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# Conversation with Josh Milani

**Marysia Lewandowska:** Josh, I am interested in the genealogy of the cultural scene in Brisbane, a city where you were born and where you now run a successful gallery. Let's begin with some general comments relating to what you know of the establishment of the Institute of Modern Art (IMA) in 1975 and how this played a role in what you are doing now.

**Josh Milani:** So in Brisbane, I would say the conditions for contemporary art as we understand it today begin to evolve just before that in the 1960s. The IMA was founded in 1975 under the pressure I suppose of the forces of art, curators, and people within the art ecology at the time. Modernist forces had been at play via the Johnstone Gallery which was showing some of Australia's key modernists here, and the Contemporary Art Society. Its collapse led to the IMA.

**ML:** That modernist work, what you call modernist culture ... who was it driven by? By people at UQ, professional people elsewhere? Who was the biggest landlord of the time? I am interested in what impact property relations leave on culture.

**JM:** I don't know about that early history, that's a bit too far back for me but there was obviously the Johnstones. Nancy Underhill is a very important figure. There was the Churchers and Jon Molvig. Gertrude Langer and her husband Karl Langer were significant figures. He [Karl] studied architecture under Peter Behrens at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna where they met. He brought a modernist architectural aesthetic. She [Gertrude] was an art critic, perhaps the only art critic in Brisbane who was open to new ideas and progressivism in that modernist sense. I think she passed away in the early 1980s, I can't remember, but there are these figures in the history of Australia as there are in American culture who were kind of cultural portals. Nancy Underhill is another important figure in this regard, particularly in relation to art history. I think she brought with her this very sophisticated and very informed position, this other body of knowledge that didn't exist here previously. She set up the art history school at the University of Queensland, which has

**CONVERSATION**

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been very important in terms of developing the ecology here. The Johnstone Gallery was one of the key early galleries that fostered artists and showed modern work in Australia, along with Georges Mora in Melbourne and Rudy Komon in Sydney. Later there was Ray Hughes Gallery (est. 1969) and Bellas Gallery (est. 1987) which were the two other major galleries supporting local artists and showing contemporary work in Brisbane. As mentioned the Johnstone gallery was showing many of the key modernists in Australia. They were promoting and using that model of dealing—a representative dealer model—and that was the first time that had been done in Brisbane. Ray Hughes then opened his gallery and I think he played a role in the setting up of the IMA. But the IMA represents the first moment where there is a kind of public policy around modernist art or modern art, as I understand it. At that time the Queensland Art Gallery was really a very small institution with a small collection. They rented a floor of a building within the city, they didn't even have their own building at that time. That didn't come until I think 1982. They've played a museological role whereas the Institute of Modern Art has been extremely important in terms of creating a platform for experimental culture here in Brisbane.

**ML:** Can you say more about this; what do you think was experimental about the IMA?

**JM:** Well I suppose in the late 1960s there had been conceptualism and there were some Australian conceptual artists who were contributing to this movement. Ian Burn probably had been the most significant. He was from Victoria but goes to London and then New York. He's one of the founding members of Art & Language with Mel Ramsden, Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, Joseph Kosuth etc. I guess by the mid-1970s the kind of new art languages that were opening up performance, art, sound art, conceptual art, were starting to filter into Australia. In Sydney there was a gallery called Inhibodress that was open from 1970 to 1972 which was very important for Australia. Interestingly two of the three artists who ran it were from Brisbane: Mike Parr and Peter Kennedy. Many progressive artists from Brisbane left because of the cultural and political climate. But I think many new forms of art were emerging at that time. They were not being given a platform in an institutional or commercial context. The Institute of Modern Art is precisely the place where that kind of practice could unfold. Similar spaces were opened in other states in Australia; it was an Australia Council initiative under [Prime Minister] Gough Whitlam. But I guess to answer your question I am referring to the experimentalism that was opened in the 1970s, after conceptual art.

**ML:** Was there an art school here at the time? And did it embrace any of that experimentalism?

**JM:** I don't think I am the person to answer that question. I think a good person to talk to about that would be Luke Roberts because he was involved at the art school in the 1970s. The art school was called Seven Hills College of Art, it was named after the Seven Hills suburb. It was a kind of a technical college rather than a university. That evolved into the Queensland College of Art, which is in South Brisbane not far from here. My mother would be another person to talk to about Seven Hills because she did a residency there in the late 1970s.

**ML:** Tell me more about the key people in the intellectual circle here ... Your parents must have been part of that, too.

**JM:** They were involved in a number of ways with the IMA. I was very young at the time but my mother went into practice once everyone had gone to school. But she didn't go to art school. At that time she produced performative-based installation art. I suppose you'd call it eco-feminism.

**ML:** Does she have an archive of that?

**JM:** Yes, she does. It's interesting actually and its not very well known. She had shows with the IMA on Elizabeth Street, I think it was in 1982, and later at Ann St, in 1993.

**ML:** What is her name?

**JM:** Lyndall Milani. So that was my first encounter with experimental art, through my mother's circle of friends. They were an interesting group of artists working out of an artist run space called One Flat. I think it was the second artist run space in the history of Brisbane. There were a couple of others like Q-space and E.M.U. At One Flat artists like Eugene Carchesio and Hollie showed. Janelle Hurst is another key person you might want to talk to at some point. She was an early adopter of video at the time. She was quite radical, which was problematic in Brisbane because it was a very repressive political and social climate.

**ML:** Are you still talking about the 1970s?

**JM:** This is early 1980s. One Flat was set up 1981–82. One thing to understand about Brisbane and also about Australia at that time was this idea of the 'tyranny of distance'. Most art from the centre—which at the time was seen as New York—was coming through art magazines and periodicals and by the time they were shipped the information was passé. We would get *Artforum* months or years

after everyone had read it. It would take years by the time the information had filtered into the art community here and evolve into some form of practice.

**ML:** It sounds similar to Poland before 1989. Although, in the 1980s, there was already a lot of contact with the West since Poland is in the centre of Europe, and people were travelling, exchanging, and bringing in publications. My first job was to translate articles from *Artforum* for art students at the Academy of Fine Art in Warsaw.

**JM:** One of the great ideas expressed by Ian Burn is that the centre is only the centre if there is a periphery, and in a way that empowers the periphery. You could argue that is what we are seeing in art at the moment. He almost predicted this shift. Perhaps it doesn't have to be thought of as power, but certainly a shift in emphasis. I think in places like Australia, which are still very isolated, and places like Poland, when you were starting your career, having access to an internationalist type of language was important at that moment. It seems to me 1968, and the 1970s here, is when that started to happen. There was this attempt to internationalise our art, not to look inward, because the whole history of Australian art has been dominated by the landscape, or at least that is the way it has been framed. And insofar as it has been a history of landscape, it has been a history of the symbolic ownership of the land. So the British artists painted the landscape, often empty of Aboriginal culture, empty of Aborigines. It was a way of mapping their belief systems onto the landscape through art, to see it as European, to see it being divided up and being territorialised. So in 1971, there is this real break where you have Inhibodress, which is a conceptual art space in Sydney, and you also have Papunya Tula, which is the emergence of the Aboriginal art movement. Those two concurrent positions converge in the 1980s. One entails Aboriginal people asserting their culture and ownership of the land through art and the other is about destabilising the imperialist model through the dematerialisation of art and its normal modes of distribution; they formed networks with other conceptual groups over the world using mail art. So in 1971, it seems to me that there was this significant shift, where something happens, where Aboriginal culture starts asserting itself in new ways through art, and conceptualism opens Australia up to an internationalist dialogue. I mean that had already been at play in an aesthetic sense, but I think conceptual art was the first serious kind of internationalist dialogue that occurred, where the artists became participants in a dialogue rather than recipients of culture. So, Peter Kennedy for example, was having dialogues with artists in South America such as Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. He was in dialogue with Lucy Lippard, he was in dialogue with Eastern European artists, and they were mailing art to each other, and exhibiting. So they exchanged work as an attempt to resist the normal channels of art distribution.

**ML:** Going back a step, I'm wondering what role your parents played in setting up the local art scene. Can you talk more about that?

**JM:** I don't know if they had a role in setting it up, but they had a role in certainly giving it support at certain points. Mum was on the board of the IMA. My father is from an Italian migrant family, he had basically gone to university, studied law, became a lawyer, and was working at that time in part with the Italian community. He had a pretty good living, and he was collecting Australian modernist art. So I lived with art at home and we did the rounds of galleries on the odd Saturday. Dad's main contribution was financial. He owned the building in the city in Edward Street where the IMA was for a period, and I think he may have given them favourable rent terms.

**ML:** What area of law did he specialise in?

**JM:** He is a general practitioner, but at the time he was one of a few Italian-speaking lawyers in Brisbane, so part of his role was looking after members of the Italian community. The Italians who came here worked very hard and were able to make a decent living, and were able to acquire property, so he handled their property transactions and so forth. Because most of them had come with nothing they just worked and saved. The backdrop to all of this is that they were in a very conservative social climate. But this new migrant culture was also contributing to the cultural climate. I think the migrant waves, post-World War I and certainly, post-World War II were bringing in new forms of culture, and an openness to new forms of culture. Dad didn't come from a middle-class Italian family, they were really a peasant family, but through education he was able to get a law degree, and he was able to do an arts degree, so he learned about the history of ideas and art. He speaks three languages. As someone from his generation he was probably quite progressive, even though in some ways he is a very traditional man.

**ML:** You mentioned your father's property.

**JM:** Yes, he owned the property where the IMA moved, I can't remember what period it was, but it was certainly up until the early 1990s, and I believe he used to give them a good deal. Mum was on the board of the IMA, so I guess that played a factor. On the floor below the IMA was the Church of Scientology. He used to get the Church of Scientology to subsidise the Institute of Modern Art's rent.

**ML:** Wow! (Laughs)

**JM:** (laughs) And, it was a great space actually, and there was an amazing elevator that you went up.

**ML:** Does the building still exist?

**JM:** Yes, the building still exists, though my father no longer owns it. Now it has a number of things, like a Sony shop. For some time it had a men's tailor on the second floor called The Cloakroom. It still has the charm of its past inscribed into the building. There are not many buildings that do in Brisbane, most old buildings have been torn down. We had a very aggressive, pro-development government from the late 1960s, through to the late 1980s, a very corrupt government.

**ML:** Thirty years of digging.

**JM:** Precisely. The fellow's name was Joh Bjelke-Petersen, and he was the Premier of Queensland, and he was a very pro-development, anti-elitist, culturally illiterate, totalitarian leader, who was eventually thrown out for corruption. I mean he was really very corrupt, and he was in charge of a deeply corrupt government. The Fitzgerald Inquiry in 1987 put an end to his reign [which had begun in 1968].

**ML:** But a lot of damage had been done already.

**JM:** A lot of damage, and it took a long time for there to be a restoration of political relationships between the public and politicians. I think one of the interesting things about Brisbane was that it was the most culturally conservative city in Australia. I think to a certain extent, it hasn't really changed that much. It is still a frontier town, and we still have very barbaric attitudes towards Aboriginal people, and I think that is being extended to the handling of this refugee crisis, which is going on at the moment, and the handling of what they call 'illegal immigrants'.

**ML:** Where are they mainly coming from?

**LM:** Well at the moment, mainly coming from the Middle East. You could argue we are complicit with all of the dysfunction in the Middle East and the collapse of their systems of government, through our participation in successive Afghani, and Iraqi wars. Our former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, who died recently, recognised that our participation in the Vietnam War meant that we should share our burden of refugees, who were fleeing post-war Vietnam. And he

oversaw the migration of 100,000 Vietnamese, and settled them in major cities. West End here in Brisbane has a large Vietnamese community. As does Western Sydney and Richmond in Melbourne. Fraser was a conservative but in some ways he was a humanitarian, and in some ways a liberal, in the true sense of the word. He wasn't as regressive as the conservatives we have today. Brisbane was a town that was settled after Sydney and Melbourne, and was settled essentially as a further penal colony. Initially, it was settled to be temporary, it wasn't necessarily going to be a permanent city, but eventually things take hold. Atrocities took place against the Aboriginal population of the area and as the farmlands pushed out into the different parts including Northern Queensland, you had different forms of violence perpetrated on Aboriginal people. There were massacres, there was poisoning of water holes, there was the practice of gibbeting, where they used to hang Aboriginal bodies from the trees, so it would keep the other tribes away, because the Aboriginal people had quite a different relationship to land, moving around and across territory. Whereas the British system was to divide the territory up, fence it, which seems ridiculous when you go out into this countryside, and you just see these fences. It's really a form of madness.

**ML:** Do the fences still exist?

**JM:** The fences? Oh yeah, and they are always being rebuilt. Fencing is what convicts would go and do after they would get out of jail. They could even be given their own bit of land far out. So, the frontier kept expanding, but I think that frontier mentality in Brisbane in a funny way, has never been lost, it is still somewhere in the psyche. It's only 180 years old, I mean it's a little bit older than that, but still it's not an old city.

The kind of racism in Queensland towards Aborigines is pretty apparent. It's based on the idea of 'Terra Nullius', that was the way Australia was settled, it wasn't conquered it was 'empty land' that could just be taken, so Aborigines were essentially treated like animals, or vermin, essentially, to be eradicated. I don't think that has changed, because we have just recently had the Prime Minister [Tony Abbott], in reference to the remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, referring to the cost of keeping those communities in the desert going, as being disproportionate to...

**ML:** Their contribution?

**JM:** Yeah, that's right. So he said we can't continue to fund these 'lifestyle choices', well that's their own land. And secondly, those communities that were set up, were set up by the Government. What they would do is herd all the Aboriginal

tribes into reserves to secure the land for mining and farming; they would herd all the Aboriginal tribes up and then confine them in these townships which were set up artificially.

**ML:** Were these townships perceived as easier to manage?

**JM:** They could manage them and keep them off those lands, so that those lands could then be used for farming and mining. What is happening now is an attempt to move those townships because, since then we've had 'native title'. So it's a further attempt to try and get access to those lands. Because once you move the people off, they can no longer establish a spiritual connection to the land, and that is one of the legal tenants of native title, that they have to demonstrate an ongoing spiritual connection to the land.

**ML:** How do people demonstrate that?

**JM:** Well, through historical records, through oral histories, and photographic histories, presumably. But they have to show that it was ongoing since settlement. Now for most tribes, that's impossible, because they have been moved on, so you know it's pretty problematic.

**Tess Maunder:** Yes, there have been lots of protests all around the country in response to the proposed change of law that would see the forced removal of Indigenous Australians in regional communities in Western Australia.

**ML:** How new is it?

**TM:** I think it has only actively been discussed in the last six months.

**JM:** It's happening with the Western Australian government now, but it's happening everywhere. The point of where I am taking this conversation is to talk about the socio-political backdrop, to which all of this is taking place. So you know, Queensland is a society that was very much built on the destruction and dismantling of Aboriginal communities. The main sources of income are farming, mining, and tourism. One of the main attractions for tourists is Aboriginal culture, which is one of the ironies, in terms of their very significant contribution to international tourism. Aboriginal people form something like 2% of the population. In addition to the remote communities, they've continued to live in urban contexts, like in Brisbane, in areas around West End, and South Brisbane, where you will find remnants of large aboriginal communities. In Sydney, it's in the area of Redfern, but even those communities are under threat because of



gentrification and urban development, property development, and this trend for inner city living, that is a further kind of threat to their communities.

**ML:** Do they participate in mainstream business, politics, or property development?

**JM:** Not in a substantial way. The person to talk to about that is Richard Bell, I think he would be able to tell you more about that. But in terms of this backdrop that I'm describing, because Queensland was so socially and politically conservative, I think it has produced some of the most politically powerful and astute artists. I'm talking about people like Gordon Bennett, Richard Bell, Tracey Moffatt, and Judy Watson who were really in the first wave of what you would call Urban Aboriginal art, which is a problematic term. They grew up in the Joh Bjelke-Petersen era, under this quasi-fascist government. It was deeply racist, and art gave them a platform on which they could explore the issues of identity and react against the forces that were determining their lives, in some way. It was a place where they could express or assert a space to explore identity as Aboriginal people, or a hybrid identity. Then there were other people like Luke Roberts, who was working from the early 1970s in Brisbane, who has been very important in dealing with sexual politics through art in this country. During pride marches there are stories of the police being told to go down to King George Square and to just bash them mercilessly. The police had disproportionate force, and the government was so corrupt it predictably became a police state, and the police would try and have some sort of social control. Brisbane had a significant punk movement here as well. The police tried to control the punk movement, but failed.

**ML:** So the police were very determined to eliminate any form of otherness, and reinforce normative behaviour?

**JM:** Yes, but in a way, within the art and music scenes it created a sort of oppositional reaction, and culture in all its forms became the space where people who didn't want to belong to the normative, were asserting their identity. I think that is true of many cultures around the world at that time but Queensland represented a particularly concentrated version of that in the Australian context, because it was the most repressive. So in Melbourne for example, you don't find as much political art being made because there wasn't as much to push against. So you will find that the art down there, even to this day, is much more inclined towards formalism.

**ML:** So, how did the IMA become a home for these more political expressions? How was that reflected in their exhibition program? How was it connecting with the wider community?

**TM:** It was perceived as more than an exhibition space. It was essentially about, in this conservative context, having a space to discuss the politics that informed the minority groups that Josh has mentioned. Then as the IMA went on, these key figures then had their first exhibitions, and started to form relationships with young curators and writers, and then art criticism began to expand, with publications such as *Eyeline* beginning in the 1980s. That's why Marysia, it will be interesting for you to look at our publications as well while you are here. So yes, all of those things were happening at once, and growing and shifting over the forty-year history.

**ML:** Would you say Tess that it has been reflected in their exhibition program?

**TM:** It depended on who was the director at the time.

**JM:** Very much so.

**ML:** So the director's role was central to what was shown and how the IMA functioned?

**JM:** For a long time what happened was, in the early years of the IMA, many of the directors were brought up from Melbourne, so it was then pejoratively known as the 'Institute of Melbourne Art'. If you have curators from elsewhere, what you want is for them to take the local culture into new contexts which is why I think having international directors like Aileen [Burns] and Johan [Lundh] is exactly what the IMA needs at the moment because they are then in the position to connect our local culture to a broader dialogue, at a time when the decentralisation of art has opened up a space for Australian art as part of a bigger, global narrative. If you bring someone from Melbourne and they just bring their friends from Melbourne up to show—which was what was happening in the 1970s and 1980s—what does that do for the local culture? John Nixon's [IMA director from 1980–1982] directorship was probably the biggest case in point. The only Queensland artist he supported was Robert MacPherson. So this predominantly formalist rhetoric from Melbourne just got supplanted here, and it was excluding many of the really interesting things that were going on here locally.

**ML:** The community that you were describing a moment ago seemed a lot more politicised. How did they respond to this?

**JM:** I'm not the person to answer that but they really don't emerge until the mid-1980s. So I suppose this is kind of fermenting in the background.

**ML:** So the period before that is purely formalist?

**JM:** Not purely formalist, I mean because you did have some conceptual and feminist art being supported. But to be honest I don't know the program well enough to comment on those early years. You would need to talk to others for that. But you did have installation art, performance art, you had interesting figures from overseas brought in to give lectures, so it still was a place where progressives could go and access, and take part in something that was not normative. I think there was a reaction to John Nixon, and his tenure. Peter Cripps [IMA director from 1984–1986] was considered better because he fostered a lot of local culture. He gave shows to a whole lot of local artists like Eugene Carchesio, Scott Redford, and Bronwyn Clark-Coolie. There is a whole generation at that time who he was instrumental in engaging with. He's considered an important director. Sue Cramer [IMA director from 1987–1989] was significant as well. After Nixon left there was an exhibition called *No Names* and it was just Brisbane artists, and it was a reaction. It was Barbara Campbell who curated it, and she was the first Brisbane director—although I think she was an 'Acting Director'—so now we are talking 1983 or something like that. This show *No Names* is mounted and it's very inclusive, all these Brisbane artists who are finally getting a chance to show at the IMA; they had been excluded from their own institution in a sense.

**ML:** They were the Aborigines in this case?

**JM:** In a way. But the political Aboriginal movement in art becomes more visible around 1987. Luke Roberts had a show at the IMA in 1982, and that was very progressive—it was dealing with kitsch and gay culture, so that was quite a radical show. You look at the work now, and it looks like it could have been made by someone working today. It was this kind of amazing assemblage, which you see being made all over New York at the moment.

**ML:** Did the exhibition *No Names* really alert people to the fact that there was a vital local art community who had something to say that was different from what was being said elsewhere?

**JM:** Yes, that time was seen as a turning point. A whole lot of artists emerge after that like Tracey Moffatt, Gordon Bennett, Judy Watson, and Richard Bell, who get their first opportunity at the IMA. Nick Tsoutas [IMA director from 1990–1994] gave shows to many of these figures. He was an old-fashioned Marxist who came from a Greek migrant background. For him these were artists who were destabilising the colonial construct. But I think many migrants

also felt somewhat excluded from mainstream culture at that time. Even the Italians. There is a very interesting way of thinking about it.

**ML:** The anxiety around ‘otherness’, whether it means Aboriginal, feminist, gay, non-white European, or non-conformist has always been the domain of what artists could bring to culture to broaden the scope of the possible debate.