



**James C. Sourris Artist Interview Series 2016-2017
Doug Hall AM Digital Story**

Interviewee: Doug Hall AM
Interviewer: Rex Butler
Date: 15 December 2016
Legend: Rex Butler (RB)
Doug Hall AM (DH)

RB: G'day, Doug. I'm here to talk to you as you know about your career at running the Queensland Art gallery, how you got there, which I think will be of interest to people and perhaps your thoughts about art and museums today. When and how did you first encounter art? Did you always think you were going to do things with art as a perhaps a younger boy?

DH: Yes, in mid-teens. It happened as a result of my parents being interested in the arts. I may have been 14, or 15, and William Frater came up to do a life drawing, painting class and I went to it.

RB: At that point, did you think you were going to become an artist or what?

DH: I thought I would, but I didn't know what it meant.

RB: How would you describe the VCA in the very first years of the '70s ?

DH: It was fantastic. It was a studio school. If you didn't look like you were going to make it, they'd quietly tell you to go away. It was practise based. It did art history.

RB: You were getting interested in ideas about art history studying for VCA?

DH: I was totally preoccupied with it. The interesting thing was that I was so keenly interested in art history at the time that I made a point of visiting as many artists that I could of the generations that preceded me. Noel Counihan became a good friend. Hung out with Roger Kemp. Saw a bit of John Brack, Fred Williams, and there's a little portrait he did of me downstairs. When I found out that I had access, or the potential to access, with people that I admired, I sought them out.

RB: What qualities do you think you gained from studying at an art school?

DH: Under my circumstances, it was developing the hoariest old cliché imaginable of developing the keenest eye that you possibly could. You looked at stuff. You had to. You could make subtle distinctions across date, media, genre, quality, wannabe, star, all those kinds of things that you did just by looking.

RB: You have a very lucky career, because you straight away virtually get a job at running a region art gallery, which would be pretty much unheard of nowadays.

DH: There was nothing uncommon with regional galleries being full of people under 30 years of age.

RB: That's a step up I guess to Bendigo, a bigger gallery, a pretty prestigious collection. What are the things you remembered of those two places?

DH: The first big difference between then and now, of course, is now it's manic programming.

RB: Yes

DH: Back then, it was the status of collections and you would think really deeply and carefully about what you acquired with limited budgets, but in the context of the collection, because you are going to be judged by the collection and its development, and that's changed dramatically.

RB: Why would you go to the Queensland art gallery, which let's say in 1987 when you get there, it's under Joh [Bjelke-Petersen].

DH: I think if you look at Ballarat, Bendigo, and Geelong, their collections of 19th century Australian art win hands down over Queensland.

RB: What made you want to do that?

DH: It had an astonishing new building. Certain things...

RB: The best.

DH: I didn't have to think about a future other than in terms of building wise, other than what might happen culturally, so that was really good. I was at ideological opposites to the government that I was going to work for but everything has a vanishing point.

RB: Remind me of the year that 'Balance' was on, which was a very decisive show.

DH: 1990.

RB: 1990. I guess, what would you call that, a sort of white/black collaborative exhibition?

DH: Correct.

RB: But it wasn't making a distinction between "traditional" and contemporary Aboriginal art, which is very innovative to start with.

DH: Also it didn't shy away from Kitsch. It was a quite liberating experience, because we didn't quarantine anything and it was all there. It was inner urban. It was regional. It was remote.

RB: Doug there is something I want to ask you about and put on the record and that's the Asia Pacific Triennial. It's something that people have always discussed. It's a very important moment in the history of Australian art and people have often asked you about your role in it.

DH: The trustees backed me with some really pretty radical decisions which was not to reject art history and by that I mean I'm rejecting a lot of the things that I was most keenly interested in myself, personally, but to actually look increasingly to the art of our time.

RB: Who was sitting around the room when you started to throw this idea around?

DH: No one. Me. My interest in Asia was self-evident. But the thing that struck me most of all was the longer the 20th century went on, the less Asian art was collected. The point is the Asia Pacific Triennial was different because it was born as a project, which was an exhibition and an event, but it also contained work which could be acquired for the collection. It was a curatorial construct and it was fraught with uncertainty because there were no established linkages between institutions in Australia and throughout China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, Thailand. Even academically they were so far removed.

RB: What's our relationship to contemporary Asian art and culture?

DH: I think one of the other things that helped Australian art and artists with the Asia Pacific Triennial is that in Asia they have taken a corresponding interest in some Australian art. If Australian art is showing in Beijing or Shanghai, the chances are it will get a greater profile because of an international audience, both East Asian and Western, by being in Shanghai, for example, or Tokyo, than it would in Sydney or Melbourne.

RB: Let's name for you some of the most important particular art works from the exhibition?

DH: I think showing Murakami, Mr Dob, and the installation for the first time, and this sort of expression of a kind of funky Japanese pop, which is always been inseparable from Japanese illustration, anime, manga, and what have you. And he brought this phenomenon, which it became a phenomenon, to an international level.

RB: I think GOMA, the massive complex that you help build. What do you feel about bequeathing that extraordinary object in Australian art museology or history of museums, this incredible thing that maybe is no longer even a museum, Doug? Do you feel ambivalent about what you've left behind?

DH: I feel pleased with what I've left behind and I'll give you the reasons for it. I wanted to do a museum which whoever followed me wouldn't have to think about building for another quarter of a century. That's the institutional obligation. People said, "How are you going to fill the space?" I'm like, "Always of course we can fill the space".

RB: It's a very particular kind of space. It's not a traditional museum space

DH: The idea was if you're going to get a lot of people in, to use the spaces at ground level as big pavilion like spaces where people go to and come to. The further up you go, the quieter and more contained the spaces become. It's a pavilion. It is unmistakably a pavilion. The 19th century is full of pavilions. It's great accessible democratic institutions. This is certainly one of them.

RB: You left the Queensland art gallery in 2007, after 20 years

DH: To the day.

RB: To the day. You've become a commissioner for the Venice Biennale. Why did you decide to do that?

DH: One building, one artist, one project. That's what I wanted to do. I just look at art now. That's what I do.

RB: It was great having a chat to you and I want to thank you for your time.

DH: Thanks for that. All good fun. Thank you.

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