Podcast Transcript
Creative Responders: In Conversation with Jeremy Smith
May 2020

Scotia: Hello, I'm Scotia Monkivitch. Welcome back for another episode of Creative Responders: in Conversation, our monthly interview series where we hear from people on the frontlines of the arts and emergency management sector as they prepare, respond and recover from disaster.

This month, we're joined by Jeremy Smith. I caught up with Jeremy in Sydney in March, just ahead of the Covid-19 physical distancing restrictions as he was wrapping up his four year tenure with the Australia Council and about to embark on the journey back to his hometown of Perth.

It was a race against time and logistics with a looming state border closure. But he's now safely back on the West Coast and settling into his new role with the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts or PICA as it's known.

As many of our listeners would be aware, the Australia Council for the Arts is the Australian Government's arts funding and advisory body. Jeremy is a beloved figure in the Australian arts community. His Australia Council role as Arts Practice Director for Community Emerging and Experimental Arts Grants and Engagement saw him engage with a vast range of practitioners from all corners of the country.

As you will hear in our chat, he has long been a champion for regional arts and community arts and cultural development, as well as a passionate advocate for celebrating difference and transforming othering attitudes.

I'm really pleased we had the chance to catch up at this important time of transition for Jeremy to hear his reflections on the past few years and take a bit of a deep dive into community arts and cultural development. So enjoy this conversation with creative responder, Jeremy Smith.

So I'm here with Jeremy Smith. We're meeting today on the Eora Nation countries. And I'd like to start, Jeremy, by asking you to introduce yourself. Tell us a little bit about who you are, where you come from?

Jeremy: Thank you. Jeremy Smith. I have been living here in Sydney on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation for the last four years.

Born and raised on Whadjuk Noongar booja, which is now known as Perth and spent predominantly my working career in the arts, working in and around community arts and cultural development, working with organisations back home, including the Awesome Festival where I did a lot of regional arts development work. DADA who are an arts and disability organisation, where I did again a lot of regional arts and health work and and then did a lot of work actually through the mining sector and social investment and then made my way over here to the Australia Council where I've been for the last four years the Director of Community Arts and Experimental Arts, getting to work with wonderful organisations like Creative Recovery Network.

Scotia: Why, thank you. Jeremy, can you tell us a little bit what your role has been? What does it constitute?

Jeremy: So it was a new role with all of the organisational changes that took place in 2014 and 15 after budget changes and what not for the arts sector. And so it amalgamated the portfolios of community arts and cultural development and emerging an experimental art.

So essentially a lot of the more dynamic, and interdisciplinary art form practice areas. And as I said, my experience was more associated with the CADC part of that portfolio coming into the job but it's been really lovely making this new role and bringing together different parts of interdisciplinary practice over these four years. It's been great.

Scotia: So for our listeners who aren't from the arts and even many in the arts don't necessarily know what community arts and cultural development are. Could you, from your perspective, give us a bit of an overview of what that is?

Jeremy: Yeah, my perspective, because I think a lot of people have their own personal definitions and ideas about it, but I sort of like to feel it's certainly all about professional practice and then just the way that communities - and that role of what definition of what is a community, it could be people of a geographic location, of the same lived experience, of a same form of self identification

- expressing themselves creatively in association with artists and maintaining that creative control of process and form at all levels.

I guess one thing that CSA has done exceptionally well for many, many years now is bringing other sectors to the table and and bringing the arts to other areas such as health, wellbeing, education, disability and other forms of our society as well.

So that's I guess that's my sort of thing. And I guess that sort of expectation and practise of rigour and and protocol and best practice in all its ways as well.

Scotia: So what brought you to this field in the first place? You're a practicing artist. How did you get involved in community practice?

Jeremy: It was actually really interesting. I started, I studied lighting design at WAPA in Perth, which is the WA Academy of Performing Arts, and I started working for the Awesome Festival as their production manager.

And at that stage, you know, in Perth was quite small and still is to a certain degree. But there was an opportunity for me to get year-round work.

And I spoke to the then director of the festival and ended up getting a fellowship, three young people in the arts at Arts WA and travelling to Canada and worked with the Vancouver Children's Festival.

And that's when I had my first opportunity to start working in a community context with what, you know, the Canadians would call ‘socially isolated’ or ‘socially disadvantaged’ groups and then was able to bring that back and start working with Awesome on regional arts development activities on a program called The Creative Challenge, which worked in ten regional, rural and remote communities across Western Australia each year with professional artists helping those young people in each of those communities to self-determine a new work that would then be presented each year at the Awesome Festival in Perth. So that was my beginnings and then I sort of followed that thread ever since really, it's been really exciting.

Scotia: So what do you see the value that the arts bring into those kind of contexts?

Jeremy: I've always seen it as new forms of self-expression, of finding identity, of un-hiding, of celebrating place a lot of the time.

So, you know, areas of geographic areas within a certain community or stories of a certain community that people may have just taken for granted or whatever - because a lot of my practise began in regional communities around WA as I've said so, helping to un-hide the stories of people who are either lost or forgotten or kept aside and how the arts have been able to bring those out and get the whole community to celebrate and recognise and talk about the importance of those sorts of matters of place and identity, I think is something that I've always felt very dear and close about.

Scotia: So in that context, how do you see that relating back into particularly communities impacted by disasters? That's the container of our work. How do you see the relationship?

Jeremy: Yeah, I think that hysteria and immediacy of impact in those situations can erase identity in a lot of cases, I think because people are so rightfully concerned about the immediacy of a response and the need to react and respond and and work out how to recover quickly.

But there is a long story of well of everything, of celebration, of identity, of storytelling, of a place that still needs to always be considered in terms of informing how a community responds and recovers in those sorts of situations.

It's important to not forget what's happened before and to know that you can learn from those things that you may have always taken for granted and how they can sort of help a community recover and respond and reconnect and find new ways to be cohesive and to talk.

Scotia: So what do you think are the specific characteristics or the essence that artists bring in to a space that would be useful for when we're looking at recovery processes?

Jeremy: I always think that artists and arts workers have different thought patterns, and so they see things differently.

I think I've always you know, I've spent five years working in a mining company in Rio Tinto working on community investment and social investment and I often found the ideas that I brought to conversations and coming from an arts background were very different to what a group of engineers and financial managers and logistics personnel were considering.

And so I think that whole way that we work around propensity to take measured risks, to use innovation, to use creativity is something that I think in these times that the arts can really offer to society more broadly.

Scotia: In terms of other ways of looking at the application of the arts into other sectors, like the emergency management sector, where do you see in the process how we might influence more particularly into a preparedness space? We're in a moment of crisis and in a moment of immediate responding but how might you see that we could layer into more long-term design or creative thinking?

Jeremy: Yeah. It's…I think, often, we're hauled in in times of crisis but then it's that way that we get a seat at the table on an ongoing basis to be part of the conversation when we aren't facing the immediacy of recovery and actual implementation, but how we actually get there.

And I think that's through, I tend to think the stories of impact and storytelling of the, you know, sharing the success, because there is a lot of that.

But then I think so often that becomes siloed into preaching to the converted and that's how we can look at getting cut-through to other sectors. And as you say in this instance, emergency management, to sort of look at the work of Creative Recovery Network and independents and other organisations that have been doing remarkable work in recent years to, you know, demonstrate the evidence and the need and the importance of the arts being there on an ongoing basis and not just brought in to help with the recovery.

So I think and that sort of a thing about, you know, different levels of government - be it ministerial level, be it the senior bureaucrats, be it agency to agency and working together, connecting the dots and having a whole of society focus in the way that we demonstrate the evidence and the impact of the arts and creativity more broadly.

Scotia: It's interesting because one of the biggest challenges within emergency management recovery practice I think is notions of time and how we manage time. And how economic and political frameworks put deadlines to things, but our communities don't have a relational sense of time.

Jeremy: Yeah, absolutely. I think, you know, I think that whole thing about continuity is really important and of assurance and knowing that well, you know, obviously in these times now with

social distancing, that contact can come in many forms I mean, nothing beats face to face contact and face to face communication.

But I think, yes, there are certain critical deadlines that government and other systems need to adhere to but then ensuring continuity and consistency over a long term is something that's really important and I think something that the arts and creativity can use as a means to sort of help buffer the immediacy of some of those response timelines.

Scotia: Yeah and understanding that we we are in evolving recovery. There's a lot of conversation around the word resilience and how we understand resilience and how we learn from our experiences moving forward. What sort of role do you think the arts could play or creativity could play.

Jeremy: I think you know, I think there's often a stigma around the arts and indeed creativity about people not self-identifying what they do in their day to day is actually related to arts and creativity and culture as well in its in its own right.

And so I think the act of reading a book, listening to music and now obviously finding new ways of sharing and talking about those experiences is something that I think can really be an important way.

The arts have always been nimble and able to shape shift and able to adapt and able to be fit for purpose, I guess and in these times that's going to become critical for that role to be able to continue and for the arts to be that glue in times of crisis.

And I think by working out and drawing connections between creative practice, of understanding of culture, of understanding of storytelling, is the way that the arts can sort of really help bring rigour and resolve to the way we bounce back from what's going on and has been going on so far this year.

Scotia: You know, the context of the Coronavirus, on top of everything else - we're working in at a time when we are trying to look at recovery as a way of bringing people together. I mean, you've been working across community practice, but also experimental arts.

What sort of suggestions would you have for us moving forward in terms of how we might think of an outward looking process because a lot of the conversation currently is very inward looking. It's about impact and economy. And understandably, that's something that is massive for all of us.

But what what would you suggest would be some ways that we maybe we could turn that lens to be more of an outward looking lens?

Jeremy: Yeah, I think that's a big part of the conversation and the jigsaw puzzle that again, it's that thing of the immediacy of the issue and the economic impact that people seem to be focussing on now.

But then as the ripple starts to broaden and move out from the centre, then how do communities respond and still remain included and still remain able to you know, I think, again, that whole importance for communities and artists and arts workers to adopt help-seeking mentalities in these times is really critical because you shouldn't isolate, you shouldn't - well you should physically I guess - that's the tricky thing. But you shouldn't ever feel alone is the big thing, I think, and know that there are others that are in the same boat. All of us are in the same boat.

I mean, I'm in the process of trying to relocate states and to a new job. I've been telling my friends that have been contacting me all weekend saying, “Oh my God, the border is closed in WA, what are you going to do?”

And I sort of say, well, there are things that I know are beyond my control. I can do and respond to the things that I can control. But there's no use getting myself into a mess and a point of hysteria about things I know will change and I know that will I will not be able to control.

And I think that's something that all of us within the arts sector and within all sectors, and within society more generally need to understand that the rapidness of change is the only thing that's gonna be certain.

And we need to look at what we can influence, what we can control and how we can make the best outcome of those situations and work together to ensure that communities are knowing that - arts, creativity and culture is one mechanism in new ways of consuming that content, be it online, be it sort of, you know, digitally and whatnot.

But I think that's something that we all need to consider is that panic is not going to help anyone and change is the only thing that's certain at this moment in time.

Scotia: So we are in the arts particularly going to face a pretty difficult time ahead - like many contracted work sectors, we are going to be pretty heavily hit in the short-term and the long-term.

What what's would you say to the arts sector at the moment in terms of how we deal with the next period of development?

Jeremy: Care for yourself, care for each other, care for your communities, care for your families. Listen and keep communicating, I think, and sharing, because we'll all come across solutions, issues, failures that everyone can learn from.

And so I think I've seen some of the responses on Facebook and other platforms that I think has been really positive. But I think that thing of keeping measured, keeping open. So don't sort of blinker yourself to sort of, you know, immediate issues to do with probably your own practice, your own organisation, your own audience. But keep your head up every now and then to make sure that you're open to sort of seeing and learning and witnessing what others are doing and how they're responding.

Scotia: We've been investigating ways of how we can create better work environments and support containers for artists, particularly who are working with and in communities that have been impacted in some way through trauma. And we've had a lot of conversations with you around this work. And I'm just wondering what you might see from your perspective as a useful way forward. What would you see as some core things that we should be addressing around around mental health, wellbeing and support for artists?

Jeremy: I think I mean, even something long before I joined the Australia Council that the sector as a whole held up with such high regard was the First Nation protocols that came out many, many years ago and they became rare as hens teeth when they had that published set of booklets across the various practice areas.

And I think that way of the sector embracing and adopting a set of universal protocols and guidelines, I guess, in terms of how the arts should respond, work, behave, interact with - in that case, First Nation communities and artists - but I think the way that the arts work with other sectors as well and getting some consistency and and universally adopted approaches to the way that that can happen would be really beneficial, because I think there are so many people and organisations and practitioners and communities that respond and do it quickly but then if there was as set of go-to guidelines, protocols, that would be so beneficial, I think in this situation and you know, obviously just look at what's happened in 2020 so far and that alone is evidence enough of something, a resource to be there and available to be applied on a needs basis.

Scotia: Do you have, can you highlight any particular project you've been involved with or were you aware of that you think is is a good case example of how the arts have been applied within community, either community impacted by trauma or something that can be applicable?

Jeremy: Trauma wasn't the sort of first impetus, but there was this really beautiful project that I came in sort of I think the second year it had been running when I was working at DADAA over in Western Australia called Marsh Art and Marsh Art began in Derby, which is a community in the Kimberley region. It's about a two and a half hour drive north of Broome.

And it's in this remarkable geographic location where the community itself and township sits on a peninsula that is surrounded by marshland. And there was an annual festival of the Boab Festival, which is one of Australia's longest running regionally based festivals that had an annual program of activities.

But then it didn't really include First Nation communities, people that identified as disabled and other socially disadvantaged or isolated groups.

And so DADAA with the community, and it did it over a long period of time, started this annual celebration called Marsh Art, which took the community out of the town and onto the marshlands and started seeing getting that community - and Derby's quite small in the scheme of townships and by the size of population and whatnot.

So this marsh area sat on the outskirts of town and we created an annual celebration of ephemeral art. So it was always temporary. But then this one day celebration of that place, which focussed the artistic content on work that was created by First Nation artists even from as far afield as Mowanjum Community and Arts Centre and then other First Nation community groups within Derby and surrounding locations and then home and community care programs as well, so programs for disabled people.

And it just became this amazing, beautiful annual event that the community really embraced. It got them to see that landscape in a completely new way, engage with it in a completely new way and talk about other year-round ways that they could sort of appreciate that sort of their sense of place and identity outside of the immediate built environment.

So that for me has been a beautiful, beautiful project and I think still continues in some form to this day. So that way of giving a legacy of your work that you know, continues and evolves into a

celebration which might have started as initially as a way of overcoming some obstacle or barrier or something like that.

Scotia: So creating new new cultural changes.

Jeremy: Yeah.

Scotia: So from your own little toolkit, do you have any suggestions of some self-care, creative self-care strategies that you could tell us about?

Jeremy: (laughs) I did a lot of this over the weekend actually, where I just surfed the Internet at some stage and just looked on YouTube and watched video clips of songs from my past that brought me immense pleasure and joy and laughter and, you know, geeky music and tunes and all that sort of stuff just to sort of take my mind off things for a moment when things all became a bit much.

And then, you know, ensuring that in a socially distant way, you can still maintain outdoor walks and those sorts of things to just sort of let the mind wander and be free and think about other things than what's going on in the here and now.

But, you know, Sophie Ellis-Bextor's "Murder on the Dancefloor" all those sorts of things.

Scotia: Did you dance? I hope you danced.

Jeremy: I did! And of course, some good Australian music as well within that as well.

Scotia: Of course. Of course. Thank you. We greatly appreciate your time.

Jeremy: Thank you for having me.

Scotia: Thanks for joining me for Creative Responders: In Conversation. And many thanks to Jeremy for sharing his insights.

I hope you're keeping well. These are challenging times and it's important that we stay connected. I'm really pleased that I can be here with you in this space for now.

I look forward to sharing a new conversation with you next month where we'll be joined by Amanda Lamont. She's a strategist in disaster resilience and disaster risk reduction. She's the co-founder of the Australasian Women in Emergencies Network and a great advocate for the arts.

In the meantime, you can also connect with Creative Recovery Network on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

If you haven't heard Season 1 of our documentary series, you can find these episodes in the Creative Responder's podcast feed and join me as I visit communities around Australia to explore how the arts and creativity can repair, rebuild and reunite.

If you're looking for somewhere to get started, Episode 4 is all about self-care for artists and has a wealth of useful information for these challenging times we find ourselves in.

Creative Responders: In Conversation is produced by me Scotia Monkivitch, with my Creative Recovery Network colleague, Jill Robson.

Our sound engineer is Tiffany Dimmack and original music is composed by Mikey Squire.

The Creative Recovery Network is assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. Thanks for listening.