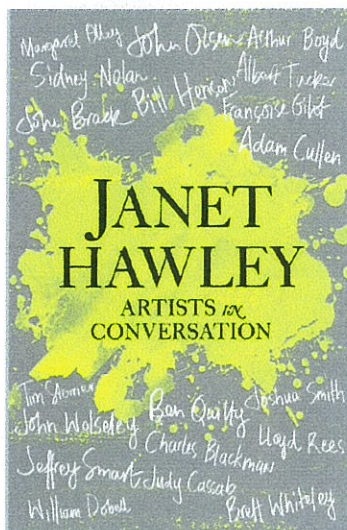


# Janet Hawley

## Artists In Conversation

Janet Hawley has spent many years researching and interviewing artists to write her new book, a compilation of essays on artists such as the late Arthur Boyd, Tim Storrier and Ben Quilty. At its heart is a deep curiosity about what makes artists tick. She talks to **Jane O'Sullivan**.



Janet Hawley's *Artists in Conversations* is published by Slattery Media Group.

**With your background in feature writing and journalism you must have interviewed people from all walks of life. Is there anything unique about interviewing artists?**

Artists have a lot of time to think, deeply and reflectively. That's almost a peculiar luxury today, with the rest of the population tearing around, working and living at accelerated speed-dating pace.

Most artists spend a huge amount of time alone in their studios. It's just them, their paints and canvas and their thoughts – a kind of divine agony.

It also means you can have wonderful meandering conversations with artists, once you get them talking. They've had time to think things through.

**The book covers artists as varied as Bill Henson, John Woleseley, Tim Storrier and Ben Quilty. Did you find any commonalities? Is there such a thing as an artistic personality or is that just a romantic cliché?**

I think it's more a creative personality [which is] shared by all highly creative people, be they artists, writers, architects [or] composers. Life is a rollercoaster ride of highs and lows, rather than a level playing field. When they're riding a high and the work is flowing out, nothing or nobody can get in their way. But inevitably the black lows arrive with a thud; when nothing goes right. **John Olsen** calls these blocks "billabong time" and it takes courage and persistence to struggle through them, and believe the next glorious high can be reached.

**Which of the relationships you developed writing this book is the most prized to you?**

Impossible to say, as I greatly value the time I've been able to spend with so many artists, including those I still haven't profiled. **Jeffrey Smart**, **John Olsen** [and] **Garry Shead** became longtime friends. I adored **Arthur Boyd** and spent a lot of time helping him with his project to give Bundanon to the Australian people. I became good friends with **Brett Whiteley** in the five years before he died, and always wish I'd known him better in his earlier years.

Meeting **Françoise Gilot**, and spending three days with this lucid 90-year-old woman

who lived with **Picasso** for 10 years, was a huge privilege. As a very young journalist, I'd read Gilot's book, *Life With Picasso*, and never dreamed that many decades later I'd be writing about a Picasso retrospective and knocking on Gilot's door in New York. Gilot was so wise in the way she handled her relationship with Picasso. As she pointed out, she was the only wife who survived. All the others went mad or died in tragic circumstances.

**Gathering the material for this book must have been an interesting process – some chapters seem to have required several interviews and encounters.**

Many of the older artists in the book I've interviewed several times over the decades, as well as spending time with them informally. I've watched all of them work in their studios and fossicked through their sketchbooks. I've gone on painting expeditions with several and shared holiday travels with others. With anyone I profile, I try to see them over several days, in different settings. This comes on top of a mass of research and talking to other people about the subject.

Writing profiles is like giving birth to an elephant. A huge amount of work is involved – but we try to make it look so darned easy! Writing books is like giving birth to a herd of elephants.

**“You can have wonderful meandering conversations with artists, once you get them talking. They've had time to think things through.”**