From our eyes to our ears - the stories of art

Podcast transcript

[00:00:00] **Jacqui:** Calling all creatives, advocates and friends. Welcome to the next chapter of this ever growing content journey. This is your space. These stories are for you. This is Community Matters Media.

Hello, it's Jacqui here. Well, today I am very excited to introduce you to my colleague and contact, Sarah Empey. She is joining us from the fabulous Queensland, and we are going to talk today about something very exciting. That is something that I've been really interested to know more about, and ever since I started chatting with her, I feel like there's a lot of people in the community that would also be really keen to know more about, not just as a artistic person, But I guess more like a culturally inclined person who loves accessibility and technology and really appreciates the local and international art scene.

And we're collaborating with AT Chat on, art describing as assistive technology. Welcome to the lovely Danika from AT Chat. I'm so excited that she's joining us today to chat with me and to chat with Sarah. So over to you, Danika.

[00:01:37] **Danika:** Hi, my name's Danika and I work for AT Chat. An online peer led community and service providing assistive technology, information, support, and advice for people with disability and those who support them.

This quarter, we're focusing on digital storytelling and how AT can support people to tell their story, find their voice, and express themselves creatively. Podcasting has become a near universal way to tell stories, which is why I'm so excited to be collaborating with my friend Jacqui from Community Matters Media on this special episode focused on the wonderful Sarah Empey.

Over to you, Jacqui.

[00:02:18] **Jacqui:** Thank you for joining us on Community Creatives and we heard from my colleague Danika earlier from AT Chat, so we'd love to hear more from Sarah and we're just going to have a bit of a chat about all things art and all things creative. Welcome Sarah and thank you for joining us on Community Creatives season four.

We are excited to talk to you about audio description and art. So No one's met you before here on my podcast channel. So I'm excited to talk more about you, but I'd love to hear from you as well. And I'd love to hear a bit about you and what you do.

[00:03:00] **Sarah:** Great, well thank you Jacqui for having me and it's been lovely chatting with you behind the scenes as well and getting to know more about AT Chat and all the wonderful work you guys do.

So, I really appreciate having this opportunity, very exciting. So, you might notice that I do have an accent. I am from Canada, but don't let that throw you, I'm actually Brisbane born but Canadian raised. So, I called myself an OzCan and I've been living here since moving from Calgary about 13 years ago, and I absolutely love it.

I love it because there's no snow here.

[00:03:34] **Jacqui:** Woohoo! Yay! That's always a good thing, isn't it?

[00:03:39] **Sarah:** Absolutely.

[00:03:40] **Jacqui:** Unfortunately, you have to travel quite far. We're in Western Australia, so you would have to go to places like Albany at the top of a hill and then going to the snowfields. I'd have to go to Melbourne, really, to enjoy it.

So Western Australia doesn't have that liberty, unfortunately. Um, but that's okay. All worth the travel.

[00:03:59] **Sarah:** I know a lot of Australians get quite excited when it starts to snow or they have an opportunity to go and see it. I've lived through it and I'm probably quite content not to go, but I do love that people get excited about it.

And just thinking from a blind person's point of view, I am legally blind. I do have a white cane. Try finding a white cane in a snowbank. You drop it. Look at that. Ha ha

[00:04:20] **Jacqui:** Ha ha ha ha. A needle in a haystack. Ha ha ha ha ha ha ha. Well you've got to have fun with it. Absolutely. Some of the best AT is uh, really accessorizing and um, and enjoying your, your style and your flair.

And um, some of the women I've spoken to have really owned their AT. Um, and you would know your fabulous friend Nerine with her storytelling. She definitely had to have a red wheelchair because then that accessorized with her floral cane as well. I think it's fabulous all the way. Let's celebrate every part of AT.

It's all about style.

Style. Absolutely. I love it. So speaking of style, um, I would really love to hear more about the art describing that you do, because a lot of the things that I was reading that you sent, uh, were just beautifully evocative and the language was just wonderful and it really told a different story that I feel like just visually.

I alone couldn't have seen all of the things that you have seen. So I really love the idea of how you work with your sighted colleague and then you can tell two different stories from two different perspectives. I think you have a really unique opportunity to describe the artwork in a way that is accessible to people with low vision but also to create further depth for people with full vision as well.

So, I was just wondering if you might be able to tell me a bit more about the work that you do in art description and what motivated you to want to pursue this type of work in your field?

[00:06:05] **Sarah:** Well, it, it started, um, after I lost my eyesight. I have diabetic retinopathy and I lost my vision at the age of 25, so 25 years ago, and I had been working in the banking sector and um, I have to say that losing my eyesight was probably the best opportunity for me because I wasn't the happiest in my job.

And after I got back on track and started finding things to do and be interested in, I did get involved with the city of Calgary for, uh, adaptive, accessible, barrier free and inclusive design, but that was also in building space. So I did that for about eight years, and when I moved over here, a colleague that I was aware of but had not met in Calgary, she was here in Brisbane, and she brought me on to her project, because this is her background as well.

She'd come to the Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, QUT, as we were doing an exhibition that was tactile, there was sound, there was scent, there was so many sensory things to work on. And I was going to be there doing the component of audio description and the work of the painting that we were describing for me, having a background with accessible design was able then to relate into talking about how to describe a painting.

I don't just do it myself. I do have 2 percent vision. So it's not me looking at it. I do have a colleagues that I work with. And their lived experience is that they have degrees in art and understanding, technique, all of these wonderful things that they're so familiar with. So what we do is we get into a conversation and we go through the painting, left to right, top to bottom, and then we start putting it together in a way that would make sense.

And I think why it's so neat to do that, it's a collaborative experience. I get to ask questions about the art. I know more about the artist and their content. It's, it's so fantastic to get involved. I've been doing this for about five years, so my colleagues that I work with, we're very familiar with each other.

They're aware of what I'm going to be asking. We're very comfortable with each other. But when we first started, we did have to get it said to other people who are either totally blind, people who are familiar with art, people who weren't familiar with the world of art, and we're talking about the blind and low vision community, to see what if they were understanding or any bits of feedback that they could give us.

So it was a big process just to go through one painting or one art piece.

[00:08:41] **Jacqui:** I love going on that journey with you and I feel like visually I can see that process unfold. And I think that's really exciting because one thing I've really loved about, uh, different exhibitions that we've had come to Perth recently and in the last few years, they have been really sensory, evocative and inclusive.

And it seems to be a changing, uh, narrative where they're telling stories in different ways through the other senses. And it's vastly different from anything that I've experienced before. Always being immersed in the art world and always attending galleries and museums all around the world and having such a passion to be around other people's creative energies.

I think it's fascinating because the last one I saw was such a different experience and a big component of it was a visual. So they actually had built this visual component and there was audio to it. There was no olfactory, uh, smell involved, nothing like that, but you sat in a room and it was very immersive and you had the flowing colours of the visuals going around you, so they were petals that were being let loose in the wind, and then they had some words on the screen and they had different images of artwork, so they were scrolling through a book.

So it was a very different experience and prior to going in you could touch the flowers so it was very gardening kind of focused and they did a highlight on a local artist that had put together these paper flowers and they were really large and you could you could touch them and It wasn't one of those galleries that you would just go look with your eyes and then that's it.

It was so much more and I've really loved those experiences where I've come into a, um, immersive exhibition and I've sat on the carpet and I've just watched things go all around me on the screen and there's been beautiful music that's melodic and, uh, it's just sets the pace so much. You've got this light show, so I love hearing more about that.

Do you think that that's kind of where we're heading in that artistic world as well? Do you think that that also has a place for people with low vision?

[00:11:01] **Sarah:** Definitely, because just what you described there was all visual, and unless someone explained it to me, or told me what was happening, I would be completely lost in that setting, other than flowers.

There's no way I would know that there was a hand, uh, releasing petals into the air, unless that was I wouldn't know about the colors going by or skirting by or swirling unless that was audibly described to me. So yeah, I think there is definitely room for that. We have worked on some that are imagery as well.

It's not the one I do most because there is audio descriptions on movies and there's also audio description for live theater and that's the whole other ballgame. So I'm not involved in that, but I do appreciate it a lot. Things are really happening for us. Keep in mind, what you see visually, I need to hear audibly.

And it can be done. And through technology, I think about five years ago is when I connected on my first project and got introduced to doing audio descriptions. And I loved it. I hadn't been part of the art world for so long because I lost my vision. And let's be honest, it's a visual. So why would you have blind people and low vision people going to an art museum?

I've had friends who have been blind since birth who were told art is just something you'll never achieve, it's not part of your life, it won't be.

[00:12:28] **Jacqui:** As an artistic person, but for someone who loves and embraces, um, accessibility and to say, how could you not find a place for people in this world? And that's when we chatted about, um, after Monet had lost his vision and he was losing his vision and how his, um, artwork changed dramatically.

And what an incredible skill that he still had to offer, and it's, the storytelling changed, but he was still expressing himself and people were still appreciating it, even if he didn't appreciate himself in that time. It's really just saying, we are still actually living and creating and being, and to be human is to create.

We know we're living and breathing when we can be creative in our own way. There shouldn't be rules around that. So in my art process, I love doing things that are more tactile and I've loved learning from you as well because I feel like I'm not quite getting where I need to be as well as I need to be doing it.

So I would love to hear more about that through your process of describing the visual elements to someone with a visual impairment. So you said you, you typically move from left to right, which is how you would read a book and how you would teach reading and top to bottom, which is the same as well, but I'm curious how assistive technology, uh, plays a role in that process and how we see audio description as the assistive technology tool.

[00:13:58] **Sarah:** So, it's interesting. So, nothing that I've talked about with adaptive equipment today is going to be anything different than what people already know about. It's just how we've used it to make it more accessible to people and make it more inclusive as an environment. So, what I do with my colleagues, before we go down and have a look at the painting, uh, face to face or get to really visualize it, we get a high definition photo of it.

Plus all the information that we know and structurally we do this over Zoom. So when, because of my field of vision is so small. It actually makes sense to look at something small in front of me, like on a phone, which is what I'm using right now, because I can see that small field of vision rather than going into a museum and looking left to right and back and forth.

It's too much to take in. So having the image a bit smaller on my phone works for me. And again, I'm not seeing too much, but my colleagues know that. So we start describing the work. Uh, sometimes we do use the clock system, starting at 12 o'clock, 3 o'clock, 6 o'clock, but it doesn't work with every painting.

And part of it is knowing the painting, feeling what the content is, which we do know from the artist's notes. If my colleague is describing something to me and I'm not quite understanding, we'll go over it again. What do you mean the tree is on the left hand side? Like, you know, just anything. What's happening in the sky at the top?

Um, we'll go through, and also we use words that would make more sense perhaps to the blind and low vision community. It's funny how in the sighted world, color is a big thing. Yes. In our world, it's not quite as big. We still enjoy it. So we know that the sky is blue, we know the grass is green, bananas are yellow, we don't need to know cornflower blue.

We don't need to know some of these others, like pale pink, bright pink. Vibrant. Vibrant is such a great word.

[00:16:04] **Jacqui:** I told my niece yesterday when I was drawing, I said I had 37 shades of green in this pencil case alone. Your wallet will thank you.

[00:16:15] **Sarah:** And I was sighted before too, so I mean, I had a nail polish collection that had colors that, wow.

As long as we have an understanding, it's less confusing, so less is more. Going back to the one about the cornflower blue, for someone who might be, uh, blind or low vision, not familiar with this color, we think of corn as something you would eat, you know, it's kernels, it's bumpy, the taste is sweet, flower, you've seen those flowers in the wind like you talked about, those are petals, you can feel that.

So what is cornflower blue? So words that we use are descriptive words that could also be tactile. So, sometimes we say like the object was about the size of an apple. Or the little pebble was about the size of a thumbnail.

[00:17:04] **Jacqui:** Okay, yes.

[00:17:05] **Sarah:** We understand that.

[00:17:07] **Jacqui:** I think that's wonderfully, uh, descriptive for me to understand because working with someone who is completely blind and my oldest friend, uh, we've been friends since childhood so I've seen her develop with her RP and lose more and more of her vision so I've been more aware of where her field of vision is and not having the peripheral but actually those tactile things have been really fascinating to understand because when I've worked with someone who has been no vision from birth She would have tactile markers so it could be like a shape and then that's a reference so say for instance if she was reaching for a shampoo or something like that then she would feel for a triangle like a rubber band or something yeah that's fascinating because then if you're understanding the sky is blue and the grass is green then you want to have some element of realism perhaps in your artwork and then you could reach for that particular paint brush or you could reach for that particular paint when it all feels the same but if it's tangible and you can feel it and you remember and you associate that with something as common as a thumbnail. Then I think that's very useful, or an apple that you can roll in the palm of your hand and you can feel that.

So I think that that kind of changes that for me because I do wonder if the words like vibrant are buzzwords that are overused and too common. So it's interesting to hear that you find those to be quite descriptive because you imagine that as a burst and if from a dictionary definition standpoint, that's how we want to use our descriptions, isn't it?

Like understanding the literal meaning of the word.

[00:18:47] **Sarah:** Yeah, so we try to use words that give movement as well. So I would say vibrant is such a great descriptive or adjective that it gives you an idea of power. Feeling like it's vibrant blue. Woohoo! Yeah, something to be excited about. We've got pale blue. We've got light blue. We've got pale blue. These are sort of words that we can understand. There was an artist that really loved using the word fuchsia.

[00:19:14] **Sarah:** So how do you describe that? You know, you come across words that just may or may not work. So let's go with less is more a purpley pink, something like that.

Something that we can, can relate it to also yet using tactile as well. Um, we have talked to artists about saying, could you bring in your paint brushes because a lot of the paint brushes have wider heads on them or smaller chips. They're very fine. So one artist brought in all of her paintbrushes, still hardened with paint on them.

And not only did we show this to the blind and low vision groups that came through, we showed it to a group of high school students. And this one girl was so excited and she goes, oh, I can smell the paint, she goes, this makes it so real. And I said, there we go. There's a quote right there that we need to be using because this works for everybody.

Using adaptive technology. Yeah, my, my friends, like my colleagues and I, we will do a meeting on Zoom and each painting can take up to a few hours to do by the time we edit it twice by the time we go and see it in person, make sure the colors are correct. And again, it's co-design. So my colleagues are not going to go there without me.

Co-design is working from the beginning to the very end of each project. And I like being involved with that too. With the Zoom or Teams that we do use, then we do get to go and see the art piece. And once the scripts are ready to go, when we have enough description, we've got it where it's not going to be confusing.

We, and I'll go over that, because left and rights are very confusing sometimes. Then we put up QR codes beside the art piece, and if it's better to go on the left or the right, with all the art pieces, it has to go on the same side, uniformity.

[00:21:07] **Jacqui:** Yes.

[00:21:08] **Jacqui:** And how does somebody find a QR code in a museum? We use tactile floor indicators on the ground so that our canes roll over it, and once our cane rolls over it, and in between these two grooves, we Right above it by one meter above the, uh, will be the QR code and around the QR code we have a little bumpy sticker.

[00:21:29] **Sarah:** I don't want to call it quite like a braille sticker because there's no words on it but it's a little bumpy sticker with dots and that goes around the QR code so we can find them with the screen of our phone and that will start the audio description or bring you to the web page to listen to the transcript.

[00:21:45] **Jacqui:** Oh, that's, that's cool.

The echnology

[00:21:48] **Sarah:** I'm using is not unheard of. But we're using it in a way that really makes it accessible for people. And something we did find with the QR codes when people are scanning them, not just all blind and low vision people are scanning them. Sighted people are scanning them too.

Can you imagine like working all day and you don't want to read another document? So you listen to the audio description. Or if the voice on the audio description is going a little bit too slow for your liking, You can listen to the transcript, because on my phone, it has voiceover or a screen reader, and there are rumors that blind and low vision people can listen to content quite quickly.

I'm one of those people.

[00:22:32] **Jacqui:** I've seen that very clearly when working with the same lady and she brought up Audible and she started running through a book and it went so fast and I thought, oh my gosh, I'm getting so overwhelmed. I can't follow this dialogue. And it was just easy. It just came naturally to her.

So I think it's great if people can then adjust the speed according to how they process their information as well. I think that sounds fascinating. It's very inclusive and I, I feel like you are devaluing a little bit that these are things people know about, right? It's nothing new, but I'm sorry, like when it comes to this kind of thinking, it's incredibly innovative.

Yes, we've been using the same things. But how do we apply the same technology in different ways to make it accessible?

That kind of divergent thinking is something to be celebrated. And that's what I love about assistive technology. And I think when we started chatting about AT, and perhaps maybe you were questioning whether what you do is AT, I think that there's a lot of room for that information and explanatory piece.

For people to understand that AT can be everyday things. We're just using them differently and we're expanding. Yeah, we're expanding their purpose by our creative and innovative thinking.

[00:23:58] **Jacqui:** And also

[00:24:00] **Sarah:** too, what we're finding, because you can see how many people are scanning the QR codes when they come in. So we might have an introduction to the gallery and there will be one for an art piece.

Sometimes because of the way the space is laid out. In one of the museums I work with in Sydney, they could only put up one QR code, so we came up with a list where you could click on the artist with their name of their work, and that would take you to another web page where they can get that same content, audibly described or transcript, and the picture of the work.

So you've got three pieces on that landing page. So, we try to make it accessible. I can't fly down to Sydney very often, and what if I want to show my parents back in Canada? Well, I send them the link, and they can listen to it too.

[00:24:46] **Jacqui:** Wow.

[00:24:47] **Sarah:** Or read about it. That's beautiful. So, it's not just accessibility for the blind and low vision community, it's accessible globally.

[00:24:53] **Jacqui:** Yes.

[00:24:54] **Sarah:** For people, if they've got the right equipment, but we're also finding that the people who are scanning the QR codes, and I think there's that age group where people are just familiar with QR codes and they need to scan it. They'll run across the room just to go scan it because that's what they do.

[00:25:08] **Jacqui:** Yes, there it is. Get my phone out, it's already out.

[00:25:13] **Sarah:** And they scan these QR codes, but we've heard back, feedback is that people who are dyslexic like to hear the audio description. People who, English is a second language. Listen to the audio description. Sighted people may not want to come to a gallery or online and read the transcript.

They listen to the audio description.

[00:25:31] **Jacqui:** Yes.

[00:25:33] **Sarah:** What's so good about these audio descriptions, because they are for the blind and low vision, a lot of people we've heard, and even in some of the museums, were saying, we have looked at this painting for years and we didn't hear all that detail. We were picking up more detail than what we had visually seen before.

[00:25:48] **Jacqui:** Yes.

[00:25:49] **Sarah:** Because of what we're going through. And I'm like, oh, it's just so exciting to be in this world. And it's not only exciting to do it, but it's exciting to be part of it. It's exciting to bring it to the community. And it's exciting to get this feedback, which has just been wonderful.

[00:26:05] **Jacqui:** I love that, and you know, your excitement is inspirational and it's catching because that makes me excited to continue paving the way in whatever way that I can do, and to tell people more about this awesome work, because I think it's very much a collaborative thing that Is never going to be one size fits all and the thing is in the disability community, then you've always got fluctuating capacity.

You've got people who maybe they show up on one day and they can bring their whole self and then because they gave their whole self that day, they have nothing for the next couple of weeks. So this is a reality that we're facing. Having this accessibility front and center and not disregarding the importance of it for any given person is just so wonderfully inclusive and I'm really, I'm also really excited about the potential in this because, you know, like essentially when we're talking about galleries embracing this, it's a lot of money.

It's, it's effort. I get that. However, this is so much more than just the low vision community. There's so many more people that will benefit from this and you know, and neurologically speaking, people living with ADHD, they can't sustain that level of focus in that situation that they could be overstimulated.

There's too much going on. So having the option, if you have a day that you just don't have the spoons, then you just tap into that so you're not diminishing your resources and you can fill your bucket in other ways. So I think it makes wonderful sense just to include everyone in this way. And I love that it's an option.

[00:27:43] **Sarah:** We've done a lot of presentations, my colleagues and I, with different groups, uh, with art museums and galleries and saying, why should you do audio description? Why not?

[00:27:53] **Jacqui:** Yeah. Really good question.

[00:27:55] **Sarah:** Why not?

[00:27:56] **Jacqui:** Rhetorical question. Yeah. Before, you mentioned to me, Sarah, that you had your life changed for the better, having lost your eyesight.

Now that's quite a bold thing to say. Could you explain to me maybe why that is and what that's meant to you?

[00:28:14] **Sarah:** I was working professionally, uh, in a banking world, and had I not lost my eyesight when I was 25, I, I would still be there, there's no doubt, it was what I knew what, how to do, and I didn't know how to go looking for anything else.

So, when this happened to me, I did have to rebuild my life, which did take a little bit, but all of a sudden I realized all the things I was missing out on when I was on my way to work and working long hours. And suddenly, I was noticing the sun on my face, and the birds, and hearing nature. And I always say to people that I see more now than I did when I was sighted.

Because I was missing out on so much. And I feel so lucky that losing my eyesight to those challenges, it has actually been the best thing that happened for me. It put me into a place where I needed to find out who I was, and what my purpose in life was. And that would not have happened otherwise. So I feel very fortunate that this happened to me and I can help make things more inclusive for other people going through a similar situation.

[00:29:16] **Jacqui:** Thank you for sharing. That's really beautiful and such a profound thing to say and to hear and I love that this is just authentically your experience and you're not just saying this because you're accepting what your life is now. You're embracing it and you're walking a different path and you're opening yourself up.

To possibilities that you never would have had previously. And I think that's incredible because every time you spoke about the imagery, I loved closing my eyes and seeing your descriptions. I think that's a really beautiful way to see the world and definitely a better way to see the world in my opinion.

[00:29:54] **Sarah:** Yeah, it's a, it's a different way to experience it. And I feel that of course, when you use one sense, the other sense kick in and wow. It can really be a beautiful thing. It really can be to do something in a different way.

[00:30:07] **Jacqui:** Thank you for sharing that feedback. All my love. Jacqui.

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