

# Series 1 Episode 10

## Artist Deep Dive: Seven key works in Helen Britton's *The Story So Far*

[00:00:00] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** This is Object, a podcast about makers, design and contemporary craft in Australia.

[00:00:07] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** I'm your host, Lisa Cahill, CEO of the Australian Design Centre. In the last episode, you met our tenth Living Treasure Master of Australian Craft, Helen Britton. And you heard all about Helen's deep research process, the materials she uses, like glass, metal, and cement, and the role of storytelling in her work.

[00:00:37] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** In this episode, we are doing something a bit different. We are going deep into certain key pieces in Helen's exhibition, *The Story So Far*. You'll hear Helen describe how she made them, the techniques and materials, the stories they tell and what they mean to her.

[00:01:00] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** Let's start with *My Godmother's House*. A set of twenty photographs taken in northeast New South Wales near Yamba on Yaegl Country.

[00:01:09] **Helen Britton:** *My Godmother's House* is a photographic documentation of the house of my Godmother Kath Carr.

[00:01:16] **Helen Britton:** I would spend time with my godmother, who was a very, very interesting woman. She encouraged me to paint to construct things and to make jewellery.

[00:01:27] **Helen Britton:** When I was working in that house with my godmother, there was no difference between painting, creating a collage with dried leaves and flowers, or making a piece of jewellery.

[00:01:40] **Helen Britton:** All of these things happen simultaneously, and flowed from one to the other. And I do believe that is how I still make my work today. It's certainly apparent in this exhibition that you are looking at.

[00:01:56] **Helen Britton:** Returning to that house after forty years, and finding the interior still intact, although she had passed away in the 1990s, was quite an epiphany for me. It helped me understand where all of my creative interests had come from. Also the diversity of my creative interests.

[00:02:23] **Helen Britton:** Over several years I took over 700 photographs. We've selected twenty for the exhibition.

[00:02:30] **Helen Britton:** What was really fascinating for me were the collections within the house.

[00:02:34] **Helen Britton:** So shell collections, stone collections, gathered objects and how they were arranged.

[00:02:41] **Helen Britton:** And then, of course, the path of time. So you'll often see, the dust. I was very interested in photographing the dust as a metaphor, the material reality of time passing.

[00:02:56] **Helen Britton:** But also, for example, in the photographs of the bracelets on the peeling red vinyl, I do see very strong references to my own construction of some of my bracelets.

[00:03:17] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** Next, *The Mysterious Path of Matter and Time*. A small cabinet framed by branches.

[00:03:25] **Helen Britton:** *The Mysterious Path of Matter and Time* is a work made out of my childhood detritus. A cabinet that I made about 30 years ago, and cement branches.

[00:03:39] **Helen Britton:** What's really interesting about this piece is if you look closely into the cabinet, into the little cases, you're going to find all kinds of indicators of my history, such as the train tickets from Newcastle to Sydney, my high school and primary school badges. All kinds of things that were played significant role in growing up.

[00:04:08] **Helen Britton:** I guess the framing with the cement branches does give it a kind of ritualised, almost relique object-like atmosphere, which is what I was trying to achieve.

[00:04:22] **Helen Britton:** And it is also in the true sense of the expression cemented into eternity. Cement is a very interesting material because it is so stable and has such a long life and it's an ancient material, which I think we also tend to forget.

[00:04:45] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** Next, *Junkyard Three*. Helen describes this piece as "a monumental necklace made of many parts".

[00:04:53] **Helen Britton:** *Junkyard Three* is the third of these monumental necklaces or necklace like objects.

[00:05:01] **Helen Britton:** For *The Story So Far*, I've created a piece using absolutely everything I could find leftover in my studio and put it together.

[00:05:14] **Helen Britton:** I've used the circle and bone catch for many years. For me, it is an interesting way to close a necklace, a circular necklace, with these two symbols,

[00:05:27] **Helen Britton:** And the rest of the pieces in *Junkyard Three* are often leftovers from my industrial series. So works that were preoccupied with the kind of environment that I grew up with in Newcastle in the 1970s and early eighties where BHP was kind of at its peak.

[00:05:49] **Helen Britton:** For example, all of the barrels and rods and piles of stuff that you would see lying around on the periphery of industrial areas.

[00:06:01] **Helen Britton:** It's almost a bit like creating a flower arrangement. It does take a long time to get the balance right. It's all recycled silver and paint. Usually a lot of these pieces would go back to my recycler and be melted down and turned into fresh plates so I could continue working.

[00:06:22] **Helen Britton:** So you'll find pieces that actually appear in other works that were either left over or they weren't quite well made enough or it didn't work out.

[00:06:34] **Helen Britton:** This piece does contain the history of the past 20 years of jewellery and object making practice in my studio.

[00:06:45]

[00:06:47] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** Next, *The Magic Cupboard*. Look for a big open cupboard that's... magical.

[00:06:54] **Helen Britton:** *The Magic Cupboard* is constructed out of a cupboard that was in the garage of the house that my mother, my brother and I moved into when I was eight.

[00:07:06] **Helen Britton:** I immediately was intrigued by this cupboard, particularly because of the proportion.

[00:07:12] **Helen Britton:** I did feel it was almost like a fairytale cupboard.

[00:07:16] **Helen Britton:** It was in a dilapidated state, and life rolls on as always. And then when my mother moved to a smaller house, much to my surprise and thrill, she said, "Well, I took your cupboard with me."

[00:07:32] **Helen Britton:** So this was already fantastic. I didn't know what to do with the cupboard, but I was very happy that it had been saved.

[00:07:40] **Helen Britton:** And when I was told I was to be the Living Treasure of Australian Craft, I decided to create a kind of 'cabinet of wonders' that included everything going back to my early childhood, the things that kind of triggered my imagination over all of those years. And then include archival works. So there is a kind of melange of significant things out of my life so far.

[00:08:18] **Helen Britton:** And then key works, from the early period of my practice, but also some very, very recent works and the whole thing interrelates.

[00:08:32] **Helen Britton:** I drew all over the entire surface of the cupboard. I lined it with old printing proofs from my early studies, textile printing proofs, lino cuts. And with the help of my husband, David Bieland, we reconstructed it completely for the exhibition.

[00:08:53] **Helen Britton:** The mirrors have engravings of lyrebirds. You will find a lyrebird engraved onto a mirror made by my godmother in *My Godmother's House* series.

[00:09:06] **Helen Britton:** So I took that drawing and engraved it into these mirrors and then put them back into the cupboard.

[00:09:14] **Helen Britton:** On the bottom shelf, there is a porcelain plate painted by my godmother that, she made that as a gift to me. And she was very interested to make something not conventional, because she thought I'd appreciate that more.

[00:09:30] **Helen Britton:** So it's quite a dynamic drawing of geckos. So I've included that.

[00:09:36] **Helen Britton:** On the middle, lower middle shelf is a cardigan, knitted by my mother, that she wore and then I wore. There's a reference there to a family of makers, particularly women making things to sustain their families.

[00:09:53] **Helen Britton:** On the top shelf are a pile of airplanes made by my brother.

[00:09:57] **Helen Britton:** In the drawer, some of my dolls, put to rest.

[00:10:01] **Helen Britton:** And on top of them is an artwork, called *Rosalie Chatelaine*. It's a piece I made with Rosalie Gascoyne in mind.

[00:10:12] **Helen Britton:** You'll see some of my early books. There is a chromed book with handmade paper. And inside that book of photographs of animal skins. Photography is a really important part of my practice.

[00:10:27] **Helen Britton:** And these books are from the late nineties. There are two car books. There's also a brain book and inside the brain, photographs of clouds and a poem about how thoughts form.

[00:10:44] **Helen Britton:** Hanging on the sides of the cupboards are two sentinels, a wolf and a horse. These are recent works. They are pendants, like one could wear them, but they are there to protect the cupboard and its contents.

[00:11:02] **Helen Britton:** So for *The Magic Cupboard* there is a complete inventory, and it reads a little bit like a data poem. The inventory is in the book. And that inventory will give you incredible insight into the cupboard.

[00:11:19]

[00:11:22] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** Next, The Big and The Small Things. A large wall piece of paintings and jewellery depicting animals and bones.

[00:11:31] **Helen Britton:** The big and the small things is a, a large wall piece. It's about, two and a half meters wide by two and a half meters high. And it's a group of paintings and jewellery. But in fact, it is one thing. It's no longer something that can be taken apart. For me, it's a complete work.

[00:11:55] **Helen Britton:** The paintings are of various animals and I gathered the frames, from the flea markets, of Munich, and then I also cut them down to the right size, to fit the drawings. It's very important to be particularly careful with the proportion of the frames. And then all of the backings of the frames I took that I tore out, I painted bones on those.

[00:12:24] **Helen Britton:** I guess the bones make this work much more sombre. They're often, you know, they are what's left over. After we've eaten an animal or what's left over from us, they are what we find often on the ground or along the roadsides of Australian highways.

[00:12:45] **Helen Britton:** Whilst I don't want, I don't want to be specific about what the bones mean, it does give this work a certain gravity.

[00:12:55] **Helen Britton:** So the backs of the frames are all bones and in the frames themselves, animals.

[00:13:02] **Helen Britton:** What I did was I made a huge series of drawings or paintings of animals over five days, and every time an animal came into my head, I would quickly google it and then make a painting as fast as I could.

[00:13:20] **Helen Britton:** So I made 150 paintings and I made an exhibition of that series called *If you could feel our sadness, you would drown in your own tears*.

[00:13:33] **Helen Britton:** And the paintings, I selected a group of animals out of that series, to push the work further.

[00:13:41] **Helen Britton:** *The Big and The Small Things* came from that series of paintings.

[00:13:46] **Helen Britton:** So you'll see a bilby, you'll see a swan, you will see a gecko, you'll see a dingo, you will see a koala, you'll see a poodle.

[00:13:59] **Helen Britton:** And you will see a penguin. And if you look very closely, you will also see that these paintings were the basis for the galalite animals.

[00:14:12] **Helen Britton:** When I make my galalite animals, I use the paintings as the point of departure for then carving them into galalite. So in a way, the gala light animals are a kind of three-dimensional painting.

[00:14:29] **Helen Britton:** There's a shark, a crab, a crocodile, a kangaroo, and a penguin. And these are carved out of galalite. Galalite is a casine plastic. This particular galalite is French.

[00:14:44] **Helen Britton:** It was made in 1920. Plastic is really the wrong word because it's made out of milk powder, and formaldehyde and pigment.

[00:14:56] **Helen Britton:** So in series I've made about animals and how they must feel in relation to us, I've often taken this particular material because of what it carries within its molecules.

[00:15:14] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** Next, *Wisdom's Despair and Wisdom's Blindness*.

[00:15:18] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** One is a broach; one is a drawing. Both of

[00:15:54] **Helen Britton:** *Wisdom's Despair* is a large drawing. We have a, an owl sitting on a, a burnt branch, looking over either a desert or a sea.

[00:16:05] **Helen Britton:** It's acrylic and ink on paper.

[00:16:09] **Helen Britton:** And we have an owl sitting on a branch with enormous, diamond eyes. So that's *Wisdom's Blindness*.

[00:16:19] **Helen Britton:** The owl figure was based on a childhood trinket brooch that came out of a chewing gum machine.

[00:16:27] **Helen Britton:** And I have a collection of these kinds of small figurative brooches that have become kind of iconic references in my work.

[00:16:38] **Helen Britton:** Wisdom's Blindness is about the size of your hand. It's patinated pressed silver with two large coloured diamonds as eyes, two matching brown diamonds.

[00:16:53] **Helen Britton:** The diamonds are sourced from a company that I work with that are only have non-conflict diamonds. And they're quite intriguing in terms of the amount of depth and facets within those ancient stones.

[00:17:11] **Helen Britton:** I find it very interesting to work with diamonds because they are a really fascinating stone. Nothing sparkles quite like diamonds, and I think this is why they've intrigued people for centuries.

[00:17:24] **Helen Britton:** It's very important to remember there are all different kinds of diamonds and in fact, diamonds aren't that rare. There's a monopoly on white diamonds keeping them off the market so that they aren't devalued.

[00:17:38] **Helen Britton:** This piece is pressed silver, so I work with the hydraulic press, and acrylic forms that I cut by hand.

[00:17:45] **Helen Britton:** Then the very thin sheets of silver are roller pressed before I start work on them. And then soldered together. So it has a kind of three-dimensional quality.

**Helen Britton:** And it's important to realise that I see this as one work. They're not two separate works. It is a kind of diptych. And thematically it is also about reflections on environmental ruin.

[00:18:30] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** Next, *The Story So Far* monograph.

[00:18:35] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** Presenting Helen's extraordinary, often colorful and playful works.

[00:18:42] **Helen Britton:** Within the exhibition there is the publication, *The Story So Far*. What's important to realise is that this is an artwork in its own right. It was created for this exhibition, and it includes a huge amount of detail about the works that you'll see in the exhibition.

[00:19:02] **Helen Britton:** In addition to this, it covers my practice for the past 40 years.

[00:19:21] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** I hope you enjoyed this audio tour. If you'd like to hear more from this incredible artist. You can listen to an interview between Helen and myself on the podcast. Just search for Object stories of design and craft in your podcast app.

[00:19:36] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** We'd like to thank Visions of Australia, the Federal Government's regional Exhibition touring program for funding support towards this audio tour. The audio tour was produced by Jane Curtis. Sound engineering is by John Jacobs.

[00:19:51] **Lisa Cahill HOST:** This audio tour was made on Gadigal Country. Thanks for listening.