

4A Talks with Sophia Cai

SPEAKERS

Dilpreet, Sophia

Dilpreet 00:01

You're listening to 4A Talks, a podcast series brought to you by 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. For 27 years, 4A has been at the heart of Haymarket, Sydney, uncovering and presenting the creative talent of the Asian diaspora in Australia. In this podcast series, we speak with curators, artists and thinkers to delve into what makes art personal why a story matters and who gets to tell it. My name is Dilpreet, and for today's episode, I'll be speaking with Sophia Cai, the curator of our latest exhibition, A Soft Touch, which features 10 contemporary artists from across the country and adorns the walls of our gallery with textile dominating work. It brings together artists from a range of feminist, queer, migrant and decolonial positionalities and whose practices engage visually with the softness of textiles but whose works embody empowerment and resistance. A Soft Touch features Soraya Abidin, Anney Bounpraseuth, Andrew Chan, Paula do Prado, Mehwish Iqbal, Kait James, Yasbelle Kerkow, Haneen Mahmood Martin, Ema Shin and Siying Zhou. Let's tune in.

Sophia 01:15

My name is Sophia Cai. I am a curator, writer slash knitter. But the last one is not professionally just as a hobby, which becomes relevant in the context of this exhibition. So I've learned to work before I for a really long time, I think like many other Asian Australians, who work in the arts in Australia, 4A is a really special organisation, and really the only one of its kind in the country. So, it kind of to me, in many ways is a dream project coming to work here as an independent curator, but also to bring something to the space that is very dear to me. And hopefully you can offer something different to the audiences that usually come through the doors here. As a curator, I mostly work with contemporary living artists. So my practice is really guided by conversation, dialogue and collaboration. What I like about working as a curator in this way is that things are not really static, or, you know, stories aren't quite finished, there's still an ongoing dialogue or ongoing questions that are prompted. So that keeps it really interesting and really exciting for me as well.

Dilpreet 02:28

Amazing. Thanks for sharing that. Now coming to A Soft Touch, take us back, tell us from the day you probably thought about it. What made you think, "Oh, I'm going to do a textile based exhibition", and your journey from there from thinking about it, and then finding these 10 artists to then opening in two days.

Sophia 02:50

Yeah. Um, so one of the joys of working as an independent curator, where I'm not, I guess, tethered to an institution is that I really have the freedom to pursue topics or ideas that are of interest to me. And one thing that's been quite common for my practice is, it's not long until something that I do in my real life that I really enjoy becomes the topic of one of my exhibitions. So for example, you know, I curated a show previously with a friend about dogs, you know, the same year that I adopted my dog, and for my

10 year anniversary with my partner, the whole show about love. So, you know, there are a lot of personal links to my work. For the textile show, it actually was really motivated by the fact that textiles have been such a strong part of my own personal, I guess, creative hobby and interests my whole life. And I've always maintained a really interest, a strong interest in the kind of intersection between art and craft, I have an art history backgrounds. So within that context, a lot of work that wasn't really I guess, taken seriously as art. And the kind of gendered and racialized connotations of what is taken seriously as art and not was really the impetus. The other thing was also, I guess, my own experience as a hobby and more than a hobby needing space. And recognising that there were a lot of kind of critical conversations about gender and class and sexuality that weren't really happening in that space. I guess the other motivation for me was also being a hobby knitter or someone who enjoys making things by hand. But then also someone who I guess maintains a critical view of the world and so forth. Often you hear this expression, you know, like, "we shouldn't bring politics into it" or you know, this idea that art or craft or anything should be the sanctified form of you know, aesthetic appreciation without a connection to lived experience with social issues when the reality is, when you're living those truths, you can't really separate it, you can't just escape it. So part of the impetus for this exhibition and was to a, you know, declare very loudly, the strength and beauty and power of textile practice and be to also recognise that those artistic forms can have a lot of agency and power and talking about some of these broader issues. So I guess that's sort of the motivation. And the the title was really a play on words, I guess, a soft touch is someone who is easily manipulated or taken advantage of. So there's this, there's all these, you know, when you look at the English language, and how we talk about particular phrases like hard and soft, it all comes down to kind of gendered and racialized lines, right, both like what is deemed feminine, what is deemed masculine, what is deemed, you know, white, and so forth. So I wanted to play with that idea as well, but the title, so a soft touch sort of implies something that is perhaps, you know, you can easily make an impression, or you can easily manipulate something, but I actually think all the artists in the work in this exhibition, have such strong voices that come through their work. So I hope that when people come here, they can kind of contest those things. But the other thing I also wanted to recognise is that there's nothing wrong with being a soft person, right. And there's actually so much strength in accepting vulnerability, fragility, openness, and all of that. And that's something that I hold very close to my heart personally. So there's a few different kinds of word plays, I think, that are happening here. But really, it's about recognising that what the art that I always love the most is art that you can look at through different registers, so you can look at it visually you'd be really impacted, you can look at it conceptually and be impacted, you can look at it materially you'd be impacted. So it doesn't really matter whether you have an art history, background, a curatorial background, whether you went to art school, like you should still be able to engage with these words on some level. And not that one level is more important than the other, but they all kind of coexist. So that's another motivation, I think, for why does such a strong, you know, materiality through all the works in this exhibition.

Dilpreet 07:11

Hmm, no, I love that. And I love that thing, softer is not a bad thing. Do you see yourself taking A Soft Touch further - working with more artists in this space, or exploring textile, even more than this, or have you not yet thought that far?

Sophia 07:32

It's really interesting, because there's a tendency in sort of curatorial projects, you know, you kind of work towards an exhibition, you get it up, and then it's finished. For me, the thinking doesn't really stop even after it's finished. And I think I like to work in a way where things are quite open and generative, so that things can change in the future, or there's different iterations. So I've done an exhibition called

disobedient daughters that to this day, that now has had two iterations. And I always think that it's going to have another one, you know, when the time is right, or, you know, when someone wants to hire me as a curator. You know, I think subtype, something like that to where it's sort of a framework, or a way of looking at these artists together in this context, but it can definitely be open and be explored again. Whether that be with more artists, or with different one thing that I really liked doing as well as having public programming, and events be part of the exhibition and the people that contribute to that be as much recognised as creatives who are a part of this exhibition as the artists in the exhibition. So that's something I would love to explore more as well, because I don't really think just because the exhibition is up and running, I can go okay, now I've done that, and I can move on with my life. I think these questions are really going to kind of stay, you know, interesting to me for a long time.

Dilpreet 08:58

Yeah.

Sophia 08:58

And also, what often happens is after the show is up, then I find out about another artist I didn't know about, and I think, "Oh, they would have been perfect". You know, this always happens, right? And then you need to make another exhibition to include them in it as well.

Dilpreet 09:10

Yeah, just wrapping up. I think working with textiles is a deeply sentimental process as well. When I moved to Australia in 2017, I found myself like missing fabric and like clothes from India, which was a feeling that I didn't know that I had, but I would miss my mother's jackets or I would miss her dupatta or a kurta, you know, I would find it very hard to get here. With that thought, what are your hopes for people who are going to come in and I know you mentioned a little bit about it earlier. But what is it that you want them to experience not maybe your themes of resistance or going beyond what the artists thought of their work but as people.

Sophia 09:57

I?

Sophia 09:59

To answer this question, I might talk a little bit that the essay that I wrote for the show.

Dilpreet 10:03

Yeah.

Sophia 10:03

So I didn't realise until the very last minute when I was writing it. What I really was wanting to say, and actually, I ended up writing about my mother. Because my whole life...I come from a family of scientists, and I was always the one that was described as you know, the creative one, the artistic one, whatever. But I always felt like my mother was actually that person, she knew how to make things by hand, my whole life, she has been making things by hand, and she just, she can visualise it, and then transform it. Well, I'm someone who follows instructions who needs guidance. And I think the reason I wrote about that in the text is because I recognise that a lot of these just kind of shared histories and practices about making textiles, etc. It's actually practised by so many people, but perhaps there's no acknowledgement of that kind of labour, or even acknowledgement that, that you're doing something

imaginative or creative, you know, especially when it's something that's functional. So in the case of my mother, you know, making garments, because that was what we needed, and so forth. What I want people walking through the doors is to recognise the validity of making things by hand. And that even if you might not recognise it yourself as a form of creative or critical kind of practice, there is something really significant about turning things that are ideas in your head into physical objects, right. And I think that's what I really love about craft is that when you actually start thinking about it, it really does influence so many aspects of our daily lives and lived experiences. You know, contemporary art sometimes gets a bad name for being really inaccessible, or being quite elitist. But if we actually broaden the definition of contemporary art to include a lot of other forms of making, then actually, there's something that a lot of people can find resonance and commonality with. Yeah, you know, a lot of us have mothers who make clothes for us, or a lot of us first learn to make something, you know, like, it's, it's, there's actually such a connection there, right? Yeah. And I think that's what I tried to communicate through the essay, but also for the selection of the artists in the show by trying to demonstrate like a lot of different ways of making. And this idea of, you know, resistance or criticality that is embodied and a lot of these words, they don't necessarily need to be loud, you know, to be seen or heard. And I think that's the thing about lived experience, if it's your lived experience, it just becomes part of you. You don't really need me to necessarily declare your political stance on something, it just is embodied with what you do and your values and what you put out into the world. So there's a lot of kind of, I guess, those kind of layers at play. Yeah, as well. But yeah, I guess my philosophy is, in order to value art more in society, we need to recognise that a lot more of us are actually artists are making work that can be considered artistic.

Dilpreet 13:00

Thank you, Sophia.

Sophia 13:01

Welcome!

Dilpreet 13:02

And congratulations once again.

Sophia 13:03

Thank you.

Dilpreet 13:04

I hope a lot of people relate to the show and I am myself, looking forward to seeing it.

Sophia 13:10

Thank you. Thank you.

Dilpreet 13:18

Thank you for listening. To stay tuned with our upcoming exhibitions, events and public programmes had to 4A.com.au - subscribe to our newsletter and never miss an update. If you enjoyed this episode, hit like and share. We'll be back soon with more.