



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 6 EPISODE 4 (Late March 2024)

DONNA MARCUS

In conversation with
Prof Pedram Khosronejad

Pedram Khosronejad:

Thank you so much for your time to do this podcast with me. It's very important for me as a visual anthropologist curator to talk to you and have this conversation between us, because you are a multidisciplinary artist that at least for last 30 years work with certain mediums and material culture of daily life, namely kitchenwares and cooking pots and different details that later on you'll let us know. And it's very interesting how you combine the objects used before, which are the containers of the stories of people, families, migration, all together, and see how really during last 30 years you develop your work and ideas, and share it with the public. That is something really interesting. As a first major question, please let me know about your artistic background.

Donna Marcus:

Gosh, that's quite a big question, the first one. And I guess where it all began was collecting, always collecting objects, always being engaged by objects. I first attended art school in the Tasmanian School of Art, and I majored in painting, but my work from an early stage either incorporated images of objects, or I collected objects and I incorporated those things. Of course, materials and objects always come with their own stories and narratives, and they're the things that throughout my practice I have continued to extract and work with.

After I completed art school as a young woman, I taught in Tasmania a few years in schools, and then I moved to Sydney where I worked in a wonderful warehouse in Chippendale with a group of artists in the 1980s. And then I continued postgraduate studies in Sydney. I then was really fortunate to be given a scholarship to go to Berlin to study for a year at [inaudible 00:02:13]. At the time, that was 1988, and Berlin was still a divided city. And while I was there, I collected at these extraordinary flea markets in the city. I've always been interested in fragments and things that are often incomplete, but remain themselves, but can have quite different meanings isolated from the whole at times.

I also went to West Berlin a little bit, and to Prague and the Eastern Bloc, and I think there I first became quite fascinated with these lightweight aluminium objects. I didn't think deeply about it then, but this materiality of these things that were so light and aeronautical, and so domestic. I was given some beautiful cake tins, these beautiful enamel cake tins by a relative of my partner who was in Austria, and I just loved the look of them. I never intended to cook with them, I was never a great cook, but I just loved the look of them. They look like propellers, and they're so domestic.

So, after I returned to Australia, I always expected to live in a large city, but I was offered a position at the Queensland College of Art. That was on the Gold Coast, and I moved to Tamborine Mountain where I lived for many years, and I worked in a full-time role for 25 years, and I had children and so forth. And very fortunate to work in an art school where part of your job is to be a practicing artist, but at the same time, I didn't have always the time that I needed. But like a lot of women with children and it fascinates me how people continue their practice in different ways, I would always collect. So, I would do this big trip home from the campus to this amazing huge op shop, and I would collect. So, I'd collect these materials that would become my pigments and modules that I use.

The people at the op shop would save things for me, and I particularly loved the sense of redundancy, the sense that I was saving these things from being smelted. And I didn't need them to be completed, or in pristine condition, so that opened up a hole, rich seam to collect.

So, in beginning 2017, I made the decision to work full-time in the studio. And it wasn't an easy decision, because I did love the work that I had done, but I'd amassed so much material, and I needed to work with that, and I guess save my children from being left to sheets of aluminium objects. And just that time, just that reflective time to have that. So, the last seven years I've worked full-time at my practice,

but I feel often like I've been given this time in lieu from the early years, from when I just continued to collect.

So, I guess in these last years I have really been able to really continue and revisit ideas. But of course, in any practice, when you take a break and you stop or you revisit things, things often change along the way, which they have. But I've certainly been continuing to make these pieces that very much draw on a history of modernism. They are the refuse of modernism. They tell their own stories. I continue to work.

And I also... I probably should mention that, during the last 30 years, I began to move into working in the public realm, working on public artworks. I was always more interested in making smaller works than larger works in the studio, but I was approached to put in an expression of interest for a project in, I think it was 2004. And I have since that time made a number of large works for the public realm.

I see my practice as one practice, not the separation between studio and public. One informs the other. In the public works, I often take these very small, humble objects of everyday life and make them large and within the public realm. And the first work that I produced is called Steam, and it's in Brisbane Square in Brisbane, also called Reddcliff Place in Brisbane. And it comprises 7,000 very perfectly replicated vegetable steamers that have been placed within 14 geodesic spheres. I've been always fascinated by the overlap of the aesthetics of the industrial and the domestic and the organic. And the geodesic sphere of course was pioneered by the architect, inventor, writer, Buckminster Fuller, who often advocated using objects off the shelf, and reuse and efficiency. And I guess there weren't... Making 7,000 steamers allowed the sense of repetition and industrial efficiency. But geodesic sphere, in theory, its structure and its form are one.

In terms of these pieces being scattered around Brisbane Square, they are lit at night, so they become quite brighter than in the day, and they look quite heavy and seed-like. I looked at the Australian landscape architect, Edna Walling, who had planted these incredible native gardens and led a program to beautify roads in Australia and so forth. And what she would do is throw potatoes, and where they fell randomly, she would plant the trees. And when I worked on that project, I adopted her method, and, to-scale I made these potatoes and threw them on the scale model. And apart from needing to move a few, for conduits and so forth, they were placed in that way.

So, since that time I've continued to work on pieces for the public realm. And I think one of the many things I enjoy about doing that work is the way the public and the studio practice can inform one another, and provide opportunities. So, more recently I have taken processes like using vitreous enamel in the public realm, I have taken that back into small, custom-made pieces within the studio practice as well, because there is an efficiency if you're working on a public work that you can access these industrial processes, the same industrial processes that have been used to create the objects that I collect as well.

Pedram Khosronejad:

So Donna, after all these years and experiences working on several materials, why choose this medium, aluminium? What's inside this material that inspires you, knowing the fact that somehow it's limited, but also in post-war period, aluminium suddenly is one of the main materials that we can see in daily life, especially in the kitchen, with very pastel colours, light blues, yellows, greens, reds? What's interesting in these for you that you choose it as your major medium?

Donna Marcus:

If I go back to the beginning, like many things, I think, in the way that many practitioners work, I was drawn to this material intuitively. I just love the look of it and the feel of it. And I spent a lot of time then unpacking what it was about this material that I really loved. And I was sitting at home in a sleep-

deprived state after my first child was born, and I had a collection of small, tiny jelly molds that I wanted to do the tonal drawings of these pieces. I picked them up at a market in Eumundi on the Sunshine coast, and I just immediately... I love the lightness, I love the futuristic quality of them, and I love this sense that they were very domestic, but they were very industrial and very, very aeronautical.

And when I sat at home with a packet of Blu-Tack, because with a gorgeous baby who didn't need to sleep very much, I knew I wasn't going to sit there and do tonal drawings for hours. So, I sat there playing with a packet of Blu-Tack. And as soon as you began to put their forms together, they really told their own stories. And it really started from those pieces. But then I began to collect more of the material, and then I think inevitably through the collection and the massive objects, these things ask their own questions. And I thought, well, it's extraordinary that there's so much of this stuff, and it is all, as you say, so much post-war aluminum, so much material had been discarded. And I began to investigate that further.

Aluminium takes so much energy to make initially, to produce, but not very much energy to recycle. And these objects had clearly been recycled from the war, from all those aircraft. So, it was possible that the jelly mold I was drawing may well have been a Spitfire once. So that fascinated me, the way... The endless reuse of these materials. So, I then looked into these wartime regimes, of the way people collected aluminium for the war effort. There was in Britain's campaign was called From Saucepans to Spitfires, where people were asked to donate their pots and pans. I think in Britain it really was more of a propaganda exercise, and a lot of the material wasn't used. However, in Australia, we were more straightforward and said, "This will save other aluminium that we use in aircraft production." This just fascinated me, and I began to look at the archives, and these stories of collection. And it fascinated me how in 1941, '42, when this campaign happened in Australia, people got very excited about collecting waste.

And I think what fascinates me in that too are these small and large histories, it's people trying to do these small gestures that are part of a larger national narrative. In fact, in 1941, a Mrs. A. Wall writes on behalf of her daughter to the minister for munitions and says, "Sir, my daughter, Billie Wall, age 14, has been collecting milk bottle tops, also silver [inaudible 00:13:19] and toothpaste tubes to build a Spitfire to help win the war. And she now has two corn sacks full and four sugar bags full of bottle tops, also a fair amount of aluminium pots and pans, and I would like to know if you could send some responsible person to collect same, as I would like to know she got the credit of her efforts. Also, all those who were so good in helping the good cause. Awaiting an early reply."

My favourite bit though, Pedram, is where she ends with, "The number of tops on hand is 135,000." And you just think about this 14-year-old in Bondi Junction in '41 collecting these masses of things, and this sense of these small gestures in something larger. So, it just fascinated me how excited people got about collecting this waste, in the sense of these things.

And then there's some marvelous cartoons at the time showing this collection, and showing saucepans flying overhead and so forth. What I loved was after the war, the same factory in Warwickshire that had made Spitfires, same men that had been making these war planes, actually used the same technology to make these very state-of-the-art, very aeronautical modern kitchens. And that transferal of skills from wartime to peacetime I found quite fascinating, but just generally that adaption. I did rather love the idea of them all being turned into kitchen cabinets.

Pedram Khosronejad:

It is interesting. Yeah, it is very interesting.

Donna Marcus:

Yeah. I think so. But then the thing about aluminium, and to a lesser extent plastic, but they are truly the materials of modernism, and for a couple of very practical reasons. You need a lot of electricity to produce masses of aluminium, so that couldn't happen until the late 19th century, and not really in any great commercial way until really the early 20th century. So, it's a very ubiquitous material. It is both grand and humble.

Pedram Khosronejad:

But let me ask, when I am seeing in Melbourne Art Fair your beautiful installations, I feel there is somehow... You are collecting social history of different people, families, mostly female ones, who use them cooking, culinary activities since, well, probably middle of Second World War until '50s, '60s, you are making a collage of people's life stories, and very beautifully you design them beside each other and create your own story.

Donna Marcus:

I think that it's very central to the work that these pieces have lived a life. You cannot use this material without them telling their own stories. And that is the story of them coming from other people's kitchens. It is the story of them being used in a number of ways. And when you look carefully at some of the objects, you can see these wonderful names sometimes applied to them, sometimes brand names, but things that speak to the time from which they were used.

It's interesting that you mentioned that obviously these things came from the kitchen and at that time was very much the provenance of women, in all sorts of ways. But fascinatingly, when I was in Melbourne, I was taken by a friend to the suburbs, went to a big op shop depot. And I don't really collect very much any more, because you can't really find much any more. And part of the project is to ... the sense of completion, to use what I have. But while I was in this opportunity shop there, there was a much older man there who... I saw of a set of these six cups, and he told me the story that he had two sets of cups like that, and they apparently were a very common thing to give to young men as their 21st birthday gift, which is a story I hadn't heard before. Those cups were... They would go into the glove box of the car.

And I kind of love that, because I think of aluminium as this great material of modernism, and with that, with travel, movement, mobility. And so the idea of these aluminium cups being held within the glove box I think is quite lovely. But certainly when I collect the material, at different times during the 30 years, you can see these changes. So, when I began in the '90s, clearly fried food was no longer something people wanted, so consequently I would find all these really quite beautiful perforated deep fryers. And then there were lots of electric frying pan lids, and they were being discarded at that time as well. So, I'd see these patterns of things I could collect at different times that related directly to what people were discarding at a particular time. So, that told a story of everyday life as well.

The other thing I love when I collect these works is sometimes finding these funny little repairs that have been done, different things that have been screwed back on.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Very interesting. Yes.

Donna Marcus:

Very interestingly, Pedram, a lot of that is from material that I think might've come from the '40s.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes.

Donna Marcus:

Older work, material where people still repaired things a lot. And so you see these very inconsequential objects now, they became, but they've been lovingly and carefully kept over many years. And obviously some of these things would be discarded by the families as well, so there would've been a generational tossing out. And so, it's sort of retrieving those objects.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yeah. I think through your artworks, you sew family social histories together, and you create a network of family histories through their objects, and create new story, and it's why, when we are standing in front of your installations, we feel something alive, which is part of different lives, countries, histories come together, and you create new life.

Which actually brings me to next question. Well, last week, as you know, I visited HOTA Gallery, and this is where we can find your lovely exhibition, which is big retrospective, Radiate. Can you let us know a little bit about the installation, exhibition, objects that you installed there? Because I did see big installations, on big wall, only one object, for example. So, how it was your work with HOTA in Gold Coast, and how long it will be still on, the exhibition?

Donna Marcus:

For many years I lived on Tamborine Mountain, and I worked at the Gold Coast campus of Griffith University, and I collected a lot of this material from the Gold Coast, and I had a long relationship early on in my role as a teacher with the gallery. And when I was invited to have the exhibition there, it was very exciting, and it seemed a very apt place for that. It's been several years of work, and I think what I've managed to do in the last seven years, what I really wanted to do when I went into the studio full-time, was to take the studio works to a larger scale. And I think on a larger scale they talk about excess and retrieval and ambitions of modernism and so forth. So with the show, there were just opportunities to play with a range of ideas.

And I guess this might be the time to also talk about the stories that are embedded in the work, and when you talked about other people's stories. And it's true, from the moment I began to make this work, I thought at first it was going to be this minimal, very formless work with this layering of these beautiful round saucepan lids and so forth. But people would always tell me stories about the work. And the thing that fascinated me about that is that those stories sometimes have very little to do with the object themselves, but they are a trigger for all sorts of other memories. And that's something that I've become more fascinated with. And also in the public works, that's been a wonderful experience.

And usually the works themselves talk about other people's stories and so forth, but I began to think a lot, and I began to do a little bit of research about my own family. And my mother talked a lot about her childhood, and her parents were Danish immigrants, and she had lived as a child on a few big passenger ships in Berrys bay in Sydney, and the ship was...

Pedram Khosronejad:

How could they lived on the ship?

Donna Marcus:

So, they could live on the ship because they were salvaging the ship. And it was quite a large ship, at the time, it was quite a well-known ship. And so they lived on the ship as they salvaged it. There's an article that I found about my grandparents and mother saying, "In every bay of Sydney Harbour where there is quiet water for mooring lie old ships which will put to sea no more. Ships whose value is the timber and iron from which they're made, and the temporary homes which they provide for caretakers, ship-breakers or their wives."

Pedram Khosronejad:

So, how long they lived on this ship?

Donna Marcus:

They lived on the ship from I think about... I've got to get this right. I think it was at least three or four years.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Wow.

Donna Marcus:

Because it takes a long time to salvage a ship.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yeah. So, how many families together lived on such a ship?

Donna Marcus:

Well, on this ship only my grandparents and my great-grandfather and my mother, who was an only child, and her kittens, her cats, which were featured in this article. But there were other ships too, there were other families living nearby. And my mother always painted this very exciting, glamorous childhood.

I also uncovered articles where they were described as the hulks of Berrys Bay and so forth. This is all in the late 1920s and through the depression. So what would happen is, they would live on these ships for several years, and they would salvage the metal. The timber was not used a lot, which is very sad. And then in the end, these ships would be... The hull would be towed out beyond the heads and be sunk. I think the Gabo now is a dive site. But this time in my mother's life living in Berrys Bay, it just lasted all her life. There's these stories, and she loved it. She loved it.

There were several people that would come and work. My grandfather would go and work on working ships, and then he would come back and people would... There'd be all these spare cabins that people would stay in, and they would work on the ship. When I began to look at it, there were these... There's a wonderful painting by Percy Lindsay in the show that's been borrowed by QAGOMA which has the Gabo, the ship, lots of material. It was obviously something that lived in people's lives and memories. So, I began to look at this, and I thought about my mother. My mother who was very good at using things for purposes they weren't intended on. I remember she talked about the loss of these big mirrors that went down with the ship and various things. But I found this great article, and there was a wonderful part in here about... And I'll just read... It just shows my grandmother in the galley, and Mom with her kittens, and then I think it might be my great-grandfather or somebody working on the ship, cutting the ship up with the oxyacetylene torch.

And it says, "On the land side of the Gabo is a rickety gangway, quite safe, but too unsteady to appeal to the landsman. The visitor no sooner gets his head in line with the first row of portholes than he's aware of a woman's touch. The lace curtains are drawn across them." And I just loved that, and the stories that I'd heard and I've made a large installation that is really very central to the exhibition. It's called Gabo, and out of many retrieved objects, from pressure cookers and all these things that are heavily perforated, and so there's shower roses and there's steamers and little coffee percolator infills. I have made eight of these round assemblage components that are all lit, and so they take on a very lacy aesthetic.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yeah, indeed.

Donna Marcus:

And I... Yeah. So...

Pedram Khosronejad:

This is how I think, with such a beautiful family story and history, that we see a type of mixture of feminism, minimalism, migration, and post-war period, if I can say, I did see that in exhibition that people are standing in front of your... Especially the two paintings that you mentioned, and looking at your artwork, and really I could see in their face how they are inspired by the question of aluminium and social history of your family too, Donna.

Donna Marcus:

I mean, it's been lovely to hear the stories that others have told. And I think I probably need to finish the story by talking about again... On one hand, the works, and there are other works such as Waist, which is also the name of a ship's deck, these pieces that I made that relate to the story of the Gabo. But they also... There's all of Mum's stories. Berry's Bay was a really central part of Australian modernism, and as many artists painted there, and there was a whole [inaudible 00:27:32] and Roy De Maistre and Roland Wakelin and so forth. So, that lovely kind of link between the industrial and domestic, which characterised that area, was actually captured by many Australian artists, and was a very important part of a larger story. So, that was something I wanted to talk about in the exhibition as well. I mean, funnily enough, my mother ended up going to art school when she was quite young.

The other thing I found interesting was that, at that time... And clearly things like this sort of industry was run by new immigrants, but also the excitement of modernism in Sydney. And it's really... In the late '20s, Australia was one of the most urbanised countries. Most people lived in large cities even then. And there was something about that whole story that tied in really well with the things that I am interested in, within the materials and the objects that I use.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes. And I just wanted to add that, in conjunction with your marvelous exhibition at HOTA, there is amazing book and catalogue published, which covers several of academics, art historians, and colleagues who wrote on your beautiful work and installations in different viewpoints of art history, feminism. And I really encourage our friends who are listening to our podcasts, if they're interested, to purchase the catalogue, which really covers more than what you and I are discussing here.

But probably I would like also to ask, Donna, in the same time that you have this background of an artist, academic, work on feminism, migration, consumption, post-war period, in the way and in the road of the development of your work, what is the role of gallerists that you had, and actually you have? And how the gallery with whom you are working develop your ideas, give you more horizons for today and your future projects? Let us know more about with whom are you working, who's your gallerist, and how you collaborate together. Because our podcast is Inside The Gallery, and I'm sure me especially myself would like to know, what's the role of gallery here in development of your artworks and ideas?

Donna Marcus:

Well, certainly starting with HOTA now, the opportunity to work on those large institutional walls and to play with ideas and to have that support from the institution is very important, to bring things together. I think since... I've been very fortunate to have been represented by very good galleries throughout my career. And...

Pedram Khosronejad:

Who's your gallerist?

Donna Marcus:

I now work with Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert. And previously I'd been with Andrew Baker, who retired, and then before that with [inaudible 00:30:51]. But after Andrew retired, and he was fabulous at helping to find his artists the paths that they could go in next, he'd been a wonderful support, and I really liked what Sally was doing, and I think it's very special. I think the link between art and design, given that my work draws so heavily on industrial design and the objects that it uses, I've now worked extensively with architects since 2004. It's a large part of my practice to do that. To work with a gallery who just has an intrinsic understanding of that has been wonderful. And just throughout the HOTA project, and you mentioned the catalogue, but working with Sally and her team very directly, and HOTA were very generous in allowing [inaudible 00:31:44] allowing us to collaborate with the designer, and to have quite a lot of hands-on input into the catalogue.

Pedram Khosronejad:

You know, I can add, for an artist like you that if I can say work are, as you said, industrial design and material, or applied art, technology and science, plus aesthetic, having a special gallery and galleries that understand the beauty, in the same time the function of such artworks, is really interesting. Because when you look at family of artists that Sally work with and help them from different generations, she has really long and deep experience of working with such materials, industrial materials. They are crafts, but in the same time they're crafts full of modern aesthetic, 21st century, light, glass, weaving and dyeing, cutting, collecting, woodwork, glasswork, plastic. So, I think it's very, very interesting and deep understanding between a gallery director and an artist like you. And I see really in HOTA, which is retrospective of probably 25 years...

Donna Marcus:

20.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Yes, 20, of your work, how really working with Sally, guiding you through selecting the artwork and installation, is marvelous. And so this brings me to your next exhibition, again at Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert. What you are going to present in this exhibition, Donna, in Sydney?

Donna Marcus:

In some ways, a lot of the show will be given over to almost a colour study of works. And there's a piece that I've waited years to make, and it's called Glove Box. And it's like a colour sweep of five triangular pieces, where I have used the aluminium cups to colour the pieces. I rarely use anything new in my work, but it felt very appropriate to set these lovely worn objects, these pieces that have really lived great lives, I think, hopefully, in these wonderful cake tins that look a little bit like a nose cone of a plane, which you can imagine I love quite a lot. So, these lovely worn pieces are carefully preserved in these little containers. In there, there's a piece that I have made from a lot of golden ice cube trays that have been collected over many years, and this is a very minimal piece of this collection. I often play with this idea of minimalism and the greed in it.

And the other thing I'm a bit excited about, and Sally really happily led me down this path, which I'm very happy about, is we have some older works. So, some of the original dodecahedron spherical objects that I made, that were used in larger installations early on. There are a few pieces that actually came from an exhibition that was held at the Museum of Art and Design in New York many years ago, and some of those have been in my collection, but it's time for them to go off into the world. And so, we're planning also in introducing those works. And I think the thinking there too was to actually, now I'm showing in Sydney after such a long time, as an introduction to the fuller practice. So, that's a wonderful opportunity.

I do love playing with space and installation. One of the things about showing with Sally is it's a return to Sydney, and coincidentally, the gallery is a couple of hundred meters, I think, away from where I was actually born. And I didn't really expect to not live in Sydney, but it's lovely to have that connection. I think so much of my work has grown from that history. So, it's great to be going back down there for the show.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Thank you, Donna. Just as a reminder, March 23rd at 3:00 PM, you and I will have discussion inside the Gallery Sally Dan-Cuthbert in Sydney regarding your new installation, and everyone is welcome to join us. Thank you so much again, Donna, for your time, and looking forward to see you again soon in Sydney.

Donna Marcus:

Pedram, thank you so much. I look forward very much to talking with you and seeing you again.