LWAGTalks

A podcast by Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery

Episode 14: Exploring the Cruthers Collection of Women’s Art with Lee Kinsella and the Student Advisory Committee

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Transcript of conversation with Lee Kinsella, Curator of the Cruthers Collection of Women’s Art and members of the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery Student Advisory Committee recorded on 17 June 2020.

**NARRATOR:**

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

**MIA (LSAC MEMBER):**

We are from the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery Student Advisory Committee. Today we are really excited to be talking with Lee Kinsella. Lee is the curator of the Cruther’s Collection of Women’s Art.

**AMY (LSAC MEMBER):**

We would like to acknowledge that we are meeting on the unceded lands of the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and emerging.

**VICTOR (LSAC MEMBER):**

Hi, I'm Victor and I am studying music.

**AMY:**

Hi, I'm Amy. I'm doing my honours in art history this year.

**MIA:**

I’m Mia, I'm studying fine art and history of art.

**FANNISA (LSAC MEMBER):**

I’m Fannisa and I'm studying Landscape Architecture.

**LEE KINSELLA:**

Yay the arts (laughs). I’m Lee Kinsella and I am the curator of the Cruthers Collection of Women’s Art here at the University of Western Australia.

**MIA:**

Lee can you tell us about the Cruthers Collection of Women’s Art?

**LEE:**

It's a collection. It's one of several cultural collections that is owned by the university. And we're incredibly fortunate that we have such a diverse range of material and/or collections at the university. We also have a purpose built gallery. So it's a great combination where we have collections that are stored and managed on campus, but we also have the means by which we can actually have them on display on campus for the public. It was instigated by the Cruthers family. And so it was a private collection effectively, and Lady Sheila Cruthers, and Sir James Cruthers, and John Cruthers and Sue the children of Sheila and James began buying art. And from the early 70s, they began more seriously collecting. And it seems that lady Sheila was drawn to the work of women. And so that was her particular interest. And she and John pursued that, you know, locally, they were living in Western Australia at the time. And so they would visit exhibitions and talk with artists. And I think, you know, Lady Sheila got a great joy from that kind of engagement with local artists and supporting, you know, emerging artists. And so it was something that was fostered within the family. And then in 2007, the family made an arrangement with the university whereby they would transfer it to the university. And so since that time, we've had what began as quite an idiosyncratic and personal collection bought primarily for a domestic space transferred into, you know, the university and so it exists now as a public collection and so how people access it and how it's contextualised has changed but also the way in which, you know, works are acquired. And you know, the collecting policies have obviously changed as well because it's different operation and there's different demands made on that collection. So it's been a really interesting kind of beginning, but also since 2007, the university’s had, I think I'm number six actually, six curators working on it. So there’s been um, you know, dedicated university staff that has many selection, and worked on publications and exhibitions and championed, the artists in the in the collection, so I am incredibly honoured to be the current incumbent.

The Cruthers families still donate and provide works into the collection, but we also acquire works, other works that are donated and gifted from various different sources. So it's changing all the time. And that's what's really exciting. But also, I guess, honouring Sheila's initial kind of impetus. She always liked the concept of collecting the work of an artist, and having an artist’s self portrait. So that there was this kind of coherent collection of works that represented an artist a certain point in time. And so that's a policy that we continue to do. The notion of self portraiture and women's work, but also different facets of like an artist’s practice.

And I guess the other flip side of that is that she was always encouraging emerging artists and she was really supportive, not necessarily even of the buying being the most important thing, but she was there at opening then she would chat with them, and there’d be an ongoing conversation, she would invite artists to her house. And you know, it was an ongoing relationship. And I think that's something that I'm really eager to keep. And to continue to foster.

**MIA:**

My next two questions were like, what was her unique approach to collecting, which I think you covered and is this still a strategy that is used to grow the collection, the concept of the artist and her work?

**LEE:**

Look, I think that's what's exciting about the potential of what happens next when the galleries reopen. *(Un)ladylike Acts* is the next show. And that is an exhibition that is purely of works that have recently into the collection. And so it documents how things have changed since Sheila began collecting but also, I mean, the works, some of them are work that Sheila may not have collected, they wouldn't have necessarily sitted within what she thought was her kind of work, work that she was you know, gravitated to. So it reflects the changing collecting practices of the Cruthers family, some of it but also how, you know, we can continue to reshape the collection on the basis of, you know, the practice of those artists that are out there and operating in the world right now, so.

**MIA:**

Yeah, awesome. And how is the Cruthers Collection received within the wider art world would you say?

**LEE:**

I'm gonna look to you guys for that actually. Um, I don't know, when you come in, have you seen it in the gallery space? What do you make of it? What do you feel about the collection?

**MIA:**

Yeah, I love it. I think it's an awesome way to display not only, yes, the work that Sheila has collected, the concept of the artist and her work is really amazing and to see it on a wall is just incredible and I think it's a great way to learn about a wide range of artists and across different time frames. And yeah, I really love it.

**LEE:**

Do you pursue portraiture in your practice?

**MIA:**

A little bit, yeah, a little bit.

**LEE:**

Yeah. That's great. I think that's also one of those things about the notions of identity and like a gendered identity. Right now portraiture is really, you know, contested territory. And I think that's the really interesting thing about some of the works that are coming up from the show. There's very different ways in which women are presenting themselves and having a presence in the public space.

**FANNISA:**

You touched a few points on the *(Un)ladylike Acts*, the next exhibition of artwork from the Cruthers Collection that will open on the 29th of August. Can you give us a bit more insight into what this show will have in store for visitors?

**LEE:**

I have to start by saying COVID-19 really messed with us a bit with our programming and like, you know, the world over obviously, everything's changed. And so what we had planned was for this to actually have already been on display, obviously things changed fairly radically and rapidly. And then we had to kind of conceive, well, would it be an online exhibition? Would it not actually be able to be hung in the space and so it was it a good opportunity, challenging as it was to suddenly go, Okay, we've got to flip things around, see what we can do with the works in the collection and how we can communicate things a little bit differently. And so as a result of that, even though now we are opening up the gallery and the works, will be hung the space, there's other projects that I'm working on to open out and provide different content online in parallel with the exhibition. And one of those is the works *In My Skin* by Kate Just is this phenomenal, it could be a self portrait. It's a knitted self portrait. And the body of the artist in knitted form is laid out in the gallery space and has this remarkable presence. Being a textile piece you're drawn to want to touch it, you actually, you know, you're in a gallery and you shouldn't touch it. But these are things that are incredibly tactile. And so in conversation with the artist, Kate and I are going to work to film it and film it being touched and moved and flexing so that you see that open weave of the knitting and the details of how she's created details relating to her own features on the body with her own commentary over the top. So again, in a gallery space, you don't necessarily have the opportunity to have the artist talk specifically about the work. So I think it's a good moment to kind of interrogate how we do things and how things might need to change but also to expand from, you know, the physical engagement in the space of seeing the works, which is something that you can't replicate online, but then to have a different kind of engagement with the video piece will be quite a fantastic thing, I think. The title of the exhibition is actually drawn from a work by Madison Bycroft, which is a video work. And the full title is *(Un)Ladylike acts for every lady lacking (Gift to the King).* So it's a really interesting one, because that title sounds kind of old world-y language and very formal. And just by the language alone, it's kind of talking about the notions of gendered societal expectations and positions and roles, but also a kind of hierarchy as well where the lady sits at one level but the gift is to the king who would be sitting at a higher strata within that kind of power structure.

So, with that in mind, I'm going to read out a bit of Madison’s statement about it, which is a pure description of what it is. It's a video piece. In the video *Gift to the King*, the artist Madison Bycroft performs multiple public urinations. In each instance, we see them run cautiously onto an empty road that cuts into different natural vistas. Landscapes vary from desert, snow, to redwood forests. With this repetitive act, a gendered taboo, we see the artist challenge what it might mean to be a ‘proper’ woman.

Through the choice of title and sites of enactment, patriarchy and colonialism are indirectly lined up. The road perhaps a phallic mark of domination and anthropocentrism is reclaimed as the artist marks their territory and transformed from a symbol of domination to a receptacle of the artists excretions. As the enactment is repeated, it becomes a ritual, a kind of performance tool for pushing up against boundaries drawn by others, and finding ways to be and act freely and politically within a patriarchal, anthropocentric context.

It's very weighty. I mean, it's great because also one, you hear that artist framing it in their own words, and two it touches on some of those really central issues about mediating your position in the world and how you manage yourself when you kind of come up against something that you find to be either obstructing, or confining, or empowering.

**AMY:**

So taking the piss out of the patriarchy.

**LEE:**

Absolutely, marking territory. Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, it'll be interesting how you receive it when you come and see the show because it will be, I mean, it's a provocative act because it is unladylike and that is at the heart of quite a few of the works. What is the acceptable behaviour? And why is that seen to be the way it has to be and how you kind of beat up against that or, or in the case of, you know, the permeable skin, how you actually move through those kind of constraints. So, it's a really interesting one, I think, also, you know, the overlay of in lockdown right now we're all experiencing various forms of trauma and loss about a lifestyle that was or our engagement with people that's been severed. And I think this is almost another way in which to kind of grapple with those bigger issues and how to manage ourselves and reimagine what we hope could happen in the future or ways in which to operate that is different from the past. So I think, you know, hopefully with all of the exhibitions in the Lawrence Wilson, anyone that walks into this space can find things that they are drawn to and that makes sense to them or that informs something that they're dealing with at the time. Or, you know that there's different ways of engaging and that they're on topics that range, you know, beyond the walls of the gallery, because what is within the walls of the gallery is merely a reflection of what's happening outside.

**FANNISA:**

You touched on a bit about how this collection will relate to visitors of all kinds of people, not men, women, all of those people. So how would you say it would relate to someone who describes themselves as not into art?

**LEE:**

I think in our darkest hour we reach for music or poetry or something that might not be at the forefront of how we operate day to day. But those things that are the touchstones about which we can kind of seek solace or some guidance or something that is able to assist us as we grapple with, you know, the challenges of living. And there are many challenges right now made more obvious by you know, the run of fairly extreme you know, environmental disasters, let alone you know a global pandemic. The gallery is nice, it's a safe space and a great sanctuary in a way where you can go into from the corner of a campus and disappear and just have there is a quiet and there is a clarity sometimes from just stepping away from the pounding of the requirements of your day to day as students. I think sometimes that just having a space somewhere doesn't necessarily have to be that you come here for the art, but there might be something that is on offer and might surprise people in ways that they don't anticipate.

**FANNISA:**

The art gallery will be a space where you can take a break from your studies and routines on campus. And find a bit of inspirations, particularly.

**VICTOR:**

As you alluded to, there is like a lot of deep reading and different lenses that you can take when viewing the artwork. I suppose this could be viewed as alienating for some viewers because they're not into doing that. Do you think that it is important to take on this sort of deep reading when you're viewing artworks?

**LEE:**

 You know, I think sometimes just standing in front of an object, a work of art, different things will occur to you that isn't necessarily about an engagement in the theory or the background or the you know, the kind of the intellectual context in in a way, but it's just standing in front of an object and having a visceral reaction and engagement with it. The beauty of so much of the work in that Cruthers Collection is that there's their historical documents, they speak of all sorts of different histories, but they're also beautiful objects really well made beautiful surfaces and textures and things. So there's all different ways of engaging that. Madison’s video, case in point is important, you know, I think some people go this is just, what is this? And as soon as I hear it, and I see it is that it? Well, yes, it could be that, but in the context of its dialogue with other works within the show, it, you know, performs a different function. And there's all sorts of interesting dialogues that happen between objects, and the space between, you know, the different narratives that different artists are talking to. So I think there's all sorts of different ways in which that flows out and hopefully connect with different people and what their own experiences.

**VICTOR:**

So I guess it's less about perceiving the artworks as a product that is abstract-ified and like separate from our social world, but rather, on the individual in the social world, experiencing the artwork and the interactions that's encapsulated within that interaction.

**LEE:**

Well said, really well said. And I guess also, you know, in terms of you can, at no point can you have read the entire collection of some philosopher’s work. At no point, can you possibly have ranged across the entire intellectual landscape of psychoanalytic theory or, you know, no one can hold that in their head. So you're always going to have various levels of engagement and points of intersection and things that are occurring in your head at any given time. But again, yeah, what you bring to it, make sense of it at that moment, and has probably networks and connections to things across the globe. But it's that realisation and making sense of it in this context that is, is important.

**FANNISA:**

So from the initial concept proposal of the *(Un)ladylike Acts* to the opening, like how much time goes into planning a show like this, and what is usually involved in the process?

**LEE:**

I inherited this exhibition concept from the previous curator Gemma Weston, who is now with Perth Festival. So I was past the baton of the exhibition concept and then could rework it and reframe it since September to move it into, you know, something, it obviously got reconfigured when we were locked down, and potentially it was going to be an online exhibition. But now it's going to be realised in the space. Again, it's a process and also, obviously, these projects will run in parallel with other projects. But it is that notion of having, looking at works, responding to what kind of is occurring to you, or what the artist is addressing in works, and then looking at how different ways relate, and how they might operate in a space. And so conceptually trying to make sense of things so that people walking into a space, understand a visual connection, they see the works and understand it, have a way into it and then want to, hopefully, engage further and go deeper into what each of the artists were wanting to do or what they were communicating and how they were choosing to do that.

So it's almost, for me, it's an artist driven process. And my role is to respond to the works in the collection and to make it available in a way that I think is, makes sense of it, but also makes it clear so that artists and audience engage directly. And then along, once the works have been realised, we have a list of works. We then do a catalogue essay, produce a catalogue. And we do associated education programmes, work with artists such as Kate to work on additional content, and then also do you know promotions and talks in the space and hope that at some point, you know, there's information that is out there in different ways and people can engage with it and at the end of the day, the artists want their work out in the public space for discussion and engagement. So that’s my job.

**AMY:**

So you would say it's a very collaborative process.

**LEE:**

To be honest, I think a good curator is a really good collaborator. Sometimes you see there's a concept and then there's people line up things that match their concept. And that's one way of curating. I hope that I don't do that. Because I think that's… I choose not to operate like that. I'm hoping that I look to the collection and to all sorts of issues that are arising at this point in time that are addressed within the collection by artists already working in, you know, in Australia and then link outwards to what is pertinent to us at this place at this time. And by us, I mean public, us, students, staff, engaged public on campus and beyond. So, but, you know, as we spoke up before, there's some really critical issues that are occurring right now. And so there's a lot that can be said and artists, you know, fantastic communicators, they're able to condense and describe really complex issues in ways that make it meaningful for a lot of people. So it's a remarkable resource to be able to utilise in in that kind of communication.

**AMY:**

You've been working on the digitization of the Cruthers Collection into an online catalogue, which will launch to the public sometime in the future. What kind of challenges have you faced when dealing with documenting physical objects for display in a digital space?

**LEE:**

There's some things that can be captured well, or information about some work that can be captured well, and some that can't. The primary collection is the objects and the artworks and so digitization is one way in which we can communicate aspects of the collection online, which is fantastic. Because obviously it's available 24 seven and, and you know, wherever you are, if you have a computer you can access, you know, that information. But obviously, you know, there's limits to that, what can be photographed or can be communicated in the text and the information available.

Quite often, I think in this, we work fortunately working on this well before the COVID situation so it's all been well timed in a way. And while there's a complete list of the collection as PDFs online already that it's a fixed document, this website will allow people to search and it will also allow us to reflect changes in the collection. So as new work is acquired, that will come in and it will be a live reflection of how, you know the collection shifts and changes. So I think that's exciting potential, but also that there's images available as well for some of the works, and we're working with, you know, artists and copyright agencies to get permission for those to go up to the public. So it's another great tool.

It's not the collection itself, because it's information about the collection, but it's a great tool. And, you know, it goes hand in hand with our exhibition programme. Because nothing beats the direct engagement with the objects and, and the works themselves. There'll be a button on the Cruthers website as well so which will take you straight through there and,

and within it, there's also the capacity for such as exhibitions like *(Un)ladylike Acts* to have a tile and it will be able to link all the records of the works in that show, so that you can kind of get information in there about the current exhibition and the works in the show as well. So it is a nice way to link to the kind of live environment of the collection as well.

**AMY:**

Yeah, um, so you just touched on a bit there that you think that engaging with works in person is really different than this sort of online digital space that we've come to be so familiar with in COVID-19 times. How do you think the way that people interact with physical artworks will change now that we can go back into gallery spaces?

**LEE:**

I think for me, I've got a heightened sensitivity towards objects I, I crave that engagement with physical things. And so I think our engagement with so many things will be changed. And I think it'll be a really interesting thing to interrogate because obviously, we don't have the capacity to have mass groupings of people at exhibition openings anymore. And the way people operate and move through a space will be regulated differently.

And that whole notion of unseen threat in a public space is something that will impact on how people engage with other people and with objects. So it's going to be a really interesting thing. I think we're, we're yet to see how it really plays out.

**VICTOR:**

So what gallery in Australia have you missed visiting?

**LEE:**

That's a tricky one. I think it's a bit like we said before I miss students, I miss the life on this campus and you know, you put exhibitions in the gallery for people to engage with them and to not have people in this space, given that I'm upstairs above the gallery, it's pretty disconcerting, actually. So it'll be great when we have people back on campus. And, you know, there’s fantastic new spaces opening even in this really difficult environment. Lost Eden Creative I went down and saw in Dwellingup just as they were opening up. There's, you know, the regional art galleries are starting to open. We're all starting to wake up again and open our doors to the public. And, you know, I think that excitement of people being in the space and engaging with content, whatever the content is in these public spaces is what I miss.

**VICTOR:**

So what advice would you give to aspiring artists and curators?

**LEE:**

I learn a lot from artists and I learn a lot from curators and I guess that's, I guess that's advice in itself, isn't it? I guess you know, already if you if you respect someone it's good to watch closely what they do and how they operate and what they do well. I guess it's also a heads up when you find something that really grates and, you know, be aware that that's not the way you want to do it yourself.

I don't know it's again, I don't think it's limited to artists and curators, I think it's a broad thing you pursue people and things that are your passion and and gain inspiration from that. In terms of my own experience, I would comment that my practice as a curator shifted, when I decided to no longer be so concerned about what people were going to judge about my curating. And I just freed it up to be responsible for presenting the artists and the collection well. I think that in my head changed things quite a lot. And I chose not to be intimidated and to stop doing things. Because at the end of the day, my job was to do that for the artists and for the objects that I'm responsible for. So kind of cut through all that stuff and just get on with it.

**AMY:**

I had a bit of a general question about the collection itself. And what sort of diversity is there within the collection in terms of representation of different types of people. Is something that the collection that the gallery is wanting to improve upon? Or is it something that's already sort of happening?

**LEE:**

It's already there. There's actually a really strong contemporary Indigenous photography within the Cruthers Collection. So we have Fiona Foley, Tracey Moffatt, we have Rhonda Dick whose new recent works have come in, an APY artist who uses text over photographic imagery. So, but that's something that we always need to be conscious of. And you know, there is diversity within the collection, but also in the case of recent donation from the Sheila Foundation, they had guidelines that were talking about what they would like to focus on with acquisitions and within that was for obviously, emerging artists and, and, you know, artists of colour and indigenous practitioners, so that is highlighted as being

you know, those guidelines exist. And so we're obviously responding to those as well. That's the kind of more formal end of it. But the notion of privilege and access and and, you know, Australian society and the various issues within that, talking to power and trying to change circumstance, I think all that is to be considered and obviously has to be, well is reflected at some level in the collection, but there's always more scope for those things to be, you know, interrogated and for us to be really clear and conscious of those issues as well.

**MIA:**

Do you think it's important to support local West Australian artists?

**LEE:**

I do, of course. Look, I guess the other thing is that you know, there is it's a national collection and the Cruthers family, John is based in Sydney, so he is very aware of what's emerging on the east coast. And he travels a lot as well. So he travels, you know, across Australia and overseas, and but he, his local haunt is Sydney and the East Coast. And so he's much, probably more aware of works by emerging artists on that side of the country. And I'm more aware of artists working on this out of the country by the nature of where we currently are.

And again, that's part of our remit. We've got to be national and to reflect, you know, emerging practice of practitioners across Australia, at various stages of career, it's important to reflect across, you know, all the different regions and the different voices. It's all about diversity. There's no single women's voice and it's not a women's collection for women only. This is where we were started the conversation really. So I think, you know, in a way some artists find it difficult to be within a women's collection because they never wanted to be identified as women artists. So I think there's all those issues that we need to be aware of in that that unconscious of in how we frame the collection, but also in the kind of shows that we do as well. It's not necessarily, you know, a women's collection, that sometimes it is essentialising you know, characteristics of certain practitioners or certain practice and I don't think that's useful way to go. But there's there's a lot of unpacking but is always required with all of these things.