

Simon Wright Interviewed by Angela Goddard

Angela Goddard: Thank you so much for joining me, Simon Wright.

Simon Wright: Pleasure.

AG: Here on Monday the 20th September 2021. We're here to do an oral history interview of your time as Director of Griffith Artworks, which is a little time ago now, but we feel like, within the context of this current year, which is 140th anniversary of the college, that we would like to shine a light on some aspects of our history. There's also a really wonderful interview with Marguerite Bonnen in our archives, and we think that it would just be an amazing resource to be able to add to this for posterity. I found that interview to be very compelling. Have you had a chance to look at it yet?

SW: I haven't, no, but I've had so much respect for what she did in the early days of Artworks, and of course people like Beth Jackson in between. There's such a rich history of the institution. I was here for its 125th, so it sort of makes me feel comfortable that it's still here at 140! Like it didn't go pear-shaped after I left at 125. [laughs]

AG: Of course not! [laughs]

SW: That would have been me causing it to go pear-shaped.

AG: No. But it's just so great that you've taken the time, and we can just take a deep dive into your recollections, the motivations, the history, the context of the great and significant work that you did here, within the institution.

So, Simon, you were the first Director of Griffith Artworks to manage it as a permanent, ongoing gallery program. Your appointment and its outlook were actually quite substantially different from that of your predecessors. So, if you look back to the initial motivations of how you came to be at Griffith University, perhaps to start there at the very beginning?

SW: Indeed. I was really interested in the idea of a collection working for its communities of interest, plural, and I had become very familiar with the collection. My real start in the art world was actually as a volunteer at the Queensland Art Gallery, for Candice Bruce. After that, I spent almost 5 years as a gallery manager in the commercial art dealing business with Peter Bellis,

which has morphed through to be Milani Gallery these days. Which was just such a wonderful experience, for so many reasons. And, to be honest, there's things that you learn in that environment that also are things good to know not how to do stuff. It's pretty much learn as you go, and Peter was absolutely a pragmatist, and it taught me a lot about cutting through quickly to get to where you need to be.

So how did I get to be at Griffith University? Well, I really came out of Bellas Gallery into the Brisbane City Gallery, and I was an assistant exhibitions officer under Simon Elliott at the time, who had just come from the Queensland Art Gallery. When he left, I think he went to the National Portrait Gallery at that point, or maybe the National Gallery of Australia straight up, I was elevated into the role of exhibitions manager. From there, I was basically able to generate programs. But what really caught my interest wasn't just what was happening in the town hall environment. It was the exhibitions program that we were running through communities around Brisbane, in the city library system. In a sense, I would be in a van, delivering works to libraries, hanging shows, photographing them, doing condition reporting, and I just really enjoyed being a generalist specialist. I think that's really a very handy place to start in the art world. I think art education, whether it's theoretical, at a place like UQ, or it's practical, like here at QCA, the more you can fan your deck of cards, I think, the more you can either build a practice, either as an artist ... And I was, of course, a failed screen printer, making t-shirts for bands through university days. But that was equally important, because it gave me a graphic sensibility. I never called myself an artist. I was always happy to be a maker, but just quietly, behind the scenes.

And interacting with people was really the thing that gave me the spark. I loved the object, but I thought pretty much from day one ... I mean, I grew up in a house that was basically a museum. My Mum's a ceramicist and an artist. She actually studied here at QCA and my father was a collector, and I lived in this house-museum on the Gold Coast, which was quite odd on the Gold Coast. I was that weirdo that had an interest in art. I was collecting by the time I was 11. And I was the weirdo on the football field that could also collect art [laughs] at school or whatever.

Anyway, rambling. It was getting out into the community and just seeing natural responses to work hung in everyday places, and libraries aren't necessarily a place that you would think the community goes to see art, but I was really intrigued by the amount of people that would come specifically to see what we were doing, as well as going to the library. And it's that thing beyond the object as a trigger for experience, that I think really laid an early track in my brain, and was the groove that I've followed ever since. I love activating the space between the object and the audience, getting public engagement or learning

opportunities. Learning has public engagement outcomes. Public engagement has learning outcomes.

The extension to Griffith University's on-campus exhibition program was really a natural progression, and it was what kind of intrigued me most about Griffith, because I saw the collection really being used. It's an important word, 'use', because I think, for the most part, art collections are set up for posterity, or with the view to keep that object in a pristine condition for a thousand years, but coming to Griffith, it was very apparent that these things were bought, often as works on paper, in serial, as graphics or in print runs, and they were to be out on campus, in spaces, in front of audiences that weren't expecting to see art. And it was that same logic of surprising someone with the everydayness of art.

Really, the mission was to make art an everyday experience for a student waiting to go into a lecture theatre. And if that was in the psychology building or the engineering building, we would be very subtly, deliberately, planning exhibitions that were somehow thematically aligned with what they were studying, and just wonderful to see people occupying their mind with visual art before they went into a lecture.

AG: That's a wonderful summation. That interesting characterisation that you make of the working collection, which I think is still integral to what we do. And the multi-campus aspect of the university does lend itself to, I think, very quite distinct themes in the hangs that you'll see on different campuses.

SW: Absolutely.

AG: So, you'd come from the Gold Coast. But were you that much aware of the campus on the Coast then?

SW: It was Nathan in those days, really. The mother ship was Nathan. QCA here was really the cleave. So, Artworks still had its base on Nathan. It had obviously started at Seven Hills in the demountables, but the collection store and the administrative hub was Nathan.

But obviously the new thing, for the new kid, was the gallery here at QCA. It was just this remarkable opportunity, that I honestly didn't believe I'd even get interviewed for the job, let alone arrive with it. But it was so fantastic, as an opportunity to basically inherit one show rather than a year of programming, and be literally chucked in the deep end with 6 or 8 weeks of a show in front of

you, but nothing beyond that! [laughs] A budget that I inherited, which was challenging, but equally, what is art without the absence of limitations? You get a budget, and you work out what you can do with it, and then you match that with what you want to do, and you go and find the gap.

AG: But all of these things are still to be uncovered, really, as you apply for this role. By this time, you're based in Brisbane, working at the City Gallery. You're probably watching Southbank transform and change, and the announcement of the Millenium Arts Project, in terms of GOMA maybe had just already happened or was maybe a bit of a whisper, but was there a sense that this precinct was really changing and moving into a new spirit? Was that part of the motivation?

SW: Absolutely. I wanted to be part of what I perceived to be, I don't know, coming of age is the right term, because I've always believed Brisbane is perpetually on the cusp. It's always moving but achieving great things. It felt like the epicentre was spreading beyond the cultural precinct, and whether it was the IMA or QCA, or the network of universities themselves that had galleries. It felt like the combination of, say, Expo '88, Southbank, the Asia Pacific Triennial series at the Queensland Art Gallery, and all of those new capital works, massive developments around the inner city, was that shift where you thought, wow, this city is not going backwards. This is the turnpike. I either get in here, or do what a lot of my friends and colleagues did at the time, which was go to Sydney to get a real job.

So I've been kind of lucky. I've applied, I think, for four jobs in the art world, and got them! [laughs] Didn't have to leave.

AG: Not surprisingly. But what about the appointment process? Was there a good sense of what the structure would be, how this new gallery would be presented, how the interface with the university and these different faculties, like of course the College of Arts is a big one, was that all very clear as you moved into the role, or applied for the role, really?

SW: It was clear that they were after someone with a very well-defined vision, that had a bit of aspiration to it, but was bedrocked in what they could offer. So when I say I inherited a budget that was quite modest, I guess, through the interview, what they were really chasing was an annual program, an idea of how well I knew the collection, what I could bring to enrich that collection, the networks that you have, and the artists that you can work with. And some big ideas, like strategically, what do you want this place to be in 15 years? And I had really good support. At the time, David Mayocchi was the college manager, and

Professor Mostyn Bramley-Moore was director of the college. Very supportive in the early days, as was the vice-chancellor, at the beginning, for me at least, Glyn Davis.

But equally, I had great support from people like Pat Hoffie and Jay Younger. I think just knowing that they were kind of in my camp meant that I felt like I had the right support when I needed it. I never knocked on doors and pressured people to help, but I just knew that if I ever got myself in trouble, there were a few lifebuoys lying around.

So I was able to think forward about that question, what do you want this place to be in 20 years, and I always had the long game in mind. In the interview, I remember talking through what my annual program would be like, but I kind of outlined starting local, going to national, and moving to international, only through the prospect of touring partnerships, really. But being a bit entrepreneurial about those sites.

I didn't mention art fairs, but I had it in mind that I needed to go in that direction as a one-person programmer for the gallery, because I felt there was going to be some synergy. I didn't know what it would look like or who it would be with, but I kind of thought, this is going to make sense. Because in the first 10 years, you want to set something up with a really steep up-curve. You want awareness-building, profile-building. You want the professional development of your staff and the artists that you're working with to start kicking goals. And then you find that you can play to some natural strengths that poke out from there.

And I said to them, "In 20 years, I'd like to see the building three times the size, I'd like it to be vertically integrated, like a high-rise art gallery on Southbank ... [laughs]

AG: Still a great idea.

SW: [laughs] Yeah, well I left the interview and I thought, that went better than I thought it might, and I was just thrilled to be offered the role.

AG: And so, the co-location of this new gallery within Southbank and the Queensland College of Art, how did that influence your initial thinking about the role?

SW: I wondered immediately about challenges rather than opportunities. Because it was a new building, ostensibly I was looking at the fact that I didn't have 12

months of humidity and temperature control results to be able to prove to lenders that this was a reliable space. So there was a lot of practical and logistics stuff that I had to really quickly get up to speed. And in a sense I relied really heavily on some very key people that are dear to my heart these days still, that were in Griffith Artworks, because I think you have to be on the ground in a public-facing gallery. There was no point in me being over at the Nathan mother ship.

So I really relied heavily on Karen La Rocca, the admin assistant for me, but really the admin guru for the whole of the organisation. And Kath Kerswell, who was just the most awesome Collections Manager. Nothing rattled her. She was just incredibly wise and calming to be around, and nothing was ever a problem. So I felt very comfortable that, in the cleave of the two positions that we were dealing with, Kath would be on the ground, running that collection at Nathan, I would be able to fall back into admin whenever I needed to be on site for meetings with the vice-chancellor or whoever it was going to be, but equally for quiet time, for writing, because at that point, you're a curator, you're a cultural producer.

And I resisted the term 'curator', because it was really a slice in a pizza. You're the photographer for the catalogue that you're writing, as the publisher that you are for the distribution network that you've set up for it, while you're the curator and whatever else that has to go on. So, as you've acquitted the last sponsorship deal and raised funds for whatever you're trying to do ... You're grinning, because you know exactly [laughs] what I'm talking about!

So I felt much more comfortable with the catch-all generalist specialist term of cultural producer. I didn't wear that as a badge, but it was just how I used to refer to myself if I was really pressed.

AG: But I really think that, within the arena, the sector of university art museums, there are some of us who I think I would characterise as far more curatorially driven directors

SW: Definitely. Yeah.

AG: ... and was that, as a direction, as a certain kind of perspective, in terms of being able to pull together a vision and to lead others in terms of bringing together the exhibitions that you think need to happen, rather than just deploying that to externals. I mean, that becomes a very distinctive aspect of your program, doesn't it?

SW: Indeed. I think, at the stage and age for the gallery attached to this institution, venerable as it is, I didn't want to walk in and do a lightweight program. And you kind of had to be a curator-director. So there was a lot of other stuff going on, as you can imagine. I mean, the community of students was in the tens of thousands. There was a massive capital works program going on, not just here at Southbank, but in a sense it was the bookend, because when it finished, the whole of the Gold Coast lit up, and Griffith began its expansion soon after I'd started.

And then it was really a stark realisation that things had to change in the collecting directions as well. I think it was really prescient, and absolutely critical, that Griffith University started an art collection based around works that were largely sociopolitical, that were steeped in activism an artist as an activist, as an agitator, as a consumer of information but a reprocessor or reteller, if you like and for those works to have been used on campus. So inherent to that is the understanding that you're essentially killing the work, but at the same time, the messages coming out of that were seriously important.

And because they were often acquired quite well, as in very affordable, there were moments where I thought, well, we'll buy three of these, because they'll fade after the first 5 years, and three prints of or three examples by the artist, because it felt like the program couldn't run forever the way that it was set when I walked in.

There was becoming a lot more demand with the new campus, and we weren't just servicing offices of important people, we were servicing corridors and hallways and lecture theatres. Very different style of exhibiting a work in a university collection, specifically to our local counterparts at QUT and UQ. UQ's sandstone collection, beautiful, blue-chip, probably the second-best collection in the state. But you know, wrapped up in cotton wool and only shown in the vice-chancellery.

So it was a pleasure to be hanging Michael Callaghan, Redback Graphix down corridors, and seeing these works being used and loved. In the many years that we did that, I think two works got nicked and one got scraped by a vacuum cleaner. Try doing that these days! [laughter]

AG: Well, we do try.

SW: Yes.

AG: We still try. [laughter] So, in terms of those interactions with the other campuses, schools and elements, was that driven by the vice-chancellor at that

time, Glyn Davis? How was your relationship with Glyn Davis? His appointment was relatively new in 2002, and obviously on, very much, a trajectory. Did that align with his vision for what Artworks would be?

SW: Glyn was a really important mentor for me. I never over-relied on the relationship, but I knew that if I needed something strategic in the form of advice, he was always open to a discussion and quite engaged with what we were doing. He was very receptive to a targeted ask. If you went in and rambled, you got nowhere, he would just cut through it.

We met a couple of times before I even started here, because I used to tutor over at the University of Queensland in the Political Science Department, and he'd often be over there talking to Ken Wiltshire or in some agency for the Goss administration or beyond. And he was good friends with the professor that had employed me at the time, Paul Reynolds. So we kind of knew of each other, but I had watched him very closely as a social policy guru, and read a heap of stuff, and it was actually a lot of his stuff and Ken Wiltshire's stuff that got me into public administration as a possible line of sight to develop a career in.

And he was interested in what we were doing on the ground, here in the gallery, and very interested in how we were funding that. Very open to entrepreneurial ideas about garnering wider community support, and even how we embedded ourselves in Southbank, because it was really about considering Brisbane with onion rings. And our critical community of interest was obviously the inner onion ring of QCA and the students here, but he saw the next ring as being Southbank, and I thought that was really quite smart, at the time.

Because there were a lot of businesses, like Thiess, for instance, that were not what you would call usual suspect to be backing the arts, big engineering, building firm. But I found a way to get an entrée to their marketing people, and then through their marketing people, we talked about what Thiess could offer, and for a few years there, we ran a really wonderful little show with their support, that was basically giving money to graduates as prizes.

AG: And so was Glyn instrumental in setting up those initial meetings, or just simply a support in terms of that particular direction?

SW: So the whole of the executive was very supportive. So from Glyn down, if I rang and said, "Hey, listen, I need a little bit of help. You don't really have to do anything. I'd like you to just be in the room, and I'll introduce you to Martin Albrecht from Thiess," or whatever it is. It was really about telling or showing Thiess that this new gallery, unproven as it was, could marshal some significant

players in the local landscape. It was symbolic, but it was also direct when I needed it.

I would be able to say, "Well, listen, our acquisitions budget is, say, spent for this year, and I've got a remarkable opportunity. Do you have a lazy \$5,000?" And I don't think I ever got a no. But also, like I say, you don't wear out your welcome. There were a lot of times I thought, I could do this with one phone call, and I didn't. I'm so glad I didn't.

AG: So, then Glyn is not actually here for very long.

SW: No.

AG: He moves on, quite quickly. But ...

SW: But he mentors Ian O'Connor.

AG: Of course! So Ian comes on in 2005, and also from UQ, but from a very different kind of background, different approach. Was there a different managerial approach there?

SW: Oh yeah, absolutely. Ian was, I would say, a lot closer to us, cerebrally. He was also a lot closer to us physically. He would be at the opening of an envelope for us. He would be a great champion for us. In many ways, he held the baton as a mentor for me, as well. Where I think that really helped us was in understanding that we had ambitions to be not just a place that showed college work, the work of staff or students. So it was really in the Ian O'Connor years where the college was getting much more organised and dealing with the idea that there was a junction coming towards the institution, and it was either research or teaching.

And I think QCA had to grapple the straddle, to be a bit of both. They were quite challenging years, in the first part of it, because as you know, money dries up in sectors over time, and the tertiary ed sector at that time was really thrusting into research. Research dollars, ARC grants, and there was a lot of work being done around is art research? Are artists researchers? And we saw the advent of Doctor of Visual Arts, DVA degrees, as opposed to PhDs that were also offered.

So he gave a lot of support through the diversification of postgraduate degrees, and that put a little bit more pressure on the gallery. What were we doing to support that agenda? We were doing quite a bit. But, as you know, running a

successful program, you don't play the same tune over and over, so it's really about a balanced program, and the timing of the balance.

So we thought, at that time, really the energy around connecting with graduates and students was best served when there was synergies in the air, and that usually coalesced around the end-of-year graduate exhibition shows. Or major touring opportunities.

But I think what Ian also really enjoyed was the idea that we were branching out and really starting to find new networks.

I think the second thing I did when I started here was a project that was a partnership with the IMA. That was a simultaneous project with the UK artist Eric Snell. And I think the last project I did here before I left for my next place of employment involved the IMA as a tripartite venue for the Gonkar Gyatso project, which was an international show that we, for the first time, partnered with the University of Queensland Art Museum and the IMA to do, three-venue, single show, big colour monograph and some international patronage, and some gifting and philanthropy around it as well.

So I think that research agenda is still very prescient today. It was important for me to be able to ... I didn't think I was holding ground against an opposition, but I felt like this was new ground to be forged, and I had to be a little bit forward on the tilt and really lean into the idea that, hey, this gallery is perfectly positioned to bring the best of the world to the student interface. And then, as part of a balanced program, we'd be offering the best of the student world to our communities of interest. And through an annual program you can diversify and balance that out really well.

Yeah, I felt like I got a lot of support from the pro-vice-chancellors at the time, particularly Marilyn McMeniman, a really great champion. Then, in the last couple of years, Paul Mazerolle. Absolute champion for the arts and the gallery, very solid supporter.

AG: So just to turn back to that long association that you've had with the IMA, have you seen that alignment between the purpose and vision, in terms of Artworks's programs and ambitions, to be quite well aligned with the IMA throughout your tenure here?

SW: Yeah, I have, actually. I mean, in those days, I wasn't a board member of the IMA, but I was part of an active community that went to everything, went to their talks, their programming, all of the openings. I was behind the scenes

often, helping artists make works for those shows, or introduce them to someone that could pay for something to make.

But equally, I think what the IMA did that really drew a sharp parallel with what I sought to achieve was they would be picking up younger artists and looking for springboard opportunities. This wasn't just about showing the latest work of someone. This was about contextualising a practice that was perhaps a bit under the radar but ripe, really ready to go. What I saw the IMA doing through its various incarnations was picking up artists that I wasn't necessarily familiar with, but I'd get into the show and go, "Right, well spotted. This is going to be great. This project will boost them."

And I thought, as a lesson to learn, that's really what we should be doing, in a small gallery similar size, similar footprint, same city. But I never viewed it as competitive or us against the IMA. It was always all boats on the harbour rise if we get this right.

AG: I think that that collegial approach has really paid off, in terms of the institutions. By which, the IMA, we mean the Institute of Modern Art.

SW: [laughs] That's the one.

AG: But also the other university art museums local to us, Queensland University of Technology and the University of Queensland Art Museum, both upgraded their own facilities and galleries in particular at around the same time, in the early 2000s. How did this feel, in terms of the context in which you were operating at that time?

SW: It's a good question. I always felt that the position, the location and scale of this gallery, although it was small, actually represented an opportunity to do projects that neither of the other galleries could.

If you look at the James and [Mary] Emelia Mayne Centre at the University of Queensland, it's a beautiful site, and there's no doubt about the spaces that were refurbished being a wonderful museum to have and work with, but it's a retrofitted building. And similarly with QUT.

So the difference really was that this came out of the ground as an art museum, or as a gallery. Purpose-built, really high ceilings, nice, big, open void, but a small footprint. And I just thought, well, that's actually quite prescient of the

administration, because they're not throwing huge, ongoing, operational resourcing at this, but it's big enough to do great things in as projects.

So I sort of sat back from the idea that we were going to do the seminal show or the retrospective or the survey of. Until I was comfortable that there were ways of doing that. So single-artist projects, single-work projects, big installations, it was an opportunity to diversify the offering in Brisbane. And without being naturally competitive with either university, just recognising that we all had a card in the deck, and I think it played out well.

I mean, all of these sites have challenges. The University of Queensland at St Lucia is isolated. The site at QUT, although it's in a public area, near a botanical garden, it's a little bit hard to see. It's a bit tucked away. And of course, the challenge with this site was always that I just never seemed to be able to win the argument that we needed some really glitzy, artist-commissioned signage, with an illuminated arrow pointing to the gallery. Because, of course, your biggest challenge was not just getting students through the gallery, but making this a place of public relevance, and critical to a wider arts ecology.

AG: Absolutely. So the other main game in town, of course, is the Queensland Art Gallery.

SW: Oh, that old place. [laughter]

AG: And I note that you also instituted programming that would align with their flagship project, of course, the Asia Pacific Triennial program. Can you talk to that approach and co-location, etc, within Southbank?

SW: Yeah. I remember receiving a lot of counsel that I should be basically bursting Doug Hall's door down with ideas about what we could do for the Queensland Art Gallery, and I would leave those meetings and think, that is exactly what I'm not going to do. Out of respect to that institution's size, capacity and ability, there was no way that we were legitimately going to either set up to be a competitive site, or even think along the lines that we offered synergistic possibilities. This was more about thinking strategically about programs that allied with sensitive timing. Respectfully.

So if I was doing something with an artist or with artists in the region, it would always be quietly run through back channels that this wasn't tripping toes, cutting lunches, whatever. And I think having that quiet sort of collegiate

respect with key people, key staff member in the Queensland Art Gallery, went a long way towards not being seen as an upstart that was trying to be a threat or ride coattails. That's a really dangerous occupation in the art world, riding coattails. You might get a free ride, but you always ...

AG: It's a small town.

SW: It's a small town.

AG: Australia is a small town.

SW: [laughter] Exactly right. Yeah. So we just looked for those opportunities that made sense, and we wanted those opportunities to have multiplier effects. It was never about just that standard alignment of programming that had material from the same region. It was really about why that was important to Griffith University's communities of interest, and the workshops that we do, or the publication that we did, the people that we'd employ to write. You know, boosting. We were just trying to develop people everywhere, artists, young arts workers, interns. And gradually we'd build this into a critical mass that was the sum of its parts.

AG: Can we shift here to a consideration of supporters and sponsors? You mentioned a little bit of the Thiess relationship which was really fruitful. Within your tenure, you had a lot of other really great support from different corporate entities. At one stage, you had an arrangement with Dell, in terms of a university sponsorship arrangement. Can you talk to us about that opportunity?

SW: Yeah, that was amazing. It was literally a phone call from not the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Arts, at the time, but another PVC in the university network, who ostensibly had the portfolio for buying for the university. He and I sat down, and we looked at the university's biggest suppliers, because we were trying to find, in that way that you prospect for business development or sponsors, we were looking for the biggest suppliers that might have some sort of synergy or strategic use value in supporting what we were doing.

And he actually twigged. He said, "We've just signed this contract that basically makes Dell exclusive to Griffith University for the supply of IT. They mentioned something about, as part of that, they would be interested in returning something to our community." That was just half the door open that we needed. He dealt with Dell America and the head office in Australia, and they basically cut a cheque and posted it to us. I'd never seen anything like it! [laughs]

And I didn't really have an issue with the name change, Dell Gallery at Queensland College of Art. It had a sunset clause. It was never going to be forever. And it was right in that formative setup period, where we just needed a massive injection. As I mentioned before, you set your aspiration and then you find your gap and you fill it. That was the gap filler that got me through 3 or 4 years of programs, really.

AG: Then later, art prizes become a bit of a focus, in terms of the gallery program. We've spoken about Thiess, but also then perhaps a bit later, you brought Churchie, the Churchie Emerging Art Prize, which had only previously ever been held on site at this local school, but gave them a very different kind of profile. How did that unfold?

SW: It comes out of a trajectory, and we mentioned Thiess, and we enjoyed a good and healthy association with them. When that folded, we actually worked with Garage Espresso, the little coffee shop up the road, a fellow called Simon Livingstone at the time, who was quite an entrepreneurial restaurateur and café owner, and he just loved what we did.

He walked down at lunchtime to just hang out and see what we were doing. I mentioned to him that I was looking at trying to change the arrangement, that we no longer had Thiess. And he said, "Oh, yeah. What's it worth to you?" We had a quick discussion about money, and he, in the spirit of sending cheques in the mail, turned up with an envelope stuffed with cash, seriously, and said, "Okay, I'm your Espresso Garage show. You call it what you like." And I said, "Well, it's the GAS, the Graduate Art Show, brought to you by Espresso Garage." And he just loved that. We got 2 or 3 years of the GAS.

So that was our local connectivity. Thiess, Garage Espresso.

And I was looking at trying to lift from being local, and what we could do, and I had been invited to be the judge 2 years running of the Churchie National Emerging Art Award. And after the second year, the committee of mothers that ran that project at Anglican Church Grammar School invited me in for what they called a feedback session. I thought, okay, I wonder how brutal I can be? [laughs]

I said to them, it was an open forum, and they said, "What would you do?" And I said, "Well, I look at the amount of work that you guys tip into this, and there's volunteering going on left, right and centre, there's trucks, and you're getting 300 entries, and you're doing this for 48 hours in a school hall." I said, "You could do the same amount of work and have this up for 6 or 8 weeks, and really smash it out of the park. You'd get national press. There isn't a media cycle that

can really sync with you on a 2-day program. Maybe you could think about a partnership arrangement with another local gallery."

They said, "Do you have one in mind?" and of course, what do you answer with?

"Yes, I do." [laughter]

So the Churchie National Emerging Art Award moved very seamlessly from the school over to here, and just a wonderful relationship. They brought all of their sponsors, who piled in even more and supported it more heavily. It was such a great thing to be involved with.

And out of those programs, the Thiess Art Prize, we're talking about springboard opportunities for artists. People like Karla Marchesi was picked up by a dealer. Zoe Porter, Ben Werner, Arryn Snowball was picked up by a dealer. Renata Buziak. So many young artists getting their first runs on the board and a bit of notice, that have gone on to do really great things. Ryan Presley, in the GAS show. Carol McGregor was in the GAS.

And the Churchie was that opportunity where we would invite a national art dealer, Roslyn Oxley or Josh Milani, to come and be the judge. So we were putting artists right in front of major players, and gee whiz, as a professional development project, I still can't think of a better model that I've been involved with. You didn't have to be the winner of this show, you just had to be in the show, and you could just see so many things coming out of it for people. Regional artists in Tasmania getting national coverage in Art Monthly, curators being interested enough to make contact with an artist, to say, "I would like to write about your work," instead of an artist begging for support.

So I felt this sort of pattern of going from local, through Thiess and GAS, to national through Churchie, needed, in that ultimate upswing that we talked about earlier, in a trajectory, I wanted to start thinking internationally and what we could offer. We started thinking through shows that we would do here but then we'd get elsewhere.

I think about Ian Burns's show that we did here, which was just fantastic, that Mother's Tank Station in Dublin was super thrilled to be involved with, and then we partnered with them to be at the Melbourne Art Fair. The eX de Medici show, *The World*, a great series of photographs that she took of television screens over 5 years of really amazing moments of terror or subterfuge or anxiety. That toured as eX de Medici and Vexed Generation to the London College of Fashion, with Magda Keaney, who was ex-National Portrait Gallery, I

think, at the time. David Thomas's show we did here, that toured to the National Portrait Gallery. It was just fantastic.

It culminated, I think, with our international presence as an institution at the 53rd Venice Biennale, where I directly brokered Griffith University to be the cultural partner for that Venice show. Doug Hall happened to be the commissioner. Shaun Gladwell was in the pavilion. But Vernon Ah Kee, who's obviously one of QCA's great graduates, was in the Ludoteca, with Claire and Sean and Ken Yonetani.

So we just found these ways to infiltrate local, national, international, and find new ways to think about touring, that weren't necessarily traditional, but suited a small organisation close to the ground.

That got unfeasibly large in a couple of examples. You talk about a springboard. I remember, we don't talk about him so much at the moment, but someone like Dennis Nona, we did a massive project with, and toured it all around regional galleries, and the next year he won the NATSIAA with Cecere. We did KIAF offsites, three of those. A historical show with Dick Roughsey and Tony Albert, Be Deadly project for Indigenous kids in Cairns, and Girringun artists' community show with KIAF in a partnership with Suzanne O'Connell Gallery. So we just found ways.

AG: So there's a really interesting interaction there, so that you really saw art fairs as a really interesting vehicle in terms of launching artists, and I think that that's really quite interesting, in terms of positioning oneself in a public institution, but also being nimble enough to present art and provide launch pads. Because in that supportive relationship with artists, they do need dealers, they do need to make sales, they do need to live. Was that part of the motivation for those projects?

SW: Oh, absolutely. I mean, we're a University. We were a university gallery at the time. So we weren't necessarily beholden to the strictures of the purity of a public gallery. We were public in the sense that we were interfaced with the public, and public in the sense that public money funds the university. But we're also a crucible for research and private collaborations, and collaborations with companies.

I just saw it as a natural extension. On my first approach to the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, I really didn't get anywhere, because I was deemed to be public. I said, "What if I come at you with a commercial partnership?" and that was a different story. So for the Dick Roughsey show, I partnered with Jan

Manton, who was a new art dealer at the time, and then we did the partnership with another gallerist, as I mentioned, Suzanne for the Girringun project.

And then for Be Deadly, which I think was probably one of my favourite projects, with Tony Albert, we got into a partnership with a philanthropist that Tony had forged a relationship with, who went on to be probably his most significant patron still to this day. And through that support, we were able to basically commission this work from Tony as a poster, and sell it at the Cairns Art Fair.

But the trick with it was that there were two price points, and if you were Indigenous it was very cheap, and if you were non-Indigenous, you were basically paying a lot more. But you were paying a lot more because that would then afford us to be able to roll other posters into tubes and send them to remote Indigenous schools and community, knowledge-keeping places and so forth. So it was a deadly model.

AG: So Tony at that time was only a very recent graduate of the undergraduate program at the Contemporary Indigenous Australian Art program. You saw something in Tony, I think, in those early years, that took others years to recognise, in terms of that sense of incredible capacity to bring community together, and also to interact with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. How did Tony present himself to you? What did you see there?

SW: Oh, look, I enjoyed the fact that Tony wasn't overly confident. He was motivated by a healthy amount of self-doubt. He had a wonderful sparkle, and just an incredible generosity of spirit, and I just thought, combine that with the power of really elemental work that spoke with guts but eloquently, poetically, and with a little bit of cheek. I just thought he was the right artist at the right moment. You just look for those springboard moments, where you just think, this person could be on the cusp. If we can get you to the right spot, you'll bounce out of here and wave goodbye, and good on you, get out of here, and go and be fabulous, and that's exactly what he did.

AG: But also, touring exhibitions throughout your tenure. There was quite a lot touring around the country and the state at that time. That requires increased capacity. How did you make that happen?

SW: Well, I think part of the balance that we talk about, when you forecast a program and try to get it paid for, is if you aspire to tour outbound or create original content and get it out there ... Which I really think is the business of small galleries. It takes so much effort and cost to do these things, there's really not a lot of point in just being a cul-de-sac with it. If you can share that and get it out

there, you're bringing value, and I think you help build your own reputation as an institution, as a content provider, a maker, a contributor.

But equally, there are moments when you need to be an inbound receiver of really great touring product. I just look at the opportunities that we were able to capitalise on at the time, and I will never forget being able to unfold and hang *I Am* by Colin McCahon, on loan from the National Gallery of Australia, and some works around that work from their collection. Absolutely phenomenal opportunity.

The inbound show that we partnered with the Goethe Institute and the IFA Organisation in Germany, touring works on paper by Sigma Polke, absolutely amazing. Never seen anything like it here, or anywhere else in the world, ever since. Rover Thomas's inbound touring show from the Holmes à Court collection. The painting show of Howard Taylor's, called *Phenomena*, which we partnered with the Art Gallery of Western Australia on.

When we go back and think about, reflect on terms like bringing the best of the world to the student interface, I mean ... It wasn't like it was graft and hard work. Often I'd be at a table where I just knew there were other institutions vying for these projects, and we had to have a point of difference, and we just had to sell ourselves really hard to get some of those projects. But I was really proud of what they brought and what they balanced our programs with.

AG: Do you think, more internationally, the project that you did in 2003, actually quite quickly after you'd been appointed, Simon, was the Luo brothers?

SW: Oh, yeah! [laughs] Wow. Yeah. Look, in the spirit of arriving somewhere and having not a lot of time to organise a forward program, what I thought I needed to do, apart from find synergies with other organisations or programming that made sense, like the APT or the IMA ...

The Luo brothers project was a single lender, and I had been lucky enough to travel into Beijing and Tianjin with Ray Hughes and his son Evan, and meet the Luo brothers. The way they operated and what they brought post-Tiananmen Square, and I think how they were a seminal part of the moment where contemporary Chinese practice opened itself up to the world ... I guess I mean by that, there was a willingness even for the Communist Party to allow these people to be so free-ranging in their interests. But to speak back to the Chinese experience of, say, Pepsi and Coke, all these brand names just swamping China through the Open Door Policy ...

It was just a beautiful moment, where I thought, okay, here's a single lender, I know where all of these works are, I've met the artists, I know I can contact them, and there's something that can happen here now. And if I don't do this now, someone else will.

So it was not so much a tour, but it was our first international program, and it had some luck elements, like I mentioned. I knew where these works were in Sydney and with Australian lenders.

Ray had been quite seminal in how I think the rest of Australia was starting to wake up to Chinese art. It has to be said, the APT is obviously on the Richter scale of importance, but there were people doing things on the edge, and particularly in the market, that were prescient, and taking a lot of risk. And I just wanted to be a little part of that, and time it so that it made sense with other things happening in the city.

AG: Did that also inform connections across the university? We are, of course, very strong in terms of Asian studies and connections with China ...

SW: Yes.

AG: That was fruitful in that respect, too?

SW: Look, it was. And, to be really frank with you, we had a certain member of Parliament and a certain Prime Minister that was the local member. Kevin Rudd came and opened that show, and he walked in, and I didn't have to say much. His read of the work, his understanding of the language, his ability to translate. I got as much learning out of the hour and a half that I had with him on works in that show, by not speaking, than I did by all the research that we did in the lead-up to it and getting it pitched right and on the walls.

So I think, looking back at that, what I didn't realise at the time was just how important that would have been seen by the university administration. And afterwards, when that was a little bit clearer, I thought, okay, that's another layer in the cake that I need to be more aware of. But again, you don't play the same chord over and over. You find different ways of varying the theme. But that was a really important little moment for us.

AG: Yeah, sure. So a few years later, in 2009, you put together a show called Sichuan Hot, which brought together a group of feisty, younger-generation painters, also from Chongqing, China.

SW: Yeah.

AG: Can you talk to us a little bit about that project?

SW: That's one of those things that happen in your program, where you kind of need a parachute. I had a show fall over, and the opportunity after some more travel into China, to work with that group of young painters, Yang Shu and Chen Weimin, Zhou Siwei, Li Li, Li Bin Bin, Zeng Hong, Liu Wei Wei, Wan Yang ... just incredible energy coming out of Chongqing. Just your small city in central China, of around 30 million people, and the main street with two huge smokestacks just pumping stuff into the air. You could smell the city from a mile away.

Sichuan Hot was really because you'd sit on the side of the street, breathing in lead dust of the cars, and the chimney smoke, and the only way you could kind of burn a taste into your mouth was by eating this liquid tofu that was cooked in chili oil, and it was hot!

Anyway, that was a really fun thing to do, and I was just grateful for the opportunity to be able to move so quickly and do that. But it was pragmatic, as much as anything.

AG: So to move to another great thread of your program and a strength of I think the Queensland College of Arts' own history, and indeed the university, is the strength of Indigenous Australian and Contemporary Indigenous Australian Art. In your tenure, there was an increasing representation in terms of the collection, collecting works from these artists. But also really lynchpin exhibitions that occurred at crucial times within major figures' careers, but also, as you mentioned earlier, launching the career of someone like Tony Albert.

Can you talk to us a little bit about those times, and observing that incredible cultural strength that emerged very much within that time?

SW: Thanks. I have a very simple view about this. For me, First Nations art is contemporary art, full stop. And if you're going to have a program, they are either in a group show or part of your program, and as balanced as possible. There was just no other way of doing it. Instinctively, I just thought, you can't have a program in Australia without [sic] ignoring First Nations' history, narratives, and, let's face it, we're on the doorstep of the GUMURRII centre and BOVACAIA or what is now CAIA. And graduates like Tracey Moffatt and Gordon Bennett, in the history of where you're standing, and it's absolutely ludicrous that you wouldn't start working with those kids in coming through those

research units and graduate shows. Putting them into whatever was a natural fit, without stretching credulity.

But that also meant that some key relationships that I'd forged in the years prior, and particularly when I was working with Peter Bellis, I was able to lean into those and bring to bear some great opportunities and look at them as multi-layered. It wasn't just about doing the first survey of prints and graphics by Gordon Bennett and publishing on that. It was the opportunity that we had such a great time doing it together.

Gordon and Leanne basically said to me one night, "You know what? Take the show."

It's like, "What do you mean? Tour it?"

"No, take it. Have it as a gift for Griffith University."

And it's like, "Oh. Wow. Okay. Let's do that."

And on the basis that the collection is used, and for me, that meant, necessarily, entropy, and the idea that you needed to keep telling these stories with other examples of the artists' work. I didn't have a problem with receiving however many it was. Was it 190 works or something, Ange? I can't remember.

AG: [laughs]

SW: It was a lot.

AG: 129.

SW: 129, yeah. And to work the cultural gift magic on that, and see them get their tax deduction. Everybody won in that project. It reflected well on the institution as well. Gordon didn't have a great time here, and didn't go through the CAIA unit, but really enjoyed key relationships along the way. People like Pat Hoffie, were always important in his thinking, and the very few people that he kind of relied on for counsel, locally.

So, again, I really enjoyed opportunities that arose.

I remember having a conversation with Fiona Foley about where she was at, and I just had this spot in the program about 8 months in front of that conversation,

and thought, right, let's do this, let's do something that really rocks the boat with Fiona. She was all over it, "Yes, let's do this, but I don't have a lot to show you right now." [laughs] We were so close to doing the show that, when she showed me what she had made, it was like, just swallow, Simon, you're going to ride this one, and we'll see how it goes. Erect cocks everywhere, and vaginas, and some pretty hard-core stuff.

I think Fiona had a really great time making that work, and without chiming too much, it was a critical moment for her. I think the thing that I brought to that, that really helped her, or her project, the most, wasn't actually the show. It was the Professor, Anna Haebich, who became a really close friend and writer, confidante, and went on to write incredibly important things. She published for the *Red Ochre Me* show and the *Overlander Journal*, and that was it, bang!

So it felt like this little, quiet moment in a quiet patch for Fiona just, it was a springboard. So it wasn't just about springboard opportunities for emerging artists, it was working with mid-careerers who were ripe for another quick look, and a really targeted springboard.

We did wacky stuff with Fiona Foley, but we had great works in the collection as well, to work with. Some terrific works by Destiny Deacon and Virginia Fraser, as a collaboration. Gordon Bennett. And Joe Rootsey, this incredibly important figure from North Queensland in the '50s, who dies of tuberculosis in hospital here in Brisbane, but manages to get some materials from the then-head of the art college while he's in hospital to make his last works. He was feted as the next Namatjira in those days, simply by dint I think, of the fact that he was a watercolourist. There wasn't actually a lot to argue for him to be the next Namatjira, in a formal sense. But we were able to find some great examples of that work beyond the terrific piece in the collection, and make a focus of him in the 125 show, that examined the whole history of the Queensland College of Art.

AG: An important figure within these kind of broader cultural histories, I think...

SW: Indeed.

AG: ...in terms of Queensland's particular history, in terms of First Nations peoples.

SW: Yeah, particularly from the regions.

AG: Absolutely. In terms of thinking about Gordon and prominent alumni, was Tracey Moffatt also on the list during those years?

SW: Yeah. Oh, yeah. Oh, all the time. Her work *Something More* is probably my favourite work in the whole collection. I'd go into the collection store and pull out the rack and just stand with that work and look into it. And there was something really fetching about the idea of always aiming for something more, no matter where you were or what you were doing. As simple as that, it actually helped me think through dilemmas and little conundrums. I'd go and stand with that work.

But Tracey herself, what an enigma! I love that woman. We'd become quite close over the years, and I was always conscious that I could do a show with Tracey. I did ask her once, but it just coincided with horrific timing for her, and I just thought, an opportunity will arise for the right thing, and it felt like I would be forcing the issue if I leaned in too hard. So, whilst I was always interested in her work and found other ways to support her practice, we didn't actually manage to have a show with her.

AG: But then, later, you were able to facilitate the gift of other, later, major suites of works to us through the Cultural Gifts Program ...

SW: Indeed.

AG: ... following the Queensland Art Gallery's beautiful exhibition, just a couple of years after you'd gone to QAG.

SW: Yeah. No, it was a really important part of nurturing a couple of key collectors in the local scene, who I'd helped from the very beginning, introduced them to art, and particular schools of thought. I wasn't driving them for an outcome that I wanted. I wanted them to engage with and find what it was that they were passionate about. For Dr Eliadis, who became a great giver to the collection, who had been collecting for some years before I met him, I became very close with him, and always gave honest, open counsel around building the collection.

He said to me after a few years, "Why are you doing this? What's in it for you?"

And it's like, "Well, Paul, I'm enjoying watching you enjoy art, and when you go and buy a work or you lend a work that's an outcome for an artist, and that's really what I'm here for. I don't need anything from you. But if you convert at some point to being a philanthropist, that's my ultimate goal."

And he said, "Right, okay. Well, here's the deal. I'll convert into a philanthropist, and I'll follow where you go, and we'll work out what gifts I can put into those collections." [laughs]

And he had a colleague that he introduced me to, Dr Slancar, and they both just fell so heavily for Tracey's work and her as a human. We got them into a kind of patron triangle. From there, we were able to gift some very significant works of Tracey's into a number of collections, and Griffith Uni was one of the early targets. It was so good to expand those holdings.

AG: Yeah. And there, also, were the other great bodies of work gifted by different collectors. We have, just to turn to the collection here a little more, the Tim Page donations, the McConnells, the Glenn Cooke gift of LJ Harvey school ceramics.

SW: Yeah. So in that way that we talk about the use value of the collection and entropy, knowing that the system will end, this bizarre work has a life, but it's being used deliberately in an environment that isn't naturally air-conditioned and conducive to its longevity, I thought around the idea that, to diversify an idea around sustainability, we should move into small objects, and ceramics if we could, that would have a longer lifespan and be portable objects in different nooks and crannies around the campus. And we could rotate 5 years of programming with the McConnell gift, or Tim Page's work, for instance.

I remember the show that we did with Tim, I had to really convince Kodak House in Rochester, New York, that we were [laughs] a lot bigger than we actually were, for them to lend! [laughs] But ultimately, they sent this show called *Requiem*, that Tim was very heavily involved with helping me negotiate, soon after he'd arrived from the UK in Australia. And that's really where the relationship with Tim started.

So we did *Requiem*, by the photographers who died covering Vietnam, the conflict. And it set an attendance record. It was like nothing I'd ever seen here. We had 3,500 people through in about 6 weeks, hairy bikers pulling up the front out on Grey St at Southbank, with patches on, and spending hours in the gallery. You know, retired service personnel, people from the RSL, people from the Vietnamese community. We had blessings out at Inala.

But one of the great moments of that project with Tim was his realisation that there was no Australian content, and the fact that there was an Australian photographer that passed away in Vietnam, I think his name was Alan Hirons. So I got hold of some phone books from Victoria. The hunch was that he was from Victoria. And I rang all the Hirons I could find, and this elderly lady, Mrs Hirons, ultimately picked up, and it was her son, Alan, and she just happened to have some prints, and we were able to bring them up, and her, to be part of the blessing ceremony for the show, with the formalities of that project.

I could see she was a very quiet, introspective person, but I could just see this incredible pride that someone was recognising her son. And in the context of like Robert Capa and these incredible luminaries that passed away covering that conflict. And Tim was this huge personality, larger than life, gregarious, amazing storyteller, that had great things to tell us about how he was still on this quest to find Errol Flynn's son Sean, who rode off on a motorbike, and he was one of the last people to say goodbye before he perished. He was a photographer covering the conflict when I think Page was doing it for AAP wire.

And geez, when that show happened here, we had people like Earl Bridger and Charles Page and David Lloyd in the photography department just licking their chops. This hadn't happened before. Photo documentary ...

AG: Photo documentary, such a prominent aspect of the program at that time.

SW: Yeah. And then to see the community get around it and respond in the way they did. Tim was just so over the top grateful. And in fact, he developed such great, deep relationships with a number of people in Brisbane at that time. Ultimately there was a band of us that roped in support of his citizenship, and he was able to move across to his partner, Marianne Mau Harris.

And conversation after conversation, he just basically said, "I'm going to work with you on a gift." And I thought, in the follow-up to a photo documentary show, it would be great to get a significant holding of his work, and being able to rotate that as a constant presence around campus, to bear witness. The whole social activism thing, it just fit so beautifully with the collection policy and directives at the time.

But just little moments like seeing Mrs Hirons in that show, made hard work worth it. Like that and the Gongka Gyatso project. Seriously, Angela, I had a swag rolled out underneath the desk that you're sitting at now, and I would be on the phone at 2:00am, get a few hours sleep, and then when American lenders were waking up, it'd be on. You know, those were the days when you did that sort of work. Get it to happen.

AG: Absolutely, yeah. The Tim Page project, I suppose, another thing to say about that is that, at that time, photography in Queensland and Brisbane specifically, Queensland Centre for Photography, there was a great interest and burgeoning of exhibitions, publications, galleries, spaces. And it was an interesting convergence of both what we would have considered fine art photographers as well as documentary photographers.

SW: Yeah.

AG: You really helped and assisted that particular strand of making in Brisbane at that time.

SW: Yeah, I mean, again, I just felt it was really important to recognise the alignments that were possible in what was being taught. And even Design and Liveworm, I tried desperately to do a font show and typography. It was on my books at the time I was leaving.

I felt, in the realm of photography, that there were things being overlooked, like advertorial kind of commercial photography. But finding the right show that wasn't like a nature prize or a Canon this or a Nikon that, in *Requiem* first, but then in Tim Page's practice, those were the critical alignments that I was actually after, that gave much more multiplier effects to what we were trying to achieve.

And then, like you say, there was a moment in time, and it seemed like there were a lot of stars aligning. The QCP and people like Maurice Ortega and his partner at the time, Camilla Birkeland, were integral in setting that up. As were a number of other ... Gordon Craig, Marion and staff here at the QCA. It just felt like an extension to our collection, to be able to say to these guys, you're not a collecting institution, and you're having an opening show, and you want a local community groundswell, borrow from the collection. You're already speaking to your local audience with the people that you're inviting, let's do it.

So we just, you know, you find a way to connect, yeah.

AG: It occurs to me that you putting together the 125th anniversary suite of exhibitions, publication, would have been a very good groundwork to do, in terms of thinking what your future program would then look like. Or even collecting directions to really be able to assess what were the gaps. I think that you then later did that in terms of these big acquisitions of ceramic works, like you say ...

SW: Yeah, that's true.

AG: ... from McConnells and the LJ Harvey ...

SW: Yeah.

AG: ... the very particularities of the Harvey school. But what are some of the other aspects of working on that big history pretty soon after you landed, that had a big impact on you?

SW: Yeah, very challenging project. Just the sheer scale of trying to find edges to 125 years that gave focus but also told stories that weren't the usual suspects. And I think, really, when you're negotiating that ground, you have to be aware of some very tricky politics in your backyard.

At the time, I think there was an opportunity to get right the various incarnations that gave rise to QCA, through the Brisbane Technical College, Central Technical College, and who exactly were our alumni? Because it gets a little bit confused that the Central Technical College as an institution, as in a building, was now situated where QUT is, but that its function and staff moved elsewhere, gave rise to, I think, a competitive element, that somehow QUT owned some history of QCA, or ...

And then, in amongst that, there's the trajectories of artists who were either students at QCA or CTC, or staff. And there's some big champions of Australian Art walking through that landscape, and had to be very aware of the fact that contested histories exist in that realm, and I wasn't going to be the historian, and nor would I pretend to be, that would get that right. So it was really important to rely on people like Glenn Cooke to go and do that research and get it right, and frame key players, like William Robinson, whose William Robinson museum is now at QUT. But very much an important part of QCA's history.

There were some great stories out of that project. We found an incredibly important little Isaac Walter Jenner painting, *Cabbage Tree Creek*, I think, which we were able to buy through a special allocation with support of the VC for that project. Donors came out of the woodwork after the show, as you alluded to. Glenn's association with that project, Glenn Cooke, the former curator of decorative arts at QAG, had such a great time with us, and me with him, too. Very funny fellow. And geez, there's few people, I think, that know this history, or knew this history, as well as he does.

And for him to then see value in working with us on a major gift of LJ Harvey, which had been a private passion of his, made so much sense to us, because I think at the time we had quite an insignificant single piece by Harvey. Or it was a bust of Harvey. Maybe it wasn't even Harvey himself. I can't quite remember. But I wanted to get that right. [laughs] And the important thing about that school, from my point of view, was that it was mainly women, and that was an opportunity in the collection to expand unnamed artists, with a bit of research, and attribute people to their practice. People like Timothy Roberts went on to research that collection and publish widely on it. Another career boost.

AG: Absolutely. So we were then able to build on that collection focus ...

SW: It's a wonderful project that you did.

AG: ... for the *With Heart and Hand* exhibition and publication.

SW: Yeah, well done, you.

AG: So did it also help you start formulating, I know there's acquisition policies, that kind of policy work at that time as well?...

SW: Yeah.

AG: ...Which kind of formulated and started bedding down.

SW: Yeah. Look, we did a root and branch review of the collecting policy. I thought that the time was right, and we talked before about how the physicality of the university community was changing, and there were new buildings coming online everywhere, on the Gold Coast in particular, and even expansion buildings on the Nathan campus, the new chancellery itself.

It felt to me like we needed a few more big, blue-chip, impressive works that were anchored to walls, not necessarily part of a touring on campus project, but made statements. And it was an opportunity, I think, to open the policy up a little bit more, a bit wider. We didn't stop collecting works on paper. We didn't necessarily shy away from sociopolitical works or activist works. But we just broadened that deck a little bit further, to include, I think, more flexible ideas of contemporary practice. And we got some great things, by the stroke of that pen, just by opening it up a bit. People like Scott Redford, who I've always rated as an incredibly significant artist from our place, from this place. And we'd had a great relationship with him, and he donated very significant groups of work on paper, but this was that moment where he could, through some philanthropic support, deliver a major work as a gift, and I think it's called *Chad*, that's now or was then hung in the chancellery for quite some time.

AG: It's currently there.

SW: Good on you! [laughs]

AG: It has moved around a little bit, but it is currently there on display on the Gold Coast in the Gold Coast chancellery, yeah.

SW: But to get really major works that were less about use and using up or entropy, to make those sort of statements that the university itself was growing, its enterprise was growing, its ambitions were growing. It felt right to review the collecting policy at that moment and sharpen the pencil.

AG: Also, in terms of collections, we've got an increasing professionalisation of our staff ...

SW: Yeah.

AG: ... the institution of our internship program, which has been incredibly successful, and that's an amazing rollcall of the alumni of that program.

SW: Yeah.

AG: What prompted you with very much a work-integrated learning outcomes based in the collection, not here at Southbank, but over at Nathan?

SW: That was quite a pragmatic response to what I perceived to be coming at me from the university. I was either going to be, in my worldview at the time, and I've got no evidence to suggest that this was actually the thing that was heading to me, but it was my suspicion that I was either going to be challenged to start lecturing as an adjunct on staff, which I had been doing as a guest lecturer once a year, as a professional development thing. How to do a portfolio, how to get ready, how to speak to a dealer. Really pragmatic stuff. But I could sort of see that coalescence of the sharpening agenda around research taking place. And I thought, I'm going to be asked, what are you doing for students beyond *Thiess*, *GAS*, and inclusion in exhibitions? What are you doing? And it was that professional development moment, where I looked at a problem that we had at Nathan, in being really stretched as a resource ...

AG: Not enough bodies?

SW: ... not enough bodies, and then matching that with the idea that a lot of artists actually have a 9-5 to live, to make art.

And I looked around at various models, and didn't see too many in the Australian variant, but loved the small museum in New York at the time, called The New Museum, where fast, or not so much speed-dating interns, but low-to-the-ground, fast-and-dirty internships that gave someone a breadth of experience rather than, "You're going to be in the marketing department, Ange, for the next 6 months."

So they'd be in here, hanging a show, learning how to handle artworks, working with the photographer to understand the trickiness of the gallery when you're documenting works, working with Kath Kerswell or Joe Duke at the time, as an art collections manager, around registration, conservation, humidity control. They would then be part of OCEP, the On-Campus Exhibition Program. And data-mining for the collection, finding out any added resourcing that we could add to artists' files, and the usual backlog of stuff to process.

So it was born of a pragmatism, but it was equally strategic, I think, to really look at what we could offer, and it was set up around not just a time zone that made sense to us, but around a semester. It was allied to teaching. It had work-integrated learning outcomes. People ultimately got assessment and credit for this program. And we put through some amazing people, mainly young women.

AG: That's very true. And it continues.

SW: Yeah, indeed.

AG: Powering ahead. So thinking about that increasing professionalism and formality, perhaps, Griffith Artworks had had beginnings as a very different kind of entity to some of the other university art museums and galleries that we see throughout the country, really. In the last few years, we've changed our name and presented ourselves as Griffith University Art Museum. What's your thoughts on that kind of change to the institution?

SW: Oh, I thought it was terrific. I thought it was a natural progression. Griffith Artworks was really, I think, a name and functionality that we inherited when the gallery opened here. So we were ripe to be diversifying our identity, and that was Dell Gallery at QCA for a while, and then QCA Gallery, but under the wing, if you like, of Griffith Artworks. So I was super impressed with what you did there.

I thought that recognises that, where a non-collecting institution might be known as a gallery, but a collecting institution can be a museum. I thought it puts you on a different playing field as well. You would be seen in a different light, but not just collegially, professionally, but also strategically, I think it was important in being able to approach new funding bodies and broadening your deck of prospective philanthropic and corporate supporters as well.

It made a lot of sense to me. I thought it was a great part of the evolution, and I think, looking forward, I only see exciting prospects. In the way that I answered the question in my interview to get the job. One day I'd love to see the gallery either expanded on its own footprint or move, or have multiple sites, or be a satellite, or have another gallery on the Gold Coast.

AG: All of those things are possible. [laughter] And then, in terms of the overall value of university art museums as entities within the sector, you're now at the state institution, Deputy Director of the Queensland Art Gallery, Gallery of Modern Art. How do you see institutions like Griffith's, as well as more broadly, the positions of these kinds of institutions across that sector?

SW: Absolutely critical. More critical than they've ever been. And that's saying something, because when I looked at the formative years of QCA gallery, the IMA was really my benchmark locally, and in that vein that I wanted to be a springboard site for artists and art workers, but I also wanted to bring the best of the art world to the student interface. Really important to the ecosystem.

This is a breeding ground, not just for artists, but for audiences. So, in a sense, we're teaching people how to collect, how to look, not just be artists. Everyone's an ambassador, and we've had some really great people come through Griffith Artworks, or GUAM as it is now.

And I think that you can't have big players like the Queensland Art Gallery without small players like the IMA. They're complementary. They're part of a vital ecosystem, and they have very different roles. The IMA can't do what QAG does, nor can Griffith University Art Museum, nor should they.

AG: So, in terms of your time here, what do you think was the most significant – skills, experiences – what informed you? What were your most formative experiences that you brought to your role at Queensland Art Gallery?

SW: Oh, I think understanding how to cope with multiple points of pressure simultaneously was really important. No kidding. The Brisbane City Gallery was a medium-scaled enterprise, and I was on this cusp of it transitioning to the Museum of Brisbane. I do apologise, I neglected to mention this earlier when we were talking about why Griffith was interesting to me.

Because I was in this acting director role at this moment of transition, where Brisbane City Gallery was becoming the Museum of Brisbane, I was put on a crossroad. Was I going to be carrying on as a senior member of a social history museum? Or is my passion contemporary art? And I think the answer's obvious. So, by dint of circumstance, timing and age in a position, I just felt it was the right moment to come across and stay focused on contemporary art. What else? Where was I straying there?

AG: What skills, experiences or philosophies that you gained here have you taken with you to Queensland Art Gallery?

SW: Apart from dealing with multiple points of pressure simultaneously, I think the really great thing that this role did to me and for me was continue developing this passion I have for activating the object. And, in a sense, not fetishising the object, but the experiences that you can get around it. And speaking to audiences and with audiences, and working with artists to get audiences more familiar with contemporary art. Make it more of an everyday experience. Let culture live and breathe.

And in a sense, it's happening all around us. Everyone's a curator on Instagram these days. That whole visual culture shift around us, and that expanding field of contemporary art, was really happening on our watch. Both you and I were pretty young. Well, aren't we still? Yes, definitely.

AG: Yes.

SW: It was a really critical moment to be thinking, well, what is visual culture now? Where is it heading? How can I be involved? And I didn't have a puritanical view that one art form was more important than the other, or that Indigenous art should be treated almost as a segregated category. I really felt that, if it was happening today, it needed to be seen by as many people as possible and talked about.

And I think, just by dint of being that person, as a cultural producer, where, after you've designed, hung and written about the show, you then get out in front of it and speak to it with an artist, with an audience, and get challenged, and Q&As and critiques, and bad reviews, excellent reviews, whatever, it's all part of the game. I feel like it just ripened me to be ready to be in the learning and public engagement portfolio at the Queensland Art Gallery, and that happened at a time that seemed right.

I love a good sporting analogy, and you often see someone playing too long in their career. The person that I watched step back at exactly the right moment - well, there's two of them, really - Alan Border, the captain of the Australian cricket team, who retired on his own terms and didn't get turfed out., and Doug Hall, who did this magnificent gesture of creating a new building, GOMA, and then vacating basically on the eve of it opening, so that someone else could pick it up and run with it in their own vision. And I just thought, right, my time's up. I'll apply for this Queensland Art Gallery gig.

AG: And it came up at the right time.

SW: Yeah, it did. And instead of having the whole pizza to look after, I got my slice of learning and public engagement. [laughs]

AG: Yes. Yes. Which is fabulous. [laughs]

So, to move to ... Was there anything that you really wanted to have achieved, or thought you should have done, that you didn't quite get a chance to? Any regrets?

SW: There's always a one ... Regrets. Always regrets. No. There's always a one-day folder that you put things in, and one day you'll get to it, or when the moment is right. We talked before about being sensitive around recognising when it isn't right for an artist. Even if your burning desire is to do a show with Tracey Moffatt, the best thing is to sit on your hands when you know it isn't right, because if you force that outcome, it won't work for anybody.

So yeah, sure, there are projects that I didn't do, that I would have liked to, but that I've ultimately either done or have handed on, and been really happy to see other people do. I can't say I have regrets, because I really feel like I was given an opportunity for autonomy that was accountable, like I was reporting to the advisory board here and PVCs and VCs. But there was a level of freedom that I just couldn't believe, really. And I think the really great thing that I was able to do, throughout the role, was travel. If you're not travelling in the art world, to see what's going on elsewhere, there's not a lot of point in speaking to your backyard.

AG: Absolutely. Well, just before we finish up- but more recently, Simon, you've become a significant donor to our collection yourself, personally. What's driven that continuing commitment to the enterprise of the Griffith University Art Museum?

SW: Yeah. Giving back. And, to be really frank, teaching my kids how to give. I don't normally give in my own name. We do it together as Pearl, Maggie and Simon. And it's just amazing, when 9-year-old Pearl or 15-year-old Mags walks into the Queensland Art Gallery, and there's our name on the donor board. It's like, they're ingrained already. I can see it in Maggie, in particular already, that this thing, giving, is very natural. There's no questions about why. It's just what we do.

And I'm going to build a little collection for her, with her, over the rest of her life, and she'll do what she likes with it, but I can guarantee you that she'll really enjoy donating those works to collections that she thinks deeply about why a work needs to be there rather than with her. And I'll be really happy if that's one of the enduring legacies out of it.

I get a lot of satisfaction out of giving back. I've had some terrific opportunities in life to acquire amazing things, and I'm just a temporary custodian for them. If they can be in a collection that's used or valued, or if the object really does need to be looked after for X hundred years, then I look at collecting policies of different places, your place, University of Sunshine Coast, Queensland Art Gallery, and I wonder what would be best, and I take a good steer when I get told, "No, not right for us." That's all part of the learning. But equally, I know how collections work, and you can't afford to buy everything that you see. And we need to be expanding the pool of givers locally, and if you can say you are one yourself, it often helps bring someone closer to you quicker, to find the inner philanthropist in them.

AG: Well, thank you, Simon, for that legacy, in terms of the material aspects. In terms of the collection, seriously, thank you. But also, for the wider legacy that we've been talking about this afternoon. It's really quite extraordinary to have a trip through that very particular history, that very particular decade, really.

SW: Yeah! It's been fun to think about. Legacy isn't something that I really focus on as a motivator, but in an interview like this, when you think back, what do you really enjoy seeing out of the fruits of some labour? I love the idea that we've been a springboard for artists, but I look at people like Joe Duke, who left us to go and be a regional gallery director, I look at people like Abi Fitzgibbons, who started as an intern with us, who's in the international department, the Asia Pacific department at the Queensland Art Gallery. I look at a young Holly Arden, who I think got one of her earliest writing gigs for the Jenny Watson catalogue we did. And I just love seeing these people go and kick goals in the industry.

And then there's little quite moments where someone like a Jenny Watson or a Fiona Foley will say, "You know that project? I still think about that project and what it did." Those quiet moments are more important to me. Yeah, that's where it matters best.

AG: Thank you. So, just looking through any further questions, I know that I didn't follow ...

AG: Were there a few comments you want to make about the Darby Ross project, a really close one to your heart?

SW: Yeah. Absolutely. Thank you for reminding me. I have such a great and long association with the Warlukurlangu community in Yuendumu. I'd literally take a holiday from Griffith Artworks for a week or two, and go out to Alice Springs and then drive to Yuendumu to make cups of tea for artists for a week, in 40 degrees, and watch people paint and learn stories, and understand Warlpiri iconography a bit, to my limited capacity, obviously.

There were a number of artists out there, living artists, Paddy Sims and Judy Watson and Maggie Watson, some really great Australian artists. And I thought, yeah, we could do a show.

But there was this towering figure in the community who had passed away, who had this incredible backstory of being an ambassador for Warlpiri culture, who had been an advisor behind the scenes for the Bush Mechanics show, who had contributed to the National Archives, who was a booster at every opportunity, if a minister or the prime minister was going through Central Australia, he'd be out the front of Yuendumu, "Welcome to my place. Come to Jukajuka, the water site. That's my place. I'll show it to you."

I looked at his work, and I just thought, this is someone who hasn't had a moment in time when he was alive. And it was my first kind of retrospective, working with a deceased estate, and cross-cultural with an Indigenous community, and a lot of sensitivities, a lot of negotiation, a lot of cultural protocol. And so proud of that project, and being able to work with that story, his stories, and put it in front of people. And I guess the response from lenders and the audience was beautiful, but from the community itself, Paddy Cookie Stewart took me aside, and he said, "We're very proud of you. You should come to this community every year. Next year, when you come here, I will have someone for you to marry." [laughter] It's like, "Oh, Paddy, that's so beautiful. Thank you."

But I really didn't quite understand what we'd done, until Nicholas Rothwell did this piece in The Australian, in the review section, and he just went to town on it. A good writer, a good reviewer, doesn't regurgitate the press release, doesn't regurgitate the catalogue essay, but takes it away and comes back with why they think it does something. And he was able to contextualise it for its significance within the community, and in doing that, being significant to outside the community.

I felt really strong about that show. It was a very sad thing to do with his passing, and working with his family. But we found paintings that hadn't seen the light of day for 25 years, and lenders that didn't think they had anything much, and once they realised the cultural significance and the iconography and

the importance to Warlpiri people, then to see that it had a broader audience, and for it to be featured in a publication ... Yeah, I loved that show. It was one of my most important model professional moments. Thanks for asking.

AG: That's okay. Gosh, and wouldn't we give to have such wonderful art criticism still operating, in our national press.

SW: Isn't it intriguing, that we can talk about how the field has expanded, and that visual arts is really visual culture these days? But we just see that death of critical writing in public places.

AG: I've not had an exhibition reviewed in The Australian.

SW: Wow. I find that ...

AG: Not here.

SW: Yeah. That's insane. I remember the days when Bruce Adams would be writing for the Sydney Morning Herald, and just picking tiny, little, obscure shows in basements of commercial gallery dealers. Or Grace Crowley at SH Irvin. And really bringing new stuff to your brain on a Saturday.

And Rothwell and his travels through country and cross-cultural interests. And I think, to be fair, the politics of his position was very difficult to negotiate, but I think he did it extremely sensitively, and with the backing of some killer important people, Alison Anderson and Central Land Councils, and art centre managers and art centre boards, more importantly, the Indigenous owners and operators of these remote centres. I'd be in places, remote as, Kintore, Kiwirrkurra, Yuendumu, and he'd be driving through in a Land Rover, or having been through the week before, or having sat with an artist. He was everywhere, ubiquitous, at the time, and was making, I thought, some really seminal contributions.

But we just don't get it these days. I mean, I'm very grateful for the coverage, obviously, that places like the Queensland Art Gallery get. But it would be wonderful to think that, say, the Courier Mail could start or broaden the coverage in the way that commercial galleries used to be reviewed. I'm not dissing anything, but they're under their own pressures, the media-sphere has changed so much that it's almost like arts doesn't bring the dollars or the advertisers, so it doesn't get the coverage. I honestly don't know what it is, but ...

AG: It's only when there's a controversy.

SW: Yeah. Oh, well ... [laughs] Yes, indeed. Or a death. Or a record price, or whatever the superficial news grab is. There's none of that cut and thrust in a review that gets you to think, that's not right! And then, when you've really interrogated it, maybe there's a point or half a point. [laughs]

AG: It's good, good stuff, but it's very, very rare. In spaces like ours, I think that is a big shift since your time. We haven't been covered in the Courier Mail for 3 or 4 years now.

SW: Unreal.

AG: 3 years, is it?

SW: That little Dick Roughsey show of historical paintings that I did at the Cairns Indigenous Art Fair, there was another almost 2-page review in The Australian, just on Dick's work. And that was Nick Rothwell, again. Of all the things in CIAF to hang your review on. It was just that moment where I walked on air for the next couple of days, you know? It was lovely. [laughs]

AG: Absolutely! [laughs] Yeah. Well, it's nearly 6 o'clock, so we should wrap up, but I think the other big aspect that's happened, in terms of our staffing, we are becoming more and more aware that we need to far more actively nurture and build capability within our First Nations cohort, not just as artists, but as curators and producers, and as you say, cultural producers ...

SW: [overtalking] Directors of the future.

AG: ... which actually is a term that really helps, that actually really applies within that sphere, in terms of working with community. Trying to work in this area is quite complex. I wondered if you had any thoughts to offer in that space.

SW: Dive in. Make mistakes, but learn as you go. Get good counsel. Collaborate. Don't be an expert. Be the receiver of information. Don't be afraid to be told what you're not doing right. You learn a lot, I think, when you realise there's a gap, and you need to fill it.

I think the experience is growing in the sector, of First Nations curators and artists, but I think the thing that will propel it and really make it a critical dynamic in the future, where we're talking beyond artists as curators, we want people to be directors of museums, and not Indigenous art museums. I'd like to see

Indigenous people, Torres Strait Islanders, running Griffith University Art Museum one day, you know?

AG: Yeah, absolutely.

SW: That's the name of the game. These professional pathways just need a start, and then I think, with runs on the board, champions come, and you'll build your support. It's actually the edge that needs more pushing than any other in the art world in Australia, I think.

AG: I think so, too. And whilst we've had Carol McGregor has been a past intern, Mandy Quadrio, several amazingly talented members of the community, but they're also fabulous artists and so, when the choice has come, they've chosen to be an artist.

SW: Yeah.

AG: Which is great, but it's ...

SW: Oh, you look at people like Warraba Weatherall, and you know the future is safe, you know.

AG: Yeah, yeah. Which is absolutely true, but it's just one of those areas I think I would like to really push further. We had wonderful Shannon Brett ...

SW: Yes, awesome.

AG: ... with us, who you would have been familiar with, from Cairns.

SW: Totally, yeah.

AG: But has also just recently made that big decision to pursue the practice.

SW: Good on her, too.

AG: Yeah, but I like to think that we've also launched these people into the world with a far broader understanding of what is that sector in which they're leaping and launching themselves into, and to know how to navigate it better.

SW: I think it's important, too, to recognise that ... This may sound insensitive. It's not meant to be, in any way. But curating isn't the be-all. It's not the end-all. It's a very important, integral part of the exercise, but Indigenous or First Nations people in public programming is so important for stories to be told with the right cultural protocols and contexts. There's so many gaps in this sector around the future professionalism of it. Public programs, I think, education roles in museums, which I find challenging to create new roles, even in the institution that I'm in. It's not that easy.

But it's funny you raise this, because it's only this morning that I got confirmation from one of our great Sydney supporters, philanthropists, that I've got a 2-year program up to recruit a First Nations person for our learning team. Couldn't be happier, because I've been wondering what the breakthrough was going to be, because at some point, realistically- it's a money problem. You know? You don't want these people to be interns. You want to pay them.

AG: Yes, absolutely. Yeah. Well, thanks for that. Sorry, I just threw that one in at the end.

SW: No! What else have you got? [laughter]

AG: I think that's it. Thank you so much, Simon.

SW: No, thank you, Angela.

*Supporting research and questions for this interview were compiled by Michael Barnett.