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NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY - INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Peter Greco: Always good things happening at the National Portrait Gallery and there’s one coming up in a few days’ time. To tell us a bit more about it, we’ll catch up with Robert Bunzli and also Marina Neilson.

Marina Neilson: Robert good to catch up again.

Robert Bunzli: Yeah, good to be speaking to you again Peter.

Peter Greco: Nice to be meeting you for the first time

Marina Neilson: Yeah, lovely to meet you too Peter

Peter Greco: Now Robert, tell us about this event coming up in a few days’ time

Robert Bunzli: It’s coming up on the 12 of August, which is a Wednesday, it’s at 2pm AEST, so that’s 1.30pm in South Australia. We’re doing a virtual tour through one of the exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery here in Canberra

Peter Greco: Okay

Robert Bunzli: The Gallery is an exhibition of Shirley Purdie’s work, an indigenous artist and Marina can tell us a bit more about her, but um yes, we’re looking to have a virtual tour through the Galleriea and make it as accessible as possible to as many people as possible.

Peter Greco: Well Marina sounds great, I have read a little bit about the artist, what impressed you about her, what do you like about the artist and her work?

Marina Neilson: Ah, so Shirley Purdie, so she’s a Gidja artist, so the Gidja peoples are from East Kimberly area, so Western Australia. So she lives a very different life to me, an extraordinarily different life and she’s always lived on Gidja Country. She is a senior artist. So, she started painting about 20 years ago, so she had an uncle, Jack Brittain who said, “Hey Shirley, maybe you should give painting a go, you could be good at it!” And it turns out he was right so she’s a great painter. Her mum was a painter, Madigan Thomas, um was her mum and then her other great Gidja artist like Rover Thomas and Queenie McKenzie. And it’s all about stories, so I guess the Portrait Gallery is all about stories, we’re all about people and Shirley’s work is all stories. Her life is a storied life – how she understands who she is, is through stories and this work that we’re going to explore in the virtual tour is a self-portrait. It’s non-representational, so it’s not about what she looks like, it’s about who she is, how she understands herself through connection to Country, so to her people, her kin, to personal memories, her relationship to the land, her relationship to Ngarranggarni – her dreaming, the Gidja dreaming. It’s called Ngalim-Ngalimbooroo Ngagenybe, the self portrait, and I practised that because I am not a Gidja woman (laughs) so practising my Gidja language so Ngalim Ngagenybe, ahh Ngalim (Marina laughs) I’m getting all tongue twisted, so we’ve got Ngalim-Ngalimbooroo Ngagenybe means *From My Women*, so this self portrait *From My Women* is Shirley’s connection to her stories and to Gidya Country and place but it’s particularly her connection to women’s stories, and so whether those women are, so grandmothers on her father’s side or mum’s side, so great grandmothers, there’s all these interminglings of stories. So for me it’s fascinating because Shirley Purdie’s self-portrait really helps me as an non Aboriginal person to get some glimpse, some hint as to the richness and the vastness of her sense of herself in the world and it’s such a colourful textured story I guess. So that’s a lot of words Peter, but there you go!

Peter Greco: No, a picture can paint a thousand words so that sounds great. I love what Shirley says about older people too. What we should do about older people, how we should feel about older people.

Marina Neilson: Absolutely and so Shirley Purdie is, ah, she is an educator at heart too. So she’s a wonderful sharer between cultures and just for older people and older people “You should listen to old people! Listen to them! They’ve lived a life, they know what they’re talking about. They’ve seen things, they observe things” And yeah, older people, they’re the ones you should listen to

Peter Greco: Yeah, I think that’s one of the things that is a very strong message in the Australian indigenous culture which is fantastic. Robert, how did it come about that the National Portrait Gallery chose Shirley’s work or Shirley’s work is exhibited up at the National Portrait Gallery? How does that sort of happen?

Robert Bunzli: Yeah absolutely, so this exhibition opened just before the shutdown when the Portrait Gallery closed to the public and to the staff and it’s one of the first of our Gallery’s reopened, when we reopened to the public a few weeks ago. When we say it’s a self-portrait, it’s actually 36 different portraits that all make up a whole. So there’s 36 squares on the wall each one telling a different aspect of Shirley’s story and her life and her relationships and it takes up a massive wall. So what we are going to be doing is taking a couple of cameras down there and Marina is going to take us through the exhibition, we’re going to look in close up at some of the images. This shutdown period that we’ve all gone through has been both problematic but also has provided a lot of opportunities and for the Portrait Gallery, we’ve really expanded the amount of digital outreach we do, so broadcasting from, well from shutdown we were broadcasting, weren’t we Marina from our spare bedrooms and room scattered around (Marina laughs) the wider Canberra region. We are back in the Gallery now, so we’ll be broadcasting from there and it’s going to be live captioned, and this is the third of the trial tours we’ve been doing with Arts Access Australia and it will be promoted on Arts Access Australia’s Facebook page and on our website as well if people want a bit more information and in fact our website has a lot of information, a lot of the images of Shirley’s work right there that you can see in advance of the actual tour. Um, but we’ve been exploring these digital broadcasts and so essentially, we’re going to be captioning, so for the first time we’re going to be doing a simultaneous Auslan interpretation…

Peter Greco: Tremendous

Robert Bunzli: …and we’re also doing a brief audio description of the tour and the works as we go along. So we’re sort of developing our digital products and services to be more accessible and what we’re finding is that people are dialling in to our tours from right across the country and it’s really great when you can see there are 98 people on a tour and they are literally from one end of the country to the other. The other thing that we are doing in our virtual programs is we’re really trying to make them interactive to our audience so…

Peter Greco: Okay

Robert Bunzli: ...People can put in questions in the chat function of Zoom, we’re going to be broadcasting using Zoom and we can try and answer some of those questions and you know what often happens is lively debates happen off to the side as people put in comments and support each other and disagree and ask follow up questions, and so that interactive nature of it always makes these virtual tours a lot of fun.

Peter Greco: Terrific, now, August 12, it’s free, but you do want people to book, don’t you, or to register at least?

Robert Bunzli: Yeah that’s right, because what will happen is, there’s a couple of Zoom links that we have to send to people by emails, so people need to register, so that we’ve got their email address. So you can either do that by going to the National Portrait Gallery’s website or there’ll be links on Arts Access Australia’s Facebook page, but for your listeners right now if they want to write down the email address to register their interest, they can send an email that just says “I’m interested in the tour” To bookings@npg.gov.au and we will send the link to the Zoom tour and then you just click on the link and you come in and we’ll start talking with you.

 Peter Greco: Terrific, Marina tell us a bit more about your role on the day?

Marina Neilson: So my role, so Robert will be behind the camera when we go into the Gallery and he will be providing tech support and zooming in on pictures and things like that so we’ll go in there together and I’ll be in front of the camera, so I’m the tall, lean woman with the short ash blonde grey (Marina laughs) hair wearing some smart casual outfit on the day and I’ll be guiding everyone through the looking, and I shall be reading out short audio descriptions of the pictures that we have a closer look at, because as Robert said, there are 36 different panels. It’s set up like a grid, so you’ve got four rows sitting on top of each other, nine across and four down. You’ve got these 36 stories connecting to country, dreaming, memory and the interweaving and so we’ll have a close look at some of the stories and I am definitely going to be inviting participation, so Robert has said we use the chat function so our tours – we always want them to be interactive. We want to hear what people are thinking, questions, but also sharing what they’re willing to share. Their ideas, their imaginative responses – all sorts of things and so it can become, really, a discussion and very open and very non-judgemental kind of space. So at different points prompted by a different story, I’ll be inviting people to share and so I’ll be facilitating the experience.

Peter Greco: Sounds great, Robert give us those details again, so it’s Wednesday 12 August at 2pm AEST which is 1.30pm in South Australia. For those people that might be listening in Western Australia through the Tune In radio app or on the website, obviously Shirley’s part of Western Australia is from Western Australia so they may be particularly interested so how can people get in touch in particularly as far as registering to book to be there via Zoom?

Robert Bunzli: Absolutely so just send an email to us at bookings@npg.gov.au and we’ll send you the Zoom link and then all you’ll have to do is on the day, 5 minutes before 2pm is hit that link from your computer or your device. I suspect a lot of people are Zoom experts by now but…

Peter Greco: Laughs

Robert Bunzli: You can come in by computer or you can get the Zoom app free from the App Store or the Android Store so you can watch it on your iPad or other device and it would be great to see people there and we will do some follow up feedback opportunities after that and we really hope that your Vision Australia listeners will not only join us but maybe give us some feedback to help us develop the programs further as we develop our various outreach programs.

Peter Greco: Sounds great, Robert Bunzli and Marina Neilson, thank you so much for your time from the National Portrait Gallery

Robert Bunzli: Thank you very much Peter

Marina Neilson: Thank you Peter