
ANNUAL EDUCATION SURVEY

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CUNNING PLANS: CURATING YOUR IMMEDIATE FUTURE

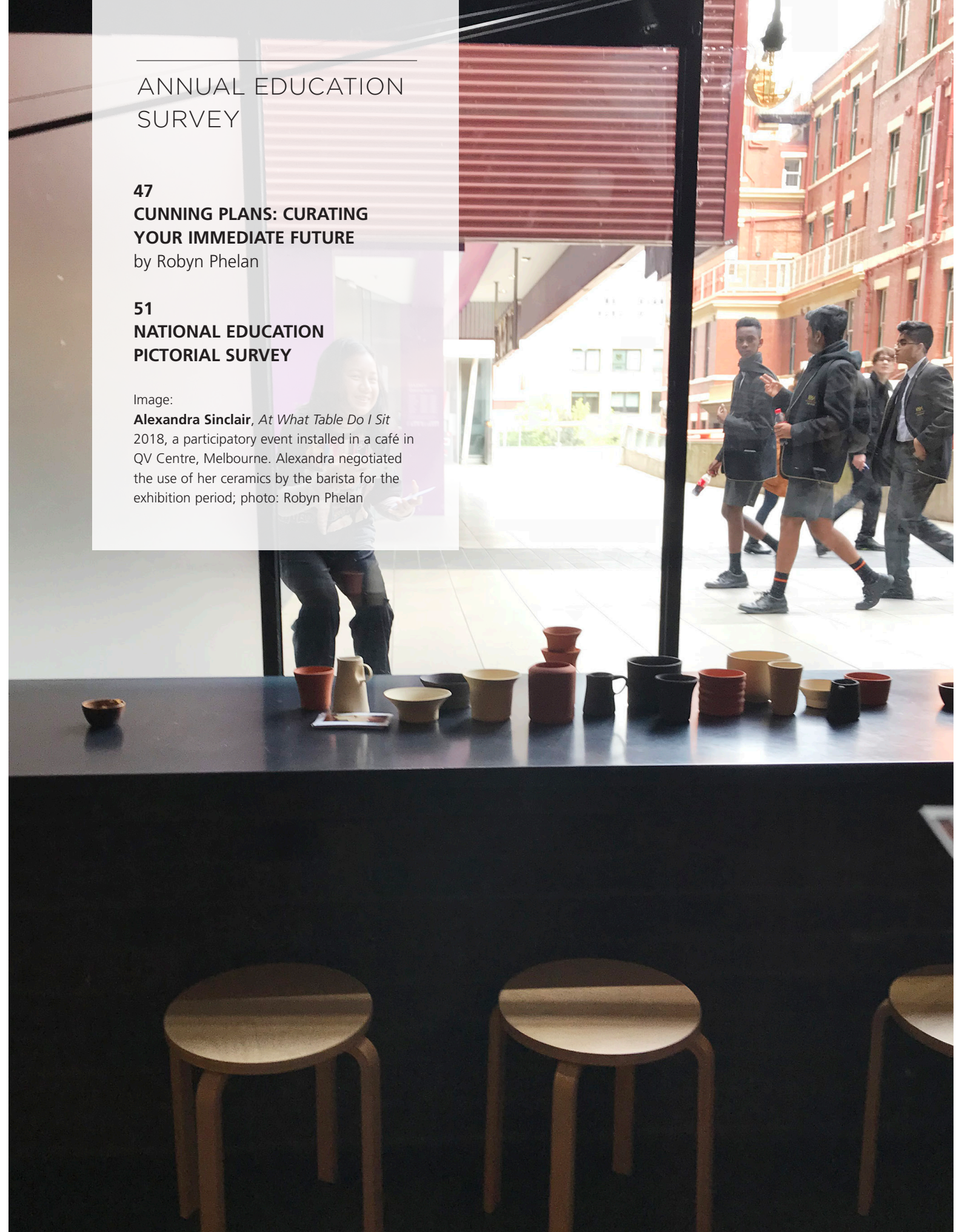
by Robyn Phelan

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Image:

Alexandra Sinclair, *At What Table Do I Sit* 2018, a participatory event installed in a café in QV Centre, Melbourne. Alexandra negotiated the use of her ceramics by the barista for the exhibition period; photo: Robyn Phelan



CUNNING PLANS: CURATING YOUR IMMEDIATE FUTURE

An outline of post-tertiary knowledge taught in RMIT University's professional development subject by Robyn Phelan

Deep in the basement of the old Working Men's College off Swanston Street in Melbourne are the ceramic studio rooms, one of many studio areas within the School of Art at RMIT University. RMIT School of Art degree courses have been turning out potters, ceramicists, designers, artists and educators for decades. Sturdy shoes have barely made a dint in the thick bluestone slabs that line the studio floors. Currently these rooms stand silent, waiting for the COVID-19 isolation period to pass. In this article I will outline a course of compulsory study developed for final year RMIT students called Art Enterprise Workshop (AEW), which provides students with the skills to successfully step from the insular world of the institution into a community of creative practice that is able to support their unique arts practice.

AEW consists of twelve weekly lectures given by outstanding experts in their field. Regular presenters are artist accountant Evan Lowenstein (who demystifies small business priorities around GST, ABNs, and taxation), passionate Executive Director of NAVA Esther Anatolitis (who contextualises art practice within Australia and where to find and maintain professional skills), and, writer of *The Good Copy* Penny Modra (who passionately outlines the dos and don'ts of promotional writing). These lectures give a brief but important overview of the 'professional stuff': the relevant career development, employment practices and entrepreneurial opportunities, along with resources and arts industry networks that enable students to establish themselves as independent art practitioners. I know this may sound like a marketing spiel, but the potency of the subjects is evident in the aftermath of the lectures. The ceramics cohort have been working with each other for almost three years when they undertake the course, and by this stage are developing a confidence and awareness of their own practice and the practice of their peers. The time is ripe for formulating an artistic and professional position to take within the field of contemporary craft and art.

Alexandra Sinclair graduated at the end of 2018 with a folio that concentrated on thrown functional ware with a minimalist design aesthetic. For her Proposal assignment she ambitiously wrote a five-year business plan, aiming to first create a range of ceramics for retail sale and to source a combined shop and studio. Her brand *Pot Dispensary* was up and running by early 2019 in a Victorian shop front in Melbourne's South Yarra. Alex cleverly expanded the retail space to include a set of pottery wheels, and by the end of 2019 was offering wheelthrowing classes to a public chomping at the bit for throwing experiences.

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In a recent conversation with Alex, she likened being an artist to being a small businessperson. The research, planning and thinking required for the AEW unit consolidated her vision for post-university life and helped her hit the ground running after graduation. The recent COVID-19 measures have seen the temporary closure of public workshops, but this break from operations has given her time to build an online store.

The Art Enterprise Workshop challenged students to think deeply about personal practice and place what they do within a broader field of ceramics practice. Year 2019 students Nicole Cocis, Adriana Goya, Emma Clark and Rory Young were inspired by their common interests in yoga, wild clay, festivals, and the natural environment of their home in Warrandyte to establish the business *Cosmic Clay Collective* which “offers outdoor, immersive clay workshops that explore basic handbuilding techniques whilst sharing the philosophy of deep ecology and how it is intrinsically rooted in the material of clay”.

Nicole reflected recently:

As we were getting more and more excited about our *Cosmic Clay* ideas and where we could take it, we decided to utilise what we had been learning through the assessments in our Art Enterprise course in real life situations by writing applications for various music festivals as well as kids and family workshops at Bali Spirit Festival. This was still while we were in RMIT preparing for our graduating exhibition. Our *Bali Spirit Festival* application was one that we were particularly pleased with as it was accepted, and it’s the one that we now use as a template.

Cosmic Clay Collective has held six workshops since October 2019 using Instagram, built a WIX website, and used WeTeach for ticketing and insurance. COVID-19 has directed Nicole, Emma and Adriana into the government-run New Enterprise Incentive Scheme (NEIS) to further hone



their business plans post lockdown. Rory's final year revealed a talent for critical writing, and his enthusiastic review of *An Idea Needing to Be Made* was published in the November 2019 issue of *The JAC*. This was an AEW class project and certainly whet Rory's literary whistle (as you will see in his article elsewhere in this issue).

Kristin Burgham, also a 2019 Alumni, developed a clear perspective of where to situate herself within the community of contemporary ceramics: as an exhibiting studio artist. AEW students are required to research exhibition and retail opportunities tailored to their practice, and it was during this research that Kristin identified the council-subsidised Shakespeare Grove Artist Studios. Unique to this unit of study is an assignment requiring an application to real creative bodies, artist run initiatives, for council funding, residencies, or whatever the student feels they need to bridge the gap between university and independent practice. Kristin's application was successful, and July will see her moving into a self-contained studio in St Kilda for the next three years. In the intervening months, she has been curated into *New Blood* at Red Gallery and selected by Damon Moon into the inaugural exhibition at CLAD, at Bendigo Pottery. As a result of her exhibitions, Kristin has had work acquired by Shepparton Art Museum.

Another assignment is a Case Study. Students identify an artist who inspires them and seek an interview based on five clear questions. This is a mini-mentoring session. I likely don't need to convince you how generous the ceramics community is in this regard. Many students have a revolutionary experience either by Skype to international or national artists or by visiting local studios. From the same 2019 cohort, Kelly Greenhalgh has continued studies into Honours at RMIT. Kelly's Case Study interview created a cascade of events that expanded into a connection with James Lemon for the entire unit of study. Kelly's interview with James revealed that he had volunteered at renowned Melbourne pottery business Cone 11. James is a passionate believer in

The Art Enterprise Workshop class visiting James Lemon's studio, workshop and retail space for a Q&A session, 2019
Photo: Robyn Phelan





Kristin Burgham, 2019 graduate exhibition work; photo: Robyn Phelan



The Cosmic Clay Collective: Rory Young, Nicole Coci, Emma Clark and Adriana Goya working their stall at Pottery Expo, Warrandyte, in February 2020; photo: Robyn Phelan

sharing knowledge through experience and questioning and has remained ever-thankful to Cone 11 for developing his skills. As a result of Kelly's connection, she gained work as a studio assistant in James's studio/retail space, an invaluable position to gain whilst studying. James also offered a visit to the studio for all students, which turned into an impressive Q&A session on everything from how to price your work to how to organise your studio.

As I write, the second semester may still be a time of isolation, so gathering for our feisty and passionate tutorials will shift to a more staccato form of online conversation. Fingers crossed we are back together in few months' time.

This article has been made possible by the Alumni of RMIT. Thanks for your candid conversations and reflections on the course.

They are:

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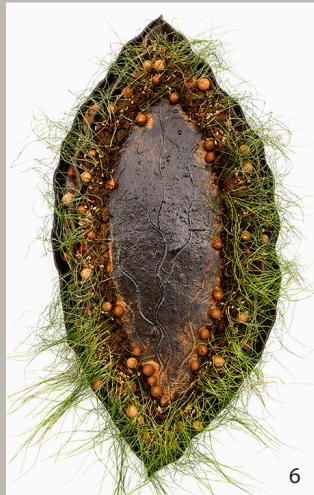
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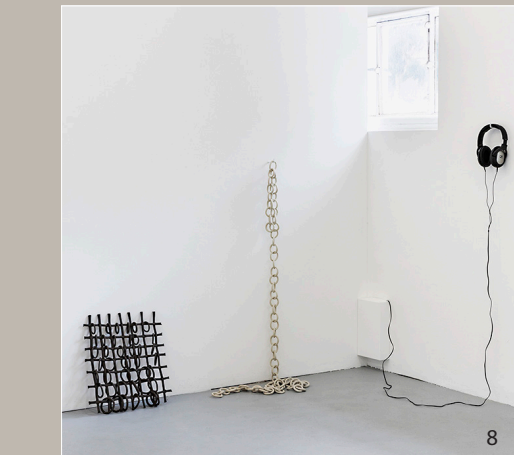
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- 1 Anni Hagberg
- 2 Kristin Burgham
- 3 Nicole Cocis
- 4 Nikolina Brown
- 5 Rory Young
- 6 Adriana Goya
- 7 Emma Clark
- 8 Kelly Greenhalgh
- 9 Charles Buchner
- 10 Anabelle Stonehouse



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