

It Comes *In Waves*

A Conversation Series

Katie

Welcome to 'It Comes in Waves' an intergenerational conversation series presented by the Women's Art Register and hosted by me, Katie Ryan. Developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, this series will feature conversations between women and non-binary artists and arts professionals on themes of trauma, care, community and identity, among others. These conversations will facilitate knowledge sharing and support across generations by pairing emerging and early career artists and writers with some of the longest-standing members of the Women's Art Register.

I would like to begin by acknowledging that this conversation series has been produced on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri and Boonwuring people of the Kulin Nations. I pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging. I respectfully acknowledge that this land has been home to some of the oldest stories in human history, deep time stories that document the evolution of species and recall climatic shifts. These stories have been preserved and shared through Indigenous oral traditions that continue to this day. I extend this acknowledgment to the peoples of the lands you may be listening on and encourage you to reflect upon the stories of these lands.

Today I'll be speaking with Natalie Thomas and Lara Chamas.

Natalie Thomas is a Melbourne based artist and writer. Thomas maintains a diverse and independent practice that considers storytelling as the basis of culture. Her work engages with mass media and its role in how we see each other and the world. Thomas was part of collaborative duo *nat&ali*, with Alexandra Sanderson which riffed off riot grrrl strategies and ran from 1999

till 2005. Since 2014 Thomas has run *nattysolo.com* (*one woman, one camera, no film*) an ongoing endurance performance project with online outcomes. This project uses the form of the social page and archive, fusing gossip and innuendo with biting cultural criticism. Through her work Thomas asks, how are words, images and stories used to build, maintain or dismantle ways of thinking and seeing?

Lara Chamas is a second-generation Lebanese, Australian artist, based in Naarm [Melbourne]. Her practice investigates topics of postcolonial and migrant narratives, specifically within the context of her cultural identity. Fleeing from civil war, her parents migrated to Australia, where she was born. Her practice explores this in relation to contemporary Australian and global society, and current political issues; exploring links and meeting points between narrative theory, cultural practice, societal tensions, and the body as a political vessel.

Nat, I wanted to ask you about your solo show, 'Stage Fright', which recently opened at Gertrude Contemporary. It's the first exhibition at Gertrude post-lockdown and addresses the anxious and precarious nature of life since COVID. Could you tell us what the show is composed of and discuss some of the ideas around the work?

Nat

So, I think that COVID has been a really interesting time for artists because lots of our work is done by ourselves in isolation anyway, in studios and stuff. I work from home so it didn't really change my working relationship that much. But what changed was the ideas in and around the audience, I thought that was really interesting, you know? What's the role of an art gallery in an artist's career? Because lots of art galleries were closed, people moved online. And I sort of really enjoyed looking at that work. So when the show opened, I had resolved, I didn't want to make any screen-based work because I thought that there had been a big focus on that. I wanted to create some physical environments. And with 'Stage Fright', I started accumulating a collection of pre-loved teddies riffing on Mike Kelly, some of his work. And I guess I've been appropriating other artists' work for quite a while now. I really like having something to build on, I guess, and building from there. I don't know whether I really believe in original thought. I think that we're all sort of... It comes from somewhere, from the work of other artists.

Katie

Yeah, so sort of critiquing or recombining those things? Because that's obviously very prevalent in the show. There's a lot of references to art history and popular culture.

Nat

Yeah. The work is then in how you re- imagine or put it together. And that it's in those compositions that you get any sense of, sort of, originality if that was

there. But it's all of the minute decisions that you make, that's where the art-making happens.

Katie And you produced a lot of the work this year so it was made within the conditions of the pandemic because there were quite a few works that reference... I mean, problems that were ongoing but were accentuated by the pandemic. Like work precarity, I think, and was there like, levels of job security or something in one of the works on paper?

Nat Yeah, that was the second go that I've had at looking at this 'Map of Poverty' by Charles Booth. Charles created this map in about the late 1880s in and around when the robber barons were there. I'm sort of interested in how society is set up, this distribution of wealth. I did one last year, but it just seemed like I could re-jig it because all of the jargon in and around money keeps changing. 'Oligarchs' is now sort of common vernacular but maybe a couple of years ago, we didn't know what that was. And it sort of just enters the consciousness. I'm on the lookout for those or 'management class', you know. And who's got a full-time job, who's in the gig economy, who's doing the speculative work? I'm interested in some of those equations.

Katie Yeah, and who's supported then based on those things. Like, I think the way that Job Keeper was given to people who had full-time work, part-time work and casual, but only after a certain amount of time. It really created a rigid hierarchy within government of how much money someone was worth due to the state of their labour.

Nat And then artists, we have to value our own labour even when the markets in which we work does not value what we're doing. And who gets to decide that and how does that impact on your career?

Katie Yeah, I think it was a really timely exhibition in that way. And even 'Stage Fright' as the first exhibition coming out of lockdown when it was just, almost frightening to be back in the world again, seeing people and being in real spaces. Lara, I wanted to ask you, because you're actually up next at Gertrude after Nat, you'll be having a solo. Without giving too much away can you tell us a little bit about your show and maybe discuss if the work that you're planning to present has changed since the pandemic?

Lara So, my show at Gertrude is going to be called 'The Entrance to Paradise Lies at Your Mother's Hands'. And it's derived from a quote from the Qur'an that has many transliterations, but is roughly along the lines of 'the entrance to paradise lies at your mother's feet'. But I seem to have this obsession with hands in my work, just in my practice in general. So, the word 'feet' will be

struck out and then replaced with hands. The original quote to me, it's of course about humility and respect, but it's sort of like... No matter what, you know, be good to your mother. And while I do absolutely agree with that, I feel like 'hands' gives her more agency. And it prompts me to think of 'what is she giving to me?' What has she made... her hands fed me as a child and clothed me and bathed me. And it's more like what she's made of her life that's so much more important to me than just this 'worship the ground she walks on' kind of thing. Yeah. So it gives her agency. So, the show is going to be an anthology of these stories and experiences and objects that are related to the matriarchs of my family on both my mother and my father's side.

The way that it's changed due to the pandemic is... has actually been quite a lot. I haven't had studio access for about nine months or so, something around that. So instead of working the whole time on all the elements of this show, I now have like six weeks to shove this all together somehow. So that's affected it greatly. And while in my mind the content of the show hasn't changed that much, I know that the reality of it is going to be that there's work that I won't be able to complete, purely just because of time.

Katie Yeah, and it's probably quite hard having a show that, you know, in the trajectory of your career, because you're still relatively emerging, is such an important exhibition. And to have it right after this chaotic year is really difficult.

Lara It's poor timing and it sort of makes me feel like, what is this all for? Right after—and not even after the pandemic—but right as it's easing.

Katie Yeah, easing here.

Lara I've got this big show, that's this big deal. That's the largest show I've done in my career to date. And it feels so, like, gross.

Katie What do you mean gross?

Lara Having a big show makes me feel like we've forgotten all of this conversation about, I don't know, class and worth and labour and money and time. It feels really... not useless, but it feels very self-centred to me at the moment. Or at least the show that I've been working towards. Nat's show is so relevant to being right as galleries have opened up again. And I feel like this shows a bit of a... I wish I could respond a bit more.

Katie I don't know. I think it sounds super relevant and there's a lot of concerns that crossover between both of your exhibitions. I think the problems that have come from the pandemic are mostly the problems that we've already had.

Lara Yeah, just highlighted.

Katie It's just like accelerated them. Or put them under a spotlight.

Lara OK, I feel better that's a good point, about like, yeah labour that isn't seen. Like in the household or..Yeah, no you're absolutely right.

Katie Exactly. Nat, I wanted to ask you another question about your show. So there's multiple references to Duchamp in your exhibition, both in your stool and bicycle wheel sculptures and even more overtly in a work on paper that reads 'Marcel Duchamp as a stay-at-home dad'. To me, these works seem to address questions of who has the time to produce art and whose art is taken seriously. Could you tell us some more about these pieces?

Nat So, you know, like a lot of artists, I really dig Marcel Duchamp. He's really cool and he's French, and also he lived in New York. He's like French and American.

Katie Tick, tick, tick! [laughter]

Nat And everyone knows that's like, yeah, tick! Top shelf. And he was into chess before the Queen's Gambit even landed. [laughter] So that's pretty cool. And he liked red wine. And he just seemed pretty cool.

Lara The artist's artist.

Nat The artist Marcel Duchamp is pretty... you know, I've been looking for chinks because I love getting a hero and then finding their weak spots. Just like, where did they fuck up? And I don't know whether Marcel actually did. I don't think he was misogynistic. He was wealthy. He was born to wealth, which is for me, slightly problematic because I'm just like, yawn that's so done to death in the arts. But lots of Marcel's vibe is about him not trying too hard. And I think throughout my whole career, I've just tried super extra hard to the point where...

Katie I just want to say as well, I love that you're on a first-name basis with Marcel. [laughter]

Lara Oh, absolutely.

Nat Well, I think also that artists can do this, we study each other, and sure he's dead of body. But, you know, in spirit, I think that he's still all-pervasive, really. And I guess, I want a little bit of that magic to rub off on me. And the poor guy, he died and he didn't get to do some of the work that I'm getting to do,

so I thought I'd have a little bit of a poke around. I like this idea of the blue-chip artists, you know, like if you're going to rip off another artist, they should be 'up there'. So then you can sort of have a little bit of their magic. [Laughter]

Katie Yeah, it's more ethical and a better way to elevate yourself.

Nat Yeah I thought, you know, he's so popular. So really, I'm just trying to get all of that to just rub off onto me a little bit. But I thought, well, what if Marcel Duchamp was a stay-at-home dad? Could he have got to the wuthering heights that he did if he was? And I don't know. I don't know whether he could of, would of... His story, the narrative in and around this man is very New York loft. He kind of moved around. He wasn't a member of a group. I think that's pretty interesting. And, you know, 'Nude Descending the Staircase' was sort of...people ripped the piss out of that at the time. But also those old cats, they really believed in art's ability to change the world for the better. And I guess, like Lara, I'm having a little bit of a crisis of belief in whether, in fact, I'm wasting my life away on some futile, sort of, hobby. And Mummy should go out and get a real job now. I like the idea of art being revolutionary, I just don't know whether the revolution is going to start in an art gallery or an art museum. I'm pretty sure it ain't.

Lara Yeah, that's exactly my dilemma or how I feel. Like art can be revolutionary, but I don't know if the art world is where the revolution is going to start. Probably not.

Katie And like if it's being endorsed by an institution, then it's probably already ineffective, potentially.

Nat I don't think that art just exists in art galleries, though. And to that end, I think my project 'nattysolo.com' is probably the most interesting thing that I've done. Because it exists outside, on the Internet, which has the potential to reach beyond...you know, physical spaces—going to an art gallery physically—all of a sudden seems a pretty indulgent thing to do.

Katie Yeah, and it also looks back on the art world, which I think is really important because there are so many contradictions and hypocrisies within the art world that it really needs to be reflected back. I really enjoyed that piece that you shared on the blog about sleep and laziness and work. And I think that was an excerpt or an adaptation of a piece that you wrote for a book called 'The Art of Laziness: Contemporary Art and Post-Work Politics'. So, in that piece, you're sort of championing laziness, sleep and generally resisting the pressure to optimize yourself at every moment of your life. Do you think approaches to work will change post COVID?

- Nat** Well, I think any creative labour, you know, sometimes the harder an artist works, the worse the art gets, like that's one of the weird...Being a creative is not your usual job where you put your coat on the chair and you're not a salary person. It's a little bit more magical than that. So how you navigate how to optimize your own productivity is really a very, very personal thing. You can be quite explosive or do incredible work really quickly, but you can't do it like that all the time.
- Katie** I guess it's the difference between wage labour, you know, if you're trading every hour of your life for money, the more hours you trade, the more money you'll get. But if you are producing artwork, the amount of hours you spend is not proportionate to the success of the work.
- Nat** And to start thinking about it in those terms is probably a trap, or it's going to affect the style of the work that you're making. So that you have to try and disengage yourself from a lot of what people would consider rational thought and, you know, jump into the void, dumpster dive, as it were, into what might happen and just sort of hope for the best. But it's not something that's quantifiable and who knows how you're going to reach somebody else or communicate an idea as best you can. And then from an audience position, art is completely subjective. When I'm talking about art, I'm talking more broadly about culture I guess, be it musical theater or film or visual art. I think that artists have a lot more in common with each other. Artists, for me, are people who make something out of nothing, in whatever medium they choose.
- Katie** Or appropriate something else.
- Nat** Or just rip off their favorites and mash it all up. And then sign their name.
- Katie** That's always important. That gives it the market value, you gotta' sign it. Lara, I wanted to ask you about your position on laziness and productivity as well. I think you're quite critical of the expectations placed on artists. Despite this though, you make really labour intensive work. So how do you manage to do that?
- Lara** I guess the truth is, I don't manage to do that at all. I do it at the expense of myself. But for some reason that's so important to me. Like it almost validates the work for me, which is quite ridiculous. And that's not something I would project onto somebody else or expect someone else to do. But I think because I'm so critical of this path that I've been set on, of being an artist, that I've got in my mind that I'm indulgent, I think was the word that Nat said. And I was like, yes, that's the word I'm looking for, a little bit indulgent. So, as

critical as I am, I also buy into it so much because at the end of the day, I put so much labour into my work at my own expense and sort of in protest and in spite of the pain it'll cause and the progression of illness it might cause, but it's not sustainable. And I think the pandemic's really, really got me to be hyper-aware of the expectation I put on myself and just how aligned with capitalist thought that is. How can I be an advocate for that and then do the opposite. So... that's a 'me problem'.

Katie Well, it's a society problem. But I think that idea of being an artist being an indulgent thing does have so much to do with ideas of class. It's indulgent to be an artist because it's an upper-class thing to be an artist because you have the time to be an artist. So, to not come from that class and try to be an artist, one: is really hard but, two: also appears somewhat delusional or something.

Lara Yeah, sort of like shooting yourself in the foot. If I wanted to get out of being born lower class, wouldn't I have, I don't know, studied business or some shit?

Nat It's more an issue of sustainability. I think that you can train to be an artist and begin an art career. I didn't know that I was almost signing a contract into poverty when I started. It doesn't help that we live in a society that is really threatened by artists and academics now. Yeah, it's an appalling portrait of a wealthy nation to have such disregard for thinkers and creative spirits. So rich financially and so bereft of so much. It's unbelievable. I don't know when Australia got so mean and so greedy.

Lara Didn't you know it was founded on being mean and greedy?

Nat Yeah I guess... [laughter] I think the post-war generation, I think there was a moment in time when it wasn't going to be as mean and greedy as what we're seeing now.

Katie Yeah, it's definitely not going in an encouraging direction. I think the changes to the university fee structure is the most, kind of, stark example of that recently. Which, you know, borderline privatizes access into critical thinking, third level education. And that is a very, very scary concept.

Nat Well, the postcodes that a child is born into now largely dictate their future earning potential. To escape socioeconomic structures is almost impossible now.

Katie Yeah, that could be a good point to ask Lara about your exhibition that was at Bus Projects in 2017 called 'What's That Skippy?', which was critiquing Australia's idea of itself as a socially and economically forward moving country. That was a really interesting exhibition. Could you tell us some more about it?

Lara Yeah. So 'What's that Skippy?' was essentially, you'd walk into the space and you saw a great big kangaroo skeleton. Which was cast from a real skeleton of a kangaroo that was ethically sourced in terms of that it unfortunately died, out the back of a friend at the time's house. And then other animals and such had eaten the skin and fur and everything. It had decayed naturally. And I found it as bone, not as an actual animal carcass. So, I cast the kangaroo and I had probably about 80 percent of the skeleton so it was a bit of a Frankenstein roo—like I had one rib. And then the beauty of casting is that I could make the rest out of the same rib and things like that. So, you'd see this great big kangaroo and there was the Centrelink hold music at the time, which was a Mozart song, 'Divertimento in F Major'. The idea, I guess, was that—so kangaroos and emus are on the Australian coat of arms because they can't physically walk backwards. And they were chosen specifically for that reason to be a forward-moving country. But by having this skeleton of a kangaroo, I was trying to allude to the, you know, the bare bones of a nation. And the kangaroo, of course, being an indigenous animal and very important to the indigenous community and how that's been taken and bastardized and whitewashed by white Australia. You see kangaroos on stuff that's Australian made. I was critiquing the roo as a symbol of white Australia. The idea was that the roo would actually walk backwards, he had a mechanical mechanism on his hips. Unfortunately, I couldn't actually get it to work, which I went with. I printed out a little technical difficulties sign and I put ScoMo's face on it. No, no, that's not true sorry. I think it was Malcolm Turnbull was the Prime Minister at the time and it was like his face pulling out the cord, making it not work. The idea was that you would see this thing walking backwards. Yeah, to absolutely just critique Australia as this forward-moving nation financially, economically, governmentally in our human rights policies, in our climate change policy, in everything really. And we didn't even have same-sex marriage back then.

Katie It also made me think of this idea of being endlessly, endlessly on hold to Centrelink, as many of us have been. And there's the kangaroo just completely wasting away and becoming a skeleton, still on hold to Centrelink. [Laughter]

Lara Yeah, poor roo. Poor Skippy.

Katie I know. And as an indigenous animal, as well, that speaks so much to how white Australia has treated indigenous people and culture and land. Just this real desecration and refusal to acknowledge, as well.

Lara And for what? It wasn't to build this great nation. It was to build this lip service to a great nation that is actually so much more backwards than we think or than we might appear.

- Katie** And for you personally, as a first-generation Lebanese Australian person, I wanted to ask you about your relationship to an Australian identity, because although I didn't grow up here, I have an Australian passport through my dad and I've now spent the majority of my adult life here. I don't really say that I'm Australian, but I'm also not totally not Australian. And I imagine, coming from a Lebanese and refugee background is a really complex position to try and own an Australian identity because your communities are so targeted by the government. Could you maybe talk a little bit about that?
- Lara** Absolutely. So I started to use the term Australian and it's still in my bio and so on, because, I mean, I was born here and I was told growing up like in primary school or high school, that I wasn't Australian because my parents weren't born here. And so I would say that I'm Australian in defiance and in anger and in... My parents fled war, but it was in the 80s, so it was in a time where it was just so much easier to flee war. I call myself Australian because no, fuck you. We're all settlers here. And it was just because I was told that I wasn't. The more I grew up and became aware of the history of this country, I'm like, 'ugh, but none of us are Australian'. And it's such a disgusting term sometimes or a term that internationally, I'm not proud to say that I am. But then there's this duality of, but I want to affirm my place here being just as legitimate as anyone else's place here. Just because I'm the first generation born here and my neighbour might be the tenth... like, you're still a settler. This land is still not native to you. I suppose it makes it also more complex because of the targeting of... I suppose perhaps more in Sydney, in terms of like, the Cronulla riots and stuff. Lebanese had this really gross connotation to it. But I think now I suppose just Arab or Muslim also still has that connotation and is still a connotation that I've had conflict with, from others and within myself even. Of course, it doesn't help when Peter Dutton says 'second and third generation Lebanese Australians whose parents came during the civil war in the 80s, are the ones doing home grown terrorism'. And I'm like, you're talking about me, literally me. You've implicated—it is such an attack, such a personal attack to a whole group of people, which makes me so ashamed to say I'm Australian.
- Katie** Yeah, your government is actively saying that you're not welcome.
- Lara** Yeah. So there's this—just such a duality of, well, you know, fuck being Australian, but then no, but I am, because you're telling me I'm not.
- Katie** And cause maybe it could mean something better.
- Nat** Well when largely white male politicians, who supposedly represent this nation that we call Australia and that, you know, openly racist, often homophobic, sexist discourse...

Lara Born into wealth as well.

Nat So Peter Dutton was a former policeman... but this idea of working for the country is just...the audacity of the words and the front. You know, it's unbelievable, really.

I think it's an interesting thing to make art about, particularly at the moment, about this idea of the relationship between artists and their audience, but also that access to larger audiences is the carrot that is dangled in front of artists. The NGV attracts a larger audience for work than, say, Gertrude Contemporary does. And they've got the bigger budget to show for it. But also, you know, the monster behind it is larger. And I'm pretty frustrated with some of the ways in which art shows or whole art careers are framed by major institutions. For example, 'Melbourne Now' is going to be re-staged 10 years after the first one. Well, I think that that should be renamed 'Naarm Now'. I think that that would be a more fitting title for that show. I think that it would pay respect to the enormous amount of work that's being done by Aboriginal activists in getting settlers to acknowledge what's gone on here. And that lots of that work has been done in and around language. Is it appropriate... are you going to call the show 'Melbourne Now Now'? Because it's the second iteration, or should you just, sort of, move on? What is there to celebrate? You know, what's an achievement? I think the fact that a lot of white people know that the Aboriginal name for Melbourne is Naarm is actually really significant. It's a culturally significant moment. And I think that the institution could show that.

Then the National Gallery of Australia putting on a show of 150 female Australian artists and calling it 'Know My Name.' Well, that for me is problematic. I call that show 'Do Your Job', because the institutional erasure of the efforts of generations of female artists, that's not on us. That's not our fault. I don't work there. I know my name. Lara, you know your name. Katie, you know your name. We know our names. It's part of the jobs of institutions to get our names out there, not vice versa. You know what I mean? That for me is highly problematic. Would you have a show of 150 male artists and call it 'Know My Name?' No, you don't have to. You know what I mean? It's sort of like writing in sexism and then, you know, putting up the hand for the gold star. It's just like, bitch, please. Be humble. Take a step back, seriously. You're not doing us any favours. A hundred and fifty female artists that—that is a bundle show. That's a bundle show. And the other thing that it does is to really wind up the people who aren't in the show. So, it's actually quite divisive of community. And this for me is not helping. Helping, not helping. That's where we're at. We don't have a moment to lose here. And smashing the patriarchy I actually think it's pretty important.

Katie Definitely.

Nat Always been important, been important for the last 50 years actually. Lots of people have been talking about it. Are we getting closer? No, I don't think we are. And I'm pretty, pretty bored. There's a lot of people getting paid pretty well to come up with some really weird, wack-ass ideas right now. And I'm just like, artists, we've got ideas. They're just not asking the right people for help. I think the difference between supporting something and saying that you're going to support it is just doing it. They've been saying that they're going to change stuff around for ages. Is it changing? No, I don't think it is for most female artists.

Katie Like doing these shows where they're like, we're going to do this big exhibition of female artists instead of just continually including and promoting their work into all of the shows that they're doing?

Nat And then the major commissions still go to the straight white dude from America 7.5 million—I forget his name—7.5 million dollar commission. This is the next show that the National Gallery of Australia is doing.

Katie Wow...

Nat You know, it's just like bitch, please. Boring! I am so bored.

Lara Actions speak louder than words.

Katie And it doesn't give a lot of space to the particular concerns of each artist's practice. It's just like, oh, you're a woman artist and therefore you fit with all these other women artists.

Nat You guys have got so much in common.[Laughter]

Lara Reminds me a bit of being tokenized, actually.

Katie Yeah Lara, I think that's something that we've talked about a few times. Can you maybe say what the difference is to you between being tokenized and being included? And would you also have advice for other artists who've experienced that and how they can manage it?

Lara Just like we were talking about with shows that, you know, feature or highlight exclusively women artists, if you're bundled into a show or even worse, you're the only one of your demographic in a show. And it's just very clear that you're there to tick a box and to fill this quota. And that might be the case

and you might not be tokenized. And the main way that I differentiate that is when institution or curator or, you know, manager— whoever it is that's invited me to this show—I think with a bit of experience, it becomes really easy to tell if somebody is invested in your work or not and actually gives a shit what it's about, what you're trying to say and discusses it with you. But if they sort of, just shove you aside and there isn't really much discussion or consideration of perhaps, I don't know, like installation or whatever it might be—if there's no consideration of your work then they're obviously not interested in your work or what you have to say. And frankly, no matter the intention, the only advice I really have is obviously, become aware of it—and you will with the experience. But take the opportunity anyway. Take their money, take their exposure and get your name out there, because it increases the chances of somebody actually being interested in your work for the right reasons. Because that's definitely benefited my practice. If I wasn't tokenized in a particular show at a particular institution, there's no way that I would have gotten, you know, the next three shows after that. And then eventually times where... People are interested in the work despite the labels that I come with.

Katie

Yeah. And I think that that seems to be a real struggle for artists who are pigeonholed in that way to also stay true to what your practice is and what your interests are. Because it can become this thing of institutions wanting artists to perform their identity in a particular way and rewarding that. But that actually becomes quite boring quite quickly.

Lara

It really does. And it's definitely possible. Like if you go on safari on your own culture, first of all, your integrity is out the window. And I mean, I started that way, for sure. But then you know, I wised up and sort of became aware of what I was doing and who I was doing it for and the audience that I was trying to please by doing that. But it's absolutely 100 percent possible for a person of color to make shit artwork. And I really hate seeing work that is included that is, in my opinion, not refined, not good, not considered...It's clearly been chosen as a token gesture. It seems so rude to say that, but no, you can make bad artwork. Like, that's a time where you know that person's been tokenized. There's plenty of good art out there by people of color that they could have chosen. But anyway...

Katie

Yeah, and I think even within universities, people of color can struggle to have rigorous critique around their work because people feel like they can't engage with it or it's not for them to say. But that is so unhelpful to those artists. They're going there and paying for an education and paying to have their work critiqued and responded to. And obviously, those critiques can go wrong and be really insensitive. But the solution is not to not say anything

and not give those artists the benefit of a real response to what they're producing. Like that's not respecting them and their practice, to me.

Lara Exactly, because why would somebody make work to be critiqued or shown in a public space if they didn't want you to speak about it. And that shaped my practice so much because I started to try to find ways for people to have an 'in' into what I was trying to talk about. And then they finally realised that, 'oh, this is what I was trying to talk about the whole time.' And they did, in fact, have stuff to say about it. They were just too scared to access it. So then a solution was to make a really easy access point and I typically do that through, emotional empathy—or something I've used in the past is humour, is a really good way in.

Nat Humour's really interesting to talk about because talking about it often is really unfunny, which makes it pretty dangerous. Definitely I know that if people can share a laugh, it is meaningful. People love to laugh and they really need it now because there's a lot of really unfunny shit going on everywhere. So, yeah, it's pretty liberating and it's quite unifying, having a good laugh with someone.

Katie And I think often when the joke is at your own expense, as well. And I think a lot of your work that engages with class and access and stuff within the arts, that humour works because you're implicated in it and so are we. And that's a point that we can converge on and laugh about.

Nat Yeah, cause having a, you know, a rich collector best friend is really good for an artist's career.

Katie Yeah. Or a whole group of them. [laughter]

Nat Yeah, loads of them. Maybe an exclusive dinner where there's only two little artists at the table, me and Lara. No other artists are allowed. And then Ben Quilty is the waiter and we don't even treat him with respect. [laughter]

Lara The only waiter I would never treat with respect.

Nat Don't even leave money for him. What's it called? A tip.

Lara Don't even make eye contact. You just—

Nat More water.

Katie More wine! [laughter] Get real, Nat.

- Nat** Get the fingers clicking! [Laughter] So, I once made the comparison between artists as the primary producers of culture and dairy farmers. I think that society understands that dairy farmers have got themselves into some business deals with some large distributors who aren't wanting to pay them properly. And that it's actually put the whole sector in a very precarious position. And I do feel like that's where artists have found themselves right now. And that governments, often their idea of supporting artists, is to increase the funding to the major art galleries that show our work. But often when you're getting a show in those major art galleries, I mean, artists are taking on all of the risk involved with putting on a show. If it's not up to scratch your name's on it and you're the one whose career is going to be affected. And that you can actually, sort of, be out of pocket by agreeing to show in the gallery. You know, most people just assume that if you're in an art show at the National Gallery of Victoria that you're very well recompensed. That's not always the case.
- Katie** Yeah, I've been amazed at the figures that I have heard for shows in larger institutions.
- Nat** Artists are all negotiating individual contracts with the institution. So you can—I know for a fact in the last 'Melbourne Now' that some artists were paid to do commissions and were paid \$10,000 and then other artists negotiated different sorts of outcomes, and that the artists who forgot to ask what they were being paid didn't get paid.
- Katie** Oh my God...
- Nat** You know that this is...you have to really be on your toes and it's pretty full on to add that to the other work that you're doing, which is to just try—attempt—to just put on a good art show. Or put together something that's going to touch someone somewhere...
- Katie** Yeah and potentially—
- Nat** That didn't sound right! [laughter]
- Katie** And potentially also work several other jobs in order to afford that. Like getting paid \$10,000 to do a commission, you know, to an emerging artist, that sounds great. But if that's the upper levels... We are truly screwed.
- Lara** Yeah. [Laughter]
- Katie** I want to hope that the culture around that stuff is changing. And I think with ARIs (Artist-Run Initiatives) at the moment, it is changing somewhat.

Like, we've gone from a model where most ARIs were paid to show to...at the moment, a lot of spaces being free or being able to pay people a small amount. Which doesn't solve the problem at all. But if that change, kind of, comes from smaller orgs, people are used to a better standard. At the moment, artists are just used to being like, 'Oh my God, you gave me a free space. I'm so lucky. This is incredible.' And if that's where you're coming from, when you get to those larger institutions you don't know your worth and you're not ready to ask them for the money that it actually would require and does cost for you to make the work that they want to show.

Lara My God, I remember back in the day when you'd apply for a show and you'd paid them to show your work.

Katie Yeah, yeah. That was very recently.

Lara And you'd be in the red something fierce. Yeah it was recently.

Katie I remember telling friends who weren't in the arts about that and they were just like, 'Oh, that doesn't really make sense. But then do you sell your work at the show and then make it back?' And you're like, no. It's just like—

Lara Oh no, my work isn't sellable. My work's contemporary.

Katie Yeah. It's literally pure deficit, like nothing but deficit.

Lara Yeah, yeah.

Nat Oh, you know, if I get into a bad mood, I just think that I'm propping up some huge ego driven indulgence. [Laughter]

Katie Yep!

Nat And that I'm the chump because I do think that artists need to take responsibility for how we got here. And I would actually point the finger at universities, quite a lot, because I think that artists/art lecturers. They get paid a lot to teach the next generation. And so if they're exhibiting, they have a separate income. So, don't need to get an artist fee from the exhibition. But also the responsibility and having these, sort of, conversations. Where you can say 'I need more money', which is not a really great conversation to have to have with a hosting organisation. It's not ideal.

Lara I had a brief stint as a lecturer, just for a semester. And so, I know firsthand just how much we're paid. And that's, you know, that's amazing. But I've

obviously been a student far longer than I was a lecturer. So, these real world experiences are not something that university prepares you for in any way, shape or form. I had to learn all of this after I started to get shows outside of university and I didn't know my rights or...I didn't know my worth. And there are so many situations I agreed to or got myself into where I was in the deficit. And I thought, but I should be thanking them? And for the amount that lecturers get paid, it's like, OK, I know that I tried my absolute best to go above and beyond and to give as much as I possibly could to my students because I was like, 'why aren't we taught things that are actually going to benefit us or set us up for being artists later on?'

Katie And I think, even conversations of the financial viability of your practice were non-existent in art school. And it was almost a dirty subject to talk about money.

Lara And it's because 90 percent of the people in there are from a middle to higher class background. And it doesn't really matter to them.

Katie Yeah, it doesn't need to be a conversation.

Lara It's not a problem. And so I took it upon myself to learn all these skills because I was like, well, when I get out of uni, the techs aren't going to make my work for me. So I, outside of class, took it upon myself to learn particular skills because I can't afford to outsource when I'm out of uni. I'm not always going to have a tech in a workshop to just make my work for me. And it's really the deskilling in universities I think is really gross because it's just setting us up to fail later on or making it so exclusive for people of a middle to upper class background only, to be in art. And frankly, I don't think those are the people that have the most important things to say or are going to incite change at all.

Nat I've been thinking a lot about the deinstitutionalization of artists and how important I think that is. That, you know, what happens if the institutions aren't there? What could you do then? How would you approach that and why would you choose to do that? What might that look like? If an institution is in trauma, which I think that universities will rapidly—well, you can see it playing out, with job losses and people fighting over opportunities. Is that a great place for a creative spirit to be? Or is there somewhere better that we might work from or out of?

Katie Yeah, I think that's such a valid question. And like, I think institutions can be a great place to go and learn a language, learn a system, learn a very particular version of history. But getting out of them and looking back and looking around at other places, other kinds of practices, other kinds of histories, is so

important. Yeah, I think the institution has so many limits, but that it can be useful to learn their languages, as well. It's like learning the language of power.

Lara

Dismantle from within is what I tell myself when I'm so involved in an institution and benefit from them and become part of that system and yet advocate for dismantling of the system. I'm like, well, really, you can only do that from within anyway. So and, you know, perhaps that's a little lie I tell myself to feel better. But also, I think the only way to work yourself into the system is by climbing that ladder. But you've just got to make sure that you don't become the void as you stare into it... It's especially hard also in the institution when there's nobody that looks like you or resembles you. And that could be visually and that could be culturally. But I think the biggest part for me was also class. There was nobody that told me how to start from the bottom and then get up. They all seemed to be born into that. And I had to somehow work that out myself. And don't get me wrong, it also didn't at all help that there was nobody who could engage on a deeper level with my work because they would just like—Lecturer, 'I can't see past my own experiences'. And yeah, and that just encouraged my peers to also not push themselves to see past their own experiences. And therefore my work couldn't grow sometimes.

Katie

Mhm. Yeah. There's so many layers to the challenges that are faced by students or artists coming from different backgrounds and from different classes, and it shapes the art world that we do get and who it represents. I mean, I think a lot of this feeds into the answers that you'll probably give to this final question that I've been asking everyone, but I'm going to still ask it and maybe you can say what is most pertinent. I want to ask what's been sustaining you during this difficult, difficult year and how do you think we can sustain creative communities in the years to come? Who wants to go first..?

Lara

Nat [laughter]

Nat

I guess what sustained me is the revolutionary vigor and voices of artists from now—people that I know—but also from throughout history. I think that I'm looking at people who might change shit up a bit because God only knows we need—not that I believe in God—but we need some change. We need such rapid change so quickly that it's going to be pretty shocking. COVID does have an incredible ability to show us what's going on in society. It's like a truth-teller or something. But it also showed that individualism is just a crock. Then we had sort of a beginner's guide to corporate socialism. We got to watch that for a while. [laughter] But, you know, this idea that we can't. We actually can do whatever we choose to do. It's just choosing or getting the people that have got that power to choose the right choices, as it were.

- Katie** I really like what you said about gathering these people around you now and throughout time, that have seemed like they could create change or really wanted different things. I find that really comforting as well, reading things from people from all different parts of the world and all different time frames who have such wonderful ideas and actually know how to fix so many of the problems that we have. Which is also really frustrating because it's like, all of the solutions already exist that we need, but we're just choosing to not implement them.
- Nat** Yeah, Megan Cope said some people would prefer to imagine extinction than to imagine the end of capitalism. Yeah, that's what we're living amongst. So I guess it's about fighting against those people because they're going to take us all down with them if we don't stop them.
- Lara** I'm glad you both had a somewhat positive way of sustaining yourselves. I was really, honestly just very hopeless the whole time and very...the only thing keeping me going was rage, I'd say. And shout out to food delivery and the entertainment sector that we love to defund. [laughter]
- Nat** I think that rage is a beautifully misunderstood artistic medium. [laughter]
- Lara** It is. Next time somebody asks me, 'Oh, you're an artist? What's your medium?'—Rage.
- Katie** You could do that. You have a lot of very gentle works, but you know, it's thinly veiled rage.
- Lara** Oh, underneath, I promise you, underneath everything is rage. [laughter]
- Katie** Maybe we'll just leave it there then... [laughter] Thanks so much, Nat and Lara. It's been really fun talking to you both.
- Lara** Yeah, it's been great. Thank you.
- Nat** Thank you, Katie. Thanks, Lara.

This project has been supported by the City of Yarra. Thanks to Andrew Bennett for the music and sound production on these episodes. You can find a full pdf transcript and relevant links on the 'It Comes in Waves' page on the Women's Art Register website. Thank you for listening.

Links

<https://nattysolo.com>

[Stage Fright at Gertrude Contemporary](#)

<https://memoreview.net/blog/finding-the-field-by-amelia-winata>

<https://www.elvisrichardson.com/TRUE%20ESTATE%20WEBSITE/natie-thomas.html>

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<https://artguide.com.au/lara-chamas-on-family-history-politics-and-prayer>

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<https://connectionartsspace.org/2020/10/13/going-solo-artist-interview-with-lara-chamas/>