



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 6 EPISODE 10 (Late October 2024)

ATONG ATEM
in conversation with
Pedram Khosronejad

Atong: I have been in Australia since 1997. We came here, my family and I, as refugees in 1997 with humanitarian visa. And I guess that's the reason why I'm in Australia.

Is because, unfortunately for me, my home, South Sudan, is not very safe. And I make mostly art, that's what I do. I'm an artist, I'm also a writer. I think for the most part, I call myself an artist, but that, that outcome often looks like lots of different things.

I like to think in public and I like to show people what I'm thinking and thinking about. Right now my work is mostly photographic and film and, textile as well. So I examine my own cultural history, my own familial history and my relationship to place and space and time through the works that I make.

That's kind of me in a nutshell.

Pedram: Where did you study visual art

Atong: I studied painting at Sydney University in 2011 12, then transferred to RMIT in Melbourne, which is where I live now. Prior to that I actually studied architecture because I had internalised that sort of migrant pressure to become successful in a very narrow definition of what success is and to support your family.

So my choices after high school was I must study a degree that gives me the capacity to support my family. And after one semester of architecture, I realized that would bring me no joy. I love architecture. I admire it, but that's not what I'm good at. And that's not what I'm passionate about. So I made the brave choice, brave within my family context at the time to study fine art.

Eventually I dropped out of Fine Art as well because I wanted to be a practicing artist and I didn't have the time to do both. So I've been practicing as an artist full time since about 2016, I think, officially. Yeah, and being an artist in the Australian context, for me, as a South Sudanese artist who talks about African history, or global kind of colonial histories, migration, or all of that stuff, especially Sudanese person, being an artist in this country.

unfortunately means being the first for a lot of people, which means that speaking personally and speaking about my own experiences in an honest manner, in an artistic manner, being an experimental, whatever, all of that stuff, it unfortunately means that I unintentionally am defining my culture, my people, my whatever you want to call it, those intersections, because the Australian art, or the Australia as a as a country is so young.

Australia is a colonised nation. It's so young. So everything that kind of happens in this country is somewhat behind other places in the world. And yeah, I think for me, unfortunately, there's a position of having to be having to make definitive statements, even if I don't want to. So I'm trying not to be too careful about what I do and not trying to be mind, too mindful of that.

But I think there is unfortunately social responsibility because I do care, I care about, the culture that I represent and all that sort of stuff. So I'm navigating that and I'm figuring it out. So I guess the answer to

your question is being an artist in Australia as a African South Sudanese woman means navigating and juggling a lot of different responsibilities.

Pedram: Where did you begin really your artistic life?

And today you consider yourself an emerging artist? Established artist? And since when you are working with your actual gallery?

Atong: So I work with Mars Gallery. I've been working with them for probably five years now and I am really lucky to be with a gallery who I have a personal relationship with so If I stopped being an artist tomorrow, and I didn't need gallery representation anymore I would still be friends with the staff of my gallery So I have a really great relationship with my gallery in the sense that I have a lot of freedom very little pressure from them.

In fact, I would say no pressure from them whatsoever. And there is a lot of concern for my well Being as an artist which I think is really important because I think when I talk about in my art and within the context of my art, I talk about being a migrant, being a refugee, being a black woman. I talk about mental health.

I talk about, very recently having had a baby and experiencing postpartum things. I And the art world is happy to consume that, that misery and that troubled background and all of that to consume it as maybe inspiration or something for them. But within that consumption, the artist is lost, and I think there's maybe we almost fetishise things like mental health issues and trauma to the point that the person experiencing them becomes an afterthought.

So I'm in a position where I feel that the things that I experience My story, quote unquote is not removed from me as a human being within my gallery. And I think that's unfortunately rare. I started making the work that I make now or starting my artistic journey, as you said, probably from childhood.

So my mother is an artist in her own right, and she's a political activist. My father, is a journalist and studied linguistics and was also a political activist. Both of my parents were brought up in very politically motivated kind of environments, not by choice, just by the need to survive.

So they were both involved in the South Sudan people's freedom movement. And they were both in that army as well as young people. So my relationship to politics was informed by people who my father, for example, was a photojournalist. He responded to politics by making. art, for lack of a better term, as did my mother.

So I've never been in a world where art was not a part of my life. Defining it within, contemporary art context is newer, and that happened when I went to art school, for sure. But yeah, I think for me, art has been an avenue to speak about my experiences, but also to make sense of a world that is quite irrational.

And as to whether I'm an emerging or mid career artist, I'd say I'm somewhere between emerging and mid career. I think other people might view it differently, but I think in the sense of what more I have to do, I'm definitely emerging. And in the sense of how much I've had to do or how much I've done to date, I think I'm probably mid career.

But I don't think that matters too much with where I'm at right now. I think because I still have the potential opportunity to keep trying new things and to keep making work. So yeah I'm just an artist full stop.

Pedram: So In your recent artworks, can you explain for us what we are seeing, what you are saying?

Atong: Absolutely. I do think that my work is about acknowledging the spaces between, home and away and what that means and what that looks like and, all of that stuff.

Just intrinsically migrant experience, especially, being second generation, or first generation, but coming here so young that it feels like second generation. I guess the work that I've shown this year is, it's mostly photographic. There are some photographic prints, self portraits, there's a series of eight of them.

of me in traditionally masculine clothing. Those were works that I made after I had a baby, because coming from a very patriarchal culture, existing still in a patriarchal culture even in Australia, I don't think Australia is not patriarchal. I think it's very hard to not respond to the ways in which your identity, your gendered identity influences and informs the way that you do or do not, or are not allowed to navigate the world.

So when I became a mother, I felt that the pathways that were available to me very much narrowed not with my consent. So it was really instinctive. It wasn't a conscious choice, but I instinctively wanted to dress in a way that was still me, but was not Traditionally feminine, whatever that means, and it's all of this stuff is my father's a linguist, was a professor of linguistics, so my relationship to language and to terms and meaning is also like at the forefront of my thinking.

So I wanted to make, basically I just wanted to make photographs of myself where the first thing that people didn't think was, oh what a lovely mother. Like I just wanted sort of nothing to do with that particular label because it's loaded in a way that I want nothing to do with. I just think it's that, it's so narrow.

As soon as we make a, for example, with my child, my baby, people ask me what gender is the baby, and I think it's, I don't want to, I don't want to define for him beyond, what gender means as a personal experience, but also I refer to my baby as him, and a boy, and all of that stuff, but it's not for you.

It's, this is the language that I'm using to talk about my baby. And I just find that those categories exist for really specific purposes, but they've become, maybe they, I just think that they're very powerful in a way that I think people should make choices about the way that they're referred to.

And I find it dangerous when those choices are erased from us. So I refuse to dress my baby in a way that people can, people get very angry at me actually, cause. He had a pink dummy and he had a blue water bottle and he had like yellow socks and somebody was like, is it a boy or a girl?

And I was like, it's a baby. So that state of existence, just existence, full stop is what I crave because I don't have that. I'm a black woman in the world. Every day when I step outside of my door, I can't be invisible. And I think I crave for a state of. Maybe flux, maybe, this sort of just existing without everything that the world has decided I am.

Anyway, to answer your question about the works it's life, and I'm not the only one. I think also that I've used textile works and I've included lots and lots of personal works in these textiles works. They're called Kitanga, and it's an African, East African tradition of fabric making.

These are garments, they always have the border, the central image, and the text at the bottom. And they're garments that we wear, men, women, all genders wear them, but predominantly women wear them, and often women will carry their babies with those fabrics. And I grew up with them, and they're seen as these sort of feminine kind of garments, even though men do sometimes wear them, and they're seen as low class to an extent, but Historically, they are our version of a flag, in the same way that you might have a pride flag that you might have, an Australian flag if you wanted to hear an aboriginal flag, like these cloths, these textiles, flags, they aren't purely decorative, they serve a purpose, they signal a message, they signal a stance, and there's context, with that shape, that rectangle, but also the rectangle on cloth that waves in the wind, like that has context.

And I think for me, I look at the Katanga as our version of a flag that you wear, and that that, that becomes contextualized when it's a garment because then it's about being seen on your body. Because often historically they would have a political slogan, say something supporting a feminist movement or supporting a political party.

When Barack Obama was running for president because he's got Kenyan heritage. Many Kitangas were made with Obama's face on it as a way of signalling support for this, man of African heritage, whether you do or do not like him politically. Absolutely. So there was it's so heavily politically layered these garments and the fact that you wear them just adds another layer to it.

So I made my own, with my own stories. I've got one that's got John Howard's face with the barbed wire around him. And I designed a little motif of. The Lifesaver boys that were floating in the water because when I came to Australia as a refugee He was the Prime Minister and all I remember was conversations about boat people, illegal boat people This really loaded conversation about migrants and of course, I was like I didn't come by boat, but that's me You know, so from the moment I landed in this country I was othered and treated as this dangerous kind of economic threat despite the fact That migration policies have historically been used by governments to further their economic interests.

So John Howard wasn't like, yes, this family can come because I like them and I want them to be happy. John Howard thought, I would like these families to come to this country so that they can contribute to the economy. Because, we're not birthing enough people or as it is or whatever it is. So I'm under no pretences that my existence in this country is out of care or pity or support.

It's purely economically motivated, because they had a white Australia policy, and they didn't change it because all of a sudden they felt sorry for people of colour. They changed it because they needed more bodies, so this work about John Howard it's a flag acknowledging this history that has personally affected me, but we've all been affected by it just by, by existing in this country.

And then I've got another work as an example that includes a photograph of my baby being born during the Caesarean section. And the text underneath it is in Swahili and it's from the Bible, from Genesis 3, 16, speaking, when God is speaking to Eve, telling her that her punishment for the original sin is to have pain during childbirth.

And it's just, again there's so much context behind all of these works, but without the context, I want people to be able to look at them and see them and think of flags and from there on kind of form their own relationship. Yeah, those are the works.

Pedram: How it is to be a mother, a wife, and professional artist in 21st century Australia, your community, and how your own community reflect to you, they are proud, they are, they make boundaries, and Also, you talk in the beginning about trauma and how you're, you, I don't know, if you used your art as a mechanism to relieve the trauma or not.

Atong: Yeah, so I guess being a mother, a wife, an artist, all of that stuff. Again, it's these are roles that I can play. sometimes choose to step into and sometimes choose to step out of in my own kind of personal identifying. But I made the choice, to be a mother, which not everybody gets that choice.

I made the choice to be a wife. And again, not everybody gets that choice. So there's some power in that, especially because the person I chose to marry, I wouldn't have had that option. My partner's Filipino and I wouldn't have met a Filipino person that maybe wouldn't have had that option if I stayed in South Sudan and grew up in South Sudan.

So that again there's layers of choice and, having this baby in the way that I wanted to in my thirties, as opposed to traditionally, I was probably too old to marry and have a baby. So there's moments of pride in those labels because I chose them sometimes. And there's other moments where when you say wife, or when you say mother, you don't mean what I mean, and I don't want you to say that.

But yeah, there's that. And I suppose with the trauma thing I do think that my art is an avenue for me to maybe not process the trauma, although that has happened incidentally, but to speak truth to it, to acknowledge it and to put it out in the world as like a mechanism for just acknowledging my existence and the processes of my existence.

, I make art because I feel like I don't have another choice. I don't think I can be quiet. If I wasn't making art, I'd be writing a lot.

If I wasn't writing a lot, then I'd probably have to have my own podcast. If I didn't have that, I'd be on the streets yelling at people, last question.

Pedram: What's the next project?

Atong: Oof. I have a lot coming up. A lot of projects coming up. But to summarize it in terms of what I would like to be doing, that I haven't had the chance to do, I want to make really immersive work.

I want to do big installations and I want to invite people in rather than just showing people stuff, if that makes sense. So I'm thinking about sculpture and I'm thinking about like large scale installations and that sort of thing. So hold me accountable.

Pedram: Thank you so much.