

Transcript:

Mandy Quadrio In Conversation with Carrie McCarthy at the Hope Street Studio 29 May 2021

CARRIE McCARTHY: Thank you for joining us today...I'd like to start today by acknowledging the traditional owners of the lands and waters where we meet, the Jagera and Turrbal people, and pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging. And I extend that welcome to all First Nations People who are here today.

My name is Carrie, I am one of the Curatorial and Collections Officers at Griffith University Art Museum which runs the Hope Street studio, and one of my jobs is to look after the Studio, hence why you've got me today. This is the second year of the residency, which is jointly supported by ARIA developments and QCA as well as the Art Museum. It has been a very fortunate experience for us, ARIA came to us with this space wanting to reinvigorate this precinct. So you'll see the sign that's outside is around a few locations and that's where developers have really decided to give back to the community and open up some of their residential tenancies, retail tenancies rather, to arts endeavours. So whenever you see that, kind of check it out if you can and maybe support them because they're doing a pretty great thing for artists. It means that we are able to provide space for artists like Mandy to create and it really gives an opportunity to, I guess, engage with the community as well and have an immediate audience for the art. All those sort of things. As I said this is the second year, if you want to see more about the previous artist, who is Julie-Anne Milinski, it's all on our website so you can check it out, and a bit more context about it as well. But today we are talking about Mandy...

Mandy Quadrio is an Indigenous palawa artist and researcher who is currently a Doctoral candidate in Visual Arts at the Queensland College of Art Griffith University. Although not for too much longer, when do you hand in your thesis?

MANDY QUADRIO: Next week.

CARRIE McCARTHY: So it's almost done. Mandy works to expose holes and myths in Australian colonialist histories and to consolidate contemporary lived experiences of her people. Alright, so let's start at the very beginning. When did your art practice begin and when did you realise it could become a career?

MANDY QUADRIO: Hello everybody, thank you for coming. I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land where we are meeting today. I'm very grateful to be here and to be able to make and share my art on this land. And so the question is where did it all begin? I suppose I've always been interested in art, ever since I was a child, and for many years I pursued hand-building ceramics and mosaics. A while back I met some interesting artists from University who suggested that maybe I pursue art at Uni, something I had never considered before. Then I discovered CAIA here at Griffith, so I put in an application and enrolled in the Contemporary Australian Indigenous Art (CAIA) program. I thought I'd just do an undergraduate degree but now here I am doing my Doctorate and nearly finished. I never really anticipated art becoming a career, it was just something that I really enjoyed. It was a way for me to bring my stories forward especially coming from Tasmania where a lot of our history is, and has been, lied about and denied. Tasmanian Aboriginal, palawa people, are seen to be extinct, but here I am and our culture is alive and thriving.

CARRIE McCARTHY: So you touched on a little bit there about in terms of your Indigeneity and the idea, which I certainly learned in school as well, that there are no Tasmanian Aboriginals left alive. That was the narrative we were taught. So my next question was what your influences are? Obviously that is a huge influence. But there are

other aspects of your practice too, like the materiality is really important to you. Do you want to talk a little bit about that and why that is?

MANDY QUADRIO: While doing the CAIA degree we were encouraged to explore our origins. As much as I already knew a lot about my history, I hadn't really gone back to Tasmania, so I took the opportunity to start going back. I connected with family and community and suddenly I found this massive community I belonged to. That was wonderful to have that reconnection, especially because I actually was born in Melbourne as my mother had come across from Tasmania with her mother. I don't know if they were trying to escape Tasmania or what, but I know that they were kind of flying under the radar. After having a series of children my mother vanished. She had put quite a few children up for adoption as well. So I had that kind of disconnect with my family through my maternal line. My grandmother was still in the picture but she went back to Tasmania broken-hearted because she had lost her only child. To this day I have never found my mother. It is like she just doesn't exist. So it was good for me to go back to Tasmania because I thought maybe mob down there might know something about her, but nobody really knew of her. It really was like she didn't exist. So that kind of also plays on this idea of the mythology that we are extinct because on a personal level my mother also doesn't exist. Even as recently as this year where I connected with people and tried to find out more about my mother, it is just always a blank wall. I have got this personal story that speaks to the nonexistence of palawa people and I've got this greater story, this collective story, of palawa people not existing. These stories influence the materials that I use.

I use the material of steel wool in my work because the material speaks to that notion of 'scrubbing out' or erasure. This cultural erasure is also relevant to my mother's story and my palawa history. So that's how the materiality influences my making. I often find, even when I'm not referencing my mother, that she keeps appearing in my work, because her disappearance has had such a profound influence on the way that I operate in the world, politically and socially. This disconnect happened largely because of colonisation. My mother and my grandmother just lived in sheds all their life, they had nothing. My grandmother was a cook on Flinders and other islands in Bass Strait. She cooked for sheep shearers and I think she just took her daughter, and then my sister when she was taken in by my grandmother. They just lived like itinerants. It was this whole effect of colonisation and the treatment of Aboriginal people that I see is affecting the outcome of my family and the fact that we have all been disconnected. My mother had three children that she put up for adoption and we all connected as my siblings were all looking for our mother as well. We have this grand story where we have all come together but none of us have ever found our mother. These events have profoundly influenced my life.

In terms of materiality I also use organic bull kelp in my work. The bull kelp speaks to our cultural continuum because it has been part of our palawa material culture for millenia. It has been used in so many different ways, it is quite an incredible material. It has been used for food firstly, and of course people eat it today. It has been used as a medicine and it has been used as clothing, including shoes. Apparently in Tasmania my people used it to wrap their feet, and it was observed that all along the west coast of Tasmania they were seen wearing shoes made of bull kelp. It might also be known that we have the unique traditional little water carriers that were used to carry water. Bull kelp is an amazing resource. I kind of stumbled across bull kelp in my travels on Country and I absolutely love the tactility, the different tones of red, yellow and green, and the variations in texture of the material. It is living and incredible, bringing so much to my work. As an organic resource it transforms in humid conditions. It is that particular aspect that I love about both the steel wool and the bull kelp. The steel wool changes over time and can rust. My work responds to that narrative of rusting. I love the fact that bull kelp changes when it is exposed to humidity. When it is exposed to heat it can become brittle, and in cold weather it just goes soft and limp. It is this changing narrative of materials that extends the story of my work. Both of these materials have become my signature materials: one is referencing cultural erasure while one references cultural continuum.

CARRIE McCARTHY: And you still return quite regularly, as regularly as COVID will allow, to Tasmania to collect materials. How important is it that you are getting that material from your Country and using those materials and the process of collecting, how important is that connection for you?

MANDY QUADRIO: It is really wonderful to be able to go to Country and collect materials. I travel with my Aunties and we collect reeds and bull kelp. Tasmania is the only place where I can access bull kelp on coastal shores and where it washes up on the beaches. The authentic connection is important but not totally, and I am happy to substitute materials. I can still tell the stories without having authentic material. I don't think it has to always be from Country. If I could get bull kelp up here (in Brisbane) I probably would access it. I do like the fact that it comes from Tasmania, however.

As palawa women we have permission to gather kelp from the shorelines. The kelp is heavy and waterlogged so we can only take a little bit as it is quite heavy to transport and to move. This is a little bull kelp water carrier.



CARRIE McCARTHY: So does that dry to that colour, or like when you say you have collected yellow, is it all different?

MANDY QUADRIO: I've got a big piece of kelp hanging up in the studio here that's red, it can be many different tones. I treat it with a waxy substance because it changes all the time. It starts to give off salt and can also start to crack. I try and keep it intact if I can, but it is unpredictable and there is only so much I can do. I try to influence the outcomes, however the kelp is affected by the weather.

CARRIE McCARTHY: It is quite a heavy material.

MANDY QUADRIO: It is yes.

CARRIE McCARTHY: So you have been very busy in the last twelve months, unlike a lot of artists you have been extremely fortunate most of your commitments and opportunities have really come through and you have been able to travel to them as well. Which has been fantastic. You have had an exhibition at Sawtooth ARI in Launceston and of course you are in the Biennial at TarraWarra, which is amazing. As well as the exhibitions you are working towards at the moment for Launceston for the Queen Victoria Museum (QVMAG), and the QCA one? So there's a lot happening at the moment. I know we spoke about when you were in TarraWarra particularly, you got to go to Melbourne for a little while, where you engaged for a short period with people who walked through your exhibit. A lot of artists probably have suffered through not having that contact with audience through COVID, it has been a huge hurdle to get over, that there is not that interaction and response that is so important for artists and is sort of the end of the practice, of the art making stage I suppose. How important is that for you and do you want to talk a little bit about some of those interactions you had, particularly at TarraWarra?

MANDY QUADRIO: For me I think the work is never really complete until you have that engagement with the audience. I love that viewers bring their own interpretation and their own stories. I am always interested to hear how people respond, that's really important. I am fine if people don't respond in a positive way, I also find that interesting, because then I want to know why, and that is great, my work is not necessarily for everybody. Yes I have some work up at the moment in TarraWarra in Melbourne, in the TarraWarra Biennial, a big art exhibition of contemporary artists. I was fortunate to be

there on the first two days of the opening and to meet a wonderful elder from the Wurundjeri nation, Auntie Joy Wandin Murphy. She actually opened the Biennial but she also came and looked through my work. My work is a really large steel wool installation that you can actually walk through. There are large cascading, steel wool drapes and a large hanging, entangled piece which could be seen as tree-like or vegetative. There is also a big cradle hanging at the back of the installation. Altogether, about seven large pieces, and the idea is to move through and immerse yourself in the work. Auntie Joy came through and the first thing she said was she got goosebumps. She said she had this real reaction to the steel wool. She then relayed a story to me that when she was seven years old she suffered a lot of racial taunts at school. One day she ran home from school crying and grabbed some steel wool and scratched her elbows until they bled: trying to scratch away the pigment of her skin. It was really quite an horrendous story. Then she walked through the work and read it so perfectly. She responded to the smooth drapes as a moment of calm but then the really entangled bits reminded her of the brutal treatment of her people, and the colonising impact on the Wurundjeri people. When she got to the cradle-like form, she said "I feel like I want to just jump in there and feel safe in this cradle." It was incredible, and then she walked around through some more drapes and really responded to the entangled vegetative form at the front. Another suspended knotted piece made her feel like her stomach was all tied up in knots. For me this was such a complete and insightful reading. I think the work is never really complete until people bring their own interpretation and I really value what other people have to say.

CARRIE McCARTHY: And so you've been here for almost a year, working in this space. And these most recent exhibitions have pretty well been made in this space entirely. What has the experience been like working in this environment where, I know I have been to your place at home and it is quite a different experience working obviously at home to working in a fishbowl you know, and you guys can see there is a lot of coming and going, and people knocking on the door and saying what is that about? Do you want to talk a little bit about what the experience of the residency has been like for you and some of those interactions?

MANDY QUADRIO: This residency has been fantastic. I have really enjoyed and embraced the time. I love the fact that it is very public, it is quite private but quite public at the same time. When people come by and stick their head in, and if I see that they are really interested, I welcome them to come in and have a look. Again, I love that audience interaction and I like those conversations because you connect with people in different ways. I have had some fortuitous meetings where it has led to me acquiring a future studio space. When I leave here I will move out to Yeronga into an interesting art space. Hope Street is a really great location. I have been able to make four good bodies of work here. The steel wool bag works for Sawtooth ARI in Launceston, the TarraWarra work for Melbourne, some work for Caboolture Regional Art Gallery and now I've got the QVMAG work happening. I have a lot of things on the go. Like you say it is too hard to operate in a domestic space, there are far too many distractions. But this is just perfect, it is a brilliant location, the main galleries are across the road and Griffith Uni is just down the way as well.



Hope Street studio beginnings of the TarraWarra Biennial work *Whose time are we on?* 2021



Hope Street studio work *Uterine bag series* 2020/2021 for Sawtooth ARI Launceston

CARRIE McCARTHY: It is lovely to be able to come and see your work evolving. Certainly every time I come I see new elements and new thinking. It is an extraordinary experience to be able to get that real insight into an artist's practice. A lot of you are artists, I don't need to tell you that, but just to be able to observe that creative process is amazing. If you want to ask a question, shout it out.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: I know you touched on bull kelp a bit, but I was curious if you could describe the personal learning, or relearning, with the cultural significance of the water carrier. How was that process of learning these traditional methods of building a water carrier, and working with the kelp and working with the reeds?

MANDY QUADRIO: Bull kelp has always been in our material culture, however there was a gap during the colonial genocidal campaigns. So we temporarily ceased a lot of those traditional practices. Except for the shells. I think shell necklace making continued the whole time on the Bass Strait islands. I know that on Flinders Island they were making necklaces and using them for currency and exchange of goods. With the kelp material, that's kind of only just been revitalised, maybe in the last say two or three decades at most. There has been some big projects. Julie Gough started a program with the Tasmanian Museum in the early 2000s, '*Tayenebe*,' to revitalise fibre and kelp practices for our women. Every year we hold an annual festival up on Country in the north-east of Tasmania, called Manalargenna Day. Manalargenna is one of our ancestor that we celebrate in Tasmania. I generally run the kelp workshops with one of my cousins. So many of our women work with kelp, especially making the carriers. We don't tend to teach carrier making at open festivals but we do teach those skills within community, with our own people.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: So to make the kelp carrier that you have shown us, it is quite small for carrying water, you'd be a bit thirsty, so I'm assuming there were fairly large carriers as well?

MANDY QUADRIO: This is actually a replica of one that is in the British Museum that was collected in 1850. So it is over a hundred years old and it is still intact. Kelp survives in the right conditions as long as it is not subjected to humidity. This is a replica actually and it is tiny. The one in the British Museum is tiny, because it came back to Australia three years ago for the *Encounters* exhibition and I got to have a look at this little carrier. This is typical of the design that was observed when French people first came to Tasmania before the British invaded. There were French illustrations made of the carriers and they were made to carry water. It is a 'seaweed' object and it holds water really effectively. It is quite amazing. I am sure they would have been all sizes. When dry it becomes brittle and can break if it is dropped.

AUDIENCE QUESTION: In your undergrad and honours, you did photography as a practice. Are you still maintaining your photography practice and does that maybe add a layer, because you work with such temporal materials, does the photography add a layer of permanence to your practice? You know that ongoing interest you have in the idea of archive, does that permanent documentation of you and your story, and what you are creating, does that feed in for you?

MANDY QUADRIO: That is it exactly. Because my work is kind of temporary, a lot of my installations only exist for the duration of shows. For example I was in a show at QUT Art Museum in 2020. It was called *Rite of Passage* and was curated by Shannon Brett. The work that I did for that show was a large drapery, it was a smooth steel wool curtain-like installation that contained different shapes and forms. Once that work came down it was gone. And with a lot of my installation works, they only ever exist in situ. So in terms of photography, that is often really all that remains. The documentation of my work really becomes the work. For example even a small steel wool, sculptural work can change and rust away potentially. So photography is a really important aspect of my practice. I do take a lot of my own photos. It is also really difficult to photograph steel wool and is something you have got to experience in the flesh. It is just so hard to photograph and can just appear as a grey wall. So I try to photograph a lot of my own work.

CARRIE McCARTHY: Thanks a lot everyone for coming.