

Helen Fuller – Interview Transcript 2023

00:18

[music]

Steph 00:18

Hello, and welcome to the SALA podcast. My name is Steph and today I have the pleasure of catching up with Adelaide born artist Helen Fuller in her home studio in the suburbs of Adelaide. Thank you for turning the air con - it's a lovely warm day, and it's beautiful and quiet. We've had to come through the trees to get here, and it's it's very special to be here. I will acknowledge that we are meeting on the traditional lands of the Kaurna People and pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging. Helen, thank you for inviting me in and making time to chat today.

Helen 00:57

Thank you.

Steph 00:59

I must confess, we have the same last name. And I went through a rabbit hole of trying to figure out if we were related last night, and I didn't find anything. Okay, you're lucky. But I can thank you because I inadvertently found a few more rungs on the family tree. So thanks for that.

Steph 01:17

And coming back to what we're here for the interview, I better just acknowledge also that I'm not even going to attempt to cover as much ground in this chat as there is in the book about you that's just come out. We can definitely talk about that later. But let's let's keep it simple and start with how did you find your way to becoming an artist?

Helen 01:39

Um, well, it was a long way, a long pathway. Well, if I think back just to early childhood really just playing around and drawing and fiddling, that somehow or other, when I went to school, I really enjoyed art classes. They were very just using horrible old greasy wax crayons, and butchers paper. But that was the material medium at the time. But I knew that every week, I'd just look forward to the art lesson where you could just relax and be who you wanted to be. So I could only see it as a pathway from stepping along. But in my family household there wasn't any art practice. Dad was an engineer, so he did have graph paper and very... what was it... double H lead pencils with very sharp points and rulers and things

Steph 02:48

so good tools?

Helen 02:49

Yeah. Yeah. And I guess he taught you to draw freehand straight lines, and sharp arrows.

Steph 02:59

mm, I bet!

Helen 02:59

But yeah, not. You know, like you see lucky kids now that are just gung-ho into a pile of paint; parents indulging, going to the art shop and coming back with the best. No. It was all minimal. But when it came to school, primary school, particularly the chalkboard drawings, that I was always the one that got invited to draw the holly or the Easter rabbit or whatever, because obviously my skill base was recognized in the classroom, but not at home.

Steph 03:43

Well, maybe Yeah, that does sound like you were given the job of artist, as early as then. So yeah, that's great. Now you've worked across -we haven't quite touched on them yet- but you've worked across various media and materials. Two dimensional work, three dimensional work... when someone in the present day asks you what medium you work in, is there a simple answer?

Helen 04:06

No. No simple answer, but probably more relevant in the last, I think about 12 years, 14 years, I've I have been making ceramic pots, "useless pots", basically forming the, you know, vessel form called pots and I just hand build, and I find it easier to go and make another pot than to go and do a work on paper or painting. It's just probably the immediacy of putting the hands into the clay. And you just get started straightaway... whereas yeah... it's not as hard on your head.

Steph 04:49

No it's more tactile and yeah, fantastic. Do you consider yourself as someone who has, you know, maybe moved through different favored mediums at different times, or is it more that you've just collected these different languages to sort of have at your disposal?

Helen 05:07

I suppose maybe in my weird history of getting to art school, it was. I, I wanted to go to art school full time. I've, I didn't do well enough at school. And my father therefore, prevented me from going and so I just had to go leave school and get a job. One of them as a clerk in an insurance company, like really, just jobs. And then eventually, I did get to art school, only part time, but in the I studied to be a secondary art teacher. So when you did that, the art school time was all split up into many different subjects from life drawing, drawing, tech drawing, painting, textile, printmaking. So I suppose the fact that I really liked art as a kid, I think I just probably did reasonably well in all areas, but then you you didn't follow things for yourself, they were prescribed subjects to achieve a goal and hand in work. I guess I always did okay. But ya know, maybe that just made you diverse in your skill base. And I suppose, within my family, there were people that were into craft like woodwork and mum

sewing and I guess that came into it, where if you're going to do something, you had to do it properly. So you skill ups. Yeah. Back of the sewing had to be as good as the front of it. So yeah, I do have those, and I suppose when I have been making things, you just sort of free range through what skill you need to make something happen. Yeah, yeah. Don't know how you say it really.

Steph 07:17

So they're not, you know, super distinct different modes per se. It's more just a happening.

Helen 07:22

Yeah. And it's sort of sometimes I think of myself as a 'Jack of all trades, master of none'.

Helen 07:27

[music]

Steph 07:34

Now can I ask -I don't know if this is going to be an easy or a hard question- but what themes are you exploring in your work?

Helen 07:42

Well, I think a lot of my work has been probably autobiographical and probably replaying aspects of my childhood experiences. My father going to the rubbish tip, with a trailer full of junk, trailer full of junk coming home from tip. 'cause Dad always had projects. And so we were all involved as scavengers to glean the tip. And I think that part I think I've always been pretty interested in recycling as you know, a proper way of looking at it but in actual fact it's just just loving rubbish and playing with it and probably because it had been discarded there's no use for it. But within your creative self, you see all these potentials and tinker away and you don't have to have money to go to the shop to buy these materials. Generously donate it back into the tip, so yes, I think that fascination for old...

Steph 09:02

Do you think there was a preciousness for the object from from some of that? Or was it more about the vehicle for other things?

Helen 09:10

A bit of both really, isn't it. Because, I mean, I still if I'm walking and you see something that had broken crockery or whatever, I will pick it up. Or seeds, or leaves, or whatever. It's something I did when I was young, and I'm not young now, but I can still just bend over and reach without going into it. But um, yeah, I think because if you look around here, there's all scavenged bits and pieces. I have a dog and the dog walking... This is a reduced thing here but a lot of bark coming off of trees a while while ago, and there were kind of stunning curling pieces. And so some of that bark too, I use to texture into the pots as well like printing, form printing with leaves and things. Banksia.

Steph 10:20

Oh, yeah, look at that, such a spiky branch.

Helen 10:25

Which, that all links into the pottery that I have been making as well, which probably informed by looking at seedpods.

Steph 10:37

Actually, now that I'm looking around here, this dried bits of nature and all in sort of pockets of the room.

Helen 10:44

Yeah. That paper form, which was from a earlier exhibition from years ago that was about wallflowers, and pattern cut to the style that mum would have made as a dress for me when I was a kid. And hanging it upside down it becomes vessel-like, rather than frock-like. Yeah. And there was that thing to that Methodist upbringing that you didn't have a lovely full skirt of fabric that you could twirl. It was just as functional, try and get something to cover your body as cheap possible without showing and revealing.

Steph 11:32

Yep, no surplus fabric.

Helen 11:34

no.

Steph 11:36

Yeah, what a great connection. And what do you think it is that really drives you to explore those kinds of things and keep returning to them,

Helen 11:51

I think came probably more after I had my son, well post his birth I ended up coming back to Adelaide from Brisbane and I did my master's degree at UniSA down at Underdale. And I think my body had changed shape everything. In fact, my whole life has changed. And I think coming home, my father had died the day Alex was born. And coming home for many reasons. I think confronted with the family again, because when I lived in Brisbane, I was up there totally by myself, there was no family connection whatsoever. So you sort of created your own weird self. But coming back, suddenly, you're hit with coming back into the family after having been absent, as a mother. And I suppose as a mother, you started wondering more about your grassroots and influences. And I suppose that body changing shape, a lot of the work had to do with clothing. Clothing I couldn't fit into any more, but also clothing and dressing Alex as a baby. Sometimes you'd like with the opening to put his head through the arms. Sometimes a nightmare. Struggling with that. So yeah. I started making sculptures then with like, yeah, with clothing, stretching, clothing over forms that are a bit kite-like as well. But I think that self thing, apart from the material self there was the psychological.

Steph 13:46

Yeah. And those changed dynamics.

Helen 13:48

Yeah and probably depression, became a reality to that, um, I can say it, I've been medicated for it. But maybe finding my way through that and resolving issues, exploring.

Steph 14:08

Yeah. Working through it.

Helen 14:10

Yeah. Sort of going in to the inside world, rather than the external.

Steph 14:15

Yes. Facing it all.

Helen 14:18

Anyway.

Steph 14:19

that's great. I think that's what it's all about, where all the greatest work comes from

Helen 14:24

depression? [laughs]

Steph 14:25

Well, the difficult things and facing it head on. But maybe in a short word, perhaps.

Helen 14:33

Yeah, well it's therapeutic, and I think that's even where at the time when I started working with clay I had just finished an exhibition of paintings. And they were becoming rather very fine lines because I suppose the painting I started going into the surface, or the canvas or the weave of the ... and it got really... I think it just got too

Steph 15:05

too sort of fine?

Helen 15:06

yeah, something had to...give

Steph 15:08

Something had to give

Helen 15:09

Yeah. And I suppose that's where I was friends with Stephanie Radok and she used to go to a hobby class at Hubby Court where every kid went to their art class. So that's when this was the inspiring pamphlet for Hubby Court

Steph 15:29

oh lovely.

Helen 15:31

So that was pottery and sculpture classes at Hubby Court, and that was where I first touched the clay really.

Steph 15:41

Wow yeah.

Helen 15:42

Yeah. So I find that, yeah...

Steph 15:45

yeah, no it sounds like that's a sort of recurring thing of 'nope, something's got to shift or sidestep, or, you know, and there's a new path and new work. That's awesome.

Helen 15:57

When I was doing the paintings, I was listening a lot to -well I still do- ABC classical. And yeah, it was sort of like doing these large paintings with a double O brush, so really, really fine. And it was sort of like thinking oh, classical music like a violinists take this one stroke with their [bow] and thinking oh yeah.

Steph 16:29

the gesture

Helen 16:30

It was all this strange thinking that I got into, whereas now rolling sausages to the handbuild coil pots, or pinch pots. It still that same strangeness, but it's multiple actions, you know, that repetition. It whether you're pressing out a form with your thumb or rolling a sausage in coiling.

Steph 16:57

It's nice how that gesture crosses the material though, you know from painting into the clay, that's still how you're approaching it.

Helen 17:08

Yeah well it's still that linear thing.

17:11

[music]

Steph 17:16

Well, we've both got the lovely book, on our laps and referring to it, so we, we should probably talk about it. So this has just come out. And it's the outcome of the South Australian Living Artist Publication, which is an opportunity supported by the South Australian government through Arts SA to produce a high quality book celebrating the work of a South Australian artist. And I feel like I'm watering it down by calling it a book because it's a big undertaking, you know, there's an application, that then get selected. And then there's input from so many people: yourself, the writers Ross Wolfe, Sasha Grbich, and Glenn Barkley, Erica Green of Samstag Museum of Art in UTSA, Melinda Rackham, all the photographer's images, the design, all coming together into this pretty hefty hardcover book that's published here in SA by Wakefield Press. How do you feel now that it's out in the world? Because it's, it's a lot and it's all about you, and, oh, yeah, I don't know what that's like.

Helen 18:21

Well, it's kind of like an affirmation that you do exist -or did exist. When it was talked about as being South Australian living artist I thought 'I could be the first dead one'. [both laugh] But anyway, I managed to survive, and I'm still here. But yeah, it's interesting, and it was very clever, it's a handsome looking book, thanks to everyone that contributed to making it. But also, I see it, on a personal level, it's a bit like a diary. And I feel like I own it, because it is my work. But it also... my work has gone on many pathways, tangents, and whatever, but somehow or rather being glued in to pages, and, that are bound, and you can flip through it, I can see. I mean, it brings it together. Otherwise, it's a pretty scattered life.

Helen 19:24

[both laugh] It's amazing when you can see it through someone else's perspective, isn't it? Those connections and chaos becomes a bit more...

Helen 19:34

Yeah, I know. And when Melinda Rackham was in the first phase of going through my archival clutter, mess, whatever with great patience. Yeah, there were moments where some of it was almost painful as well because it was fit like exhuming the dead

Steph 20:01

what a word!

Helen 20:03

But at the same time, there were, I don't know, just,

Steph 20:07

yeah, that would be a process

Helen 20:09

because you're sort of looking at, probably 50 years. And it feels to me like only yesterday I was painting a tree or something, but at the same time, I haven't painted a tree for 50 years or something. And I guess it's a pathway of having had many life experiences, traveled, and known a lot of people, and then in retrospect, now, you see, some of those people have dropped off the planet. And so yeah, it's a strange process.

Steph 20:49

Yeah, I find it interesting because there's... it's not just, you know, a picture book of work. It's the way that the journey weaves in, and you know, the turns and yeah, which I think is an important distinction to make. It's not just a coffee table book. It's this really polished thing.

Helen 21:11

Yeah, it was pretty amazing to because Ross Walfe, who's great at asking questions, and just probing a little bit more and that. Yeah, he was very helpful at unleashing

Steph 21:32

Teasing things out?

Helen 21:33

Yeah, teasing things out. Yeah.

Helen 21:37

That's nice, though. And affirming, that's a great word for and I'm glad that that's how it feels as well. And then, as well as this, in keeping with tradition, as the recipient of the South Australian Living Artist Publication Opportunity, you were then also the feature artist for the 2023 SALA Festival. And there was a picture of your work on the official program, which we've got right here, and the posters. I was wondering if you could give a bit of backstory to that work, because it was seen by, you know, people around the state and I'd love to hear about it in your words.

Helen 22:21

Well, I tell you what, it was strange seeing the image on the cover, and also seeing the poster... everywhere. And it was sort of like, that's my work, but how did it get there? You know, like, nailed to a tree, or stuck in a cafe. But the piece of work itself was one of five pieces that were acquired by the Art Gallery of South Australia from the previous year. I was the artist exhibiting at Samstag Museum. And Khai Liew was also involved in doing the gallery installation. And anyway, five of these pots were acquired, and so exhibited during the SALA time. And those five pots have a heavy link to flora, Australian flora, like seed pods and things. I actually haven't got that pod anymore, because after, I had a bit of a tidy up, and I decided I'll get rid of all this stuff.

Helen 23:47

And then someone like me comes and asks!

Helen 23:49

And probably that pod is now in the garden out there.

Helen 23:55

well what pod was it that that one was based on?

Helen 23:57

Well it would have been a gumnut, a eucalyptus.

Steph 24:04

oh!

Helen 24:05

Yeah. Because then that's the outer form,

Steph 24:10

and then you would have had the little bits coming out the top, i can see it! Oh that's so brilliant, because I have to have been staring at it for a long time, and hadn't made the connection. So that's lovely. Yeah, I can almost see the little blossoms coming out the top.

Helen 24:25

Yeah. And I think I have a lot of them, like this was an old one

Steph 24:33

Oh, yeah. That's lovely. For some reason that's nostalgic for me as well. I don't know why.

Helen 24:39

Yeah. I think like when I was a kid too, you would collect eucalyptus pods and make pipes out of them or whatever

Steph 24:48

Yeah they kind of are a crafty thing.

Helen 24:50

Yeah, um, not the Jacaranda pod... making Robin Redbreasts out of the... I can't remember

Steph 25:03

we'll have to have a whole litany of seed pods in the show notes.

Helen 25:08

Yeah, you'd put cotton wool in, and paint it, or get some of mum's rouge and blush it so that

it's a Robin Redbreast.

Steph 25:18

brilliant, you'll have to tell me about that because I can't quite picture it.

Helen 25:22

were they currajongs? I didn't know that they had horrible prickly little seeds in them if you didn't you've got

Steph 25:30

the best I've done is make a Christmas tree out of a pine cone in reception but so I do understand something about that really lovely texture for dark bark which is echoed in the that work as well which is really lovely.

Helen 25:42

Yeah, it probably goes back to you know again, not not having money to go and buy art materials but you just collect. In fact my grandmother used to make seed pictures. She'd get a bag of mixed parrot seed.

Steph 25:58

oh yes, yeah

Helen 26:00

do her drawing, and then separate all the seeds into their own category and then glue them all down. And I thought she was so clever, and did the same with bark paintings - it wasn't but painting as Indigenous, but cutting the bark

Steph 26:18

kind of collage and mosaic?

Helen 26:20

making little houses and trees and yeah, I suppose they were the things that you watched very carefully as a kid

Steph 26:30

watching her doing that?

Helen 26:31

yeah, wishing you could do it. So probably some of that stuff feeds in as well.

26:59

[music]

Steph 27:00

Let's talk about the exhibition shedding which at the time of our chat is currently open at Adelaide Central Gallery within this sort of Adelaide Central School of Art, at... the name of the suburb has escaped me... in the Glenside campus, hope I got that right

Helen 27:19

Fruville? isn't it? They call it Fruville, that area

Steph 27:22

probably, My head's in gumnuts and seeds now.

Helen 27:25

Oh, well it was the asylum. - where dad threatened house me from time to time in my growing up.

Steph 27:35

Oh how funny. So yeah, I've just popped into the show yesterday so it's still kind of fresh in my mind, but I haven't yet soaked in Alison Smiles' lovely essay to accompany the show. But it's jam packed. And yeah, I think I went in there with no expectations and it was like really delighted. It felt quite... I don't know, familiar? and I really liked it but I can't articulate why. But please tell me, or tell everyone listening about that show.

Helen 28:10

Well, that show came as an extension of the SALA thing. Mainly because Andrew Purvis, the curator there, he's a wonderful guy, he had a some hiccup in his exhibition program. And he came to me to see -having known a little bit about me and my excessive flow from time to time- would I be interested in filling in this time spot. And at the same time QUT Art Museum in Brisbane had a similar hiccup. So I was kind of, well, next week, that one will open in Brisbane. So a truck took 20 boxes up to Brisbane and Andrew took...

Steph 29:05

So this is the bare version of the studio?

Helen 29:08

Yeah, and in actual fact, I don't know how it's all gonna fit in again.

Steph 29:13

Yes, once you've taken it all out, how do you fit it back in again.

Helen 29:17

Maybe we'll have to have a silent auction. But yeah, so yeah, Andrew had the idea, or ideas, about using things around in my studio to try and recreate an aspect of it. I guess in a way it's sort of didactic for being a art school gallery that students also maybe see something there that could motivate them in their own work. And I know that William Robinson, a friend and painter in Brisbane, he used to always say to students, 'you don't have to leave

your front gate to find your imagery'.

Steph 30:05

that's great isn't it

Helen 30:07

Yeah, and I suppose a lot of the work that is in that show. Well, it is my work, and it is about probably my childhood, aspects of being a woman...

Helen 30:22

And a sense of things that were proximal to you?

Helen 30:25

Yeah, so it's an honor for me to, even the way Andrew interpreted and understood, it sort of also... it feels like the book again, as well. It almost illustrates what the book has too about it.

Steph 30:44

Yeah, that's great that there's that continuity and that... he got it.

Helen 30:49

Yeah

Steph 30:49

I think he always does get it.

Helen 30:51

Yeah, I know, he's got a good eye

Steph 30:52

got a knack, and very attuned

Helen 30:58

So yes. And I think it was interesting, because he came here a few times in that mode of finding things. And I guess it stimulated me too, to get in behind into the dark corners and retrieve more artwork. Yeah. And then that to you, I could, I can see, you know, like 1986, what was happening in my head at the time, and there was a lot of crockery and imagery. And I think every time, I moved a lot, when I went from, when I left Adelaide, that was about '79, came back in '91, I was moving all the time, because I was renting houses, of course, so you discard what you had. And then when you went into another house, or share house, you'd end up going to the shop, and buying more cups, and so, or whatever,

Steph 32:00

and repeat

Helen 32:01

and repeat. So yeah, and then some of those objects, at that time, I was making photographs as well. So they became, you know, on a lonely Saturday afternoon, you'd find yourself with your camera, just because the light or something was fantastic. And so you just sort of...

Steph 32:23

tinker

Helen 32:24

tinker, yeah, a lot of tinkering.

Steph 32:26

Yeah, I think that's a great word for the context of the shed, and that kind of space, and the freedom to, you know, no pressure just tinker.

Helen 32:42

Well, dad, in that exhibition, and in the book maybe, that reference back to my father's shed, which I used. After my master's degree, it was time for the family to clear the shed, and which was extensive. And as I suppose that clearing the shed took on a major thing for me. And also, the shed was a place of male territory, like dad's shed. And I had two brothers and a sister, the brothers were allowed access. I was supposed to be in the house, doing domestic stuff, which involved fighting with mum and refusing to make my bed. And so the shed, to me, was much more exciting. And I guess I used to go down there when Dad wasn't home, find the key and get down there and turn the lathe on and

Steph 33:49

oh, wow. Get into the tools. Yeah.

Helen 33:54

And then you'd get into trouble. And also he was you know, a bit of a... I don't know. But anyway, the fact that he wouldn't let me go to art school, there was this incredible disappointment with him as a father because I had my whole hopes hanging on that I could go, and I was accepted by the art school. Back then then you had to do a ...

Steph 34:19

like a portfolio or something?

Helen 34:22

Yeah, no, they set up a still life and everyone, you had to draw for so many hours. Well, I didn't get the scholarship. Only one person got the scholarship and that was Trevor Nichols, who probably you know, was an Indigenous artist. And anyway, so dad said I wasn't good enough, that proved I wasn't good enough. And my mom said, in her day of dying to my ex

partner, husband at the time, that her biggest regret was she didn't stand up for me and make that happen

Steph 35:00

and to get you there to art school?

Helen 35:01

yeah, because I think, Yeah, I think if maybe if I got there, I would have just gone. No, I would have been a happy little painter or something. Because it was around that time where people like, oh, bit later but Barbara Hanrahan people like that, they'd all take the boat to England and go to art school and it all seems super exciting. But the boat went without me.

Steph 35:32

Yeah, no, I liked the sort of duality of the shed as a place but you know, shedding as a metaphor for something else as well. And, and again, I guess we've come back to processing and facing things and yeah,

Helen 35:46

Yeah, there is a lot of shedding in it. Even, like I'm sitting here I can see a button jar in a big Vegemite jar. Those buttons were my grandmother's. You know how you... they would have all been... some of them, oh well you can see they've been cut off of garment. Recycling and yeah, yeah. And there's jars of funny things around.

Steph 36:11

So we could sit here all day and tease out the story.

Helen 36:17

Anyway, that's sort of how it all happens.

Steph 36:19

Yeah, lovely.

36:30

[music]

Steph 36:43

Now, this is a favorite question of mine to ask, so please indulge me. Do you have a favorite memory of someone either experiencing or interacting with your work from any point in your whole career?

Helen 36:57

Well, if I...

Steph 37:00

If you had to pick one?

Helen 37:02

Well, there's one small one, and that was: when I was at Kindergarten, I was painting a picture. It was Christmas time, and I had, standing at a little easel with paint, and I did a great big Father Christmas, he was profile. And he looked pretty good, he had a red cap on, the whole lot. And I was really proud, and the kindy teacher was adding the praise. And then while I was listening to her, I sort of had a moment, and then I went back because I'd just blobbed his eye, I'd given him a big blue eyeball. And in that time, when I turned around the eyeball had dribbled right to the bottom of the page. And I remember that sheer horror of messing it up, but at the same time, the fascination of actually watching what happened. And that, so it was a win-win in a way, oh well not... one was pain, one was winning. But that for me...

Steph 38:11

I love that that stood out

Helen 38:12

because I still do dribbles and drips in my work. But

Steph 38:17

but at such a young age. Yeah, to go 'Oh, actually, it's okay.'

Helen 38:21

Yeah, it was just how gravity and the weight of the water took it. And the only other memory to probably is when I had an installation at the Art Gallery of South Australia, and it was called A Cow of A Thing, which was an extension of dad's shed business, but I had a big kitchen table and all things happening. And people came in and they didn't see it as an artwork, they just put their bags on it and started ratting through things, and occasionally the guard had to say 'this is an artwork'. And I suppose it was they're like 'an artwork?', you know, like it, because it was so familiar that it didn't command respect. And I think I remember thinking that was pretty amazing as well. Because it was like, 'excuse me, do you mind' and then it was, 'of course', you know, that's what we use the table at home for, it wasn't an artwork, it was just a thing where you dumped stuff.

Steph 39:30

I was glad you thought that, weren't offended or, you know, it wasn't an issue, but it was just a curious thing.

Helen 39:37

Yeah.

Steph 39:41

That's great. Yeah, just those little things. Oh, look, thank you so much for indulging my questions and, you know, harking back to different times. Thank you so much, Helen.

Helen 39:55

Thank you.

41:35

[music]