



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 5 EPISODE 3 (March 2023)

OPENFIELD BERRY: LENKA KRIPAC

TIM STACKPOOL:

Lenka, thanks for your time.

LENKA KRIPAC:

No worries. Thanks.

TIM STACKPOOL:

First of all, how did this all start?

LENKA KRIPAC:

Well, this project was kind of invented by me and a couple of close friends. It was around 2020, great year, but we had met earlier than that some Berry people, and were cooking up an idea to maybe start doing something in the arts in Berry because we felt a real lack of arts infrastructure in the town. But there's so many artists. And I guess because I'm actually a musician, so my whole world kind of collapsed because of the pandemic and the global kind of shutdown. Normally I would go to tour overseas each year, and so I wasn't going anywhere and I didn't have anything to do. So I had sort of a bit of restless, creative energy and decided to choose this festival model and start something new in Berry. Took a couple of years to really get it going. But yeah, that's how it began.

TIM STACKPOOL:

So a lot of sitting around, idle thinking, what am I going to do next? And this in fact is probably of great value to plenty of other artists in the area who felt similarly.

LENKA KRIPAC:

I reckon. And people were making great work. It was actually quite creatively inspiring, that time. But there were just so little places to show work around this area particularly. But yeah, a lot of the works that we're showing now in 2023 were made, or at least inspired from that period of time.

TIM STACKPOOL:

This project you just mentioned in that area, you felt that there was a bit of a lack of opportunity for artists down there. Is that the main reason why this is so important for I guess, the Shoalhaven as a whole?

LENKA KRIPAC:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, we do feel like we're a part of the zeitgeist of more and more arts things happening down here. There are new art spaces popping up in the Shoalhaven area, and then if you include the Southern Highlands as well like Ngunungulla is there. Bundanon's had a big makeover. More and more people are taking the arts seriously, and it seems like it's getting known a bit more for arts down here, whereas previously it was just a bit of a holiday kind of beautiful nature, stop and get a scone, something like that. Now I think people are interested in what's happening here. So we're not the only ones, but there's definitely a zeitgeist happening where people are realizing the lack and there's a lot of artist run situations going on.

TIM STACKPOOL:

I've spoken in this podcast both to the directors at Ngunungulla and also to Rachel Kent of Bundanon, of course. And the discussion I had with them actually pointed to the fact that the injection of interest in the arts down there is good for the arts everywhere. So the setting up of Ngunungulla, I guess the reinvigoration Bundanon on as well, it counts in spades for the arts in the entire region. Now, in terms of you coming along and setting this up, has it been difficult to engage those, I'm not going to call them large institutions, but those very well established institutions into what you are trying to achieve?

LENKA KRIPAC:

Well, they've actually been quite good mentors for us. I had a beer with Sophie O'Brien who's given me some advice, and we've had a few meetings with them where they've... And they will kind of continue to help us if they can lend us anything or whatever, but they've got their own thing going on. I think we're just all sort of aiming for the same goal and doing it not together, but I guess parallel. Yeah, so we're not doing anything super direct together, but there are lots of links between us and those kind of sister organizations, even though it's probably a guess. They've got a lot more funding than us and a lot longer history and bigger staff where pretty much just an artist run community run situation. But there are definitely some artists that are working in all those spaces. Themically, obviously there's going to be some crossovers. A few of the board members and funders and things like that are across all three of us in those two spaces that you mentioned.

But we don't have bricks and mortar. We're just going to be a biennial event and perhaps sort of form an umbrella brand that can just put on events here and there. If we could one day get our hands on a building in Berry, we would love that. But real estate is absolute premium in Berry, so that's probably a bit pie in the sky right now. But actually the reason why we chose a festival model is because there are fantastic beautiful heritage spaces throughout Berry, and they're very underutilized. They get rented out for little community groups and things, but they're just owned by the council and they're just sitting there. These colonial spaces, old sort of showground buildings and school of arts, cute little halls. So we're actually just hiring all of those. We've got 11 spaces indoor and outdoor throughout the town, so I think that's going to suit us for a while.

TIM STACKPOOL:

How wonderful. You talked about how you are a musician, normally you would've been touring through COVID. How much of a change has it been for you to actually kind of divert from your practice and move into the management of this sort of thing?

LENKA KRIPAC:

It's been an absolutely massive change for me. My brain is definitely growing and sometimes exploding or imploding. In my life, I've always been in the arts, but I've always been on the creative side. I've always been the talent, so to speak. I did go to art school, and that's why I'm connected to contemporary art so much, and I've always loved contemporary art, but I've never practiced really as a professional exhibiting artist. I've always been an actor and a musician.

So to move to the side, at first, I sort of felt like it was a bit, oh, it's my turn to give back and my turn to put my head down and actually create some opportunities in the arts because I have enjoyed so many opportunities in the arts as a performer. I want to create opportunities for those artists that I know, and I felt really passionate about that. And now I feel like it's actually part of my personal journey in my life that I had a lot to learn about how things, things work and being on a committee for the first time, learning how to do governance and policy and run a business and marketing.

And I feel like I'm doing a business degree to be honest, because I've always just had managers. I've got a manager, business manager, agent, acting manager, all these people that basically hold my hand and do everything for me, and now I'm having to learn to do all it all myself. Which even though it's been quite difficult and a real learning curve for me, I think it's been amazing in my life journey. Yeah, so it's pretty full on.

TIM STACKPOOL:

We'll move into your project a little bit more, but I just want to examine this personal impact on you and your practice as an artist and a performer. How will all of that bureaucratic side of it do you think reflect back into your art eventually?

LENKA KRIPAC:

Interesting. This reminds me of something that is very related to what we're talking about. So recently I was in a songwriting session with Julian Hamilton from The Presets because I'm actually working on an album at the moment, and it come out in August, September. So I am still doing my music. I can travel again. I'm touring Asia in April, but I'm still doing OpenField alongside all this.

But I was in this songwriting session and I was just cracking up so much because Julian, even though he's in The Presets and that's a sort of electropop music festival type outfit, he's actually a very nerdy musician. He studied jazz. He went to the Conservatorium, the con high school, and he's very well educated. He writes songs in a spreadsheet and I write songs scribbling with a pencil on a piece of paper. I took a photo of our two methods side by side because it was so funny to see.

But his method was amazing, and it kind of got me thinking, well, you can actually apply these intellectual skills to a creative process because what his spreadsheet allowed, and if I was any better at spreadsheets, I might steal his technique because it was pretty good. So he is got all these columns with the bits of lyrics, and in a pop song, you often do repeat lyrics or you have kind of a hook that moves around the song. So he could actually just kind of move it into a different column if it was going to repeat later, or he could grab the first half of the first person, slide it down into another section of the spreadsheet, and it was very functional.

TIM STACKPOOL:

Astonishing.

LENKA KRIPAC:

Yes, it was. And it was a real good moment for me to go. I don't have to be this crazy creative living on the edge, coming up with inspiration and who knows where the musers will strike kind of person. You can actually apply a more methodical system to a creative process.

TIM STACKPOOL:

Yeah, very much.

LENKA KRIPAC:

Yeah, that was a eye opener. So hopefully moving forward I might be a bit more neat and tidy in my creative process from this experience.

TIM STACKPOOL:

Well, that's good. That's like an area of growth. Now, let's get back to this event now. Quite extensive. I can't fathom what it was like. I mean, working with artists can be challenging, but has it been like herding cats to use a cliché?

LENKA KRIPAC:

Not really. No. We've got 21 artists projects in this festival lineup, and most of them are really experienced and a lot of them are good friends, or at least we've known them for a long time, or we've known people that have known them and they're super happy to help out. They know that we are a nonprofit community-led event. They're very happy to step up and do something fun and take this as a chance to experiment. And they're really on board to help out as much as they can.

We've got really great artists that have amazing careers, a lot of mid-career practicing artists from mostly regional areas, but you know what artists are like, they just want to muck in. They want to get into it, and they're happy to do whatever they can to make it happen. And they appreciate that we're doing it and it's exciting. So it hasn't been too hard, hasn't been too much handholding. We are the curatorium as well, basically. A few of us on the committee basically acting as curators this time because we had no funding at the beginning, so we couldn't go out and hire somebody. So we're doing it ourselves, and we were really nervous about that. How the hell are we going to be the organizational committee and the curators?

But it does seem to be working now, we've quite a lot of blood, sweat and tears from a whole lot of helpers. Everybody's just mucking in. If someone's coming to Berry for a site visit, we'll invite any other artist to come or crew, and we'll kind of just all meet, get the keys to these halls, go in, do some measuring and everybody's eyes light up and everybody gets excited and inspired. And so far so good. We've got local builders helping us frame up ways to exhibit the art in these heritage spaces, and everybody's just volunteering left, right and centre

TIM STACKPOOL:

When it comes to the artists, tell us who you've got involved in this and what you expect them to bring to your event.

LENKA KRIPAC:

We've got artists from the local area as well as from other regional areas, and also Sydney. We've got a wonderful art duo, Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro.

TIM STACKPOOL:

Know them well. They've appeared on the podcast, yeah.

LENKA KRIPAC:

They are wonderful. I've known them since my art school days and been following their career and just think they're so awesome. And they were one of the first artists that we asked to be on. And because I do know them, we were able to almost let them guide us on how the process works, how they would like it to work. And we came up with this amazing idea. My co-chair, Amelia, came up with this great idea because a big passion of ours is to involve the community and attract people to the arts and really be accessible.

She had this idea to put a donation box in town for people's old Lego because Sean and Claire sometimes work with Lego and so attractive for kids. And so it was basically like anyone in the

community, if you've got grandparents have got old Lego, anyone's got old Lego, please bring it along. And we collected a big box of Lego, delivered it up to Claire and Sean in Blackheath, and they're making a new work out of this Lego from our community. So that's pretty cool. And themically kind of around the mythology of country towns and I mean, it's hard to explain what their work is about, but I'll have to leave a few things mysterious until you can see the work. But they're inspired by the stories that people tell of what's happening in the town and a town's mythology, and they're making a new tryptic wall piece, and they're also showing some of their Lego works that they've made in the past. So that'll be really exciting.

And we've got Tamara Dean, who is also a really early person that we got on board who is a local artist. She lives down here in this Shoalhaven area, even though she's world renowned and exhibits all over the place. She's actually a local and she makes a lot of her work in this area. So she's really connected to the land around here, and she's showing a video work. I mean, we've got the wonderful Donna Marcus, who's Brisbane based. She's already shipped her work down, she's putting her work... Do you know Donna Marcus? She makes huge sculptures and she's got a lot of public artworks around the place, makes her works out of discarded old kitchenware. And then if she's making a really large work, she uses that as a mould and she makes a giant sculpture based on that. But she makes works out of baking tins and lids and things like that.

TIM STACKPOOL:

Lovely, yeah.

LENKA KRIPAC:

And she's actually putting a work in the backyard of the CWA, so it's really perfect for that sort of the baking type charity that they're known for. We've got an artist from the southern Highlands called Natalie Miller, who is a quite famous fibre artist, and she's got a massive following. She does workshops around the world. She's also an architect and she does quite big commissions in macrame and fibre art. We've commissioned her to make a work with a sound artist who's from Sydney called Amanda Cole, because they both work with the colour spectrum. And so for possibly the first time there's going to be a mashup between fibre arts and sound art in an installation that will be installing in the School of Arts in Berry. That will be a quite an immersive large fibre art work that makes sound based on the colours of the spectrum that the wool is coloured in. So that'll be really cool.

Many more. We've got video art, we've got performance art, we've got a bunch of local artists. There's a great guy called Warwick Keen who's an indigenous artist from the Nowra area. He's quite a big kind of mural artist. He's done a lot of murals down here. He was in Vivid last year, did these light up poles all down along the foreshore, and he's done things like, he did a whole ferry for Sydney Ferries one time. I sort of think of him, the Ken Done of indigenous art. He's got some traditional patterns, but he's very contemporary in his colours and his work really pops. So he's doing quite a large installation where he's putting 27 poles hanging from trees in a little glade in Berry. So that'll be really cool.

I mean, we've got a contemporary dance piece that is by an artist called Emma Saunders, who's based in the Coalcliff area. I know her from Sydney, she was in a group, she had this group a long time ago called the Fondue Set. It's almost comedy, contemporary dance, quite quirky. And I would sort of call it disruptive. It's kind of happens on the street and you are invited to watch, but you're sort of confronted a little bit to watch, really engaging with the viewer. So they're going to be roaming around town and doing a performance a couple of times over the weekend.

Yeah, we've got lots more amazing local artists doing large scale works. We've got Sophie Cape, who's an amazing painter that has actually settled in Gerringong now. She's signed to Olson, so she's a Sydney

artist normally, but she's settled down here in this area too. And I don't know if you know her work, but it's very wild, gestural, abstract painting. And she normally goes out bush and she spends a long time working in the Outback and using the earth and the materials around and to get the colours and work the canvases. So she's actually going to be doing that live to be witnessed by the viewer in nature in Berry for the first time, which will be exciting. So there's something for everyone. I would say a really wide scope, but all quite appealing, accessible, contemporary art.

TIM STACKPOOL:

Yeah, I'm looking at the press information here in front of me. It talks about sculpture, dance, photography, performance painting, installation of music and panel discussion. So this is a four day event, right?

LENKA KRIPAC:

Yeah, pretty much.

TIM STACKPOOL:

So what advice do you have for me coming down to see this? I mean, should I be taking a week off and getting some accommodation in Berry to make this work?

LENKA KRIPAC:

I reckon, yeah, I reckon it's a great time to come for a nice little winter escape. As with festivals as they always are, the program is going to be pretty full. You're going to have to choose a little bit what you want to do. So there might sometimes be more than one thing on, but there's also things that are getting repeated. There's a few performances that will happen a few times over the weekend. So the program is going to be fairly complicated, and you'll have to kind of choose when you want to see stuff. But in a ballpark way, the first main day is Friday. We open on Thursday night, but there's nothing major happening on the Thursday. The Friday is all the exhibitions are open, and we'll be focusing on school excursions because we're quite passionate about attracting the local kids and high school kids and primary school kids of the area to come and see contemporary art without having to go to Sydney or Canberra.

But on Friday night, we're having an acoustic music night, so that's going to be hosted by a comedian and have five singer songwriters. So it'll be a bit like a variety night. So if you like that kind of thing, sit down, have a laugh, enjoy some songs. That's the Friday night. Saturday, there's a huge amount happening throughout the day. There'll be the dance, some performance pieces, industry panels. I think we're going to have Richard Moorcroft chairing an artist panel. So there'll be a lot of interesting things if you are interested in the inner workings of the arts to sit down and enjoy. There'll be some workshops, there'll be kids workshop, few adult workshops. We're going to do a bit of a Tamara Dean activation in the evening where hopefully we'll have the musician that made the music for her video piece performing live outdoors with fires, get a bit of a dark mofo vibe happening.

Then we're going to have an electronic music night that night, transform the space into a bit of a rave and hopefully have some, maybe a bit more of a queer club scene, which never happens down here. So we're really excited about presenting something quite different for the area. And then the Sunday, we've got a bit of a focus on First Nations stuff happening. There's hopefully going to be an unveiling of a new work in Berry and a bit of a yarn circle, some storytelling from some local community leaders and elders. So that'll be really beautiful and followed by that nice calm closing night, which will be a cinema night.

So it's kind of a whole journey that you'll be taken on if you wish to really get into it. And of course, you're in Berry, so if you want to take a break, you can go on a bush walk, it's 10, 15 minutes to the beach. We've got beautiful restaurants and lots to do if you wanted to really make a holiday out of it, which I know quite a few people that have already booked. We've got an accommodation partner, we've got a couple of accommodation partners on our website. So there's a few deals to be had. I reckon it's a great time because I don't know if you know Berry, but it can be very busy in the summer. It's like mosh pit.

TIM STACKPOOL:

Yeah, I'm a little concerned Lenka hearing about all of this, about how busy that donut van's going to be.

LENKA KRIPAC:

Exactly. You want to be able to get in line for the donut van, but this is a quiet weekend. It's literally the middle of winter. So we'll be hopefully taking over the town. We picked the quietest weekend we could find on purpose so that we could have room to do a bit of an art takeover. There'll be a lot happening. There's a few restaurants coming on board with special menu items that are inspired by artists and things like that.

TIM STACKPOOL:

It's extensive. You are touring your own performance practice in April. This is in June. Will you be anxious at all being away while this is getting to the pointy end?

LENKA KRIPAC:

I think my committee are a bit anxious that I'm ditching them for a couple of weeks, but I had to take the offer when it was there. So I think we are all just, we're all volunteer and we are basically, we've got such a good team of nine of us that we can kind of hold the fort for when people need to have their real life happening.

TIM STACKPOOL:

Yes, yes.

LENKA KRIPAC:

Yeah. So we've kind of keeping our boundaries to... We're doing this for fun, we're doing it to enliven the arts. We don't want to have anybody having a nervous breakdown over this festival. There's just a really good spirit around it, and we're determined to keep it that way. So I'm feeling fine about it. I think that we're getting really organized now, and I'm just asking the universe right now that everything goes smoothly and we're ready for anything. And also, it's a movable feat. We're very flexible, we're ready to pivot, and all those great words that we learnt during COVID where you have to stay on your toes, you have to be flexible, you have to go with the flow, you have to be ready to evolve. And we are. We're going definitely going to be putting on something amazing no matter what.

TIM STACKPOOL:

It does sound incredible. Thinking about arts in the Shoalhaven, every city and every state has its enclaves of artists. In Sydney, it's currently the inner west. There was quite a bit. I can remember back in



the nineties it was Katoomba Blue Mountains. What do you think is gravitating artists down to your part of the world, the Shoalhaven?

LENKA KRIPAC:

Yeah, good question. I mean, it is lovely down here. It is a really nice life. I think people and artists, but all people do sometimes want to drop out of the city, get away from the anxiety and the fast-paced stress and take a slower life to really get into the practice and just for life choices, take a sea change, take a tree change. So I think that has just been happening a fair bit as this generation of artists get older, perhaps they're wanting to make their life a bit nicer.

It's just been a trend in general over the last few years. I moved down here nearly six years ago now, and there are so many people that have moved in that time to this area, and they are people that are a bit more creatively engaged. It does seem like there's a shift away from living in the country for agricultural reasons, to living in the country for reasons like being connected to nature, living a slower life, you can still use the internet to upload your work, things like that. People that need to stay connected to a more fast paced world can do it with the internet. But yeah, I mean, I guess the Shoalhaven maybe is just having its moment now because like you say, so many other places that are accessible from Sydney have already been, I don't know what the word for, it's not gentrified exactly, but art-ified.

TIM STACKPOOL:

That's true. But I mean, cost comes into it as well, and artists get pushed out of their traditional studio spaces, their workshops and move further and further away. But I think in terms of the Shoalhaven as well though, and you almost got there, I was going to say mental health really. And without clear mental health, it's difficult to be creative and undertake your practice to a satisfactory extent.

LENKA KRIPAC:

Yeah, I reckon for sure. I'd say quite a few of those people have moved for mental health and physical health, wanting to just live a more calm life or perhaps focus on their mental and physical health a bit more. And that helps sometimes with their practice. It actually has been a pretty stressful few years down here though, especially just Black Summer floods and COVID and I actually think that a lot of the people that I know in this area have been really affected by that mentally and physically, and that's been reflected if they're an artist that's been reflected in their work.

TIM STACKPOOL:

Lenka, it sounds remarkable, and I think the amount of work you've put into this has been incredible. Talking about what you just were so many people are just lurching from one crisis to another. And to be honest, after COVID and I was able to travel the country and particular state, again, I was very horrified at the impact that it had had on smaller regional centres. And I think the work that you are doing is really helping to revive that, not just in a commercial sense, but also in terms of an inspirational sense for everyone who's living and working in the area. And I wish you all the very best, and I look forward to coming down and seeing you.

LENKA KRIPAC:

That's so great to hear. Thank you, Tim. I'm glad that you are seeing that, and that is definitely a passion of ours. So thanks very much and it's going to be fun. I look forward to seeing you down here too.