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BRONWYN WARD

A MOUNT EVELYN ARTIST INVITES US INTO
HER HOME TO SHARE STORIES AND ART

Bronwyn Ward is a creative thinker and maker. Her multidisciplinary art practice is guided by her deep understanding of the experience of death. A topic we traditionally shy away from, Bronwyn's experience in palliative care has informed both her art, and her intuitive ability to bring grace and compassion to her skills in guiding reflection on western society's approach to death literacy. She encourages important conversation around the way we think, feel, and speak about a sometimes difficult subject. Her bodies of work reflect the human experience of love, loss, change - and the way love is often an overwhelming feeling in times of sadness or in joy. Bronwyn's work celebrates the natural world, particularly through her love of birds, and reflects the light within our human experience - even in times of grief. She forces us to think about a beauty that is ever-present amongst life's unpredictable challenges.

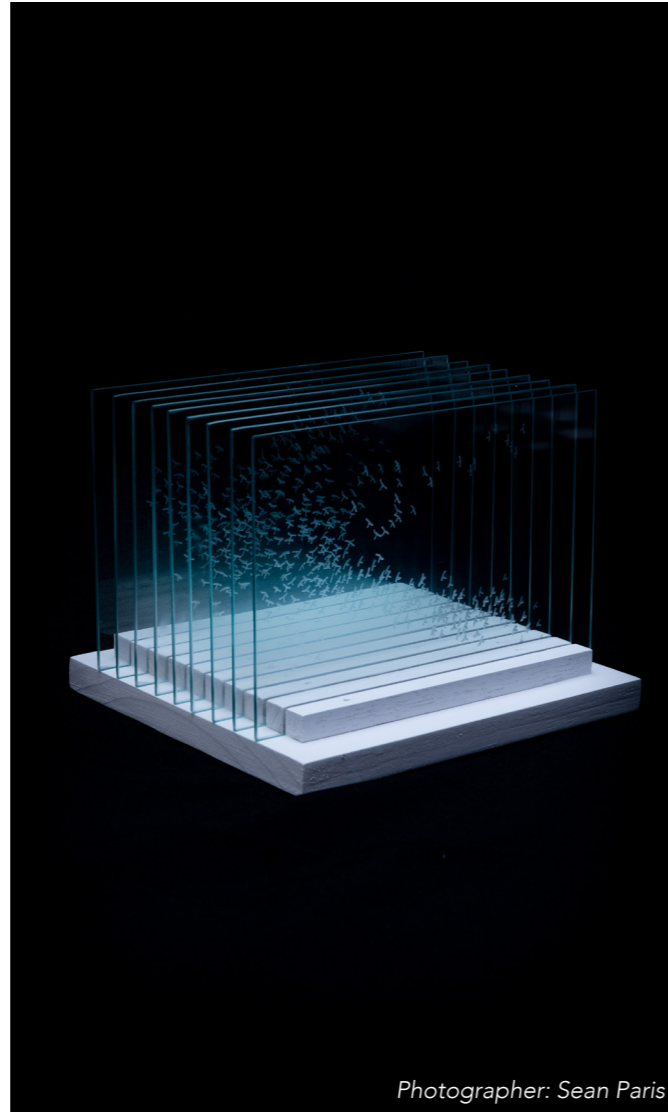
Bronwyn is down-to-earth, approachable and full of fun. The serious nature of her teaching and art shows a deep appreciation of the fragility of life and she embraces it, and all its chaos, wholeheartedly. She wears many hats - artist, teacher, mother, partner, daughter, Arts worker, to name a few - and wears all of them with grace.

Born in Baxter, Victoria, Bronwyn's family moved to Canberra when she was young. Her Dad, Gordon, led the installation of furniture for the new Parliament house and she vividly remembers watching in awe as Boyd's large-scale work, the 'Great Wall Tapestry', was hung for the first time. She remembers, "I've always been creative. As a kid I was always into everything art and by the time I was a teenager I knew that it was what I wanted to do."

After returning to Melbourne, Bronwyn combined printmaking, drawing and sculpture in her studies in Visual Arts at RMIT. Her early career began in the pattern room of Yarra Falls Wool Mill in Heidelberg - Australia's last woollen mill. Later, overseas, her practice led her to another historic site where she became part of the community. Spike Island, a former tea-packing warehouse, in the UK had been turned into studios for artist's collectives and Bronwyn's practice flourished there. These places, steeped in human tales, are an integral part of Bronwyn's own story. Her love of history and connection to the English countryside has also profoundly influenced her.

Bronwyn lived on a canal boat in England for many years. Her work in a hospital, supporting a nursing team who looked after children with life-limiting illness gave her a deep appreciation for health and wellbeing. She reflects upon her life in the UK, "From the experience of working in that paediatric, palliative space I retrained as a complementary therapist...I'm a reiki master, reflexologist, clinical aromatherapist and trained in Indian head massage." These are all skills she used in her hospice work too. At Dorothy House Hospice, in Bradford upon Avon, she supported patients who were actively dying, and their families in their journey from carer to bereavement.

After eight years, she needed something to support her own wellbeing. "As you can imagine it's quite difficult work, and emotionally quite challenging, so as some self-care, I started doing art again." By this stage, Bronwyn had met a partner, her now husband, Colin. "I became a member of Spike Print studio in Bristol. It was very cool - still is. I was not cool enough," she laughs. (I suspect she absolutely was). She describes it as, "It's the Bristol equivalent of Fitzroy."



Photographer: Sean Paris



From here, her art practice grew. "I was doing print making, spending time out on Salisbury Plain, walking and bird watching. At certain times of the year the starlings come in and they murmurate and so my current practice is kind of a mish-mash of all those things - working in palliative care, of going back to an art practice and spending a lot of time observing and watching birds murmurate as my downtime. I really connected very deeply to the countryside in England...feel that ancient connection. I lived up the road from Avebury Stone Circle and Stonehenge. I'd go there to celebrate the solstices."

There's a painting on the wall in Bronwyn's Mount Evelyn home of Roundway Hill where Oliver Cromwell battled. It was the view from a 16th century cottage in Wiltshire where she lived for a while. Bronwyn commissioned the view to be painted so that when she moved into her Bristol flat with Colin, the view could be with her wherever she may be. The Wiltshire countryside holds many significant memories which she will pass on to her daughter, Olive, who was born there surrounded by a history steeped in the foundations of druid settlements, tales of witches and sacred gathering places for women. "When she goes back through her life Olive will have a connection to this special place, this place for women."

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The couple left England to come home to Australia when Olive was a baby. They bought their Mount Evelyn home and after a short break it was time to reconnect. Bronwyn reached out to Yarra Valley Arts as a volunteer. From there she moved on to deliver, coordinate and curate the Yarra Glen Art Show. She describes this time as, "Deeply challenging in lots of ways - but life changing. I met so many artists that I connected with, not just locally but from around Melbourne and I've continued those relationships. From there I was offered a role as Arts coordinator up in Kinglake with Regional Arts Victoria - a role that I didn't really think I'd get it." She realises now that her trauma-based work leading to this point was fundamental to her success in this role. "My experience combined with my art...well, I kind of found my niche. I never thought that being an artist and working in palliative care would crossover and come together as a career path."

After developing a cultural strategy and delivering the projects that came out of that strategy, securing funding and managing the processes, the area has just celebrated its 2nd year of Open Studios. There's an art trail, many of the water tanks through the area have been painted. "It was a great experience and through them I did a few other jobs working with Regional Arts Victoria mentoring as part of their Creative Workers in Schools program." Prior to her current role working for the Shire of Yarra Ranges as Regional Exhibitions Officer, Bronwyn managed the National Taskforce for Creative Recovery working with the CEOS of key emergency management organisations across Australia, making key recommendations for state, local and federal govt on how to include arts and culture within an emergency management framework. She has a soon to be published research paper with an intern from Melbourne University for Creative Recovery Network and Foundation for Rural and Regional Renewal, exploring the legacy impact of creative recovery programmes - how do we measure the impact of creative practices after a natural disaster? Together they have created indicative frameworks which will be available for other communities to use.

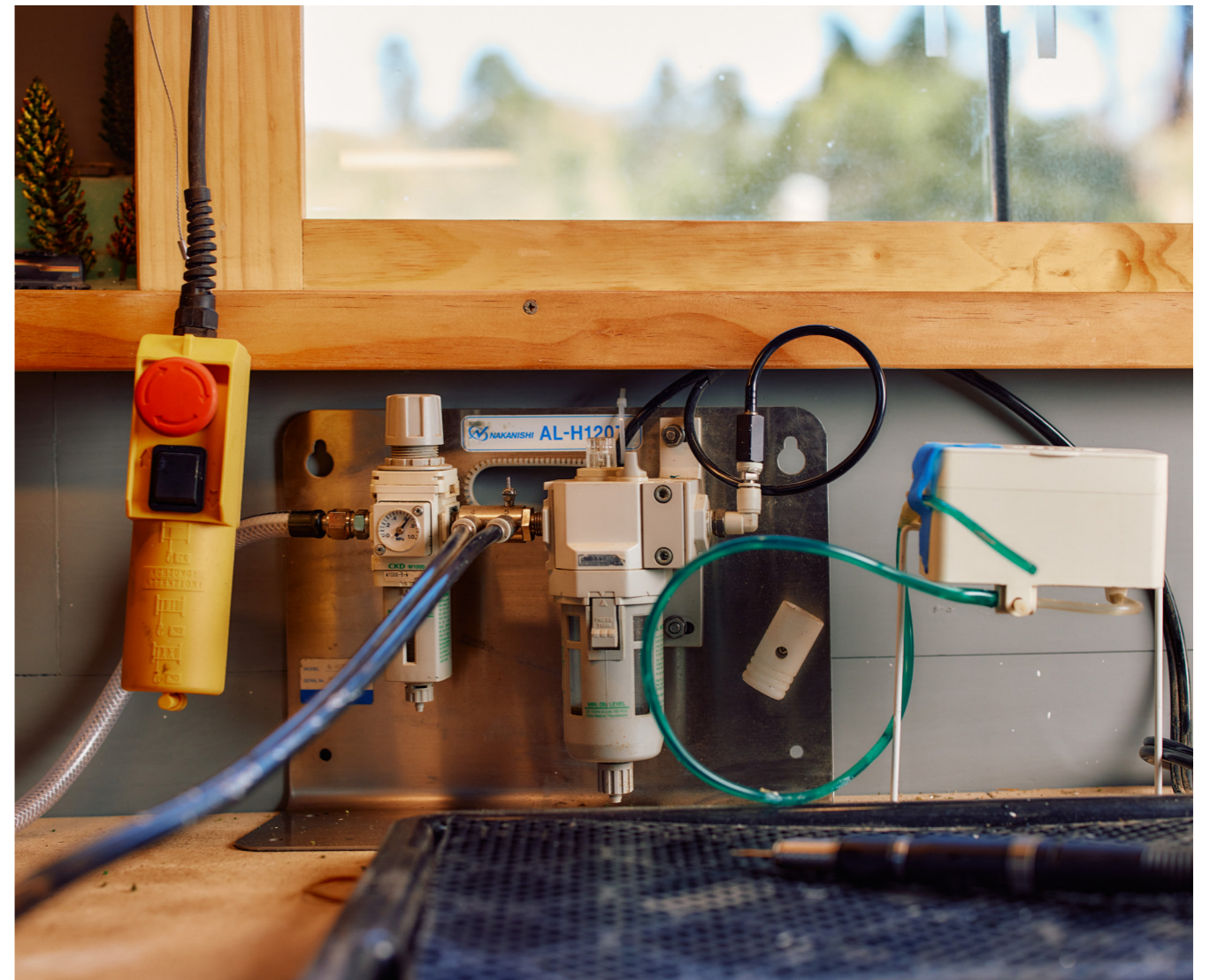
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Alongside her career Bronwyn explains, "My art practice has been really focusing on death literacy as my legacy from working in palliative care. I've done specialist training and art residencies at Liverpool Hospital in Sydney a few years running, for a programme funded by Dry July, and managed by the Groundswell project, called Creative Legacy ...working as an artist in residence on the palliative ward, recording and capturing life stories... It's an incredibly rewarding experiencing combining my palliative care background with artmaking. When you hear someone's story you fall in love with them. Listening to someone's lived experience is so special. Makes you feel so connected. Every time you hear someone's story it changes your perspective."

In her own practice, Bronwyn has used the ideas of the murmuration - the flock of starlings - to represent how, "we can come together as a compassionate community and look after each other, instead of shying away in the face of death - which is what often happens, In the western society we are so fearful of death and don't know how to respond to it. People who are dying or grieving often feel very isolated because people don't know what to do or what to say - so they think I'll just not say anything or do nothing. So, someone at that point of loss is often left quite lonely and isolated from the experience or seen as 'different'. Making a difference is something I'm passionate about."



“My work is deliberately beautiful – although it’s all about death and dying, it is still beautiful. When you’re with someone dying and observe the way the people are around someone who is dying – it’s miracle in reverse, it’s birth backward, there’s no fighting, none of the stuff matters, all that’s left is love in that space... All the bullshit from life is removed in those minutes. It’s an honour to bear witness to.”

In 2022 the family of deceased artist Sally Miller, asked Bronwyn to exhibit at Healesville’s YAVA Gallery and Arts Hub. A difficult project, she says, “It took a long time to get my head around how I would respond.” The suite of work by Miller was created leading up to her death. Bronwyn explains, “She had a rare degenerative illness, and knew she was dying, and she made these extraordinary artworks that were circles made of different materials which represented the different stages of losing herself through her illness. In the late stages of her degenerative disease she could no longer write, but she could still create these extraordinary drawings because a different part of her brain was working”. The work that Bronwyn produced is in glass. She says, “Sally’s suite of work was leading up to her death, and mine was all about picking up on the other side - those who carry on after a loss.”

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Bronwyn’s work was also a response to her own loss of family members during covid. During long phone conversations with an aunt, she made a piece from long shards of glass hanging like a waterfall. “I’d written down these things that she’d done in her day without him - ‘I put the bins out’, ‘I had to ring the bank’, ‘I walked past his chair’. The mundane things that you’d never mention to anyone else but are these constant points where you crash against your grief. ‘You’re not here, you’re not here, you’re still not here and I’ve got to do the laundry, and you’re not here.’ That piece was very much for her to acknowledge that space.”

“I’ve spent so many years working two dimensionally – the glass was an exciting opportunity to start pushing back into three dimensional. Starting creating these murmuration that were pieces of sheet glass...I would draw into the glass with my diamond engraver and make the three dimensional murmuration. It was a really interesting challenge to me to start thinking in 3D again and also to embrace new technology with my engraver”.

Loving the ghostly quality of glass, Bronwyn explains, “It’s really good at representing that idea of something gone – in my work now I’m using the medium of glass as a memory. It’s like you have an experience with someone and then they’re gone, and suddenly, the memory of that time becomes more precious and fragile – fearful of forgetting it or losing it. Glass has that sense of fragility. I’ve been working with a lot of prefabricated glass – existing glassware and things like that. I love capturing the movement of the birds around the glass. If you turn it, the birds will fly. I try to capture that sense of movement. The same with the stacked works – as you walk past, they move. They are stacked in a wooden base so you can rearrange them. Change them into something else.”

Photographer: Sean Paris





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There are new projects in the planning. "Work takes a bit of time to percolate for me. I'll be starting a new project this year, but it will be a few years in the making." Working 4 days a week in her professional role as Regional Exhibitions Officer, Bronwyn must fit her practice around her career. She says, "Friday is my 'yes' day to myself - I can do whatever I like. It's self-care day." She makes time for yoga, creates art and works on all her projects outside of the 'day job'. As well as her latest body of exhibited work, Bronwyn runs workshops teaching botanical drawings.

Home is her sanctuary - a beautiful space full of light, and of art, mid-century furniture and plants. There's a studio inside the house, and a workshop in a cleverly designed shed space that she shares with her dad's model railway, which can be winched up to ceiling height to make space for Bronwyn and her diamond engraver, the tiny drill used for her glass etching. Miniature schnauzer pup, Ruby, is always around to follow her from the house through a covered veranda abundant with potted and hanging plants, and curiosities. The garden is a peaceful oasis; there is the sound of birdsong and little more - though Bronwyn laughs about nature's very own alarm clock; "The cicadas start up at two minutes to nine. Every night. On the dot." They are a perfect and constant reminder of nature's delicate rhythm, so beautifully reflected in Bronwyn's art. ■

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