



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 7 EPISODE 1 (Feb 2025)

COMA GALLERY

Sotiris Sotiriou

**Tim Stackpool:** Welcome back to the podcast. And of course, as we always acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land upon which this podcast is recorded and listened to. For me right now, we're on location in Marrickville. So that's the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. And we pay our respects to their elders past, present, and those emerging.

And also don't forget you can download a transcript of today's conversation at [www.insidethegallery.com.au](http://www.insidethegallery.com.au) and that's made possible by the folks at the Australian Arts Channel which you can view for free at [australianartschannel.com.au](http://australianartschannel.com.au)

As you heard in the introduction we're talking to Sotiris Sotiriou who is the founder of COMA which has recently moved into Sydney's inner west in Marrickville. So Sotiris, welcome to the inner west of Sydney. Does it feel like home, do you think?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Yeah, it feels like home. Well, I'm Greek Italian, so it feels like home. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

**Tim Stackpool:** Now, you were originally over two venues, right? Is that correct? Why the move?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** It's so funny, people always say, you have two galleries there are two spaces. Having two galleries was not something that was important to us. We just wanted more square meterage. It doesn't matter where that came from. When the Chippendale location came up, we weren't making a move to have, two exhibition spaces. It was us just wanting to have more, More room in Sydney. And we spoke about it for a long time. It was great having more room. And then the team were bouncing between the two venues. And the whole conversation came to the 2025 and 2026 program. And the type of artists that we're showing. And our artists that we already work with. Wanting to execute more ambitious projects.

We thought let's turn this into a serious space, like a international, a world class space where artists can be , as ambitious as they want. We can provide full client services and the team can work together.

**Tim Stackpool:** We do hear a lot about difficulties locating appropriate real estate in Sydney. How long were you looking for a new place to call home?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** We see you. We're not rushed into opening the space. We move quite quickly once we make a decision. But I, as do a lot of Sydneysiders, I just look at property all the time anyway, we're a very property focused city, so Look, I'm looking all the time.

I'm looking at residential. I'm looking at commercial. You just, you you just, you see what's happening in the city anyway, I'm still doing this even though we've moved. And I saw this place maybe about eight months ago. I wasn't too interested because We still had other projects we were focused on.

I came back from Basel . So we thought we'd take it a little bit more seriously. We moved in about a month, and we built in about two and a half months. We moved pretty quickly. Yeah. It wasn't like a long address process at all.

**Tim Stackpool:** It's a very grand and impressive space. When you walk down the street, there is only one building that is painted brilliant white, and that is yours.

Your signage out the front is elegant, understated, yet elegant. Tell us about the space that you've actually built here now. What are the facilities that you insisted on actually doing with your interior, at least?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Obviously the main exhibiting space is. It's, the most important part of the gallery but this is a 500 metre space.

It was essentially on a perfectly rectangular footprint, means we can have one monstrous prime exhibiting space. The ceilings are six meters high, it's got these beautiful skylights, lets all the natural light in. I think in a lot of kind of press that's come out, it says it's like comparative to.

A lot of Los Angeles, Los Angelino spaces and it is true, that's warehouse town and so is this suburb Yeah, primarily it's a the epitome of viewing spaces in Sydney is our goal and then secondary to that is we also do a lot of secondary markets work, with clients, we're primary market usually in the main room and we do secondary market deals alongside, our core focus at the gallery.

And so beautiful viewing rooms, super important in that regard. And also, just to be able to take moment, there's two private viewing rooms here, there's two storage areas there's a reception area, there's the office. It also means my staff have flexibility, one private viewing room, the one we're sitting in right now, is a lot more elegant, it's more relaxing, it's devoid of any storage, it's purely meetings. Consultancy and viewing. And the other one is for my clients who are maybe a little bit more erratic. They want to rifle through our things while they talk to us. So there's like direct access to storage next to that meeting room. And so essentially we're trying to say to ourselves, The whole kind of genius is the least amount of steps, any trucks unloading in this building, they go to perfectly straight line to storage connects in a perfectly straight line to private viewing, so how can we make this as efficient as possible while keeping all services onsite, so we'll also, we won't need any offsite storage.

Probably for a long time. And it means our marketing teams and we have like another group, an external group, Tacoma, who do a lot of content and marketing and things like that. It means they can actually situate their offices on site here as well. It's just about keeping everything in one

**Tim Stackpool:** location. It is a very comfy room where we're sitting right now. But one thing I also notice when I walk in the door is that you have merch.

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** I love merch. I actually don't know how much merch I actually buy, but love the idea of different ways to interact with any brand. It doesn't matter to me, like one of my most worn items of clothing, which is now completely covered in paint and torn apart after the build is like a space X hoodie. I don't know. I like merch. It's it's also a way for younger visitors to, to interact with the brand. I've had a great experience with a friend and in. In Paris a non art a non gallery going friend and we'd been in Paris together And we went to a gallery a huge commercial gallery, And he bought merch and then we were in Paris a couple years later this year actually and he said he didn't want to go To any galleries. I was going to galleries and then we were catching up, you know in between and then he said hey Let's go back to that gallery. I got that great, t shirt or whatever from I was like That's a great experience for someone who's not It's not, art centric and whatever, it's not, it's not rocket science, but commercial galleries in Sydney, it's not really their thing. It's more a museum thing. I like it. So we like it. So we'll have it. I

**Tim Stackpool:** mean, your brand is like a work of art anyway, in a way it has to be aesthetically pleasing, memorable, that sort of stuff. Placing it on a t shirt, that's the canvas for it. But you have t shirts. That sort of stuff. Caps.

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Caps. We have matchboxes actually. We have those like cute hotel room keychains. Those kind of keychains. What else did they make? We have lavender incense, because this show is called Waiting for Lavender.

**Tim Stackpool:** We'll come to Justin Williams show in a minute.

In more general terms, with what 2016, and looking at your publicity material, it says that you talk about striving to elevate Australian art, Positioning the artists within esteemed international institutions and fairs, providing a platform that amplifies their visibility and defines their place in the art world as figures of international significance.

Has that been any more challenging today than it was back in 2016? Is there a pre COVID, post COVID type of feel?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** it's easier today. I think it will be easier as time goes by in general, I don't like saying, Oh, the world has become more globalized. The internet, yada yada.

We know these are not new things. We understand how they exist, but they do iterate and they do compound. And every time one of our Australian artists is put in context with a number of international artists at this gallery, and then they have a, finally they have a show at a somewhere overseas that's, that is a great place for them to show. Then it makes it easier for the next artist. It makes it easier for the one after that. It makes it easier for us to bring out more international artists. It makes it easier for us to bring out artists of greater acclaim. I think the idea of creating this contextual, framework around Australian artists here and Australian artists offshore is, it becomes easier as time goes by. But I think what we're doing here with, for example, our first show here is Australian, second show is Australian, third show is Mexican, fourth show is Indian, but these artists all have such varying exhibiting histories and exhibiting schedules and placing them together allows people who follow one to look at the other and look at them in a different light and I think it's really important for these like groupings of artists to be like placed together.

It, like it, it elevates everyone. It really elevates everyone. I think it's I think it's really important for young Australian artists as well.

**Tim Stackpool:** There is a bit of a concentration in your marketing material regarding Australia and the Asia Pacific. However, in our conversation just now, you've spoken a lot about Paris, Europe, that sort of thing. Are you positioning yourself in order to create a focus or basically are you thinking globally, but actually Positioning your marketing somewhat locally in the Asia Pacific, just give me a business sense of that.

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** I think the Asia Pacific thing has just come out of when we refer to Australia. We refer to it just as Australasia or the Asia Pacific. Us using the term Asia Pacific or Australasia is just essentially saying where we're from. Cause I think the Australian market is deeply tied to the Asian market as well. So I, it might not be one region, completely one region geographically, but there's still a lot of ties and I think it's like most of the work we do at the moment is probably in the States, but but I still say, where is COMA located? It's it's Asiatic it's Australasian.

We're still part of that region. So I'm not saying we work. Predominantly in that region, but I am saying we are from, that region.

**Tim Stackpool:** Talking about doing most of your business in the U. S. Who is your client broadly?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** It's predominantly and probably similar to most commercial galleries.

It's private collectors. It's private collectors, but I think because when I first started COMA and the idea of what we were doing was like I said, it was harder when I started, like your previous question. Is it easier now? Yes, absolutely. It was harder because I think a lot of the artists we were bringing to Australia were, absolutely unheard of in this region.

And then some of the Australians we were showing, hadn't picked up traction yet. It was, the first six months of a gallery. And so naturally the people who did know these artists, A lot of the time we're Americans and Europeans because the artist had a history over there. So it was actually more of a reverse education.

We didn't really need to we didn't need to work as hard to convince Americans and Europeans as to, like the validity and the importance of what we were doing, but Australians, because it was a new thing for the region they were coming to terms with this new gallery also with a lot of artists they didn't know so Naturally a lot of our business has been focused on the Northern Hemisphere because that's you know, it was easier for us to find peers there earlier And as time has gone by, we have a great network there and we have amazing friends and collectors and institutions that we like to work with.

And in the next, with the opening of this space, this whole thing is about the opening of this new space. And a lot of the focus will be on our region here in Australia. And, like we said before, a little bit more broader, the Asia Pacific region. But we really want to interact with Australians more than we have in the past.

And that's another big part of opening this space.

**Tim Stackpool:** Your opening was very successful, I understand there are something like 600 people here and you were tossing people out at 3 o'clock in the morning.

What is your point of difference, do you think?

, what is the attraction that you bring having founded this commercial gallery in Australia?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Well,

Look we, I've always tried to set myself apart by showing different work.

We're not really we're not looking at other Australian commercial galleries to poach artists from them and compete with them on the same grounds. I actually have never been interested in doing that because. There's a lot of commercial galleries in Australia I like. I like their programs, I like what they're doing.

They occupy a place in the market. There was no reason for me to open another gallery in Sydney showing the same work and trying to show the same artists. So our point of difference will always be our artists. We have a very idiosyncratic kind of eye, there's a specific set of parameters we like to meet around, certain artists we're bringing on. And we're very ambitious in the sense of the type of artists that we have brought and we will bring and, we've confirmed for shows and I think our biggest difference is our artists, that definitely reflects when it comes to. The type of crowd we attract and we are a very, we are a very young team.

So our, you're talking about the openings and I guess, why there's a big crowd. We're a young team. So you have a big young opening and that's very fun, obviously. But I guess our difference is we've never wanted to show the same artists as other commercial Australian galleries.

Because like I said, a lot of commercial Australian galleries do a great job of the stables they represent, and so I don't think it's my place to, even attempt to assert that, we have our own place in the market, and we won't occupy that,

**Tim Stackpool:** let's talk about the artists now. Did you have to ponder quite significantly over who was actually going to open your space here, Justin Williams? His work is unique and we'll talk about it, but did you, was it a no brainer to actually have Justin be your first artist in this new space?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** I think it was actually a no brainer because it was time for him to have another show.

We've also worked with him for a very long time, maybe the longest out of all the artists that we represent, I think it was very fortuitous. We knew the build would end now. We knew it had been X number of months since Justin's last show. Justin's last two projects were in Los Angeles and in Paris, it was time for him to have a Sydney show again, there's been a lot of increased interest in his market in this region, so we just.

Lined everything up.

**Tim Stackpool:** Looking at his work I think the thing that struck me was the fact that pretty much all of them are scenes that reflect a moment in humanity, if you like. And they're just ordinary scenes, people going about their ordinary life. There's hardly one image. In his work, in your gallery at the moment, which doesn't include people.

I don't think there is one, actually. Do you see that in his work?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Firstly, I haven't seen him paint a work that doesn't have a human figure in it for a long time and yeah objectively, these are all small moments. The most important thing about Justin's work is the gravitas and, the importance placed on these small moments and these small points of interaction between people. Which extrapolate out to these, larger conversations. His work's always been very intimate, so even just someone's hand on another person's hand or like the idea of a telephone sitting next to someone and the implication that it may ring, , a lot of this work is about the idea of waiting, and these kind of liminal states and what happens if this phone rings and, the phone rings and it says, your wife's gone into labour.

A lot of this is obviously about, it's about childbirth as well. This figure, it's a tiny thing. It's a small moment. All it is a phone ringing, but the moment before the phone ringing and the moment after the phone ring, two totally different like states. And so I think Justin's trying to, He's for a long time. He's actually, for this body of work, he's essentially been trying to say the, this. Post small moments, you can still come out profoundly changed. And that happens a lot in this show. There's a lot of figures in rooms waiting. And the implication with the waiting room is obviously you're waiting for something. And what happens after that is again a profound change. You enter the room as one person, you leave as another. And it's these really small moments that kind of make up these moments of potentially profound or like grandiose change and all the small moments seem so inconsequential. They're tiny, like pouring a cup of tea or, showing like a little girl like ducks at a pond, but they're very important.

**Tim Stackpool:** He has quite the remarkable cultural and heritage mix as well. And in having conversations with him in other forums, this arrival of Lavender, his child, hasn't necessarily had a profound change in his work so far, but it's likely that it will. Are you expecting, as a gallerist representing him, to see some changes now that he actually is a parent, a father?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** It's funny because I speak to Justin most days. I actually think it has had a profound effect already. I think it had a profound effect very quickly because this body of work, I think there's 12 paintings. Every single painting bar one, the figures are static. It's this idea of like Justin was hyper nomadic, prior to making this show.

He was living between Lorne, which is in Victoria, in Australia, and then Los Angeles, Santa Fe, Paris, he was in Athens for a few months, like you said, it's a multicultural kind of amalgam, it's very interesting, but I think it has had a profound change because normally this kind of movement, this kind of nomadic nature of people is reflected in the work.

this series is a little devoid of that. Everyone has found purpose or like a place to rest. Even the people waiting are quite static. They're sitting quietly, knitting, you have two men knitting a rocking horse, the character's essentially opened his shop and, he's found a place to undertake his craft and invite other people into that.

A lot of Justin's work in the past is people looking for a place to undertake their craft or to, to live their lives. And a lot of the time they are travelling, that's why a lot of Justin's previous work has a lot of horses and animals and people moving and, people carrying their items and their belongings. But, a good example is, like I mentioned earlier, the man next to the phone. It's a man and a woman and a baby sitting next to a phone, and they're not carrying their belongings. All their, knick knacks and mementos and small masks and keepsakes are pinned to the wall. The implication is, they were nomadic and they were traveling, but they've now stopped.

And they're not carrying their belongings with them. They've found a place to keep what they own. They've found a place to keep the things that remind them of, their time traveling. I think that's really important. Really reflected in a lot of these works and this has happened post or, around the time of birth of Lavender and I think this sense of responsibility is is prevalent in the works.

**Tim Stackpool:** Do you get the butterflies in your stomach? The anticipation of wondering what he's now going to turn out?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Yes, I always do.

any great painter. Should elicit that response and yes I obviously want to know exactly what he's going to make next.

We've talked about it a little bit, but it actually feels like it's up in the air. It's quite ambiguous as to what he'll make because also physically in his life, unrelated, obviously it relates to the paintings, but unrelated to the show itself. He is now , making the decision. Where will I raise?

My child and where will I situate my family? Will that be in Australia? Will that be in Santa Fe? Will it be somewhere else in the States? So I think that question needs to be answered first, but everything around this show was get to the show open the gallery and Then now he has to choose. I guess it's a luxury.

He gets to choose, where I guess that's also the beauty of being an artist, where will I live? And I think that'll affect the next body of work.

**Tim Stackpool:** You spoke at a media event talking about how his life had changed in such a short period of time. You saw him, he went away. When he came back, he was married. Had a stepchild, and then had his own child as well, and then here he is, again. It's these are the sort of things that really inspire artists, aren't they? These huge life changes.

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Yeah some people move quicker than others as they how can you not be, how can you not be affected by such dramatic changes?

Even if his environment hasn't changed that much, he's still in his studio, he's still looking at the world, he's still talking to a lot of his friends, he's still talking to a lot of the artists he's always spoken to. But his set of responsibilities, what his day looks like, the people he cares for, it's changed completely.

It's funny because he's never really been a holiday painter. Some artists, they do a residency, they paint. The landscape, or they're inspired by that residency. He's been quite interesting. He needs to be situated somewhere for some time before he really starts painting that location.

And then sometimes, like it was interesting, he was in Santa Fe, and then, for many months. And then when he went over to Paris to take a studio he often takes. He then started painting Santa Fe. It's like he needs to be in a location for some time, absorb it, leave that location. And then he's able to paint it. So I think that's funny because of this drastic change in his life. He will be in places, I think just naturally for longer periods of time. Like you don't have the luxury to be somewhere for a month with a family. So I think we'll see how that affects. You know the work, how much it deepens his depiction of a location, and like he often does, how he amalgamates that with another location.

**Tim Stackpool:** At the end of this conversation we'll make sure people know how they can actually take a look at Justin's work, but moving ahead, what your plans are for Coma, I mean it's a pretty full schedule, what you've got booked for the rest of the year, can you just take us through that?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** At the close of Justin's show, which is the first show at the new venue, we will open a solo show by an artist named Mick Modrewski. He's an Australian Polish artist who was based in Melbourne for a very long time. He's now, has been living in LA for the past year. He's making a new body of work for Coma. And that will follow along from I think three or four group shows he's recently been included in Los Angeles. After that we will go to Art Basel Hong Kong.

We'll show new works by Mia Middleton in an off site location. And at the fair itself we will show a huge installation by Lu Yang a Chinese artist we've worked with for a very long time. He's based in Tokyo. Become one of the foremost new media artists in the world. That takes us to the end of March. And then in April we will exhibit a new body of work by Jose Davila, a Mexican artist who's been at the forefront of sculpture in Mexico for a very long time.

I actually contacted Jose, I think a year before I opened the gallery I think I contacted Jose seven years ago. And so finally we've managed to, we've talked, we've met up a few times, we've discussed different types of shows and formats of shows.

I'm extremely excited. I've, I'm a huge fan of the work. I think it's the first time it'll be shown commercially in Australia. He actually did show work at the Sydney Biennial. I can't remember which edition, but it was when it was on. I think maybe the last one that was on Cockatoo Island. That will then take us to the start of May where we'll show a suite of paintings by an artist named Mahesh Baliga, he's an Indian artist.

He shows with a gallery called Project 88 in Mumbai and had his first show recently outside India at David Zwirner in London. He then He did another show in India and then his second show outside of India will be at Coma here at this new venue. And after that we go to Taipei Dangdai, do the fair there. I think that takes us pretty much up to our first six months. We'll then have a show by Kansas Smeaton, one of our one of our artists who actually is one of the only artists we work with who's living in Sydney and working in Sydney. Amazing painter this beautiful kind of Rococo, Baroque esque, figuration. And after that show I've also been working on for a very long time by a Native American artist named Teresa Baker. It's these absolutely outstanding it's like geometric, semi geometric textile work made out of AstroTurf with these beautiful weavings of felt and yarn and buffalo skins.

She was recently included in the Hammer Biennial. The Whitney just added work to their collection. The work is so beautiful and so amazing. Pretty much nothing like that has been shown in Australia. And this idea of, Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous peoples from other parts of the world, interacting in this



region, and there might be, there will be analogous histories, analogous perspectives, I think a lot of curators I've spoken to, I've seen the work in the past, but I haven't seen it in person, so this will be the first time a lot of curators are able to see that kind of work.

I think that's also so important, it's what we spoke about at the start. It's this really interesting juncture of different types of practices from different parts of the globe, at all, at different career points as well, coalescing in one space is super important.

**Tim Stackpool:** This is a very full and busy schedule that you've organized for yourself. Going back to what you were talking about with Justin being nomadic. How do you manage this in your life? How do you separate your work and your life? Or do you, can you not? Because you're here, you're working internationally.

Do you have a place that grounds you? Is it this gallery or? Or is this your life, this is how you live your day?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Why would I want to separate them? I don't want to separate anything. The beauty of this job and I think this career is we can work at any hour, at all hours, at any place. The gallery, sure, the gallery is grounding, but the gallery is still a space. Gallery is just a box, when it comes down to it, this will all come down to how great is the programming. So I love this city, and a lot of people said, Oh, you love this type of art, why don't you open a gallery elsewhere? Because it's not my like mission. My mission is to make sure it's shown in this. City, sure, we'll open another gallery somewhere else, offshore at one point, I'm sure we will. But, I don't think I really want to be tied down in that regard. The gallery is a place to come, we can put on great shows, when we need to leave, we leave.

**Tim Stackpool:** , established the business in 2016. Are you fulfilling your need in your life?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Yes. Yes. If I wasn't, I would close the gallery. Yeah. If I wasn't, I would close the gallery and do something else that would fulfill the need in my life.

So until that point, COMA stays open. We keep putting on shows. It enriches me because that's what I want to be around. I'm here to, sure, we're here to show the work, and introduce it to the public, and sell it commercially. But, first and foremost, I'm also, this is a selfish this is a selfish endeavour. I want to know what's happening in the plains of North Dakota.

I want to know what's happening in, foundries in Guadalajara. I want to know. And yeah, it's enriching. It excites me. And we just will continue to work with artists that enrich us. Until they don't. I don't think that day will come. Because there will be new artists that continually enrich us.

But yeah, that's the format. That's the philosophy.

**Tim Stackpool:** It's been a very easy 30 minute conversation with you today, and you've done a great job putting the gallery together and creating the spaces that you have here, and I really thank you for your time. But before we go, the question everyone asks is, name of your gallery come from?

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Oh, that's actually quite funny. COMA stands for nothing. There's absolutely no way I was going to call COMA Gallery Sotiris Sotiriou. It's, by a non Grecian audience, it's impossible to spell, sometimes say, so that was out of question. I was, I spent a couple of months in the States, I was meeting artists, I was meeting collectors, I was doing some consultancy work, I was visiting a million

institutions, stupidly, I would normally buy catalogues and monographs and things like that and just send them home.

Or just whatever. Buy it on Amazon. But I don't know why. I was having a great time. I was there for a long time. I wanted to read them. I was buying them all. And I was putting them in my suitcase. Which became, obviously, increasingly heavy. And I took an apartment in the West Village of New York for a couple of weeks.

And I unpacked the suitcase and was lying there. It was at the same time, I think maybe Jerry Saltz and those guys were obsessed with writing. About how everyone had fear fatigue, and I was also looking sitting on the bed at one point. I was looking at this huge stack of books and the spines of them all said You know, LACMA, MOCA, MOMA, MOCA Detroit blah blah blah I was like, my lord, And all this talk about fear fatigue.

I was exhausted as well I was like look, it's four letters. It means nothing. It can't be Gallery Sotiris Sotiriou Catera, let's just call it Coma. It alludes to something bigger than it is, there's like an institutional reference, but this thing doesn't even exist. There was still no business structure.

The business was just a, an idea at the time. So I thought I'd call it Coma. It's easy. And I love a one, a short one word brand name. People still ask what it means, what it stands for. People ask less than they used to, I don't think people care anymore. What it stands for. My dad actually calls it the cave of many adventures, which is my favourite.

My favourite so far. Yeah. It means nothing. It means anything we put into it. Yeah.

**Tim Stackpool:** Thank you very much for your time on the podcast today.

**Sotiris Sotiriou:** Pleasure. Thank you for having me. Appreciate it.