



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 4 EPISODE 6 (early September 2022)

ROSLYN SUGARMAN

SYDNEY JEWISH MUSEUM

SIDNEY NOLAN – SHAKEN TO HIS CORE

Tim Stackpool:

Ros, thanks for joining us on the podcast.

Roslyn Sugarman:

Thank you, Tim. I'm really grateful that you are interested in our exhibition.

Tim Stackpool:

I think I do need to begin, first of all, with a bit of a warning along with the intensity of the work, this is a very distressing subject to cover and never to be forgotten, of course. And we'll go about this with a certain level of deep sensitivity, but why it's nonetheless to suggest, I think that the content in this edition of the podcast might prove triggering for some listeners.

Roslyn Sugarman:

Well, it's interesting because most visitors coming to our museum will know that they're coming to a Holocaust museum and should in some sense, be prepared for some of the difficult content that they're going to be faced with. But we decided, or in consultation with my colleagues at the museum, we decided that the Nolan exhibition in particular needed a separate warning because some of the images are very graphic and some of the ways which we describe. The atrocities that took place during the Second World War are quite graphic. So we have a separate warning for that. So I think I'm very pleased that you brought this up at the outset, because I think it's quite important for listeners to realize that there's some very graphic material that they might be visualizing and it could be a trigger for, and ideas. We don't want to traumatize our listeners or our viewers. We want to teach them about this really difficult period of history, but not have them suffer the kind of trauma that the victims and their families had endured.

Tim Stackpool:

Okay. Thank you for sharing that. Now we'll just get into the collection here. It is absolutely remarkable, this Sidney Nolan collection, very unique. How did you come to learn of it?

Roslyn Sugarman:

Well, I have to say I'm quite proud of the fact that it really was, you could say a stroke of serendipity. So by chance, about two years ago, I went down into the basement of the museum to visit our resident historian, who's Professor Konrad Kwiet. And I just normally catch up with him once or twice a week. And I went to his office and he had someone with him at the time. And he introduced me to him and said, in his very deep kind of German accent, "You should meet this person and his name's Andrew Turley. And he's done some research on Sidney Nolan's Auschwitz paintings."

Roslyn Sugarman:

And obviously, I had heard of Sidney Nolan, but never knew that he'd engaged with the subject matter of Auschwitz or the Holocaust. And so that really did pique my interest. And sort of sight and scene, not even knowing what research he'd done or having seen any of the paintings, I suggested that perhaps we could curate an exhibition together. And I guess it was just as a say fortuitous. But at the same time, just realizing that this is something that really relates to our museum.

Roslyn Sugarman:

So the reason why Andrew Turley, who, as I said, had done some research on Nolan with our historian, was that he came to really check with our historian, whether the research that he'd done as it relates to the Holocaust and to the Jewish people, he was checking that it was done with historical integrity and cultural sensitivity. And so it's really just luck that I met him on that day and that he was amenable to the idea of an exhibition and compiled an exhibition proposal and put it to the museum's board and the museum's CEO. And in the interim, Andrew, he used his contacts and helped get approval for the concept from the Lady Nolan Estate in Victoria, where this remarkable collection is actually housed. And also the Nolan Trust in the UK who holds the copyright of all Nolan's work.

Tim Stackpool:

Wow. So quite extensive. What was the period of time took you to prepare all this?

Roslyn Sugarman:

I'd been thinking about it for quite a long time and thought about how I might approach the exhibition. As it turned out, I don't even know whether this is sort of share-worthy, but the truth is we had a window of opportunity to put on an exhibition. And I thought that the Nolan would be quite an easy or simple exhibition to curate because I just imagined it was artwork. I'd have them framed, put them on the wall, have a bit of context. And that would be that.

Roslyn Sugarman:

So one of my colleagues and I joked it was meant to be our easy peasy exhibition, if you like, but exhibitions are much more complex and nuanced than that. And so it did take quite a lot of planning. And-

Tim Stackpool:

So, are we talking 18 months here, Roslyn, do you think, start to finish?

Roslyn Sugarman:

Start to finish, I would actually say this is the quickest exhibition I've ever put together. And one of the reasons was that it could be pursued so quickly is because the research had been done. It hadn't been done by myself. So I'm not the knowledge holder. In this case, it is Andrew Turley. And I give him all the credit for sharing very generously and with a lot of passion, what he'd discovered about this period of Nolan's works. And so it could never have been done in a short period without that.

Roslyn Sugarman:

And then since you are asking, Tim. As a curator, I know who to turn to for getting the best parts that are needed from other experts. So I could turn to our resident historian to provide the context for the historical aspect of the exhibition, because it's very much embedded in the history of Auschwitz and in the Eichmann trial. So I knew who to turn to for collaborating and getting inputs.

Tim Stackpool:

You're perfectly positioned basically, Roslyn, I think is the situation. But still, it's surprising that this is one of the few times that so many of these Nolan works have actually been seen. We don't relate his works to mostly anything to do with the Holocaust.

Roslyn Sugarman:

Oh, I agree with you. It's not the first thing that comes to mind. It's probably the last thing that comes to mind when one thinks of Nolan. And I think at the top of everyone's mind, if you mention Sidney Nolan, Ned Kelly's name is going to come up. And the mythologizing of the Australian landscape is what one's very familiar with. So I guess it is surprising in some way that it's taken this long for Nolan's Auschwitz paintings to be revealed to the world. But then I guess it's not surprising because they were private works, or at least that's the way I understand them to be.

Roslyn Sugarman:

They were private works in his own personal collection and perhaps they stayed private and stayed with him because they revealed such a visceral outpouring of emotion. I was actually even considering this morning when I was looking at the exhibition and going through it quietly on my own, whether he ever had any intentions to have them sold or commercialized. And I guess the answer is in the fact that he kept them private from the world. It's not really speculation. The answer would possibly be no, that they were never intended for kind of a public consumption.

Tim Stackpool:

We often talk in the podcast about the inspiration. And the inspiration for these comes from a very dark place, but oftentimes the artist cannot rest until they have actually expressed what they're feeling inside, what is welling up inside, and put that down on the canvas, or if they're an author, putting it down on the page. And they're often compelled. I think wondering whether these items are actually ... They compelled him, the stories and the experience that he had shaken to his core. They compelled him to record these onto the canvas. He couldn't rest until he'd actually recorded what he felt.

Roslyn Sugarman:

Well, I think you've probably tapped into something really important about these works and that is the element of emotion. And I think that they are very visceral, kind of very strong emotion comes through in the way Nolan painted them. And obviously, in the subject matter and the fact that he did them as a series. I remember reading once that a quote from Nolan himself when he said how something to the effect that he was compelled or dedicated transmitting emotions and that he didn't really care so much for how fast he got the paint onto the canvas or the paper, but the fact was to get an emotional communication. And I think that comes through so strongly in the works. And I think as a viewer, one responds to that emotion coming through very raw, very guttural. And in a way, we try to, when Andrew and I were conceiving how we would put the exhibition together, we very much thought about how to get emotion across.

Tim Stackpool:

So, what can we expect to see in a material sense? What have you got hanging?

Roslyn Sugarman:

The 50 illustrate in a sense three main themes, and we've hung these three different themes differently to demonstrate their differences and also in a way, perhaps to highlight some of their similarities. So for example, firstly, and I'm only saying "firstly", because Nolan painted them first. Firstly, there's a group of paintings of heads of Adolf Eichmann that he did in November, December 1961, just in fact, before Eichmann was sentenced. And these paintings Nolan sort of fills sheets of paper with Eichmann's face and he painted the same face with the same features over and over. And this was the face of Eichmann

that the world was seeing at the time. Everyone who was following the trial of this horrendous Nazi was seeing these images of him in the daily newspaper, where he was recognizable by a broad forehead, a receding hairline. He wore round black glasses. And so Nolan's images of him really reflect or echo photos that he saw daily, so that's the one group that we selected. I think it's seven or eight paintings.

Roslyn Sugarman:

And then there's another group. So once Nolan had painted our Eichmann series, if you like, he moved onto painting victim heads. And then in this series of paintings, we see victims, just the faces, and some of them in a strapped Kent uniform, some with vertical bars, sort of superimposed, very much like giving you the impression that they imprisoned or are imprisoned. And some of the heads are clouded or wreathed in a kind of smokey haze and many have facial features that are sort of scratched directly out of the paints, in quite a kind of a visceral way. And these are very powerful images. And I wouldn't mind talking about some of them in more detail a bit later, but I just wanted to get onto the third theme.

Roslyn Sugarman:

So we've spoken about the first two. And the third that he did, which he did in early January 1962. And I'm mentioning the date because I want to interject at this point that Nolan painted these Auschwitz series before he actually visited Auschwitz. So if we keep that in mind, now we come to the third series, if you like, or it seems to be well grouped as a theme. These are images that one might describe as a tortured stream of skeletons, their bodies piled on top of each other, their bodies overflowing trollies. And amongst these piles of bodies, there's smoking crosses, or one might call a crucifix. And these works are very powerful, displayed in the series, I guess, for maximum emotive impact. So even though these works could stand on their own, they're done as a series. And I think we would want people to view them as such. So when you say, "What can you expect to see in the exhibition? On the one hand, there's these 50 original artworks, but there are a couple of add-ons that add to the exhibition.

Roslyn Sugarman:

So as I said earlier on, of course this could ... In an art gallery, an art museum, they might have possibly only displayed Nolan's paintings. But because we are Holocaust museum, we took the opportunity to immerse or fully contextualize them in the history in which they were made. So we have included some text panels, but of course, very mindful to make them short and poignant. We didn't want too much reading to take place because the main ideas were looking and they're sitting down on a bench and just looking at these very powerful paintings. So yes, there's text panels, there's a couple of artifacts from our collection. And then there's also some photographs that Nolan himself took when he did visit Auschwitz and a couple of other things, like quotes from some of our survivors.

Tim Stackpool:

What you've described, some of the artwork is horrendous, and we have warned people about what to expect when they visit what is now called the Sydney Jewish Museum, which I guess is an extension of what we perhaps remember as the Sydney Holocaust Museum, is that correct?

Roslyn Sugarman:

It's always had the title Sydney Jewish Museum, and it used to have a byline, Holocaust and Jewish history. So it is very much a Holocaust museum, but also Jewish museum. So we serve both functions really.

Tim Stackpool:

I guess I'm wondering about how easy it has been for you as a curator to connect all these pieces together, these 50 pieces of artwork with that more general aspect. I'm just wondering whether if there is a bit of a broadening here or perhaps more of a focus on what the institution is hoping to communicate, not just to the Jewish community within Sydney, but the broader community. I mean, pretty much every secondary school student makes a trip to your museum at some point in their education as well. There's just no end to the horror of this history.

Roslyn Sugarman:

Yes, we are Holocaust museum. And we tell the story of this period of history very much from a survivor perspective, from a survivor point of view. And we like to humanize our exhibitions beyond merely providing historical facts and figures. And obviously, we provide that and we even have done that in the Nolan exhibition. So for example, it's very clear that that Auschwitz is a place where 1.3 million people were murdered of which 1.1 million Jewish people. So we do have some hard hitting facts and figures.

Roslyn Sugarman:

I think this is what makes this exhibition particularly interesting is that we have an artist of the stature of Nolan with an international and a very strong national reputation and that he is grappling with this subject. He's grappling with this history and struggling to find a language and a visual language at that, through which he can communicate not only his own response and his reactions or emotions about this period of history, but a responsibility as a major artist to do something about this history.

Tim Stackpool:

So, how do you cope, Roslyn? You are immersed in this aspect of history constantly. I mean, how do you mentally cope and indeed remain objective?

Roslyn Sugarman:

It's a very interesting question you've asked. And I sometimes question that of myself and sometimes worry if I've become a little bit too desensitized. But I think as a curator, we have a different role and responsibility say to our educators. So our education team, I often find, they sitting and listening to survivor stories, teaching and explaining to the public, to visitors, to school groups. They do tend to get quite a lot more emotional and they also face to face with people and are responding to our ... Other people are responding to what they're learning.

Roslyn Sugarman:

When you are the curator, I think you're much more objective because you're looking at ... I have a responsibility to take this concentration camp jacket and make sure that it's stored in the best condition possible. I'm going to document it, photograph it. Or if it's a document, I'm going to scan it, I'm going to record the history. We've got sort of processes to follow that sort of remove you somewhat from the horror of what you're dealing with and make it collection management as such. So certainly, there are times when something cuts through and you hear a story and it's just incredible and it stays with you. And that happens really often. But I think just in terms of the administrative duties that you're forced to do is what really does help keep the job from getting too emotional. Otherwise, I don't think you could function.

Tim Stackpool:

No, it is tough.

Roslyn Sugarman:

Yeah, it's tragic and you're dealing with genocide. And every day, you're meeting, if not a survivor, then a descendant or a grandchild, or some family member that has a connection to someone who was murdered. And you're hearing these stories and you're trying to help them find ways to commemorate and to remember. And you're assuring them that what they perhaps donating to the museum, we will look after and take care of for posterity. So you go into curator mode.

Tim Stackpool:

I mean, if I just think about elderly neighbours of mine who have Jewish ancestry, they may have medical conditions. Their doctor asked them about family history and they say, "Well, I can't tell you what my family history is because I lost my family, my ancestors in the Holocaust."

Roslyn Sugarman:

This is really the point, that the Holocaust did not end in 1945 when the war ended. It's a history that reverberates through time, through place, through people. And it is really ongoing. And I think the traumas actually passed down to generations and it's not something that ever ends. So you're absolutely right there. It affects people in so many ways. I mean, I meet so many second generation who say, "We never knew our grandparents. We never had grandparents. We never had extended family. We grew up in this vacuum of family." So many people grew up not even knowing their Jewish or perhaps not knowing their parents' experiences because their parents wanted to protect them and not tell them about it. So yes, it's exactly as you've described. It's a history that bears with us today.

Tim Stackpool:

In going back to the Nolan works, which is the exhibition we're talking about, which is on at the Sydney Jewish Museum right now, is there a single piece that crumpled you inside when you had a look at it?

Roslyn Sugarman:

Trying to think of one that might stand out above others. And in a way, it might be unfair to pick one out from a series, but there certainly is one of an unidentified victim head where the face is twisted and tortured and the mouth is open as if in a scream. And I think this work reminds me very much of the impact of a work that I saw many years ago is Edvard Munch's *The Scream*. I think it was from about 1890s, 1893, somewhere around then, that artists and art lovers would be familiar with the iconic work and that sort of agonized figure, which depicts or expresses extreme anxiety, extreme fear. I look at that and then see Nolan's paintings of a victim. And I see it as being no less powerful than that iconic work. So amongst the series of work ... Well, most of them are strong, but there's some that speak to me in particular. And that would be one of them.

Tim Stackpool:

It's representation of millions of people who just had no opportunity of escape from the inevitability that they were going to face. It's impossible, I think in order to really appreciate that level of despondency that these individuals must have felt, which is the message, I guess, in a way that you try to communicate every day at the museum.

Roslyn Sugarman:

It is. And I think in the case of the Nolan exhibition, shaken to his core, and which as you described in the beginning, that was the actual effect of visiting the site of this death camp that it had on him. And it's interesting that once he visited the site and was confronted with the reality on the site and in a much more visceral way, things that he was faced with, he could not paint Auschwitz. Because as we know, the series that he did was in preparation for an article he was to illustrate for a friend of his who was writing for The London Observer. And he couldn't paint. So he couldn't see Auschwitz or the camps being the subject of art once he'd actually gone to visit this place.

Tim Stackpool:

I also noticed in the museum, there's some documentation, a leaflet that I picked up. There's some rather extensive essays in there. Have they been written especially for your exhibition?

Roslyn Sugarman:

Well, one in particular has been written for the exhibition, and that is the one that Dr. Avril Alba wrote. And again, it's a question of just knowing who to target as being the best person for the job. And one of the images or the series of images, but actually one of the iconographies or motifs in Nolan's work in that third series that I spoke of that features quite prominently across, which one could also read as a crucifixion, and the cross had very often smoke emanating from it, which is a very clear reference to the crematoria and to the chimneys in Auschwitz. It was quite a challenging motif for Jewish museum to have a Christian symbol in many of the artworks. And I asked Dr. Alba if she wouldn't write something for us.

Roslyn Sugarman:

So the piece that she wrote and what's available in the museum, in our brochure and on a shortened version on the actual exhibition is written by her and so well placed to do it. Because years back, she was the museum's head of the education department. And now she's associate professor in Holocaust studies and Jewish civilization, if I've got her title correctly at Sydney University.

Roslyn Sugarman:

Her piece is amazing. It absolutely interprets some of the kind of multitude of symbolic references that Nolan's work evokes. So I would just rarely recommend everyone to read it, obviously to see the exhibition, but then to read her article, which is done very academically, but done in a way that is very easy to understand and allows for an open interpretation while also providing multiple options for interpretation.

Tim Stackpool:

I found everything that was written in there quite compelling. I mean, I don't want to say it's a great memento to take away from the exhibition, but it is certainly worth holding onto.

Roslyn Sugarman:

That's why we felt ... Almost everything in the exhibition is in the brochure, but we felt very strongly, we wanted a memento for people to take home so that they could just digest it again, if you like, after the fact.

Tim Stackpool:



It's a highly relevant exhibition. You've pulled it all together to a certain extent and you've given credit to others. Do you think this could be an exhibition that could tour to other similar museums, not just in Australia, but around the world?

Roslyn Sugarman:

I think that idea is very much on the table. I think the museum recognizes that it would make a really good traveling exhibition because it does two things really, in attracting an arts audience, as well as history Holocaust audience, and brings the two together so perfectly. It's not our collection to travel and it's not our collection at this point, but I do think that we are seeking to possibly ... Well, let me rather say we investigating the possibilities of perhaps acquiring some of the works, in which case that would be something that we would hope to do.

Tim Stackpool:

Yeah. Well, good luck with that, Roslyn. Before I let you go, anything else you've got coming up at the museum we should preview or pre-empt?

Roslyn Sugarman:

I'd be quite excited to tell you about the exhibition that's coming after Nolan. It's called Reverberations. And it's essentially a testimony exhibition. My colleague Shannon Biederman is curating that one and it features video testimony of more than 40 of our museum's Holocaust survivors. And it also features something that's really revolutionary in a sense, or sort of technologically revolutionary in that we call Dimensions in Testimony. And it's a interactive biographies. So whereby we have interviewed six Holocaust survivors over a period of a week, asking them each up to a thousand questions. And the technology, or the AR, allows a visitor to interact with this digital survivor and retrieve through voice recognition, the correct answer to the question that they wish to ask. So it's fascinating from a technology point of view, and it's absolutely riveting from hearing the survivor's voice. And our museum is all about really giving history a voice. And I think that will be a fantastic exhibition to look forward to.

Tim Stackpool:

All right. Well, Ros, thank you so much for joining us on the podcast and for staging this collection of works that so little in general is known about.

Roslyn Sugarman:

Thank you, Tim.