

Sunday Jemmott in Conversation with Carrie McCarthy, Hope Street Studio, 6 April 2024

Carrie McCarthy (CM): Hi everyone. Thanks for joining us today and coming out to hear from Sunday! I'm Carrie McCarthy, the collection manager at Griffith University Art Museum and the coordinator of the Hope St Studio, and it's my absolute pleasure to be here talking to Sunday today. I'd like to start by acknowledging the Yagera and Turrbal people on whose lands we're meeting today, and pay my respects to elders past and present. And I extend that respect and welcome to all First Nations people joining us today. For those of you who don't know, though I think actually many of you do know this little Unicorn of a human beside me, Sunday Jemmott is a Meanjin-based artist concerned with the expression of play. Their work examines how the mobilisation of trivialised aesthetics can reframe the devaluing of play in art, history and contemporary culture. They graduated from the Queensland College of Art and Design with First Class Honours in 2021. In their studio method, abstraction, multi-disciplinary painting, and sculpture are activated through high key colour and immersive installation to manifest joyful affect and the unfixed and unspecific nature of play. Jemmott's work illustrates how the nature of play can be mobilised in expanded painting to reclaim experiences of joy. Which, if the world doesn't need more of that, I don't know what it needs more of! So let's start at the very beginning. When did your art practise begin and when did you realise it might become a career?

Sunday Jemmott (SJ): It's so weird to hear my bio spoken, because I really never write it and read it, never actually hear it verbalised, so that was a lot! Anyway, to my art career... I mean, when I read that question, when you sent it to me, I was like, whoa, like am I doing this? I feel like it's only just become something that I've realised that can become a career, even after going to uni. But I'd have to say if I look back, it's the classic tale. When I was little I was very artistic and I pursued that through all my schooling. I was really fortunate to go to a creative arts high school where I had a really great visual arts programme that really fostered my practise. And when I finished high school I was just like 'I'm going to keep going with this!' I really enjoyed it and I was in a really privileged position to be able to do that. I went to uni and did four years including Honours, and I would sell things here and there so that motivated me to keep going. I always had people supporting my work, and I had some really fantastic mentors through that time, like university lecturers and other artists that I've come to know, as well as friends who've always supported me.

CM: Who were some of those mentors?

SJ: I've been working with Rachel Burke, an artist and designer based in Brisbane, and she's been really wonderful. She's always really motivated me and she's very adamant about the fact that a creative pursuit can become a career. And also Julie Fragar. She was my supervisor in Honours.

CM: That's interesting because, for those people who don't know Julie Fragar's work, it is probably the complete antithesis of yours in a lot of ways. It's painting, but it's very monochrome, very much based in self-portraiture, an aspect which has some parallels, but a very different way of approaching it. Where did you connect?

SJ: I think in the honest approach to process. She knew the right buttons and questions to ask. And she really pushed me to figure out what was at the core of what I was doing. And at every stage of that journey in my research, she was there, always with something to further refine. There was always something more to kind of get a better word, better phrase of way to explain what I'm doing. And even though our practises aren't aligned in that way, I think the way that she critically examines the work is also transferred into how I approach my practise as well.

CM: I mentioned before that your practice explores the idea of play. When did that become the focus of your art practise and, you've spoken about some influences, but were there influences that specifically influenced the play aspect?

SJ: That's also something that came out of my Honours research. Play has always been at the core of what I have been doing with my practice for many years but I didn't find the word for it until my 4th year of uni, which is funny because it's so obvious by that stage. But it sunk in when I read an article about play and Dadaism which made clear that play has been present throughout most of our history, and it sort of alleviated the pressure to over-conceptualise my work and allow me to see play as being at the core of what I'm doing. In terms of key influences, another artist that really spoke to me was Lily van der Stokker, a Dutch painter who does these beautiful murals usually in the gallery setting. The way that she toys with colour specifically and the imbuing of her work with this femininity through her mark making. Seeing those two things together was really like 'ohhhhhh!' I could see that happening in my work.

CM: When you've got a practice based in play, and you're then disseminating heavy things and difficult themes and deep, dark inner thoughts, how do you find the aspect of play works? Does it help or hinder the process of getting those ideas out?

SJ: I think one of the things with my work is that I position play and what I'm doing and how I'm expressing it as serious as the dark emotions that are usually positioned as important in our culture. So I guess I'm trying to emphasise joy is being just as valuable as those things.

CM: You've been the artist in residence at Hope St for the last six months. What attracted you to doing this residency?

SJ: I think the location is amazing. Being so close to the Cultural Centre and the creative heartbeat of Brisbane is amazing. And my day job is in the city, so it was easy for me to come over after work and do a few hours in the studio. Also, the studio gave me space to see my fabric works, because usually when I'm making I just like keep sewing and then I don't actually see them until they get installed, so it's been really great to have the space to see what's going on.

CM: Will that experience change how you make your fabric works in the future? I didn't realise that this was the first time you've really had the opportunity to properly see the scope of them while making!

SJ: I think, after this residency, I'll need a designated space to visually play as well as make. Now that I've tasted how good it is to work that way.

CM: This space is obviously a bit of a fishbowl; it's on street level, it's within a residential area, there's lots of foot traffic and lots of gym goers walking past looking in the windows. How was that experience for you?

SJ: For the most part it felt quite private, even though you can see in every window. Sometimes I'd have people stopping and looking, and I've had kids fully pressed up against the window like 'what is that?!' But it's funny that you say that it's a fishbowl because the fish motifs in my work were one thing that really came forward during this residency. I'd wanted to make these fish works, and then I arrive here in the Fish Lane Precinct, and I'm making work in this fishbowl. It was too good!

CM: Let's talk about the fish, because I had not meant to make such a clever segue, but here we are! Do you want to explain what you've been working on and talk everyone through these rainbow fish works on the walls around us?

SJ: This is a body of work that's coming together for a show later in the year, looking at the Rainbow Fish picture book. I've taken specific images and repositioned them in my art style to critique the picture book from the perspective of a queer person in Australia. In the book, Rainbow Fish gives his colourful scales away to fit in and be liked by his peers, and I think that's really sad. As a queer person I don't know why it's so celebrated. I liken the Rainbow Fish's experience of dulling itself to that of a queer person in Australia. So playing with the aesthetics that I use, these playful, joyful aesthetics paired with quite sad excess is just a really interesting contrast.

CM: You mentioned kids before interacting with your work. What's it like when children are attracted to your work? I'm assuming it's the colour and movement that attracts them, but have you had the chance to talk to kids about the work and interact with them and what they see and what experience they bring to it as well?

SJ: I can't say that I have. I think most locations I've exhibited my work haven't really been spaces for children, like local ARIs or the University galleries, but I know that even just my appearance is something children respond to. But I feel like there's a really, interesting thing that happens when adults interact with the work, even without children. I like to think that it brings them back to a childlike state, you know?

CM: How do your textile works and your ceramics interact with your painting practice? And obviously you also do ceramics as well.

SJ: I see my fabric works as an extension of my paintings; I use colour and shape and form in the same way that I do when I'm using paint, they're kind of just a larger scale version. When I started using fabric, I was trying to disrupt the white cube, trying to create a second space that freed you from the expectations that are usually put on you by the white walls. That then opens conversations about play and being able to take play seriously as well.

CM: The Hope Street Studio has its limitations, particularly for painters as it lacks practical things like a big sink, and the floor needs to be kept clean. How did you work around some of that and what came out of it for you?

SJ: When I started the residency, I was primarily working with fabric which just requires sewing. Then using my paint pens and doing little drawings, which is when I initially started doing these fish studies. And, because I work a lot with spray paint in my work, having these doors and being able to open them up...you don't need to wash away spray paint. So that was great.

CM: You just need to not fixate on the fumes!

SJ: Yeah, I've got a mask!

CM: One last question from me before we open the discussion for audience questions. You seem to always have a lot going on professionally. It's funny that you were thrown by the question about this being a career because you're one of the busier early career artists in Brisbane, and incredibly self-motivated which is what led me to nominate you for this. You're a real go getter, but obviously you juggle work alongside creative opportunities. Maybe for the artists in the room who struggle with that, what's some advice that you would give in terms of juggling all those things and seizing opportunities when they come along?

SJ: When I try to take on every opportunity that comes my way, which is sometimes not sustainable, it has led to burn out before. This residency has been a good learning curve because I've tried to really push myself to get into her as much as I can, working in here whenever I'm not doing other things. But you also need to be able to listen to what your body wants, because you want to be able to produce good work. If you're trying to force that process, then that's not going to happen. But at the same time, I'm just doing everything always, and I always have visions in my brain of work that I need to make happen. So I think I always just feel like I need to get things out of myself.

CM: Your practise does have an element of feeling like it's a compulsion, like it's a bit of frenetic energy as well.

SJ: Definitely.

CM: Well, I'm glad you were able to take this opportunity on. Alright. Does anyone have any questions for Sunday?

Audience Question (AQ): What projects do you have coming up?

SJ: Later in the year I'll be featured in the vitrines in Fish Lane, which is exciting. And I'll be in the Affordable Art Fair. It will be interesting to see what that's like in Brisbane.

AQ: I love the Rainbow Fish and I'm wondering if what point did you kind of see the parallel between the Rainbow Fish?

SJ: It was recent because I really liked the books as a kid. When I started posting about Rainbow Fish, one of my cousins messaged me and said 'I used to read this to you all the time when you were little!'. And I thought that was so sweet, but it made me think about where ideas come from. Sometimes these ideas come and you're like, 'I thought of this myself', but when you consume so much content it's probably come from somewhere.

AQ: On the topic of children, obviously your source material is children's media all the time and these bright colours. I'm just wondering how you feel your work can be used as an educational tool for younger children to specifically discuss erased queer history and things that are often not taught in schools. I'm studying to be a high school teacher, so I'm very interested in this and how this sort of aesthetic can be mobilised and how you can recontextualize those themes for younger children to be able to access.

SJ: That's a big task and a big question, but I think what my work does in the first instance is provide an entry point to both children and adults. If I was to compare like my work to a great masterpiece of oil painting, portraiture for example, I think the difference is my work can be understood in the same way by children and adults alike. And I think

that's where the magic is, but I don't know how specifically I can employ my aesthetic for that purpose. I need to think about that!

AQ: Can you talk a bit about your process of mark-making in the studio?

SJ: I take a very intuitive approach. I kind of just go with what flows. With abstraction it's really difficult to figure out when it's finished. You can keep going and going and going, and a lot of the time, even though my work is very visually busy, the actual making is 50% me just sitting and staring at it and waiting for it to tell me what's the next move is. Another big part of my process is when I'm in that flow state of painting, I will be dancing. I think that comes through in my work as well with the movement. So I guess I kind of like to play with the paintings too. If I get to a point where I don't know what's next, I'll let it cook for a bit. Or I'll make a drastic change and deeply regret it, but that will inspire the next the next move.

CM: That's all we've got time for today, I'm afraid! I'd like to thank Aria Property Group for supporting the Hope Street Studio artist residency for the last five years. Sunday is actually the last artist for the Hope Street Studio as the residency is coming to an end, the last in a long line of awesome artists that have been a part of the Hope Street Studio. You can see some of Sunday's predecessors on the Griffith University Art Museum website. Some amazing things have come out of this residency for our artists in a way that I haven't really seen in other residencies, so I think it's a great model for future residencies. The fact that it's a free space, that artists are supported but left to their own devices without pressures and interruptions, has freed artists up to just go for it and experiment. Even with those limitations we discussed, they've been things that have really helped the artists break through into new areas of practice. There's not that many opportunities like this around, so it's fantastic that Aria have been so invested in supporting artists in this way.

And thank you Sunday, of course, for being such a brilliant Hope Street Studio artist, and to all of you for coming along today and showing your support.