



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 4 EPISODE 1 (Late February 2022)

RACHEL KENT

CEO BUNDANON

Tim Stackpool:

Rachel welcome to the podcast.

Rachel Kent:

Oh, it's an absolute pleasure, Tim. Thanks very much for inviting me.

Tim Stackpool:

Now you've moved into this role at Bundanon. It's been quite the tree change. How have you settled in? How easy has it been for you to change gears?

Rachel Kent:

Look, it was a very strange time to move because it was middle of the shutdown. Last June, July, August, quite a strange time to try and move city, home and role all at once. That said, I feel incredibly fortunate. And I mean, we left inner, Sydney inner West. We've moved obviously to the region. My cousins are here. They're oyster farmers here. And I was able to find a place to move too. So actually, it was the right time, right opportunity. And I have to say I'm utterly delighted. And I'm feeling really quite settled now.

Tim Stackpool:

It's almost like that Southern part of New South Wales, it's like an enclave for artists. Ngununggula opened up there in the Southern Highlands, south of Sydney not so long ago. But it has always been that place for artists, particularly ceramic artists as well to do their work. And of course the Boyd setting up Bundanon there. Does it feel like that really is a bit of a centre of artistic endeavors and merits in New South Wales? Do you think?

Rachel Kent:

Look, it absolutely does. And with the launch of this beautiful, big new build at Bundanon, I think this will become heart and soul in the area, but also the South is really where things are headed. I think this is the right time and there are a lot of artists here.

Tim Stackpool:

Well, that's right. But for you, how did this opportunity come about? I mean, your history as I mentioned in the introduction, so many years at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. You are legendary in that role as chief curator. This is like you say, a real tree change for you, was this something you were looking out, out of the corner of your eye for so long and then the opportunity came up and you thought, "I really have to take this now."

Rachel Kent:

Look, in many ways, yes. I've always known and loved Bundanon. I mean, I came here very, very early on when the Boyd Education Centre, the gorgeous Glenn Murcutt building first opened. Spent time here, saw at first hand what that relationship to landscape was for Arthur Boyd and looking at the river, the escapement, the gum trees and so on. I understood what it was artistically. I must say, when this build got underway and of course the role came up, I mean, this to me, it just felt like the right thing. It was perfect and I'm very happy.

Tim Stackpool:

It almost seems like you had the longest handover there from the MCA because you'd set up and pretty much launched that Doug Aitken Exhibition New Era in challenging times, as you say, then you took up the job with Bundanon. You were still doing all the publicity as it were for Doug Aitken at the MCA. I remember the media launch as well, you were there. I have it on good authority that you were there on Christmas Eve even, showing people around. And of course, Doug was able to come to town and you undertake the conversation in the flesh with him. Finally, you're able to do that as well. You've almost been like at the circus juggling plates for months now. How has that gone?

Rachel Kent:

Look, it's been actually crazy. But then again, I should say poor Doug, goodness, me. That exhibition is a year late. In fact, over 12 months late at the MCA, of course because of COVID, shutdowns, endless delays that that causes. But Doug is a friend and colleague of 20 years. I did absolutely give him my word, I would stick that project through for him, likewise to the MCA. Because as you say, I was at the MCA for 20 years. It's an organisation really close to my heart, but at the same time, I've managed to make this transition right across and have been all eyes and ears on Bundanon for about six months now. And I've really found my groove here and I'm very excited.

Tim Stackpool:

I do promise we will get into the Bundanon work that you're doing very shortly in this podcast, but I think tribute does have to be paid to the work that you did at the MCA. I mean, you really did shape the type of culture that was brought to Sydney and to Australia through all the works that you did. I notice in some of the exit interviews that you've done, if I can call it those, with other media, you mention a few high highlights. One of those was working with Yoko Ono. Is that a standout still for you in your career?

Rachel Kent:

Look, there are so many moments that were really special and meaningful for me for a whole lot of different reasons. I mean, Yoko Ono was absolutely one. I mean, what an opportunity to get to work with such an extraordinary person, their history, their legacy. I mean, Yoko, I always felt was not well enough known as an artist, really quite underappreciated. And that's why I wanted to do that major project with her. And she absolutely rose to the occasion and did the most beautiful exhibition. So that was one highlight for me. I think though there are many other highlights as well. And one thing I really did do at the MCA was try out more about this country and also spend time working with first nations artists here. And that again was really quite extraordinary.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. There's no doubt about the commitment that the MCA has given to first nations artists as well. Now let's talk about what's happening on at Bundanon, especially with you. The responsibilities between being a head curator, say as you were at the MCA, now you are the CEO of this arts organisation. Have you had to change old habits?

Rachel Kent:

Look, it's completely different role. And it's one that I've been working towards for many years now. So for me, it feels like a very natural shift and development. At the MCA, really my role was the very big picture in terms of artistic vision and direction, setting the time in terms of public-facing agenda. I also did a lot of work in the public patronage space. So philanthropy fundraising was very much part of that role. And of course it's a larger organisation structurally. It's right in the middle of the city, has a very high visitation which we grew very strategically through very careful programming and wider offer. This role at Bundanon is very different in many ways because of course it sits outside of this city envelope. It's actually an incredible landscape. I mean, we are a wildlife sanctuary, it's 1,000 hectares. It encompasses all sorts of different history and also different eras of buildings, and this gorgeous new art museum and bridge for creative learning.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes, this is incredible.

Rachel Kent:

It's the big picture. And that's what excites me, is the big picture and the next chapter.

Tim Stackpool:

The construction of the Bundanon bridge, and it looks incredible, the whole architecture of it as well. And I think challenging too, but it was well underway when you joined. Have you been able to bring any, can I say Kentish angles to its foundation?

Rachel Kent:

Well, look, I suppose it's been a great time to arrive because first of all, I have to say government, they were amazing. This is a \$34 million build in regional Australia. Now that is extraordinary. And if we hadn't had that, we never would have got this incredible build. But it is the only national museum in regional Australia. When I came, of course the build was in its last chapter and we had a lot to deal with in terms of dealing with the strange times that are COVID. Trying to complete and adapt a building project within those circumstances, also all logistical, structural, engineering, and other challenges that come with a build during an unknown time with very limited workforce in quite a turbulent landscape. I think one of the key things is that the whole build is really about bushfire resilience and also flood mitigation. And I feel like I've been able really get involved in that space.

Tim Stackpool:

And you've really had to learn about it, I guess in a very short period of time.

Rachel Kent:

Well, as a child, I actually grew up regional Victoria. And I have had quite a lot of personal experience in terms of bush fires, and the devastation, and what the toll is. I don't know if you remember Ash Wednesday in Victoria, but I was there at my family friend's farm. And I mean, there was no way out. We were looking at literally a black and orange wall on the horizon line. It was terrifying. And I feel like coming in here at this time, working with this landscape, but really addressing those issues around resilience, bush fires, as well as flooding in terms of architecture and design of this space, it's something that resonates for me and it's really important going forwards.

Tim Stackpool:

I guess in a way, you're the perfect person for this job because of that. You're imprinting your DNA on how this is going forward, and especially so close to launch. You had a soft launch, a little while back. Did that go okay?

Rachel Kent:

Look, it was the most lovely weekend, I have to say. One of the things that I thought was important is we don't need to rush, these are unusual circumstances. We take things slow, cautiously. We listen to our community and we don't just barge ahead because it is an unusual time to open anything, let alone a cultural organisation. What we've done is a two-phase launch. So we did our soft launch and all we did was open the doors, open up our art museum, our cafe, just invite people, come in, take a look, try the cafe, have a look at the bridge, see the beautiful inaugural exhibition and just start to get to know us. The next thing of course will be our formal launch with government, which is when we can actually acknowledge properly our government support. And that will be the 4th of March. And then we'll do a beautiful big festival. And it's a first nation's led festival on Saturday, the 5th of March.

Tim Stackpool:

Great, something to put into the diary most definitely.

Rachel Kent:

Absolutely, I want everyone to come.

Tim Stackpool:

It is a stunning location. There's no doubt that this is an exceptional addition to that whole vista that is there. And that comes back to the Boyd's initial generosity. I mean, this really does, I was going to say renew the impact and legacy of that. It was already in place, but this really cements it. Doesn't it, Rachel?

Rachel Kent:

Look, it really does. I mean, the Boyd's were very forward thinking. I mean, Arthur Boyd actually, I mean, I would say he was quite an environmentalist. For example, he had very good relationships with First Nations community. He understood something of what this place and this region is. And he really wanted to preserve and protect this area, this landscape, the collection and so on. And in doing so with his wife, Yvonne gifted it to the Australian people in 1993. And I mean that's probably one of the most generous acts of philanthropy in this country.

Tim Stackpool:

You would have a timetable in place, no doubt. Can you give us a little bit, or are you able to give us a little bit of a preview perhaps what we could expect? If we are in normal times, let's assume normal times going forward, what we could expect from exhibitions and opportunities at Bundanon bridge going forward?

Rachel Kent:

Yeah, look, absolutely. What we will be doing is three exhibition seasons a year. So every season is three, four months, which means that you've got a nice amount of time for people to come in and see the projects, engage with all of the activities around them. The first takes the history and legacy of Boyd and places it in conversation with 12 contemporary artist commissions. And it's really about this site, this history, it's a beautiful show. And one of the interesting features is that Boyd's works look unbelievably current. I mean, if you didn't say, the label saying, "Arthur Boyd", you think it was made yesterday, that gorgeous work. And they're really within that conversation, the next big season is really taking us back to those really fabulous Shoalhaven landscapes, the paintings that people know and love of Arthur Boyd.

Rachel Kent:

And the third season this year is all about environment. Some of you will know Siteworks, which of course was a fabulous festival event that Bundanon staged that many in the community, many artists know and love deeply. What we're doing is expanding Siteworks into a full season. So you'll have things to see in the art museum, you'll have live events, whole array of programs.

Tim Stackpool:

The philanthropy and of course the membership and ambassadorships, perhaps that other museums enjoy. Is that going to be part of what you offer?

Rachel Kent:

Absolutely. We've actually got a fantastic new membership program. And I see that it's an annual paid program, but I see it as something that would be great for our local community, for families, for repeat visitors, people who want to drop in and out quite regularly and do our programs. So that's one of the ways that we have people coming back and doing all sorts of things with us over the course of a year. I'm also building up our philanthropy programs going forwards. We will be building a big family of patrons and supporters around us.

Tim Stackpool:

The other thing I think, and I've mentioned this before, when regional galleries are opened is that it actually reinvigorates the thought of art in regional centers and attracts even more opportunities for artists in the area.

Rachel Kent:

Look, I absolutely agree. Like I said, I mean, this is the only national museum in regional Australia, so it's quite extraordinary to have that. And I think one of the key things that I will bring is destination tourism off coast. This is great for everybody, it's environmental tourism, it's cultural tourism, but it also has a very direct effect on community in terms of wages, employments, economic growth, but also strengthening community relationships.

Tim Stackpool:

And Rachel, what do you think in terms of, I mean, will this project ever be completed? Will the work ever really be done?

Rachel Kent:

That's a great question. I would say, no. I think it's an ongoing project and it is a slow, steady, considered transformation. And it is really about community bringing people together and offering an array of experiences. I think that's an open-ended process. I think we'll be continually listening and learning, adapting what we do, responding to the times and also responding to the region. I mean, ultimately, this is here for our community. It's here for New South Wales. It's here for all Australians. Ultimately, it will also become an international destination I hope.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. So the next question is, of course, you've just finished this massive build, one which you're very proud of and everyone in the region should be very proud of. But what else is on the plans to be built on the property or developed on the property? Is there anything else to come?

Rachel Kent:

Well, I think we've just complete a really huge bill, Tim. Give us a moment.

Tim Stackpool:

I know. I mean, you're always looking forward. I mean, in all your other work.

Rachel Kent:

Absolutely.

Tim Stackpool:

You're always 18 months ahead of actually what's happening now. So I can't imagine Rachel Kent is thinking, "Okay, well I can fold my arms now and put a line through this because it's done." That's just not you.

Rachel Kent:

No, most definitely no. I tell you one of the things I'm thinking really carefully about at the moment actually is access. How do people get here? How do they get in and out? Because of course, our greatest challenge, I think is also one of our greatest assets. Where two and a half hours, thereabouts outside of the major city centres. For example, Sydney or Canberra. We're also in the middle of the bush. The only way in and out at this point is really by car. I'm really interested in trying to expand our access, really interested, for example, in river access. And how we might activate, I don't know, a ferry service, for example, going forwards. Also really interested in how we connect up the different parts of the property because you've got this site with the new art museum, the bridge, the cafe Boyd Education Centre, stunning accommodation.

Rachel Kent:

You've got our site just adjacent, which is the historic homestead. It's Arthur Boyd's studio. It's an incredible ArtsEd in residence program. But you have to drive back and forth between them. And I'm thinking, we need a shuttle service at some point to take visitors back and forth as well. So one of the things I really have up my sleeve at the moment is how do we widen access? Also, of course, alongside the practicalities of getting here. I'm thinking really about how do we deepen engagement, make this something really meaningful and valuable for different communities. So I'm looking really hard at our learning programs, for example, looking forwards at what the artistic vision is in terms of taking an incredible history and incredible legacy and building that into the present. And I'm really interested in how we do that, in conversation with First Nations artists and practitioners across the region.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Wonderful outlook and perspective. There's also the aspect of scientific research. I think I read that in a press release somewhere, which had never really crossed my mind regarding this. But is that also part of what you're doing there?

Rachel Kent:

Yes, that's right. We have really strong environmental programs and also of course, LandCare and maintenance that we need to do. So this is a fantastic site for research. We also partner very closely with the University of Wollongong. I should also tell you about the environmental aspects of the build, because I think that's really important. And that I see as the future of well, I mean, the building industry but certainly the future of museums. Because really one of the things that's critical about this site is that you have the integration of the architecture, the landscape. We've talked about the design itself in terms of bushfire and flood resilience. But we also, for example, we run on solar power. We have solar panels the entire length of the new bridge and that powers our site. We also collect all our rain water. We have a black water treatment plant, so we produce all our water on site as well. So there are really incredible environmental aspects to what we do. We're aiming for carbon neutral and we also have two carbon forests.

Tim Stackpool:

It's incredible. It's incredible the extent beyond, I guess, what people would think of as an art space or an art gallery.

Rachel Kent:

Absolutely. I mean, it really is a site for environmental excellence and for future research.

Tim Stackpool:

Well look, Rachel, it's been absolutely a delight to talk to you. Finally, I nailed you down because I know how busy you have been over the past few months. So I really thank you for your time. And I thank you for your contribution to contemporary art. I'm speaking on behalf of so many people. I think over the many years that you have been involved, not just with the MCA, but just the support you've given throughout Australia indeed. And I thank you again for your time.