



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 5 EPISODE 7 (JUNE 2023)

JOHN KLEIN SALLY RYAN

TWO ARTISTS, ONE SUBJECT

ARCHIBALD PRIZE

Tim Stackpool:  
John thanks for taking the time to chat.

John Klein:  
Thanks for having me on your program, Tim

Tim Stackpool:  
Sally, thank you for joining us as well.

Sally Ryan:  
Yes, same. Thank you for having me.

Tim Stackpool:  
Sally, first of all, and we'll bounce these questions between both you and John. What was the reason why you wanted to do a portrait of Claudia?

Sally Ryan:  
Probably for a couple of reasons. Firstly, she interviewed me this time last year, which was actually through the help of John. He actually introduced me to Claudia, and she interviewed me because I had done a large painting commission for St. Mary's Cathedral. And at the end of talking to her, and she's so easy to talk to, and I felt very comfortable with her. I asked her if she would be interested in being painted, and she just jumped on the idea straight away. So I didn't really have any grander plan that I thought, "She's iconic, she's stylish, she's interesting, and she's easy to work with." That was my first thoughts with Claudia

Tim Stackpool:  
John, on the back of that response from Sally. You obviously have a past history with Claudia, but did you always want to do a portrait of her?

John Klein:  
I've actually painted Claudia four times over the last couple of years, and I've known Claudia for a long time. I've known her since about 2000. Her mother used to have a dress shop in the Queen Victoria building called Vivian Chan Designs, and Claudia used to work with her mother as a designer. I used to be the marketing manager of that building at the time, so I got to know her way back then. I've stayed in touch over the years and she's such a great subject. I'll probably paint her again because she's great. She loves it. She's really easy to work with. She really engages with you on the whole process.

Tim Stackpool:  
Given that you have undertaken a number of portraits of Claudia, and the arranging of sittings and the way it's undertaken is very different to how it was done during the Renaissance period. How is it that you go about, first of all, putting a sitting together?

John Klein:  
I use photographs. I paint completely differently to Sally, and that's probably good because it's interesting to explore the different ways people work. I like to spend a lot of time with the subject,

talking to them, and I take a lot of photographs and I usually have in my mind how I want them to look. In the case of the painting I just did with Claudia, I wanted to paint her as a sculpture. So I had about 10 different sculptures that we looked at together, and I had her pose as the sculptures in all these different poses and photographed her in all these different poses. And then from that, I worked a few up and decided which one I thought would work the best because I wanted it to represent her as well. But I wanted it to be true to the original sculpture that I was referencing. So it was a blending of the two

Tim Stackpool:

John, the one that we're seeing hanging in the salon at the moment. That's an Art Deco type of representation, I think.

John Klein:

Yeah, it is. It's based on a sculpture by Josef Lorenzl who worked primarily, he was a Austrian sculptor and ceramicist, and he worked in the 1930s and throughout the Art Deco period. He was very well known at the time. I have referenced a work by him. I basically turned Claudia into a sculpture, is basically what I've done. I've painted her as the sculpture, and the reason I did that was because she loves Art Deco, so do I, she totally got the concept and really wanted to buy into it, which was terrific and I think it worked. I don't think I could paint anyone else like that. She's a very stylish looking woman, and she has a bob, which was very popular in the 1920s.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes.

John Klein:

She looks like she stepped out of the 1920s, so it really worked well in that case. It just all came together.

Tim Stackpool:

Sally, okay on that, how did you arrange your sittings with Claudia?

Sally Ryan:

I'd say that probably the big difference, or one of the big differences for me is that I like to tell stories when I paint people. As a portrait artist, I'm interested in people's stories, I'm interested in them. A lot of, I feel, my paintings about people are really focused on that, and I think it's an exploration of other people's lives for me. I'm a rather Realist painter, and a lot of my art practice is actually painting from life. I do that two, three times a week. Every week I'm painting people from life or I'm painting any other things from life and I spent many years training as a classical painter studying anatomy, studying the human anatomy and so on, and many years of drawing, which is a huge skillset that leads into doing a painting like the one I've done of Claudia.

For me, it was very much about telling a story, and she's a champion of other artists. She champions their art, their work is what I'm trying to say. She's super supportive. She's very energetic and enthusiastic and I thought, "Well, it would be really nice to be able to tell, not only reveal something of her character, but to tell something of her story of the sorts of things that she does." If there was anything that was complicated about it, is that she does too many things.

John Klein:

That's true.

Tim Stackpool:

Like I said in the intro, amazing.

Sally Ryan:

Look, once again, she's Art Deco theme. She was running tours at the time and lecturing on Art Deco design, and I was a long time from the point at which I asked her to the time when I actually got sitting with Claudia, and I had done a lot of research in that time, I'd explored lots of different concepts. I'd gone and bought an Art Deco chair. In fact, I'd gone looking for Art Deco chairs everywhere because I, like John, wanted to have this overarching theme in my painting. That extended to a lot of things. It extended to the colours, it extended to the actual overall design of the painting. It extended to the patterns. It extended to the fact that her dress is an Art Deco design on her dress, which she designed herself. Lots of little elements to it, which I think when you combine them all, tell a story about who she is and what she does. That was my main aim.

Tim Stackpool:

Quite a bit of planning there, Sally, I think.

Sally Ryan:

Yes, months.

Tim Stackpool:

Given all of that, do you think any time does it happen when you get halfway through the work or three quarters of the way through the work and decide, "I've got this wrong, this is the wrong direction"?

Sally Ryan:

I sometimes get to the end of a painting and I think, "I'd love to start that again," because all of a sudden a new idea will come to me. Not that I don't like the old one, but then I'll just be thinking, "Wow, actually, I could have done another one. There's something else I could say, or another way to say it." I could have done about 8 or 10 different paintings of Claudia, and I had done mock-ups of those different ideas where she was standing, where she was in all sorts of different gestures, and they all would've been great paintings of Claudia. But the composition I chose in the end was the one that gave me the greatest potential to say the most about her.

Tim Stackpool:

Given that one of these portraits is in the Archibald, one of their versions is in the Archibald, do you look at them when they're done? Do you think of what perhaps the criteria might be within the judge's mind at the Archibald that particular year and say, rather than just eeny, meeny, miny, moe, do you say, "Actually, this one will probably get me across the line?"

Sally Ryan:

No, I don't do that because it's a waste of time. You could never pick what anybody else is going to see or not see, or what the agenda is for the Archibald Art Prize or any other art prize. So no, I'm afraid to do

that I would lose integrity, and integrity is very important to me. I feel like I must do the painting that I want to do. That is how I see it, so I don't ever consider that sort of thing.

Tim Stackpool:

I was having a chat with someone early this morning, actually outside of this interview, about how it's pretty much impossible to determine what might be in the minds of the judges at the Archibald from year to year. As much as you might like to think that perhaps you have an idea, ultimately you don't. But John, with you, given the number of times you have painted Claudia as a subject, is this your best or perhaps most favoured representation of her, do you think?

John Klein:

Each painting I've done has been quite different. I have done another painting of her as a sculpture, but as a different sculpture and I was pretty happy with that as well. That one ended up going down to Canberra into the last 100 for the Darling Portrait Prize, so I was excited about that. I think they liked that one. But each painting, you see something different in that you like, I think, and they each have their own merits. I think this one's probably the most interesting that I've done of her. I guess technically, there are a couple of things in it that I really wanted to achieve. Like there's a lot of the metal and the reflections on the metal. I really wanted to bring those out. Also, the base is a green marble, and I really wanted to try and capture the feel of the marble. Just trying to represent things fairly accurately, I guess is what I challenged myself with in this particular painting.

Tim Stackpool:

Sally, you were introduced to Claudia via John, and I guess to a certain extent, you had an understanding that what John had represented in terms of his portrait of Claudia, he had an intention of perhaps entering his portrait of Claudia into the Archibald. Do you then have to consider about how you're going to go about this differently considering you know that there's another artist who is quite likely to use the same subject as an entry into the Archibald?

Sally Ryan:

I actually didn't know that. I had no idea she was being painted by anybody else. I didn't ask her that, and I had no idea about that. I don't think I, actually, when I embarked on painting Claudia, had only the Archibald in mind. It was a case of, I really like to paint her. I think she's an interesting woman. I like painting interesting women, and so I thought, "Well, look, if it doesn't make the Archibald, there'll be something else that will come along, and I'm just going to do the painting that I need to do, that I want to do. However long it takes me, that will affect or determine which prizes it may go into." I definitely painted it with art prizes in mind, but whether it was the Archibald or something else was perhaps less important. In fact, I probably wasn't even sure if I was ever going to enter the Archibald again. I think I had got to that stage.

John Klein:

The bitter and twisted stage.

Sally Ryan:

I don't know if it's called bitter and twisted. It's just a bit exhausted by the process of it all, really. But look, I ended up getting the painting done in time, and when I mentioned it to Claudia, she seemed quite excited by the idea. So I went ahead with it.

Tim Stackpool:

If we use the Archibald as a timeline, as a deadline, for example, how soon before the Archibald deadline did you start painting Claudia?

Sally Ryan:

If I talk about when I first approached her, it was a year in advance. I didn't, in this instance, get a sitting with her until November last year, and I actually didn't get a canvas to start painting on until January. So I painted very long hours, probably from 8:00 in the morning till 8:00 at night, around other responsibilities and painted solidly for all of that time. I will do that if I have to try and meet a deadline in the end, which I did. I worked very hard in the end to do it. Usually a painting that size and of that level of detail could take me anywhere between two and four months, depending on what's involved.

Tim Stackpool:

Great, and looking at the, it's like a shopping list of prizes that you've been a finalist in. If we take a look at your website, the list just goes on and on. There is a huge commitment there, no doubt. John, if I could just swing the question back to you, similar sort of question I'm asking. You introduced Claudia to Sally, and then you think to yourself, "I've got a painting here that I want to actually enter into the Archibald as well." Does that present a conflict to you? Does that cross your mind at all?

John Klein:

I did know that Sally was painting Claudia, but I didn't know what it was for, to be honest. It didn't really concern me because I knew the way that I was going to approach the painting, and I knew it would be completely different to how Sally would approach it, I just knew in my mind, knowing Sally's work, I kind of thought it would be a very different approach, which it was. So it didn't really concern me because we're both very different artists and have different styles and techniques. Also, too, when I did it, a bit like Sally, sometimes you start a painting, for me, sometimes I start a painting and I complete it, and sometimes I don't like them, and then I won't enter them in things if I don't like them. It's really only if I'm 100% happy with the painting that I bother entering it in any arts award, because obviously you want to put your best work forward.

Tim Stackpool:

Now, I don't want to pitch each of you against each other.

Sally Ryan:

Oh no, go on.

Tim Stackpool:

Sally, first of all, if I was to ask you to formulate a response to John's rendering of Claudia, how would you describe it? How would you respond to it?

Sally Ryan:

I think it's fun. I think his idea of representing her as a Deco goddess, and particularly referencing the style of sculpture that he has, I think it's a great idea. In that respect I think it works, and I can see how he would come up with such an idea. I didn't, but I can see how that is probably how I would most likely take the painting or comment on it.

Tim Stackpool:

Yes, and I think if you just look at Claudia's own personal brand, her own style, it does exude a certain level of enthusiasm and fun. This is what also makes her such a great media presenter as well. She has a great light to shine, if you like. Very, very sparkling in a way. John, by the same token, if you were to I guess, critique Sally's work, how does that talk to you?

John Klein:

I love Sally's work. I should say I have actually done some training under Sally, so I have a great admiration for her skill and ability. What I do think Sally has done very successfully is captured the essence of Claudia. Knowing Claudia very well, as soon as I saw it, I thought, "Wow, she's really captured the person." That's really the sign of a great portrait artist, it's capturing the person and bringing forth their personality in a painting and I think that's been done very successfully. Congratulations, Sally. I love-

Tim Stackpool:

Thanks, John.

John Klein:

I love the painting, and I love all the other little references to the Year of the Rabbit and the other elements that bring to life Claudia's interests. She's got the Collectomania book on the table, and just the other little things that really bring Claudia-

Sally Ryan:

I think the star of it was Gumby, actually. That was...

John Klein:

Yeah, it's Gumby, made an appearance.

Sally Ryan:

Gumby made an appearance firstly because he was the right color, but also as a reference to her toy collecting. But I think Gumby's been a hit.

John Klein:

Yeah, no gum's great. And also the chair and the wallpaper and all of those wonderful subtle references to the period and Claudia's collecting and love of the architecture period.

Sally Ryan:

Look, there's challenges in a painting like that. To paint the design on that dress is one of those things where you have to take a deep breath before you start and go, "I can do this." That's probably some of the most challenging aspects of a painting like that one. But it was important. It was important for me to include things like that because it's so much of what she's about.

John Klein:

No, there's certainly a lot of detail in it, and really you can see that. Being a painter, I can see how much time you would've spent on that to capture all of that detail. It's incredible work.

Sally Ryan:

Well, thanks John.

John Klein:

You're welcome.

Tim Stackpool:

This, I think, discussion, what we've just heard from the two of you opens up another question, which is about how artists can motivate other artists. When you see other artists work, does it then engender something new or creative or perhaps a level of doubt or inability in what you can produce? I was just thinking about the broader aspect of arts, and particular in music. In 1966 when the Beach Boys released their Pet Sounds album, Paul McCartney, he heard that album and was shocked and concerned. He felt that it reached so far into imagination and creativity that he wondered how The Beatles could match that level of artistic merit in the music that he heard and the way it stretched, I guess, the caliber and the expectations of the audience.

Perhaps the same exists between visual artists such as yourselves. Do you sometimes feel that level of self-doubt when you see somebody else's work and think, "There's no way." Even considering the extent of how established both of you are as artists, you feel that perhaps there's no way you can meet or reach beyond the bar that has been set by an artist that you admire, or perhaps a new artist who comes on the scene and presents a work, which is just from your perspective, astonishing.

Sally Ryan:

I'm going to go first on that. I constantly feel massive self-doubt. Sometimes it's from artists that I personally know who I just have enormous respect for, and I think, "Oh, man, I should have started a lot earlier in my life doing this." Their skill and what they understand and what they are able to do is extraordinary. Particularly from painters overseas, and I'm not just talking about past painters, but contemporary painters that I follow on social media and so forth. On the one hand, it's massively inspirational. It's something that I look up to and I think I strive for and at the same time, I can feel completely overwhelmed that it's just unattainable.

It's a constant battle, that sort of self-doubt and also thrive at the same time to continually want to perfect and be better or to improve the way you're doing things.

Tim Stackpool:

How about you, John?

John Klein:

I think most artists, and I'm not just talking about visual artists, visual and performing artists often have bouts of self-doubt. I think that comes part of it. If you think about it, artists, we're constantly putting our work out for scrutiny. We're putting it out for everyone to see, for people to scrutinize on a daily basis. You have to have a very thick skin as well, I think, because if you're a wilting violet, you wouldn't survive.



Sally Ryan:

Come on, John. All artists are wilting violets. I don't know too many that's got that degree of resilience all the time.

John Klein:

Well, yeah, I guess. But it is one of those things, every artist tries to do their best and they always, you want to put your best foot forward and present yourself in the best possible light. But at the end of the day, I think it's very difficult if you're constantly comparing yourself to other people. I think ultimately you have to find your own style and your own voice through your art. I think just go with it. I'm like, Sally, I've only really been painting for the last 10 years, so I'm relatively new to it as well. So I'm learning, I'm on a steep learning curve, and I'm constantly trying to get better and constantly looking at other artists to see, how do they do that? Or what's that technique? I'm always analysing people's work to see what I can take from that to add it to my own practice. But I guess you never stop learning. Would you say that's true, Sally?

Sally Ryan:

Absolutely. I think if you are not feeling like that, you're just not progressing. In fact, the times that you're most frustrated with your work actually are the times when actually something good is happening, but you just haven't got there yet, which is what I say to my students often because I teach several days a week as well. It's what I often say to my students, "When you feel the most uncomfortable, it's because you've seen more, you've understood more, but you just haven't got your hands yet doing what it is that your mind has become aware of."

Tim Stackpool:

Sometimes I think the life of an artist is also a life of significant rejection because you submit works, whether it be to art prizes or just to the general public, to galleries to see what the response is from the public, hopefully to make sales where you can, but for the most part, that doesn't happen. You get more ejections than you do kicking goals in a way. In terms of kicking goals, what's the reaction been to your work, John, first of all, Claudia, what was her reaction to your portrait of her?

John Klein:

Claudia loved it. She loved the concept from the outset and she was very excited with the finished painting, and she was really excited when she found out it got into the Salon, as was I. That was pretty exciting for both of us.

Tim Stackpool:

You, Sally?

Sally Ryan:

Her first response, which I thought was great, was a wow. She loved the painting. She did say to me though, afterwards, and particularly after she found out it was in the Archibald, which she was super excited about. She said that she was a little nervous about how I would represent her because I'm a Realist painter. She was a bit worried about whether I would see every little crease and crevice and all the rest of it. But I think she felt relieved that I portrayed her as she is, as she appears to me anyway,

which is elegant and confident. That's what I set out to do. But I think she was happy with the painting and I think she was happy with the story that was told

John Klein:

Sally, you know what she said to me? She said, "Sally is very kind."

Sally Ryan:

I know. It does not matter to me who I paint and what they look like really. To me, it's about creating a beautiful painting. If she says that sort of thing, the thing that I gain from that, which is the positive, is that somehow my design and my composition has worked to create something that people like to look at. It's less about someone's physical attributes and it's more about the whole body of work as a whole.

Tim Stackpool:

Do you ever show a work in progress, either of you?

John Klein:

I do. I just did a commission last week and I do only because you don't want to get to the end and there's something very wrong and you have to start again. But you have to qualify it every time. You have to explain what you're doing and where you're at and how it's going to progress because people don't normally understand the process.

Tim Stackpool:

I think that's pretty reasonable for a commission. You, Sally?

Sally Ryan:

Yes and no. It depends on the commission as to how much I share it. I have had experiences in the past where, as John was just explaining, people don't understand the process. They don't understand where you're at with the painting and halfway through, sometimes they can look pretty ordinary as you work on them. It's not like you sort of have a little window that you're painting on and it feeds out from there and all the rest of it. Sometimes in the beginning stages, it can feel quite basic and overemphasized perhaps in some ways as you explore all the shapes. If you show people halfway through, they can become alarmed. I don't always like to do that, but it depends on the commission. If there's like the one I did for St. Mary's Cathedral, that took a year to do, and obviously the people from the Archdiocese of Sydney wanted to see that the work was progressing.

There's different reasons for sharing it. I don't like sharing my work with a lot of other artists in the process because I don't like to have other people's ideas invade my own thinking. That's really a problem because it can really take you or take your focus off what you initially intended. I think probably the only person I share work with at those stages is my son, who's also an artist and a very good artist. I have such respect for his opinion and he sort of gets where I'm going with the painting so that's the only time I would be inclined to really be confident about sharing a half done work.

Tim Stackpool:

I do really appreciate your time on the podcast today, but before I let you go, in terms of the arts in Australia going forward, if you had one wish that could perhaps sum up what you would love to see the

arts develop into or to see what the arts could be or should be in Australia, what would that one wish be? John, you first of all.

John Klein:

I think there should be more education and appreciation of the arts in general. I feel like sport takes center stage all the time and sucks up all the public funding. I just think there should be more appreciation and more awareness of art and art should become like it is in Europe. It's becomes part of the fabric of society. We haven't reached that point in Australia, and I don't know whether we ever will, but I'd like to think that art would become more a part of everyone's life, whether it be through great design or sculpture or paintings or what have you.

Tim Stackpool:

Anywhere where I've had to get up and make a presentation or introduce somebody when it's related to the arts, I always bang on about how the arts in Australia as a whole across the board actually sells more tickets to the public than sports in Australia, which people find a actual phenomenal figure. But that's basically the truth, that's the fact. Sally, about you, what's that one wish in the arts for you?

Sally Ryan:

I think I would be saying the same largely as John has just expressed. Only adding to that, that I'd love to see a little more collaboration in the whole arts sector in terms of say, like art prizes. There's a lot of money in Australia that floats around in art prizes and it goes to individuals. I'd love to see a little bit more of a collaborative minded effort in where there might be more showing of contemporary Australian works in a slightly different way, or I don't know, different ways to reward artists on a broader sense than we get. I feel like in a little bit with some of the art prizes that are around Australia, because of the amount of money, you will not find those kind of prize money overseas compared to here in Australia. I think it sets up this philosophy around like sport where you have a superstar rather than rewarding the arts generally. That would be my extra comment on that.

John Klein:

I think it'd be great if people like Mr. And Mrs. Joe Average could name some Australian artists. I think if you ask someone in the street, "Can you name five Australian artists, contemporary artists?" They wouldn't be able to do it. "Can you name five sporting stars?" They probably would. I don't know. It just doesn't get the cut through, I think, that sport does or the accolades or focus from the ordinary kind of person.

Tim Stackpool:

A lot of that actually comes down to development, unfortunately. It's not something we can just switch on and hope will happen.

John Klein:

No, that's a generational thing.

Sally Ryan:

I don't think art education occurs even at the school level. I've had quite a lot of experience. I used to teach younger children and right through to now, and I just don't think there's any conversation that

even happens from a young age about any type of experience or art appreciation or even involvement in art really very much. So I think people just don't even have a language around art to even... They might enjoy turning up to these blockbuster events, but there's not a lot of value placed on it as a choice of career, for instance, I suppose.

Tim Stackpool:

It is a very frustrating situation I think for people who work in the arts and actually want the arts to be recognized for the level of engagement that actually the population has, and the level of engagement that it could develop into and the extension of that culture within Australia. That's the reason why I raise it with every gallery director, a gallerist themselves, whether it's in the commercial sense or every curator. Because I think what has to happen is basically we just need to talk about it some more, which in fact is what we've been doing.

John and Sally, it's been terrific talking to you. Always great to catch up with artists and get a bit of perspective. This has been a really interesting one, the sharing of a single subject between two artists. I really appreciate your candid discussion, your perspectives, and it's been great having you on the podcast.

John Klein:

Thanks. I hope-

Sally Ryan:

I appreciate it for having us on. Thank you.

John Klein:

It's been great. Thank you.

Sally Ryan:

Thank you.