

Visual Arts

FutureNow is the Western Australian Training Council for the creative, leisure and technology industries. The Council is a skills advisory body that represents the voice of industry, advising the State Government on the training and workforce development needs of our industry sectors.

The Carrolup Centre for Truth-telling at Curtin University in Western Australia is a testament to the power of the medium of visual art to drive collective remembering, reckoning, reconciliation, and celebration¹. The Centre is being established to house the Herbert Mayer collection of Carrolup artworks, which is a collection of strikingly accomplished drawings and paintings created by Aboriginal children of the Stolen Generations in the 1940s at the Carrolup Native Settlement in Western Australia.

In 2020 as in 1940, the immediacy, but also longevity, of visual works have a powerful capacity to underpin cohesion and nurture healing in the artist and in the wider community, in ways that reach immeasurably into the future. Working to ensure that pathways continue to exist for Western Australian emerging artists to continue to grow and thrive in their careers is vital when viewed through this lens, more so in the difficult global context of current times.

Current environment and emerging trends

Workforce Characteristics

Nationally, the visual arts and crafts sector supports 10,000 workers,² and the small-to-medium (S2M) visual arts sector employs over 2,000 people, puts \$100 million into the economy, and produces 26,000 new art works each year.³ Data around the size of the visual arts workforce is generally considered to be unreliable, owing to visual artists self-reporting as working primarily in another field. Annual income for visual artists is on average very low, and consequently visual artists typically supplement their work with other income streams. Workers in the sector are primarily female, older than average, and have attained higher than average educational outcomes.⁴

Australia Council research suggests that visual artists' average income is approximately \$48,000 per annum, well below the national average. The gender pay gap is significantly more acute than average in the sector, with female artists earning on average 44% less than their male counterparts for their creative work.⁵ No firm data exists to explain the gap, though it is recognised that women have been underrepresented in media and galleries, and are underrepresented in higher income disciplines such as sculpture.

Covid-19 Impacts and Strategies

While the impact on the visual arts sector from Covid 19 and associated quarantine measures has been less immediate than in some other arts sectors, the general economic downturn is affecting discretionary spending and suppressing what has become a global market. Most visual artists report that they have been able to gain access to their studios and continue working throughout the quarantine period, however sales opportunities continue to be lower than previously.

Visual artists have faced the curtailing of income-generating activities such as artist talks. Teaching opportunities that many artists use to supplement their income have diminished as local authorities and universities curtail activity.

These factors contributed to the vulnerable position of many arts workers before the pandemic, and have

exacerbated their risk of unemployment and underemployment in the current environment. The visual arts sector is not characterised by employer/employee business structures, however activity and work, and therefore the size of the labour force, has contracted in 2020.

Given the challenges faced by visual artists, the sector continues to prioritise career sustainability as a core issue. The visual arts sector consists almost exclusively of self-employed artists, so sector strategy tends to be directed through peak organisations. There are several arts organisations in Western Australia offering a range of professional development services to the workforce including Australian Museums and Galleries Association, FORM, Regional Arts WA, Community Arts Network, Art on the Move, the Aboriginal Arts Centre Hub of WA, and Artsource. Despite challenging economic conditions, most of these organisations report a positive philanthropic environment has allowed them to continue to offer these programs through 2020-21.

Federal, state, and local government initiatives designed to provide continuing support to artists throughout the pandemic and recovery are mitigating some of the immediate pressures faced by artists in the current climate.⁶

Emerging opportunities

Online marketplace

Online art sales grew during quarantine measures, and industry anticipate this trend will continue to a lesser degree going forward. For instance, Fremantle Arts Centre hosts the annual Revealed⁷ Aboriginal Art exhibition in which Western Australian Aboriginal artists from across the state exhibit and sell their work. Quarantine measures meant that the 2020 exhibition had to be moved online with very short notice, just before opening. Despite a much shorter run, the Centre achieved \$92,000 in sales, with all proceeds returning to artists and art centres. Works were sold to buyers in the US and Switzerland, highlighting the potential of the online marketplace.

Where artists can be represented through a trusted brand such as Fremantle Art Centre, market reach will be improved. Online portals such as Artplode, Saatchi Art, Fine Art America, Artfinder, Artnet and Artsy⁸ have proliferated in recent years, allowing visual artists direct access to a global audience. These sites house an overwhelming selection of work however, and artists can become 'lost in the crowd'. A sophisticated understanding and application of social media, data analysis, audience mapping, and development, is necessary for artists to market themselves in this environment.

Public art

There are opportunities for local artists to work in the sphere of public art, largely driven by the Percent for Art scheme^{9 10} and local government placemaking efforts. The scheme has faced recent criticism^{11 12} from developers and commercial interests with concerns about its cost implications (the scheme requires up to one percent of the construction budget for new works over \$2 million, to be spent on artwork), and the visual arts industry is concerned that these projects, which are providing rare opportunities to work in the current climate, may be lost.

Across the broader economy, branding and placemaking initiatives had been generating opportunities for visual artists prior to Covid. The Adnate Hotel¹³, opened in October 2019, is the first of Accor's Art Series hotels to feature a street artist, and is reflective of Perth's reputation as a street-art hotspot. The trend has extended to private clients, with commissions to produce artworks for the public-facing walls of private residences becoming a growing market for local artists¹⁴. Brenton See, a graduate of North Metropolitan TAFE's Graphic Design school, is a highly successful example of artists working in this space¹⁵. These opportunities again highlight the importance of artists' capacity to manage their own marketing and branding, as well as being able to communicate and write strategic proposals, grant applications and acquittals. While there is a high level of uncertainty about how the market will behave in 2021, a construction boom and resilient housing market may bode well for visual artists operating in this space.

Growing support for emerging artists

The Art Gallery of WA is moving to develop a program of major exhibitions that will promote emerging Western Australian visual artists to local consumers. The Gallery will host 3 such exhibitions in 2021, and while only a small

number of emerging artists can be supported this way, the opportunities represent major career boosts for the artists concerned.

Workforce development strategies

Remote Aboriginal Arts Centres

Estimates of the dollar value of the current Aboriginal visual arts market vary very widely, however a figure between \$2-300M is generally agreed on as a reasonably modest evaluation.¹⁶ Art sales have been identified as “the primary or only source of non-government income” for many remote indigenous communities.¹⁷ As well as the broader economic contribution the sector makes to the Australian economy, community goals around economic independence and self-determination are advanced by the work and success of the sector.

Impacts on the mostly remote Aboriginal Arts Centre sector were considerable in 2020, when many were isolated not just at the state level, but the community level. Lucrative tourist markets were inaccessible, forcing the Centres to shift focus to online markets. This trend is likely to continue in the medium-term and it will therefore be vital to the development of this sector to ensure that Aboriginal Art Centres are able to access training and professional development relating to eCommerce and online market engagement. Several factors have historically inhibited remote communities from accessing training¹⁸, however an initiative coordinated through peak body AACHWA- Aboriginal Art Centre Hub WA- to deliver a Certificate III Arts Administration traineeship to artists from remote communities may alleviate some of these barriers and may also allow for upskilling in online marketing and ecommerce.

Changing skills needs

Within the current context, artists and arts workers have an increased need for skills relating to career management; small business and contract management; online engagement, digital production and marketing, sales, and brand management; and personal resilience and mental health management. Units addressing these skills have been built into relevant vocational qualifications in recent years, however many existing workers will not have had access to this training and may benefit from upskilling via an affordable skill set.

Digital transformation is underpinning the need for visual arts workers to be flexible and adaptable. There is a growing range of digital production methods for artists to master, for instance in 3D printing or augmented reality, as well as an increasing need for rigorous knowledge around intellectual property, business planning, marketing, public engagement, curation, conservation, and funding. This broadening skills requirement is presenting challenges for training product development, with industry expressing concerns that students are missing opportunities to develop depth and rigour in core artistic skills because of the need to address a broad array of enterprise skills within the qualifications.

Shifting role for vocational education

The cost of gaining a higher education arts qualification is set to increase in line with Federal Government proposals announced in June 2020¹⁹. This, when mapped against potential earnings in the arts and cultural sectors, may become prohibitive for many prospective students. Industry are concerned that this phenomenon will directly impact on the diversity of voices to be found across the sector. Vocational training may serve a crucial role in mitigating this impact, with articulation arrangements potentially becoming more popular. Where students can complete a Diploma and/ or Advanced Diploma and then articulate into 2nd or 3rd year of a Bachelor of Arts, costs will be significantly reduced for the student and employability skills will be maximised.

Please get in touch with FutureNow

FutureNow is continually seeking broad input from stakeholders and representatives in the Western Australian GLAHM sector. If you would be interested in providing your perspective on this snapshot or related workforce matters for your sector, our Creative Industries Industry Manager would love to hear from you:

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References

Note that unreferenced information in this snapshot is based on direct consultation by FutureNow with WA industry.

All references current as at 14.12.2020

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