

TRANSCRIPT for the podcast Object: stories of craft and design

Living Treasure: Master of Australian Craft Helen Britton

[00:00:00]

Helen Britton: Growing up in Newcastle, it was a very working class town, a good Labor town.

Both my parents were very involved in the Labor movement unionists. We had heavy industry ship building, steel making certain suburbs you couldn't hang your clothes outside because you'd bring them in, they'd all be black. The river was filthy.

Newcastle is Worimi and Awabakal land.

And, it is distressing to think of what an exceptionally beautiful environment that must have been before colonisation.

We were taken as tiny children to the BHP and we watched them pour tonnes of molten steel. And my earliest memories, maybe I was six, standing in the BHP with no safety clothing or protection where it was so hot you could actually feel your hair singe.

Watching [00:01:00] this steel for making ships being poured... It was fairly impressive.

There was a Philips glass factory in Newcastle and we were taken there as small children as well. Glass was made. And we watched them making vases and lampshades, and it was fantastic watching, watching these people pull these huge blobs of molten stuff out of these huge ovens and turn them into these objects.

This was really fundamental to my fascination with these kinds of processes and the stories about them.

Lisa Cahill HOST: This is Object. A podcast about makers, design and contemporary craft in Australia. I'm your host, Lisa Carl, CEO of the Australian Design Centre. In Series one, you've met Master Crafts people.

We call them Living Treasures, and they're a unique initiative of the Australian Design Centre. [00:02:00] We celebrate and share their work through a national touring exhibition, a major monograph publication, and a podcast episode.

And you can scroll back and hear interviews with seven other living treasures in season one of the podcast.

In this episode, you'll meet the 10th Living Treasure Helen Britton.

What is it about her practice or material that she loves? And what's her advice for makers who follow in her footsteps?

Helen Britton is a multidisciplinary Australian artist based between Munich in Germany and Australia.

Helen's practice includes contemporary jewellery, photography, sculpture, painting, [00:03:00] drawing, and installations, and is informed by a deep research process examining popular culture, threatened traditions, environmental destruction, and human anxiety. Let's meet Living Treasure Master of Australian Craft, Helen Britton.

Welcome Helen. It's fantastic to have you in the studio with us today.

Helen Britton: It's such a pleasure and an honour, and I'm so thrilled to be here.

Lisa Cahill HOST: Helen, you are here because we're about to launch your exhibition, *The Story So Far* for our Living Treasures, Masters of Australian Craft series, which is really exciting.

What does it mean to you being back in Sydney for this event?

Helen Britton: Oh, it's very meaningful. It's very exciting. I grew up in Newcastle and I studied in Sydney, so Sydney feels really like home to me, as much as I can find a home in Australia.

And you say it's *my* exhibition. That's really interesting. Because I always, it is a collaboration. I would never [00:04:00] have come up with an exhibition like this had the ADC and you, Lisa, not asked me, invited me, awarded me with this incredible honour.

So I'm looking forward to building our exhibition and also putting it on the road. That's going to be very exciting, with the tour of... how many museums do we have now?

Lisa Cahill HOST: I think about nine venues around the country. So it's going to be amazing for all of those people to have the opportunity to see your work and experience our exhibition.

Helen Britton: Yeah.

Lisa Cahill HOST: Let's talk a little bit about your early life experience, Helen, and how that influenced your decision to become an artist.

Helen Britton: My mother was a very creative person who drew and painted and sewed clothes and cooked, and this was also very inspiring. We were encouraged to make things. You'd spend your weekend, doing stuff making things, gluing things together, sewing things, not necessarily always practical things.

[00:05:00] And I think this was very influential.

Lisa Cahill HOST: It's foundational, isn't it? Those skills of making, learning how to use scissors and glue and nails and hammers and, all the tools that become so important to craftspeople for their work.

Helen Britton: Yeah, absolutely. That was, I think it was also a particular time in Australia perhaps, or in farming communities generally.

Although we lived in Newcastle, but my mother's family were farmers and you just made everything yourself. My, my grandfather was a blacksmith quite a famous blacksmith. He actually went to the Montreal Olympics to shoe the horses, for the Australian team. And so we grew up, or I grew up watching those kinds of things happen all around me as part of daily life.

And milking the cow and making the butter. These were processes, material processes.

For me, it was very fascinating. I was very drawn [00:06:00] into them. Thinking about the connection between the grass and the cow, and the milk and the butter and the ice cream that was made. This was really important to me as a child. I loved making those connections in my mind.

And perhaps that's where the structure of the parameters around the different themes in my work came from because it helped give order to a hyperactive imagination.

And certainly then being as a very introverted child, I was then often delivered to my godmother's house, to my godmother, and we would paint and draw and create things. And there was never any hierarchy of what you did, it flowed from one activity to the other. And I think that was incredibly formative for me as an artist.

Lisa Cahill HOST: And your godmother's house, tell us a bit about that.

Helen Britton: Yeah, I was thinking about that region when I was coming [00:07:00] here and one of the most remarkable things is the smell of the air particularly in the early morning that is so deeply embossed in my being and makes me feel really good.

So my mother's family came from the Clarence Valley, Palmers Island, Palmers Channel to be specific. So close to Yamba on Yaegl Country.

And my godmother's house was there.

So when I would visit Kath Carr, my godmother, my grandmother's older sister we would paint porcelain.

We would [00:08:00] draw things. We would press flowers and leaves from the garden and make arrangements with them, and we would also make jewellery.

My great uncle, her husband Aubrey Carr was collecting stones and polishing them in his shed, and we would take the small stones and glue them into commercially made settings for jewellery. One of my favourite pieces from the

time was these little squares of roto, which always reminded me of little squares of bacon.

Or meat and I used those to make a pair of earrings. So they were a little bit weird, but also quite fascinating.

So it was, there was an incredible focus on that environment that was really important. And the house itself, obviously I [00:09:00] left that environment. I didn't grow up there. I would visit that environment. I grew up in Newcastle and that was a different story altogether. I'm almost. A polar opposite story.

But then I moved to Sydney and moved away. And then at some point I went back and was able to access my godmother's house and photograph it. And it was also a kind of epiphany to realize after 40 years of practice where all of those threads came from.

Lisa Cahill HOST: And then you moved away, way away. You left New South Wales and you moved away to study. Can you tell us about that?

Helen Britton: Yeah I did, I studied at Newcastle College of the Arts at the time, then Sydney College of the Arts. And then, yeah I [00:10:00] left Sydney. It was overwhelming.

There were a lot of there was a lot of heavy drug use all around me. I felt uncomfortable and I felt it would be good to get out. So I took off round Australia, drove around Australia, and ended up in Perth and went back to university to art school.

In Perth, I went back to study in Western Australia at what is now Edith Cowan University. And I have to say I am very thankful for a thorough education. I think all up I've done 12 years of university and in Western Australia. I, in my naive jubilation, I said, "Oh, I have already two years of university, but I'll just start from the beginning again."

And did a very comprehensive program of printmaking, textiles, painting, photography, importantly and cultural studies, visual inquiry, it was called, and life drawing. So [00:11:00] they had a drawing 13 hours a week for three years. That was really formative.

[MUSIC]

Julie Ewington: I was very lucky to be one of the examiners for her master's degree when she was studying at Curtin in Perth.

And because I was based in Queensland working at the Queensland Art Gallery, I couldn't easily travel to Perth.

I'm Julie Ewington. I'm a writer and a curator and sometimes a broadcaster living on Gadigal land in Sydney.

So Helen sent a box, a beautiful wooden little box that she still got, and it was compartmentalised and it came to me at the gallery. So I took it home to write my report, and when I took the lid off, there were 15 or 20 objects each in their own little compartment.

It was so beautiful. It was so intelligent to send it to me.

They were mostly broaches, but it wasn't that so much. It was the unexpected combinations of [00:12:00] things like pearls and plastic, uh, silver and tin. And she does it to this day. She puts glass and diamonds into the same brooch. It's wild.

So she's no respecter of. Conventional value. She's only the respecter of what she can make out of the things that she has.

So I wrote my report and after that was done, I took the box into work and showed the other curators because I thought, 'This stuff is incredible. This is really beautiful work. This is major talent.'

And sure enough, a year or two later, the Queensland Art Gallery bought a couple of pieces from Helen for its contemporary jewellery holdings.

[MUSIC]

Lisa Cahill HOST: And then you made your home in Munich, in Germany for a long period of time. Yeah. And you're still there and working between Europe and Australia.

Helen Britton: Yeah. Home's a funny word, isn't it? Yeah. Because I've never ever seen it [00:13:00] or felt it. More importantly, I don't feel that it is my home. It is my base. It's a very good base, but Australia is my home. And it's a luxury

problem living between Australia and Germany. I'm very fortunate to be able to do that.

But the reasons, the reason I remained in Germany particularly is a private reason, not a professional reason. And yeah, there are certain situations where you just can't make those decisions to move back to Australia.

Lisa Cahill HOST: So you work in lots of different materials and I just wonder how do you decide what to use for your work? Where does that material come from? What motivates you in terms of your material choices?

Helen Britton: I get fascinated by certain, often objects or practices or geographical locations and their histories. And so I will then go [00:14:00] and find out about them. I'll research them. I'll look into what was made there. Why was something made there?

A very classic example is the glass making practices of Thuringia in the middle mountains of Germany.

So I became really interested through my friend Felix Lindner.

It started out that we were standing at a Christmas market in Munich in front of a whole wall of glass birds shiny on the inside, different kind of colours.

And I said to Felix, we had one of those in Australia on the Christmas tree, you clip it on the Christmas tree.

And he said, "I can show you the factory where they're made."

He was from that region.

And I said, "Okay, let's go."

And we did. I went to the forests of Thuringia. It was part of the former GDR. Very steep valleys that the forests have been [00:15:00] rid of deciduous trees and planted with pines.

So the fast growing pine could be used to fire the furnaces for glass making. Glass makers settled there in about 1497. They were driven from through one of the many wars out of Bohemia, and they travelled across Germany until they

found the right geographical situation to make their glass, which meant forests, sand and water.

So they settled their villages in the bottoms of the valleys so they could pull the trees down the slopes, feed them into their furnaces and make glass. So it's very dark, it's very cold. And all the houses there's are covered in slate. So they're black, they have beautiful patterns.

And it was always a fairly modest region of working people who made a living through [00:16:00] their capacity not only to make glass, also porcelain. Manufacturing also then of things like mirrors and thermometers among many other things to the toy industry, was very important there as well.

Also because people could make it in their homes and then send it off to merchants who were filling the great department stores of the world with those things.

I started in 2001, researching there, talking to people, went to those factories looking at the museum, accessing the archives, learning to read German.

And I couldn't make work about that experience until 2007. And then subsequent exhibitions around the glass animals happened in 2009, 2018, 2020 2021.

And so they're [00:17:00] very long-term projects and that process is my work as much as the pieces themselves in the exhibition.

And for me, that is my art. It's the end product of often a really long research project.

So that's the kind of point of departure for the work.

And then I'm very open for many years. I often have no idea what I'm going to do, but if the fascination is there and I can find inroads and it keeps expanding that's how I make my work.

So there isn't really, "Oh, I think I'll work with this material and then I see what happens." It's combined with a much more complex experience.

And that's also why, for example, I started working with cement. Because after a period of being in that region and looking at history photographing, which is a very important part of my [00:18:00] practice thinking about what happened there, what are the materials that could tell me that history?

I reduced them to glass, rusted metal and cement for the long history of glass making in that region; the dilapidated factories that were scattered through the forests; and the Soviet occupation, which left behind a plethora of cement structures both in the form of bunkers but also kind of monstrous buildings.

So I took those three materials and started to make my art with them because I knew they would carry their own stories in their atoms and the materials can tell those stories equally as well as I can. So that's how I look for materials and how it, the work evolves.

Lisa Cahill HOST: So the materiality is very much drawn from the [00:19:00] story, from the history, from the issue, from the place that you are examining through that process of research and getting underneath what it is that interests you about it.

Helen Britton: Yeah, that's right. And these aren't the kind of big epic stories where the pieces are. Then we know them from museums and books. They're often more humble stories or stories that are from working people from a... I wouldn't say subculture or what one perhaps would've once called folk art.

But those kinds of stories, often of ephemera or ephemeral practices that are poorly documented but incredibly human and... Yeah. Really fascinating and often free.

They're often free of some kinds of dogma because they're not embedded in a kind of [00:20:00] hierarchical structure of artistic practice painting or sculpture.

These are forms of creative expression that have gone their own path often in a, isolated geographical situation that for whatever reason I have a connection to.

Lisa Cahill HOST: Helen, tell us about the role of storytelling in your work.

Helen Britton: Yeah..we all have our own stories and we all know how problematic history is.

What stories get told, whose voices are heard, what are the stories of these different kinds of practices. And I do really feel a need to share these stories that have touched me, the production of certain ornaments and why they were produced in certain regions. What really happened [00:21:00] there to, to working people.

What were the conditions of production? These are the kinds of stories I feel also need to be told alongside the. Epic stories of painters and sculptors. There's all this other activity going on, and part of my, the impulse is to give those stories a voice to making art about them.

Lisa Cahill HOST: Helen, you are a multidisciplinary artist.

You work in sculpture, you work in painting, photography jewellery, contemporary jewellery, and many people would probably know your contemporary jewellery work perhaps more than your other work do.

How do you decide what you're going to make out of those stories and research that you're doing, and how do you decide whether it's going to be a sculpture or a series of paintings or drawings or a piece of wearable art?

Helen Britton: Yeah. I think the different [00:22:00] parameters of all of those forms are really interesting to think about.

Do you make a square thing that you stick on the wall or do you make a square thing that someone can wear?

And the materiality, the things you're working with, whether it's paint or stone, where do they have the most room to expand their own story?

Function inserted into history. I'm not really a kind of reactionary artist that needs to destroy what's gone before, but I do like to make work that it inserts itself into history to tell the story differently.

Cement is really a wonderful sculpture material for the kind of sculpture that I make with it. I have no interest in making cement jewellery, although there are some beautiful examples in the world. But for me, it doesn't do what I need it to [00:23:00] do.

And some things need to be told in paint and some things need to be told in jewellery or told in photography for the materials to tell their stories and that you collaborate with them.

Julie Ewington:

Before she became a jeweller, even perhaps before she became a painter, she'd been a bikey, and a bikey girl. And she was really good at stripping down engines and putting her back together again.

So the Helen networks with metal. On a small scale has worked with metal on a much larger scale. She's just a very, very good maker. She's got that country kids inherited aptitude to pull things apart and put them back together again and find out how they work.

I've been following Helen's work for nearly 30 years and since I first saw it, what really gets to me is that she's a mother of invention. The work is so various and sprightly and inventive, and I never [00:24:00] know what to expect next.

So it's the profligate, the profligate imagination of the work...I guess the way in which she goes straight to quite curious places and with such passion and directness.

Lisa Cahill HOST: One of the most fascinating things for me is that, that there's so much to the imagination in each work.

How do you like people to experience your work?

Helen Britton: Oh, I have no idea.

Lisa Cahill HOST: Let them do what they like.

Helen Britton: Yeah, my work as an artist is to make things that are autonomous, that they no longer are connected to me.

They need to be able to live in the world without me, and without me having a kind of desire to control the experience of my audience. Of course, I'm telling stories. Maybe they're interesting for some people. Maybe people can't connect, but [00:25:00] people connect, obviously. They connect to those stories in their own ways and there are many layers.

There's a lot going on.

My job is to try and sort a kind of completely overactive, constant barrage of imagination and ideas that are in my head at all times.

And this is might sound really amazing.

But it's actually quite stressful and I've had that since I was a child. There's a lot going on in there.

And that's also why I constructed in my practice, these different kinds of strategies of pursuing art making, contextualizing things, impulses like the glass of the touring of forests saying, okay, I will pursue that in a more constructed way and continue to pursue it over time and see where that opens up.

But it has parameters because if I don't give myself parameters is quite overwhelming.

Lisa Cahill HOST: How [00:26:00] do you sort through all those ideas in your imagination?

Helen Britton: Yeah. I keep journals and notebooks, but I also have learned to follow those kinds of impulses, so different impulses, and then create a structure around that with a set of parameters that it just can't include everything.

It has to be related to specificity, whether it's geographical, historical material, often a combination of those three things in one place.

So the forests of Thuringia; in the beaches of Australia; Limoges [France] where I recently did a kind of major new porcelain project; Idar Oberstein where I've done several bodies of work based on the history of that region and the transportation of stone.

So that helps me keep things organised in my [00:27:00] mind.

Lisa Cahill HOST: Is there a part of your practice that you most enjoy, or does it depend on the particular work you're making or the story that you're telling?

You might find different parts of the process more enjoyable than others?

Helen Britton: Yeah it's often really difficult, technically physically sometimes, and I do like to move around and, if I can't solve things, I like things, I like to let things, to keep approaching them. It can be, it could take me two years to finish a piece of work could take me 10 years to finish a piece of work.

So I keep coming back to them and often they'll never be finished. But I've learned a great deal from those pieces that are really difficult.

But there isn't any one thing that I enjoy more than anything else. I guess generally speaking, I could, I enjoy the challenge of [00:28:00] resolving something and making, giving it that autonomy where you can sit back and think, who made that?

That's a really important moment in the studio.

Lisa Cahill HOST: A Living Treasure can be seen as a role model for other makers, artists.

What advice would you like to give out of this experience, out of your experience as an artist working over the last three decades? What would you like to share?

Helen Britton: Just be really courageous. Stay off your phone and don't care what other people say.

Lisa Cahill HOST: I think that's very good advice.

Helen Britton: Have a good plan B, that's also really important.

It is incredibly difficult to live from one's work. I've lived now for over 20 years from my work. I'm almost 60 and it hasn't gotten easier and it is really [00:29:00] tough. And I think it is important to be humble and also not to be afraid of having a job to keep you financially stable.

Lisa Cahill HOST: Let's talk about being a Living Treasure and what that means to you?

Helen Britton: You know what I am, I find really interesting to, to be in the situation of being the 10th Living Treasure. And we are, I look forward to another 10.

But it is a unique award because it gives a practitioner like myself who is, whose work is drawn from craft practices. Because I'm based overseas, it has had a huge impact.

People are really impressed by the idea that there is an Australian Living Treasure series. So whilst it obviously has this amazing resonance within Australia, what's quite interesting with this award is that it has a huge international resonance.

And since having been [00:30:00] awarded this, a lot of my friends and colleagues in different countries have reached out to me and asked me about it.

And of course, I've been able to share this fantastic podcast series with them. So it generates a lot of interest and admiration from the international community as well, a fantastic outcome.

Lisa Cahill HOST: Helen Briton, we are very much looking forward to the Story So Far because it is just the story so far.

A lot of story, but a lot of stories still to come, I'm sure.

Helen Britton: I hope so. Thank you very much, and it's a great pleasure and honor to be here in Sydney. Thank you.

Lisa Cahill HOST: That was Helen Britton, 10th Living Treasure Master of Australian Craft.

What I found interesting in this conversation with Helen was her childhood fascination with making, her deep research process that informs all of her work and the importance of storytelling.

You can see images of [00:31:00] Helen's work on the Australian Design Centre website.

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Object is produced by Jane Curtis, in collaboration with me, Lisa Cahill. Sound engineering is by John Jacobs. Thanks for listening.