

Adam Art Gallery: Opening up new digital frontiers



Home to a nationally significant collection spread over Wellington's Victoria University campuses, Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery pivoted to reach new audiences through an accelerated digitisation programme and audio tour when Covid hit.

Since 1947, Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington has built up a nationally significant collection numbering over 600 artworks featuring key modern and contemporary New Zealand artists such as Colin McCahon, Robyn Kahukiwa, Frances Hodgkins and Don Binney.

Adam Art Gallery has been responsible for the management and development of the Collection since 1999.

When Covid hit, work was stalled across a number of areas – exhibitions couldn't be viewed; digitisation work stopped in its tracks and collection care was put on the backburner.

Covid immediately impacted the capacity of the team as budgets were cut across all aspects of the business and a hiring freeze was placed on staff which left the gallery unable to fill an essential vacancy. For the past two years, Curator Collections, Sophie Thorn has been stepping up where needed.

ABOVE: Artwork hanging in the Cotton Building on the Kelburn Campus. Featuring: (In the foreground) Judy Millar, *Zoom Zoom IV*, 2013, acrylic and screenprint on canvas, Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection, acquired 2014 and (in the background) Simon Ingram, *Aldra Island and Ebino*, 2011, oil on canvas, Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection, purchased 2018, partial gift of the artist and Gow Langsford Gallery. Photo by Colin McDiarmid



ABOVE: Artwork in the studio being digitised 2022. Featuring: Samuel Cairncross's *Nature Morte*, 1945, oil on canvas, Victoria University of Wellington Art Collection, formerly Wellington College of Education Art Collection, accessioned 2009. Photo by Robert Cross.

“It was a strange time. We had an artwork by Ken Friedman on display titled *Post-Calvinist Art* (2019) that said: “*Arrange an exhibition. Close the space and keep it locked for the duration of the show. Outside the exhibition hall, post a sign with this text: “There is a wonderful exhibition inside. You are not allowed to see it”*.” This was so close to the bone that we thought about posting it on Instagram!” Thorn remembers.

As the team gathered to think through how its work would change under Covid, its Instagram account took on a new life. At the time, the team came up with the idea for kaimahi to do a week-long takeover which changed its voice to one that was more informal and more human.

“People posted artworks around their homes and it became much more intimate. We get a bit of stick for being up the hill, maybe a bit cold and we often display conceptual artwork, so it can feel exclusive. It shifted our thinking when we discovered that a picture of staff member is the most popular post we’ve ever put up. During that time, we created

something for everyone and our channel grew significantly.”

Spotlighting collections

It was during these months that the gallery learnt about the Museum Hardship Fund and decided to apply for additional funds to help with core work of cataloguing, conservation and collection accessibility. Thorn put together a proposal to fund a backlog of cataloguing and copyright clearance work and reactivate a basic collections maintenance plan.

During lockdown, event programming moved online, enabling the team to learn new skills in developing online content. Buoyed by their newfound audience and burgeoning skills in online production, the gallery has since added podcasting to its offerings and, thanks to the Museum Hardship Fund, they are looking to create an audio guide.

“In our discussions we got to thinking about the ways in which the pandemic changed us, how we were physically disconnected though always online. So we got in touch with artists and asked them to talk with each other from their homes about how their practices intersect and collide. We released our first podcast series, called *Laundry Day* on a Saturday, so you could fold your laundry to it.”

Having worked at Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery for eight years, Thorn has become incredibly familiar

with the artworks across the campus and the new acquisitions purchased over this period. She regularly gives tours to staff members to enable them to “get to know the furniture”. So when the idea came up to create an audio guide of the pieces across the Kelburn campus, Thorn leapt at the chance to produce it.

Using money from the Museum Hardship Fund, the team has been working to create the tour with the help of their Head Technician & Production Coordinator Andy Cummins, who has a background in music and recording. A portion of the fund has been used to clear copyright on the artworks, so each artwork has a digital image that can be used across the organisation’s digital channels from their website to their audio guide.

“Covid meant that any non-urgent work came to a standstill which meant we didn’t have enough resourcing for our digitisation programme and accessibility project despite the fact these are key priority areas for the organisation. However with the support of the Museum Hardship fund, we’ve been able to hire a Collections Assistant to carry out copyright clearance work so we can create a searchable database with all of our works on our upgraded gallery site.”

“This work will help to fulfil our role outside our exhibitions and public programming responsibilities. Digitisation of our collection will help people to conduct research projects, write papers, loan artworks and hopefully get a broader sense of our full collection.”

Unlike many museum art collections, the gallery has 60% of its collection on display across three campus sites, so creating high quality images is a challenge. With no budget to perform such a task, Thorn reached out to the University’s image services team with a tight brief. Now, the team is well versed in photographing artworks and produce publication-grade images for all variety of mediums.

Breaking down walls

As well as creating time and space to conduct these projects, Thorn says the arrival of Covid opened up new discussions as to what their online spaces could deliver and how they could use these spaces to spotlight the unseen parts of their collection.

BELOW: Adam Art Gallery Collection Assistant Lachlan Taylor and Curator Collections Sophie Thorn reviewing collection copyright documents 2022. Photo by Robert Cross.





Like podcasting, creating an audio guide was an activity that the time-poor team had put on their wishlist. Covid allowed them to shift their attention to developing the gallery's online spaces and content programme. Thanks to funding from the Museum Hardship Fund, that idea could become a reality.

“We often get requests for maps, self-guided tours and audio guides around campus. Though as an organisation we've never had the time or resources to make it happen – that is until Covid disrupted things. At the moment, we're in the final stages of working out exactly what it will look like though we imagine it'll be modular, so it can evolve over the years.”

As a long-term project, the audio guide gives the team a chance to deepen engagement with the collection, pick out narrative thread-lines and spark connections between pieces.

ABOVE: Adam Art Gallery Curator Collections Sophie Thorn recording audio guides in the gallery. Photo by Robert Cross.

“The guide is exciting for me as it provides a chance for me to share and elaborate the thought and care that goes into the placement of works on campus. It is a new way for individuals to engage with the collection-in-the-wild on their own terms, be it an unexpected encounter down a corridor or curiosity about a familiar face on the way between lecture theatres.”



This case study was produced by National Services Te Paerangi

The Museum Hardship Fund is a COVID response funding stream from the Ministry for Culture and Heritage



Ministry for Culture & Heritage