

April 2020—May 2021
*Nina Ross, Jessie Scott
and Lizzy Sampson*



The following is an excerpt of a conversation thread between three artists over the course of 12 months (April 2020–May 2021). The images accompanying are works that the artists produced in the presence of, and about, their children, and which have never been exhibited or published anywhere except on their own websites.

25 April 2020—From: Nina

Hi Jessie and Lizzy, I have been thinking of you both so much, and I've been meaning to call but I just don't get a moment to do anything during single parenting, widow, homeschooling. So I thought I would shout out this morning and say hi. I literally want to phone you both every day, but it just doesn't happen. Anyway, I hope you both are going well at home, and ... I don't really know what to say! Because I know that that would come with lots of ups and downs ... I wanted to say I'm not going to make this into an art bitch or anything, I just had a giggle during the week because I saw how ACCA had a call out for initiating new projects and there was going to be three commissions, and they all had artists fees of around \$8000 or something, and I thought ohhh that's so funny, in the past I would've contemplated it, and now I just think nuh, not even interested. Do not want to apply. And I also thought, and again this is not complaining, it's just getting older in the arts and having things reveal itself, I realised how they'll get someone who's willing to spend a lot of money on the project, cos the most ambitious projects get picked, so someone who's got more than that amount of money ... sorry, losing my voice ... and that's completely fine ... but it's indicative as to how the industry works, isn't it? A new commission, and someone who's got the privilege to be able to put something really ambitious up. And I sort of felt relieved that I wasn't going to apply ... which really surprised me. Anyway, I'm wondering if you've both seen it? It's just really freeing actually, not applying for stuff, or having an exhibition, and just thinking about how a practice can unfold or what a practice can be. Anyway, I hope that Saturday brings a bit of quietness for both of you. Jessie, I loved your post about Donna getting really good at TV, it made me chuckle.

25 April 2020—From: Jessie

Hi Nina, thank you so much for sending that voice message—it's actually amazing to hear your voice, and I agree that I think of you guys all the time and it is often hard to pick up the phone or schedule something, so I like this idea of a delayed conversation, where we each get to say what we wanna say! I did see that call out from ACCA, and I started trolling them in their comments actually because I was really appalled ... What a weird allocation of resources ... and what are they doing to support their casuals and short term contract staff who are no doubt out of work now? Yeah, to me it just seems kinda gross and really disingenuous, like basically something to bring glory to themselves, rather than to actually help anyone. It's like three public commissions that are \$8000 each, of course only really famous artists are going to get them. They're not going to give them to volunteers or casual workers at ACCA—who are also artists. Indeed, they're also not going to give it to me, so yeah

... it's actually amazing to hear your voice, and I agree that I think of you guys all the time ... I like this idea of a delayed conversation, where we each get to say what we wanna say!

I'm not bothering to apply for it either! I'm not gonna spend time putting together an application for something I know I'm definitely not going to get. And that is basically a farce anyway. And that also politically I really strongly disagree with, as an allocation of money at this time when people are unemployed left right and centre, on the dole ... you know people have got real life concerns.

25 April 2020—From: Lizzy

Hi Nina, Hi Jessie. Love these voicemails which aren't really voicemails. So good to hear both of your voices. Um, yeah. We've had an intense week this week. We had to get Luka to hospital in an ambulance, which was really stressful. So yeah after spending five weeks inside trying to avoid coronavirus, Luka and I ended up at the Austin Hospital, so hopefully we have avoided any further infections, but yeah, she seems to be slowly improving now. But there was a really intense four or five days where she didn't sleep at all, and it was just really crazy crazy, sad, stressful, horrible parenting times.

Um ... I have to say that I haven't thought about making art at all, and it's been a conscious decision, because I just think that it's unrealistic, and stay at home parenting is intense enough. But yeah I did briefly see the ACCA thing, but I have to say

You know I never wanted to do anything but go to art school, like never, it's the only thing I wanted to do, I didn't look at anything else, it's the only thing I've ever wanted to do, all my life, up until a few years ago ...

I don't really pay much attention to much that's going on anymore. And yeah I did also see the West Space/Bus/Caves/Kings residency thingy and look I read through and kind of felt a similar way ... oh yeah you know there's potential there, but at the same time, the idea of sitting down and trying to convince people that this would be good for me and that I would do a good job was just totally tiring. And I also just thought, no, I don't need that. And just the way it was worded: there was a line in there "the opportunity will be given to people who can really embrace it and take it far" and something something ... And I just thought, well, that is not me! I can't give it

everything I've got. So ... I'm going to ignore it. So, getting rid of the mental load of the idea that I have to be practicing, is a big relief.

But the idea of committing to studying a whole new profession ... it's really overwhelming, it's very appealing, but totally overwhelming and you know the types of professions that you brainstorm that you'd like to do ... they're all precarious! I mean what's not precarious ... it's really hard. It feels like this massive huge investment in time and money and kind of a big leap of faith. You know I never wanted to do anything but go to art school, like never, it's the only thing I wanted to do, I didn't look at anything else, it's the only thing I've ever wanted to do, all my life, up until a few years ago ... and I've never regretted it, but you know I'm kind of coming to this realisation that actually I think I do want to do something else. Or maybe I wish I had've done something else. Because I've just followed my passion all the way, but yeah, now I find myself regretting that I've spent my education on that.

10 May 2020—From: Nina

Hi Jessie and Lizzy! I hope you're both having a nice Mother's Day ... just thinking about what you said Jessie about prioritising, or the rationale of doing things and making in this pandemic. I realise the pandemic's offered me a way out that I'm enjoying ... I'm being more slap-dash about things and it's really good. I'm very happy to just let things go and not do things, and think, oh that can flow over into the next day. But that's because I know every day looks the same in lockdown ... SO I jumped onto a Zoom artist talk, and I have a really bad attitude towards the arts at the moment. Actually I don't think it's a bad attitude, I think I'm just fed up, and I think it's ok to be fed up and disheartened. I spoke about how in terms of production, galleries are supposed to be doing all these public programs and events, and that falls on the artists and art workers, and how it's about, the commodification of it all, and just asking us to work more—more for less pay, or the same pay. And someone said "but you know that's how ARIs started in Melbourne, and this is an opportunity when we come out of lockdown, you know artists are resourceful and they might be able to draw on their

innovation". I feel like there's this huge disconnect with a lot of people's realities still, with this pandemic—you know people have lost so many (casual) jobs, and those jobs hold up the arts ... and I don't think this is an opportunity for innovation ... I think this is an opportunity to say NO—this is not working, and it's ok that it's not working. And I think it should all fall over personally, because it's not sustainable.

12 May 2020—From: Lizzy

Hi Nina, Hi Jessie, I'm just heading out on a walk, and it's quarter to five, and it's the first time I've left the house (today). Yeah it's great news that we can meet and visit people now, I think it will make a huge difference ... What I'm not looking forward to is going back to work. Secretly a part of me kind of feels like I like the staying at home bit, not that I want to be a stay at home mum, but at least the not having to be out the door at 8am with two kids ... it feels absolutely impossible at the moment ... it's such a weird time.

I've actually started ... and I think a lot of people do this: their artworks end up evolving, or stuffed in a cupboard, or under the bed, or whatever ... um, and like I've started kind of getting rid of all my art—or trying to turn it into something else. One artwork I made of bricks, I actually got my brother to pave a little pathway in my backyard. And you know another artwork that I've used wood and sticks, I kind of turned into June's cubby house. Yeah so, it's a process of decluttering, but also breaking down my art practice and getting rid of everything. I've started turning all of my studio notes and files and all my thesis drafts and everything that I've ever kept in my studio—I've decided to make it all into little books and zines, and to send it all out into the world and get rid of it all. Partly because folding paper is just nice and a thing that I can just manage to do at the moment. But also, I dunno, you know, I've just got a huge storage cupboard full of all this shit, slash artwork, that's never gonna go anywhere, you know? Like, I'm not gonna have a retrospective, it's not gonna happen, why am I keeping it? So I like the idea of trying to get rid of it and turn it into something else.

13 May 2020—From: Jessie

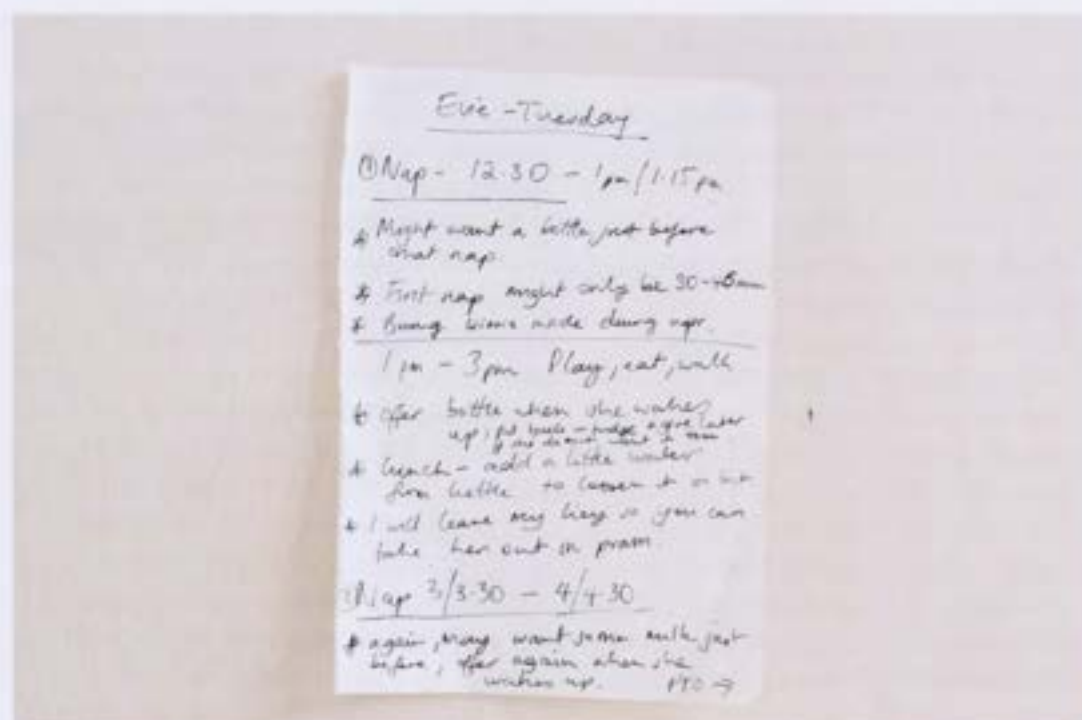
Hey Nina and Lizzy, thank you so much for your messages ... so much in both of them to unpack and think about—they both made me quite emotional actually ... yes, happy Mother's Day to both of you. It took me a while to respond to this because I actually had a really awful Mother's Day. Genevieve has been so fractious, and anxious and upset the last couple of weeks, and it kind of all culminated on Mother's Day, and she was kind of an arsehole to me, and I was kind of an arsehole back: not my finest mothering; not my finest day [laughs]. And it just made me feel really like shit.

But yeah, I can totally relate to all the things that both of you are saying ... I had like this real intense revelation over the last week. I took part in something that my friend Ghita organised at the Capitol, and I bloody agonised over it, I recorded it about three or four times, and I kept changing it, and then I felt quite happy with it in the end and I just loved working with Ghita on it and I loved the little series she was doing. And I just had this moment of yeah fuck, I actually just don't even want to be part of the art world and maybe I never should've been, and maybe trying to fit this square peg into a round hole all this time has just been insane? And I feel quite ready to actually walk away from it all, to be honest, and it feels good. It's like this huge relief. I will always make stuff, and whether I think of myself as an artist or not—I definitely don't consider myself a contemporary artist anymore, and am not interested in being part of the gallery system or you know, that whole world. Sorry my thumb keeps slipping off

the little button ... To me that screen culture world probably makes a lot more sense to me, than the art world, which has always given me the shits, and at the moment I just feel so despairing and disgusted and pissed off at it, and I don't even know how I could continue to contribute to it in a genuine way anymore. I guess what that means for me now means not applying for grants, for shows, and also not saying yes to doing stuff I normally would—panels, podcasts—I won't be doing stuff like that anymore, I don't want to be a voice in that space anymore. It just feels really increasingly disingenuous, because I just have nothing positive to say anymore. I don't care how the art world recovers, because we have got ourselves into this position over so many years, and even now it's like you know, classically, we don't really want to change or improve anything, we just want to go back to how it worked for some of us, at a certain point. Anyway. Yes, very negative, yes yes yes.

29 August 2020—From: Lizzy

Hi Nina and Jessie, it's Lizzy, as you know. I don't really have anything exciting to tell you, but I just wanted to say hi, cos it's been a while between our voice messages and I miss hearing you both. I'm just out for a walk near the creek, and I'm really happy that spring is almost here. It's my absolute favourite time of year, and the smells in the air are just so good and it's exciting because we can plant new things in the garden and I just feel like it's going to make things a little bit easier with, um, the improvement in the weather. So yeah, hopefully you've been able to get out and get some exercise. Um. What else? What are we now—seven weeks in or something—maybe we're getting the hang of how to do this? Um, no, I know what's made a difference actually, what's made a difference this week for me is I've made an effort to go for my walk with people I don't normally see that often, and it's almost felt like a normal week ... just being out and about and being able to see other people. I still don't really have time to make anything or do much creative work, but making playlists and sending them to people has been nice.



18 September 2020—From: Nina

Hi Jessie and Lizzy, I'm out walking the dog. My mum has come over to look after Archie so I can have a moment to myself. It's the last day of term—Term 3—last day of remote learning, which I'm very happy about. Um, Archie managed to do all of his school activities, and he's happy and confident so that's very nice for me but I'm really vague ... and worn out and worn down from it all. It's hard, the playgrounds are open again and I start talking to parents with their kids, and ... I just feel like I need to

People ask "Doesn't your partner help with home learning ...?", and I say that it's just me, and they ask "What about your partner?" And I don't know what to say? Oh he's dead ...

acknowledge this to someone ... people ask "Doesn't your partner help with home learning or do you do it all?", and I say that it's just me, and they ask "What about your partner?" And I don't know what to say? Oh he's dead ... I do say that sometimes actually, but use passed away because I know people can't handle the word dead because our society doesn't know how to manage grief so you have to be gentle with them and say passed away. And ... um ... they are all talking about how hard it is for them and their partners, and I feel like saying ... pick a different audience. Anyway, I can laugh

about it now. It would have hurt in the past but I can feel the grief changing shape so that has been interesting and validating for me. Makes me think about what my grief counsellor once said—your life starts to grow around the grief and with the grief, as opposed to the grief being everything and all consuming ... your life no longer restricted to just grief and being exhausted from caring for someone.

29 October 2020—From: Nina

Oh my gosh I left the longest message and my thumb fell off the button at some stage as I was recording and I think it could be a good thing ... I think it's the WhatsApp Gods telling me to shut the fuck up? So I'm not going to repeat myself, it was a boring message about photography, and how the pandemic has exacerbated, I guess, the extinction of photography as a commercial job or medium. And, blahblah blahblahblah. So, that's the gist of it. Anyway, I hope you both are great. I'd love to catch up. Let me know what days suit you. I actually really miss you both, I can't wait to see you in real life. Even if it's in real life via video, which has been our real life lately. Um, yeah.

30 October 2020—From: Jessie

Yes, no ... yeah [laughs] what we're experiencing with COVID is not grief, Nina, that's so true, and yeah I've heard that word bandied around, about fuckin hairdressing ... and not being able to go to cafes and restaurants ... and look yeah, I mean people are just using it as an analogy I think. I don't think they really mean it's grief, it's just a handy analogy. But it's still bullshit, and it's still not right to use that word, I agree. Um, I think what I would say is that the thing that has been hard for people to get their head around is not knowing what's actually on the other side yet, you know, and that's the part that's scary is that people's whole life plans, um, are being altered. So it's not just the not being able to go out, and not being able to do the things you normally do, I think it's the sense of like: I'm not sure that I can invest in what I wanted to invest in, for this part of my life. I'm not sure that I can take those risks anymore. And that might mean not being able to do the thing you wanted to do, being able to be the person you wanted to be. Not being able to achieve the things you wanted to achieve. So, that is the thing that I think actually is a better analogy for grief. Because that's the loss of a future you imagined for yourself. And the loss of a person that you imagined yourself to be.

This break in the transcript reflects the fact that we came out of lockdown and went back to reasonably busy 'COVID-normal' lives. During this several month break in messaging, we wrote a 4000 word chapter for a book about care together, meeting only once in person in this whole time. Much of our communication during this period was actually via Google Docs, in the comments in the margins, and trying to schedule (and reschedule) an in-person meeting on the WhatsApp thread.

26 May 2021—From: Jessie

Hello ladies, I have got all your spam Nina ... I've read everything and I'm ready to work on this this morning, and tie up any loose ends, but I agree, I think it's sort of coming together quite well. And thank you for the warning. I also got a warning yesterday from a mum who knows someone, who knows someone, in the Department of Education, so it was kind of on my radar, but I don't think I was expecting it to be such a long lockdown.

And yeah, feeling really really bad for everyone involved in Rising. Cos it's basically the whole festival ... um, fucked. And I'm not worried for my own things I was going to see, but I've had a sick feeling in my stomach about this festival since they put the call out. And something about the hubris of it, and the kind of ... you know the idea that artists should just be the ones to kind of represent renewal all the time. I'm like, maybe they just should've fucking listened to artists in the first place. That you know, we just need to be supported, we don't need to be performing monkeys all the time. Sometimes we just need to be supported. Because we're all going through the same shit that everyone else is going through. And so, I'm kind of a bit angry actually, that like, you know, whoever powers-that-be fucking curators and institutions thought that this was a good idea. And have put all of these very vulnerable artists and arts workers, who've just been through like the funding apocalypse and you know then COVID, in this position again. And anyway, I'm quite furious about it and sad for my friends who've just spent all this time and effort putting together COVID plans and making incredible work, and it's all just up in the air ... anyway. RA RA RA. I'm gonna go home today and try to get as much work done as possible, and maybe even go out and see some art while I still can.

Sometimes we just need to be supported. Because we're all going through the same shit that everyone else is going through. And so, I'm kind of a bit angry actually ...

26 May 2021—From: Lizzy

Yeah, Jessie, I have to say that the Rising festival, thanks for sharing that perspective ... I guess it's just the nature of how unpredictable everything is at the moment. Literally within 24 hours, we've gone from zero cases to going into lockdown, so you know it's like timing is absolutely everything and it's completely out of their control. But what you said about artists and putting extra pressure on them is very interesting. I'm working on this Working for Victoria program, where I'm working with artists who are in schools, and on the flip side of what you said, I'm having these conversations with artists saying "This program is changing my life, I've never been employed full time, I can't believe I've got this job, is it going to continue, how can we make it work?" like they're literally in these life changing jobs, and like, it's going to end very abruptly for them, it's not going to continue. This is a Working for Victoria program, they didn't even fund an evaluation of the program, so the government's not interested to know how successful it is, it's about short-term jobs. And we're all thinking "What the fuck is happening at the end of this program?" Like, artists are going to be

pushed off a cliff, into precariousness again and ... they're forging good relationships and putting together plans, but it's just so interesting to be having these conversations. Like someone literally said to me this week: I've lived in this community for 14 years and I've never felt like I've had anything to contribute and I'm in this job, and it's the first time she's been employed full time in her life, and it's like wow—imagine if these jobs existed for artists all the time, and not just as an emergency response. It's equally devastating and amazing to hear. Anyway, let's keep talking.



Nina Ross, *It took me 3 years to complete this 2018–2021*, acrylic on canvas.