Julia Robinson Interview Transcript

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Steph 00:00
Hello and welcome to the SALA podcast. This episode is a live recording of ArtSpeak which is a series of talks run by the Adelaide Central School of Art that have been recorded in collaboration with SALA Festival.

Andrew Purvis 00:23
Hello, thank you very much for joining us. I would like to acknowledge that the land that we meet on today is the traditional lands of the Kaurna People. We pay our respects to Aboriginal Elders past, present and emerging. Today we're very fortunate to be joined by Julia Robinson, a supremely talented visual artist and an Adelaide Central School of Art lecturer. Julia has exhibited as part of the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art twice, and the National at the MCA and Sydney Art Space and CACSA. Julia currently has a wonderful exhibition *The Beckoning Blade* currently showing it Hugo Michell Gallery. The show features a sequence of works that uncannily combine weathered antiquated farming equipment, and intricately crafted textile works to create an unusual brightly hued apparitions which haunt the gallery space. The exhibition is a tour de force and one of the absolute standouts to this SALA season. Julia is here to talk to us about this exhibition, her processes and some of the thinking behind the work. Welcome, Julia.

Julia Robinson 01:24
Thank you, Andrew.

Andrew Purvis 01:26
The Beckoning Blade feels like such a unique, idiosyncratic amalgam of elements. But I know this body of work connects very deeply with your cultural background. Would you like to talk a little bit about that? Where this comes from?

Julia Robinson 01:39
Yeah, sure. So. So I'm a second generation Australian. So my parents emigrated, and I was the first of my family line to be born here. And my parents are originally from England, they met in Colchester, they're both from Essex and Suffolk. And I had been really fortunate growing up that my parents wanted me to be really connected with my kind of my family over there, maybe not so much my cultural heritage, although that's part of it. And so I've been to England a lot of times, and I spent a bit of time over there on family holidays and extended trips. And I feel like it's just been so much a part of my upbringing to have this kind of almost dual identity, this kind of connection to what I couldn't would almost kind of call a spiritual homeland, I feel really, really deeply connected to my kind of cultural heritage and my ancestral roots. So yeah, so a lot of the things I'm really interested in, from, from the British Isles, from England, from Scotland, a lot of the folklore and the superstitions that I refer to, in my work and the mythologies come from connecting very deeply with that, that part of my my identity in my kind of ancestral past.

Andrew Purvis 02:45
because there is a there is a romance to that second home, that sort of desired location as well. And when you talk about sort of folklore and folk traditions, I think something that might not be immediately obvious to viewers that see your work, but I think is a big sort of influence for you is a lot of those kinds of folk festivals, the kind of costuming and a lot of those kinds

of mythological creatures that are so prevalent in the folk traditions of the United Kingdom. What are some of those standout?

Julia Robinson 03:16
There's so many. And I think this is the sort of thing that I've connected so much with over the years, and increasingly in my practice, and I really look at folk traditions now that are currently being performed across England, and Scotland. And they often might be kind of folk traditions, or festivals that are centuries old, or have been kind of revived or kept alive by communities. And I think that's really interesting to me as well about people currently performing these festivals, but kind of linking back to their past as well. So I think that's something that particularly kind of connects with me in terms of specific kinds of connections, a couple of examples. So my paternal grandparents, just for kind of context lived in Essex in a town called Lawford, which is right next to Manningtree and Mistley, which is where Matthew Hopkins the Witchfinder General did a lot of his foul work. So there's always been that kind of connection to me of like really significant kind of historical stories really landed right on the doorstep of my my grandparents. But in terms of current festivals and things that I follow, I haven't been to to any of them yet. I'd love to get there. But my favourite would be the Burry Man, which is this man completely who... so this festival takes place in the second Friday of August every year in South Queensferry in Scotland. And it's a man completely covered in the burrs of a burdock plant from head to toe. You can't barely see his eyes you can just about see his mouth. And he parades through the streets on about a seven mile walk, moving all around the different locations and all the local community come out and they feed in whiskey through a straw. And it's really good light to be seen with the Burry Man have your photograph taken with them and it's meant to they believe that symbology of the Burry Man is he's a sort of scapegoat for the community carrying the evils out of the village each year and ensuring a good sea harvest, for example. So he's one of my favourite bucket list festival that I really want to experience that I've only experienced via social media and online.

Andrew Purvis 05:17
And I think he stands as a really fascinating example because to encounter him today from a contemporary context, it might look humorous in many ways, but the folk traditions that are tied up with that figure are often quite 'life or death', certainly in that sort of start of those religious festivals or those sorts of folk festivals, this idea of good harvests and so forth. If that didn't happen, entire communities will be at threat. And so I suppose that what I'm getting at is that underneath those kinds of seemingly humorous elements, there are darker undercurrents. And I think that that's really something that comes through in The Beckoning Blade as well. This feels like a dark a body of work for you. There are elements of humor there is there often are in your work. But there are elements of violence and sort of disturbing oddity deformity as well. Is this body of work connecting with other cultural touchstones for you?

Julia Robinson 06:08
Yeah, so I think that obviously leads me to talk about folk horror. But a folk horror is, you know, like the Burry Man and things like that there is this kind of, I think of it as this knife's edge between sort of the sort of positive energy and kind of negative things that can happen. So the harvest is literally life or death, in many cultures and in the past. So folk horror is the kind of real touchstone for this body of work. And that's probably why this particular beckoning blade leans much more into that darkness that you were talking about, and maybe pulls back a little bit on the humor. Folk horror to describe that it's a funny one, because it's such a nebulous territory, and lots of people have tried to describe folk horror and not you know, it's a very ... they talk about it like trying to describe fog. It's really kind of

edgeless and it changes with different contexts. But I think about folk horror is this really kind of neat conjoined kind of words, folk and horror, or folklore and horror kind of splicing together. Folk horror could be seen as the kind of violent conjoining of pagan and pre-Christian traditions or customs with horror tropes or horror themes. And it frequently manifests/mostly manifests in the filmic tradition, and also in literature as well. But there are a lot of artists really engaging with folk horror as well. And obviously, that's the lens that I bring to it. Although I do look at a lot of films and read a lot of folk horror fiction as part of my as part of the research into that topic.

Andrew Purvis 07:37
And I think some of those films that you've been researching formed quite a strong influence with this exhibition. Is there one that stands out amongst the others?

Julia Robinson 07:45
There is one that stands out, Andrew, and it is the 1973, Robin Hardy film, The Wicker Man, which has been a really influential film in my practice for many years. And it's just been slowly sifting to the surface. So I've often cited The Wicker Man. It's a seminal folk horror film, almost, I think that's where folk horror comes from that that particular film or around that area. And that I've often cited it as a kind of a latent influence in my practice. And when I started devising the work for The Beckoning Blade, which didn't have a title back, then obviously, I thought, you know, I'm just going to lean into this, I'm going to make this the folk horror show, and I'm going to cast The Wicker Man right, you know, front and center and bring it right into the foreground and kind of, yeah, make it make it my kind of homage to the Wicker Man. I don't expect that if you know, if people haven't seen The Wicker Man, it's not that you won't get the show. It's not like a kind of key to unlocking it. But if you have seen it, it definitely would sort of bring some of the narratives to the surface, or you probably look at the works in a slightly different way, or maybe notice little things about the film that I've directly referenced. But I was really using it as flavour. Yeah.

Andrew Purvis 08:56
Yeah, there are sort of visual resonances and echoes, particularly in the palette of some of those outfits that directly reference some of the visual imagery in The Wicker Man

Julia Robinson 09:04
and the and the installation of the work too, as well. There's this really famous scene in the wicked man is mayday procession, which is not specific to The Wicker Man obviously - mayday processions are a really old tradition in many, many cultures. And I look at a lot of mayday processions when I'm researching- But there is this particular Mayday procession in the Wicker Man, which is the kind of climax of the film. And I particularly thought about that with the installation of the work that the pieces in the gallery would form a kind of eerie pageantry along one wall with these kind of the objects, the sculptures being kind of almost like characters in that procession, or costumes or objects that might be used in a ritual for a ritual purpose.

Andrew Purvis 09:44
Yeah, I think that's a really interesting observation and something I wasn't aware of. Certainly, the way that they're installing the exhibition is not a sort of eye-level, all-in-a-row hang as that that description of pageantry might suggest that kind of move up and down, almost like musical notation on a scale. or a kind of that kind of hurly-burly of a parade as well. I think that's really nicely done.

Julia Robinson 10:05

Thank you. Yeah, the works had been in my studio, obviously for two years accumulating and my studio is not incredibly big, but I've got these quite tall walls and I was sort of storing them up on the walls. And I was thinking about that some of them as being like, 'they are the high up ones, they are the eye-level ones, there are the below level ones'. And some of them have, I think, have a particular energy or movement to them that I wanted to kind of invoke it as well in that that kind of wall of procession.

Andrew Purvis 10:29
And I suppose talking about pageantry and talking about these sort of folk traditions like the Burry Man, that kind of costuming, the works involves such prominent textile elements and textile elements that evoke clothing very clearly and costuming as well. The techniques you use a remarkably intricate and complex. I believe that there's a particular process that you've used in these works that has particular relevance to the context of the work itself.

Julia Robinson 10:57
Yeah. So in this particular body of work, I have used this garment called the smock or the smock frock, which is traditionally a handmade garment, women would have made them but men would have worn them. So then they're not they look like a dress in a way, but they're actually a garment for traditionally for men. And they the smock frock is this kind of very boxy, almost apron dress-like garment with a really complex pleating across the front and the back, which is then embroidered over the top top giving its name, the smoking or the smoke. And they would have been worn in the 18th and early 19th century by field workers or farm laborers as being these kind of really durable loose fitting garments that would just be thrown over other clothes to protect the other clothes, and then you could take them off at night, you'd have your other clothes protected. So it's a sort of it might be sort of an interesting one to like, Why did I use the smock, but I really was kind of leaning back to that kind of agricultural influence of it. That's where they're located. And the smock has a kind of almost a mythic status in British kind of folklore and culture. It's very much tied to this idea of a pre-industrial, idyllic British countryside where honest people worked the land. And were really connected to the seasons, which is obviously partially true, but partially a kind of romanticized version of that. But the smock then had a resurgence in the 70s with women's wear and children's wear, when little girls started wearing these little kind of smocked garments and women were wearing sort of more what was called the kind of 'peasant-inspired' fashion. And that was also about this kind of leaning back to that into like, romanticized past. And the relevance of that to the show and folk horror is that folk horror often undercuts that pastural idyll, it's kind of often described as the antidote to that, cutting through this idea of Britain in particular, as a kind of green and pleasant land full of quaint country folk and villages and, and often sort of sifting the darkness inherent in that to the surface. So when I decided to use the smock in the show, it was not just because it's a garment, and garments are so wonderful, and I'm really engaged with the social history of garments. It was also to tie it back to that kind of that folk horror idea of like, here's a romantic vision that we can then kind of slice through, unpick, unpack, modify, and disrupt, which I like to do in my practice a lot, especially disrupting garments and disrupting expected things.

Andrew Purvis 13:17
Yeah, absolutely. I feel like that's something that's very strong in the show the sense of disruption of assumptions. In particular, I think the show works on that level. But hearing you talk about that, as well, I find it really interesting to shift the way that we encounter these works, because the smock has become a very gendered garment item now, and it will be much more typically seen worn by women. And to read that into the work they read, at first glance, very much in a sort of typical Gothic Horror, sense of peril of violence perpetrated on

a female protagonist, but to then understand that these figures might represent male agrarian workers, there is that kind of uncanny sense that we have to readjust our, our expectations and our assumptions about the work. And I suppose if we're talking about agrarian workers, it would it's really significant to talk about the found materials that are incorporated into this show. So in The Beckoning Blade, you're repurposing old farm equipment, including scythes and sickles and so forth. In *The Song of Master John Goodfellow*, an earlier show, it was gourds. Does this process present particular challenges or does it inspire different forms of creativity?

Julia Robinson 14:32
Yeah, so working with found objects?

Andrew Purvis 14:33
Yeah.

Julia Robinson 14:34
Yeah, it's sort of it's interesting. It's something that I haven't always leaned into. I've often been much more kind of constructing things from scratch. And over recent years, I've started incorporating more found objects and let's say quite loud, found objects isn't the kind of carry is of history and meaning or symbolism. I'm really drawn to that though, particularly things like the scythe like I'm drawn to the fact that it is a completely mundane agricultural object. But it's all So got wild kind of symbolic connotations with death and the Grim Reaper and stuff like that. So I feel like, you know, when I'm working with an object like that, I'm trying to balance those two things, and then also find my own way into it. So yeah, working with found objects is, you know, it carries a lot of weight with that. And I'm often trying to balance that, and also sort of not rely too heavily on the weight of that object, particularly something that is so beautiful. And so inherently loaded with history, you don't want to sort of just 'well that's the only thing it's doing', but you're also trying to sort of find your own way. And with that, and kind of work with it. The gourds were interesting, because a gourd is a kind of, I feel like not a particularly well known object, you know, it's a fruit, but it's not a particularly well known or recognizable fruit. So that one I had, I feel like I had to work a lot harder to kind of sift that the meaning to the surface to kind of get that idea across. But they're also really kind of overt associations of the gourd with kind of plant matter and vegetation and, and often sort of referencing bodily parts as well. So I was sort of trying to hold them up a little bit.

Andrew Purvis 16:05
And I've been fortunate enough to visit your studio, when some of these works were in preparation, I've seen the meticulous sketches and the kind of ideation that you do in preparing a work, but I imagine working with a found material, that governs some of the outcomes of the work and dictates its shape and so forth. Is that a, is that a way of compromising with materials that you enjoy? Or do you struggle.

Julia Robinson 16:29
Um, I mean, unlike that, the objects will set the terms a little bit for me, but then I also like that I can kind of, I can wrench them a little bit to my own will. So I probably bought at least 12 scythes overall over the course of a couple of years, and sickles, and I would have them in the studio, moving them around, and then started cutting some of them up or swapping out that blade for that handle. So I guess in in some ways, the material or the object dictates a little bit how I can work with it. And sometimes I'll sketch something in my book, and then I'll go to mock it up, and it won't behave that way at all. And that's quite frustrating, because you're like, 'I wanted it to hang this way', and the scythe won't do that. So then you have to have a kind of call and response with the object. So when I'm when I'm working with

something like that a pre existing thing, yes, I do a lot of sketches. But then I move very quickly to a mock-up stage just to see how is this operating. And I'm not going to come unstuck, hopefully, by working something out planning it to the nth degree and then going to do it and be like, Oh, okay, well, that didn't operate at all how I thought it would. So a bit of a kind of call and response, I guess.

Andrew Purvis 17:32
And I suppose an element of the work that may be less visible to people than the intricate textile work is the very clever engineering that goes beyond behind the scenes as well, the way these things sit on the wall, their way, the way they're arranged. And I hope I'm not revealing any technical secrets here: but there are magnets installed in some of those works to ensure that the fabric falls in the way it's intended to. I think they're quite marvelous.

Julia Robinson 17:56
Thank you. Yeah. And like the engineering of them, like getting something on the wall, I often sort of say, like, as a sculptor, like gravity is my enemy, because it would be so much easier if I could just hold something up, and it would just stay where I wanted it to go. But also think if there was no gravity, I wouldn't have as much fun as I do, trying to work those things out. So I do put a lot of energy into the engineering of these things, getting them on the wall. I think about that a lot with garments because garments have been displayed in so many different ways over the years, both in art practice and in costuming, and in museums. And I think about what am I bringing to that, for the current show, for The Beckoning Blade, I worked really closely with James Dodd who's an artist but as well a fabricator, showing him my designs, like this is how I want this piece to hang on the wall. This is the aesthetic that I wanted to and then he would bring some of his engineering know how as to, well, this might be a simple way to do that or to mock it up that way. But I do think about those fixtures as being, in this show in particular, very very much part of the work; not hiding them, not concealing them in a way that some other works have done that but really sifting them to the surface and just kind of leaning into it and... but I like that engineering like I like that problem solving. That's really exciting to me to be like how do I make this thing float on the wall but also acknowledge the substrate that it's on.

Andrew Purvis 19:17
And I suppose this process of sourcing found materials they're not always sort of found on the side of the road, it brings you in contact with other communities, other collectors, other potentially people that might grow gourds or collect farm equipment or something like that. What was the process of like sourcing these materials like Well,

Julia Robinson 19:38
I'll start with the gourds just because it's a great thing, but like when I originally had this idea, I had a gourd that my friend had given me from their garden. I had it for about two years before I decided I wanted to work with gourds and then I quickly realized I'm gonna need more gourds so I googled 'buy gourds Australia' and the Gourdfather was the very first website that came up. So I saw sourced one of my gourds from the Gourdfather; he is a New South Wales-based grower

Andrew Purvis 20:02
I wonder what comes first: the gourd or the name gourdfather? and you think 'I better grow some gourds'.

Julia Robinson 20:07
It's been doing it since the 70s. So I feel like you've probably lent into that. Yeah, and then

the scythes. I mean, I can't remember where I got my first scythe genuinely, I think I just might have Googled the Scammells website or found one in an antique store. And then you start to turn your lens on it and hone in and be like, right where are these objects? I would just regularly check Scammells, regularly check Gumtree, and check every single antique store I pass, but then, you know if I like do a little post on Instagram about 'I'm collecting scythes' people would start ringing me. I remember you rang me once and 'I'm in an antique store in the Barossa or or whatever, I found a scythe, do you want it?' And I'm like, yes, yes, yes, buy it. So I really love it when people reach out to me with stuff like that. And often just send me pictures of tools. And like, 'Would you like this?' and I can sort of jump in with that. But I also for this project collected floral embroidered handkerchiefs, or floral embroidered pieces of fabric like tablecloths and stuff like that. And I was kind of aware that it would take me ages to scour shops for those things, and I potentially needed hundreds of them. So I did a little Instagram callout saying, 'Hey, friends and family like, I need these floral embroidered handkerchiefs, if people can contribute'. And that was a way as well, for me... that kind of actually has a conceptual link to the show, which is that a lot of these festivals, particularly let's say May Day festivals would be about communities -and even the Burry Man as well- gathering flowers or natural organic material to make the costumes for the special parade. And that that kind of community involvement is really important. But I'm not a particular, I'm a very studio focused solitary worker, I'm a very traditional in the studio worker. So that was my kind of way of kind of doing a community kind of callout like helped me gather flowers, but they just happen to be embroidered flowers instead of natural flowers. And that was a way to sort of do my own version of the May Queen collection if you like,

Andrew Purvis 22:02
it's beautiful how that sort of concept ties into the process. So, so neatly, as it were. Now I remember speaking to you in your exhibition, and describing some of the physical forms on the wall as quite human, and seeing sort of different arrangement of limbs. But you suggested to me that there are other echoes there about a ways of honoring farm equipment and farm machinery and how that might be... how clothing might be used differently with those. Is that something we can touch on in this in this conversation?

Julia Robinson 22:38
Yeah, yeah. So I think that, you know, the first few works I made for The Beckoning Blade where the highly figurative pieces because I was just first becoming comfortable and familiar with the smock garment and trying to work out its sort of edges. So there are several kind of full figure kind of works in there that are meant to sort of stand in for that figure, maybe be a scarecrow kind of character or something like that. But then when I hone in on a particular technique, what I want to do is start tearing it apart from the inside and like, yeah, like changing it and, you know, making incursions in it and sort of seeing what I can do with that technique. So I guess the works. That sort of, I guess, there's works where the the tool kind of the scythe maybe kind of comes higher up in the hierarchy and the garment slips away, or there's a kind of equal footing with them. And there's some works in there where the garment's not present at all and the tool is kind of doing the work or the manipulation to the tool was doing the work. But yeah, they they sort of variously sit in kind of figurative or semi figurative, or just kind of some kind of weird manipulation of the smock. I'm not sure if that kind of answered the question or not

Andrew Purvis 23:45
Yeah, totally. Yeah, that's wonderful. Thank you. Do you have a different approach from making work for a commercial gallery outcome like the The Beckoning Blade, it's on at Hugo Michell Gallery, as opposed to exhibiting in a group show in a large scale exhibition in a public gallery? I'm thinking of your work Beatrice that was part of the Monster Theatres show

at the 2020 Adelaide Biennial of Australian art at the Art Gallery of South Australia, how do you approach those different types of projects?

Julia Robinson 24:14
Look, look, I do approach them slightly differently. Because you have to sort of be cognisant of what the space is that you're going into. I would say that my kind of my benchmark is like, I would never compromise the work, I would never kind of change what I'm thinking to fit a particular need. Like I wouldn't sit back and think well, now I'm making commercial work. And then that's, you know, something else. But I do think a little bit more about like, okay, that Hugo Michell is a commercial gallery, there is a kind of need to engage with the space in a slightly different way than if I'm engaged in a biennial space. So Beatrice was, I consider, a much more site-dependent work. It was located in the Museum of Economic Botany as part of the biennial so and because it is a biennial I think I just went in hard with like, let's just make a big grand gesture kind of sculpture. Let's make something that's kind of a single piece, for example, that perhaps has a different kind of ambition to it. As in the ambition is kind of wrapped up in the kind of that moment in that time in that place. And that that opportunity of the Biennial. So yes, I did sort of approach that in a slightly more Wilder manner. And then I sort of turned my lens to Okay, well, now I'm Hugo Michell. So it's a white cube gallery. This is a different parameters there. So I just tried to move towards those parameters, but not not, I mean, I don't really know what... I wouldn't know what like making for a commercial outcome particularly looks like because who knows what, what's going to work, I just go well, that's the work I want to make and happens to be wall-based at the moment because I'm thinking about a wall gallery.

Andrew Purvis 25:45
Absolutely. I suppose touching on some of those older works like *Beatrice* that was at the Museum of Economic Botany and some of the gourd works that were in *The Song of Master John Goodfellow*. I'm really interested in, and I think this is a testament to your versatility, the textile techniques seem to change and shift according to the different body of work and the different contexts they're alluding to. Can you just touch on what how you choose which technique to pursue.

Julia Robinson 26:10
Yeah, so *The Song of Master John Goodfellow* with the gourds was a sort of a gosh I've got to get thinking back to that work now, but it was sort of a body celebration, it was playing very much off to sort of sexuality of the fruit and the and I was particularly looking into Tudor and Elizabethan costuming techniques then, and in particular, because of their lavishness, their kind of colour and palate and the sort of silks and the, the kind of excess of that. And I was trying to bring that language of access to the gourds like sort of as a counterpoint to their humble, earthy kind of origins, they're a very dirty kind of fruit. But the Elizabethan techniques I was particularly interested in is this sort of slashing and cutting and this underlining coming through and it sort of spoke to me of kind of revealing and concealing stuff and about sort of hidden desires kind of being pulled to the surface. And I guess that really linked well with the gourd kind of concept of these sort of body, undergarments coming to the surface or kind of revealing, revealing this sort of like prudishness and sexuality kind of like playing off against each other.

Andrew Purvis 27:18
Yeah, they reminded me a little bit of the way the pomegranate splits open and the seeds come out. That's another sort of very sexualized fruit.

Julia Robinson 27:24

Yes, and I was thinking a lot about fruit when I was doing those bodies or works around the board and thinking about, well, I don't want to do that with the board itself. But I want to sort of dress it in such a way that it feels like it's this explosion of ripeness, or just on the turn, as well, kind of on the turn fruit. And that was very much something with the National works at the MCA, this sort of sense of ripeness, and kind of skins splitting open and insides kind of coming out. So revealing that that kind of lash or plush interior. So that felt very, an appropriate costuming technique to use for that language, which I then carried forth into Beatrice. Although when I was thinking about Beatrice, she was sort of more on the rot kind of on the turn. And I was looking at sort of the garden, there's a bit of space in the story and Rappaccini's Daughter, but there's this sort of garden in there with these poisonous toxic plants. So Beatrice kind of leant more into the toxicity of plant life and the ruptures in the silk skins for her was sort of more about that fruit on the turn, or that kind of decay setting in. And then when I started The Beckoning Blade, I, you know, I still really wanted to work with colour, but I just couldn't think I couldn't think in silk anymore. And the introduction of farm implements meant I was like this, this, these languages don't speak to each other. And it was a big wrench in the first six months of thinking, to put the silks aside and be like, okay, they're not working for this, something new needs to come in. And I'd worked with linen before. For these kind of homespun techniques, I brought the linens back in but I brought in these wilder colours. So rather than traditional linen, linen palette, like muted colors, and grays and earthy textures, I was like, Nah, I need to kind of bring the violent colours of the silks but but marry that up with the linen and kind of get that kind of crossover and that lead to all these sort of really quite Yeah, really quite what tend to be quite a rainbow show, which was a bit of a surprise when I put it on the wall as well. It's, it's really colourful, like and I like colors that are on the turn as well like a little bit of an uncomfortable colour, like sort of an off-yellow, or a sort of pucy- pinky color. Or, you know, there's like a sort of turmeric-y baby-poo colour in there, which is sort of like nice, but you wouldn't quite wear it and I like that, you know, and in dying them and bleaching them these other colours kind of came out that were really unexpected and I really liked that sort of just just colours on the turn on the nose a little bit.

Andrew Purvis 29:55
I suppose this might be a bit of a cheeky question, but thinking back to to the A Song of Master John Goodfellow with the gourds and Beatrice is placed in the garden of Economic Botany in the Museum of Economic Botany at the Adelaide Botanic Gardens. And then with the farm implements, are you a keen gardener Julia?

Julia Robinson 30:12
I wouldn't I would not say I'm a keen gardener. A few years ago, we we regenerated our garden from from the scrap heap that it was and put some nice flower beds in. And I have since discovered that I quite like the idea of gardening and having a nice garden to look out on. But I have mainly planted things that I haven't been able to kill, that's my baseline is like, if it doesn't die in the first season, I'll plant more of that. That's the level of gardening that I'm at.

Andrew Purvis 30:42
That sounds like something that I can aspire to; that sounds like a good level of gardening to be at.

Julia Robinson 30:46
no fruit or anything like that. It just like really hardy plants in there. I don't mind going out there and weeding a little bit. But like with a lot of things, in my practice, I'm really kind of interesting the idea of them, maybe not the kind of literality of them.

Andrew Purvis 30:59
And I assume your home garden is a little less dark than The Beckoning Blade or the poison garden of Rappaccini's Daughter?

Julia Robinson 31:06
I think it's full of non toxic things.

Andrew Purvis 31:10
You think. Wonderful. Maybe this is a good opportunity to open up to some questions, if we have any questions for Julia?

Audience Member 31:18
Is if a gourd is a fruit, is that... and you're making art, is there an expectation that it will deteriorate over time or?

Julia Robinson 31:28
Yeah, well, it's really interesting because a gourd because it is literally a fruit, but they, unlike all other fruit, instead of rotting, if you don't let them get wet, they harden from the outside, all the seeds dry on the inside, and you're left with essentially almost a brittle, firm, kind of skin, which if you shake it, you can hear the seeds rattling around inside. But there are literally gourds in like museum collections that are hundreds of years old that they just don't rot. So of all the fruits to use, it is the most archival one. And I was very conscious of that. Because you know, not that I'm always seeking a kind of archival commercial outcome. But I do think like I'm showing it in a gallery, if it sells I need to be able to say that it has a life. But I was also partly using the gourd for that reason. So the the fact that they don't rot and they have all these seeds has made them symbolic of fertility and longevity and resurrection because of this sort of this long lasting quality of them. So they're quite fascinating objects. They've been used for like musical instruments for vessels, penis sheaths, all sorts of different uses over multiple different cultures.

Audience Member 32:37
Just wanted to ask about smocking, did you do all this mocking yourself? And did you do it by hand? Or was it machine?

Julia Robinson 32:44
Yes so it's all done by me. It is all done by hand. All the pleating is done by hand as well. It's quite time-consuming. But I like that, like that's, you know, I get off on that. But also, it's not that complex a technique, you know, pleating's not that difficult to just dot everything out. So, you know, the hard thing was working out how to make the pleates work for me, or how deep to to do them, not the actual physical smocking, that was just sort of surface embroidery. The biggest challenges I face in my work is looking after my body and making sure I don't do too long stints because I would happily sort of sew or smoke for eight hours, but then I might wreck myself for the next day. So I have to do it and kind of sections but it is all done by hand. And you might have seen a picture there before of the Dorset wheel buttons which looked like little kind of embroidered wheels, and they're all done by hand as well. And that's just like a little loop like a little key ring that I weave all the fabric round, make a little spiderweb of the threads and then do a little weavy under-over. So yeah, everything's done by hand where possible.

Audience Member 33:50
I was just gonna ask about the significance of the the gold plated sections, some of the

metal is gold.

Julia Robinson 34:01
Yeah, so the I've used a lot of gold plating in previous bodies of work. And so I actually had my I had two scythe blades gold plated quite early on in the piece when I was still playing around with ideas. So I had one that was done on a rusty blade, so you get this matte finish, which holds the texture of the rust. And then one that I asked them to polish it so I can see my face in it. And it's a sort of it's nearly an anomaly in the body of work because I was thinking much earlier on about the ceremonial as part of ritual and thinking about signifiers of that so that you might have your best scythe blade or your special ceremonial one that you use for let's say the 'right kind of job' which in folk horror might be the sacrifice. And so I sort of wanted to allude to that with the blades, that there was a higher purpose or a different purpose to them and that in the context of everything else in the show, that that purpose might be. You might not know what it is is as a viewer, but it sort of signifies there's something special about that. And gold plating is so lush, you know, like, and it's strangely not that expensive in the context of stuff. So yeah, that's how I was trying to use the gold. I mean, just super appeals to me having like a gold plated scythee blade like, just it's just it's partly an indulgence. I gotta be honest, it's also an indulgence.

Audience Member 35:25
The fabric that you've used linen, I take it now all the dyeing that's done I presume you did it. But I'm asking did you do it? Was it organic? What was special about the dyeing? And the thread I noticed too.

Julia Robinson 35:38
Yeah, sure. So the linen was a choice. Because of the original smocks were all made of linen. So it's a historical reference there. None of the linens I use started out white. So everything had a base color, except that the white linens. And then the dip dyeing gosh I'm trying to remember why I sort of, I think I started with this highly figurative piece, which is the sort of two interconnected garments that are like a four-armed scarecrow in a field. And I was thinking about, it's called The Lurker at Dusk, which is a sort of traditional name for a hare, which is another story from the time but there we go, and a very evocative sort of title. And I wanted the work to feel like something that you would sort of see on a threshold time like dusk or dawn. And so I started with this kind of vaguely uncomfortable purple colour. And I thought about dip, dyeing it in orange to get this sort of idea of sunset or sunrise kind of coming into it. And I just wanted something that would disrupt the blankness of the color, there's a lot of fabric in a smock, you know, six meters personal, and I just felt like, one big block of color could be a bit, almost a bit bland, and I wanted to introduce something that would just change that a little bit. And then it just opened up from there I was oh my gosh, there's like so much I can do with dip dyeing and dribble dyeing and spatter dyeing. Some of the colours are derived from bleaching the fabric and seeing what a cut, what kind of colors come out of that, which is always very unexpected, you don't know what bleach will bring to the surface. There's works that reference, kind of dirt and the earth, for example. And then I would just for each one, I would think, Okay, well, what do I want the thread to do. So sometimes I was dip dyeing the thread to match it, or spatter dyeing it. So you would kind of have that feeling of a rusty kind of effect. Or sometimes I was over stitching with the base color. So you'd get more contrast, or just using one color across all the different colors, one color thread across all the different fabric. So you get different points of contrast and interest. So that's kind of how I was using it. But yeah, just to sort of, yeah, disrupt the expected with the colour and give it a different kind of tint or taint.

Audience Member 37:46

I was just wondering if the names come first, or, you know, did they come at different times? Or just start with the farm implement? And you know, which? What order is the process?

Julia Robinson 37:59
Yeah, so the so the question of like the title, the work of the object, it's all a bit of a washing machine effect. So it's not always the one that leads to the other in some cases, I would start with the tool, and I would have the idea for the tool. In some cases, I would start with the sketches and kind of improvising around that I have, I had just like a kind of plain garment in my studio that was throwing over things to try and manipulate that. So that would lead to the the idea. And then sometimes the title would come after. And sometimes I would start with a title. So there's this yeah, there's this famous poem called The Names of the Hare, which was translated by Seamus Heaney, I think and it's this sort of, I guess, kind of magical poem where if the hunter is going out to kill the hare, he has to list all of the names and it's like dozens and dozens of names and it's a way of controlling it's a kind of like performative magic, if you like. Controlling this, this hare that you can then shoot. anyway, the reason I'm saying that is because hares are very prevalent in folklore and folk horror, and a lot of the names of the hare like the lurker of dusks, the stubble stag, the Nibbler at dark, all this sort of stuff. They're really evocative titles and so I gleaned a few of them and was like, I'm farming these out in the show, like they're really great titles. 'The purblind one' is one of the titles and one of the, the connections, 'the raker of mud' is another title for the hare and for the work. So really evocative titles. There was one title that came first amongst all of them, that's a work called 'Borrow Mump', which is just the name for a little hillock. And I was like, that's just such a great word. It's almost onomatopeic, sort of, so I was like that I need to make a work that fits that; that was quite a hard challenge to fit the work to the title and I was persistent in that. And then I you know, I bought a lot of job lots of farm implements and rakes and hoes and scythes and I would just have them all around my studio. I mean, two years. This is two years in the making this; so some things I would have around literally for two years. And I would be like I'm doing something with you, I just don't know what I'm doing yet. And I needed to like learn more about the body of work before I could include that object in there. So the rakes came quite late. There's a flax hackle, which is looks like a kind of really angry nail comb on wooden surface that I bought, I think a year ago but didn't work out what to do with it until about three months ago, because I was just sitting with the object, learning its properties, working out of all the millions of things I could do with this, what's the kind of dominant idea I want to express in that particular object? And how do I work with something so loud? So yeah,

Andrew Purvis 40:34
I'm sorry, I think we could talk to Julia all day, but I'm also aware that she has a another class to get to and teach in about 10 minutes. So let's give her a 10 minute reprieve and please join me in thanking Julia Robinson for her time today.