

CITY OF SYDNEY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ART & ARTISTS

Name: Caroline Rothwell

Date: 20 June 2013

Place: O'Connor Street, Chippendale

Interviewer: Deborah Beck

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **DB:** This is an interview with artist, Caroline Rothwell. My name is Deborah Beck and the interview is taking place in her studio in O'Connor Street, Chippendale. It's the 20th of June 2013. The interview is part of the Art & Artists in Sydney Oral History Project which is being conducted on behalf of the City of Sydney's History Programme.

So I'll mainly talk about the public art projects and commission that you recently did in the city but I'll ask some background questions at first.

CR: Sure.

DB: So you were born in England and studied first at the Wimbledon School of Art in London. Were you interested in sculpture at the beginning of your studies?

CR: When I went to art school I hadn't done any art at school because my family, I don't know, it just was not on anyone's radar. It was, you know, smart people didn't do art. So when I first went to art school I knew I had this kind of urge to make stuff and maybe going back even a year – I'd actually spent a year in Australia just travelling around just sort of seeing the world.

DB: So between school and art school?

CR: Yes, between school and art school I spent a year here and I just discovered landscape, I discovered space, I discovered drawing and it was such an incredible experience that I decided I needed to go to art school but still I probably didn't have the confidence to think "Oh, I'm going to be a painter or a sculptor" so I decided I was going to do theatre design because that seemed a kind of practical thing to do but within a year of art school I knew I wasn't going to do theatre design because I was just obsessively kind of drawing and painting. So then I went to Camberwell College into the Painting Department and after about six months where I was kind of putting plaster and clay and things all over canvases one of my lecturers said to me "Have you ever considered that you might be in the wrong department, that you should be in the Sculpture Department" and I basically moved the same day into sculpture and it was just such an obvious place for me to be.

2.09 **DB: So what years were you there?**

CR: That was '90 to '93, I think, yes.

DB: So you did one year of painting and then into sculpture or how does it go?

CR: Well, it was a foundation. I did my foundation at Wimbledon which is the everything; and then I did a few months at Camberwell in painting and then moved into the sculpture but it was pretty broad. It was just, I suppose, when they were deciding to dismantle the different faculties and move everyone together anyway so we kind of were pretty fluid but it was just great being with just the materials and the equipment, different setup.

DB: Did you stay in London when you finished your studies?

CR: I finished. I had one kind of pop-up exhibition in London and then I went to Greece with a friend and I met my future partner on a nudist beach on a Greek island.

DB: That would do it.

CR: Actually, neither of us were nude, we were both reading interesting books. So I think I spent a year after I finished my degree or maybe less – that's right, because actually I was still at art school when I met him. So then I inadvertently moved to New Zealand because he had a job opportunity, I had no work, so he said "Let's go to New Zealand for a bit".

DB: So what nationality is he?

CR: He's a New Zealander.

DB: O.K.

CR: And so even though I'd spent a year in Australia that was how I ended up coming back to this side of the planet and I ended up there for quite a long time.

DB: I noticed that you did some work in New York in between.

CR: Yes, yes.

DB: Was that in between?

3.56 CR: No. So while I was in New Zealand it was really amazing but I suppose I missed the hub, the energy. It was a really important research time for me because I basically didn't know anyone and I just sort of locked myself away in a studio and researched, kind of worked, worked, worked in a way that I wouldn't have done if I'd stayed in London because I would have had to have spent every hour God gave just making a living and stealing hours when I could, which is what most of my friends did, whereas in New Zealand I could get a badly paid job but life was so much cheaper that I could spend a lot of time developing the practice. But after probably, I don't know, two or three years there I suddenly realised that my partner didn't want to move back to London because he was having an interesting career there.

DB: What was he doing?

CR: He's a filmmaker, documentaries. And I suppose he used the economic mallet in a way. He said "If we go back to London you can earn the living as an artist". I couldn't keep the two of us going. Anyway, so I started applying to do my masters overseas and I got into

Hunter College at City University New York and so he and I made a deal that we'd go and try and see if it worked for both of us and it was incredible. Robert Morris [artist] was my theory lecturer, I had incredible lecturers and I worked for Sol LeWitt [artist] for a while and the intensity of the programme – I probably did more kind of thinking and kind of intellectual research in that first six months than I did in my entire undergraduate degree and maybe that was just the stage that I was at with my practice, that I had been so entrenched in kind of thought and my own research that I had a lot that I wanted to work with and through.

6.18 **DB: That's the late '90s.**

CR: Yes, that was '97.

DB: So you'd been out of art school - - -

CR: For three or four years.

DB: Yes, for a while.

CR: Anyway, basically we ran out of money so after six months we had to go.

DB: So it was only six months?

CR: Yes. So I cross-credited and went to Auckland University.

DB: O.K. So you did your masters there in the end?

CR: So I finished my masters there at Elam School of Fine Arts.

DB: That's a good one.

CR: Yes, it was fine and again it was interesting to come back to – well, look; it was disappointing leaving New York but still it had its moments; it was still a good programme.

DB: When you worked with Sol LeWitt in New York had you done any wall drawings before then or is that when you got interested?

CR: No. The thing I found most exciting about that was I was always very respectful of the canon, the art world canon, and I'd always seen Sol LeWitt as this huge kind of art historical figure, really rigorous conceptual artist. You know, he had all his kind of methodologies and his sentences on conception of art and when I started working for him there was a fantastic kind of casualness to his approach. He'd just email – or actually he'd fax at that stage – he'd fax through an A4 drawing, this kind of really quite wiggly drawing, and say "Please scale

up onto the gallery wall to twenty five by seven metres” and we’d be doing it by eye. So we’d just hold up this drawing and do just an eye drawing of what he’d sent through and we’d do the whole thing and he’d come in every four or five days and say “Yeah, that’s looking great. Just keep going”.

8.05

And I said to him, “Wow. I’ve done a series of your drawings. I could do one at home” – I made a bit of a joke – he said “Yeah, of course you can”. He said “The only thing that gives it any value is the authenticity certificate” which was really liberating as well. So, yes, it had a big influence on me and I actually started trying to work with assistants after that but I realised that I’m very hands-on. I actually did a lot of work using vinyl, signwriter’s vinyl, very industrial material, and I tried computer cutting it but it was a very dead line and I tried getting other people to cut it for me but I just realised that that act of doing it is an important part of my process and that whole sort of tenuousness of the drawn line – I see them as big drawings, really – was very much just part of my practice.

DB: So were you working in that medium when you did your masters?

CR: Yes.

DB: What did you do for your masters?

CR: I actually did quite a lot of work in fibreglass and, yes, I think I already was. Yes, I started using the vinyl during my masters, yes. And I was always interested in kind of industrial materials, like materials from our urban everyday but then somehow hand processing those so I think that’s how I got to the signwriter’s vinyl - it’s just these fantastic kind of coloured sheets.

DB: Flexible material.

CR: Yes, flexible materials.

DB: And did you start exhibiting there or did you exhibit in New York or when did you start?

CR: Well, I had my first pop-up show in London after art school. Well, I suppose I exhibited in New York within the art school, the masters show. Well, you know, first semester masters show.

10.07

But then, yes, I was exhibiting in New Zealand from the year after I arrived, this amazing gallery called Gregory Flint Gallery. And I remember when I first arrived in New Zealand there’s an amazing art scene there. Within a week of arriving I went to the Elam Degree Show

and it was really impressive. And then the first gallery I went into had a show of Bill Hammond, this incredible painter, and I just thought “God, this is really humming, this is a really interesting place” so I signed up with that gallery. I’ve been very fortunate with my relationships with galleries so I had an exhibition with him I suppose a year after arriving.

DB: So you finished your masters and then what prompted you to move to Sydney? Was that long after?

CR: Yes, I suppose it was: we moved to Sydney in 2004. It’s a fairly small country, New Zealand and I’d been kind of itching to do – I’d been showing in London, I had a quite big show – actually that was after I moved here. Anyway, I’d done a few things in London and it just made sense for both my partner and I to move on; we’d done as much as we could do there. I’d sort of shown in quite a few of the public galleries and he was keen to move and Sydney just seemed right. And we had kids by then and again he was keen not to move back to London and I’m really happy here; it’s been a really good move.

DB: So do you live near the studio?

12.00 CR: Live in Darlinghurst.

DB: In Darlinghurst. Close enough?

CR: Yes, yes.

DB: What about the studio – have you been here for long?

CR: Yes, since 2009, I think. I had a residency at Artspace in 2008 and then I found a studio in Sydney really hard to get. It’s unbelievably expensive and just there’s not much of it and I just sent a mass email out, saying “Has anyone got any space that they want to share?” and Janet Laurence got back and said “Well, I’ve got this storage area. Let’s just see how it goes” and it’s been the best studio space I’ve ever had. So she’s fantastic and it’s a really great community. There’s Jenny Turpin and Michaelie Crawford and Janet Laurence and a few others about to move in, actually, and it’s just fantastic, really great group of people.

DB: Good group and a good area and it’s close to Central Park where you’ve been doing some work too.

CR: Yes, yes.

DB: What did you do when you first came in 2004? Did you know people in the art scene or did you get a gallery or what did you do?

CR: I was so lucky. I don't know if you know Peter Fahey(?). Peter, he's a very unusual person. He's I think an English teacher and artist, a curator, he's just a fantastically smart, generous, poetic, rigorous human being. He's a really interesting person and D'Arcy's said to Peter "There's this new artist in town. Would you mind having a look at her work and just seeing what you think?" And Peter always tells this story: it's like "Oh, God, here we go" but he was good friends with Judy, a friend of ours, and he said "I'll do it" and he was just so generous. He looked at the work. He said "Right, I'm going to call three galleries for you" and he did and the first one I had a meeting with was Grant Pirrie and we just really hit it off and they were a really big part of my relationship with Sydney, that community of artists.

14.19 **DB: Yes, and they've been good at promoting you?**

CR: They've been fantastic. And it was more than a gallery, really, it was a community, it was a really extraordinary community and that's really made my time in Sydney kind of a special one, I suppose.

DB: And how about making a living – have you been able to do that?

CR: I have, yes. I'd always taught – I used to teach at the University of Auckland, I used to teach at Elam right up until I left.

DB: Teaching sculpture?

CR: Yes, teaching in the Sculpture Department and I had a lectureship, I'd just been given a lectureship. What I realised was that my practice, my own practice, couldn't keep up in a way so I decided – I mean it was exciting and it was great and I'm glad I did it but I decided when I got to Sydney that I was going to give myself two years to see if I could make a go of it without having to teach. And I can't remember what little jobs I was doing here and there but, yes, I basically decided to hold off teaching. I got a residency, that's right, I got free studio space for a while; I was the artist in residence at Bondi Public School. So I did a bit of interaction with the kids there and had this amazing studio and a bit of a grant and I've been making a living.

DB: It's very unusual, actually.

CR: I mean I can't say it's been a wildly good living but it's been, I suppose, a working class living.

16.04 **DB: But you have managed to sort of exhibit everywhere. I mean you've got a huge CV and exhibited all over the world pretty well. Well, rather than discuss all of that I might just talk about the works in Sydney just at the moment.**

CR: Sure, sure.

DB: And you've continued to exhibit at Grant Pirrie, have you?

CR: No, they shut down in 2011. I think I was the second to last show.

DB: Damn.

CR: Yes, yes, that was a shame.

DB: So do you have a gallery now?

CR: I show with Tolarno in Melbourne who are fantastic. I will get a Sydney gallery at some stage because I suppose it's where my community are and I like having that relationship with a gallery. But just Sydney's in a strange place at the moment. There's a lot of galleries that have shut down so I'm just seeing what happens.

DB: Yes, fair enough. But you've done most of your commissioned work here, by looking at your CV. So did that start with the drawings – is it drawings, wall drawings at Deutsche Bank?

CR: Yes, I think so. I did a big piece in Auckland before I left for the city of Sydney there, a big steel piece, and I found in New Zealand the public galleries were interested in the wall drawings but just as temporary projects, whereas in here people were happy to take a risk and have a wall drawing because they're quite difficult pieces; you know, once it's on the wall you can't take it anywhere. I've had a few commissions. I think Ferrier Hodgson, the commissioned was probably my first one and I did wall drawings and a kind of mobile sculpture piece and then, yes, Deutsche Bank. So they've started off I suppose as more hands-on, you know, me working in the space for two or three weeks to get it complete.

18.06 **DB: What materials do you use for your drawings?**

CR: Those are the signwriter's vinyl again, sort of sticky plastic.

DB: So it sticks onto the walls?

CR: Yes, yes.

DB: So do you cut them here or cut them on site?

CR: I cut it on site, actually. I just take my rolls of vinyl with me and do it on site. People looking me as if I'm completely insane but still coming along for the ride.

DB: Now, we get up to 2012 and you participated in Art & About in Sydney with the installation of two bronze sculptures called 'Youngsters'. Can you describe them for me?

CR: Yes. I'm really interested in the materials of sculpture so whatever a form is made of I'm interested in kind of I suppose the history of that. So with bronze it's such a loaded material, it's the monument. And I'd started to work a little bit with bronze in my previous projects where I have this strange process where I sew a fabric mould and then pour either metal if they're smaller or a kind of plaster - - -

DB: Into a fabric mould?

CR: Into a fabric mould.

DB: So it would be a rough surface in that case?

CR: Well, it's a really kind of luminous – it creates, I suppose, a sculpture that looks like it's not a solid sculpture; it looks like an inflatable basically. So it's this solid sculpture that is looks soft and defies its materiality, I suppose. So I'd cast a couple of those pieces into bronze and it really played with the materiality of the monument and the anti-monument. And then I was trying to think "What is the twenty-first century monument?" and I we used to see monuments as figures of authority and it's usually a bloke on a horse or a civic gentleman or something on the whole, unless it's Queen Victoria, and I just thought "What is the currency of now?"

20.16 And I've always been interested in kind of drapery. I did a whole series of fibreglass pieces a number of years ago just looking at kind of just a fabric on the floor and I did a whole series of drapery pieces and I just started thinking about a diminutive monument to do something again that engages with that kind of urban vernacular. And my kids' school uniform is a little hoodie and so I just decided to make a little girl wearing this hoodie – it's basically the kids' school uniform – you know, street shoes and just play with this idea of this monument, play with the idea of a kid in a hoodie. The hoodie's been seen as – what's the word – as a subversive uniform and I wanted to undermine that. And so the little girl, she's got plaits - you have to look into the hood – she's got plaits in the back but I've also played with ideas of economy, our mineral economy so the interior of the hood is encrusted with casts of amethysts, Tasmanian amethysts and coal. And so all through the hood and all through the pockets and anywhere there basically would be space it's encrusted to that so they're quite serial pieces. And also I'm really interested in seeing us, humanity, as part of the greater natural environment and talking historically I suppose about the

consequences of whatever we do has a ripple effect for the environment.

22.23 So the crystals and the coal are part of that in a playful way. You could look at the coal as actually being – you know, there’s an easy resonance around coal and the economy and the crystals sort of play with ideas of the spiritual and the spiritual economy as well. But I cast a stingray - and I don’t know if you’ve ever looked at stingray very closely but they have very human eyes and mouth – and so actually the face of these little people have stingray eyes and mouth.

DB: I was wondering where that came from.

CR: And it’s actually just placing us as part of the greater natural world, it’s just putting us as an equivalent. So they’re quite playful pieces and also there’s a lot of stories in there that I know that maybe other people never will. Like encrusted into the shoes are bits of weed seeds and bits of Roman pottery that my dad had collected so there’s little bits of ballast sort of stuck between the sort of mud and the shoes.

DB: Did you do that in the casting process?

CR: Yes, yes. So I made my original in the studio.

DB: In clay?

CR: No. I used a mannequin, I used clothes, I used wax – it was a very odd looking form – and then I worked with a foundry, Crawford’s Casting - they made a silicone rubber mould.

24.05 **DB: It would have been tricky with all those protrusions.**

CR: Yes, yes, it was potentially difficult.

DB: And were they made especially for Barrack Street?

CR: Actually, the first one, the little - - -

DB: So there’s a standing one and there’s - - -

CR: There’s a hand-standing one.

DB: - - - a handstand one, yes.

CR: The first one was already shown a year before and the curators, Vi Girgis and Adam Porter, who approached me to be part - - -

DB: For Art & About?

CR: - - - yes, approached me, they curated me into the project, they'd already seen that piece and thought it would be really interesting in the city.

DB: In the city, yes.

CR: And then we decided that actually a second one would be a really interesting relationship and to have it hand-standing and again the kind of plaits spill out of the hood they become like a little team; there's sort of that idea of "Well, where's the next one?"

DB: It could have kept going all down the street.

CR: Exactly.

DB: How did the public react during the Art & About?

CR: Actually, I wasn't sure how people would react but I've never had such an amazing response to the work. People have really loved it and they've really embraced it. I think the scale, because there's nothing intimidating about the scale, they kind of feel like these little moments of silence because they're so human but they're so still and they're so small that they feel quite vulnerable and they're on George Street, they're just on the corner of George and Barrack Street. And there's a fruit-seller who's right next to one of them and he gets there really early in the morning and he was telling me a story.

26.04

So it was a guy and his truck who'd just done some piping work in the street and he was having his breakfast about 5.00am and he said he saw him stop kind of mid bite and he was just staring at this little person and then he just put his sandwich down, got out of the truck and ran to this sculpture because he thought it was this little lost person just standing in the street. And just there's been a really positive reaction to them.

DB: What about children? I bet children love the scale.

CR: Yes. There's been quite a few people have posted quite a few photographs or sent them to me and, I think, put them on Facebook of the kids kind of giving them a cuddle.

DB: Holding them.

CR: So it's had a really amazing response, yes.

DB: And what's happened to them now?

CR: Well, they're staying. What had started as a temporary project, the City [of Sydney council] decided to keep them permanent.

DB: So they bought them for the public domain?

CR: Yes, they bought them for their collection so that's really exciting for me. And I think the City's strategy is really smart, of asking professional curators to put projects forward and then showing these projects that would probably never be commissioned. If you were just writing it on paper you would probably never commission a project like that or the bureaucratic machine would probably never say yes to a project like that, but then to actually have them in the site, sort of test them out, I think it's a really interesting way of getting good art into the city. I think the same with those fabulous birdcage pieces [reference to artwork 'Forgotten Songs' in Angel Place, Sydney].

DB: Yes, they're wonderful, yes.

CR: They started as a temporary project, didn't they, and then stayed? So I think it's really interesting.

DB: It's like testing them before they buy.

CR: Yes, yes.

DB: It's good, yes.

CR: And for the artist it works because the City, they're basically supporting practice, they're supporting you making new work but if they don't stay you still have that.

28.10 **DB: You've still got the work.**

CR: You've still got the work. And it allows curators to have an interesting engagement with urban space because it's a very different thing working out in public space too and galleries and I really enjoy it. It's one more layer of complexity to work through with a work is how it engages with a site or with the public or with the history.

DB: Is it the same year that you did the other work, the other public work? So was that commissioned?

CR: Yes, the 'Watling's Tree'. Watling's Tree, I think was the year before. And the commission of public works always take a lot longer; I think I got that work two or three years before it actually finished because they had to wait for the upgrade of the laneway. Watling's Tree is in Albion Place just off George Street – it connects Kent Street and George Street, next to the George Street cinemas and it's quite a difficult site

because there's a pub at one end and it's a really kind of dark laneway that's used as a urinal for the pub. So there's these six alcoves, I think – yes, six alcoves – recessed - they're basically the exit doors for the cinema – and they were getting more and more feral, basically, tagged and pissed on and so they've upgraded the whole laneway. So I came up with an idea that was – Thomas Watling was, I suppose, the first convict artist into Australia and he was sent here for forgery and he did these beautiful drawings all around the area.

30.02 And I found this one drawing that he made of that area – well, what people assume is that area – and he was a great artist but he wasn't a trained artist so a lot of his drawings for me they speak about psychology, human psychology, I suppose, as much as trying to capture a specimen. So all his trees they were always a bit wrong. They always looked like those sort of European trees/gum trees and I'm really interested in that because I think that's the Europeans not getting the landscape. It still has this effect on the place now, it's still rippling, it's still that misunderstanding is still part of the currency of the place. So I basically borrowed his tree and made it my own through drawing and Photoshop and digitised it and also rotated it so it's upright at one end of the lane and then it kind of shifts I think by thirty degrees each time till it's upside down at the other end of the lane. So it's like it's been windblown and then it's etched onto a mirror of stainless steel and then it's chromed which means that people can piss on it and it's not going to deteriorate.

DB: So there's no actual glass over the front of the windows then?

CR: No, no, no glass. It's a mirror finish but the chroming means that it doesn't scratch. So it was an interesting project.

DB: A different sort of interaction.

CR: Yes, yes.

DB: But it was commissioned by the City of Sydney?

CR: Yes.

DB: So you were asked to do that for them?

32.00 CR: It was a competition and I got it.

DB: So you submitted that actual proposal?

CR: Yes.

DB: What about the longevity of those sort of works – do you think about them sort of staying there? Is there any time limit or what do you think?

CR: That's interesting. Do you mean in terms of how appropriate?

DB: How long would they stay in that site and the same with the figures, I suppose.

CR: Yes. Well, it'd be really interesting to see. I suppose I don't really think about what it'd be like but it'd be really interesting to see, especially those little hoodie pieces what resonance they have in fifty years' time.

DB: Exactly, yes. Michaelie upstairs was telling me that some of their works there's a twenty five year limit or something. They're expected to last for twenty five years or something like that when they're commissioned. So I was just wondering if you'd heard of any of that.

CR: I see what you're saying. No, no, that's absolutely right and that's one of the nightmares of public art is that you're really limited with materials. That's why with that Albion Place piece it had to be so tough. I mean, I ended up having to go to oil refinery technology to have it plated because of the scale. Most materials that you show in a gallery would literally be destroyed within an hour of being out on a Saturday night in Sydney. And it's the same with the little Youngsters: they're bronze so they're tough but they've seen a huge amount of interaction. Ten beers on a Saturday night and people - - -

DB: Pouring things on them and touching them?

CR: Well, more that they get a lot of love; they get a lot of love. And one of the things I like about bronze is that these pieces are black and the patina is just a jet black which is intentional but I'm quite enjoying the fact that they get polished.

34.08 People touch the heads the whole time so the head is getting really polished and it suddenly has this historical reference to I suppose those beautiful Italian pieces, you know, the Boar and the Pieta and things that get their snouts polished.

DB: Yes, you can see the shiny bits.

CR: And I actually really like that sense of change but it is something that is such a big part of the nightmare of making public art.

DB: And what about the City's proposal to ban cars in part of the city?

CR: Yes, George Street.

DB: Do you think that's a good idea?

CR: Fantastic, it's great.

DB: Then you could have more sculptures, obviously, in that area.

CR: But I actually just think it's less even about art and more about public use of space. I mean, cities are for humans. I actually think the more that we engage with public transport the more – I mean what use is the car, really? It's clogging up the networks in time, it's clogging up the environment in fumes and also if you free up space people come back into the city.

DB: That's true.

CR: I've noticed living in Darlinghurst – I've lived there maybe nine years or so – people are coming back into the city. The little school that my kids go to, it was almost at the stage of being on the shut-down list; it got down to ninety kids.

DB: What school is it?

CR: Darlinghurst Public School. And now there's two hundred and fifty kids on the waiting list. I think people are wanting to be back in the city and they're wanting to walk. Like loads of people around us have sold their cars; they're using those Go Get [carshare business]. It just makes sense to pedestrianise; it makes everything more liveable – and just really work on that public transport. Yes, so I'm all for it.

36.05 **DB: All for it. I mean they're building a lot of buildings for residents in the city now like Central Park for instance.**

CR: Yes, yes, that's right.

DB: So were you artist in residence at Central Park?

CR: That's what it was called. It was an interesting naming. I think basically the brewery is a derelict site so I think three of us were called "artists in residence". So there was Brook Andrew, Mikala Dwyer and then I was the last project and actually probably "artwork in residence" is probably what it was actually - it would have been an amazing place to be a resident. So we all basically made works that engaged with the history and future of the site.

DB: What did you do for that?

CR: I developed a twelve metre inflatable of again a treelike form that I kind of developed one half of a tree and I mirrored it on itself like a Rorschach inkblot so it's quite abstract. So it's this big kind of red bloom on top of the building but it's fed by a series of PVC pipes because the building was an old brewery, it was an old water production site, and now it's a tri-generation plant under the site so pipes have always been a really huge part of the history of the site. So I decided to make the pipes be almost like the circulatory system to feed the inflatable, so they pump air up into the inflatable. So it's been up for a year.

DB: Twelve metres.

CR: Twelve metres. Yes, it's huge and the sense of scale when things are in public space - - -

DB: Yes, it'd take up your whole studio.

CR: Well, it doesn't look twelve; when it's on top of a four storey building it's suddenly - - -

DB: Yes, it looks small. And it's still up there?

38.02 CR: Yes, it's still up there. Because the site's being used and it's been incredibly high winds and forty five degree days in January so it's suffered a bit but, yes, it's still there, still looking all right.

DB: And the pump's still working, everything's working?

CR: Well, that's the thing is they keep turning off the power during the building process but even that's quite interesting.

DB: It goes up and down.

CR: It becomes this sort of flaccid looking thing and then suddenly it kind of blooms into activity.

DB: Was that curated?

CR: Yes. Again that was the curators invited, I think, ten artists to pitch ideas and I was lucky enough to get one. That's the other thing with public art is you get a certain number and you don't get – there's a lot of work in pitching.

DB: Just putting the proposal in, yes, absolutely.

CR: So I've been very fortunate in the last few years but there's been a lot that I haven't got too.

DB: Yes, of course. So have you worked with Jenny [Turpin] and Michaelie [Crawford] upstairs at all?

CR: Well, they were part of the curating team for the Central Park one and that has been a really great process to actually work with artists who've worked in public space. And Anne Loxley was the other – there were three curators, so it was Michaelie, Jenny and Anne Loxley who's at the MCA at the moment. So they're really, really smart. They had this great idea which is for the artists to work with an engineer straight up so once you got the project you actually worked with these engineers to develop it and you could be as hands-on or as hands-off as you liked. And they're all really unusual projects, difficult. And the engineer, Jeremy Sparks, I think he's probably had a huge effect on the art world because most sculptors I know who worked out in public space worked with Jeremy.

40.01 **DB: Do they?**

CR: And he's an engineer who says "Oh, no, I can't do that, can't do that". Sorry, he doesn't say that, he says the opposite. He says "Just give me your wildest idea and I'll do it, we'll sort it out. We'll go backwards from there".

DB: Great.

CR: Yes, that's very unusual and it's great.

DB: Yes, it is.

CR: And also most sculptors have enough of, I suppose, a natural engineering head to get a sense of what is feasible and what's not feasible.

DB: Yes. So something like that one, would you do a scale model of?

CR: Yes.

DB: And then he would work out the engineering side of it?

CR: Yes. The big thing for that piece was the wind loadings because it's about a metre off the building which doesn't sound very much but that's quite a big leverage.

DB: And it's so high.

CR: Yes, and it's high so that was the big part of it, the inflatable itself. And I've worked with the inflatable fabricators a lot so we already had a working relationship but, yes, the wind loadings and there had to be a

steel structure inside of the object. So he did the drawings for that and managed the project, so it was great.

DB: And how do you like that collaboration process?

CR: Oh, fantastic. With the right team it's just fantastic.

DB: Even though you're hands-on you're still controlling how it works.

CR: Yes, that's right, all the changes that were developed. I mean with the pipes, the pipes were really exciting because basically we hired a crane, we got a plumber and it was like building a drawing on site; we just did it on the day so "Left there, down there, another one there". We had a certain number of metres that we could do and it was very buzzy, yes. No, I enjoy that collaboration.

DB: Have you done any more wall drawings at all in Sydney?

CR: No, not for a while. What I realised with the wall drawings with the signwriter's vinyl [was] that it was only an on-site practice, there was no studio practice.

41.02

So I actually started working with PVC so that I could actually create works that I could develop in the studio as well. So that's what I've been using are these flexible PVCs and developing them in the studio so I cut them all. So I'm still interested in the wall drawing idea but it tends to be more of a commission.

DB: Do you do any like gallery sized works? Do you do drawings that you would hang in a gallery scalewise?

CR: Yes, yes, yes. I've got another very quirky process that I've developed probably a couple of years ago was I started collecting carbon, car exhaust out of people's cars.

DB: How do you do it, how do you collect that?

CR: Well, make sure the engine's turned off but just the back of the exhaust pipe it's full of that black gunk.

DB: And that's carbon, of course.

CR: Yes. Well, it's carbon mixed with sort of noxious fumes - I actually want to get it analysed to see exactly what's in it. But I collect it just with a paintbrush and scrape it out on a knife and then I mix that with an acrylic binder medium to make a paint and I've been doing a whole series of drawings using that medium. And I did a piece for Shepparton Art Museum last year where they'd seen this process and

they really liked it and they said “Oh, can you come up with an idea for us because we’ve got this twelve metre wall; we’d like you to do something on it”. So it was a really great project. I said “Well, could you please ask your community, Shepparton, to collect their car exhausts?” So they did and I’ve got these amazing pigments from a 1960s tractor, Daimler, Holden Monaro, and then I basically painted endangered species from the Murray Darling area with the exhaust emission and then scanned those and Photoshopped it up into this sort of massive five metre digital drawing that they showed on their large wall.

44.21 **DB: Did the carbon have different colours?**

CR: Yes, it does. Like with the older cars it’s certainly mixed in with the rust and some of them are very dense black, others are lighter, got less emission. So, yes, there’s slightly different colours, different densities.

DB: And so the binder medium will hold it onto the surface, whatever the surface?

CR: Yes, the binder just basically turns it into a paint. It’s exactly what the Victorians used to do. I don’t know if you’ve heard the term of “lamp black”. So they used to collect the black from inside of those lamps and then mix that with a binder medium to create their own paint.

DB: I didn’t know where that came from.

CR: Yes, so this is exactly the same. I was speaking to Parkers about it and I was saying “Well, how can I stabilise it so it doesn’t rub off?” and they went “Oh, that’s really easy. It’s just what these guys used to do a hundred and fifty years ago”.

DB: Just put a bonder with them. Yes, fantastic.

CR: So I do a lot of drawing but those are the only ones I’ve started to show. And I’ve got a show in Singapore at the moment with a series of those drawings that I’ve actually also used gold leaf alongside it, just playing with ideas of

DB: Against the black carbon?

CR: Yes.

DB: And what about exhibiting overseas? Are you still doing that now that you're in Sydney?

CR: Yes. It’s not that easy doing it.

DB: No, it's a long way.

CR: And what I've found is that people, galleries, if someone comes into the gallery and wants to engage with the work they often want to come to the studio and talk to the artist so that's a bit of a struggle.

46.05 But I've got the show on in Singapore – it's a really fabulous show curated by Nina Myall [?] who's now Sydney based but was in London for years with Chiharu Shiota who's a Japanese artist living in Berlin so that's a really great two person show and I have the odd thing in London still. And I've been really fortunate with my galleries taking me to international art fairs. Grant Pirrie took me to New Delhi and Hong Kong and that's been exciting.

DB: Do you go to those when they're on?

CR: I didn't go to New Delhi and what I realised is if you don't turn up there's a different level of engagement with the work and I've decided to try and go when they're on because particularly the New Delhi one there are lots of architects particularly that are interested in the work. That was really hard; when you're not a face it's hard to follow up on in a way.

DB: So you could get commissions or whatever from there?

CR: Yes, yes.

DB: So when somebody asks you "What sort of work do you do?" - - -

CR: Yes, that's really tricky.

DB: - - - how do you describe it?

CR: I hate that question. I usually get my iPhone out and just say "Have a flick through".

DB: So you need to visualise it, really, to explain it?

CR: Yes, because I suppose my practice is just completely a cross media; it's three-dimensional, it's two-dimensional; I'm even trying to look at getting a video piece made now so it's just I'm not really interested in trying to shut my practice down into a media. I do find that I have these media that I'm now committed to which seems to be PVC, kind of bronze, this casting process.

DB: Because you're known for it, yes.

48.00 CR: Mind you, I do embroideries, yes, these drawings. I'll use a media that works for the practice.

DB: Do you ever paint? That's one you don't?

CR: No, I do use a paintbrush when I'm using those exhausts so that's a painting for me.

DB: Yes, it is, yes, of course.

CR: Yes.

DB: So you wouldn't say you're a sculptor?

CR: Well, I'm more likely to say I'm a sculptor than a painter. I do, actually, because I find that even when I'm say painting those carbon drawings the engagement to get to that point has always been sort – I think sculptors generally engage with material so it's been a real material process to get there. But I'm more likely to call myself an artist, sorry, than say I'm a sculptor.

DB: Yes, sure. And what about any projects in the city coming up? Have you got anything planned?

CR: There is one project that I apparently have but that's taking a very long time to come through but there's a building being built in Ultimo. It's not an easy project, actually. The people want a lot but they want that kind of iconic clad artwork onto their panels and the idea I came up with to digital print onto the panels looks like it had to go to Germany and come back and it's just a bit complex. But, yes, that's hopefully going to happen next year in Quay Street in Ultimo.

DB: So a lot of your time is spent actually sort of applying for things and doing that as well as sketches and early proposals?

50.02 CR: Yes. I used to say yes to everything that I was asked to apply for. I've become a little bit more selective now because I've spent a lot of time applying for things. You know, there's so much work in putting an idea together so I'm a bit more selective now where I think that I actually might have a look-in. If it's a call for proposals and there's fifty artists applying then I probably won't do it but I will if I'm one of five or even one of ten and it's an interesting site and my mortgage needs it then I'll apply for it.

DB: Do you work with assistants? You mentioned that when you do the solo work - - -

CR: I don't work with assistants in the studio. I probably have to bite the bullet a little bit at some stage and do that. Unfortunately, even though I'm earning a living I'm only just earning a living and I'm not earning a living well enough to be able to - - -

DB: Afford an assistant. Yes, of course.

CR: - - - afford an assistant, unfortunately. And I don't like not paying people. I know there is the system where you can actually get an intern but it just doesn't feel right for me and maybe I should because I know probably as a young artist I would have actually happily gone and worked with an artist for a few weeks. But, having said that, I suppose effectively with your foundry that's working - - -

DB: Yes, you're collaborating with people.

CR: Yes, I'm working with people a lot on the bigger projects.

DB: How do you organise your day if you've got children?

CR: Yes. Look, my kids are luckily heading towards ten and thirteen so they're at that age where they're much more independent. I'm very lucky my partner is completely hands-on. I'm also just a bit obsessive so I just drop the kids to school, I'm straight to the studio and they do a bit of after-school care.

52.01 I work at night, it just depends on my projects, but I have two things in my life and that's the studio and that's the family and when I'm not with one I'm at the other. And school holidays are about to start. They'll just come in here and do a few things.

DB: Will they, they'll come in here?

CR: Yes. They quite like it for a few hours.

DB: And your husband's still working in documentary filmmaking here?

CR: Yes, yes.

DB: So it's sort of flexible in that you can share the kids?

CR: Well, sort of. Yes, no, that's right.

DB: That's good. Well, that's probably about all I need to ask at the moment so thank you very much. That's great.

CR: Did I draw breath? How long was that?

Interview ends