LWAG TALKS

A podcast by Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

Ep 11: We are Crumbs with Iain Dean and Ted Snell

Published on 23 April 2020

Transcript of an interview between Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery director Professor Ted Snell and artist Iain Dean on INSIDE/OUT, a new project for LWAG’s 30th anniversary, recorded on 4 April 2020.

[piano music fades in]

**NARRATOR:**

LWAG Talks is Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery’s new podcast bringing you insights and ideas with artists, curators, educators, writers and more.

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For this week’s episode, LWAG Director Ted Snell talks to artist Iain Dean, whose work was part of our 2020 Perth Festival exhibition The Long Kiss Goodbye and is featured in INSIDE/OUT, a new series of commissioned artworks celebrating our 30th anniversary.

[piano music fades in and out]

**TED SNELL:**

It's Ted Snell. I'm the director of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery and I'm here with Iain Dean, who has taken on the first commission for one of our windows for the 30th anniversary of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery. And this is a big project, Iain. Is this your first window commission?

**IAIN DEAN:**

Yes, I've never done anything to this scale before, I don’t think.

**TED:**

Was it scale? Or was it the visibility in the public domain that was more of interest to you?

**IAIN:**

Probably the visibility in the public domain. The image itself was just based on a small drawing I did in my studio. So in a way, I didn't have to deal with the scale, that was up to the people who installed the vinyl so… much easier.

**TED:**

But in terms of reaching out to an audience I'm assuming that that's obviously that's a very important part of what you do. Yours are very strongly communicated works so having that larger palette, that larger opportunity of reaching a wider audience must have been attractive.

**IAIN:**

Yeah, for sure. Because of where it is, it's sort of (pause) I was trying to keep in mind the people walking by that don't necessarily have any connection to the arts or, or even any interest. So I felt like, in a way putting the text in was a bit of a shortcut to, to that, to getting people in, or to at least turn their head as they walk past.

**TED:**

Yeah. And the colour to of course.

**IAIN:**

Yeah. I wanted bright colours. And I mean, the motif was stolen from one of the works in the show, which was I thought would be a good way to go, to connect the two works. I wanted bright, bold, joyous colours. I messed around with some complementaries and some harmony colours and things. But uh, in the end, I didn't really know how it was going to translate once it was printed onto the transparent vinyl. But I'm pretty happy with how it came out.

**TED:**

One of the ways the very clever ways I think you dealt with the inside outside problem was to spin the image around. So in effect, you're one images, two images, one which is facing out to the external audience and one which is facing into the internal audience. Was that part of your design mentioned initially?

**IAIN:**

Yeah, well, I know, from speaking to you, you were emphasising the fact that ideally, it would translate from both sides. But um, initially, I was thinking about sculpture and all kinds of things, but it wouldn't have the, it wouldn't able to translate from both sides. And I wanted text in it. I thought I mean, the simplest and most obvious way to do that was just a mirror. And yeah, pretty much the same work from either side. So…

**TED:**

And tell us about that text because that is the intrigue, that is the sort of the catch as you say, for most people walking past - I am a crumb. Where does it come from?

**IAIN:**

I don't know exactly, I do. I mean text is something I mess around with a lot as you see in my other work. I keep notes a lot from, I’m kind of always listening to audiobooks or movies or whatever in my studio and I quite often keep lists of thoughts, or snippets from other people's thoughts, or a nice quote from a movie or something and I'll kind of look back over them and that could give me an idea to start a painting or just a title for a painting or something. But I find the text is always important to me whether or not it's in the painting. I like to mess around with that stuff. This one in particular felt works almost in relation to the I am work in the show. It's more of a looking outwards instead of looking inward, it’s ‘you are an artist’ not ‘I am an artist’ kind of thing. And I guess it's kind of a bit of ah, I don’t know, how do you feel about, I feel like it's a bit of a fatalistic kind of thing like you are meaningless but you're not, you know, but you're also unique. Life is meaningless, but you can do something meaningful kind of thing. Which is a kind of pretty simple contradiction but I think it's pretty true. So yeah,

**TED:**

Well, that’s nice. I like that. Because it did it does initially you think, Oh, I'm a crumb, Oh, that's not so great, but then are actually It reminds me of course of Blake's the universe and a grain of sand. And I guess that has that sort of that for you as well. Yeah.

**IAIN:**

Yeah, I'm very interested in that kind of thing. I'm not religious or anything at all, but I guess I analyse what it's all about and why we're here and stuff a lot. And that kind of comes into my work. For sure. I’m always questioning like, what it's all about. And quite often, you come up empty handed, because not about anything.

**TED:**

(Laughs) One of the things I love about your work, and there's lots that I love about your work, but in particular, it's that sort of larrikin sensibility. I mean, you're really out there. You know, pushing things around making people feel uncomfortable, as you said, you making them … making them have some thoughts and some doubts. Is that, that's always been the sort of core of how you've been, how you initiate an artwork.

**IAIN:**

For sure. Um, I don't know exactly why or where it started from. I've always kind of been a bit like that as a person, I guess. And I'm always sort of wary of artists or I guess people in general that sort of take what they do or themselves too seriously. In a way I feel like that’s almost dishonest if you know what I mean.

And I think part of us just sort of pointing out the absurdity of ourselves. I mean, I'm, we're all flawed and sort of ridiculous in our own ways. And I don’t think anyone gets a pass on that. People quite often. Yeah, I don't know. And I think it works also partially critiquing art itself, making some jokes about modernism while also paying homage to modernism. Like it's kind of a double edged. Yeah, I don't know. It's always been. It's just always how I’ve approached making art. I don't know. I don't know where it started.

Quite often, the other artists and the other musicians or writers, whatever they're like, coming from a similar direction. So they're attracted to that.

**TED:**

Yeah, yeah, I guess. I mean, one of the interesting things about that is that you seem to be taking the role of pointing out to people their inadequacies or making them, you're the sort of thorn in the side. Is that, is that also part of it?

**IAIN:**

Yeah. Yeah, I guess. I mean, I think I'm probably most critical of myself in a way. I mean, I know that I'm not perfect, but in a way it's like that can be a cause of a lot of anxiety and depression or whatever for myself, but in a way, it's kind of liberating once you realise everyone's actually the same, if you know what I mean, we're all, we're all flawed. And it kind of, that actually relieves a lot of my own anxieties and I guess, you know, inadequacies and insecurities and things. I don't know and the humour part of it I think, like any good comedy is also sort of a tragedy, which is even modern comedies. Because life is hard and ridiculous and sad and stuff. But in the end you just have to laugh, kind of thing, I love that kind of sentiment. The comedies I find the most funny are the ones that are the darkest and most true to life, if you know what I mean and you get that resonation, it’s just like everything's ridiculous.

**TED:**

It's like a gallows…

**IAIN:**

Is that answering your question?

**TED:**

Yeah, you can't help but laugh. Yeah, terrible. Yeah. How very appropriate at this time of COVID-19, corona, coronavirus and all of us in the anxiety. It’s a core theme, isn't it throughout The Long Kiss Goodbye. Your works do seem to resonate in that space.

**IAIN:**

Mmm, there are certain things we don't joke about. Obviously, this is a crazy time. I don't like it. Who knows what's going to happen? There's also a prediction in the US yesterday that the worst predictions are estimating another two million people might die or something before it's over, which is just crazy to think about. And what happens after this? I don’t know, like it's, I don't think I'd make any works joking about corona at this point. I don’t think that’s appropriate.

**TED:**

There’s certainly that anxiety and that is another topic or another theme. Can I ask you about one of the words in the exhibition which is the, the work based on Colin McCahon, you were mentioning before that you have a thread of criticism or critique about modernism running through your work. Why did you choose the Colin McCahon work? And perhaps describe it too.

**IAIN:**

Describe my work?

**TED:**

Mmm, and the Colin McCahon.

**IAIN:**

Well the Colin McCahon work, well I think he actually did more than one but um, it was the I Am or, what was it called?

**TED:**

*I Am* was, was one that was the great, the big one that the New Zealand government gave to the Australian Government.

**IAIN:**

Yeah. I mean, Colin McCahon, he’s a New Zealand legend, whatever, and even think Australia tries to kind of claim him as well, like they do. But um I definitely resonate with the sentiment in terms of the self-actualisation kind of thing I mean I have always, like I have mentioned, that I’ve struggled with maybe self-worth or whatever. So it's kind of announcing yourself as I Am, I am here. I am an artist and I am just as important as anyone else. But then it sort of when, like when I was in New Zealand, I was talking to a female artist who, um, who hates him. And she explained why because she's, you know, he's a terrible role model. He was abusive, he was a drunk. He used to abuse his partners. You know, all that. All that stuff, which is the whole question about can you separate the art from the artists and stuff.

It's interesting to think of, in a way, a lot of the modernist artists probably fall into the same category. A lot of machoism and a lot of bad behaviour and stuff, all in the name of, I guess, expressing your true self or something. So in a way, it's all a bit of a joke. At the same time, I love Colin McCahon’s work. There's always been this like, conflict of, you know, um. So sort of the I Am, which is the direct Colin McCahon, and a joke connects to it kind of nullifies the I am, nullifies the idea that I am special or a genius or whatever, which modernism, was a big part of modernism, I guess.

Yeah. And I play around, I play around with those things a lot. I think, more than anything else, my art references art, if you know what I mean, it's not really. And I look at a lot of that constantly incredible. I buy art books all the time. And I get a lot of, I feel a lot of things, I guess and re, ah, reinterpret things. Not always for the better like it's, sometimes I'll do something not as a homage but as a critique, sometimes as a homage as well. So…

**TED:**

And sometimes they blur. And of course there’s a double art reference, isn't there, because of the Brent Harris version, which is hanging next to it in the exhibition. You've been doing a mentorship with Brent.

**IAIN:**

Yeah. Well, that was a surprise. I didn't actually, I wasn't aware of Brent's work until Gemma showed me the photos that you sent her. Which is a little bit of a I don’t know what that is. I guess it's just a coincidence. But then I will guess we're thinking about the same thing.

**TED:**

Serendipity.

**IAIN:**

Yeah. So I had an amazing 2019 working with Brent. I got an Australian Arts Council grant and spent maybe about six weeks in Melbourne last year. And he also came to Perth for a studio visit and I also went to Wellington with him to his exhibition at Robert Hills gallery.

Yeah, amazing. It was amazing to have spent so much time with him and pick his brain and him and Andrew Brown his partner, a hugely beneficial year in many ways. I'm now trying to process it in terms of I don't want to be Brent Harris. I don't want to paint like Brent Harris.

But at the same rules apply in terms of his dedication and, you know, diligence. He doesn't take shortcuts. On anything. It's all about the end product. I think that's the main thing I've gotten out of it. Yep. He won't let a work go out into the world unless he's completely happy with it. And I've already let a lot of works go into the world that I'm not completely happy with. I guess that's a taking yourself too seriously thing too. You don't know.

**TED:**

Well, Iain it's a wonderful work and it is a very, very excellent beginning to our 30th anniversary window series. So thank you very much for taking on the project. And we look forward to seeing some more large scale works from you in the future perhaps.

**IAIN:**

Great. That'd be amazing. Thank you.