



INSIDE THE GALLERY PODCAST – SERIES 7 EPISODE 3 (Late MARCH 2025)

NELSON NGHE

“LOSSES DISGUISED AS WINS”

This conversation discusses gambling and its associated harm.  
For help visit <http://www.gamblinghelponline.org.au/>

**Tim Stackpool:** Your art practice, no doubt it has developed over time, and we've probably known each other for a year or two now, but I notice that there's certainly a theme behind the work that you've actually turned out to this point.

**Nelson Nghe:** Yes, thank you for noticing, and definitely since we've met, it's been an evolution of me discovering that there is an advocacy and activism part of my artworks to give you background about myself.

I'm a first generation Australian born Chinese. And my family are from refugee and migrant stories where they escaped the Khmer regime in Cambodia, as well as the Vietnam War. So, coming to Australia, and me beginning my story, and now telling it, is part of this practice. And as you may have picked up, a lot of this My story is to do with my living experience of gambling harm as an affected other, I'd like to also emphasize it's a living experience, because we hear of lived experiences where it's Emphasizes that the experience and the stories in the rearview mirror, people are looking at something that they've overcome and they're reflecting on it, and I'm doing that on top of still experiencing being an affected other.

due to gambling harm and taking that into the future as well with my advocacy and activism work. So I hope that gives you a bit of a flavour of where I'm at.

**Tim Stackpool:** Very much so. But can I just step back a little bit? And you talked about the challenges that your heritage has suffered over time.

We do talk in this country about intergenerational trauma when it comes to an indigenous population. , do you feel because of your heritage, there's a level of intergenerational trauma that you've carried forward, even before we start talking about living with the effects of problem gambling?

**Nelson Nghe:** Absolutely. These are other untold stories and they're not my stories, but they are things that have been passed on to me silently, and because of the journeys and the experiences that my parents and families went through, they carry through almost in my DNA, and I now try and make sense of that as much as I can try and find out from them first hand.

It's a very unspoken experience. In terms of, I'm imagining they're also coming to terms with, and they'll never fully come to terms with, so there's that intergenerational process of we pass on things and we're not even aware of what we are passing on. And now I am trying to make sense of that on top of, as you said, what is happening in the present right now and what will continue to happen.

**Tim Stackpool:** When you think back over this history, do you sometimes become despondent and think, well of course I'm going to suffer some level of modern trauma because of the historical trauma that my family has been through?

**Nelson Nghe:** Absolutely. There is a despondency and an acceptance of what happened has made us and shaped us into who we are today and created this new story for us to try and move on.

However, I don't focus on that part because, as I mentioned, it's not so much my story because I am so thankful and grateful my parents searched for a new life, for a better place, and that they were able to come to this country. What I do feel I have almost a responsibility in doing is telling my story right now

and letting them know and letting the people around me know what I'm going through as a result of things that may have been passed down through that silent intergenerational trauma and how that has manifested in a different way now.

**Tim Stackpool:** Yeah, we'll certainly talk about the nature of your work and the various shows that you've been involved with so far. How far back can you trace this? This effect on you regarding gambling.

**Nelson Nghe:** I trace it back to even before I was born. So this gambling harm has existed before I came about in this world. So it's, for lack of a better word, an inheritance.

That I was given and that has also been something for me to try and understand of where that came from to try and connect how that intergenerational trauma in being a migrant and refugee to a new country, how then that becomes linked with gambling harm. Because I've also come to realize that my experience and my story is not singular.

Well, I am. a representative of an entire community that unfortunately has not really spoken about this story even today. And so it's a very daunting, but also important and exciting actually, place to be in, in understanding. What is this gambling harm? Where did it come from? And what are the impacts on affected others, on loved ones, on children, on colleagues, on fathers, mothers?

And knowing that for every person who is experiencing gambling harm, there are seven others who are also impacted by this harm. And I'm one of them, and I'm putting my hand up and saying, this is what it looks like, and this is our story. Because you don't see that represented, so I'm having to represent that myself.

And trying to raise that awareness so that the public can see, okay, there is a face, there is a name, there's a story, there is a community to the impacts of gambling harm.

**Tim Stackpool:** You're being quite overt and open about this. How is your openness affecting those around you who have also probably been affected by gambling harm?

But the fact that you're telling the story, how is that being received by those who are also affected by perhaps those who don't want to be so overt about it, who don't want your art to tell this story because you're kind of hanging out the dirty washing?

**Nelson Nghe:** Well, first and foremost, I would like to pay my respects to these other lived experience members who are not telling their story, and acknowledge that what I am saying is coming from my own living experience, so I am telling my experience and my story, which is my story, would not be very dissimilar to what other families are going through. It has been a very big coming to terms with not only myself, but With the broader family, with the broader community, of almost trying to face the shame and stigma that keeps us all silent, and actually say, hey, we can actually chat about this, we can actually choose not to be living with this shame and stigma anymore, because enough of the shame and stigma is given to us that we don't need to give it to ourselves anymore.

So it's definitely a process that I'm still trying to understand and to figure out because I haven't seen this done before, particularly as an artist bringing in such a sensitive and hidden area.

**Tim Stackpool:** This is certainly a most legitimate way of being inspired to create your art. Tell us how you tell these stories in your art. How do you demonstrate this?

**Nelson Nghe:** I tell my stories in ways that only I know how to share, which is through arts, because I'm not in politics, I'm not in social work, I'm not in health care, and I admire and respect the people who work in these spaces to address gambling harm. What I can offer and do is share my story through art, so through mediums of painting, photography, video work, assemblage.

They're my tools. And they're ways that I can shape a story and can present and invite other people to come and connect. So it's something that is developing as we speak. And I'm currently working with a lot of found objects that directly tie in with my living experience. And that brings in a real educational focus.

For not only me, but to show people this is the landscape right now, this is what's happening in our country in relation to gambling harm.

**Tim Stackpool:** Nelson, can you give me an example of a piece that you've completed and perhaps talk us through it and tell us how it is telling a story?

**Nelson Nghe:** Absolutely. So I use photography.

So I have archival photography and works sourced from the Mitchell Library at the State Library of New South Wales, for example, that archival memories and proof of a moment in time in Australia where gambling was illegal. So these photographs they're black and white. They're from the

1930s, I believe, or around that period, because New South Wales was the first state in Australia in 1956 to legalize gambling. And once upon a time, this was illegal, this was not allowed, so I bring that in to examine how our country has changed since the legalization of gambling, and so for me that is trying to understand the history and this DNA almost, where it's happening.

Gambling is so normalized here, and it's then also where I bring in my own living experience of childhood memories, and it's a revisiting and a retelling through the lens now of gambling harm as an affected other, so I've had to not only cross examine myself, but then cross examine the landscape I live in, the country I live in and I suppose even the, the legislation And, how it's all worked out.

**Tim Stackpool:** Are you able to share any of those childhood memories that you recall? Are you happy to?

**Nelson Nghe:** I am trying to remember these memories, if that makes sense. Because being an affected other and growing up where there were no Acknowledgement. And to be honest, there is still very little research on the impacts of gambling harm on Children in particular.

So I'm not the only one who really is still trying to understand this and figure out what has happened to this part of the community. But to give you a bit of an insight, I suppose you grow up with. A strange and probably not normal association with money, and money has this power not in a good way, because you see, it's, you see what it can do and its impact on the family, and there is, as to be expected, the worries, the conflicts, the fears, the insecurities of what really no child should go through and.

It's all as a result of this money element which isn't the only element, but it's, yeah, it's definitely a different experience because you often wonder what would your childhood have been like had you not experienced gambling harm. And at the same time, you wouldn't, you don't know what that would be like.

And you never will. So you try and make sense of it as much as you can now as an adult. And the honest goal is to just try and stop another child from going through what I went through because it's still happening. There are still children out there who are experiencing gambling harm as an affected other and as a child, how do you even know that you're experiencing it because you're a child in that moment

**Tim Stackpool:** this is likely an obvious question, but how much of your art is your therapy to deal with this?

**Nelson Nghe:** That, yeah, it's actually not too obvious a question because I'm just coming to realize that yeah, this art is becoming my therapy. This is really the first time I'm opening up and showing this very personal and A private story that not many people know, and it's again, trying to break this shame and stigma that kept me silent for a long time, and It's definitely been a way for me to reflect on the past, but also to be compassionate to others in my family, because I'm seeing the bigger picture more and more every day when I see, the roles of the industry, the roles of the government, we all have a part to play in this.

And unfortunately, we still look at the gambler, and we judge a lot, we stigmatize them a lot, we shame them a lot. So, it's definitely healed a part of me, and I'm hoping that has healed a part of the rest of my family. And hopefully that can heal a part of society, because It's such a hurt world that we live in right now that I'm just trying to heal it a bit more and to help it a bit more and I think if we could all do that, it would be an incredible place.

**Tim Stackpool:** You're a very approachable and also considered individual and we can tell that from the way you are responding to these questions, but when you walk down the street, you walk past a pub and you see rows and rows of poker machines in there, slot machines as the Americans call them, when you see the establishment of casinos in our city, do you have a visceral response to that?

Do you become enraged or, or are you filled with sadness?

**Nelson Nghe:** It's definitely a mixed feeling and I think will always be a mixed feeling because again, part of it is out of your control and a part of it is not, and the part of it that's not is me trying to process this through my art to not try and make sense of it.

At the same time, I've acknowledged that I live in one of three local government areas in Sydney that account for one third of Sydney's total poker machine losses, yet we are only 16.5 percent of the population. It's an acknowledgement that This is my reality. Growing up in Western Sydney, this has been my bread and butter. This has been my oxygen. So, it's the landscape that I know. And, walking down the street and seeing that this landscape is prospering, for lack of a better word.

It's definitely hard to process because You know where that's coming from, where all that money comes from one party to another party, it's an exchange, and you've seen that exchange, and rather than

money going to a family holiday, and to a nice dinner a nice treat, you know instead that money is going somewhere else.

So, I suppose I'm not the only one acknowledging that, but what I'm now trying to do is find the parts that I can have a say in and to just tell my story so that the awareness gives people more of an insight into what it's like to live with, to live as an affected other.

**Tim Stackpool:** We've learned so far now about the motivation behind your art, but how long ago was it that you actually began your art practice and began using this to create your work.

**Nelson Nghe:** This has been a very I suppose, recent development. Where my art practice has been a few years now, and last year was really when I saw that I could tell my story. So I had a show at the Institute for Australian and Chinese Arts and Culture at Western Sydney Uni University.

And that was really the moment where I realized. That people do want to listen to my story and I suppose it was no surprise as well that growing up in Western Sydney and telling my story, at the Western Sydney University, it was a resonating story and when I had my exhibition there, the response was tremendous.

It was a great experience. really unexpected and overwhelming. I had students at the university come up and share their own lived experience and mention that, my works reminded them of their grandma going and, buying the lottery or going to the pokies every week. And it was that, it really touched me.

And I did not expect that and so from then on, I had hope and I had faith that I was trying to tell a story that existed and that I was not the only one who had that story and so I really am trying to do this on behalf of other affected others, other people with issues. lived and living experience who may not get to tell this story and really try and honour this for them and for me, because I know that in doing this won't bring back my childhood.

This won't change what I've lost. This is really to look forward. To make sure no other people have to go through what I went through and have to lose what I lost.

**Tim Stackpool:** This leads into your exhibition as we talked about in the introduction. First draft at Woolloomooloo

You have been busy creating works for that show. Are we seeing anything significantly different at First Draft coming up than what you've presented in the past?

**Nelson Nghe:** Absolutely. So, as I'm still exploring mediums and ways to tell my story, this show at First Draft, It will be a real big invitation for everyone to come in and to connect through storytelling where I share new works that have evolved and there will be also a video installation.

So this will be the first time where I brought in this video element. And it's a new installation that I've created that I'm hoping will be very immersive and give people a bigger insight and understanding into the landscape, not just of the person who is the affected other, but of the other side of the coin, the industry, of the government and just every one of us, because it's As I've continued on this path it's been

a real realization that people have come up to me and say, Oh, I remember my colleague or my, loved one or my friend who's had a story to tell in relation to gambling harm.

And so it's, it's wanting to bring it out there and also, I'm really excited that it's coming to a new audience. I don't know how people are going to respond but I think that's part of it is to really want to share the story and I suppose the rest is for everyone else to take with them.

**Tim Stackpool:** You're obviously advocating here through your art. Are you undertaking more practical measures as, as well? And to what level of change do you think you could ever hope to see?

**Nelson Nghe:** That's a really interesting question because I've accepted that this may be a lifetime's work because if we're to compare this Even to the journey that, smoking reforms had, it was not overnight and it took a long time from society changing where we, people were smoking inside, indoors, in restaurants, to now plain packaging, to Not seeing any cigarettes on display.

And I'm hoping that with my art, it can chip away at much needed reform. And the ultimate goal is to minimize the harm and to make sure that affected others, that children, other children, families out there. don't have to experience this. And at the same time, I'm hoping to try and work at the shame and stigma so that people are okay to share their story.

And it's okay to talk about this because there's also that element that, will take a big coming to terms with socially and yeah, I suppose I don't know what's ahead but this definitely has been therapy for me. So it's been a good thing to, to try and process in a productive way.

And at the same time, I suppose art is always a reflection of its time and place. So, this really is just a reflection of the society, the culture, the time we live in. And, maybe in the future, the art I make will reflect a different time, and I guess I look forward to that too.

**Tim Stackpool:** It's always a tough business, I think, particularly with the motivation behind your art, because if you think about the development of it, as you say, made legal in the 1950s to bet on the horses, you had to go to a TAB uh, was licensed to be able to do that.

Then it moved into the pubs. Then of course there was the online gambling introduced. So this is a moving feast. You talk about this being perhaps a lifetime work. I think you're right.

**Nelson Nghe:** Yes, I acknowledge that it is a changing beast and I suppose part of Me doing this is an educational piece. It is a public health message for everyone.

And when I had my exhibitions at the Western Sydney University, that really hit home that I'm trying to raise awareness to a new generation, to young people now who are now exposed to online betting and who are now normalizing that. It's trying to have that messaging to them about the harms and to share my own living experience story.

So, I'm, yeah, aware definitely that this is not a static situation and that also makes it exciting for my arts practice because I get to evolve my mediums, I get to evolve the ways I tell the story and definitely my priority and my focus is also on this new generation because we see how with tobacco.

That vaping captured a new generation, and that it evolved into a new form, so I see that in the same way that gambling has evolved into this online space, which is just alarming because you could be anywhere anytime of the day and accessing gambling and that makes it even trickier because you no longer have to go to a venue, you can be at home in your bedroom and as an affected other, how would you know? And how do you address that as a society? And as a public health issue,

**Tim Stackpool:** it's almost impossible. I think, Nelson.

**Nelson Nghe:** Yeah, I think that's why we need to have this conversation collectively as individuals, as families, as an industry, as a government. I think we all really need to ask ourselves the, the hard questions of should we continue to profit off people's pain?

Because I think we it's just the transfer of money and wealth from one party to another, and a lot of the times, this is coming from very vulnerable and stressed people I've been there, and so, I don't know if that really is okay, and if we really should be doing that That's why I want to keep having this conversation and to keep sharing my story to raise this awareness and to, yeah, shed a light on something.

**Tim Stackpool:** Let me close on a pure art question. If this motivation and inspiration was removed from you, would you still be an artist?

**Nelson Nghe:** I don't think I'll ever be able to answer that because who knows, but to be honest, I think I've realized that definitely has this power and I'm learning more and more about this power and what art can do.

It can really transcend things. It can transcend verbal, written, physical. Language and be able to reach you in a, different way. And I think the real magic of art is. It's a part of you really, it's a part of you that you're sharing and so it'll always be special. And I think just highlights really the importance of art for society and for mankind and that arts existed forever and there's a reason why.

So I think definitely I would have been an artist regardless. And it told my story, whatever that story would have been.

**Tim Stackpool:** Well. I think it's certainly a worthwhile cause as you have identified, Nelson, and you've been so truthful and honest in this. Podcast conversation, I'm sure there are so many people listening who want to reach out and congratulate you on the great work that you are doing, using your craft and your talent to actually lift awareness of this and to actually indicate how, yes, it has devastating effects on people.

And I really thank you for your time on the podcast today.

**Nelson Nghe:** Thank you so much, Tim.