



JULIE FRAGAR

Year 12—1994

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1994 Graduate and Three Time Archibald Prize Finalist

Acclaimed artist and three-time Archibald Prize finalist, Julie Fragar always aspired to be an artist. Spending long hours in the art room at Wee Waa High School collaborating with her friend and classmate Phoebe Powell, remains one of her happiest high school memories.



“I could not overstate the impact that growing up in Wee Waa and going to Wee Waa High School has had on my life. Julie’s parents still live in Wee Waa, having moved from the Central Coast when Julie and her brother Ben, were quite young.

We had a great childhood. It was one of horses, motorbikes and lots of hours exploring the bush. I’m very grateful for that. My parents are pretty courageous people and I’ve always had a lot of respect for what a bold move that was. I think my brother and I benefited a lot because of it.” said Dr Fragar.

“Growing up in Wee Waa taught me how to relate to an incredibly broad range of people. In a small town there are not enough people to section yourself off to only people whose values and background are exactly like yours.”

At high school, with her love of Art and English that was further cultivated by her two favourite teachers, Jacqui Harrison and Wayne Eade, Julie recalls Wee Waa High being “a good school with lots of really dedicated, smart and valuable teachers.”

“From about Grade 10, I spent a lot of time daydreaming about the next chapter of my life beyond high school. That said, my favourite part of high school was the art room where I could get lost in making things.”

Graduating in Year 12 in 1994, as a result of her dedication and determination, Julie was offered and accepted a place at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA), University of Sydney. “It was a competitive process to get in to SCA, but I think they liked that I was from a small country town and genuinely wanted to be there. It was a challenge at first, but very quickly I grew to love art school and Sydney.”

At SCA, Julie completed a Bachelor of Visual Art with a Class 1 Honours, which Julie explained, “meant I qualified for Postgrad scholarships. So, I did a Master of Visual Arts with a scholarship also at SCA. ‘During the undergrad in particular, I built an art community that continues to be at the core of my career to date. I had exhibitions, entered and had success in prizes.’ It was during this time that Julie was twice finalist in the hugely popular Archibald Prize.

In 2006 Julie went on to complete a PhD at the Queensland College of Art, Griffith University in Brisbane, also with a scholarship, and she is now QCA’s Senior Lecturer and Head of Painting.

Reflecting on the 26 years since graduating, Julie says, “I have been so fortunate to have many solo and group exhibitions, been awarded prizes and Australia Council for the Arts grants that have enabled me to make artwork based on research in the USA and Europe. My work is held in the collections of the Art Gallery of NSW, Queensland Art Gallery/Gallery of Modern Art, Art Gallery of South Australia and numerous other public and private collections. In one way or another, I’ve managed to cobble together a reasonable life as an artist and educator.”

Wee Wawa High School, Purcell Avenue, NSW 2388

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Julie explained that an early challenge for her, like all artists starting out, “was figuring out what the art world actually was and how to navigate it. It’s not like other fields where you get the qualification and apply for a job and climb the ladder. The art world isn’t just making paintings and putting a price on it either. It is incredibly nebulous, strategic, and multi-faceted (and a bit opaque) and that’s why, if you want to be an artist (for a career, not a hobbyist), you really have to go to art school because that’s where you learn how the whole thing works.”

Despite her success, Julie is quick to share that “the biggest difficulty of being an artist is, I think, psychologically coping with the fluctuating wins and losses that can seem to operate at random. You have to have a certain resilience to cope with it (and most of us only barely do). There are absolutely no guarantees and just when you think you have risen to the top; sales dry up and nobody asks you to be in shows. Then when you are ready to throw in the towel and do something else, inevitably you’ll win something and you’ll decide to give it another go. The rollercoaster is a real thing and it’s not easy.”

“Being a studio artist is also pretty isolating. I find it hard to spend so much time alone in the studio; some paintings take hundreds of hours. I don’t think being an artist (or the kind of artist I am) suits extroverts. The constant self-initiation of being an artist is also challenging. You have to keep being bothered and generating energy and ideas yourself, because actually nobody cares if you stop making art. There will always be another artist to take your place. Sometimes that self-initiating side of being an artist can be tiring. Ditto the business side of promoting and constant competing.”

But not withstanding this, Julie said, “ It’s still a great life. I can’t imagine doing anything else ... except maybe landscape architecture.”

“My role at the Queensland College of Art is really two roles. It’s both Head of Painting at the College and also being an artist. In the studio, I am working on a series of painting for a solo exhibition that was due to open with Dark Mofo opening week in Hobart (postponed due to CV19). These paintings are based on a residency I did with St Andrews War Memorial Hospital in Brisbane where I observed surgeries in an operating theatre.”

On being asked what it is she loves about being an artist, Julie was quick to respond. “Artists on the whole are intellectually curious and interesting people. I like being around people like that. In both my studio work and my University work, I am also able to work pretty independently which suits me. I run my own timetable except for the time I need to be face-to-face teaching, and as long as I get the work done, I can be flexible about when and how I do it. This has been especially useful in my other role as a mother of two children.

I also feel like what I do is meaningful and I get a lot of satisfaction from that. Without art (painting, music, theatre, design, movies, and so much more) we are left with a pretty barren existence. Humans need art to better understand ourselves and to share our experiences and feelings with one another. Art brings us together and taps into a part of ourselves that we can’t access in other ways. I feel really lucky to be doing what I always wanted to and to really believe in its usefulness.

My university teaching was something I didn’t expect, it wasn’t a part of my plan. In saying that, it has been wonderful for making me more social, ensuring I never stop learning and also because it keeps me in touch with younger generations of artists, many of whom become my friends. I love art schools and basically, since I went into first year in 1995, I haven’t left! In art schools, there’s almost no recognition of age difference and a huge acceptance of incredibly diverse people all interested in making and understanding art. We have students from 17-75 and from all kinds of backgrounds. I like that at art school, nobody cares if you are good looking or athletic or come from a wealthy family or were ‘high-school popular’. None of that matters. Art schools are one of the most interesting places, with an incredible diversity of interesting people. I highly recommend it!!”



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When asked what she sees as the secret to success in life and work, Julie is clear; “Back yourself. Assume you can do it, then as my father says “bite off more than you can chew and chew like mad.” Especially in the early days I think you have to accept that you will have to work hard: but if you like what you do, that will come anyway.”

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