



**James C Sourris AM Collection  
Artist Interview Series**

**Dr Philip Bacon AM**  
Digital Story (5 mins)

**Date:** 12<sup>th</sup> of February 2018

**Interviewee:** Dr Philip Bacon  
**Interviewer:** Louise Martin-Chew

**Legend:** [Dr Philip Bacon (PB)]  
[Louise Martin-Chew (LMC)]

**LMC:** So, Philip, we're here in your gallery that you started 44 years ago in July, on this site, I believe. Most people in the industry would regard you as the most successful art dealer in Australia, so I just wondered if you could talk to us about how you got involved with art at the beginning?

**PB:** Well, I was always interested in paintings. I bought pictures as a kid. I'd go into galleries – whatever galleries there were in Brisbane, Moreton Gallery and the Johnstone Gallery and the Grand Central Gallery – and I'd put paintings on lay-by. I never wanted to be an artist. I wasn't particularly interested in being a painter, but I thought the ethos of an art gallery was pretty special and there was one particular gallery, long since gone, the Grand Central Gallery, and the man who ran that, a fellow called Keith Moore said to me one day, "Oh, you're always in here paying off your paintings. I like to go to the races on a Saturday, why don't you come in and work here on a Saturday morning. I won't pay you, I'll just take it off your bill." So, that's how it started. So, I worked in the Grand Central probably from about 1967 maybe. Something like that. The Johnstone Gallery closed in '72, and the closure of that gallery really gave me the impetus to open my own, which took a few years. I didn't open here until 1974. But those artists who Brian had represented were now without representation and were starting to look around for galleries, and the Grand Central, which I was by then managing, was not really considered to be the right environment for most of the artists.

**LMC:** And so it was at the urging of Margaret Olley, Lawrence Daws, Blackman and Robert Dickerson that you began to think about opening this space?

**PB:** Exactly, yes. But there was a feeling always in a way that the Johnstone Gallery ethos continued with me, and it's probably true. And it's due to Margaret Olley, particularly, who was very, very vehement in her support for me right from the start. When the Johnstone Gallery closed, Victor Mace had been working for the Johnstones and then he came back and opened a gallery of his own and I think a few of the artists that Johnstone had shown toyed with the idea of going with Victor, but Margaret Olley soon convinced them not to. I'm

thinking particularly of Ray Crooke because Ray wrote me a letter to say, "Oh, thank you for your interest in me but I've decided to go with Victor." And then two weeks later he wrote again and said, "Oh, I've reconsidered." But I knew he'd been in Sydney, so I think she worked her magic.

This site in the '70s was very down market. It was what I could afford. I couldn't afford to buy a building, I rented the space here, but I had been looking around to buy something. I didn't want to be in the city because I felt that that wasn't working and also it was expensive, and I wanted a big space. I wanted a big, I don't think the term 'white cube' existed then but I knew what I wanted which wasn't a compromised little suburban building. It was pretty seedy, it was very seedy. The building that we're in now was an old tile warehouse and the building outside was partially tiled and in the basement downstairs where my stockroom is now was where they stored the tiles and things. It was very, very, very run down to the extent that... this is Arthur Street, two streets up is New Farm. Two streets away up Brunswick Street, but in the original advertising and the address for this building was Philip Bacon Galleries, 2 Arthur Street, New Farm which was a bit of a fib. But you couldn't put Fortitude Valley because that was just brothels and breweries. But later on of course, Fortitude Valley became very fashionable so now it's correctly named 2 Arthur Street, Fortitude Valley.

Why have I stayed in Brisbane? Why not is the easy answer. And I also kind of love the idea that people walk into this very beautiful gallery. I mean, I think it's a really beautiful, beautiful space now thanks to Cox Rayner's renovation, and people say, "Oh, I've heard about you but this is amazing and it's Brisbane." I hate that rising inflection, Brisbane, question mark, question mark. So, I'm determined to prove, not just in my art dealing business but in my other interests which are philanthropic and to do with the arts, performing and visual, that Brisbane rates and deserves proper respect.

I keep thinking, "Oh, look, I should retire," but I want to keep having great exhibitions, doing beautiful catalogues. I think I'm the only gallery now, practically the only gallery, I think I'm the only gallery probably that still does big shows with big catalogues, which are very expensive, which we pay for but I still think to physically have something in your hand like a catalogue is terribly important and I want to see that continue. And I think as long as I'm able to continue to finance these things and my business continues to do well, why not?

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