



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 6 EPISODE 9 (October 2024)

Emil Canita
in conversation with
Pedram Khosronejad

Emil Canita:

In terms of my background, so I am Filipino. I'm Ilocano, specifically. So I'm from the northern part of the Philippines. I grew up there toward my early teens. My family moved to Australia. Me and my mum and her husband moved to Brisbane in particular, or Magandjin now. So I spent high school there in Victoria Point in Quandamooka country. And then as soon as I finished high school, I moved to the city in the country of the Turrbal and Jagera people. And I stayed there because eventually when I got my citizenship I can afford or, well, in this case, I can borrow money from the government to study, go to university at University of Queensland.

I actually started psychology, but I find the over pathologisation of it really quite out of fit with my own values. So I ended up falling in love with sociology. I finished that in around 2019 and then 2020 because I thought it was a beautiful number. It's about clarity. I decided to move down to Naarm, also known as Melbourne. I feel like, yeah, in terms of my ethnic background, it's definitely been a constantly moving one.

Pedram Khosronejad:

So do you consider yourself Australian or migrant artist or you find yourself really integrated totally to the Australian society?

Emil Canita:

I think it's one of those things. One, because I am not mixed. I'm purebred Filipino and because my accent isn't Australian, I'm always in between. And I find that even in my Filipino, when I meet first generation Filipinos here, they see me as Aussie. When I meet Aussies here, they see me as Filipino. So it's always that in between. Yeah, I consider myself a migrant. I also consider myself an Australian. I consider myself a very proud Australian. I've really fallen in love with this country. It's a place I call home. I don't know what it is, but I just have this very core memory of mine when I was a kid, I was in kindergarten and I was asking my mom to draw a person and she draw a stick figure and I was so upset because it was so ugly. I'm like, "Why can't you draw it like the TV?"

But I remember that was the very first moments of memory for me that I'm like, oh, I like this. I wasn't necessarily seeing it as art at that time, but it was just drawing. It was expressing, but it was this very different language. And I know for quite some time it just called me, I feel in a very romantic way, there's a deep sense in myself that I'm like, I want to be an artist. Even though I don't know what it means to be an artist, I don't know what's involved to be an artist. All of these other things to actually sustain myself as an artist. I've always, deep in my heart of hearts that I wanted to be an artist. I didn't really comfortably identify as an artist until only recently.

It was only around 2020 when I moved down here that I felt even more comfortable about identifying as an artist because I was actually approached by... Because I have a practice that I've used social media for quite a number of years since 2017.

And basically I capture and document my sex life and write about them. And I use Instagram specifically or social media as a way to express myself. And then one day, the director of the Institute of Modern Art, Liz Nowell messaged me and she was just like, "Come to the gallery. Can you come visit me? We

need to chat." And I'm like, "Okay." And then I came in and she was just like, "We need to get you a book. You need to write a book. You're making art." And that for me was really confronting. Because I was like, "Oh, I don't see myself as an artist." One because I've been around artists and I hold them to such high regard. I thought that there was this formalised institution that you have to go through to really call yourself an artist. You can't just call yourself a doctor.

I see artists as being that. And because I didn't go through that traditional education, it really didn't sit well with me for a very long time. And when Liz said that, I was just overwhelmed. I actually just, oh, I don't know what to do with this. And then it was only till I moved down to Naarm during COVID where they had a project called Making Art Work. And it was like artists responding to COVID. And I was like, "You know what? I'll give it a crack." And then I got in, and then I was able to show my work for the first time at the Institute of Modern Art at Making Art Work. And then my work was part of a book that they've published and it's just, oh, I am an artist. But still, that didn't really sit well with me again until, to be honest with you, until just this year. This year is really the year where I felt like, okay, yeah.

Pedram Khosronejad:

You're a little bit open about your professional career, what you are doing and why you wanted to share that on social media.

Emil Canita:

In my day job, as they call it, I work as an HIV advocate because I'm a person living with HIV. I've been diagnosed with it when I was 22, and a lot of people don't know, but weighing your own treatment now, effective treatment now as an HIV positive person, you actually live a normal life. You can't transmit the virus anymore. I'm at a point in my relationship with HIV where I genuinely feel cured from it. So I've dedicated a lot of my life since being diagnosed to work with HIV positive people from testing them in clinics to now being the first person that you get to talk to if you're already diagnosed with HIV. Because when I was diagnosed with HIV, I didn't meet another Asian person living with HIV for another four years. And me working in this space is really trying to address that.

If someone was just diagnosed, I want them to see me and know that they're going to be okay. I just know the power of representation and what that means. And yeah, I guess with the social media, really, when everyone was starting to use Instagram, I just didn't want to use it without any purpose. And interestingly enough, at that time when I did start my Instagram account, I was going through therapy. I was going through a lot of therapy because of growing up in the Philippines, sadly, and with my family, there's been a lot of abuse going on, and I've been just everything, literally physical, emotional, sexual. I've experienced it all growing up as a child, and I've experienced it for over a decade growing up. So I was going through a lot of therapy for my chronic PTSD, and at that time, my psychologist was saying to me, do a lot of free writing. Just let your mind just go, just write whatever, no filter. And I struggled with that.

And because also am a highly sexual person, so what I decided to do then was just capture vignettes of my sexual partners, like their elbow coming out of the door or their feet coming out of the toilet or their sock on the thing. And one time I wrote something about a former lover of mine on Instagram, and it was a photo of him making me dinner and then just the sudden response that I got from these people. And I was like, "Oh, people like that." But in a lot of ways, those two came in hand. If I was trying to

practice free writing, but also it was associated with a lover of mine. So in a way it's not very direct, but I'm trying to be a mirror through them, and that's what I just basically developed and that's how we started the practice. But then again, there wasn't an intention about it being practiced, you know what I mean? I'm doing this because of therapy.

Pedram Khosronejad:

So they are temporary lovers or long-term lovers?

Emil Canita:

Yeah, it's a combination. It's basically anyone that I've had sex with.

Pedram Khosronejad:

May I ask how often this happened? Is it your choice? Is it a friendship choice? Is it a professional choice?

Emil Canita:

These one in particular were mostly just my casual sexual partners and some lovers that I've had over time, but it's definitely been a combination of that.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Do you consider yourself in modern term a sex worker?

Emil Canita:

At that time, I wasn't doing sex work. During that period, no.

Pedram Khosronejad:

But today you consider yourself as a sex-

Emil Canita:

Yes.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Worker. And then your Instagram and social media was reflecting them, be a voice for voiceless people somehow. Am I correct?

Emil Canita:

In a way. And again, this is one of those things, too, that I never reflected on as I grew up, as an artist and as someone who had to create an ethical framework around this, because back then there was no concept of consent. I was to take a knee and just write about it. I was so young and didn't really know anything about this stuff. I was just like, I'll just share my experience. And I think as I grew older and I learned more and I studied more, and I think because of my own experience of it, really got to know more about that and start to really embody what I've learned and my values, that's when I started doing like, okay, you know what? If I need to take this seriously, I need to create an ethical framework around this so that I know I'm actually doing this as safely as possible, not only for me, but particularly with the people that I'm working with.

And it's such a source of joy and pain and difficulty for me because yeah, when you're working with a very stigmatised area subject like sex, you don't have a lot of people to look up on. You almost often have to learn as you go and make a lot of mistakes in the process.

Pedram Khosronejad:

You are your own guru.

Emil Canita:

Yeah, you're your own guru, and you really have to check yourself and really think about these things. And your subjects become your mirror in a lot of ways, give you feedback. And it's about being open to feedback and being constantly reflective about your work. Yeah, it's been very difficult, but in a lot of ways I've been very lucky that I've had so many generous people who've taught me and led me, and it's still something that I see as a constant work. I don't think it's ever going to stop, and I can only commit myself to improving my practice as I grow older and hopefully have more lovers.

Pedram Khosronejad:

How you connect this visual practice of yourself to your lovers or those that we see in your visual artwork?

Emil Canita:

Yeah, so I think photography, I've always just love. I just love it as for its history, and I love its immediacy. I love how in a lot of ways, out of all the art forms, it's one of the most democratic ones. I love it based on that. But I think also in the context of the fact that photography, very often, I think particularly traditional photography happens in the combination of three things, and that's light, time and chemistry. I love how those three elements is something that really comes together as well in the context of sex, the context of my work where I'm trying to really show the intimacy, the emotional intimacy between two people and really their thoughts and how they feel because it takes time to develop that. It takes light, basically is whatever's made visible. So when you see the images in my work, they're basically how consent is negotiated in that context.

So if you see a hand, that's what they're willing to show. If you see the body, that's what they're willing to show. So I really want consent to be embedded in that because I think that's one common thing a lot of people ask me like, oh, did these people consent to this? And I'm like, a Polaroid is a very big camera and it's one of the most confronting flashes actually that you could really experience. So this is one of those very blatant forms of photography. There's no hiding when you take a Polaroid. And I think for me, I loved the politics, but also the naughtiness of a Polaroid camera because it's intimate. It's one of one, it's the kind of camera that I think couples on naughty holidays would go to take pictures of one another. It's a camera that holds secrets. And yeah, that was part of the reason why I really connected with this, not only photography, but also that particular camera.

Pedram Khosronejad:

And then, because I think Polaroid's photos are quite smaller, but I did see your artwork are quite larger with extensive writing on them. Can you tell us what that part is and how you elaborate that?

Emil Canita:

So part of the reason why the visual language of my work looks the way it does is because of another queer Asian artist named William Yang. So William Yang is a Chinese-Australian photographer, historian. And I think for me an icon and really a legend in queer history and Australian history because when I was trying to see myself in the world of art, he was the first artist that I saw myself in. I remember his work, Joe, and it was a photograph of one of the guys that he picked up at the club and his curly hair was facing him, and it was a photo of him still in bed sleeping. And then his story on how they met is just embracing him. When I saw that, I was like, oh, I didn't know being a slut could be a form of art. So in a lot of ways it was also really monumental for me as a person because it made me realise that I'm like, oh, actually no, anything can be art.

And to know that William Yang did this in 1979, just around the AIDS epidemic as it was happening and all these other things and conservatism was rife, and homosexuality wasn't even decriminalised in Australia at that time. It was so brave. It was so brave. And because of how much he's opened the doors for me, and really I feel like I'm part of the lineage of William Yang's work, I really wanted to honour that. I really wanted to honour how important he is in my artistic practice and in our history. And I think particularly with my work, I really wanted to explore this idea of what does queer cultural inheritance look like, particularly as queer people where we may not want to have a child or it's not possible for us for a lot of different reasons. I want to try and do that, particularly for a lot of our queer elders. What does it mean to have a legacy, especially in the context of HIV AIDS where so many advocates and artists we've lost? So for me, this work, my practice particularly this recent body of work, it's a love letter to William Yang.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Amazing. So what are the contents of those writings? So you digitize-

Emil Canita:

Yes.

Pedram Khosronejad:

And the original Polaroid, I imagine, bring them to your PC or computer and then you work on the image? What are the content of those writings?

Emil Canita:

I wanted to apply my sociological lens in terms of how I approach this work. And very often these are, I see it as doing a qualitative research. I get their name, I locate it, I talk about where the place was taken, what year it was, and then essentially what the text that's around or in of the subject is what I've learned through that experience with them. It could be anything from conversation or a reflection I have after having sex with them or an event, but it's basically, it always situates itself at that moment.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Did you show the end of the process of each artwork to them?

Emil Canita:

It really depends. Some of them are curious. Some of them don't want to see it. It's really quite plural. There's a few of them that just, some of them were just basically because a lot of them, too, have never been to an art gallery before or really think that they don't get art. There's a bit of almost a distance. They'd be like, oh, do whatever you want. I don't mind just cut my head off. And it's definitely one of those things that really made me think about it. I'm like, "Are you genuinely consenting to this then if you're not fully informed or aware?" But it's one of those things, too, that I also had to navigate working this because everyone has such a different relationship with art, right? Yeah. Yes.

Pedram Khosronejad:

When was your first time that you had professional connection with a gallerist?

Emil Canita:

When was it? So it was last year when Andy Dinan, MARS Gallery in Windsor in Melbourne reached out to me. But that was through the help of Atong Atem, another brilliant artist that I really admire and Scotty So who are represented by MARS. And they were the ones who actually advocated for me. I didn't ask for it, but they just told Andy. They're like, hey, if you want to show someone, I think you should really show Emil. And that was incredibly touching because Scotty and Atong are just some of the best contemporary artists in this country, and it's so touching to be seen by them. And then, yeah, Andy pretty much invited me and be like, "Hey, do you want to do a show?" So yeah, that was real scary, like, oh my God, I've just been writing about my sex life on Instagram. Now I have to think about it. How does that actually present in a gallery context?

Pedram Khosronejad:

So you had a solo exhibition with them?

Emil Canita:

I did. I did. It was in March this year of 2024.

Pedram Khosronejad:

So in Sydney Contemporary is your first public exhibition?

Emil Canita:

Yes.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Everyone very interested. What's your experience about Sydney Contemporary?

Emil Canita:

It's not for the faint of heart, I tell you that one. It was interesting because just to give you an example, on Tuesday on install day, and I was there helping out MARS on how to install my wall, we were asked to put the condition of us showing my work was actually to have a curtain over it. It's a family event. And it was challenging because I had such a small corner too, the moment I heard that I thought that people just won't see it. So we were very creative at basically, I decided that all of the naughtier photos, so-called naughtier photos, the ones that were showing penises would be on the left-hand side. So if you're walking past, you actually can't see it until you go.

Pedram Khosronejad:

No, exactly.

Emil Canita:

And then the more non-horny or sexier ones are the ones that you're visible through when you walk past. And we just didn't put the curtain up because one, it just was ugly. It was really ugly. I didn't want it to happen. So we just let it down and hopefully we thought maybe the PR people would just let us do it, and thankfully they allowed us. But I think for me, being in that space during the install day, it was really confronting to me how many gallery owners and gallery assistants were white, but also how many black and people of colour's work they were lugging into the space. It was so intense, and I was quite upset about that too. I guess being an artist now and knowing the economy of arts, so to see that en masse was really confronting for me. I'd be lying if I said that a part of me didn't hate being there. And it's one of those things that I was telling my friends when I got back that I'm like, "I was in Sydney Contemporary, but I didn't get to see art."

Pedram Khosronejad:

I understand that. Yeah.

Emil Canita:

And then thankfully they didn't allow us to put the curtain up, and then when the VIP or the rich people of Sydney came in, my heart sank because as soon as those people came through the galleries, I knew that these weren't my audience.

Pedram Khosronejad:

I see.

Emil Canita:

And not that there's any wrong way or right way to engage in art, but when they were going through my wall, they were just laughing at the big dicks and calling their friends over so they can take a photo with a dick photo. You know what I mean?

Pedram Khosronejad:

They didn't get the core of artist's message.

Emil Canita:

No, but I also recognised, it's one of those things too where I have to pull back a little bit that I'm like, "Hey, if you're a particularly rich person, and relatively quite conservative too, you don't want to act outside of this norm that you have among your peers." So I also really recognised it at that point. I guess for me, I just thought, oh, it's Sydney. There's going to be more queer people there. But I guess when we do talk about the VIPs of Sydney Contemporary, it's predominantly heteronormative. It's a lot of it too, and this is just for me assuming it, a lot of straight, white, middle-aged women that come from a very high income bracket, like top five or 10% at least. At least. Those Chanel sandals are not cheap.

So yeah, it was very particular. So that was really challenging for me. And I remember there was a point there where a few people that came up to my stalls and there were queer people, and then she came up to me and she says, "I'm really envious of the people that get to engage with your work, because when they engage with you, they see you eye to eye. And these people engage with me, particularly these white women, it feels like they feel like they're saving me."

And I felt that. I really felt that. I saw that with how these people engaged with her. Those things for me that really hit it home that I'm like, yeah, it was, to be honest with you, I felt like when I was at the fair, I was like, I feel like one of those sales assistant in Louis Vuitton and showing my luxury product for this person to buy. A lot of queer people, a lot of queer people and also sex workers bought the work. So that was really beautiful for me. When General Public opened up towards the end of the week, that's where I felt so much better that I was able to talk with people that saw me. I was able to engage with people that understood the practice. My community came through.

I think if anything, for me, going through there, meeting other artists and us seeing one another and seeing our work together was so beautiful, getting to meet curators. For me, I felt like my audience were really curators, other artists and my community, and that was great. And I think coming back to and

reflecting on it with another friend of mine who used to work in commercial art for a while, he was like, "Look, it's one market, but it's not all of art. That's just one part of it." But for me, I'm really grateful about the experience because I've learned a lot from it. It's been incredibly insightful, and it's one of those things, you can't really critique something unless you've gone through it.

And I'm really grateful for MARS Gallery for giving me the lived experience to see the arts as a beast, and the beast that it is. Like I said, I'm very grateful for MARS, for Andy because in a lot of ways, she's bold, she's courageous, she really shows work that she believes in, even mediums wise, we were quite a distinct stall. But also, I think it's one of those things too, they've come to learn more around working in the arts or working in the arts, is that a lot of these people are extremely rich people, so they can, depending on how much security you have, you can take a risk and be bold and do that, and you can just claim that or back on tax or cancel it.

So there's a bit of that. But for someone like me, I was able to take home about 15% of what was sold there because when it comes to going to an art fair like this, the gallery automatically gets 50%. But on top of that, the framing, the shipping, the printing, the hanging, the shipping back to my home, all of that, I still have to shoulder on. So yeah, it was definitely one of those moments to me, too, that I'm like, God, art is not for the poor.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Art is not for the poor.

Emil Canita:

No.

Pedram Khosronejad:

You put it nicely in the word. I understand what you mean exactly. Emil, what's next?

Emil Canita:

I'm going to keep on, continue doing art. I know I've been very critical of it, but I think I am very critical of it because I love it. I love it so much. Yeah, I'm looking forward on creating some new work. The next show I'm working on will focus more about my HIV status. It was one of those things that I felt very protective about of sharing or talking about, but I also recognise that it's about 40 years now since the introduction of the epidemic in the world, in the larger Western Hemisphere. And a lot of things have changed, but unfortunately, a lot of those knowledges hasn't been updated yet for a lot of people. And I want to really update that.

I want to tell the story of what it means to actually live with HIV now, but also decentralise this idea of what we think HIV history is. Because for a lot of people, the epidemic didn't just happen 40 years ago. For a lot of our neighbouring countries like Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, the epidemic is happening still to the present, and we still have a lot of people dying from AIDS in Australia to this day, but we tend to just forget about that or think that these things are in the past, but they're very much still in the present. So I really want to commit to exploring that a bit more and taking control of my story.

Pedram Khosronejad:

To finish with Emil, do you consider yourself a queer artist, emerging artist, refugee artist? Which category you put yourself in?

Emil Canita:

There's a lot of people that came up to me at the fair and they were like, so are you a sex worker or an artist? I always bring it back to what my psychologist told me when I was going through a lot of issues around my gender, and he was just like, advocate, artist, trans person. These are just roles. They're hats that always change depending on the context and the environment you're in. But if you want to know who you are, who you really are, it's the first thing that you get to be around the people that love you and that's who you are. Because everything changes. Your identity will always change. I'm neither an artist or any of this, but if there's anything I can label myself with and want to be remembered by, I want to be remembered as a lover.

Pedram Khosronejad:

Beautiful, Emil. Thank you so much for your time.

Emil Canita:

Thanks, Pedram.