

CITY OF SYDNEY

ART AND ARTISTS

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

TRANSCRIPT

Name: Michael Hill

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Interviewer: Margo Beasley

Recorder: Marantz PMD 620

TRANSCRIPT

0.00 **MB:** This is an interview with Michael Thomas Hill. It's taking place in Town Hall House in the City of Sydney. The project is the Art and Artists in Sydney Oral History Project. My name's Margo Beasley, the date is the 21st of December 2009 and Glenn Wallace who works also for the City of Sydney is also present, so if you hear a third voice on the interview that's whose voice it is. I should mention that we introduce Michael as Michael Thomas Hill because there are many other Michael Hills and so should anybody be listening to this and want to Google or do some kind of on-line search it's best to look for Michael Thomas [Hill] and you'll have a better chance of finding the right one.

MH: Yes.

MB: So, Michael, would you mind telling me where and when you were born?

MH: Born in Melbourne in 1962 but grew up in Sydney. My parents were just seconded to Melbourne for a couple of years and then I came up

here when I was two, so I grew up in the southern western suburbs of Sydney in the St George area.

MB: So really you're a Sydney person.

MH: Sydney person.

MB: So we're here today to talk primarily about one particular work of art but we're going to talk about that in the context of your other work as well and your education and training and so on and the one we're talking about is called 'Forgotten Songs'.

MH: 'Songs'.

MB: 'Songs', plural, and it is part of the Laneways By George! project which is a kind of annual project now in the City of Sydney where public art is installed temporarily for a few months and I guess the main idea behind that is that there is a general push here to revitalise the laneways.

2.06 And one way of doing that is to make the laneways interesting and attractive and inviting places to walk through. Your work, 'Forgotten Songs', which I had a look at the other day, is – this is putting it in its most simplistic form – consists of a number of birdcages. They look almost as if they're suspended in the air. They're in the – I think it's actually called the Angel Place Laneway which is beside the Sydney Recital Hall – and they're suspended quite high and then there is birdsong associated with them. So that's very simplistic; it might be best if you described it the project - - -

MH: Sure.

MB: - - - since you are the artist.

MH: Yes. I think we wound up with a hundred and sixteen birdcages, different ones sourced from various places, mostly second-hand and we got a lot of eBay and second-hand stores and my mother and sister and other people, relatives, were all kind of collecting and picking up off sides of the roads. So we got a collection of these cages and we then put – in ten of them there were speakers, all-weather, all-weather speakers playing back the sounds of bird songs. The bird songs come from files collected by a wildlife recordist and they were all sourced through one of the ornithologists at the Australian Museum, Dr Richard Major, who helped with kind of selecting the species of birds or birdsong that we wanted for the project.

3.56 We approached him because we wanted to get just those birds that have been sort of forced out of the city by, you know, the growth of

pavements and buildings and the loss of kind of native habitat and vegetation. And so he was able to kind of look at existing species around the perimeter of the city and see where they still existed in their native bushland and when we finally located our site he worked out that it was kind of sandstone based under – well, whatever you call it - the ground, it's sandstone based instead of shale based and that determines the type of vegetation that grows different fruit; you know, it's quite distinct, the sandstone vegetation as opposed to the shale vegetation and as a result that kind of determines what birds tend to exist on the shale or the sandstone. So he was able to kind of sort out this list of species for us and that's kind of the underpinning of the project as well; the concept is about these birds that don't – you know, their songs aren't heard any more in the city so we wanted to kind of bring the sound into the city and make that an important part of the project.

MB: It is very beautiful to listen to when you're there and extremely evocative of the bush, which I suppose bird sound is. One of my questions when I was there, though, there were so many sounds but were some of them actually – I mean, you're talking about educated guesswork in a way about what species would have been there, I mean very educated guess, it's not just random, it's a very good guess but I also wondered whether maybe there were species there that may once have been recorded but actually don't exist any more.

5.59 **MH:** All of these – there are probably – well, there are quite a few species that don't exist and have been wiped out. You know, he bases a lot of his research, Richard Major bases a lot of his research on the collection. There are a lot of skins in the Australian Museum collected over the hundred and fifty years of the particular organisation's life and, you know, when they used to go out in hunting parties to far-flung places like Ashfield and, you know, Dee Why and come back with bird specimens, so they're reasonably well catalogued over the last hundred and fifty years and there are species that sort of don't exist any more. But the ones that we wanted were – well, I mean we had to have sound recordings of them and we can only get the sound recordings of ones that still exist, so there's probably songs that are, you know, lost forever.

MB: I just thought perhaps, I mean, sometimes there are projects to preserve sound that was recorded decades ago and I just thought perhaps some of that might have surfaced during the course of this but obviously you're saying no, that they're extant species.

MH: Yes. I think it was kind of, you know, we were bound by the, you know, constraints of the project where we kind of had to do things in reasonably swift time and if it was a longer kind of longer form project where you have a bit more time maybe we would have gone further

into the archive and see if there was anything around. But usually those sources are pretty, you know, not as good quality as a lot of the field recordings done today.

MB: Yes. I must say that's one of the noticeable things about it is the quality of the recording in that space and it's so surprising because I suppose there's a few pigeons living there and maybe the odd Indian myna, I don't know, but nothing much else would survive in there.

8.03 **I suppose you might get that odd lost seagull or something but nothing much else but that's one of the things that makes it so effective is the quality of the sound. That's why it replicates the bush, I suppose, because it sounds real.**

MH: Plus also you get this great echo in that space that really sounds like you're in, well, you know, a valley or a glade or something and, you know, the sound bounces around so nicely and for some reason some of the sounds are reasonably badly recorded – or not badly recorded but they do have a lot of hissing and a lot of noise that if you listen through headphones you can't quite, you know, believe that it sounds so good when you play it out in public. So I think a lot of the sound files are masked; you know, there's a lot of traffic noise in the background and hum and city noise and everything that masks a lot of that kind of tape noise and just the kind of high frequencies that the birds occupy within the dynamic range, you know, just cut through everything and, you know, it sounds so clear and bell-like in that space.

MB: There's also a very strong – apart from the beauty of the audio is there's a very strong visual aesthetic there, which is I suppose surprising in the sense that if you said to people "Well, there's a number of old birdcages hanging up there", it's not like they're those little – you know, there are some very elaborate cages around but these are the basic budgie kind of cage that most Australians would be familiar with but when you put all of them together – I've forgotten the number you said, about a hundred and - - -

MH: About a hundred and twenty, yes.

MB: - - - a hundred and twenty, there is a surprisingly strong and cohesive aesthetic about the – I guess it's the vertical and parallel lines in the cages. I don't know how much you were able to anticipate that when you were hanging it out.

10.03 **MH:** Yes. Well, I think we knew that the wire would always be good against the sky, you know, that it kind of always has a fineness or something to it that would look good. What's surprising, though, is the kind of moiré effects you get when you put a lot of vertical lines

next to other vertical lines and they all kind of vibrate or work with each other. It's a bit like – I'm not sure how to describe it aurally but it's, yes, it's like when one set of parallel lines overlaps another set of parallel lines and it starts to kind of activate it, become active or dynamic just because it - - -

MB: Yes, yes, it almost moves.

MH: Yes, yes. And, yes, so it was when we started to collect the cages it was a little bit surprising that – I think there are legal widths now on – you know, you have to have – some of the older cages we've got are quite large in the spacings between the bars but a lot of the ones now, the legal ones that are able to be sold have very fine wires and, you know, I think that's just to protect the birds and make sure that they're – you can't have cages that are too small for big birds, so a lot of the older ones we've got kind of, you know, have big spaces, you could only ever fit a parrot in them but they're massively small – sorry, that are really tiny when you think of a large parrot going inside them and you can't quite believe that that's the way people used to keep them. So a lot of the times when we bought a lot of them they said, you know, "You can have it as long as you don't put a bird in it" because I think there are restrictions on it. But a lot of the, yes, smaller ones, they all kind of had this fine mesh and when you hang them together it kind of all, don't know, we were slightly surprised as well at how well all that came out.

12.04 **MB: I was also struck by the way that there was a kind of a contradiction in the whole set up. That is, you're hearing the bird sound of sound of birds in theory in their native habitat – I mean well within the building but well within the built environment but they sound as if they're in open space but of course cages are a contradiction with the open space, the cages themselves but they do make you think of birds and I guess the emptiness of the cages is also another powerful image.**

MH: Yep. It's a suggestion of, you know, enclosed space and the emptiness is the thing that sort of suggests that they're gone but I think that contradiction it's sort of the bit that keeps it alive, I think. I reckon if it was too obvious or too kind of straightforward - you know, people said "Oh, are you going to put, you know, stuffed birds in them or are you going to open all the cage doors or are you going to? – you know, all of these sorts of other suggestions to make it a bit more literal. I think if it was any more literal it'd sort of collapse.

MB: Yes, you're probably right because just as far as my own response is concerned anyway it leaves it with a little bit of a puzzle around it which allows you to, I suppose, add your own interpretation, really, about what the cages mean.

MH: Yes, yes.

MB: Anyway, we've talked a lot about the actual work of art itself. In a little while I'd like to talk about the other people who are involved with the project but if you don't mind I'd like to talk about how you came to have the idea for the project.

13.57 I know artists are often irritated by the most common question that they get, which is "Where do you get your ideas?" and they often say "I'm not really sure" but I wonder if you can at least describe the process in some way about how it came about that you started to think about birdcages in the sky.

MH: Sure, sure. I think it really stems from the call for entries for the programme, the By George! programme. It's kind of a funny thing that, you know, I feel like I am thinking things all the time but in terms of bringing an idea to fruition I don't really respond unless somebody kind of asks a direct question. So it's sort of I'd have to put it down to that. And the theme that the curator, Stefan Lehman, put forward was this one of sustainability, so we started to think a little bit about that. But I think my recent work over the last fifteen years has not been as an artist but it's been more of an interpretative designer or someone who works with museums and museum material, presenting concepts and sort of creating touch screen projects and video installations and these sorts of things for museums and so I kind of tend to think in that – it's caused me to think more in that interpretive way. So I think in terms of coming up with the idea we definitely had previous kind of interest or work with Richard Major from the Australian Museum on a number of his ornithological projects. And birds are a kind of long-standing interest of mine and I've made video artworks and things previously using just caged birds and birds shot in zoos and things like this.

15.53 So, I don't know, my mind naturally kind of falls into those patterns but also working with media, I think all my, you know, recent projects have been media based and are, you know, predominantly video projection or video art based. Trying to imagine that in a public space and a public laneway was a bit difficult, especially if we wanted it to have some sort of daytime life as well as nighttime life, plus all the problems of, you know, vandal-proofing a projector and those sorts of things. So I started to think all about audio but I'm not sure where the idea sprang from for the birdcages but it was definitely I was thinking something hanging and then if I sort of trace it back it was probably thinking about those fantastic pictures of Asian marketplaces and, you know, Asian sort of plazas and meeting places where people bring the birds that they have, they're caged birds, they bring them down into the plaza and kind of all create this kind of communal cacophony of birds. So I suppose it's just, you know, that image was the one that I kind of wanted to achieve but I can't say where it all came together. But I think I had the birdcage image before we started to think about the interpretive side of it but, you know, the kind

of “What would you put with it?” and then we started to think “Oh, actually the sounds of birds but how do you kind of organise them and what kinds of birds would they be?” and that’s when we started to think about the missing ones and then the idea of having the kind of daytime birds and then the nighttime birds. So then it becomes kind of just a process of “Well, how do we settle on the birds, how do we find the sound files, how do we kind of, you know, roll this project out?”

MB: And you’ve just mentioned there something that we didn’t mention earlier but that is that the bird sound changes throughout the day.

18.01 MH: Yes, yes.

MB: That’s part of the work, isn’t it? So at dusk and at dawn and at nighttime - - -

MH: Yes.

MB: - - - the sounds will be different.

MH: It’s based on just a clock timer, that it suddenly switches over to all the nighttime birds, all the tawny frogmouths and the owl-nightjars and things. So, yes, just so that it has kind of a different life and the idea of having birds twittering away at night kind of didn’t sit right so we had to work out a way of making it switch over to something – whether they all went silent or whether they went to the night birds was a point we had to develop.

MB: Now, technologically what’s involved with making it all work?

MH: We’d just run it off a single power point but there’s five mp3 players. One of them is a master which was a clock, scheduling it, and it plays out commands – sorry, not only plays out its own stereo file but it gives commands to the other four to play off at various times. So it’s a ten channel soundscape, ten speakers running five mp3 players, plus we had to kind of put it in a weatherproof box because it’s all externally mounted and, you know, the rain hits it and we had to work with weatherproof speakers and kind adjusting them, covering all the cables and the making sure it’s all weatherproof and can stand up to anything that gets thrown at it. Plus the other thing was just trying to hang everything in a way that when the wind comes pouring down Angel Place so that the cages don’t bash into each other and bash into the windows at the Recital Hall and all of that.

20.01 So we had a lot of not only professional riggers, rigging the whole thing with special cable but engineering advice on, you know, how much weight each line can hang and how much wind tolerance and

all of this sort of thing so that it didn't damage any of the buildings around it.

MB: So all of the architecture of the work is all external to the buildings?

MH: Yes.

MB: There's nothing coming from inside any of the buildings?

MH: No.

MB: Everything is external to the buildings?

MH: It just plugs into the external power point that was preexisting. So, yes, we were lucky enough that a couple of – well, the previous artwork had already put in anchor points throughout Angel Place and we were able to - - -

MB: So those points were there from an earlier laneways - - -

MH: Project.

MB: - - - By George! Project? Well, that was handy.

MH: That was handy. Otherwise, yes, it might have blown our budget even more than we did.

MB: I'm sure nobody's worrying about that now that the work's in place.

MH: Except us.

MB: Except you.

MH: Yes.

MB: Because it's been a big success, hasn't it? It's very popular and people are speaking very highly of it and no wonder. You know, it looks and sounds fantastic. So, I'd like to talk a little bit about the other people involved in the project because you also have a business called Lightwell.

MH: Yep.

MB: And I think a couple of people from Lightwell - there was Richard Major from the Australian Museum - - -

MH: Yes.

MB: - - - he was the ornithologist - - -

MH: Yep.

MB: - - - and a couple of people from Lightwell also worked with you on the project?

MH: Also contributed, yes. Dave Towey, he's the technical director of Lightwell. He organised all the mp3 players and the codes and the calendars and all of the programming that goes into making them work just on a power startup, so there's a bit involved in that.

22.02 And Richard Wong who originally came to us as a intern and we got him stated on this laneways project, just to give him something to do, and he developed up the kind of network of cables and the hanging methods and all this. So he was an environmental design student at the College of Fine Art and then completed his degree this year and then he's been employed by us as well to continue doing this work.

MB: Well, that's a happy outcome.

MH: So that's kind of a happy outcome. But, yes, Richard Major, the ornithologist, he has teed up the sound files with Fred van Gessel, the wildlife recordist, and Fred is a – well, he's been described to me as being about eighty years old and, you know, still continues to travel around, you know, Katherine Gorge and places, recording birds, but he's got a huge library of sound files from all over Australia and the rest of the world and was able to give us these files for this project. But Richard Major spent quite a bit of time working up because he's very particular and very concerned as well that, you know, he didn't want to put in any of the wrong birds and knowing that ornithologists, the ornithological community if they came along and hear the wrong bird there they would be onto him. So, yes, he was kind of very keen to get that right. But, yes, it's kind of, it's a little bit different from a project that we would do as Lightwell because we tend to respond to creative briefs or respond to just more like a production brief from a museum and this was the first kind of opportunity we've had where almost the reverse happened where kind of, I mean ultimately the work itself could still be somewhere between art and, you know, what we would call an interpretive project or a piece of interpretive media.

24.12 But it kind of stemmed from the idea first and then it's almost like the interpretation happened second, so it's sort of slightly different to the way we normally work but still kind of using a lot of the same production skills and project management and, you know, all that that we tend to bring to use.

MB: But even within those four people, you are the artist as such because the overall concept is yours - - -

MH: Yes.

MB: - - - and other people helped you to implement it?

MH: Yes.

MB: That's the difference.

MH: Yes, yes.

MB: So, let's talk a bit about how your art education – you did, I think, originally do a degree in - - -

MH: I've done it all.

MB: You've done it all?

MH: I did a art certificate at the National Art School – well now called the National Art School, then called East Sydney Tech – in painting and then went to Sydney College of the Arts and did sculpture, performance and installation, which was kind of a very active branch of Sydney College in the early '80s, mid '80s, and then at the College of Fine Art I did my Masters of Art in media art. So I think it was that time that the Sydney College of the Arts first started to leave behind kind of fixed sculptural works and got more interested in performance and film. There wasn't a lot of video equipment around at that point but Super8 and there were some kind of low band, pneumatic machines and cameras and things that you could use as well. So I started to get more interested in media art and then from that point on started to make video art and video art installations and when it came time to find of get into the real world I suppose I was making video art but then got a job at the Australian Film Commission, funding and financing experimental media and animations, experimental animations.

26.13 And then we suddenly got this last wave of money from Paul Keating's Creative Nation Fund and we had to work out ways of spending that in interactive and digital media works, so I had to head up that programme, kind of writing policies on how that money should be spent for managing those projects.

MB: For the Film Commission?

MH: Yes. So I started to do that and then after about three years of that I got more into, you know, back into the production side again but at that point it was more websites and interactive media.

MB: When you were doing your own artwork, you're really talking about the technical side of it, that you got into video art and so

on, but what was the content about, what interested you, what did you want to say - - -

MH: Yes,

MB: - - - within that kind of media?

MH: Well, I suppose there's – well, there's a number of different ways, especially at that time when people were kind of suddenly able to with Super VHS and, you know, VHS cameras and camcorders and things like that coming out of the Super8 group, film group, where we were all able to kind of get our hands on shooting the images and making films and then presenting them with video cameras. You know, it suddenly meant that you could make long form pieces and you could actually keep them in a gallery or keep them sort of running for a lot longer than you could just a film loop through a Super8 projector. But also at that time there was video festivals where people would go to a cinema like the Chauvel and sit down and watch video clip art if you liked a clip.

28.04 So there was a lot of single channel video work being made that was kind of like cheap cinema, I suppose, as a way of, you know, showing stuff to people because it was before You Tube and before, you know, all of these, you know, fantastic distribution possibilities that have arrived. So getting things out; you know, making them was one thing, like on a Supra8 camera and you could edit things together but unless you had somebody with a projector and a projection room and, you know, audiences turning up there was no way of kind of distributing it, getting it out. So video meant that at least you could kind of put it on a tape and send it to somebody or send it to different festivals and things. So, you know, in the late '80s, early '90s there was a lot of activity in that kind of world. So I was making, I suppose, personal, almost sort of video diary things with narration, a lot of still, natural world kind of imagery, squids and jellyfish and, you know, things that are set up in kind of water tanks at home and, you know, light them strangely. So, you know, heavily kind of still probably influenced by Boonwell and Chris Marker and, you know, a number of kind of the early sort of – I suppose anyone who's doing things, short films in black and white, you know, with kind of a little bit of unusual narrative, I was there. There was a French documentary maker, Pan le Vie – I think that's how you pronounce his name – who was kind of kind of like a scientific filmmaker but he crossed this border between – he loved the surrealists but he was this sort of documentary maker, making film about sequels, this very kind of subjective commentary. So I thought that was kind of fantastic and tried to do a bit of that sort of work.

30.02 So, yes, anything where it's kind of – you know, I suppose I started to make things with – there was one where I had a voiceover where I then filmed my eye lip syncing it, sort of opening and closing and, you

know, sort of lip synced the song that was over. Other ones with, as mentioned, sort of performance elements and things. So, you know, traditional kind of avant-garde, student stuff that, you know, you're embarrassed by now.

MB: But it sounds as though you always had a strong interest in the natural world - - -

MH: Yes, yes.

MH: - - - in one way or another.

MH: Yes, definitely, yes.

MB: And you did say also that you had had an interest in birds as well and had shot them quite a bit.

MH: Yes, yep.

MB: "Shot" as in filmed.

MH: As in filmed.

MB: So that sounds like that was a bit of a continuing theme.

MH: Yes. You know, I mean it's hard to say now that, you know, I've been a bird lover or, you know, my life has been devoted to the natural world but you look back and you see the work that I've developed and it does tend to have those similar things and it's kind of one of those things where it's a lot easier for the people outside to say "Oh, yes, that looks exactly like that" than your own viewpoint; it's very hard to kind of imagine or very hard to see those tendencies in your own work. But, yes, I'd say that there's always a continuing, you know, always a return to the natural world and film of the natural world and it's always a good starting point.

MB: And you wouldn't be alone amongst artists, would you?

MH: No, no.

MB: In fact, you could probably say it's the foundation of most art in one sense or another.

MH: Yep.

MB: But of course it's also a very happy fit with the work you do for museums - - -

32.00 MH: Yes.

MB: - - - which is what Lightwell primarily does.

MH: Yes.

MB: So, perhaps we could just talk a little bit about some of those projects - - -

MH: Sure.

MB: - - - which are not strictly speaking art but must have a very strong aesthetic element in them, most of them.

MH: Sure. Yes, and I mean it's true that a lot of projects are kind of natural history projects for museums but mostly they're not. We do a lot on, you know, WWII for the War Memorial or it might be the Slim Dusty Centre at Kempsey next week and, you know, something else another time, so the Mary MacKillop Museum, for example, you know, North Sydney. But I kind of like the way that there's just this broad range of, you know, subjects that just come through the door and you're not sure what's going to come through next. So, you know, my kind of attitude of just sort of floating through life and kind of taking what comes works well within this field because people come to you or, you know, you still have to tender for work and all that sort of stuff but you can never say "I'm just going to do this and just focus on this" because it just doesn't work out that way.

MB: No. I suppose it's probably quite stimulating as well to be drawn into worlds, like culturally, things that you're not particularly familiar with.

MH: Totally, yes.

MB: I don't know if you're a Slim Dusty fan but if you weren't and then you're drawn into that you have to start thinking about - - -

MH: You do.

MB: - - - those places in a completely different way.

MH: You do, and you also have to find the thing that is interesting in it or else if you're working on a project for a year and a half you don't survive; you know, you have to kind of get interested in it. And that's easier with some projects than others but, you know, you always have to find that point of fascination with it in some way or another.

34.04 But, yes, a lot of museum projects or a lot of the natural history ones are really fascinating for us or for me because, you know, working with content that I feel familiar with and I always like working with the scientists as well and whenever there's an opportunity to kind of talk with them about the deeper things. But the recent work for the

Australian Museum, we did a number of major projects for them for their recently reopened permanent exhibitions. One piece is a six metre long interactive touch table where we've ganged together four projectors and project down onto this table and you can interact with some of Australia's deadly creatures, so funnel web projections and sharks and box jellyfish and these sorts of things; using this touch technique called machine vision or computer vision you can register where people's hands are and they become the mouse so it's almost like an interfaceless project. People can kind of, you know, put their fingers in the water and a shark comes up and bites them and then they give them first aid information about what to do if their hand's been bitten off and things like that. So that was a fun project because not only is it like a big – it's a big communal table and kids love it because they can stand around and, you know, shriek with fear and horror just at these virtual projections. But other things we'd done are like a little bit more in the art realm and if, you know, you were presenting it as art people would say "Yes, that's art" but here it is in a museum. We're on a big curved wall that's painted a dark blue. We got a whole series of fish and sea life from Sydney Harbour and rotoscoped them, cut them out frame by frame and put them against a black background and then projected it with a water effect from a lighting projector, so a combined video projection and lighting.

36.17 But the fish cut out from its background sort of swims over the dark surface and, you know, it kind of looks because it's projected onto this dark blue, kind of a bit murky and you're not quite sure, you know, how deep it is and then combined with this lighting effect it just sort of expands the – it doesn't look like it's just a projection, it looks like it's, you know, part of the broader canvas. So, you know, it's kind of a nice effect but it's unusual for the Museum in that it doesn't really have an educative value, it's just there for atmosphere and, you know, fun. Usually they like to have some sort of pedagogical - - -

MB: reason.

MH: - - - imperative behind that but that was one that just is there for pure atmospherics. But as these museums start to realise, you know, that keeping audiences entertained and stimulated and we work with a lot of exhibition designers who kind of understand media a lot better now and it's not just a simple touch screen in the corner, it's a whole range of elements from complex soundscapes to, you know, atmospheric pieces to large interactives to small, detailed databasing projects. And it's this whole kind of range of media techniques that's kind of starting to be used and it's kind of interesting for us that, you know, you have to start to imagine what way a particular story can be told in each of those forms.

MB: Are there many other companies doing that kind of work in Sydney?

MH: There's maybe one other, maybe one other in Australia that specialises in just museums and visitor centres and there's quite a few others, you know, that do also event work and other kinds of projects for ballrooms and things but, yes, we kind of just specialise in just doing this interpretive media.

38.14 MB: **I suppose you have also had to become a businessperson. Having come out of an arts background and doing work that's primarily creative, there's that other complication in managing all those projects, large projects and managing the funding and finance for them that can't have been easy to have learnt that side of it.**

MH: No. No, not easy, and I've never really, you know, I mean, imagined myself sitting down and learning MYOB or these sorts of things but it comes about as a result of, you know, small business and, you know, the more employees you have the more you have to worry about staff superannuation and these sorts of things when really you'd like to be kind of developing concepts for artworks. So it's sort of – and, you know, we're probably at that point. We've got four people in the office and we're probably at that point where, you know, there's no one else around to do that except me, managing all, you know, the tender writing and that kind of, you know, the business side of it. So, yes, I mean for a while I got interested in it because it is, you know, part of the game, part of the entire sort of work and I think it's kind of important to understand that money has to come in from somewhere and not legalities but that, you know, form or something, you have to kind of understand the exchange or the commercial exchange involved and the more I think about it, the more I kind of like the business side of it.

40.08 MB: **That's interesting because a lot of people say they hate it.**

MH: Yes. Well, you know, if somebody said "I'll take it away from you tomorrow" I'd be very happy but I kind of don't mind it. And the more you – you know, my partner who is currently researching a book into the Renaissance, she said, you know, that's the way that all the studios used to be. You know, Leonardo's studio they would always just do commissions and he was responsible for feeding six mouths, he said and so, you know, you kind of have to work that way and have an understanding of the business. And so, you know, that was kind of that model of doing things for commission and doing things or doing what you can within the bounds of commission is kind of interesting. You know, we think of these individual geniuses but mostly they were kind of having to, you know, do the Birth of Apollo or something like that and - - -

MB: **They were just jobbing artists.**

MH: - - - yes, yes, and they did what they could within, you know, the bounds of the brief and the budget. So it's kind of, you know, it's kind of instructive. But, you know, if I won the lottery tomorrow I'd be quite happy in my studio just sort of tooling around but I think looking back over what might be my career I've always responded better to requests – and I said that at the beginning – than kind of making art along the way. You know, I tend to sort of doodle and waste time and fritter away things - but, you know, it's probably good thinking time when I'm just by myself but when given a commission or given something to think about it's almost like a design problem to think about, you know, and I feel like I respond.

42.00 **MB: And that makes it happen?**

MH: Mm.

MB: Your studio is in Surry Hills, is that right?

MH: In Chippendale.

MB: Chippendale, I beg your pardon. Yes, I just wanted to, yes, clarify that because that's also within the City of Sydney's local government area.

MH: Yes.

MB: Yes, if we could just - - -

MH: And we're very happy with our new street kerbing, thank you.

MB: Well, I don't think either Glennn or I was responsible for that but we will accept on behalf of the organisation.

MH: But you probably put in a good work.

MB: Now, yes, just about you saying that you've always worked better if a project is presented to you or you've got a deadline to work to or whatever and when we talked on a previous occasion you did talk about that a bit, that your own artistic practice sort of dwindled as I suppose other work commitments took over and you, you know, I guess had to earn a living and do all the things that other people have got to do and the work that you're doing now is obviously extremely, you know, intellectually engaging but something prompted you in this case to just make a piece of art as opposed to a commission - - -

MH: Yes, yes.

MB: - - - and I wondered if there were any particular circumstances around that that made that happen.

MH: I don't know. I suppose it's been a period of, you know, a few years where I feel like I need to think differently again and it's a good way to kind of – or maybe I feel like that responding to the brief all the time is just quite a – you know, your brain might get ossified or you think within certain parameters, you're thinking always of the budget, you're thinking always of, you know, the time available and thinking always of what the client might like kind of thing. So, yes, perhaps that need for freedom, creative freedom, is kind of bursting forth a bit more.

44.07 But I think also I feel like there's this new sort of area within – when I first went to art school I felt like, you know, there was not many careers available for professional artists and even less than there are now in terms of people earning money from their art, so probably in the back of my mind I've always had this feeling that you can't really make money from, you know, art practice and, you know, I feel like now you can, there are artists around who can make money from their art practice. But also there's interesting - you know, within the design world and within the art world artists are sort of crossing over into design and designers are crossing over into art, there's a lot more kind of, you know, those sorts of divisions that kind of existed before don't really exist any more.

MB: Because of the new media you mean?

MH: I just think it's this sort of freedom where artists are probably – maybe artists are becoming more professional and artists are also being respected as well and so that they can contribute to, you know, a design problem or they might be involved in a public project or there's a lot of examples of, you know, all sorts of artists working at a more professional level, not just coming in as the random sort of creating but they're kind of coming in almost as a kind of uber-designer, somebody with, you know, ideas that maybe the designers haven't thought of yet. So there's these sorts of fields emerging where that crossover happens more but also I think it happens because, you know, you're just thinking of project based work where this project you might do this and this project you might take on a slightly different role and be slightly more creative, this project might be just a small-scale project that's in a medium you haven't used before.

46.12 I think I've started to think instead of myself as a artist that does one thing I'm somebody that does projects and you do lots of, you know, you're running commercial projects and you're running, you know, other commercial projects that don't pay as much but you're those because they're fun and then other ones that just might be pure art and might be loss leaders because they keep you alive, you know, keep you mentally fresh and then they lead onto other things. So like this sort of, you know, that's the new model I have in my brain of what I do of kind of crossing this boundary between design and art. Maybe it was only my mind, ever in my mind but certainly, you know, when I

went to art school there was the design school and there was the art school and there was no communication between the design school and the art school. And designers had already made their decision about, you know, they were going off to chase dollars and the artists were going off to, you know, stay true to their craft and be poor and it's bizarre to think that that's - - -

MB: It's very peculiar when looking back now the crossover is so obvious but perhaps it has been encouraged by the ease of - I don't know, you were I think not really seeing it that way – but the ease with which people can move between different media now - - -

MH: Yes.

MB: - - - including people who don't have any training - - -

MH: Yes.

MB: - - - who are not trained in anything at all can start to create art now.

MH: Yes, yes.

47.53 **MB:** And without ever having to develop painterly skills or draughtsman skills they can do things that are interesting and creative and worthwhile without having to worry about their own actual, you know, what we might call "aptitude".

MH: Yes, yep. I think it comes back to, you know, the sort of not focus but the rise of the concept as the artform, you know, that when I went to East Sydney Tech it was still quite focused on, you know, the quality of the brushstroke and the way of kind of applying paint that was your signature but then Sydney College of the Arts, where I sort of came into contact with a lot more conceptual work, the focus there was not so much on, you know, your signature and your personality, it was based on the quality of the idea and, you know, your ability to kind of make it flesh. Although, you know, I think in recent times the quality of the idea has been raised to such a point where the making flesh and the making manifest is not as important and I think it's kind of to art's detriment that, you know, you need to know the idea to understand the artwork and you should be able to kind of just appreciate the artwork on one level and then when you hear the idea of a concept appreciate it on another level. But I think, yes, you know, people who don't make their own artwork, who kind of rely on experts to come in and hang birdcages or do whatever they rely on, it slightly is easier, you know, for me that I can kind of move from concept to concept and medium to medium and, you know, when designers are designing a toothbrush one day and a sports car the next and these sorts of things.

50.06 It feels like, I don't know whether the process is any easier so that they can – whether the tools make it easier for people to do that sort of thing or whether all they've got with them is, you know, like a website and a calling card and, you know, that's kind of what people want from you, you know, just to put the name on this kind of work. Maybe I'm not quite explaining what it is but I feel like, you know, what is it when somebody buys a Mark Newson or, you know, gets Mark Newson to come in and design their chair for them? I suppose it's just his, you know, ability to solve that particular problem but – I'm getting lost.

MB: No, we don't have to go on along this stream much more but I guess what I was trying to say, really, is that the potential for people to create art has grown because of new media. It doesn't necessarily mean that that art is terribly successful and obviously the kind of works that you do has an enormous amount of skill and experience and intellectual input in it, so of course ordinary people can't go and do that but the sense, I think, I've had the sense myself anyway in recent years, the sense that young people are not so intimidated by art as they used to be because of the idea that you have to be so skilled at this or that, it wasn't O.K. to make a piece of animation. Anyway, I'm not here to talk about what I think but anyway we're getting a bit sort of complicated.

52.02 What I really wanted to ask was, now that you have made this piece of art, unashamedly art, it's not a crossover thing, really, are you interested in doing more, do you think that will lead you back along that path and do you have any thoughts now about what you might do?

MH: Totally, totally. Yes, it's been a fantastic project for me just to make something manifest and, you know, have people appreciate it and kind of feel like "Well, that's a project that, you know, puts a" – it feels like I've, yes, come back to do what I was trained to do. Yes, I would like to do more of these sorts of things but what has been really interesting is doing this in the kind of public realm, instead of doing something for a gallery or for an obscure German television channel, it has felt, you know, the kind of range of responses and the generosity of the response has been, so much different to, you know, the work I used to put in museums – sorry, the work I used to put in galleries – and maybe that's because, you know, it's a better work than the stuff I used to make. But it's also I feel like people have been kind of, you know, coming across something in a public space is a different experience than that kind of mindset you bring to work in galleries, it feels, you know, like you've kind of stumbled upon something unexpectedly and it's a lot more of a fruitful sort of engagement. So the work I want to do in future is probably, you know, maybe work that's not in galleries, that might, you know, do a whole lot of other,

use a whole lot of other distribution channels, whether that's You Tube or public art or street art or whatever it is but, yes, being kind of creative in those sorts of forums might be more interesting than trying to do stuff for galleries.

54.10 **MB:** **Well, I'm sure we're all looking forward to that, seeing what else you might develop over the next few years.**

MH: No pressure.

MB: **There is one other thing I'd just like to mention. I know there is some talk of your work in Angel Place possibly being made permanent. I don't know if there's been any developments on that at all but the idea has been flagged.**

MH: The idea's been floated with the Public Art Panel who would support the idea, so it comes down to budget and approval, you know, for having what was a temporary project permanently located there.

MB: **Right. We'll see what happens but one of the reasons for that idea being floated has of course been such a positive response. And I think also we probably should mention that although Angel Place when you walk through it now is just a dark and rather gloomy laneway with the exception of this beautiful piece of work up towards the sky, that there are actually also going to be tables and chairs outside, opening out from one of the restaurants there which will really add to the enlivening of the space and add value to the work of art as well, I think. I imagine that's what you're thinking: it'll be lovely to have people actually sitting in that space and socialising with one another, rather than just walking through it and listening to the birds above.**

MH: Yes.

MB: **So let's keep our fingers crossed that the work is made permanent.**

MH: That's right.

MB: **Now, are there any other things that you would like to talk about or you, Glenn, that we haven't? There may be some major points that we've missed that we should have talked about?**

MH: I think I've said too much.

MB: **Too much. No, you haven't.**

GW: *I wouldn't mind just asking – just seeing as you offered..*

MB: **No, no, go on.**

56.00 GW: *Well, the laneways programme is, you know, an idea that's kind of been borrowed, if you like, from, you know, another city down south.*

MB: Melbourne.

GW: *In Melbourne, yes, a very successful programme over many years now, but cities do these sorts of public art projects from time to time and they have ideas in mind about what they will achieve, you know, activating the lanes and those sorts of things, but I'm just wondering from the artist's point of view, you know, how does that sit with you as the artist being, you know, kind of asked to do a job for the city in that regard? I wonder if you even thought about it.*

MH: Yes. Well, I think you could only respond if you felt like it was an equal exchange in the first place. You know, the budget of twenty five thousand was, you know, I mean, it was enough to kind of spark an interest and, you know, it felt like that was generous enough to do something good. It eventually cost us about twenty six thousand dollars but, you know, I think - - -

MB: Over and above the original council's budget you mean - - -

MH: No, no, not over and above. So we only kind of, you know, costed out - - -

MB: - - - in what you put in?

MH: - - - five hundred dollars or something.

MB: I see, yes.

MH: So, you know, the budget was fine. But, so, you know, it felt like it wasn't so much doing a job, it felt like an opportunity. So, you know, maybe other artists might have felt differently but also you think "Well, that's what art does, you know, is to draw attention to itself", so, you know, the fact that you're kind of drawing attention or drawing people into these places felt like a great opportunity rather than in any onerous or, you know, against the aims of what art is intended to do, so.

GW: *Yes, yes. Sometimes it's seen as sort of instrumentalising art, you know, sort of putting it to an end that might not be the artist's intention.*

MB: Because you're using it to revitalise the laneways?

58.03 GW: *Yes. You know, it's kind of like it's the most affordable thing that a city can do to activate it before they do anything else.*

MH: M'mm.

GW: *I mean, that's partly why we do it, is to draw attention to the lanes. Well, it does get a lot of people there, they do see the potential of these spaces so, you know, we are using it to everyone's benefit, we hope.*

MH: Yes. But it's not like you're, you know, buying a painting and then hanging it in a laneway. It's, you know, you're getting people to address each laneway specifically.

GW: *Yes, specifically.*

MH: I think if you brought a sculpture and hung it in an out of the way or mounted it in an out of the way place that'd be a different intent but because you're asking people to address all of the problems or all of the wonders of these laneways anyway that that's the task and, you know, you feel like it's a really good thing and often the worse the space the better the art.

MB: That just raises one point, is were you allocated that laneway, how did it happen that your work was in Angel Place?

MH: No, we originally thought Bridge Lane was going to suit us because of the, you know, architectural look and there's a nice little sort of coiffured part to the entrance of bridge street but we didn't have any idea of how we were going to hang things in Bridge Lane and I think, you know, putting anchor points and drilling holes in all of those buildings around there might have upset a few people. The programme or the By George! programme suggested we shift to Angel Place and the existing hanging points there made it certainly easier and probably kept us within budget as well.

MB: So that was just a matter of practicality?

MH: Yes, yes. We made some additional sort of penetrations in the wall but the owner there was kind of happy to allow that to happen to his building that he was going to pull apart anyway.

60.03 So all that was fine. But, yes, as it turns out, I mean, you know, everybody's commented on the appositeness of it being outside the Recital Hall and the Angels and all of these sorts of connections that people have made, you know, makes so much sense now and, yes, I can't quite imagine it in any other place now and Bridge Lane would sort of feel too cramped or something.

MB: Did you have something else you wanted to say?

MH: No.

MB: No. That's Glenn I'm talking to.

GW: Yes, no.

MB: That was just the one question you wanted to ask?

GW: *Yes, I think so. Yes, I think, no, the number of responses – going back to what Michael has said – has been great. You know, we've got eight projects in laneways and the diversity of responses has been what's been sort of, you know, thrilling for us or the City to see, you know. A lot of the projects contain ideas that can be explored further, you know, by different people, landscape architects. And, you know, seeing trees in some of the lanes and there's a small bar in another lane, so there's all sorts of ideas that have come out that we wouldn't have imagined which is good to show other people, you know, what's possible, what art can bring to, you know, the city, you know, much more than what we could have preconceived, you know, of what art was going to do, yes.*

MB: I think for myself I would say – and I imagine this is probably fairly typical of most people who walk through those spaces – is the art makes you smile in the place where you would otherwise not do that.

MH: Yes.

MB: It's a place that you're scurrying through normally to get to somewhere and the art really makes you literally smile which is a wonderful thing for it to do.

GW: *It sort of transforms a space, you know, it transforms people's experiences of the city which is great, you know.*

MH: Yes.

MB: I think that's an excellent way to end.

MH: O.K, good.

MB: Thank you very much, Michael and Glenn?

Interview ends