

Ash Tower – SALA Podcast Interview 2022

00:00

[musical intro]

Steph 00:10

Hello and welcome to the SALA podcast. My name is Steph and today I'm catching up with artist [Ash Tower](#) in the upstairs studios at [Adelaide Contemporary Experimental](#), or ACE for short. I just want to acknowledge that we are on unceded Kurna Land and pay my respects to the Kurna People as the Traditional Owners of this land and these waters. Hi, Ash, thank you for making time to chat today.

Ash 00:33

Thanks for having me.

Steph 00:35

I've been reading like lots of bits of biography that are attached to various projects that you've done, and I have no shortage of questions. But I really wanted to start with something that sort of isn't always captured in those official texts, which is: what actually drew you to art-making to begin with?

Ash 00:52

Yeah, it's an interesting question, I actually can't remember a time that I wasn't going to become an artist, I think, or at least that I wasn't going to spend a lot of time making things, I think there was always that inflection as you start to finish school, where you look towards maybe design or maybe architecture, or those kind of allied creative professions where you can maybe have a little bit more of a stable sort of professional life. And I sort of tried them out and work experience in bits and pieces, and I just didn't like them. So I think it was it was sort of, well, I guess I'm off to arts.

Steph 01:26

I'm sure a lot of people can relate. And any particular medium to begin with, or just knew that you had that creative bent?

Ash 01:36

I think I drew the most as a kid. And in retrospect, I also did a lot of a lot of kind of sculptural stuff and making and crafting, but I never really understood those to be kind of an art practice until I got to art school and sort of, you know, thought about them as aligned with that kind of drawing that I did a lot.

Steph 01:57

Yeah, there's a lot of that learning the validity of materials as you go "oh, okay, yeah, this is... I'm already doing it." That's so good. How -this is a tricky one, but I'm gonna throw it to you- How would you describe your current practice in layman's terms?

Ash 02:16

Yeah, it's an interesting one. I mean, I think it's kind of hard to start with materials, because I'm generally pretty, I suppose promiscuous materially.

Steph 02:25

You said it, not me.

Ash 02:27

So it kind of starts with sculpture and installation. But I also I draw, and I paint and I make prints. I'm very non committal, I guess, I suppose to my material investment. But I think the one thing that has followed me throughout my practice, and I've come to phrase it in lots of different ways over the course of my life is I'm always interested in knowledge. And I'm interested in the way that knowledge is connected to culture and connected to what we know about the world. And while it's kind of often relegated to, you know, knowledge and knowing and the act of learning is really relegated to like this kind of cold institutional place, I find that it's actually a really rich story of human intent and human behavior. And I would say that the one thing that's always that, you know, the common thread that runs through my practice is that it always comes from a place of research and enjoying research and enjoying learning either new ideas, or learning new techniques. And so I will often look to places like libraries and archives and museums, as these places that sort of make knowledge, not just store it, but are actually responsible for like sort of constructing it and giving it shape. But more recently, I've come to open up that understanding of knowledge to include lots of lesser institutional practices as well. So things like, you know, science fiction, or pseudoscience, even or, you know, spirituality, or all these different things are different ways of knowing about the world. And they tell us a lot about our humanity, I think in how we how we use them.

Steph 04:06

That's so interesting to bridge from, yeah, the classic, yes, museums, libraries, and then go actually knowledge is in all of these places as well. That's so cool. And so yeah, would you say that the medium often follows like, the idea comes first, or the line of inquiry comes first, and then the medium kind of makes sense afterwards and falls into place?

Ash 04:26

Yeah, absolutely the medium, I tend to usually employ media that have an established language or an established history with the ideas that I'm investigating. So if I'm looking, if I'm looking archaeologically, then I will often try and emulate the kinds of materials that I use that the artifact in the artifacts that I'm looking at. I focus a lot on you know, when I'm looking at libraries and museums, for example, I'm looking a lot at bookmaking and papermaking. And the way that word encounters page and you know those different things, and so the medium kind of always follows the idea. Yeah,

Steph 05:01

I'm just picturing all the clear books put back in the shelves. I do like that work. Can you quickly just explain that one for?

Ash 05:08

Oh, that's an old one. Yeah, that was ['Postcards from the Bibliopolis'](#), which was actually art schoolwork away back in I think maybe 2013. But it's still a very fun one i That work was made in response to the [Barr Smith Library](#), which is the library at the University of Adelaide. And I was often I was going through this library and sort of just wandering the shelves and thinking about the library as a sight, you know, frequently or as a piece of as a field. So often when we think about research, we think about, you

know, back the, you know, back at the institution, which is home, and then outside, which is field. And so we do field work. But I was interested in this space of, you know, something within the institution, but actually considering it as as a kind of wild as a kind of untamed, or untamed or variable kind of ecosystem unto itself. And so when I was walking through the library, I sort of encountered these, like, handwritten notes that people would leave in the stacks and things like that. So the old system, I suppose, a system that's a little bit archaic now as you would go into the library and search on one of the terminals that was in the computer that was in the library. And that would be, you know, like a little tray of scrap paper and a pencil that you would, you know, note what you needed, and then take it into the states to find and people would often leave those bits and pieces in there. And I became interested in those things as quite resounding like artifacts of intent in their own right. And they wouldn't just be, you know, call signs for books, either there would be like shopping lists or letters or, and that would be on the letterheads of, you know, pharmacies, and you know, like lawyers and like, all these really rich bits of information to find in this vast network of information. And so I gradually started collecting them and noting where I found them, and then I would resin embed them into like a larger book sized block and working with the library, re embed those books, that resin books back into the library field. Yeah. That's so cool. Yeah. And the library was really wonderful as well about, you know, giving them radiofrequency tags, so they worked like library books, and, you know, they kind of circled through the system as Not For Loan books, and you know, I got most of them back, and then some of them are still out there in the world.

Steph 07:15

That's so cool. i Yes, I do get the impression that you're very comfortable in a library setting, comes through loud and clear. I did have a question specifically pertaining to knowledge systems. But I think you have, yeah, already touched on this being a sort of, you know, you've got that interest in research and you how you are very much an academic, you've got your PhD, and you teach and lecture and all sorts of things. Do you have? I got that, right.

Ash 07:44

Yeah. So I think I got my PhD at the end of 2018, at the start of 2019. And somewhat related to the practice, it was on the relationship between arts and sciences, and how they, and how artists and scientists work together in the laboratory. And as much as that documents sort of looked in a very different direction, I think, from my practice, now, the one thing it did, or the one great gift it gave me was that it really unseated Western Imperial science as the predominant way of knowing about the world. Learning what I did over my PhD was really a process of learning the ways in which knowledge is constructed. And so some of those, like nascent or really latent ideas that were in my practice, prior to my PhD, you know, I was looking a lot at systems and the ways we organize knowledge, you know, the PhD sort of blew open the doors to that and made me realize that there isn't only one way or one correct way of knowing about the world. And that, you know, really caused the crisis in my practice, almost of realizing this thing that I was like wedded to is like, actually not, not so monumental and monolithic as it as it makes itself out to be. Wow, that's huge. Yeah, I think there are, sometimes I think PhDs, you know, contribute a lot to knowledge and a lot to the world. And other times, I think they just really serve to completely undermine the reality of the person that gets them. Mine was the second one.

Ash 09:10

[musical interlude]

Steph 09:16

But I think he do quite nicely make room for acknowledging -I don't know what the right term is- but I'm referring to works that memorialized, like the scientific papers that were rejected -is that the right word?- and still acknowledging that they existed. And can you speak to that body of work?

Ash 09:35

Yeah, yeah. So that was a work called '[Studies of nature](#)'. I think that was maybe 2017. And I became really interested in I became interested, I was, you know, just entering academia just starting to put papers up and just starting to have them knocked back and becoming really interested in the ways that you know, all of this labor was poured into these, you know, really from the outside quite dry written documents, but once you become familiar with and they can actually be quite rich things. And so I took, you know, I did like a survey of three or four years of the Journal of nature, which is the kind of massive umbrella name for a group of scientific journals. And I looked at all the papers that have been retracted from the Journal of [nature](#). So instead of the ones that would be rejected, which is probably in in the scope of 1000s, across papers that were published, and were then taken down, right, as a, and sometimes I think people attribute a retraction of the paper has been quite a sinister thing, like it's been falsified, or there's something fraudulent in it. But a lot of the times, it's kind of a the honest mistake, or the fact that it hasn't been able to be reproduced by the rest of the scientific community. But I became interested in these papers that sort of went up and came down as a kind of science fiction in their own way, like they still describe the world, not necessarily in a way that science lacks, but they are still artifacts of labor and love. And if anything, the fact that there are so many of them boils down to the scientific communities kind of great efforts to sort of keep a high standard of kind of scientific activity. But one of the things that happens when you retract a paper is that the publisher issues a statement as to why it's been retracted. And sometimes those are quite salacious things. And other times, they're quite earnest things of this, you know, this figure was accidentally or we accidentally use a version of this figure that had been color corrected, which is, you know, as much as that seems like a really insignificant thing, it does invalidate the paper in the in the eyes of the journal. And so I took the citations for all these papers and listed them on an on a board that you might see associated with, you know, sporting veterans or war heroes, or all those sorts of people and just as a way of memorializing them and giving them some sort of

Steph 11:50

they had a space to occupy I guess, after...

Ash 11:53

definitely Yeah, and I think that, you know, the scientific community, you know, it has a, it has a mandate to uphold those really high standards. But I think that the wonderful thing about art is that it has the free potential to acknowledge those things, even though they are sort of cast aside by the scientific community.

Steph 12:12

Yeah, yeah, I think that's quite a strong work in you know, that the board is really commanding, you know, quite tall. And yeah, perfectly has that... is that gold lettering?

Ash 12:26

Yeah,

Steph 12:26

yeah yep, the whole 'down to a tee'.

Ash 12:29

Yeah, I've become like I think one of the things that has started to emerge over the last few years is my like, absolute fascination with this kind of curious Australian RSL clubs that I mean, we'll probably get to talking about architecture eventually because that's where it will make discussion seem to end up but the ways in which you know, Australia is just I spent a lot of time in RSL clubs as a kid growing up in original Western Australia. And I was always so fascinated by you know, like the kind of unadorned cinderblock, RSL Club with these beautiful elaborate crafted on a boards and sort of on a rolls that sort of hung in the space. And I was so interested in the the absolute kind of jarring contrast of those visual languages,

Steph 13:14

it can be quite stark.

Ash 13:15

I think the culmination of my career will truly be making an exhibition for an RSL club.

Steph 13:20

you heard it here first folks.

13:32

[musical interlude]

Steph 13:34

I will take you up on asking you about architecture. I think we all knew it was gonna go there. You also teach architecture, but it comes through on your work heaps. Imagine you're just super passionate about it. Is that fair to say?

Ash 13:51

It's a really funny story. I think the teaching led to it finding its way in my practice.

Steph 13:55

Oh, not the other way around!

Ash 13:57

Yeah. So when I started my PhD, I took on a little bit of work, just tutoring at the university. And they didn't need art theory tutors, they actually needed architectural history tutors. And you know, the story of architecture runs quite parallel to the history of art. So with a bit of extra studying that great to take it on. And I've been teaching or tutoring rather architecture for about six years now. And I think it's just, it's a really convenient or a really useful parallel language to art history. They often follow quite similar movements in quite similar themes. But the nature of architecture as being somewhat utilitarian, but also maybe sometimes a little bit more survivable than art in the kind of historical record. Makes it a really useful kind of parallel current to draw from. And so yeah, it's a I often describe architecture within

my practice as a kind of vehicle for meaning. And what I mean by that is that it's just a good way of giving form to a certain set of ideas that run underneath the practice of Western art. picture. And so yeah, the more I sort of, you know, taught this and learned more about it and studied up on it, I started to realize how much potential it had in a creative practice.

Steph 15:10

So cool. I just assumed it would have been the other way around. There you go. And then I think we see, drawing on some more recent work that you've done. I know I've cast back to some older stuff. But you had a show recently at Flooding Goose called ['The Burning of Vision'](#), which I think it's fair to say, brings some of that architectural language, although also tabletop gaming. Do you want to talk about that show a little bit?

Ash 15:36

Yeah. So I think this is maybe one of the reasons I think I sort of partition my practice into projects is because it may be enables me to stretch out a little bit further than I otherwise would than if I had one kind of clarified statement for all of my work. The Burning of Vision was a really fun, really frightening, really interesting show, that consisted of a lot of cardboard sculpture. And it was it was deliberately riffing on [baroque architecture](#), particularly, or specifically, which is, you know, the sort of the architecture or technique that arises from the Catholics in, you know, Italy in the, for the purposes of a Counter Reformation, to contest this schism that happens in the church, at that particular period in history. And so it's pure theatrics, it's all about bums on seats, it is creating a celestial grand spectacle that is so revelatory to people who see it that they can't help but believe that the Catholic way of knowing about the world is the only way of knowing about the world. And so while it is the utricule, it's also extremely persuasive. But it's also extremely high art, you know, and it appeals to the, the metaphysical, the celestial like all these issues of beyond the world beyond life, these massive ideas. And I sort of became interested in what might happen if it were crammed into this sort of crude visual language of tabletop gaming and terrain building. And I think like, most people, my age with my upbringing, sort of went through a lack of bit of a tabletop gaming phase, where you would build terrain and model foam and cardboard and you know, flock with little

Steph 17:19

paint figurines?

Ash 17:20

exactly, yeah. And I was sort of interested in how this like really kind of high art architectural language could be rendered in these really crude materials. And so it came from a lot of there were a lot of ideas that the show picked up on the way but that was the original premise of it. And so yeah, the exhibition culminated in quite a large cardboard installation of all of these different I call them tombstones, I think, because they have an obvious relationship to tombstones being this kind of large, flat faced thing was sort of pointed top, but also because I was interested in the role of, they sort of seemed to want text on them, like they, because they, they were these, you know, Tombstone things that were expanded to the scale of honor boards. And so they seem to want this text on them. But also, they're connected back to this kind of Italian Roman tradition of writing on tablets. And that's not that's like a quite a storied thing in western archaeology. And so the resulting work was really supposed to feel quite overwhelming in the way that a Baroque cathedral might but also quite flimsy in the way that a teenager's tabletop gaming efforts had resulted in.

Steph 18:31

What a great two things to try and marry.

18:36

[musical interlude]

Steph 18:47

While we're picking apart works that have caught my eye, I really have to ask about the work is it 'Via Purifico'?

Ash 18:55

[Via Purifico](#).

Steph 18:56

Terrific. Fantastic. I have to ask what does Baz Luhrmann's 1996 film [Romeo + Juliet](#) have to do with Squaresoft's 2001 video game, [Final Fantasy](#)?

Ash 19:11

In short, nothing.

Steph 19:13

Excellent!

Ash 19:13

But I think that that was the purpose of the marriage. Yeah. Not unlike the sort of quite jarring influences that were behind the burning of vision. I was interested in. Well, first of all, I just have a deep and abiding love for that film. The '96 Romeo and Juliet

Steph 19:29

Who doesn't; [it's] pretty iconic

Ash 19:31

with Claire Danes and Leo DiCaprio. And originally, the show was just going to be about that film.

Steph 19:38

Oh Okay.

Ash 19:40

In particular, it was going to be about the set of that film that has a particular story behind it. So there's a scene in the film that set on this kind of miami beach style scene. And there's like a ruined stage set called the Sycamore Grove Theatre, which is a reference to the original Shakespearean text and the character of Mercutio's death scene plays out on that stage is and it's Luhrmann making a filmic reference to the original theatrical play of Romeo and Juliet. But an interesting piece of trivia about the movie is that, you know, after they'd recorded Mercutio's death scene, you know where he dies, and

then curses, you know, 'a plague on both your houses', and then a storm rolls in in the film and destroys the beach and everyone runs away. The filming location in Mexico City was actually [hit by a typhoon](#) after they filmed, and destroyed that set.

Steph 20:29

Oh, wow.

Ash 20:29

And so there was a kind of curious art-meets-life thing that happened where that storm sort of punches through the different fictive layers of the film. And so the whole show began with the drawing that's in that show, which is '[underneath the grove of sycamore](#)', which is an attempt to forensically reconstruct the stage set, given that there are no drawings available. And so I sort of had to work with a few surviving, like the scenes in the film, and then a few surviving bits of Super Eight footage from the production material to reconstruct this thing in a drawn architectural diagrammatic form. And from there, I sort of was thinking a lot about ruins and a lot about the ways that ruins have been used in the history of Western architecture. And, you know, particularly in something like the neoclassical tradition, ruins are always a call back to a previous time, ruins are used architecturally to evoke a lost golden age or some kind of great knowledge that has been... that has been lost or subsumed by, you know, the ebb and flow of time. And that drew me to another formative influence, I guess, in my childhood, which was this video game called Final Fantasy, which I think not many people know about. It's a category of games called Japanese role playing games, which is, you know, just a particular style of video game that comes out of Japan. And it was translated to the West in 2001. And it follows a kind of a similar kind of Hero's Journey arc that Romeo and Juliet does. There's a you know, a lead romance as well. But it also takes place in a world that seems to be cyclicly destroyed every 10 years. And so everyone lives in the ruins of a precursor civilization. And so I sort of became interested in the way that the ruin connects the two texts. But also, there's a particular... there's a pivotal scene that plays out in the video game, not unlike the one that occurs in Romeo and Juliet, where the two characters stare out over a sunken arch that's slightly off shore. And it looks quite similar to the arch or to the sunken theater in Romeo and Juliet. And so that quite flimsy connection became the basis for the entire show, which is essentially imagining a kind of speculative world in which these two fictional works actually take place in the same universe.

Steph 22:50

Wow, that's so cool.

Ash 22:52

The more and more I sort of make, the more I realized that I, I really enjoy placing a lot of weight on this quite flimsy connection.

Steph 23:00

Yeah.

Ash 23:01

And then the work of the practice is to try and expand them out into a kind of rich logic of their own.

Steph 23:06

Yeah, well, I suppose once you start looking, you're like, 'Oh, I'm finding more ways I can connect this'.

Ash 23:12

Yeah, absolutely. And so yeah, and so the work was almost about trying to build an evidence base for this insane theory. And I was also thinking a lot about how that fits into these previous, you know, themes of knowledge systems and things.

Steph 23:27

Yeah, it does tie back.

Ash 23:28

Yeah, it presents a it presents a logic of its own, it presents a world of its own. And I think that's what is draws me to this this kind of speculative angle, which has been emerging recently. Just because they you know, just because it's speculative. It's still presents a logic about the world, which is not too dissimilar from the way that we report the world through science or through fiction.

Steph 23:48

Yeah. Amazing.

24:03

[musical interlude]

Steph 24:11

Now, coming to more of the present; I think we've been quite chronological. One of your most recent things that you've been doing is you've had [studio space at Adelaide Contemporary Experimental](#) for is it most of 2022? Tell us how that's been.

Ash 24:29

It's been great. I haven't had designated studio space since I left art school, been really wonderful to get back and sort of claim a space for making again, because, you know, everything has just occurred on the kitchen table and you know, in just absolutely kind of frantic mess of life. And it's really nice to have a designated space and really, also important to have time to think about my work in larger timescales as well. Like there's a there's a designated place for the practice and it doesn't have to work with the cycles of home and the cycles of funding and the cycles of semesters and all those sorts of things. So it's been a really significant opportunity as well to work with Megan Robson, who's the curator at the MCA, but who has been working with ACE this year to sort of mentor myself and the other studio artists towards this kind of studios 2022 exhibition, which I suppose is the culmination of everyone's work this year and the things we've been working towards.

Steph 25:22

And how many of you were there in the studios this year?

Ash 25:25

There are five of us. So aside from me, there is also Chelsea Farquhar, Dani Reynolds, Shaye Dương and Cecilia Tizard. And it's been really wonderful to get to know them as well and bounce ideas back

and forth. I think we're all really fast friends now, which is just an awesome thing to have coming from a home studio and where you just work silently into the night. It can get a lot sometimes.

Steph 25:51

Oh, cool. And so yes, [Studios 2022](#) is the show that has culminated, so everyone's got work represented in there. Is that all recent, like work that has been built over this last 12 months?

Ash 26:03

Yeah. So fortunately, ACE was in a position to be able to commission new work for the show that's downstairs this time. So the th offerings that are in the studio show are all new work that have all been made this year in response to the different investigations that people have been undertaking. That's great.

Steph 26:19

And while we're talking about it, what are the dates for the exhibition?

Ash 26:24

It runs from the 12th of November to the 17th of December, in 2022 yes. Shout out to those of you listening from 2023. We made we made it everybody.

Steph 26:35

this is a ruin of the year before. Excellent. And can you talk about the work that you've got in the show?

Ash 26:42

Yeah. So the work that is in the show downstairs is kind of the first iteration of an idea that sort of came to me when I was drawing, spending a lot of time drawing the theater and the last work in the last body of work. I've been really interested in a long time companion, I think in my academic life has been the history of technology and looking at the way that technology tells us a lot about the cultures and histories from which it arises. And I'm not just talking about technology in terms of iPhones and things, but technology in terms of you know, stone tools like shipping, like you know, all those kinds of expanded built things that enable us to sort of control our environment and work in the world. And I've got a long standing interest in archaeology as well. But I was thinking a lot about specifically the materials of lead and glass and how they have a really long archaeological legacy, like they exist quite far back in the historical record, but also the extremely relevant materials today for a number of things. And one of the things that was kind of emerging, maybe this was just because of the stuff that I was watching when I was making it watching listening to when I was making the previous exhibition, it was it was a lot about nuclear technology and nuclear weapons. And, you know, following this kind of premise of how do I draw, how do I use my practice to draw together these two kind of quite distinct aspects of history and culture, I decided to sort of look at the materials of lead and glass and use them as a way of connecting our contemporary understanding of nuclear technology. And what that tells us about modern history and modern life, with the archaeological uses of lead and glass and how that tells us about historical cultures and times. And so one of the historical uses of lead has been as a writing implement, you know, it's quite a soft, supple metal that supports the written language quite well. But it's also been used historically to line coffins. And the reason being is because it's so soft and supple, it enables it to create a seal, essentially, sort of preserving the remains of people who are interred inside it. It's a historical tradition. It goes back actually, I don't even know how far it goes back. But it lives on

today in the way that actually the British royal family is still buried in leadline. coffins. So if you look at the footage of Diana's funeral, for example, you'd say 10 pallbearers straining under the weight of what's actually a quarter time coffin. But the the other use for leadline coffins is in nuclear accidents. Because the Yeah, because the victims of nuclear accidents, their bodies are still radioactive. And so by burying them in leadline coffins you're essentially containing that radiation.

Steph 29:34

This is such dark information.

Ash 29:38

And I think that's been a real challenge of this work is to look at it from you know, the, the inevitability of looking at it from a purely historical perspective, because that's where I depart from but then it draws on you know, it touches life so much that that actually becomes quite sinister. And I think a bit of that shines through in the in the artifacts downstairs there hopefully it's not too overwhelming

Steph 30:00

Amazing. I definitely have to go back and sit with that work again. Oh my goodness.

Ash 30:07

But if my work becomes too overwhelming just look over at Chelsea's acrobats and it'll all be okay.

Steph 30:13

There's a nice balance in that space for sure.

Ash 30:15

Yes.

Steph 30:17

Amazing. And where can people follow along with your next projects and what you're up to?

Ash 30:22

Oh, well, I'm on Instagram, you can follow me at [@Ash.Tower](#). And that's where people can stay in touch with all this sort of zany things I'm getting up to and it's also got links to everything else that I do.

Steph 30:33

Excellent. Well, thank you. Thanks for letting us pick your brain. And yeah, we'll see what you do next.

Ash 30:38

Thank you.