is like…”

ES: Isn’t that amazing.

CH: Yeah, she was so touched.

ES: I can see that though.

CH: Yeah.

ES: Because, there’s something about that piece that really touched me in it’s the floor that you know, the floor you’ve walked on and, I think, because I think looking at that, I then, I did start to think about my grandmother’s house and because as a child who spent so much time on the floor. Playing games on the floor, driving cars on the
floor and it was the lino in that house that really triggered me to start thinking about creating a poem project in stacking a poem like that.

CH: Yeah.

ES: Um, yeah. I’m really amazed.

CH: There are so many layers of lino in that too.

ES: Yes.

CH: We just went with the final lino and of course putting it on the wall like that everything starts to slide down.

ES: Right, yes.

CH: SO we’d have to staple it back on.

ES: Okay, right. Oh yeah, yeah.

CH: I don’t know how he felt. He, I think he was really, just really holding his emotions but she was very open and just so proud and it was very touching.

ES: Well you would feel like it wasn’t lost altogether, like, it was like a tribute too.

CH: Yeah totally.

ES: Yeah.

CH: So that was really nice to come away with that.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

CH: But, I liked being able to look at a house in this view like an architect would.

ES: Yes.

CH: Something that’s like, you know, you’re looking straight down on to a floor plan and you know there are two floors that grow more. I can’t remember, two or three that you could view it at different levels. So that was nice too, to be able to, you know be able to explore a work that is just so tall and overwhelming and overpowering. To be able to be up at another level and come on to a balcony and look down onto it too…

ES: Yes, yes.

CH: …was really good, too.

ES: So you had that. Did you have to stand in that space for a long time and think what can we put in here or how will that work or like, does that happen? Is that what you do when you look at a space and you know that’s the space you’re going to be working within?
CH: Ah yeah we, I mean, I think we’d had one visit there so it wasn’t like a long time cause we were living in Germany at the time so, we’d take a lot of photos of the space and try and, it’s always important you know, to think about it and be in it.

ES: Yes.

CH: You know, be present in the space.

ES: So the crew got the floor. Is that what happened?

CH: They got the whole house. It was still like in, um, in the town of Millmerran and they went and demolished it and then they trucked it in to Brisbane like just as a stack of floor pieces but the rest of it was discarded.

ES: Put it back together like a jigsaw? Is that?

CH: Well, we didn’t do anything. They had an amazing team and they worked with the architect of the building, you know, he knew where the below bearing struts were.

ES: Yeah.

CH: But they had to, I think they used like these amazing rods to keep each room intact because otherwise, it’s an old house, it like, to then suddenly put it on a different plain, just putting all that force.

ES: So the technical stuff would be enormous.

CH: Oh yeah.

ES: And how involved do you get in that?

CH: Normally we get right into it, you know, but this time it was totally off limits because we were living away from it.

ES: And you had to hand over that part of it.

CH: Yeah. So and then when we came for the install period we weren’t even allowed on site. We have to be like three floors up and look down at it because they had two cranes craning it up on to the, on to the walls. So it was OH&S, you know, would not allow us to be on the floor where it was being installed so it was a very strange feeling. You know, like it felt a bit removed.

ES: Yes, yeah.

CH: But then, you know, it’s nice to put the few staples into the lino. On cherry pickers just stapling that back in, but that was like such a minor detail.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

CH: I mean a major one in terms of aesthetics.
ES:  Yep, yeah.
CH:  But in terms of like the whole structural engineering of making that work.
ES:  Amazing. I've never thought about that, but yeah.
CH:  Yeah, so they reinforced each room.
ES:  Right.
CH:  So room by room they pretty much made like a steel armature frame, so it’s just hanging, okay, on certain points then the whole metal kind of structure is you know, taking care of the whole structure of each room. Yeah.
ES:  And the other space, that I was interested in is the VHS tapes project.
CH:  Lifespan.
ES:  Lifespan. So the chapel that you put that in, you saw that before.
CH:  Oh well see we were really lucky because we were living in Berlin we could easily get over to Venice. It’s like only a one hour flight and we could go. We wouldn’t have even gotten that space if we hadn’t of been able to do the site visit.
ES:  Okay.
CH:  Because the other artists that were involved in that project, you know, being in Australia, they never got the opportunity to go and do a site visit. So, um, Felicity phoned the curator and just said “Look I’m going over here, do you want to come” and so this guy that showed us around, he showed us like the back spaces where the whole show is going to be. He said “Oh, you know the chapel’s free too” and we said “Oh, can we have a look?”
ES:  Because it’s perfect.
CH:  Yeah, and so, um, he showed us the chapel and I said “Look I’m really not inspired by those other spaces is there any chance we can use this?” And so they managed to do a deal and it was, we were so lucky to go otherwise we wouldn’t have got the chapel. We would have been in like old classrooms.
ES:  Oh,
CH:  Yeah, so um.
ES:  So I’ve never been to Venice but I would love to do it.
CH:  Oh you have to go.
ES:  It’s on my wish list of things to do.
CH:  Do it as soon as you can. It is like the most magnificent, magical, surreal thing.
ES: So when you, do you go as part of the Australian team or something like that? Is that how it works or with an Australia exhibition isn’t there?

CH: Oh yeah, so there’s two, but that year was different because there was an offsite project.

ES: Okay.

CH: So there’s the Giardini, Sean Gladwell was representing Australia in the Australian Pavilion.

ES: That’s what I am thinking of.

CH: Yeah, so we went, um, we were representing Australia but in our offsite project. Which we were happy to be.

ES: A friend of mine goes every time. His name is John Melick, in case you’ve come across him in the Biennale. He does the marketing for the Australian Pavilion sometimes.

CH: Oh Okay.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

CH: His name rings a bell.

ES: Yeah. He lives in New York but he’s done a lot of PR for galleries in New York over the years. Because he’s Australian he sometimes gets that gig I guess. But um, he’s always saying “Oh you’ve got to come to Venice”, you know, I think well it will be, one day, one day. Not yet, not yet.

CH: Oh go as soon as you can, I say.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

CH: Because Venice itself is like, it doesn’t seem real.

ES: Yeah.

CH: But then to have like an exhibition in there ... but what’s so lovely about all the offsite exhibitions is that you always get lost and then suddenly you come across an art work and it’s just like the most amazing thing, It’s like, you know. Yeah you’ll feel like you’re escaping because it’s massively tourist and it just, you feel like there’s all these locusts kind of like encroaching just like on this place and it’s just, overbearing, but then if you’re there for the art, it feels very different.

ES: Yes.

CH: So I don’t know, it’s really lovely.
ES: How amazing. So the VHS tapes I love that work, every time I see photographs of that, I find it really moving.

CH: Really. Oh it’s nice to hear. Because we, for that work, we um, you know, we’re in the chapel and we’re looking at the Fresco and it was the Fresco, the dimensions of the Fresco that pretty much took the shape of the work itself.

ES: Okay.

CH: So they’ve.

ES: Cause the logistics of that, the maths in that would be really...

CH: Oh yeah.

ES: ...amazing.

CH: It seems like all of our projects end up being very mathematical in a way.

ES: Are either of you mathematical?

CH: Yeah, Sean is. Initially like when I had my solo practice I would always go to Sean and just say look how am I going to make this sculpture stand up, because he’s really good with his trigonometry... He used to be a maths tutor for high school students so his maths is strong.

ES: Okay.

CH: And it’s kind of essential with sculpture.

ES: How amazing.

CH: Yeah.

ES: Well that’s true, I mean you know, architects have got to deal with maths and engineers and, yeah, yeah.

CH: See I’m hopeless with maths but I love being the one that does all the counting. I don’t know why. But yeah, that work, that was a logistical exercise, it was really tricky, there were a few components to it. So the first, the façade, they were all VHS collected from Australia. So it was very Australia centric.

ES: Okay, oh yeah because where else is VHS?

CH: Oh, worldwide, I mean.

ES: But the states didn’t though, did they, they weren’t VHS, they were something else.

ES: The Europeans.

CH: The Europeans, yeah.

ES: Yeah. Well, anyway.
CH: Basically the facade is sourced from a lot of stores that were closing down around the time that we were, when we just started to make that and so that was lucky. We sourced a lot of VHS quickly and we also put an ad out on to Planet Ark, you know, if anyone was getting rid of personal collections.

ES: Okay, right, right.

CH: So we went into people’s homes and that was really amazing. You know, like, collecting people’s videos that they had recorded over, you know, like and a lot of the handwritten notes on recordings and do not touch...

ES: Yep, yep, yep.

CH: So that was really amazing. And then the rest.

ES: And that to me it’s like it’s just a metaphor for life, isn’t it, like all those little bits of you that, well no that’s not a part of my life you’re not allowed to go there, that’s private or you know the bits that are silly, that you know stupid movies that you watch or whatever and then there’s other bits of your life that are very deep and soulful. It would have been amazing just putting that altogether and thinking about all the moments in life. That’s what I found really moving about it.

CH: Yeah.

ES: You know.

CH: Well the rest of the VHS like the bulk of it because it’s a solid block so the interior is made up of like we’ve managed to source the rest from a waste plant in Greece. So we were buying VHS by the tonne. So I think we bought like 30 tonnes. Yeah, so we had so many pallets of VHS.

ES: And they were intact.

CH: Ah, yes and it turned out it was all pornography.

ES: Ha, ha, ha, Porno?

CH: Yeah, and the whole interior of it is all like porn and being Greek porn a lot of it was, it was a bit awful because, um, they all came with like paper sleeves and plastic covers and so we didn’t want to use that part of it we just wanted the black cassette.

ES: The black, yeah, yeah.

CH: So we had a huge crew of people, like I think there were about 13 students.

ES: Yeah.

CH: Helping out, so I think there were 12 girls and 1 male.
ES: Right.
CH: And all of, everyone just to be exposed to this imagery of, it was just horrible, you know, and the funny thing was like we’re doing this in a chapel next door to a like a kindergarten. Well, word got out that we had like all this pornography and people were at the door and then of course when people came to the end show, going but where’s the porn.
ES: Yeah.
CH: But you couldn’t see it because it was all internal, I mean there were are a few in there...
ES: But that’s interesting to, isn’t it, that little commentary, what’s in the dark innards...
CH: Yeah totally, we thought that was kind of, it seemed perfect that it was like this kind of dark base.
ES: Yeah totally, instincts and you know whatever.
CH: On the interior and the exterior as you know the façade of the dark side or and also this is being black, but I guess your average viewer wouldn’t really see that. It had a real weight to it.
ES: Did it,
CH: Yeah.
ES: Yeah, yeah.
CH: So it traced the dimensions of the Fresco.
ES: Okay right, right.
CH: So we just went up from there. Yeah, yeah.
ES: Where does that go now? Like where is that now.
CH: It’s a very sad story. MCA, um, had it as part of their collection, then it was going to be part of our survey show and it had been in storage for like two or three years in a storage facility out in Chipping Norton but they were very wet years and each pallet of VHS cassettes had been wrapped in like a transport film.
ES: Right.
CH: And this created these like mini eco systems and a lot of mould ended up growing inside and they deemed it was unsafe for the VHS to come into the building. They didn’t want, like, their workers working in there because they said it would be as dangerous as working with asbestos and they have to destroy it.
ES: Oh no.
CH: I think there’s other reasons why they wanted to get rid of it. Like it took up to 44 shipping containers, you know it’s a massive thing to store and the MCA don’t have the space and also the space where they have all of the collection in storage, it’s not a controlled environment.

The guy who owns it and donated it to the MCA he, just, he was willing to eradicate it and just get rid of it because you know, and we were all for that of course, but they were just going, no, it’s like we don’t know where we’re going to store it. Oh it’s just like, oh okay. Is this the real reason?

ES: Well yes that’s crazy.
CH: So yeah, it was a bit sad.
ES: So it was lost.
CH: It was sent over to Korea and recycled, because it has like about 7 different plastics in each um.
ES: Yes.
CH: VHS cassette.
ES: Yes apparently they are very hard to recycle.
CH: Yeah, so I think they put them in the plant where they just had them suspended in water and somehow they unscrew everything and then the different plastics float to different levels
ES: Oh right.
CH: And then they somehow can recycle it. Yeah.
ES: That’s sad. That must have been like when that decision is made.
CH: I know. We were just gutted, you know, because we were so happy that it was in such an important collection.
ES: Yeah, yeah.
CH: And uh, just so thrilled that someone really wanted it to be part of a collection and yeah it was looking really promising but then as soon as it was about to be part of our show it couldn’t be and it all happened very quickly, I was just, oh God.
ES: I loved your show at the MCA, in the end my whole family went.
CH: Really.
ES: Yeah. Yeah.
CH:  Oh Good.
ES:  I wasn’t writing about you at that point but for some reason occasionally you’ll get the teenagers to come as well. Obviously you’ve got teen appeal. But um, I think the aeroplane got them in.
CH:  Yeah.
ES:  Yeah.
CH:  The one outdoors, or the.
ES:  The indoor one like the packaged up, yeah. Yeah, that’s an amazing one as well. Okay, um, how are you going out there Sean?
SEAN:  Yeah.
ES:  You all right.
SEAN:  It’s exciting, a bit of crowd control.
ES:  Okay, um all right, so I’ve said what. Where do you do your inspired work?
CH:  Meaning like what the studio.
ES:  Yeah, see I guess, ahhh, if its studio or if it’s, you know is it, do your ideas ever happen in the studio or is it something that.
CH:  Oh yeah.
ES:  Yeah, yeah. So it’s...
SEAN:  What about in the shower?
CH:  Yeah I’ve already done that.
ES:  Yeah, she did.
CH:  Where do your ideas come from Sean?
SEAN:  They can come whenever.
ES:  I’ve heard all about your maths Sean.
SEAN:  Oh really?
CH:  So I guess like the inspiration like happens,
SC:  Like happens in our head.
CH:  Yes so then the, and then that is just left until a book in a diary, in a process diary and then like, that inspiration.
ES:  Do you journal a lot like you’re drawing all the time?
CH:  Oh no.
ES:  No.
CH: Oh no, I’m a hopeless drawer.
ES: Are you? Yeah.
CH: Sean does like, nice comic drawings and sometime I like, like doodling and that sort of, subconsciously I realise I’m drawing and I didn’t realise.
ES: But like, I mean, venereal architecture, like those ideas, you’re not drawing those? That’s like, to me it’s just how did that...
CH: Yeah, I was thinking in a real spatial theme, because it’s like we have to draw between each other and then how we would think the animal would interact with it, but that’s very hard, like we don’t actually just, had to somehow visualise it in your head first.
ES: I mean creating those animals, it’s amazing.
CH: Yeah, it was pretty tough but we ended up like we had a book on how to render animals in Lego but then we realised we’d be doing it for a decade if we were going to do it this way and, so we ended up, um figuring it out on the computer and then.
ES: Okay.
CH: Building it from the 3D models
ES: Okay.
CH: that we had created around the furniture.
ES: But how did you get the colour right? Like the colour on that, it’s just amazing.
CH: Oh that was, yeah, the first one we did was a dolphin and it has every colour and every animal was going to be that same pallet.
ES: Oh okay.
CH: But then that was being the test piece, we just thought, oh, we need to reduce the pallet.
ES: Yep. The original pallet, what, were any of the animals the original pallet?
CH: The dolphin.
CH: And then you know, we just played from there and just getting a few pieces together like getting liquorice allsorts in a way and seeing if those colours work.
ES: Yes. Okay.
CH: Yeah.
ES: Does colour figure a lot in getting ideas like you’ve mentioned?
CH: Not really. I mean I think, you know, one of our artist friends when we were going to do the Cordial Home Project, that was going to be a totally different configuration until it came into the building.

ES: Yes.

CH: We realised that the material had a real relationship with the material of the building. Initially we were going to put them all into bags

ES: Uh huh, uh huh.

CH: And sort each material into different bags but then we realised that, you know, a lot of the aesthetics of it, the wood and everything would just be lost. And so, we had a good Swiss artist who said “how are you going to make this look any good, it’s just going to be pile of rubble” because we had told him the idea and then, so you’ve always got to consider aesthetic because that’s how you’re going to get your audience in. And it’s true, people just, I mean sometimes people are really just conceptually hooked on to an idea but...

ES: Yes, yeah, yeah.

CH: But it’s always nice if you can aesthetically think how you’re going to get someone in.

ES: Yes, yes, yes.

CH: So for me, like colour, I’m probably more the colour, person, more. Sean doesn’t think he’s very good with colour.

ES: Oh really? Okay.

CH: No and I think I’m probably more behind that, yeah.


CH: Every sense.

ES: Yeah, yeah, so the smell would be the trigger something or.

CH: For inspiration.

ES: I mean I thought a lot about touch like the feel of Lego when you were doing this and um.

CH: Oh well your tactile qualities are always important for us being sculptors, you know. You’re always like attracted to what surfaces it would react nicely with other surfaces and

ES: Um, um, um.
CH: And um yeah, I think also scent is, but you don’t really know that until you’re working with something.

ES: No, no.

CH: I don’t know, I don’t really feel like I get inspired by scent it’s more like the path you go down once you’re working within it or you’re amongst it, but the scent might trigger something also.

ES: Yes.

CH: You know, a memory.

ES: Yes, yes. Well scent is supposed to be good for memory, isn’t it?

CH: Yeah, it’s really connective.

ES: Yeah. Music?

CH: Oh yeah, well I guess because a lot of our work is so process based.

ES: Yes.

CH: We’re always listening to something.

ES: What sort of music do you tend to listen to when you’re working?

CH: All different, really it’s a bit hard to say, like very minimal techno or even jazz or just pop. It’s very hard to.

ES: Yep, yep and do you both dictate the music or is one of you.

CH: We often listen to audiobooks too.

ES: Oh okay. Right. Oh.

CH: I like listening, well since I’ve been back in Australia from being in KL I’ve been listening to the radio a lot.

ES: Yes, yeah.

CH: And I really enjoy that just to kind of you know, re-engage with what’s happening.

ES: Yes.

CH: So that’s really nice, just, um Radio National and...

ES: Yeah. Because you spend a lot of time doing stuff like.

CH: Yeah. Sorry, it’s always nice to have something going on.

ES: Going on. Yeah.

CH: You’re listening to something otherwise you can go crazy.

ES: Yeah totally.

CH: But Sean and I have done a lot of meditation too.
We’ve spent a lot of time doing Vipassana meditation. I think that helps. Sometimes it’s nice. Would you do that at the beginning of your day or? Not anymore. I used to. We used to have two sittings a day but having kids it’s like how is that possible? They would be running in every 5 minutes going Mum, help. I found with meditation once I had kids I um, usually end up asleep. Oh that’s good, at least you get some time out. Do you want some more tea? Yeah, I’ll have some more tea, it’s a good idea having a thermos, isn’t it. Oh it’s essential here otherwise it, these are not working so well anymore we need to get a new one. How do you go heat wise out there? Is it colder than in New Zealand? Yeah, oh we’ve got a fireplace in there and we’ve got a fireplace in the garage so there’s two studios. And uh, the house becomes a studio too. Yeah, every, there’s lots of different nooks that become unintentional studios. Okay. I might get a bit more milk. Sure. Is that warm enough, the tea? Yeah, I’m good. I can whack it in the microwave. No, no, no. It’s all good. Okay. It’s very good of you to have me on a day when they’re not at kindy though I guess you want to maximise your days when there at kindy as well. Yeah, well, no. We’re going to Cairns, my Dad’s, my stepsister is getting married, so.
ES: Oh lovely.
CH: Tomorrow.
ES: Oh lovely, oh, so you’re off to Cairns.
CH: Yeah, the big day.
ES: Oh gorgeous, it will be warm.
CH: Yeah.
ES: It will be lovely.
CH: Looking forward to it.
ES: Oh very nice.
CH: It’s hard to pack when you’re cold and then think. Oh my God, I just can’t imagine.
ES: I totally get it.
CH: Its 25 degrees. Do I need a hoodie?
ES: Yeah. Exactly. Yeah well you won’t need anything really. Maybe a cardigan at night.
CH: Yeah. Maybe just one just you know, say light.
ES: It will be beautiful.
CH: Yeah. Can’t wait, but still like there’s things I’ve got to do work-wise. I tried to shift things so that we could just have a holiday.
ES: You’ve got two shows going on at the moment. You’ve got this one and another one.
CH: Yeah. One in San Fran and so we’ve got this Skype meeting like the next day we arrive and it’s just like, ahh. Yeah anyway.
ES: Timing, timing, timing. What do you think the process you just talked through with the farm house for example.
CH: Yeah.
ES: Has that changed for you over the course of your working years?
CH: Yep. It changes for every project.
ES: Does it? So every project is different?
CH: Yeah so.
ES: And with inspiration as well, has that changed for you? Like can you turn an idea on more now or was it easier when you first started out? Or were there things that were more compelling straight up when you first started?
CH: Yeah, I think for me it’s probably different for Sean and I but for me I felt like I got much more inspiration before I really was an artist because I used to be so inspired
by, like I think it’s always dangerous to get inspired by other art. Like it’s nice when it’s something from nature or something that you know. I know for Sean it’s political or social concepts. And um, yeah just, there are so many things that come into play with inspiration, it might be just scale, space, um, material, yeah, but often our material will be part of the concept. So, what was the question again?

ES: Has that process changed?
CH: Yeah it changes for every process.

ES: And what’s the first memory you have of feeling really inspired artistically and carrying through something, what was the first time? Were you really young? Were you like a child?

CH: Oh yeah. It was like when I was. See my grandmother was an artist. She was forever taking me to galleries and stuff. I used to get so bored, I hated it. And um, she was a painter. We used to have sit like, for her for hours just painting.

ES: For her painting you?
CH: But then I think as I have grown older I grew really close to her. She is no longer around and we had very different art practices but as a young child, like I was really into art. I was hopeless scholastically like English, maths, science that’s just not good and um, I guess, yeah when I was in high school I chose every possible art subject there was. But even before.

ES: So there was something to keep you going in high school.
CH: Oh yeah, I remember even in primary school, like, all of my projects like we have to do Behind The News, a project.

ES: Yes I remember doing BTN.
CH: And I never really got into it, like you know, it was a written essay about something on one page essay or something but I’d spend more time colouring and shading a page than I would with my writing so, I really can’t like pinpoint, like.

ES: What about the first work that you did that you really can remember being, like it being really wonderful experience of producing something or something you were really proud of at the time, or?

CH: Maybe that happened like during the more senior years at high school. Cause, my teacher, yeah, he was quite harsh on me and he expected a lot from me. It was.

ES: Like he knew you had some distance to go with your art, so.
CH: Maybe but he kind of like would make me, there used to be a double period of art like because I did 3 unit and so it was like the period before lunch and the period after lunch. He would make me stay in through lunch and I would be like, no I want to go and be with my friends. You know, in some ways I wanted to run away from him and I really, I feared him in a way that he put a lot of pressure on me I guess and expected me to perform well and, yeah, I think some of the works I made for my HSC because there was such pressure to produce something that was going to be assessed in such a way, maybe that’s when I felt like a certain proudness. I don’t know.

ES: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CH: But I know for Sean it was different because he was doing at that time like a lot of you know science based and philosophy and maths and he did a degree, he started doing a degree in science and psychology and then dropped out after a year and then decided to do, you know, art. So I think it was different for him.

ES: I love hearing about how you arrived at this place.

CH: Yes.

ES: I’ve find it very um, it’s just amazing, people’s journeys because even though obviously your grandmother had an influence on you but you know, you got sick of sitting for her portraits or whatever and the art teacher kept you in but obviously you really, you know, you had something there that you wanted.

CH: It didn’t feel like it. I felt like my art was really just not very good. But um, if you look at my marks from high school I was doing well but I never, oh maybe it’s just lack of confidence or something but I never felt that confident about it.

ES: Yep, yep.

CH: Even when I went to art school, because I started going to um, when I left school I went to a graphic design school and then got into advertising. I hated it and then I went to art school like three years later. Then a teacher at art school she was similar to my teacher I had in high school. She was like “I don’t want to know what you do, just go and do it” and that, like, really scared me because I just thought, god, like I need some feedback, I need some help here, can’t you see. She’s like no I don’t want
to talk about it. Maybe she was just too busy or something but I thought that was
like, a lot of pressure.

ES: Yeah absolutely.

CH: I was like God I better do something good then.

ES: So, when did you feel confident about your work?

CH: Oh, I still don’t know if I do.

ES: Really?

CH: Yeah. Oh, I don’t know, sometimes maybe with that show at the MCA like I started
seeing a connection between works thinking, oh gosh, there’s a real trend going on
and I hadn’t really seen that but, you know, because I always think we dabble in so
many different things, that.

ES: But, there’s such a continuity in it.

CH: Yeah, but it’s hard for me to see but I am starting to see it so maybe I do not know.
I think being an artist is always, it’s so, one minute I’m feeling confident the next
minute I am feeling totally crushed, because, I don’t know, I’m just being sensitive I
guess.

ES: Yep, yep, comes with the journey I think.

CH: Yeah.

ES: How does, how you’re feeling in that way affect your inspiration, so if you’re feeling
crushed how do you get going again?

CH: Um, I’ll have to go and do something else other than art.

ES: Ok, have a break.

CH: Bushwalk

ES: Yep

CH: Yoga, otherwise it’s just, nothing’s going to come, I’d just have a holiday maybe.

ES: Yes, yeah, yeah, yeah.

CH: Which is sometimes hard to do but it’s good to take a break.

ES: Do you ever get completely blocked?

CH: Oh, yeah all the time.

ES: Even, like even if you are emotionally feeling like yep I’m ready for this. I don’t need
a holiday whatever if you get blocked.

CH: Hmmm.
How do you get yourself out of that? Do you have a break again or, how do you push through that? I guess with collaborating that would help.

Yeah collaborating helps, yeah.

Bounce off each other’s energy.

Yeah but then we can both be blocked.

Yeah.

Yeah. Bushwalking.

Bushwalking.

Yeah. It really helps because it’s a real meditation, you know and well you can’t really bushwalk so much with kids now but we have like this bike, it’s just there and when you put the kids in the front of that and I’ll walk and Sean rides and we can go down dirt tracks and get into the bush.

Yep, yeah.

Because it’s a real, you know, meditation and just losing yourself in the rhythm.

Yes.

Yeah, that helps.

It’s hard when you’re at that stage where you can’t both go and do a bushwalk because of the little ones and sort of trying to get

Yeah they’re starting to walk with us now which is really exciting.

Yeah, yeah. Um, that’s good.

Yeah, last week we went on a walk, it was probably a bit too much for poor Astrid. We ended up having to carry her and she was sleepwalking at one point, I just thought, oh this not fair.

How far a walk was it?

It was meant to be 7 kilometres.

Yeah, okay.

It was just too much. We won’t do that again.

Well I remember taking, because we all went out to Central Australia when Matthew was about Astrid’s age and we walked to Kings Canyon which is about 7ks I think and I remember at the time thinking, is this abuse. What am I doing to my child here?

Yeah, it was good if you can break it up.

He still remembers it though.
CH: Oh wow, that’s amazing.

ES: Yeah, I think that whatever it was it was like, I did that mum, and I did it with my brothers. I got through there. Okay, what happens when you finished a series of works? Like, how do you, do you have a break? Do you have a complete break? Or, something, you mentioned before sometimes you do get inspiration for something else when you kind of cleared something and you’re not thinking in a way.

CH: Yes. It’s usually just having finished a body of work but then, yeah, it’s good to maintain a rhythm because you know, you’re in such a routine of the work itself but, um, it can be dangerous if you, if you just stop because I think for me I find that is when I can get really anxious and depressed and I think it’s important to keep up a rhythm of something else.

ES: I get that.

CH: Yeah, it’s hard. I think a lot of artists do and coming back from KL, like we haven’t even fully unpacked because we had two bodies of work that we had to get on with. So our yard was used as our storage while we were away.

ES: Oh right.

CH: So we’ve still got boxes to unpack, we still haven’t unpacked though. Now, I mean we’re still just trying to get the house in order.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

CH: But I mean, it just seems that like, as soon as we finish this project for San Fran then we’ve got to get on with, like should’ve got on to it like a couple of months ago that we were really lucky and got like a fellowship from the Australia Council and you have to complete everything within a year.

ES: Okay right, right.

CH: But at the same time it’s like you can’t really expect you know, it’s like winning the lottery when you get a grant like that. It’s just like thank God. But then it’s like oh I’ve got to finish this first and then I’ll be able to get on to that. So it just seems, at the moment it seems a bit constant so it doesn’t feel like there is really that time I just go okay I can finish.

ES: Yep, yeah, yeah.

CH: Got to get along with the next thing but at least we’re going to Cairns for a wedding and that little bit of a break.
And change.

Yeah. Yeah. The weather will be warm.

You won’t be near a gallery, or...

Yeah totally, I know everyone in the art world is like, are you going to Melbourne to the art fair. I’m like no.

No actually.

No going to Cairns, opposite direction.

Good. Good. Um, I’ve said is there someone who affects the way you work, I mean obviously your collaboration with Sean but for some artists, you know, there were particular references or people that, mentors or is there anyone that really particularly has affected the way you work or your process or inspired you, particularly.

I don’t know about affected but there’s a lot of artists that, you know, inspire me. Jeff Koons, Rachel Whiteread, it’s a long list of artists that...

Rachel Whiteread I do not know. What sort of work does Rachel Whiteread do?

Oh she’s part of the Young British Artists — there’s a cast of a House.

A House, is that right?

Yes, I think she got the um, what’s her major British art award she won? And she, that piece is called House.

I’ll have to have a look at that. Okay.

But, that’s always changing to like seeing how the art. Especially living in Europe we were able to go to so many museums and see what new work, yeah, so. Sometimes architects, you know, but more often artists.

Um, okay, how do you feel about articulating your thoughts on this process of inspiration and, yeah, do you find it difficult to?

Yes.

Yep, yep, yep. Does it feel private?

Yeah. I mean often people always go okay so because you are in a collaboration who does what? But that’s always changing and it’s just.

Yes, yes. What have you got? You got a letter. Oh, have you written someone a letter?

Auntie Lulu and Olive.
ES: Oh lovely. They’re so lucky. It’s great to get letters. Do they send you letters sometimes?

JONAH: I’ve got a card in here and a bracelet for Auntie Lulu.

ES: Oh, is it her birthday?

JONAH: No.

CH: No we’re going on holidays with them.

ES: Oh.

JONAH: We’re going to Cairns tomorrow morning.

ASTRID: I’ve got something inside it.

ES: What is inside it? You don’t have to take it out if it’s sealed up.

JONAH: We made a bracelet for Auntie Lulu and nannies. We made a bracelet out of beads.

ES: Out of beads. You’ve done some lovely writing and drawing.

JONA: Because the beads have a hole and then you put.

CH: And you string them on.

ES: Oh okay.

JONA: And then you can put all the beads.

ES: Another bead?

ASTRID: I need a...

CH: Yeah, I’ll get one later okay?

ES: I think she’s very lucky.

JONA: And there’s two more envelopes in this envelope, so the one envelope has a card in it inside this envelope and one envelope has a bracelet.

CH: Can you guys please go with daddy?

ES: I’m just going to show you something, you might be interested in this. This is what my little boy made me.

CH: Oh that is beautiful.

ES: He made me a necklace, see. It kind of goes with my jumper.

CH: Oh, that’s so nice.

ES: Yeah. Do you think he’s clever?

CH: Amazing.

JONA: Yeah.

ES: He gets cross if I don’t wear it all the time.
CH: Oh really? Which one’s that?
ES: It’s Matthew, the youngest. He’s totally into loom bands. Which is great.
CH: Yeah, beautiful.
ES: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, is it something that feels private? Is it kind of.
CH: Talking about projects?
ES: Yeah.
CH: Because it’s like, you know, as I said it’s something you put into a diary. The only people that read it are Sean and I. But I mean, it doesn’t feel private with Sean of course because we have to be open to be in a collaboration but to talk about it, yes I think people always want to get to the bottom of how does this work. Well, it’s kind of private.
ES: Yeah, yeah, yeah and there is something about it that you don’t want to be able to contain or completely break apart, whatever’s going on and to an extent you can’t share.
CH: Yeah. I do not know.
ES: Okay. All right, so then there’s a couple of questions that I particularly use for painters Okay and then, really, the only other thing I wanted to talk about was any text you’ve used in your work, so I’m trying to think if you’ve used any text. I know your titles are sometimes really captivating for me. I really like, um, I love primary producers that really, like those titles sometimes they are really, very evocative.
CH: Yeah, I mean often we will use literature to bring about something and that was the case for Par Avion and with Around the World in 80 Days and
ES: Oh okay.
CH: You know the whole idea, oh it was for, who was the other one, the Luigi Rossini I think his name is, he did From Peking to Paris.
ES: Oh okay, oh right.
CH: And it’s just about the individual who can span the globe, you know, just like this lone person trying to, you know, get from one point to another.
ES: Yep, yep.
CH: And there was another book we read about a sailor, um, no I can’t remember the name of that one but yeah often literature can really play a part with um, you know, what it is we make.
ES: Yep, yeah. That’s something I’ve really found, with a lot of the people I’ve interviewed, like Nic Folland,

CH: Ah ha.

ES: I’ve interviewed Nic and he has lots of references to text.

CH: Like movies for us as well.

ES: Movies?

CH: Yeah.

ES: Yep, yep.

CH: Often we reference, you know, like we did a project in Washington DC where we, um, what was it called? *Are We There Yet?*, I think it was? It was what you would take on a mission to Mars.

ES: Oh okay right.

CH: So we looked at the comparison of like, the top 10 foods that Americans are eating at the time and how much of that in calories would you need of those top 10 foods to go to Mars.

ES: Oh right.

CH: So we read a really great book, by um, was it Mary Roach - *Packing for Mars*. So there always has been quite a lot of reading and also movies.

ES: Do you read regularly?

CH: Oh, I don’t get to read that much, I’d say like if I have a holiday, I get to, because we’re always making the work and, if it is like for a work then I’ll read but, um I would like to be able to read much more than I do.

ES: Yeah, yeah, but your reading is often like prescribed reading that you need to do for a particular.

CH: Yeah or sometimes the reading does inspire.

ES: Yep, okay. Have you ever considered any poetry?

CH: Um, not yet but I mean sometimes I come across it and just, you know, get blown away and, but I feel like that is already an art form in itself. You know how I was saying, I find it dangerous to get inspired by other art but I know that writing is too and films are so I do not know what I’m so scared of. Maybe it’s to come.

ES: Yeah, okay. I think that’s sort of really the main things I wanted to talk about.

CH: Okay great.
Um, except that I have to ask you about the Lego, just because I need to know.

Sure.

So is it glued together?

Oh yeah because we shipped everything from KL. It wouldn’t stay together. And like even.

Yeah right. Is it like tall, were they tall?

Oh, some of the pieces come apart because Ikea’s, like flat packable and the seal like one of the things came off.

Yep right. Okay.

Yeah so I’m just trying to think of the crate like, to make it a bit smaller, that we had like...the crates are ridiculously huge.

Okay.

Yeah.

But um, how do you capture something so organic with something, so, it’s like just amazing?

Oh it’s good, because it kind of framed it in a way. So instead of using...

The stingray particularly

Yeah.

I just, was so blown away.

Oh really, that’s nice to hear.

The movement and...

That one almost killed me. It was such a challenging one but yeah, it was nice to make that you know, just seeing it grow and seeing the dynamics, all the movement, that yeah. That was happening as well in the Lego, I was like this is not coming together. Yeah, oh God. Glad to have that finished. That one I finished in the garage here.

Did you?

Yeah.

Oh gosh.

It was crazy because it was so cold and we’re trying to put Lego on with really cold fingers.

Totally.
CH: Yeah I made some, I had to, like, I got the kids’ old socks that you know lost a pair and I was using them.

ES: Yeah

CH: Yeah.

ES: Because your fingers would be getting all cut and I would have thought.

CH: Yeah it was very sharp the Legos.

ES: It is, it’s really sharp.

CH: Yeah, there was a lot of bloodshed over that.

ES: That’s why I again, capturing that organic feel I just found that really amazing. I loved the little bits of Lego in the pot plants too, in the geraniums and yeah, yeah, fantastic.

CH: I’m glad you got to see the show.

ES: Yep, I guess I should ask you about Cordial Home Project just for that house story with that, because I heard the house story with the farm house but was that house going to be demolished, is that what that was?

CH: Yeah so in a sense we um, the people who were doing the demolition we teamed up with them and for them it saved them a heap of money in landfill costs.

ES: Yes.

CH: So instead of it going to landfill it went to the gallery.

ES: Okay.

CH: And so it was every single, you know, the entire house which is something that we have always been, you know, concerned with like the entirety of something.

ES: Okay.

CH: Because when we produced that like with Venice, um they really wanted us to be oh the smoke and mirrors and to, you know, make the object hollow. The whole premise is, is like, I mean the concept would be lost.

ES: Yes.

CH: The whole idea is that if you went to watch each VHS cassette in one point to another then it’s 61 something

ES: Yeah totally.

CH: Something years that was the amount of, that lifespan of the person.

ES: Yeah I know, that would gut me.
CH: Yeah. We like to be for real that way and they said the Cordial Home Project and we’d been asked a number of times to recreate it and couldn’t we just do it by, you know creating a shell but you know, you can’t.

ES: No.

CH: If it’s about like a house and the home and what it means...

ES: I am so glad. That’s really important to me. I would never consider that it would be hollow on the inside.

CH: Yeah a lot of people do. They go oh so what’s on the inside? And it’s like, no, that is, it’s solid. Yeah.

ES: Good. That’s good.

CH: Yeah, that was really nice teaming up with a demolition company and not feeling like we had gone out to destroy a house. It was inevitable, you know, that was on its way to landfill anyway so it was just like part of the process.

ES: Yeah. Something I talked about with Nic Folland was how fantastic it was to work with refrigeration technicians and how much they enjoyed being engaged in that artistic process. Have you found that with any of the demolition workers?

CH: Yeah, totally. They were like really thrilled and it really brings a different angle or dimension to their work.

ES: Isn’t that great?

CH: Yeah.

ES: I loved that.

CH: It’s happening all the time, you know. I hate going to the hardware store here because they always get fed up that you’re not using things in the conventional sense. So I never really tell anyone what we’re really doing, you know, like because even the glue that we used for the Lego. It’s a PVC cement that you know, if, what it does is that it changes the molecules of the plastic and fuses it together in a sense that, you know, is usually used on pipes and toilets and in Australia everything has to be dyed so it’s either blue glue or red glue, I was like, oh I don’t want that. I need clear glue because I don’t want it to be seen. It would be such a mess if I got like this dripping reds contrast.

ES: Yeah, yeah, wow.
CH: So yeah, in a sense like working in KL was really good for that because even the glue like the chemical makeup was not as toxic as it is here.

ES: That’s interesting.

CH: Yeah, terrible.

ES: So you obviously had to glue the...

CH: We had to use like, masks and just it was much more toxic here. It was unfortunate because, you know, being in KL was perfect because you can have windows open, so much ventilation because it’s so hot, but here I had to have the large doors open for the fumes to go out.

ES: The fumes to go out. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

CH: Yeah.

ES: And the last thing, there was a comment you made right at the beginning and the question is important because often the comments are right at the beginning are the important ones.

CH: Oh yeah.

ES: And you said that often there was inspiration happening or something creative happening when you stop thinking. Is there anything more you can say about that? Like is it, is it something, I won’t talk.

CH: No, no, I just do not know how you can breakdown like how inspiration happens because it just happens.

ES: Yep, yep.

CH: For me anyway

ES: Yeah, yeah.

CH: You’ll find it’s probably different for everybody but it can just happen, I don’t know I think in so many different ways.

ES: Yeah yeah.

CH: It can be from reading or it can just be from pure exhaustion and just being outside of yourself in a sense.

ES: Yep, yeah.

CH: Yeah.

ES: That’s something that a few people have said, being outside of yourself or being in the zone or you know, there may be references to that. Anyway because I’m reading
quite a lot on poets and how they get their inspiration and, actually Sue Woolfe, I think lives up here. She’s written quite a lot about neurological pathways and poets. She’s a fiction writer but she’s quite into that, sort of what’s actually happening. What about you know, disengaging, cognition and.

CH: Yeah, it’s important.

ES: That’s when things happen.

CH: It’s a, it’s a, somehow you need to let go for it to come.

ES: Yeah, and I’m fascinated about that with poets because there’s so much thinking involved where you know I think often with visual artists poets almost envy the process because you can let go of the thinking in the actual putting together of materials.

CH: I do not know. I think it is really hard to let go.

ES: Yeah.

CH: Yeah. It’s tough.

ES: Anyway well that’s great. Thank you very much.

CH: Oh, pleasure.

ES: It’s been such an insight and I realise it’s time...but it’s also...

CH: That’s fine.

ES: It’s a big ask to come into someone’s home and ask them about, you know, quite personal things so I really appreciate it.

CH: My pleasure. Thanks for coming all this way.

END
Appendix H: Interview Transcript – Tom Carment

Interview with Tom Carment on 14th October 2015 in Darlinghurst.

ES: All right Tom so, I guess, just opening it up really, can you tell me about what inspires you artistically?

TC: Oh, just everyday life really. Little things, I’m not really a ‘big thing’, ‘big ideas’ person, but then I think the little things accumulate. It’s like making a wall out of bricks or tiles or something. That’s the way I work. But I should say I’d like my art or my writing to enhance the way we enjoy life, just the things around us. It’s about celebrating things that I like the look of, not necessarily conventionally beautiful things but just sometimes things that catch my eye - so I try and paint and draw them or write about them.

ES: Mmm. I’m very interested in that making … enhancing our life through finding the beauty in things that are not necessarily, you know, beautiful in the traditional sense, I like, I love the way, when you pick up a building that everyone walks past every day and you catch the light and...

TC: Your eyes do tend to skim over, you skim over things in your life. You know people say that when they travel their senses are a bit enhanced, they’re in a new place and they’re looking around and they go back home and they sort of get into a bit of a blinkered state. I think, or well you can do, not that your perceptions when your overseas or away from home are that perceptive, or that great, but you think they are maybe, I don’t know. So when recently I started doing these paintings of Centrepoint Tower I was just walking into town one day and I noticed it, and I thought that’s a kind of towering seventies icon. So I started painting it from various aspects, different places, you know, in Sydney. And it’s made me look at the city’s skyline, which my eyes had skimmed over previously. Then I saw there’s all these new structures and new buildings beside it, and then you’ve got this random craziness about them and all the different shapes and I’ve not really been looking at them that much before, and I realised you know, that choosing something to paint makes me really really look at it.
ES: I have a real sense when I look at your work around Sydney that you do make us travellers again. I felt like you bring, you make people who would walk past those buildings everyday look at them and bring a fresh perception so that’s, it’s interesting you bring up travelling.

TC: Sometimes I feel like it’s the kiss of death, the things that I choose to paint: a particular building or, you know, an aberrant shaped tree. Then I go back two weeks later and the tree’s been chopped down, or the building’s been demolished, so, because I am, I think I am, attracted to the slightly weather-worn or, like I said, aberrant-shaped things in the city; that probably leads to them being demolished or...

ES: So there’s been a few buildings, like, I’m thinking of the Boulevard that they’ve I think there’s another building in the Cross maybe where you’ve looked at it at different times of the day or in different weather...

TC: There’s one called Adereham Hall I’ve done a lot of paintings of. It’s in Elizabeth Bay, it kind of sticks out up on the top of the hill. People call it Gotham City. It’s sort of Gothic, and I suppose I’m sort of influenced by those English Romantics, the watercolourists who went around painting gothic ruins, that whole movement...Caspar David Friedrich. So, I reckon you get influenced by things in art and then that influences the way you look at where you live.

ES: Yeah, that’s right. One of the questions I’ve been asking people through this process, it struck me, I wonder if this applies to Tom or not but it’s about whether inspiration for a painting or an idea comes to you slowly, bit by bit or is it something that happens quite quickly and with you it feels very different to me to some of the artists I’ve been interviewing. Could you talk to me a bit about that?

TC: Sometimes it’s quick and sometimes it’s slow, you know.

ES: Okay.

TC: I might have a long term plan to do something and then I might see something that might just strike me out of the blue. For example, I used to go to South Australia every year to a friend’s sheep station. It’s now been acquired by the Army so that period of my life is over, but for 20 years I went there every year on painting trips.
I’d go to this particular spot, or within 50 metres of a particular paddock, called Two Mile Paddock, and paint the skyline. It was a bit of a long-term sort of project, not that I’ve ever put all the paintings I did together but that would be interesting. The paddock didn’t change very much because, in that very dry country, the trees and the shapes of things don’t move around much. They do change slightly over 20 years, but they are still recognisably the same skyline. But there had been changes. I’m interested in how the way I painted it changed too - because I’m changing.

ES: Yes, yes.

TC: So I wouldn’t, unlike some people; I don’t think I’d go back and touch up an old painting I did 15 years ago, because I’m not like that anymore and I think I’m such a different person, not that people change that much, but I don’t think I’d go back and change things from the past.

ES: Yep.

TC: I’m looking forward, you know. I think, because you’re a different person you’ve got a different touch, a different way of looking at things.

ES: Is that a skill thing, or is it perception or wisdom or what do you think?

TC: Just my perception I think. I know people who rework poems from their past but, as a painter, as an ‘alla prima’ painter, it’s not a good idea. I paint from life, and if I bring a painting home and don’t like it, rather than play around with it in the studio, I’ll either destroy it or I’ll go back and have another go at it in front of the motif.

ES: Okay.

TC: I find when I’m working on things later on, I tend to ... I don’t have the same flow. I get a bit timid really.

ES: Yeah.

TC: You know, and when you’re working from life like I do, when I’m starting to get tired at the end of a painting session I might do things that are a bit like fiddling around. I’m not bold enough and I stop, you know.

ES: Okay, that’s interesting.
TC: Sometimes if I go on too long I start to feel it’s going in reverse, and when your painting goes in reverse I get that dreadful sick feeling in my stomach, I’m thinking, ‘this painting was all right about half an hour ago but now it’s not’; and I’m trudging on with it and I should stop.

ES: Yes.

TC: But sometimes you don’t realise that and then you just keep going, it makes me feel almost physically sick when I know I’ve done that.

ES: Yep.

TC: It happens, it happens quite a lot really.

ES: Because of the destroying something that was already...

TC: Yeah but you painted over something that was better and the way I work, though, I’m better to start again, do a new one. With writing and words of course you can go back to the earlier draft...

ES: Yep absolutely.

TC: But with painting it’s not like that.

ES: Yeah, well that’s something I’ve really learnt through this process how different that is, that you know the liberty with words of you know, putting something aside and coming back to it and going again.

TC: There’s an interesting series of, I think they’re black and white photos, of a Matisse painting from, it might have been from the 1940’s, and it shows his process of doing this painting. He changed it about 60 times, you know, I mean it’s just, maybe 60 is an exaggeration, but there’s a series of photos and you think, ‘surely that looks good, that looks good’, and yet he’s kept...

ES: He’s kept changing it.

TC: Changing it, in quite dramatic ways.

ES: Yeah, yeah.
TC: Until finally, you know, it’s finished. But it’s not like a detailed sort of realistic painting where he keeps working it, it’s quite a bold and simple painting but he just keeps changing it and changing it.

ES: And do you think that you, how you deal with that situation now has changed over the years, like when you were young and starting out did you have the same approach to work that you weren’t happy with or do you...

TC: It’s like, God I never learn anything sometimes! Yeah, agh, no it hasn’t changed that much really. You think you learn some sort of wisdom but …you don’t.

ES: Thinking about one of your works that you particularly like, can you talk about how you came to that work… just pick anyone that you’ve got a particular affection for...

TC: Mmm, let me think for a bit, because it’s hard. I’m usually most interested in what I’ve been doing this week.

ES: Yeah, that’s okay, that’s fine. But, instead of the Centrepoint paintings for example, another one...

TC: I’ll base this on my middle son Fenn. He’s borrowed some money from me recently and so I said, ‘you can pay me back by sitting for a series of portraits’. So I’ve… every Tuesday he’s been coming over, except when he cancels at the last minute, which is a bit annoying but …

ES: Yes.

TC: I’ve been painting him in the afternoon, downstairs in the house. I sit out in the light well and sit him in the doorway, and, so far, I’ve done, I think, 3 different paintings. One front on, which I thought was a nice-looking painting, but it wasn’t… I didn’t think it was a good enough likeness; and then I did one, three quarter profile, and I didn’t like the lower half of that and I painted that out and redid his mouth and the bottom of his nose. And then I did one in profile that I quite liked, but then I rubbed out the nose and now I want him to come back and sit again to re-do the nose. But then yesterday I was going to do the nose on the profile portrait but, because it was raining, I would have had to sit in the rain in the light well, and he arrived just as I’m having some lunch, and sat at the kitchen table and I said ‘okay I’ll paint you there’
As soon as he finished his lunch I started, and I think that painting came out quite well. That’s the best likeness and probably a better painting than the other ones I did.

ES: Oh that’s interesting.

TC: In a way because I went against my expectations. I did something a bit, you plan and you think ‘this is what I’m going to do’, and then you change your mind at the last minute and do something different. You challenge yourself in some way which reminds me of a story I read, in Spanish film director Bunuel’s autobiography called My Last Breath. He talks about...

ES: Hmm.

TC: He talks about how, when he made a lot of films in Mexico, he had a cinematographer who always went for the picturesque view. He found that annoying, and he used to go up to the cinecamera and spin it around to 180 degrees on its tripod and say ‘film that’. And sometimes I think about Bunuel when I’m out painting landscapes. I do his thing. I turn around 180 degrees and ask myself, ‘do I want to paint that?’ Often I turn back around again, but it’s an interesting process...

ES: Yes.

TC: To challenge the preconceptions of what you’re doing.

ES: Yes, yes, so something shifts in your perception again and you’re able to see it a bit more clearly maybe, or, yeah. So getting the, getting your son to sit in a different place, different light all of that, that worked, it.

TC: Oh yeah, maybe next week I’ll hate that portrait of Fenn, but I, they, my daughter and son like it, they think it’s all right. I don’t know, maybe it’s not. It’s tricky with portraits, I think they’ve go to be both a good painting and a good likeness. I think you know, with historic portraits, something done 3 or 400 hundred years ago, you can almost tell by looking at it whether or not it’s a good likeness. I know that sounds crazy because you don’t have the sitter there anymore.

ES: Yeah.
There’s no evidence, but you kind of feel that a good portrait is a good likeness; like if you look at a Goya portrait and it’s the royal family they’re looking like...inbred.

Yes, yes.

You know that it probably was a good likeness!

Something missing.

Like fingers! Yeah but somehow you know with great portraits, they work... and I think that, yeah, it’s got to be a good painting and it’s got to be a good likeness - that’s it. Your parameters are quite narrow but I think that, within that, you’ve got a lot of freedom.

Hm, you’ve done quite a bit of portraiture over the years, haven’t you?

Yeah, off and on. I, you know, come back to it.

Yeah.

I had an interesting project, my optometrist who’s a really old friend actually, got me to do, to celebrate, I can’t remember a certain number of years of his optometry business. He got me to draw all of their favourite customers.

That’s great.

And they were mainly people with eye problems of different sorts, but that included their accountant ...

Yes.

I went around to all their houses and did pencil drawings. I had a list of about 40 or 50 people, and I did it over 3 or 4 months, on weekends most of the time.

So I drew them all in their home and now they’ve got them framed on the wall in the optometry business.

Isn’t that great.

It was a lovely thing to do.

And well optometrists look at faces a lot...
ES: You know and they get to know what looks good on people and get the shape of their face and all that sort of thing, so what an interesting project.

TC: Yeah it was.

ES: Yeah, oh that’s good. Now your walking is so much a part of your creative process and I wondered, my usual question is about where do you feel inspired but with you, is it more about being out and walking?

TC: Well it’s, you know, I could get inspired from something I see from the car or the train or I cycle, as well as walk.

ES: Yes.

TC: But I think walking puts you in a nice, calm frame of mind.

ES: Mmm.

TC: To paint and draw and I think it’s nice to walk in somewhere, rather than, you know, be stuck in traffic and driving, and when you get there you’re not in the calmest frame of mind.

ES: Yes.

TC: I think, to do your work.

ES: Yes.

TC: So, I think walking certainly puts you in a very nice state of mind I think.

ES: Mmmm.

TC: To get away from the, all the hassles and the anxieties of everyday life, especially when you go for a longer walk.

ES: Mmm.

TC: Even just going for a day walk can do that for you as well. And even just, you know, walking from when you are, here in Darlington, into the city can be a calming activity.

ES: Yes.
TC: And walking, I find walking in the city as well as walking in the bush pretty interesting, I love, you know, the way that the slower you go, the more you see really.

ES: So true, so true. And do you think that just the rhythm of walking does anything for the way you, get out of your head in a way...get in a zone, in a way.

TC: I think it kind of does, I don’t want to get, too, you know, mystical about it.

ES: No.

TC: About it all.

ES: Yeah, yeah. But a lot of writers walk.

TC: Yeah.

ES: Walk for rhythm and you know there, they, I think that’s a different, sometimes it’s a different process that helps writers when they’re walking.

TC: I go for long walks and I go for long bike rides as well. Like on Saturday, I’m going for a ride to Wyong, Hornsby and along the valley and down Wiseman’s Ferry and like I ride my bike all day, but it actually clears my head quite a lot, to do that long sort of physical activity and be out in the country and the air.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: Listening to things. I find it really refreshing.

ES: Mm, mm. Well I mean I think most people I’ve interviewed have talked about whatever it is that allows them to get out of the everyday head space into you know, I mean, without getting too mystical as you say, you know getting your brain to operate in a different zone.

TC: I think...

ES: Free it up.

TC: ...the real challenge these days is not to multitask too much. I keep having to tell myself one thing at a time.

ES: Yes.
Every morning I try to write in, write a little bit, in my journal. I don’t write, ‘I’m feeling so depressed’, or something like that.

I tend to write observations, and talk about what I’ve done, overheard conversations, anything, like anything that I find interesting. It’s a bit of an exercise, just to do some writing every day. I also write a list of the things that I would like to do and then there’s, there remains a list of things I’m meant to do, you know this might be write a letter to a friend or...

...or buy more toilet paper, but you know and there’s other more ambitious goals in my list, like, ‘do a painting’ of this particular spot at this particular time, like because, I guess, as I get older your memory goes a bit, and when you think of something and don’t write it down...

...it can disappear down the drain hole of my subconscious, so ah, I’ll write down you know, ‘corner of William Street, such and such’, you know, I write down the geographic location and then the time it looked good to me, and put it on my list of possible subjects.

So I write a list of landscape subjects. I might also write a list of people I might want to paint a portrait of.

Usually my friends. I might write down possible places I want to visit and those sort of things. They all go in my list. But you can get bogged down you know, with, having to answer emails. I don’t have a mobile phone, so that’s one restriction I’ve made on my life so I don’t get interrupted, I still get those nuisance calls from call centres trying to tell me that...
...you know I’m going to be arrested if I don’t pay them a lot of money and things like that.

ES: Yes, yes.

TC: So I answer that phone but, I yeah, I try not to. I’ve got a tendency to, you know, on your arrival I was looking for my lost left boot, which is probably under the couch. You know, when I’ve lost something I can get too scattered, so I’ve go to keep saying to myself just do one thing even, if it’s a small thing, and then move on to the next thing.

ES: Yes, yeah.

TC: And I think doing that helps my creative process and as a freelance person, and as an artist and writer I have to make my own regime every day, get a clear idea of where I’m going and what I’m doing each day.

TC: So I start the day by writing in my journal and taking a look at my list. That’s a good way for me to kind of order my life.

ES: And would you always go out to draw each day?

TC: I try to. It doesn’t always happen. I try and at least do a watercolour or a drawing every day. I love drawing every day.

ES: Yeah.

TC: ...seven days a week, you know my partner Jan used to get annoyed that I’d, that I was never ‘on holidays’...

ES: Yes.

TC: ... or take weekends off. So now I do try, and do have at least one day on the weekend when I probably don’t paint, and do social things with family and friends. I do social things during the week too, and one of my routines has been, and it’s nearly finished now, is centred around my children - picking them up from band practice and sport. Those are the book ends of my day.

ES: Yes.
TC: You know I’m usually pretty reliable about balancing my painting with daily commitments. But I think there’s been a couple of times when I haven’t... I remember one moment I was up West Head painting and I got a bit carried away and went too long and I was meant to pick up my son from childcare and I realised I was going to be late and I ran back up the bush track from Mackerel Point, or wherever I was, and got in the car and, not having a mobile, I drove to Terrey Hills and found the first public phone and I think I rang up a friend and said, ‘can you go and pick up my son from day care?’.

ES: I think that’s a pretty good effort. It’s only been once in all those years!

TC: I think it’s been two or three times I’ve forgotten, but yeah usually, for someone who doesn’t wear a watch, I’m quite good at telling the time.

ES: I don’t wear a watch and I can pretty much...

TC: Except when the daylight savings comes. So yeah, there’s a lot of my creative day or whatever that is usually spent bookended by looking after children, and I’ve shared that with my partner and we shared cooking and, at the minute, she’s finishing a doctorate. So my life right now is quite domestic.

ES: Yes, yes.

TC: But like I enjoy that, sort of, you know going and buying food for, or cooking dinner.

ES: Yes.

TC: That sort of thing. It’s all part of my routine.

ES: Well it can work well with an artistic life with the structure of it. It gives you a bit of structure doesn’t it really?

TC: I’ve always worked from home and Jan still says ‘I wish you’d get a studio” because I tend to, you know, as she says, ‘turn the house into a shed’. I do have two rooms downstairs and I do a lot of my painting outside, although yesterday I was painting in the kitchen, and then I cleaned up afterwards.

ES: Mm.
TC: I like working from home, I’ve tried having a studio outside, and it just hasn’t worked for me.

ES: Mm.

TC: I like being able to, you know, maybe before I go to sleep at night go and look at what I’ve done during the day. Just have a quick look or when I wake up sometimes I, in the morning, first thing, I’ll have a look at what I’ve been doing with a clear head. It’s usually disappointing... so yeah, I like mixing it in with my domestic life.

ES: Yeah. I think I was looking at a little piece of film on the Art Gallery website that was, you were talking about putting, placing pieces together, in your studio... The narrative that might emerge from that...

TC: Well what I do in the studio or at home or on the kitchen table or where we are now, is ah, am I talking loud enough?

ES: You’re good, you’re fine.

TC: I quite like arranging the small water colours I do into groups, and sometimes the arranging takes almost as long as the doing of them. But I enjoy that process. It’s about getting the balance right; arranging 15 water colours and getting the eye to travel across them in a good way.

ES: Mm.

TC: It’s one of the things I do at home.

ES: Mm. That’s something I’m picking up on when I’m writing something about your work on, I’m trying to arrange, I guess, small narratives that are about places.

TC: Oh okay.

ES: I’m actually working on, I’ve got it here, a table format. So I’m actually, this is the sort of thing I’m doing where I’m writing about your work, you might have twenty small works and I am writing fragments of narratives and placing them in the same arrangement.

TC: Oh I see.

ES: They don’t necessarily correspond to the pictures...
TC: It’s almost like you need to write on – like a library card, you know those file cards.

ES: Mm, yes, yeah.

TC: Then shuffle them.

ES: Mm, yeah, so I’ve done various things with arrangement before...depending on the person I’m working with the piece can be quiet different...sometimes it follows the form of the work and sometimes it’s a little narrative that spins off from the image so yeah, but that one was one I wrote, in response to a painting you did in Waverley Cemetery. You can read that later...

TC: Okay great thank you.

ES: Yeah, yeah, so that’s a little bit more of a narrative type one. A place that I write a lot of snippets about but I haven’t formed a lot of whole poems is Coogee cause I go down there quite a lot and you’ve obviously done a lot of work around Coogee.

TC: Coogee, probably about 8 years ago.

ES: Okay, yeah. And the piece that I haven’t been able to get hold of...I think it’s called postcards from Coogee?

TC: Uh hm.

ES: I’ve got to have a look at that. A good look at that because I think that might work with what I’m doing. Where would I be able to get a good image of that one?

TC: I can send you one maybe, I’ll have a look in the files.

ES: Okay.

TC: I think I’ve got a reasonable one somewhere.

ES: Okay cause I’ve got little bits about...

TC: I’ve put a note about it in my book.

ES: Yeah, yeah, but that’s and the other place is... have you done much painting at Scott’s Head or is that a one off?
TC: Oh, it’s a bit of a one off, the one Robert used in his book. Robert’s used that, because that’s also a time we used to spend a lot of time together at that era. That was maybe... 1979.

ES: Right.

TC: And we were on journeys together and spent a lot of time and so ah, he used that one but it was a period, that was an interesting period in my painting. I’d started off like, that series of gouache I did when I really found myself as a plein air painter and I remember I used to go up the North Coast, I had my cousin and her husband living at Bellingen on the North Bank Road, near Coffs Harbour and I had some friends at Yandina and Maleny up in Southern Queensland and I used to go and visit them, so that was, that painting was done on one of those kind of road trips where I’d stop and paint and had a folder of paper in my clutch.

ES: Mm.

TC: Yeah, so, I think Robert really liked that series of paintings.

ES: I think it’s really lovely to capture that because I think it’s all changed quite substantially.

TC: I have, I was friends with someone who lived in Scott’s Head, he just died about 6 months ago. Desmond Digby.

ES: Oh right.

TC: He was ah, an illustrator...

ES: Oh yes.

TC: He did a series called Bottersnikes and Gumbles, they’re making an animation of it now. He was an old friend of Patrick White’s.

ES: Oh yeah.

TC: He was a lovely guy.

ES: I know who you mean now.
TC: So that was another interesting thing, I remember when I did that painting actually a lady up the road asked me if I’d like a cup of tea and a biscuit and brought me a cup of tea and a biscuit while I was painting and said I won’t interfere.

ES: Was that in Scott’s Head.

TC: Yeah in Scott’s Head, she said take it back to number 79. So sweet I thought for her to do that.

ES: I spent a lot of time in Scott’s Head in my University days, so, I had friends living up there so I, and then I went back there years later and it was so that hill was so built up, you know.

TC: Yeah, I go to other coastal towns and I’m still painting coast, I’ve been going to Currawong recently quite a lot down South.

ES: Yeah, I know Curramong well, as well.

TC: And I go to Currawong which is on the side of West Head which used to be owned by the Labor Council the cottages...

ES: Oh yes.

TC: We used to go to South West Rocks a lot.

ES: Okay.

TC: We’d rent the same house every year and I loved it up there.

ES: Yep, yep. And I know that stretch where you painted the caravan park at Coledale too.

TC: Yeah, I’ve got friends at Coledale.

ES: Okay.

TC: My aunt who just died recently she lived till 97, was in a nursing home at Woonona, so I used to get the train to one of the stops up near Coledale or Thirroul and ride my bicycle along the coast and stop and do a watercolour, go and visit my Aunty Marion and then do another colour on the way home back to Thirroul. So yeah, I love that bit of the South.
ES: So that little interaction, the woman bringing you the cup of tea. Is that something that happens?

TC: Oh it’s a bit rare.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

TC: You know people are usually pretty nice, I’ve developed a method of, of not really making eye contact with people when I’m out painting, especially in the city because you can get very distracted. It’s natural... that’s why I don’t really do big paintings in the city, I just do my small watercolours because it’s a bit more discreet, and I still, after all these years, I’m still kind of really embarrassed painting outside when people come up to me. I still feel kind of embarrassed so I just try and concentrate or just keep going.

And if someone asks me a question I’ll respond, but just very briefly.

The annoying sort of questions you get are, ‘Painter are you?’ ‘Do you sell them?’, they always go ‘Do you sell them?’ and I usually say ‘no’ and then they say things like ‘oh I’ve got an aunt who paints and she’s called Maureen Gleeson, you don’t know her? Oh you should know her, she sells a lot of stuff’. So you sometimes get those sort of questions that can be a bit annoying but, after a while, if you give ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers and keep working, people are usually very nice and leave you alone.

ES: It’s the similar disappointment you get when you tell someone you write poetry and then they want you to come out with a tumtitumtitutim dah.

TC: Oh yes, the galloping rhythm. Yeah, right, the bush ballad.

ES: Yeah, yeah a couple of times I’ve had you know that my boys are rugby tragics so the rugby club asked me to write a poem.

TC: Oh.

ES: I’ve said oh please no!

TC: I think in a lot of sort of circumstances with strangers I don’t tell them I’m an artist or a writer. I used to work quite a lot as a house painter so I might, and that’s something I know a lot about, so I’ll say that’s my profession, then I can talk about it.
ES: Yes.

TC: I’m not going to say I’m a chicken sexer or something I don’t know anything about. So you judge your situation.

ES: Yeah.

TC: To say what you do, because once you say I am artist or I’m a, I prefer ‘painter’ because it sounds a bit less pretentious, but if, once you say that sort of thing you’ll get questions.

ES: Mm, mm. I guess it depends on the mood you’re in at the time.

TC: Yeah, whether you want a longer conversation or just...

ES: Yep.

TC: You say I’m a painter and decorator or something and they think oh, he’s sixty and he’s working as a house painter, ‘what a loser’. Then they leave me alone and they don’t ask any more questions.

ES: That’s quite convenient painter, that’s, I like that.

TC: A painter covers everything.

ES: Yeah, that’s right. Any stimuli, like you know music or ah, do you like to feel things?

TC: Oh well, I love music but my taste is quite eclectic but, you know, the idea of the twentieth century artist in the studio who paints while they listen to music...well because I’m working outside all the time I don’t, I rarely...

ES: You don’t do ears (headphones).

TC: Yeah, I don’t do earphones, and I love music, but I’ll listen to it when I’m not painting. I’ll listen to it, I used to listen to it when I was housepainting.

ES: Yes, yes.

TC: And I listened to a lot of book tapes when I used to do housepainting.

ES: Okay, yeah.

TC: Ah, book cd’s more recently.

ES: Yeah, uh uh.
So but ah, no I, and I sing and play the guitar at home.

Sometimes to the family but that’s a pretty private occupation as well. But I do...

But that’s all relaxation it’s not...

Yeah it’s relaxation, I really enjoy it. I’ve always enjoyed singing and sometimes you know if I’m walking along a track I might sing to myself.

Okay, yep, yeah.

When no one’s around. But when I was younger I was you know like a boy soprano,

Okay right.

I could read music of the sheet but you know I’ve always loved music, I like you know, Classical - Benjamin Britten, African music and Jazz and some, I’ve been introduced to a lot of more contemporary music by my kids, some of which I really like and some I don’t. So yeah.

If you’re walking along a track singing what are you likely to be singing?

Oh just what’s been stuck in my head maybe...

Yeah, yeah.

It just could be annoying, oh I don’t know. I, it’s interesting my children have now discovered my vinyl collection and they’re going through that. And they’re really enjoying it...

I’ve been wondering about that. Cause we’ve got a lot of vinyl under the house and I was thinking...

I’ve resurrected it. I know I’ve recently…it’s worth keeping.

Yeah, I think I’ve even got an old turntable down there. It probably is worth digging out. What is the first memory you have of feeling moved to paint or do you have a memory of...

Oh I don’t know if I really can say I have. I remember I did a painting and I thought that’s kind of really me, when I was about 19. I had a job as a dishwasher at this
Mexican restaurant and I started doing this painting and it was, not really like what I do now but, I knew I wanted to keep painting it and I rang a friend who used to sometimes swap jobs with me, and he filled in for me that night and I finished the painting and I felt you know, I felt compelled to keep painting it till 2 o’clock in the morning or something. I’m not sure if it was a great painting but I felt like that painting, I felt, you know, that it wasn’t anyone else’s, just mine.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: When I was younger I liked painting and drawing and I remember I, some of my first adventures into colour were with watercolour and copying the ‘Beautiful Australia’ illustration from the Australian Women’s Weekly when it used to be in big format, in the 60s.

ES: Okay, right, yes, yes.

TC: It had a section which was often a picture of a billabong or some, you know, like a Frank Hurley photograph - that sort of aesthetic. Ah, which I’d sometimes copy. But yeah, it’s hard to say, sometimes I felt oh I’ve done it, something really good and then I realise later on, no, I was fooling myself so, my immediate judgment isn’t always correct.

ES: Mm. So at that point the night you stayed up till 2am and couldn’t stop it was about the process it was like...

TC: Yeah.

ES: You were on a roll....

TC: Yeah I felt like I knew what I was doing and I knew when I finished it. So that was something interesting for me.

ES: Did you keep it?

TC: Yeah, yeah, I gave it to my parents and my parents have now died so it’s in my brother’s house, so it’s still there, it’s quite a strange painting.

ES: Is it?

TC: Yeah.
ES: And what about your emotional state, does that affect your inspiration, do you sort of?

TC: ...what do you...?

ES: Do you get yourself in a zone where you can get rid of ...

TC: Well I mean my emotional state probably does, I think when you’re really anxious and I think a lot of artists tend to suffer from various forms of anxiety, it’s an impediment to your work, and being at ease and being relaxed is good. A bit of adrenalin is good too for the creative process, and along with feeling kind of calm at the same time, it’s hard to put a finger on it, but being very, very anxious I don’t, I think it’s an impediment and that’s something I have personally had to work against, conquering my various anxieties.

TC: Yeah and then there’s times I think when, you know, times of my life when I’ve been a bit depressed or there could be external reasons for that you know, and things haven’t gone that well, but I think that since I’ve been a father and had a family, when I get the opportunity to paint and draw or write or something I seize it. I don’t faff around as much as I used to when I was younger.

ES: Yes.

TC: Waiting for inspiration...

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: And sometimes you know you may not, you start off doing something and you don’t feel very inspired but it’s like sort of with the cold water eventually you get used to it and something good might come of it.

ES: Yes.

TC: You just don’t know but I, I might start of with, I don’t know this isn’t going well, I’m not enjoying this, and then an hour later something might come good. Or, I might paint all morning one day and it’s rubbish and then do something at 4pm that might be okay.

ES: Yep.
TC: So I do tend to just take those opportunities and try and use them because life’s getting... As I get older, how many more good days have I got? You know, when I can still walk around, still got a bit of brain left...

ES: I reckon you’ve got plenty of decades to go!

TC: And don’t get run over by a bus or fall off a cliff or you know.

ES: ...heightened sense of mortality.

TC: I waste a lot of time too, often looking for things. I walk into a room and I know I’ve come there for some purpose, to look for something, or to pick something up but I can’t remember what it is. It’s not a good sign.

ES: Oh I think that’s, yeah, the result of looking after a family as well isn’t it.

TC: Yeah.

ES: I’m always looking for some random object that someone’s lost or...

TC: Yeah, I think there’s a lot of that.

ES: Yeah.

TC: Or maybe your brain’s like a cup that’s brimming with water out and you pour more water in it and some of it spills out the sides.

ES: That’s right, some of it’s got to fall out. Absolutely, absolutely. How do you feel when you finished your series of works or do you do that, is your work like that, do you?

TC: It sort of peters out, rather than, ‘Oh wow I’ve finished. Isn’t that great!’

ES: Yeah, yeah.

TC: Like I’m, I did another, I’ve been doing this series, this last month or so. Pictures of Centrepoint Tower, from different places, I feel it’s almost finished but then I saw a view of it from a different place in Darlinghurst this morning and so I did one more. So maybe that series is sort of starting to come to an end and I’m thinking about new things. I think I kind of get a bit obsessed about one place.

ES: Yes. Yep.
TC: ...at times. Sometimes I go back and paint the same motif and then I sort of ask myself, ‘Am I repeating myself? Or is this a different thing?’ So, ah, for example, over the last 5 years I’ve been painting a lot of flowering trees, which I never did when I was younger. There’s one particularly great coral tree on the edge of Botany cemetery and I’ve done quite a few paintings of that. So, last month - it was the time when the coral trees are at their peak - I went and did 3 or 4, I think I did actually 5 more paintings of that tree with the cemetery in the foreground.

ES: I’ve got some bits of writing about coral trees...

TC: They’re a bit of weed tree really I suppose, but I love them when they’re flowering.

ES: Oh they’re amazing trees.

TC: There’s one at the cemetery that’s got a particularly nice shape because the wind must come off Botany Bay and push it sideways, and then behind, actually behind the coral tree, is the container terminal, so it’s a very interesting spot.

ES: Yes.

TC: I have painted that tree before but I think if I put these new ones up against the ones I did, I think I did them about 4 years ago, they will probably be quite different. And then, last year, and the year before I did quite a lot of painting of jacarandas which I haven’t really done before...

ES: Oh okay.

TC: ... I got quite carried away with painting jacarandas in an urban setting. Ah and just today I’m noticing their starting up again so...

ES: They are, yeah.

TC: So I think will I do some more.

ES: mm, mm.

TC: I like Illawarra flame trees too. I’d like to do some more paintings of them. You see some real beauties going down past Kiama.

ES: Yes, yes.

TC: So that’s where I...
ES: So if you, yeah, it doesn’t seem to me like you know, ah, a number of the artists, I guess you know, you’ve interwoven your life with your painting a lot more than a number of the artists that I’ve interviewed that you know, some of them get a block of 3 months where they go into studio...

TC: Yeah.

ES: ...that’s it and then they have this kind of real cycle of you know, having to regroup after that, where do they go next type of thing, where yours seems much more interwoven with...

TC: There are times when I do a lot more than other times you know eventually, I have a week when, oh that’s a good week and I have a really dud 2 weeks.

ES: Yes, yeah.

TC: Maybe I’ll just have a day when I do something.

ES: Yep, so if you have a day or a week where it’s a dud week, how do you get going again? What works?

TC: You just keep going, you know.

ES: You do.

TC: Or just try and readjust your focus. In painting and drawing I’ve got all these different things that I’m doing I suppose it’s writing and painting and drawing, I’ll just change my medium, you know, go from my oil painting, to watercolours, to drawings.

ES: Yes.

TC: And to writing, and then as far as subjects are concerned I can, you know, uh, go from portraits to landscapes or then there’s different types of landscapes, you know.

ES: Mmm.

TC: A lot of ways I ... so I change around like that, if I’m in a bit of a rut or things aren’t going my way, I can, say, stop doing landscapes and do a portrait, and turn it around.

ES: Yep.

TC: Turn it around.
ES: Shift things a bit.

TC: Shift things.

ES: Yep, yep. Do you look at other people’s work to get inspired, do you look at the classics, or?

TC: I look at the... I’ve got some art books with old favourites I like to look at, you know, that’d be a long list, but when I was younger a lot of my... I went to art school for one year but I see myself as more of an autodidact, especially my fine arts education I had certain peers who I learnt a lot from, like I mentioned earlier, Robert Gray the poet who influenced me a lot, and my cousin Diana Wood Conroy and her ex-husband Joe Conroy. They were artists and they influenced a lot of what I looked at and ah, what I read. But I used to go up to the Stack at Fisher Library in Sydney University I lived in Glebe and I was living by myself then, when I was about, you know, 22, 21, 23. I’d go and read my way through the Fine Arts section of the Stack. It was open till 11 o’clock at night, so I’d have dinner and go and look at art books and I’d browse, which, now that they’ve moved a lot of the books out of Fisher Stack that facility of browsing without actually knowing what you’re looking for has disappeared.

ES: Yep.

TC: Which is a real shame I think.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: But, that’s when I sort of discovered artists I really loved, like Caspar David Friedrich. I just randomly discovered them really and sometimes someone might mention, it might be a friend that mentioned have you looked at this work or that work ah and you go and look it up and sometimes I discovered things just by chance but, yeah, it was a mixture of both. I do like, I also look at my peers’ work sometimes, but I’ve got my head in the sand a bit sometimes. If a friend’s having an exhibition I’ll usually go and look at it.

ES: Mm, mm.
TC: I’ll look at things at the Art Gallery of NSW or sometimes I might, you know, I went to Brisbane for the Asia Pacific Triennale a couple of years ago.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: I’m not really in touch with everything but...

ES: Yeah.

TC: I go and see a bit, sometimes I think my mood changes so I’ve got times that I feel absorbent or non-absorbent and use those phrases when you feel like you’ve...

ES: Yes, yes, yep.

TC: I guess when you’re writing your poetry there’s times where you want to read other writers’ poems and times when you just want to shut yourself off and concentrate on your own work.

ES: Mm, mm

TC: I remember when I was writing my Seven Walks book people said that, you know, you should read this, or should read that certain travel books, or, you know, talking about, was it McFarlane who wrote the Old Road or something?

ES: Oh right, okay.

TC: Which I haven’t read yet, but I’d like to, but when I wrote that I just thought I’d, I’d kind of shut myself off from reading travel or walking books and just...

ES: Sort of.

TC: Wrote it.

ES: Got another layer to it, your book, it’s.

TC: So that took longer than the illustrations for the book, writing the essays… some of the essays were quicker than others. They were done over a period of time but you know, I didn’t want to read, cause I have read a lot in my past, so.

ES: Yes.

TC: There are certain travel writers who I like, going back to Eric Newby.

ES: Mm, mm.
TC: People like that. So I’ve had plenty of influences, I’m not denying any of that.

ES: Yes, no, no.

TC: You’ve just got to absorb the influences.

ES: Mm.

TC: And make them part of what you are.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: Because you wouldn’t be anywhere without influences.

ES: No. No.

TC: But sometimes I’ll do a painting, and I think that’s a bit like, you know, I did the portrait, the portrait I did yesterday of my son, and I thought, ‘That’s a bit like’, there’s a portrait painter I admire from America called Alice Neel and I thought, ‘That’s a bit like Alice Neel’.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: I never want to deny another artist coming through, or you’re channelling some, you know sometimes I’ll paint a particular subject and although my painting style isn’t like his, I’d think, ‘That’s kind of a really Caspar David Friedrich subject’, because I’ve been influenced by looking at him, or by Edward Hopper watercolours or...

ES: Yes.

TC: Even old English painters, and even Australian watercolourists like Namatjira.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: I can see all their influences at work when I’ve studied, looked at their work a lot.

ES: Yeah.

TC: Sometimes I go, I go and look at auction previews. Fine art auction previews, because you get the chance to see paintings that are about to disappear again into private collections, so...

ES: That’s right, yeah.
TC: I think that’s a nice process. It’s quite a, usually a random selection of things but I enjoy doing that, so yeah.

ES: Mm, mm. The process of the book that the writing ended up taking more time you think than the watercolours...

TC: I was doing the walks and doing the watercolours.

ES: And was that, did you anticipate that?

TC: Oh, I knew it would.

ES: Yeah.

TC: The original idea for the book. Michael Wee had the original idea for the book. He wanted me to write the essays and to do the pictures and ah, he ah, he wanted it to be 15 walks and I’m, I’m quite stubborn, I wanted it to be far less than that, but I kind of didn’t tell him straight away and I didn’t want it to be a ‘best of’ sort of book I just wanted it to be about the walks we’d done. But I did made certain criteria: that they be walks that were at least two days long and I didn’t do any city walks, just wild places.

ES: Yes.

TC: So, the thing I wanted to combine in my essays, a little bit of history, a little bit of flora and fauna, a little bit of the conversations I had with my companions or thoughts I was having when I was by myself.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: So and to make it all, sort of, sit well together, to merge the history back into the kind of exact account of a particular walk ah, it took a while just to get that, the syntax the rhythm of it, to work. Ah.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: So ah.

ES: I think there’s a beautiful parallelism or play between your art and your writing because it’s comfortably anecdotal but there’s a depth that you almost don’t realise you’re going into until you’ve finished.
TC: Oh okay.

ES: And I think, for me I see this real parallel between walking and I’m, I haven’t done a lot of long walks but I do like to walk but the walking your, your paintings and your writing all of them it’s kind of that journey and there’s little anecdotes that happen on the way but sometimes you don’t actually see the depth until you’ve finished the walk. You know if you come out of a walk, and you know, you’ve just put one foot in front of the another, you’ve seen some beautiful things that when you’re lying down to sleep at night, you think oh that was a really amazing day. That’s how I often feel about your painting and writing.

TC: Well its times during those days when your memory of it was ‘that was an amazing day’ and you tend to forget the times during the day where it’s a bit of, there’s a quite a bit of drudgery or...

ES: Totally.

TC: Discomfort.

ES: Yep, yep, totally.

TC: Or,...

ES: I’ve thought about it a lot.

TC: Worrying about something or.

ES: I did Coastrek this year and...

TC: Yeah? Oh, my partner Jan did that.

ES: Did she?

TC: Yeah.

ES: Yeah, and I thought about your seven walks quite a lot along that walk, where there are, you know, some good moments and some not so good moments...

TC: Yeah.
ES: And some moments when you yell at the other people in the team. But uh, I love the anecdote about the fellow and his boots, that must have been, where was that? Was that?

TC: Was it the boots coming apart.

ES: Yes.

TC: Yes that’s my friend Helen who did that.

ES: Oh no, there was some other fellow who didn’t wear proper boots.

TC: Oh, yes, yes.

ES: Yep, yep. We’ve all walked with that person.

TC: Yeah, he was very stubborn about his boots which were steel-toed elastic-sided boots and I thought, look, I’m not a very experienced walker or anything, but I knew they were going to give him grief, but he was determined...

ES: Yep.

TC: I wanted it to be a mixture of that personal, social stuff and the wilderness stuff and thinking about the indigenous people along whose old pathways a lot of the trails around Australia are based, so you think about them and how they lived in this continent.

ES: Yes, I did a walk through around Wineglass Bay down in Tassie with my partner and we were walking through a marshy sort of area for ages and ages and I realised that there were middens everywhere.

TC: Mm, mm.

ES: And uh, it was quite, I don’t know, it was a very moving walk.

TC: Yeah one thing I found regarding the middens is that when I’ve chosen, and like I used to go up to West Head a lot and paint and different places around Sydney, I often found that the place where I’ve chosen to sit and paint is next to a midden or even on a midden.

ES: Yeah right.
TC: And I’ve thought thousands of years ago people chose to sit here and eat their shellfish...

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: And I’m sitting here too, it’s a strange feeling.

ES: Yeah, yeah. Okay where am I getting to, I do tend to get off track a bit. Ah yes so we talked about music but anything else, like to do you like to go to films or like is there any other form in particular?

TC: I like to go to films and then sometimes. I don’t go to many concerts but I do like to occasionally.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: Going to a film has always been something I love doing, going out for a film. Even seeing the ads and the shorts, before the film comes on, is all part of the process.

ES: Yep, yep.

TC: And, going into the dark and watching a film, like, that is great. I’ve always really loved that.

ES: Mm.

TC: Yeah.

ES: And I mean architecture must, you must be inspired to an extent by architecture?

TC: There is a side, yeah my mother studied architecture for four years but she didn’t finish, she got pregnant to, she was married to my father and for some reason she didn’t finish, but ah, yeah architecture, I guess in another life I could’ve been one.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: I’m into that, and I’ve got friends, quite a few friends who are architects.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: Had a lot of discussion about architecture.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: Though my taste in architecture is quite amorphous really.
ES: It’s a good reflection of Sydney.

TC: The thing I like about architecture and the thing I like about Sydney is its crazy anarchy.

ES: Yes.

TC: So uh.

ES: Yes.

TC: I like the fact that where allowed to paint our houses whatever colour we like, as opposed to some European city where it’s all quite controlled.

ES: It’s true, it’s true. Sometimes you don’t realise what you’ve got, you know, that’s very true. How do you feel about articulating your thoughts on inspiration? Like do you find it easy or hard or what? You write, so, like some artists find that very difficult but...

TC: Yeah I just, I guess I don’t think about it. I do think about it in a sense that I’m always trying to get myself going every day and motivated so ah, consciously or unconsciously trying to keep... I find it is quite hard to talk about inspiration in that sense.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: There’s this sort of anti-wet side to me that doesn’t like to.

ES: I can tell!

TC: To talk about ‘the creative spirit’ and then, when I hear the word ‘creativity’, I ‘reach for my gun’, sort of thing, you know. And there’s a certain art talk I don’t like very much; they’re often talking about ‘creativity’ and your ‘art practice’ and things like that.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: Certain expressions I try to avoid. I’d rather talk about my ‘pictures’ than my ‘art practice’.

ES: Yep.
TC: Making pictures.

ES: Mm, mm.

TC: I like to keep it practical.

ES: That’s good.

TC: A kind of a practical approach, but, within, behind that pragmatism, of course there is, I suppose, ‘inspiration’ and ‘lack of inspiration’.

ES: Yep, yeah, yeah. No I had a feeling that that would be something for you but you know because the way you write is very practical as well, there’s lots of detail about you know, what happens during the day and art and the equipment and you know so I had a sense that you know I might need to be careful about... how much mystical bullshit I went into!!

TC: I love listening to the Spirit of Things when I’m cooking dinner on the radio.

ES: Oh good.

TC: with Romana Koval.

ES: Okay.

TC: Yes.

ES: No oh that’s actually part of the reason I think you’re the last artist I’m going to interview and I think I was a little bit reticent cause I had a sense that you might be, oh come on let’s not talk too much about mystical creativity, wanky stuff. So I, you know, I’ve got to grapple with that.

TC: It’s probably good for me to actually think about, like, how it works in some ways.

ES: Well it’s good for me to not to get too wanky to, so. Okay, and I think that sort of, I think I’ve covered most of the things I wanted to talk about, do you write when you’re walking or just paint?

TC: No I just paint, occasionally I might just write down two words about something I want to write about later.

ES: Mm, mm later.

TC: As a memory device.
ES: Yes, yeah, yeah.

TC: So uh, but I don’t write on my paintings and I don’t really draw on my writing books.

ES: Okay.

TC: Occasionally, I might for lack of other...Yeah, I don’t kind of illustrate these books but occasionally I might do a line drawing in the back of this book, cause I haven’t brought my other drawing equipment with me. My partner Jan says something very good when I reach for a serviette or something to do a drawing she always says: ‘Use the right tool for the right job”...

ES: Okay.

TC: ‘Just don’t be so impatient’, you know.

ES: Yes.

TC: Get the proper paper and then, it will only take you 20 seconds, you know, so I do have a book with line drawings or something.

ES: Yeah. That’s interesting you keep that separate.

TC: There’s that, I think Anselm Kiefer that German painter, has a lot to answer for. There’s quite a lot of imitators who write these sort of serious words on the bottom of their paintings.

ES: Yeah.

TC: In his style, and he does it very well, but it’s kind of, can get a bit, a bit wanky sometimes.

ES: Yeah, yeah, I agree and it, yeah a lot of people are.

TC: I don’t, I’ve only recently, I don’t sign my pictures. The initials on the front with a signing on the back.

ES: Okay.

TC: And only recently I’ve started meticulously dating my watercolours and things.

ES: Have you?

TC: Still got to start doing it with my oils.
ES: Mm.

TC: But I actually, apart from writing the date on it, I can nearly always remember if I look at some painting from 30 years ago I could remember that time and place and pretty much date it, not, you know, just within the year and the season, probably but not exactly, but I could remember, it would take me back to that, that event or that occasion.

ES: Do you think that there have been more days in your life when you have painted than not?

TC: Mm, maybe it’s about 50:50.

ES: Pretty good ratio.

TC: I don’t know. Painted well? Two percent of the days...

ES: Yeah, yeah.

TC: You can work away and it doesn’t mean anything...

ES: Yes, yes, absolutely.

TC: It’s not about the time spent.

ES: I was reading that John McDonald review of the group exhibition that was...

TC: At the Biennale?

ES: And ah, he was talking about some of the artists, saying they were not good with words and I know you are good with words, but does drawing replace words for you in that you know, are you capturing something with a drawing that....

TC: Oh yeah, I think it’s one other thing, way to express what I, how I perceive the world.

ES: You feel like this is my little hang up that sometimes I feel like I’ve, I can’t capture what I want to and I wish I could paint it.

TC: I mean I sometimes, I think I’m don’t write conversation very well. I’d find it very difficult to write a play.

ES: Yeah.
TC: Because I’m not as attuned say, as a playwright would be, to listening to conversations but perhaps the way I’m looking at light, looking at shadows and things...

ES: Yes.

TC: I’d really, ah, that part of my brain must be quite tuned up.

ES: Yes.

TC: In a sense that my ear for dialogue perhaps isn’t, so yeah I think in that sense I, my drawings do something that words can’t, but there are similarities in the way I use words to the way I paint. I think that I’m, it’s hard to say exactly, but I think there are, its I guess it’s me, but ah, I’m interested in the way messages to your brain actually sort of travel through nerves and come out your fingertips.

ES: I am too. Yeah.

TC: And I’m very, very interested in talking about words and drawing, I love looking at the British Library, at the manuscripts of famous writers, I look at them.

ES: Yes.

TC: The way Thomas Hardy wrote or, the way Emily Bronte wrote or...

ES: Yes.

TC: Or Virginia Woolf, or whatever and I find that really fascinating – their line.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

TC: So I, I like looking at writing because it’s, it is a line then I’m interested in it too. Although I can’t read kanji or characters I love you know, Japanese calligraphy.

ES: Yes, yes.

TC: Because they’re pushing the boundaries between legibility and line and the mark, the man-made mark.

ES: Mm, mm. Yes it’s kind of sitting on the fence isn’t it between art and writing, capturing a bit of both. I think they’re the main topics I wanted to cover. I don’t think there’s anything else that ah, comes to mind. I mean I’m interested in what you’ve
just said then about you know, the processes, getting it from here and how that travels.

TC: Choosing your medium is really important, you know, even different writers have different ways they like to work and, someone was saying recently about writing that it’s come a full circle. People are now having voice activated computers so you talk into them or even into a smart phone and it will come out as text. It goes back to writers like, I remember, Robert Louis Stevenson dictated his last book to a secretary and it...this person was saying you have to think very clearly before you actually speak when you’re using that form of writing rather than, and then when people typed on typewriters they had to think clearly in a sense because you really didn’t want to retype the whole thing endlessly, although a lot of writers did.

ES: That’s right.

TC: And using white-out.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

TC: The advent of word-processing gave people this freedom which in a way people got a bit lazy about thinking clearly before they committed something to the page.

ES: That’s right, mm, mm.

TC: Myself I like to write by hand and then type it in the computer and then print it out and read it aloud and then go back but everyone has different.... But the medium is important.

ES: I can’t imagine typing straight.

TC: Cormac McCarthy still uses the typewriter.

ES: Does he?

TC: Yep, he sold one recently at a fundraising auction, it got about $250,000 dollars and he bought it for $45 dollars; but then a friend found the same model of typewriter in an Op shop for $10, so he’s got a new typewriter now.

ES: He can sell that for $250,000 next year.

TC: That’s right.
ES: Amazing writing though isn’t it.

TC: I like some of his, I like *The Road, No Country for Old Men*.

ES: I couldn’t stop reading The Road.

TC: *All the Pretty Horses*.

ES: Yes, yes.

TC: Though, sometimes the violence is relentless.

ES: Yeah, yeah.

TC: But you get the same relentless quality in a lot of great writers, like Thomas Hardy, who, with a few exceptions, is relentlessly depressing, because if people are having a rendezvous they’ll always just miss each other or.

ES: Yeah, absolutely.

TC: You know, so.

ES: So Hardy, any writers that you particularly, what about poets?

TC: Oh I like Hardy, oh there’s, I used to really like Philip Larkin.

ES: Love Larkin...

TC: I love Hardy, ah, I used to really like Arthur Waley’s translations of Chinese poems.

ES: Oh okay, yeah, yeah.

TC: Elizabeth Bishop is a poet I like.

ES: Oh yes.

TC: I think she’s really great. And John Clare, the English nature poet.

ES: I don’t know him.

TC: He went mad...John Clare was a great poet. And I like, you know, and I’ve got some contemporaries, whose poetry I like, Robert Gray and I like Helen Garner’s non-fiction.

ES: Yeah.

TC: I could go on.
ES: Yeah, that’s good.

TC: I love the Brontes.

ES: Mm, mm. Okay well that’s given me a lot to think about.

TC: Okay, good.

ES: Thank you.

TC: No worries.

ES: I really appreciate the time, I know it’s precious and it can be quite exhausting, just talking.

TC: It’s good to make your brain work.

ES: Your brain’s certainly firing away when I read your writing, I really enjoy your writing as well.
Appendix I: Images and artworks referred to in the Exegesis


Tom Carment, *Waverley Cemetery*, 2010

Tom Carment, *Postcards from Coogee*, 2008
Regina Wilson, *Syaw (Fish Net)*, 2005

Nicholas Folland, *The Door is Open*, 2006
Nicholas Folland, *Anchor*, 2008

John Wolseley, scraping canvas in the bush:
Cressida Campbell, *Oysters*, 1994

Cressida Campbell, *Nasturtiums*, 2002
Alison Multa, *Stars*, 2005

Patricia Piccinini, *The Comforter*, 2010

Ricky Swallow, *Younger than Yesterday*, 2006
Rachel Carroll, *Hattah*, 2011

Rox de Luca, *Saved Series*, 2012
Joe Frost, *Docked Ship*, 2005

Lionel Bawden, example of work considered.
Hossein Valamanesh, *The Lover Circles his own Heart*, 1993

Lola Ryan, *Harbour Bridge*, 2000
Rosella Namok, Rain Paintings

Aida Tomescu, *Obliqua*, 1997
Ah Xian, China, China – Bust 28, 1999
Fish Traps at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, woven by Lorna Jin-gubarrangunyja and Elizabeth Mipilanggurr of the Burarra people
Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro, *Cordial Home Project*, 2003
Fiona Hall, *Medicine Bundle for the Non-born Child*, 1993-4