

*At the time of this interview Pro. Ross Gibson was Professor of Contemporary Arts at Sydney College of the Arts.*

*Describe your practice?*

I'm a medium. I am always very interested in the half concealed secrets the world has for me (and for all of us). I like to be available to the world and let the meanings, or the feelings, or the propositions, or the revelations of the world, resonate in whatever way they need to. Then I convey them back out to an audience of some kind.

Sometimes that means it will be language based. Sometimes that will be an installation, some type of redeployment of bits from the world. Usually my work proceeds from some cache of evidence, or some set of fragments that the world has left behind, usually through some historical processes, usually through institutional processes. So I usually work with archival material of some kind.

All of the training I have had, with all of the techniques that I have got, all of the predispositions that have been built into me, I try to keep in abeyance when I encounter artworks, but also when I encounter the world (laughs). Certainly the past and the world have more in them than I know and so I am constantly trying to sense what might be worth investigating and what might be worth communicating out to people once I have investigated it, resonated to it and found the best way to bear witness to this stuff that the world has got for me.

*Implying a felt response rather than a structured intellectual response?*

I think that is right, but I don't think they happen simultaneously. The felt response (in a way aesthetic – and for me aesthetics are happening in the senses. I like the Webster Dictionary definition where aesthetics is 'that which is perceptible by the senses') – so that aesthetic sense operates and a kind of meaning making, or an interpretation can operate alongside and they both feed each other, but they oscillate, they shuttle. You are inside and outside, inside and outside. You can get it happening so quickly that it feels simultaneous, but I actually feel cognitively they are different.

*How would you make that artistic response tangible?*

It is case by case. It depends on what the stuff I am encountering, or what phenomena I am encountering, has for me, and what they require from me in response. A long running set of specific, but interrelated examples is the fifteen years I have done with the archive of crime scene photographs in the *Justice and Police Museum* in Sydney. Over fifteen years working with a bunch of different collaborators (many of them consistently over those fifteen years) we have made ten different responses to different portions and different aspects of that archive. These are photographs, but they are photographs often involving people, often involving gestures that people make and involving clothing. Depending on what you are going to try to resonate to and bear witness to, you come up with different ways of responding to the material. I have written many, many articles. I have written a novel that has the pictures involved in it. I have been involved in making immersive environments that behave almost like the weather (the weather is a weather of imagery and sounds) that responds to the movements you make when you come into an environment made of these pictures and these sounds. In that one what we were trying to do was to help visitors to the installation get a sense that they are in a charged space – how history moves through

ordinary spaces and that somehow that history is available to you for divination. Not only that, but that the spaces that we inhabit, the spaces we make, the spaces we move through and in which encounter each other, those spaces are systems that are alive somehow, a bit like the weather. Therefore that particular work that took five years to realise and was a concerted and elaborate response to certain aspects of the material, is an audiovisual, sculptural, time-based musical and textural thing. But I try not to presuppose what I'll do.

*Does that come from a skills base?*

If you add up all of the collaborators there is a skill base. There are modes of operating and some of them, one already has. I know I've got some skills. I learned very early (actually from teaching) to try to encourage people to be open to the material, rather than say 'I'm a really good guitarist, I'll go over to that thing and see what my guitar can do to it'. It is more go over to that thing and see what it needs. If you don't have what it needs, develop the skill, or find someone with whom you can collaborate in order to address what it needs, rather than plant oneself on top of the thing and shape it to what you already are.

*Is the audience important?*

Very much so, I always hope that some sort of transformative experience is made available to people, because that is what happened to me when I encountered the thing. So I hope to convey nothing specific necessarily. I don't want them to come out with a specific message or anything, but I do want people to feel some shift in their sensibility and in their understanding of the world that they are in.

Each project defines its terms. The crime scene work has lots of different concentric circles of focus. It's about any post-War War II town. It's about everyday life in everyday places that have some charge in them (that's actually is all places where human beings exist). It is about a particular town – Sydney. It's often about places in Sydney, but if you are not familiar with Sydney that doesn't discount your ability to be involved in it. I do like to have several kinds of frames of relevance for it, but mostly it is about setting up a scene, or setting up a situation, or a system in which your common sense gets altered somehow.

*An event?*

Yes, because something happens (laughs) and the event can happen in your head as much as anywhere. If I decide that this time the aspect of the material, or this batch of evidence that I'm addressing here needs to be a short poem, or it needs to be a five hundred word narrative written down on an ordinary piece of paper, I'm hoping that the event still happens in the head on the person who reads it.

*There are similarities with what I would be hoping to achieve with an object.*

Yes. At the same time most of my training (which is a prescription, or a predisposition I bring to things, even as I talk about trying to be open about everything) has convinced me that language is material, that language is 'stuff' that you move around and you panel beat and you change, and it has impacts on people in a similar way to me whacking you with something can have an impact on you.

My brother is a painter. When we were young I used to watch him moving, sloshing stuff around and moving this over to that, getting rid of that, changing that bit, and it occurred to me before to long that it's exactly the same thing that I do with writing. When I decide a writing response is the right thing to be doing, I'll throw something down then decide I have to take that out and move that over to there, get rid of that entirely, that's almost OK there, but I need to put a different tone in it. It is a real comfort to understand that language is material like that.

*You were using words of 'form'.*

Yes, structures and rhythms and moments of divulgence and concealment.

*If you were curating a contemporary art show and participants could come from any field, what would be your criteria for selection?*

I would decide on some kind of boundary, some sort of frame. This will determine what is inside. Sometimes that is put to you – it could be *Brazilian Post-Impressionism*.

*If I pull out that thing saying 'thematic' – it is going to be the best of contemporary practice.*

I would look for work that causes in me (and I suspect will cause in anyone else who encounters it) some shift in my consciousness and enhancement or intensification of my understanding of something. So if it is as broad as here do the next *Perspecta*, or whatever, I would look for people who are real artists and who are making real art. By that I mean I rely on a definition of art, which is that you recognise art when you see some shift. Some turn happens. Some articulation happens between your received commonsense and your new understanding of the world, or of that object, or that proposition, or that event or whatever. You perceive some shift, or turn in your understanding. That can and should happen all through your sensorium, your nervous system, in your aesthetic sense and in your intellection and your cerebration. Some works are more emphatically haptic and sensual, but some works are more austere in their senses, but are very powerful and sensual precisely because of their austerity. Some are very, very conceptual, but there is something about the crispness, or the elegance, or the unruliness of the concept, which I think is felt as well.

I am always looking for a complete spectrum of where the sense is happening – through the nervous system, through the senses, through the intellection. But you have felt some shift. That is why art is called 'art'. The etymology of it is that it is at a join; it's at a turn. That is why we have words like articulation and arthritis. Some shift has happened.

There is a basic principal that architecture may have been the first art in as much as someone threw a wall up against the ground. Someone did a transformative act, which changed the environment, and potentially changed one's experience in time and space.

*Where do you put boundaries between say literature, a painting, or an installation?*

Potentially there are no boundaries. Often though you are working with a set of pragmatic concerns, a set of expectations that people have. You do want to engage with those expectations. Usually, if it is someone inviting you to put on a show you ask,

“It’s in a gallery - right?” “Where will it happen?” The answer might be that it is at the MCA, or the Art Gallery of New South Wales and that will be the medium that I’m working in. That’s one frame, one of the several frames you usually work in. So people will bring their bodies to this place. They will physically turn up. That helps me already with my selection, but there will be a website? Yes. There will be public programs around it? There will be discussion? Will there be a catalogue? They are all other aspects. So some time-extensive thing like a five thousand word piece of writing might legitimately be part of the show (and it might not have to be an ancillary comment of the show). You might find someone who does exquisite language work and for whatever reason it is germane to that particular show.

*Do you find yourself placing work in categories when you first see it?*

No, not when I first see it, because of that process of trying to be as non-prejudicial as possible, trying to let whatever surprise the thing has register with me. Context is immediately available, but only available for my response. I try not to cast it out in front of me and use it as a grid necessarily.

*What enables you to dialogue with the work?*

First is usually some sort of holistic multi-sensory response (as open as possible). Then a nanosecond afterwards interpretive things start to happen – “What is this?” Contextually what is it like, or unlike, and what are its fellows? Is it inside itself, or is it signalling that it has fellowship with other things and how do I work with that? Then, has the space itself provided a context giving me cues for interpretation? Has the curator given me cues for thinking and feeling in response to it? All of these (and I don’t particularly step them out in any order) are all available and at any one moment I could disengage. At any one moment one could say I’ve got a lot of things I could be doing, I don’t think I’m going to invest much more in this.

That is happening with every single piece, with every single experience. A curator’s role is to prevent that disengagement. That engagement is intellectual, but it is also sensory. Curators have to ask themselves again and again why will people be here. That is what writers have to do constantly. The reader has always got something else to do. The work does not have to be easy. It can be troublesome, but it should be compellingly, or disturbingly, or provocatively so.

*Both emotion and intellect, right and left-brain?*

And the longer I am engaged the more those two are just oscillating. At the great Colin McCahon exhibition that was on at the Art Gallery of New South Wales several years ago why was I happy to spend hours there (not everyone was like that) and go back a few times? It is something to do with the sensory aspect of all those pictures that is continually satisfying and nutritious somehow. At the same time they are puzzling and if you hang with them for long enough you get little glimmers of insight. You feel your thought processes altering. There is more to think about. It keeps on giving. There is a kind of very well structured incompleteness in the work. They never ever cash out completely.

In art critical terms there is that word ‘antinomy’, a tense balance of opposites that you can get sometimes in really great work where it doesn’t settle, but it is not chaotic. Great Minimalist art does that for me – why is this working, it is just a bunch of bricks?

But there is something about the materiality, the spatial relationships, the meaning of those really simple elements, or the meaning available in those simple elements. At the same time that they are so austere that they almost only sensory, but they are somewhat semantic as well. So when you get that, “I am still thinking. I am still feeling as well. I am still here” – that is when really great work goes on.

*What if someone comments on a work being ‘resolved’?*

It depends on what is meant by ‘resolved’. You can recognise that a person knows what they are doing (laughs), which is a bit different, but I can see someone making a comment like the one you’ve mentioned when they actually mean here’s good art. But for me incompleteness, irresolution, very well managed asymmetry – all of those kinds of aspects, are very, very important to art that I come back to, or that I stay with a lot. It is almost a cliché to say it, but great Zen architecture and great Zen installation work usually has in it incompleteness, a tendency to perfection, but an asymmetry there, a rhythm of continuity and stagger.

*Leaving an inability to encompass it all?*

Exactly, and that sense that here is something that is actually smarter than I am. Here is something that has more in it than I have in me. Ergo it will be worth my while to spend time here because I will feel myself alter. I will feel myself intensify. or expand somehow. The event is in the relationships that your presence makes.

*Resolution is very much a ‘craftsperson’ response to an object. Your response to the Deb Jones glass piece was that you really liked it. Why was that?*

I’ve seen that piece in real life a few times (and I do love that piece). I seek it out and I go back to it. What is so strong about it for me is that each time I encounter it, it’s a bit like saying hello to an old friend, but each time I encounter it there is some other thing about light, some other thing about temperature, some other thing about the haptic, some other thing about my relationship of scale to that fragility which is also so solid. It keeps on causing in me new thoughts and feelings. It keeps on retuning me, no not retuning – not bringing me back to tune – but causing shifts. That grey pillow work is ‘resolved’ because really good artists know when to stop buggering around with the thing. It’s resolved, but what it puts in train is endless and that’s really good art.

Really great Zen objects, great Zen environments have stopped mucking around with it, but what is happening with them is endless when people encounter them. If you (the person encountering them) are available to them, they are available for transformation. They are available to help this transformative event happen.

*As a contemporary practitioner would you be as receptive to an object if it were made in glass or bronze?*

Absolutely and really simple things like at what point is something craft and at what point is it art (laughs), those questions are vital to anyone, but they are vital to me. The people I go through the world with and the people I know and love and hang out with, we all have these moments (and everyone does) when we go ‘that is art’. Sometimes it is not even in an art gallery. Sometimes it is something a neighbour has made and left outside their back gate. But that recognition of what is artful about it, what’s the art in it, (rather than that’s just a well crafted, or well-made thing) constantly interests me. I will take art wherever I find it.

*And that is defined by?*

It is causing some event. It is causing some transformative surprise. You can go into an art gallery expecting to be transformed, but not knowing how it will happen. For me really good artistic encounters are when you say, "I'm different now because of that".

*Being a singular material is not the issue?*

No. I understand it as a question, but no, it doesn't matter to me.

*It has been raised because often glass practitioners have chosen to concentrate on that one material.*

I suppose that is because it is such a cantankerous material I presume and you have to spend a lifetime getting skilled with it.

There are reasons why people tend to be writers (and in a way I tend to be a writer). That's the same thing, you are working with this very persnickety material called language and it takes a good ninety-five years to get any dexterity with it. At the same time what I love are artists who know that this particular set of issues that they are going to muck around with now need this particular set of modes or media.

*What about object as opposed to installation?*

As long as they have got something for me, as long as some transformative occurrence is possible, it doesn't matter what they are doing. As long as they are artists working on that transformative join.

*Have you seen the use of a singular material as a demarcation between 'craft' and 'contemporary practice'?*

I haven't seen that for a while. I can see that it would still happen, that there would be a kind of 'policing' happening that way. If I saw people doing easy categorising and easy inclusion and exclusion around that I would ask them if they were attending to the artistry here – isn't that a more important thing to do. No matter what this thing is, no matter what it is made of, or where it is occurring in space and time, isn't the first question, "Is there some artistic aspect to it, rather than what is this made of?"

*A colleague mention he had a contemporary in a major institutional art gallery say that they did not 'do' glass.*

How do you know you don't do glass? (laughs) I would have thought it was we do art wherever it happens. It could turn up as yak butter (we know it does).

*What elements are you reading when you approach a work?*

I try to just come to the work saying what have you got and what are you proposing to me? I take it from there. I am grateful to the kind of training I had as a writer and a critic. The really good teachers and the really good critics that I know and that I read, don't apply their taste to something. They wait for the terms of the work to be proposed to them and then they make judgements and analysis and descriptions around the terms that the work presents, otherwise you are just imposing your prescribed taste

and judgement on the thing. You are disallowing any possibility of surprise, of alteration, of having your commonsense shifted.

*The audience can suffer from being closed?*

Most people seem to expect something of an artwork. In a way so do I. I expect that I'll be shifted rather than I expect that it will be well made and that the horse will be in the right perspective when it is at the back of the paddock. I don't care so much about that.

Take it at a whole other angle. In literature and in criticism around literature in the last fifteen years or so there has been this never-ending kaffuffle about the historical novel and how the historical novel is a means by which one gains empathy with people from the past. For me that's the worst reason for reading. It is good to have empathy and compassion and all that, but I think that if you are empathising, you are actually saying you think you know them now, which actually means they are just like me, whereas I think a much more powerful thing is I no longer know myself now that I have encountered them. That is because the next step after I no longer know myself is you have to put yourself back together again. Usually that means you have been shifted somehow. The bad thing is if you put yourself back together with even deeper entrenchment of prejudice. But I no longer know myself temporarily is a really great 'event' (once again) to happen in art.

*Art introduces chaos?*

Yes, some sort of shift – or intensification. It can be that as well. There is a lot of that language of breaking down (which is a very modernist kind of language), but I think that a lot of great devotional art shifts you in an intensifying way. It deepens, or brings to the fore an aspect of experience that was probably in your sensorium, but wasn't as explicit, or as fore-grounded.

*Are you aware of differences between the way you read a work and the way others read that work?*

To the extent that everyone is a different sensibility, yes. Everyone brings their own context, brings their own huffiness, brings their own expectations, brings their own openness, readiness, and that varies from day to day in any one person, but that is where all of those contextual frames seek to focus you. Some of them are useful, but I try not to have those frames focusing me as I approach the thing. I like to use them as I reverberate out after the encounter.

*Your aesthetic sensitivity first?*

- and trying not to make that a set of prejudices. This is a word I am going to have to write something about soon, because it comes up again and again – 'availability'.

I have developed more and more this determination to just be 'available' to the work in the first instance, because that has in it not too much predetermination. It is just 'present-ness' to the work.

*You remove the frames that pigeonhole work.*

At the same time frames are necessary, or else it is all chaos. Your self is already a set of predetermined things. In somewhat homogenous societies (like nations used to be

configured) you could probably rely on about 80% homogeneity, a basic set of values, a basic set of 'self-ness'. What I love about the contemporary world is that those figures are shifting a lot. There are people from all over the place with different 'selves' coming towards this stuff now. There are still class determinations and so on.

*When you do position things you do look for context. You look to place it among other things?*

Not only where I could place it, but also where it has already been placed. What indicators are already with it, either because of its own formed qualities, or because of what a curator has done with it, what it is next to.

*Discuss the tendency to be self-referential within a field.*

Yes, and that's an artefact of professionalism, an artefact of specialising, an artefact of the twentieth century really. At the same time more and more people are more aware that you need several things. You need the specialty expertise and you need specialty expertise crossing expertise. Probably no one person can do all things, so what you need is a system where you have specific nodal expertise (or specialty) and a network of commensurability amongst all the nodes and the ability to move equally amongst those nodes. Therefore you need electricity in the network, or you need brokerage. For the system itself to be fully healthy and fully functional and fully responsive and flexible and resilient and strong, needs nodal special strength and extensive cross-nodal brokerage.

*A wider vision?*

Deep and wide. The ability to see that for that particular speciality in this moment to address this particular issue that particular speciality needs to connect to that speciality over there and how does that happen if someone is so deeply inside their speciality that they won't be aware of the other speciality. Partly this is my role within the university system these days. That is to be one of those 'broker' characters whose role is to be over everything. Not to be so lightweight on anything as to be inconsequential. I need to have nodal strength in a couple of places, but I need to be one of the people who can cause the nodal connections.

*Collectors want consistency. If you are relying on an income from your practice it is financially risky to change. It is harder to be experimental. Tenure in a university grants financial independence. Tenure enables risk taking in artistic practice.*

Same deal with me. I figured out that much quite young. This was as a writer, I saw when I was in my twenties I could become a staff writer for the *Bulletin*. I could be a stringer on several magazines. What would that mean? It would mean for the next thirty years I would be doing fairly generic work. I would be working and I would be writing and that would be good. I didn't want to do that. What did I want to do? I wanted to explore the mysteries of the world through whatever response I thought might go to those mysteries. There was no money in that – wait a minute that is about knowledge. Where is knowledge valuable? It is a bit like [Harvey] Littleton – as long as I keep moving knowledge around and making it available, producing it sometimes and making that knowledge useful, someone seems to pay for me to do that.

*Taking risks (but supported in failure), always moving into new areas and taking others with you, makes academic makers extremely valuable in change.*

I think so and quite multi-skilled, if you are a good one at it. You do have to know how to go into that mystery and do all that vigorous intuitive work. Then you have to be able to look at what happened in that intuitive work, look at all of that tacite knowledge you have built up and explicate it. Not only explicate it, but communicate it effectively so that over people can have an enhanced understanding of what they are going into.

*Balancing teaching and practice becomes a high-wire act.*

At the same time one can design one's teaching and practice so that they are better blended. I think to be cannier about that is one of the challenges of art schools and universities. There are real inefficiencies in the teaching methods (unchanged since the early nineteen hundreds really). Some of the younger generation of academics who were born digital and know about the value of social network feedback systems and peer assessment and so on, and how those are often built into communal discourse, those people (if they were allowed to) could set up teaching regimes that are quite different (but equally effective) from those ones that have been pretty well unchanged for the last one hundred and seventy years.

*The web?*

It is also worth asking about the atelia style (somewhat charismatic knowledgeable person at the front of the class) of education and if it still needs to be the predominant mode of tertiary education. That mode won't go away, but in so many circumstances that is still the primary, pre-eminent mode – the person that spends a lot of their time broadcasting to other people.

I think it is a provable fact that for the current generation of students most of their experience of the world is heuristic rather than didactic. Most of their experience of the world is explorative, triangulated, testing out for themselves and with their fellows, what their grasp of the world is. Given that people have already become very adept at that in their encounters with the mysterious world, why are they then coming into tertiary-education to be told to shut-up and listen?

In education theory everyone is addressing this, but it hasn't filtered down to the world yet.

*What of naming your works?*

I don't have a theory about that. It is a little bit like that process of waiting and waiting for the work to tell you what it needs and often waiting for the right title to occur. For me a good title is intriguing, attractive, in good faith with some aspect of the work, but not the whole story. It has to call people toward the work respectfully, but it can be playful. It can be mysterious.

*The title comes out of the work on or near completion?*

Usually. Sometimes it will turn up early and you say thank you for that. I will leave that on the shelf and I will see if that stays relevant. What is axiomatic for me (and this question or statement turns up again and again in the collaborative situation) – what does the work need? That is something that, in the teams of us that have worked on these *Crime Scene Projects* for fifteen years, one of us has said that many times. "I know you like that, or I know you want that – but what does the work need?" So 'what title does the work need' is often how the naming of the work comes through.

*A response to the event that is now the work?*

Yes, and a belief that the work is bigger than you. That it is more mysterious and interesting than you. The title is open and available. You keep yourself available to the work, because it is smarter than you are.