

LISMORE REGIONAL GALLERY :: ARTIST IN CONVERSATION SERIES

Written transcript of:

Artists in Conversation with Karla Dickens and Polly Borland

Talk occurred Wednesday 9 December 2020, at Lismore Regional Gallery.

Artists are Introduced by Brett Adlington, Director of Lismore Regional Gallery

BRETT: Tonight's talk is with Polly Borland and Karla Dickens. Firstly, I'd like to acknowledge that we are located on the land of the traditional Bundjalung people of the Bundjalung Nation who have looked after this land so amazingly for so many generations and continue to do so. I'm not going to say too much. Obviously, it's a great pleasure to have two fine artists in our presence here tonight. Of course, one is Karla Dickens, who's show 'A Dickensian Sideshow' we're sitting in. From what I've seen so far, it is delighting audiences and will continue to do so. It references an amazing local man, Con Colleano; if you haven't had a chance to look at some of the film footage, make sure that you do tonight. Of course, we also have Polly Borland. She's an internationally regarded photographer who went overseas for many, many years—a few decades, probably—and has photographed some pretty incredible people in her career, suffice it to say that she's (inaudible) and I'm really proud of that. Please welcome Karla and Polly.

Applause from audience—

POLLY: Thank you very much. Hi, everyone. This is really Karla's gig. As you can see, this work is just mind blowing, and it's really, very emotional to be in this room. Can you all hear me?

Member of Audience: Just. It's very hard.

POLLY: We're working on it. I can talk louder. I can yell; I know how to yell. How did I meet Karla? This year, as we all know, has been a total kind of nightmare, but out of it have come some positive things. I met Karla at the end of February. I got off a plane and went to the Biennially in Adelaide. Three of my sisters were already at the Biennially, and I got off the plane and literally had to have a shower, get dressed and

go to the opening. My sisters had already found Karla and her work, and they dragged me to this room. Then, all of a sudden, Karla appeared and there was just an instant connection. That night we all went to a party where there was food and, automatically, we all sat together. From that point on, a friendship has grown. Then my family and I got stuck here, because we couldn't get a visa to go back to America. We had to get a document and, supposedly, we were going to get it in three weeks. Then I said to my husband, 'Oh, we've never been to Byron Bay; why don't we check it out?' Eight months later, we're still here. Also, I now know that this is really where I want to come back to. My son's in the audience, and we need to go back to America at some point but we're not quite sure when. But I rang Karla when we got here—lockdown happened soon after—and I was like, 'Oh, we're in Byron Bay and I don't really know where we are; I'm sort of really freaked out and scared and I can't get back to America'—and 'dah, dah, dah'—and she said, 'Oh, I'm just up the road.' I mean, it was amazing. So she and I used to have long conversations about various things over the course of lockdown. Then, when everything reopened, she took me camping. I'd never been camping in my life, and she took me camping. But it's just been incredible. I just think this work is extraordinary and I think the person is extraordinary. I decided to do a little bit of research because I thought, 'I know Karla personally, but we don't really know each other's back story.' Obviously, we've had pretty deep conversations, but today I stumbled across this quote and it spoke to some of what she and I have talked about and also about the work. This is Karla: 'I've surrendered to the fact that there's a lot of darkness in me and my work, especially if you're looking at the treatment of First Nations peoples in this country. Historically and socially, joy isn't a part of an honest account. I was seriously in search of light and more joyful stories and experiences, when I made the decision to focus on circus life in Australia. It was early in my research that I realised I was being too optimistic and, of course, the lives of First Nations peoples had pain and injustices, whether in a circus or prison cell.' Anyway, I'm sorry; I've gone from funny to deadly serious. I don't know; what can you say, Karla?

KARLA: First, I'd just like to acknowledge that I'm standing on incredible Bundjalung country. I'm really delighted to be able to talk publicly with Polly because, as Polly was saying, we've had so many long chats, but we don't talk much about art. It's been interesting. Polly put up a post: 'Interview on the ABC'. I listened to it and I was

like, 'Ooh, fancy!'—the stories behind it. I don't really go and check people out; I kind of connect with people, like we did in Adelaide, so it's been amazing. Meeting Polly and seeing her work in Adelaide at the Monster Theatre was just like 'aah!'. You'd see these people's artworks in books and stuff, and I felt like the country cousin down there. They looked after us so well, with Leigh Robb putting that show together down there and with us meeting people like Polly, Stelack and Mike Parr, who was born in Lismore. The 2020 year has been many things, but Polly, Louie and John—

POLLY: Thank you.

KARLA: Have been real blessings in our lives, and the most rewarding thing has been these long chats and so on that we've been having over the course of lockdown and out of lockdown. COVID didn't affect me like it affected Polly and her family. I'm artist; I was like, 'Great, fantastic; into the studio!' I did panic about the chip shop not being open. Also, it did force me to clean out my studio and it actually changed my work. These are the works that I did in lockdown and there's actually a lot more space in them compared to these works over here that I did when I wasn't in lockdown; that was because I was like, 'The chip shop's never going to be open; I won't be able to find any stuff,' so it was a joyous day when it did open. So COVID didn't really touch the sides for me; I would have been in lockdown after Monster Theatre in Adelaide and then the Sydney Biennial anyway. It was Black Lives Matter that really brought me to my knees this year. Polly, John and Louie had left LA and they had a different perspective on what was happening, and it was a really relevant kind of perspective. So that's where most of our conversations were directed; they were directed into race politics. That's getting back to that quote that you read. Yes, a large work that was in Adelaide is not in this show, and there's a bit of a quote from me. I think I stole it off somebody but I can't remember who it was, but it was a good quote: 'The sad truth is that the truth is sad.' So it's been a year of kind of being sent to our rooms and thinking about things, and definitely all the race politics have been huge in that.

POLLY: Early on, you were saying, I remember, that it was really traumatising for you to see what was happening in America and the parallels between here and your own experience. For me, I suppose, as a white person, having left Australia 30 years ago and then coming back, I didn't really know what had been going on and how things had changed, and it was really weird because I felt that things hadn't really

changed. I know that a larger number of people have a greater awareness but, to me, it just felt that the politics in a lot of the institutions were the same. Going to Byron Bay the day of the Black Lives Matter march, we saw all these traumatised families standing up and talking about their loved ones who had been killed in custody and there's been no justice, even though there's been a royal commission. I am just absolutely horrified that this is still going on. That was sort of topical—topical—when I left the country 30 years ago and it's still going on, just as it is still going on in America. We talked a lot about the parallels, didn't we?

KARLA: Yes.

POLLY: Shit's got to change; this is not right. I suppose that I have been educating myself, taking responsibility. I realised recently that I can speak about it, but it's also about action. I think—I'm not going to remember it exactly now—it's complicity if you're silent, and there's another word for it if you don't act. So it's just been beautiful to meet Karla, with her being open to my ignorance in a way and actually not judging my ignorance and my wanting to learn because, as a white person, I want to be able to help. I don't know; do you want to comment?

KARLA: I guess that it's always easy to connect and have an open conversation with people who are interested, but that's not always the case. I think the key to this year too is that it's global. It's not just Australia and the streets of LA or different parts of the States but such a global situation. With Monster Theatres in Adelaide, it's like there is this uncanny insight and foresight that artists have. There's Michaela Dwight. As you walked into the Art Galley of South Australia, there was a huge foyer with yellow walls; it was a giant sick bay with masks—the ones with the big noses—from the black plague hanging on the wall. There was also Abdul Abdullah's work in there of this 'lonesome theatre' that one person was sitting in. I had work out there with Warner Brothers with the little piggy with the cop hat on. So it's just been bubbling for so long, and it's amazing being around artists who acknowledge that bubbling and give time and presence to those issues that are bubbling. Then, with the Sydney Biennially—the first Biennially that an Indigenous curator/director had been involved with, being Brook Andrew—I was there, installing that show, before we got kicked out because COVID had seriously hit, just connecting with all these First Nations people from around the world and black Americans. There was so much artwork there. When you walked into the New South Wales Art Gallery, you saw all these

images of T.J. Hickey by Barbara McGrady, an Indigenous elder who lives in Sydney; he was a young fella who got killed by the police. There was all this work by—you'd know this fella—Arthur Juffrey?

Member of Audience: Arthur Jafa.

KARLA: Yeah, Jafa; there was his work there. One was of a white truck driver, talking about racism and how embarrassed he was. My heart was already ripped apart, but I was also very held by the realisation that what I and Indigenous people in this country struggle with is a global issue and my connection to it. This incredible artist—my brain is not going to give me his name now; he has won a lot of awards recently—dug out a hole at Cockatoo Island, land on which there had been the imprint of Captain Cook's statue. It was all about colonial invasion and police brutality. So I guess that it comforts me to know that it's not just in my head and my family. My brother was getting really toey and was like, 'Oh, this is so traumatising, watching police beating these people up.' Having lived that life, you have a lot of trauma bubbling under surface. Well, it wasn't under the surface anymore; it kind of brought it to the surface. I guess that old Donald Trump is just like an incredible boil that just has to be burst, and he's just kind of brought it to a head. He is the head of the boil, and that just pushed it up.

POLLY: Yes. He brought the plain, stark horror of it into view. It's been going on for hundreds of years, but I think there was nowhere to run and nowhere to hide for anyone. It was just heartbreaking but also like, 'Okay, this just can't go on.' As a white person, I've got to take responsibility. Even though that's not what I have done or feel like, I just have to take responsibility because it's white colonialism. It's that idea that somehow, because I've got white skin, I'm 'better than'. I don't think that, but that is what a lot of societies have been built on. Also, I went to school here and I've canvassed and asked the questions, and the real history still isn't being taught in most schools. Then I was like, 'Why is this happening; how can people be asleep to this?' Then I realised—it took me a while, even though the answer is very simple—that, if we're capable of the original sin, we're capable of doing that over and over again, until we face and reckon with what we did in the first place. That's why you still have what's going on, and it's still going on. It's not only that it's comfortable for white people and it's about power, money and land; but actually, if you're in that much denial and you can't even look at what happened right at the beginning, you can't

change anything. You've got to reckon with your own history, and that's the thing. Does that make sense?

KARLA: Yeah. But the beauty, I guess, is that it's education. You guys arrived in Australia and went into lockdown—I know that many other people here did too—but you turned on NITV to actually hear and see a black perspective, so self-education is huge.

POLLY: Yes.

KARLA: I'm happy to talk to Polly, but I don't always feel like doing that with others. Polly came over for a great dinner at our place, when Megan Cope was living with me in lockdown; she's an amazing Indigenous artist and she was also in Monster Theatres with incredibly powerful work. Where was I going with that? Yes, it's that tiredness that First Nations people get in having to educate people. It's like, 'Yeah, it's cool to answer a few questions,' but maybe that's why I like my six-foot fence and locking myself into my studio. Obviously, I can't speak for everybody, but it is very exhausting. Going back to that initial quote, I think that's why I wanted to look at the circus and try to find some kind of joyousness or lightness in it all. It does get incredibly labour intensive emotionally, and that hits me physically now because I'm older. But, yes, it gets exhausting, feeling the expectation of having to dive into educating. But there is so much education out there now; there are incredible books and there are incredible podcasts. I really had to educate myself a bit more about what was happening in the States. I don't do Facebook anymore, but I do use Instagram, and I've found incredible people, like Shaun King and others; so I listen to them, trying to get a handle on issues and broaden my vision of what's unfolding there. I know that, even though the boil has burst now, the story is not over and there's still lots of work to be done. I think you get exhausted, just knowing that that work is so continuous.

POLLY: Obviously, this work is very articulate visually about what you're saying; it's very political. Was your work always like that? Were you always talking about the same sorts of things but using different subject matter?

KARLA: When I first started painting, abstract expressionism was big at the national arts group, and I was young and had a lot of energy. But no; being able to not purge but kind of heal has just come out of necessity. My work can be really therapeutic

because it's the things that I think of and the things that keep me up. Some of this work here and here was in NIRIN in the Art Gallery of New South Wales. As well as the circus, there were the human zoos, and it was obvious to me that I wanted to create work about them. My work goes to the future, but it also comes back to the relevance of today, as with the jails and the huge incarceration rates, especially of Indigenous women. I feel safe in my studio and at home to say things and have a voice and get a bit cheeky. I love my gallery deeply. 'The Carousel' was the last work that I did that went down to Monster Theatres. That koala went up there before the fires started, and here you can see that the trunk was burning. I've had a passion for koalas and that sort of stuff for a long time. 'The Carousel' is the lions from the Queen. You know her; you've met her personally. I have her mattress protector from when she stayed at the Gollan just across the road in Lismore. You know, you're doing this work and it's like, 'Oh, man, I'm nearly there,' and I just had to put those Australian flags on the butts of those mines. It cheers me up, it does, from the heaviness of it all. My dad sometimes sees the humour in the work, so hopefully the humour of it balances the 'political' and the rawness of it. This work behind me and over here I did in lockdown and, through the pandemic, all I kept hearing about was money. I wasn't hearing names of people who were dying and I wasn't hearing many human stories; it was, 'Oh, the money, money, money.' All of my work has a strong working-class essence behind it, because that's my story and my family's story, but I feel like these are even a bit beyond that. There are a few great old postcards from the Great Depression. There's 'Johnny on the spot'—I love that—and there are a few others somewhere; there's one over there. But they are just about the Depression and what that draws out of the human spirit too, when we're stripped of certain of our comforts. It really brought into reality these circus performers who were travelling around the world, but especially in New South Wales, and the kind of entertainment that they could put on with absolutely nothing.

POLLY: Today, when I was doing my research—I didn't know about this and actually asked Karla about it—I read that there were the tent boxers, the travelling sideshows, the leg shows and the circuses, and I asked Karla what the leg shows were. What was the answer?

KARLA: The answer was, Polly, that 'leg shows' was a polite term for striptease. The tent boxing was a huge story that I wanted to explore in this work. When this

exhibition goes to Orange, the elders and the land council out there are going to be more involved and be telling more personal stories. There's also Digby Moran's drum. Digby, a local elder who's recently passed, was an incredible elder and artist but also a tent boxer. When the tent boxing travelled around and they'd put up their rings and their tents, there was also a strip tent for the leg girls, who often were in relationships with the boxers. This kind of practice started in New South Wales, where the Protection Act meant that people needed written permission to get off a mission. So at the time, even though stripping mightn't seem to be such a glamorous occupation, the women actually had more freedom. Then other women, either on missions or in domestic positions, such as the one my great grandmother was in, actually gained a lot of power from that, and they did get to travel around the countryside with strong, good-looking black men.

POLLY: So there were the tent boxers, the leg shows and the circuses, and you've said that they all sort of hung together. What were the sideshows?

KARLA: Last week, when we were here—Georgy was here with some people, and I had to do something—Darlene Johnson, an Indigenous director and film maker, was also here. I was like, 'Come up; I really want to show you my mermaid.' At a sideshow, you have to have a mermaid, so I made a mermaid at the front door; and Darlene's mother, in 1953, was Australia's first mermaid. Darlene's mother had run away from the Cootamundra Girls Home to join the circus and she would eat, drink and smoke under water. Darlene has made documentaries and she's putting together a feature film to tell her mother's story.

Audience: Wow!

KARLA: Yes, it's an incredible story. Her family also has links to Cabbage Tree Island here. But, for me, there is also a really sad thing about this. I like to do everything myself because I'm so wilful but, because I had funding, I had help with the research and could get the names of Indigenous male boxers and people with the human zoos and in the circus, such as the rodeo riders. But then it got to the point, especially during the time of the protection boards, where identity was a major issue and people weren't identifying with their real names. Like, we couldn't get the real names of all the women. Even Darlene's mother, the mermaid, was said to have come from Florida. Then there were the leg girls, and I worked with an older woman

many years ago in Redfern—I used to teach down there—and she'd say that she was Hawaiian. So they were selling a story as 'the other', like Con Colleano. With their family, at that time, it was like, 'Right, let's'—

POLLY: Was that because it was deemed to be more acceptable to be those people or to escape the authorities, or both?

KARLA: Both; for movement and—my grandmother used to say to me, 'Say that you're Italian and stay out of the sun'—for protection.

POLLY: Right.

KARLA: Con's family changed its name from Sullivan and then, when he met his wife, Winnie, he took on a Spanish kind of outfit. He never denied his Aboriginality, but he never waved the flag, so to speak, because doing that just wasn't viable. However, he did that so well that Hitler gave him a passport to Germany; I love that. On the weekend, we were doing workshops to bring Con's name and his family's name to Lismore, just to go, 'This man is an incredible Aboriginal-Irish man who was born here and is world famous; if you live in Lismore, why don't you know his name and why aren't we celebrating this hero here—this incredibly spunky man in more ways than one—for the sake of ourselves and our children?' So we've started workshops and, hopefully, next year, the lovely Lismore Council is going to help support a project called 'The river crossing'. There'll be a tightrope across the river and Indigenous kids will get to walk across it. So we've started that workshop. John Mundine, a Bundjalung elder, was there. His partner, Anne-Marie, an incredible costume designer, handmade Con Colleano outfits and the kids had them on. We were doing a workshop—I got sick and could only do it for two days—and we all had to go, 'Who is Con? I am Con.' I was just thinking about one of these workshops, and it was like, 'I was invisible in the spotlight.' It's that thing, like he was a 'secret assassin'. I've often found it to be an advantage in my life not to be obviously dark skinned. I can be in restaurants and other places and hear exactly what somebody at the next table thinks about Indigenous people and I can have a voice about that. That identity thing was and is incredibly interesting and also deeply heartbreaking, in trying to find stories of circus celebrities.

POLLY: Because they've eradicated the history.

KARLA: It was hidden, like so much of Australian history.

POLLY: Right.

KARLA: Yeah. That's when you keep shaking down 'what the, what the'. It's the denial and hidden kind of histories.

POLLY: Is it recorded through oral; is there oral history?

KARLA: Yes. Also, because of the amount of trauma suffered by lots of Indigenous people, their life span isn't that long. It's not as though there are many 90-year-olds still passing on those stories, because most Indigenous people don't live that long. I got the funding, started this project and worked on this body of work and other stuff that's not in this show. But, yes, the seed has been planted. Whether or not I keep going on, the stories will keep coming, and they have kept coming. It's like with Darlene showing up; I knew about her mother, but it's about having her here and knowing that her story is going to go out and more people are going to know about her mother. When I go out west, I'm sure that I'll hear about more deadly boxers. I don't often go out and get oral histories, because I'm locked in my studio where I'm happy, but there is a huge need to go out and get those stories. I really wanted to work with Digby, and we were going to do a piece for this show because it was coming to Lismore but, sadly, he passed. Our time to get these stories and hold on to them is running out.

POLLY: Was there a hierarchy with the performers? Was it a white person who was running the show and exploiting them for money, or was it quite a democratic kind of set-up?

KARLA: Earlier on, it was like that. When they had the human zoos and when different station owners would take their No. 1 rider who was working on their station and put them in shows, they'd often change performers' names and put their names into the names of the performers and so on; so earlier it was. Whether it's true or not, I like to go to bed at night, thinking that those women who were in the leg shows and those men who were the boxers had their own power in what they were doing. I saw something that had been written; somebody put up a great post about the tent boxers just last week. It was not that white people didn't struggle and weren't financially in hardship when the tent boxers were on; but, for the Indigenous boxers, it was like 'a pound for a round'. I think they'd get a pound to get flogged or to get into the ring, and that one pound was feeding all of their kids. I'm sure that happened. It

wasn't a race thing, but they weren't getting paid that when they were working for 'the boss'. Also, often black people didn't get paid at all for their domestic work, whether they were domestics in a home or on a farm. So I like to think they definitely had some self-determination in those times.

POLLY: Does anyone want to ask any questions?

KARLA: Help us out.

Member of Audience: Hi. It's nice to see you both talking here; welcome. With the freak shows, the sideshows and other things—that whole space—it's been documented that a lot of the people working with them, as time went by, were thought to have been discriminated against because they were kept in cages and treated as performers. But, as you've said, Karla, they actually had independent wages and community within those businesses and sideshows, so it actually empowered them. A friend of mine has researched the earliest freak show of disabled artists and how, as time went by, they were considered to have been exploited. But they weren't, because they actually had community and got paid. Eventually, as the businesses continued to run, the better they were treated and the better they performed, and they actually created an independent income for themselves. I think you've mentioned that it was really, really important that these communities were established and got to move out of some really dangerous situations. Various people moved out and had a new power. Like, with the tent boxers, if they were really good, no-one was going to argue with them about their pay because they were the best boxers in town.

KARLA: Yes. But, if they were black, they still had a really good chance of getting locked up.

Member of Audience: Yes.

KARLA: But, yes, definitely—

Member of Audience: Yes; but there was a kind of human level of independence that was just beginning to be established. I just know that through a friend of mine who has been studying freak shows and circuses, and it was really interesting to learn how they became communities that actually supported each other.

KARLA: And family. That was another reason why I loved doing this. I did a body of work years ago about the South Sydney Rabbitohs. I did that because it was about black and white coming together, and it was sportspeople. Of course, there's still racism in sport, but there was movement and acknowledgement of skills. But I think, in the circus and the carnivals, it is a real family—

Member of Audience: It is.

KARLA: And, with all the misfits, they were there to hold one another. Yes, there would have been a great sense of freedom in that. I wanted to join the circus.

Member of Audience: There's a big balance though, isn't there, between that freedom and that exploitation?

POLLY: Yes.

Member of Audience: And what is beautiful is really what is out the front for all the people to pay for and then what actually happens behind the curtain. There's this lovely sort of dichotomy, which I think is definitely felt here or will work often where there are beautiful objects and decrepit and decaying objects simultaneously. I think there's just a great relationship between those spaces.

KARLA: I like layering in the stories. I wrote a piece of poetry for this show. Yes, they were going out, but circus people also managed to get a bit of money out of a few people too.

Member of Audience: Yes, it was a game; it was really a bit of a game, which is really interesting.

KARLA: Yes, totally.

POLLY: Yes, Robyn.

Robyn: Do you have your poetry here with you?

KARLA: Yes.

Member of Audience: It's on the wall.

Member of Audience: It's on the wall, hanging over there.

KARLA: I'll read it before we finish, if we've got time. That's my new party trick.

Robyn: I have a question about the actual work and the objects in it. When I first met you, you were a painter mainly, and I've watched your progression as you've gone into objects and collage. I'm just wondering if, with this work that you're doing now, you see an object or combination of objects and get the idea from that, or you have an idea and you find the objects to create that story.

KARLA: I don't know how my brain works, Robyn. Sometimes I just collect the objects that I'm interested in. With this work, I was grateful to have funding. There are so many stereotypical images around circuses and, when working on and looking at them, I didn't want to work with those, but I still needed to have certain objects to tell those stories. In the Monster Theatre show that Polly and I were in, I did a big, what I was going to call, peep show. It is not a peep show; it is a little-boxes or pigeon-holes kind of work; it's quite big. I was collecting things, and Lee Robb came in—it's great when you've got artists and work curators coming in—and went, 'Oh, that's a sketch book.' I was like, 'Yes, that's exactly what I was doing there; that is a sketch book for this body of work.' I was collecting objects to get myself familiar with the path that I was about to take.

Member of Audience: I guess that there's that randomness of what you find. You never know what you're going to find, unless you're scouting, fishing for certain objects. It's the randomness of it and then the putting of them together that tells the story, so I'm wondering whether it just happens in a loose, organic way.

KARLA: Yes. These works felt a lot looser and reminded me a lot more of the paintings that I did in the 1990s; they were a lot looser.

Member of Audience: Yes, your 1990s paintings—

KARLA: Yes.

Member of Audience: Just using the objects.

KARLA: Yes. I had a nice compliment at an opening. A friend said, 'They're very poetic; you're a poet,' and I thought, 'Oh, let's hope that I'm a live poet.'

Member of Audience: This is just more on the materials. When we walked around and had a conversation about this exhibition, we talked about the boxing gloves and what they say on that. Do you like to put tools to your work a lot? Can you talk a bit about why you do that?

KARLA: Yes, there are the tools, the farm objects and the work gloves. When I'm telling stories about Indigenous women, I love to use lots of kitchen tools and so on, because people don't connect them with Indigenous stories. It's like, 'This country was built on the back of lots of black fellas,' and lots of Indigenous people connect with those work tools. That's the main reason that I really like to use the tools. Also, those boomerangs and cultural objects were taken away. We also had incredible farmers. I worked with Bruce Pascoe last year. We all knew about it, but those stories are coming out now of how the land was farmed. Land was given to different Indigenous people in 1910 and so on, and they farmed it really well in more of a white man's way. Then it was like, 'Oh, we must have given you the wrong land,' so the land was taken back again.

Member of Audience: There's really deep stuff, isn't there? Sometimes you can look at some of the objects and see the aesthetic quality of how they would look together; but that really went quite deep, when you think about the work that they did.

KARLA: They were good.

POLLY: Yes, Suzy.

Suzy: Congratulations, Karla.

KARLA: Thank you.

Suzy: It's fantastic that you're both able to be here tonight. I've got a question for Polly. Through the self-education that you were talking about earlier tonight, do you feel the genesis of a new body of work emerging for you?

POLLY: I've obviously got to address it; how I do that, I don't know. My next body of work is extremely disturbing for me on a personal level and it's very revealing. It is political in a sense, but I don't know if it necessarily speaks to the awareness that has grown and grown. I've always been aware, but now I'm just like, 'I've got to do something.' I don't identify with white colonialists; but I'm white skinned, so I've benefited. It's small transactions, it's non-transactions and it's the way in which I conduct my life and how I treat other people, but at some point I've got to contribute to the conversation and just do shit differently.

Suzy: That's exactly what I was alluding to. Our elders have the ability to teach us things, and I certainly know that our artists' work attracts attention. I guess I was going there.

POLLY: Yes, I think you're right. I think what's so beautiful about Karla's work—it's really what a lot of artists have—is that she soaks everything in and then presents it in a way that is almost the essence of what she's digested. Not only are such artists like truth-tellers, but also it's almost like they foretell the future and see the past. For me, when an artist is good, it's almost as though they have spiritual X-ray vision. I think Karla has that, and I would hope that I could approximate it. My work is very concerned with 'the other', alienation and what it is to be human and what it is to try to not be human. It's a lot of things and there is crossover, but it's not overtly political, and maybe I need to address that.

KARLA: Your work mightn't be political, but I'd be in your room in Adelaide, looking at and engaging with your work, and then have to go out and have a breather before coming back. We have an internal dialogue going on, and your work exposes that so deeply; it really goes so deeply into that inner dialogue. Whether that self-exploration is political or needs to be political, your works are very subconscious and they get in. They work on a level that mightn't be political, but I really think there's an emotional intelligence in there that is obviously getting through to December 2020. It's such a big thing for all of us, and that's what we all need in life, isn't it?

POLLY: I'm doing a lot of talking, but I know that talk is cheap. For me, I need to get to that next point where I'm doing more. Again, I was like, 'Oh, I can't say anything because I haven't lived here for 30 years.' Well, actually I can say something. I've lived all over the world and I've seen shit in each country. The one thing that I think will give me a pass is that I haven't lost my accent, so I'm not going to be too hated for speaking the truth. But, of course, in my work I think it all will come out, but how I manage to do that I don't know. Yes, I don't know how that will come out, but it will. The thing is that I've always been concerned that we put politicians in power to do what the fuck we want them to do, and they never do it; they never do the right thing, and that really upsets me. You look at how things are now and, yes, I can feel a little bit relaxed that Biden got in, but actually shit's got to change. This has been going on for far too long. It will require a radical shift because a lot of people still like the old way, and actually the old way is not keeping all of them okay. This is the thing; it's

the whole system. We can get into the climate change thing; we're in an existential crisis and the world is under threat. So there needs to be a shift on such a monumental level and, again, it comes back to the original sin. If we have survived through genocide—I'm talking about by white-skinned people—we can keep doing that and think we're going to get away with it and keep surviving. But no; not only is it abhorrent, disgusting and wrong, but we've all got to be together. The old way is not going to work. But the main thing is that no-one should be treated like that— no-one. Look at institutionalised racism, where murder is acceptable, and at what Australians have done with offshore detention centres; that is against all human rights. But, again, it comes down to this: we can all be in denial about the original sin, the massacre of Indigenous people—that is why we can keep doing it in the 21st century—but, to me, it is like, 'How, why? This is wrong.' I don't know why everyone's not screaming from the rooftops 'stop'.

KARLA: We could all do that now.

POLLY: Pardon?

KARLA: We could all get up and do it now: 'fucking stop!' We can do it at Lismore Gallery.

POLLY: Yes. But I loved it when Karla said that, with COVID, it's all been about the economy and money. Well, actually, fuck off! What about all the people who are dying? The bottom line has become everything being about money and power; well, it was about money and power back then too.

KARLA: We need to find the love, Polly.

Member of Audience: Welcome to the shire, Polly.

KARLA: We need the love, especially for it to be given to the environment and the land. I find it really interesting that the silence and the oppression of First Nations people, Indigenous people, are such a priority for most governments and so on. We're the people, the custodians of the land, speaking on behalf of the land; so, if you knock out the black fellas, you're also knocking out the majority of the care for and the knowledge about looking after country.

POLLY: I don't know, because this is something that I haven't researched completely, but I heard about the First Nations people looking after the land.

However, Australia wasn't a desert; white people turned Australia into a desert through their European farming techniques. Is that right?

KARLA: It hasn't helped.

POLLY: No.

KARLA: It definitely hasn't helped.

POLLY: Anyway, I don't know if I can—

KARLA: How are we for time?

Member of Audience: It's 6:45. You've been speaking for about an hour.

Member of Audience: Beautiful.

POLLY: Thank you.

KARLA: Shall we just start the next session? We're just getting warmed up.

POLLY: Do you want to read your poem?

KARLA: Yes, we'll stop for that. Then Brett or somebody in authority can give us some instruction.

Member of Audience: The white man.

Member of Audience: You're in authority.

KARLA: All right. Watch out; Polly and Karla are in authority.

BRETT: It's your space until the 21st of February.

KARLA: All right; cool.

BRETT: I think we've had a really fantastic discussion here tonight. It's been just two hearts talking about their work and the current state of the world and how that does fit into their work. It's been great to hear about the way you're thinking about the future with your practice. Polly, do you still have the Queen's phone number?

POLLY: She's the biggest colonialist.

KARLA: I've got a question for Polly before we go. Now, about the Queen, you got the photo of her, an incredible image, but then you handed that into the possession of Phil James.

POLLY: Who's Phil James?

KARLA: He's an artist in Sydney. Have I got his name right?

POLLY: Phil James, yes.

KARLA: He's done that stuff to the Queen, and I love it.

Member of Audience: What did he do?

KARLA: What did he do?

POLLY: He's really incredible. He paints all that stuff with oil paint. He turned her into a piccaninny, didn't he? It was really full on. Another one that he has done is where she was a clown; is that right?

KARLA: Yes. He uses a lot of graphics from Looney Tunes and that sort of thing, so he kind of Looney-Tuned her up.

POLLY: He Looney-Tuned her up and gave her weird eyes as well. It's interesting. I don't do portraits much anymore, but I did a photo of a fantastic man who was a real socialist—like, a nowadays socialist—and he was an incredible guy. I loved him, and we got on like a house on fire. Do they have a supreme court in Melbourne? He was one of those who are really high up; he was a judge. But he was a real working-class boy. His father had been living in a town in Germany and was the only Jewish survivor of that town. Basically, the town turned all its Jews in, and his father fled into the forest to hide; he hid in the forest for three years in order to survive. Anyway, they migrated to Australia and his father was real working class. He, himself, ended up as one of the top judges and was a real right-on sort of socialist guy. Anyway, I photographed him and did a podcast with him recently. He must have known that I'd photographed the Queen, but it didn't seem to bother him. We both agreed that we were not monarchists; we really didn't believe in the monarchy, and we got on great. I photographed him at the time Brett Kavanaugh was being voted onto the Supreme Court and we were bitching about how Brett was obviously guilty; he had attacked a girl. It was obvious that he had lied about his drinking career, for a start. Obviously, he was a terrible drunk and had got up to no good. Anyway, this man said, 'I could tell that the woman accusing him was telling the truth because she remembered a lot of the detail.' Anyway, that was his sort of 'judge' point of view. We really bonded on the politics stuff and then ended up doing this podcast in lockdown for the law association or something like that. Anyway, he found out that I'd photographed Donald Trump, which I did in the 1990s, and he said, 'Polly, if I'd known that, I would

have never let you photograph me,' and that was the friendship over! I was thinking that maybe he was joking, but I got really upset because I loved this man. Then I thought, ' Well, how do I justify photographing the Queen and photographing Donald Trump?'

KARLA: There's a work in that.

POLLY: I don't think I'm Leni Riefenstahl, who was actually working for the Nazi Party, but maybe I am! This is the thing; this is the dark hour of my having a really deep, hard look at who I am.

Suzy: I think you should go to the chip shop with Karla.

KARLA: I've taken her camping, Suzy. I think we might go on a few more camping executions.

POLLY: Yes, I definitely need more camping. I did photograph Donald Trump, but it was not for him, and maybe that makes a difference. Anyway, I'm trying to justify it now. But Phil James has also done these wild cartoons where he's turned him into the Devil and other things all over my photos. So I'm now recycling my photos but giving them a new twist, with the help of Phil James. Maybe I should give some of my photos to you and you can cut them up and put them on your—

Member of Audience: Watch out.

Member of Audience: I'll go to that show.

KARLA: Yes.

Member of Audience: Watch this space.

Member of Audience: I do love it, Karla, that you turned the Queen into a pirate.

Member of Audience: Yes, that was very cool.

KARLA: Thank you.

Member of Audience: Can we have your poem?

Member of Audience: Yes, please.

KARLA: Okay. Can I finish on this?

BRETT: Yes.

KARLA: 'A Dickensian sideshow: a bit on the side; yes, please. Choking on life's square, colourless box, one daily chore after the next 25, unrepairable souls wearing respectable shoes; just keep swimming, just keep swimming. If you're lucky, you will drown in paid bills, pointless political poo, tangled in heartless heroism. Dragging your shackles, the carnival shakes in; trucks, utes; well-worn tires grip your groin. Bewitched by beaten faces advertising glamour, you sigh a long, deep breath through dirty eyes; just keep swimming, just keep swimming. Sweet sweat drips from hurting anticipation. As you prepare your Sunday best, licking your hair into place, hope sets up a dusty camp, painstakingly hammering together a crusty facade, smiling mirages tacked together with broken dreams, creating optical illusions that the blind can see; yes, please. Ready to beg, borrow and steal, you slip on your heels, after digging in shallow graves for shiny coins. You ache to be taken for a cheap, bumpy ride. Your pockets now rattle with creamy dreams for a tickle, a gawk and a hearty squeal, washed down by a greasy dog; take my money now. Handing over hard-earned cash, the unbreakable grace, you break. The tents come down, fold up quickly, disappear, leaving you with a crook smile and empty pockets. Memories linger until the next dust storm rolls in. A bit on the side; yes, please.

Audience applauds—

BRETT: What a finish. Karla and Polly, thanks so much for coming.

POLLY: Thanks, Brett.

KARLA: Thank you.

Audience applauds—