



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 7 EPISODE 6 (Sept 2025)

SYDNEY CONTEMPORARY – PHOTO SYDNEY

Fair Director: Zoe Paulsen

Artists: Caterina Pacialeo and Tina FiveAsh

Zoe Paulsen: It's great to be here. Tim. Thank you so much for inviting me.

Tim Stackpool: Now this year, Sydney Contemporary, it's the largest edition of your show to date. This is always the case. Every time we talk to you guys, it's just getting bigger and bigger. Something like looking at your press material, 116 exhibitors over a thousand works hanging on the walls.

Do you think this growth signals something about the strength and the appetite that we have for contemporary art in this part of the world?

Zoe Paulsen: Um, yeah, I absolutely do. I think it speaks volumes, you know, the, the scale of this year's fair. It is, it is our biggest to date. , And I think it not only reflects the, the strength of the local art ecosystem, , but also, you know, the, appetite for contemporary we're seeing an increased. In participation from galleries across Australia, and especially from New Zealand as well actually, we've seen an uptick of, you know, kind of New Zealand galleries coming over, which is, which is really fantastic. But I, I think that's kind of matched with real enthusiasm from, from our audience.

So, you know, I think art is, is it's being embraced as, not, not just maybe a cultural pursuit, but part of everyday life. So I think that's what, , keeps people coming back and, what makes events like this really thrive.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah, it's something huge, like 25,000 people have, have come to pass Fairs and what is it, \$140 million or something turned over in art sales since Sydney Contemporary first started. Do you think that's to do with the reputation that you've built for the fair?

Zoe Paulsen: Yeah, absolutely. And that's an important point. You know, I think it is important to say that Sydney Contemporary represents the highest concentration of art sales annually in Australasia.

You know, so I think that's, it's such a significant boost to the market and, and critical to contemporary art in the region. And you know, at the end of the day, the role of an art fair is, is to grow the market. But I do, I, I, I think it's such a draw card because it offers such a rare combination of you know, being highly accessible but also deeply sophisticated.

I think you, you know, collectors know that they'll see museum quality works that, that they can come to the fair, they'll be having meaningful conversations with, with artists and, and gallerists. But, At the same time, I think the fair, it's so welcoming. It's such an accessible, space for, for new audiences as well.

It's energetic and I just think it really encourages that curiosity. I think that's absolute key. We need to, we need to be a space for everybody. So whether you are walking in and, you know,

looking to buy your first artwork or, you know, you, you as. Season collector coming back to purchase your 50th.

I, I think that's what, you know, kind of makes Sydney Contemporary so unique. And then obviously, not, not only that, but the program is so broad from installations and talks, performances, workshops. So I really, there is something for everyone. I think people continue to leave inspired and, yeah, I think that's what makes them come back year after year.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. I think it is kind of like the festive season for visual arts in Sydney. It's, it's so hard to actually organise anything else for people in the business to come to when Sydney Contemporary's on, it's like impossible. You might as well just block out the dates in your diary.

Zoe Paulsen: And not only that, it's the beginning of spring. Yeah. It's the start of spring. Everybody's, you know, kind of shedding the layers and they're wanting to come out of, you know, hibernation. So, yeah, we, we couldn't be luckier in regards to the time of year. But for all the reasons that I've, I've mentioned above, I, I do believe that that is what really sets Sydney contemporary apart.

Tim Stackpool: mm. Now, I do want to talk a bit about Photo Sydney, but first of all. More broadly you, you're alluding to that when people walk into Carriageworks for the first time this year, what do you think is gonna be most striking about what you've got in store?

Zoe Paulsen: Oh, well I had thought about this and I thought, oh my gosh, where do I start?

Um, but I actually think it's really worth mentioning, uh, the venue itself, you know, Carriage works, and that's been, that's been our home from the beginning. And, we couldn't be lucky at a call Carriageworks our home. I think that kind of industrial space couldn't provide a better backdrop for, for contemporary art, so, I'm very excited about all the installations this year. And yeah, we installations have been curated by, Jose DeSilva and we, we have such an incredible lineup of artists participating and presenting, you know, some major works. ... *(names artists)* ...

just to name a few. We've got a major work by Johnny Nisha (sic?), who's working in collaboration with, uh, Mark. Pritchard (...*names artists* ...)

But if, if I was going to mention one, um, I think I'm, you know, kind of very, very excited about a major site specific work that's being created, by internationally renowned.

Aotearoa artist, Lisa Reihana. and that work is called Anzac, which you know, makes reference to (?) or, like a traditional gateway. And essentially it's like a tapestry. It's made of thousands of shimmering discs that, kind of catch the sunlight and they move in the breeze. It's gonna be the first thing that people see walking down the steps of Carriageworks and it will just provide such a spectacular entrance, So, and the idea that the (?) kind of blesses everybody as they embark

on their journey inside Sydney Contemporary. So that is, that is one to, you know, kind of really look out for and get excited about. It's just, uh, it's gonna be, uh, incredible. We've got, you know, performances as well that's been curated by Jose.

So very excited about a performance, uh, or a number of performances by Christian Thompson, who will be joined by composer Adam Rudiger (sic). And they will present a live performance and sound work, that builds on 25 years of engagement with recorded sound and the revival of Christian's families endangered Banjara (sic) language.

and so that work is called Recital, uh, and it's going to be performed twice on the Thursday night of the fair. So that's definitely one not to miss. And then of course our talks program this year again, , being curated by Michael Do and, and Steven Todd. Steven's talks, you know, explore the intersection of art, design and architecture, and, and he's engaging with some of the most exciting voices working in design in the design world today.

And then Michael curates kind of, more the contemporary art stream. So there's, I would say if there's one, one piece of advice that I could give anybody would be to really study the program because there is this, there is so much to see and do. and it would be well worth kind of getting familiar prior to coming on site so that you're not missing anything that you are really looking forward to seeing.

Tim Stackpool: Can you still fit everything in the space? Zoe? Are you turning people away?

Zoe Paulsen: Um, we're not turning people away, but I must say even, kind of thinking about last year we were pretty, we were pretty full on, throughout. So yeah, I mean, um ...

Tim Stackpool: even in terms of exhibitors though, I mean people that actually wanted (Oh), use the space.

Zoe Paulsen: Yeah. No, we are actually the only event that, that takes up the whole of Carriageworks and that really feels like there's not, there's not an inch that's not being used. So, yeah.

Tim Stackpool: But in terms of that, this is the first time that Sydney Contemporary has introduced, contemporary photography as a, as a category on its own. Do you have space for that? And is this the right moment to highlight photography in this way?

Zoe Paulsen: Uh, yes, we have space for it and, it's something that's been, in discussion for, for, for some time and, uh, I think it absolutely felt like the the right year to be doing,, or to be launching, photo Sydney.

We are really lucky to have been working with Sandy Edwards. Who's just been fantastic. And you know, I think we've seen an increase in interest from collectors and people wanting more visibility. Photography has always been part of, of Sydney Contemporary and will be, but I think, you know, creating a dedicated sector allows people to really, you know, consider what it is that they're what.

You know, what it is that they are, that they are looking at. So it's just our way of, highlighting and continuing to celebrate photography. I think it, , it's so dynamic. It's collectible and, and it deserves a dedicated space.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. I mean, often times people will look at a photograph and say, that's a really nice photograph, but see it more as documentation rather than necessarily art. Does that help, do you think, what you are doing refocus photography as a, as having a place in the, in contemporary art in Sydney?

Zoe Paulsen: Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And I do think, photo Sydney aims to challenge those old binaries, but also like in this day and age, we're in a time of image overload. So I think it really is a fantastic opportunity to refocus photography's place within the contemporary arts space and also especially within the context of an art fair. And, you know, working with Sandy we've got an incredibly diverse lineup showing as you just mentioned, photography as a medium.

I mean, it reaches a huge audience. however, it's not always that audience that understands the definition of art. So, I think yeah, creating a dedicated sector just continues to, to highlight, kind of the. the medium within this space,

Tim Stackpool: the, the curatorial side of it, and not wanting you to speak on Sandy's behalf, though, I mean, that's gotta have been challenging. You've only got a certain amount of space. You're gonna dedicate some of it to Photo Sydney. How was the decision made as to who you were gonna let in for this first time?

Zoe Paulsen: We had a separate selection committee for, for photo Sydney this year. So we engaged with a, you know, highly experience, experienced panel.

Gal Newton, who for many years was the photography curator for the National Gallery of Australia. Alistair Foster, who was the. ACP'S longest serving director and now, you know, director of Talking Pictures, where he interviews photographers around the world, Margot Riley, curator at State Library and Merilyn Fairskye who is, you know, an artist herself working in moving in image and video installations and photographic series. So we had an incredibly experienced panel, but we received a significant number of applications. So the task was not easy. But I think what we have ended up with is, like I said before, really interesting and diverse, lineup, which just, reflects the diversity and vitality of, of the medium and Sandy and the panel,

it was, all about bringing together established voices and also emerging talent as well to, to represent photography in all its forms. So, yeah. I think it's gonna be a fantastic sector this year.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. Looking at the diverse names you're talking about, in Photo Sydney, with artisan photographers coming in from like Los Angeles and South Africa or, and the UK as well. That's a difficult balance when you've gotta actually weigh it up against local photographers as well, in order to make sure that perhaps the international names don't swamp the local talent.

is that a fine line to walk?

Zoe Paulsen: Um, yeah. You know, but I think it's important. I think, you know, photography as a medium really crosses borders so naturally. So it creates, creates place and identity and time in a way that really resonates globally. And so by including some international voices, we are creating a space for dialogue between artists that are working in, really different contexts.

So, I think this exchange, benefits everyone and it connects audiences to, to new or, kind of different ways of seeing, seeing the art as well.

Tim Stackpool: yeah. I can kind of see it as an opportunity to bring people to appreciate contemporary art who maybe never have considered it before. Maybe they have an eye for Contemporary photography, but not necessarily for the traditional contemporary visual arts. So the market, purely by you doing this, is very much broadened.

Zoe Paulsen: Oh, absolutely. And I do think that this will really kind of, interest and, and pull in a new audience as well. Photography can be an incredibly accessible entry point for, collectors or, or new buyers, especially in terms of price and, and format. So I think a lot of new collectors are drawn to photography because it speaks to their experience of the world. It's, it's immediate, but it's also familiar and, and very layered as well. So, I think the platform, where gallerists and photographers can really showcase their work with intention is something really, interesting, but also as well that it invites people into the space where they can really immerse themselves in the medium and consider photography and all its different formats.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. Very shortly in this episode, we're gonna talk to a couple of local artists whose photographs are being featured in Photo Sydney this year. But before I let you go. Is this gonna be a permanent thing for you at Sydney? Contemporary

Zoe Paulsen: yes, absolutely. I think it will be a, a permanent thing.

I think, you know, the reception has been so, so overwhelmingly positive., it's one of the most significant additions to the fair since we launched over a decade ago. And I think it's, it attracts a new audience. And, our goal is to remain relevant, dynamic and, and future facing. And this is

exactly the kind of evolution that we need. So absolutely. A vital part of Sydney Contemporary moving forward.

Tim Stackpool: Yeah. Zoe, thank you very much for your time and I wish you all the very best for the fair. It's coming up very quickly and I appreciate that you've made this time so close to the launch of the show.

Zoe Paulsen: My pleasure. Thank you so much for inviting me.

Caterina Pacialeo: Well, you're going to see four images, approximately 115 centimetres by 83. Work that looks at the elements of nature, fire, earth, water, and air. And, uh, taken here in the east coast of Sydney actually down near Stanwell Park. And they are, soft slow motion, uh, works that look at , conceptual landscapes and they're looking at the stillness within.

So, uh, we are connected with nature and, um, wanting to have that moment of reflection and pause and really not photographing a traditional. Portrait or landscape, so to speak. But more so looking at the elements or breaking down. The element, almost like seen through particles. Hence that's why I use very slow, long shutter speeds.

My work is shot in camera. I don't use any AI or any, um, intervention. It's basically shot as I've seen, and I like to use or photograph just at twilight, just as the sun's going down. So, so it can get those quite moody long exposures. the work was inspired pretty much straight after the death of David Bowie.

And I also had a knee death experience in 2014, and I noticed that the light for me was incredibly sharp and predominant. I felt there was a, um. There was a shift within how I saw my world and it was almost like I can see splitting particles and that's how I wanted to I wanted to capture that on in my photographs, in my work.

And yeah, it was a challenge as easy. It may, may, um, kind of you. Picking up a camera and then shooting these beautiful water series. This is part of the water series. Uh, and within water, there's air, fire, water, and earth. Um, and hence the, the colour blue and hue. That's what I got. I didn't play with the hue.

I just wanted to capture that deep water element and that connection, the stillness within,

Tim Stackpool: I'm guessing then that it's not, we're not talking about spontaneous photography here. You actually set out to record something, which had you seen the scene previously and you wanted to recapture that moment?

Or did you look at, this is a virgin opportunity here. I know where I want to take the shot. Let's see what I get.

Caterina Pacialeo: Absolutely. It was, it was well thought out. It was something that I've, I kind of contemplated for a while and I've written down and I've wanted to look at where, how I can create a beautiful landscape that can bring that concept through.

And I would go down and I would do lots of testing and especially during various times of the day. , It was something that. It came to me naturally and I think Earth, earth was the first one that came through and um, I wanted to really kind of work with that. So all my work is always well thought out.

Lots of storyboarding and lots of testing before I actually shoot. And then when I'm ready, I spend a solid month or two months. That series took about four months to photograph. Four to five months.

Tim Stackpool: Plenty of contemplation there. You are exhibiting at Sydney Photo as we've been talking about, how tough is it to choose just four of your works?

Caterina Pacialeo: Uh, that's a great question, Tim. I, I found that, what, um, selection or what should I put forward? 'cause we were approached and I thought, I'm really, really, really love this series. And I thought it's something that hasn't been viewed by the public. So I decided these were the four. It belongs as a set.

I couldn't separate them,

Tim Stackpool: Tina, your work is concerned with death. But not necessarily in such a morbid fashion. But tell us a little bit about how you are inspired by that.

If I could put it that way. If anyone can be inspired by death, what led to this, and then tell us a little bit about. What we're gonna see.

Tina FiveAsh: Sure. So I always had a massive fear of death, um, to the point of having panic attacks. And then just after I did my fine arts degree at COFA, that was when I met Caterina actually around 2007.

I, I sort of fell in accidentally into a book on near death experiences which completely opened my mind and transformed. My world because the people who'd had these near death experiences came back with memories of them, which were so vivid, so awe inspiring and wondrous and, I just like, it became a preoccupation for me, thinking about, oh my goodness,

you know, perhaps when we die, our consciousness continues, which is seemingly what, what these kind of cases revealed.

I then looked into the science of it and realized that the science and definitions of death have been always kind of shuffling, moving, kind of quite [00:05:00] unknown. But if anything now the scientific. Definition of death is that our consciousness does continue. I, they dunno how long for, but what I realized was people are very uncomfortable talking about this.

And so I was, as a photographer I was thinking, well, can I try and find ways of, of kind of communicating these concepts of, of, you know, life continuing after death photographically, which may be less kind of. Threatening and more, I, I'm more able to kind of go into those beautiful feelings and, and textures of, you know, using twilight skies.

But kind of superimposing weathered signs on top of them, which. Taken the texts from the signs are taken often from song lyrics referencing the afterlife. So for instance, see you on the other side. it's very beautiful over there. That was actually a quote from Thomas Edison who invented the light bulb.

He woke up from a coma and suddenly turned to his wife and said, it's very beautiful over there. And then I think within a couple of. Hours died. So I'm kind of taking these ideas of, you know, what our culture is saying about death quite casually, I think in song lyric forms and, and poetry.

I, I mean, and I'm, I'm actually turning them into, transforming them into sort of, signs on scaffolding. That kind of overlook the sea that, or are attached to kind of scaffolding on big buildings that these luminescent neon signs that kind of tell you things about what it may be like when you die.

But I'm not necessarily, people don't necessarily realize that. It might just be that they've kind of heard, um, the phrase from a song or they've heard the song lyric and it in. But I think what it, my work does it it's kind of like there meditations of the kind of unseen world basically. And they, it provides a framework for which people's imaginations or consciousness can kind of make that jump into the unknown.

And with that scaffolding that I've put in place, which is the photograph,

Tim Stackpool: Are you hoping people to be inspired? By the work or more contemplative and actually reconsider their own perceptions of death.

Tina FiveAsh: I think both. I think it's a conversation starter. A lot of people when they realize the work is about death, kind of open up to me.

It feeds into a whole other project I'm doing called the Death Letter Project, where I've invited a hundred Australians to respond in, in letter writing form to the question, what is death? What happens when we die? So I've got that going alongside my arts practice. But I suppose I'm really hoping people can just kind of be transported into the world of these photographs where they have the space or, you know, the freedom to kind of contemplate these concepts, these unseen concepts within the photograph.

. What I've been told is the photographs of the signs, some of them are kind of weathered, rusty looking signs, on the sea side sort of thing. They look, they're so real that it's like people really go into them and they really consider what these words say, like, see you on the other side. People really think about that and it can have different meanings for different people, but it seems quite evocative and it kind of, it.

It's touching people in different ways. It's reaching them in or connecting with them in different ways. And it's had some really quite, you know, powerful, interesting responses that work. And so this is a real chance for me to kind of, you know, sort of get some more feedback from other people and hopefully inspire other people to, into conversations about death, which I love.

Tim Stackpool: Although we have aircraft flying overhead here in your Marrickville studio, there's a certain level of stillness and control amongst these four walls that we're sitting in here at the moment.

How do you hope to convey that in an art fair, let's face it, which is absolutely full of people having plenty of conversations with loads of distractions.

Tina FiveAsh: Well, I think that's the power of art, like, you know, the power of art. Can just arrest you and arrest your attention and sort of grab you and pull you into a work where you can kind of lose a sense of time for however long that might be.

And I think, I think that's the power of the art that, that we're well, I'm hoping that's a power of the art that we're exhibiting, that people can just take a, take a moment out of their lives to kind of, just escape or just imagine some, something else for a moment. And, um, and yeah, I think that's, I think that's a good thing.

Art always stops you in your tracks, doesn't it?

Caterina Pacialeo: I, I really, I really wanna add to that. I think, I think we lead such busy lives now, and I think with tech and, and we are constantly being distracted.

I think the beautiful thing about art is that you can just. Proves through the, the galleries, and you can stop. There's a moment. And I, it's, it's indescribable. It is that meditative process where you get absorbed into the work, the work speaks to you. And, given the way we practice, given the way, you know, we live our lives, we make work from that stillness.

Tina FiveAsh: And I think there's something about the work you've portrayed Katerina, you know, with the, the fire, the sea, the stars. You know, the earth, they're all things that you can find yourself just staring at, and you can stare at these things for hours.

If you're relaxed, you don't have anything to do, and there's a mesmerizing quality about, about your work. And about looking into fire, looking at water, so I think I, I think [00:02:00] that will come across to, I, I think it's that thing. You know, we, we are all natural. Beings.

Mm-hmm. And, and I think, you know, often the fa our favourite moments are sitting in the sun looking at something or sitting on a cliff, looking out to sea, looking at something that kind of, you know, mystically kind of touches us or transforms us in some way, or where we lose track of time. There are, that's my fa favourite times and I think.

Both of our work is kind of has that within it

Caterina Pacialeo: I think when you look at the settings and the way we've, we've put the work together, I think it just harmoniously, you'd think that it was shot intentionally together, but it, but and the words that you describe about death and those moments, and it's true. There's nothing more pure, in essence, where we are connected to the land and, and we are earth, water, fire, air, and we have one thing that we are, we surely do know is that death, there is this [00:03:00] death that is waiting. And I think it's a beautiful thing. It's a contemplative thing and it's something that should be celebrated.

Tina FiveAsh: Because it also reminds us that life is here and now and just to enjoy it and get the most of it now, you know, because we never know when our death will come. Absolutely.

Caterina Pacialeo: It's, it's about living in the moment. It's quite a, a Buddhist philosophy that I do live by. It's like, you know, living the moment, you know, there isn't this future that we think that we, we are gonna live forever.

But as I experienced. Back in 2014, I thought that my time was up and I thought, no, this isn't gonna happen. But I think we need to live in the moment and I think we need to connect in the here and now. And, uh, you know, and I hope that, that the work speaks that as well.