

# FutureNow.

## Visual Arts

FutureNow is an independent body that provides industry informed advice to influence skills development strategies across the Creative, Leisure and Technologies sectors. Our work assists Western Australia to be prepared with the new order skills required by the evolving economy and our changing society.

The visual arts industry has always been characterised by extremes of fortune, with a handful of famous artists commanding hundreds of millions for their work while for very many others, the opportunity to build a sustainable career feels unachievable. In March 2021, artist Mike Winkelmann, known as Beeple, caused waves when his artwork *EVERYDAYS: The First 5000 Days* sold for US\$69.3m, or A\$96.6m. The wholly-digital artwork was purchased via auction house Christie's as a non-fungible token.<sup>1</sup> A few months later, their Art + Tech Summit sold out. And in December 2021, Beeple's record was smashed, when artwork *Merge*, by Pak, sold for US\$92m (A\$129m)- the third most paid for the work of a living artist, after only Damien Hirst's *For the Love of God*, and Jasper Johns' *Flag*.<sup>2</sup>

It remains to be seen whether NFTs represent an opportunity for the broader visual arts workforce, however visual artists will benefit from embracing technology as a medium to produce, promote, and sell their art regardless.

## Current environment and emerging trends

### Covid-19 impacts

The impact on the visual arts sector from Covid-19 and associated quarantine measures has been less immediate than in some other arts sectors in 2020-21. Most visual artists reported in 2020 that they had been able to gain access to their studios and continue working throughout the quarantine period, though faced the curtailing of income-generating activities such as artist talks and teaching opportunities. Visual arts work is rarely a full-time or primary source of income for practicing artists and consequently, this phenomenon undermined the stability of arts careers for this cohort in 2020. While the impact was short-lived, and has been minimal in 2021, the sector holds concerns that open borders in 2022 may see the reintroduction of lockdowns and therefore ongoing impacts on opportunities to work.

### Workforce characteristics

The number of visual arts and crafts professionals in Australia has been growing in recent years, rising from 11,000 in 2019, to 14,100 in 2020, and is projected to reach 15,600 in 2025.<sup>3</sup> Approximately 8.7% of visual artists are based in WA versus 10.8% of the overall workforce. 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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.

## Emerging Opportunities

### Arts and health

Evidence in support of the value of engagement with the arts for health and wellbeing is considerable and growing, and underpins national arts and health policies.<sup>7 8</sup> As Western Australia emerges from two years of isolation into a world where Covid-19 is becoming endemic, the importance of our physical and mental health has never been greater.

Outgoing CEO of the Chamber of Arts and Culture WA, Shelagh Magadza, chose to highlight in her December 2021 exit interview for industry news source ArtsHub:

“... there is massive research out there around the benefits of arts programs on health – mainly mental health, but it can also be around physical health in contexts such as aged care,’ she told ArtsHub. ‘This is an area in Australia that we are not really looking at, but it’s an area for potential jobs,’ she said... ‘The National Skills Framework now has an arts health qualification, but not many TAFEs or eligible RTOs are offering this as an option.’”<sup>9</sup>

A 2016 report by the WA Arts and Health Consortium, Examination of the use of the arts to improve health and healing in Western Australian hospitals, identified the restorative power of engagement in the arts. 75% of hospitals surveyed indicated that they delivered arts and health activity. The report argued for Arts and Health Coordinator roles to be established for each hospital to ensure that those working in the arts and health arena were appropriately screened, oriented and supported.

In 2020, a new Diploma of Arts and Health was added to the CUA Creative Arts and Culture nationally endorsed training package.<sup>10</sup> The qualification is designed to develop individuals who can create, deliver and monitor arts and health programs for a wide variety of clients and contexts in the arts and health industry. At the time of writing, the qualification was not on scope with a registered training provider anywhere in Australia.

### Online marketplace

Online art sales grew during quarantine measures, and industry anticipate this trend will continue to a lesser degree going forward. Online portals such as Artplode, Saatchi Art, Fine Art America, Artfinder, Artnet and Artsy<sup>11</sup> allow 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.

### Non-fungible tokens

An NFT is “a unique and non-interchangeable unit of data stored on a digital ledger.”<sup>12</sup> Using blockchain technology in this way allows creators of digital artworks to sell an ‘original’ piece, and a

buyer to 'own' it, while the same work continues to be widely available to view for free online.<sup>13</sup> This may be comparable to images of a famous physical artwork being easily accessible while the original is privately owned.

Opinions remain mostly suspended with regards to the degree to which NFTs will create opportunities for a broader swathe of artists to access direct markets. To date, the majority of NFT sales activity has been concentrated among very few artists, and the technology has been criticised for perpetuating existing inequality in the art market, with more than half of sales to date being generated in the US, and less than 16% of artists being women.<sup>14 15 16</sup>

Many online tutorials and courses are available which promise to teach visual artists how to engage in the NFT space.<sup>17</sup>

## Public Art

There are opportunities for local artists to work in the sphere of public art, partly driven by the Percent for Art scheme<sup>18 19</sup> and local government placemaking efforts.

Across the broader economy, branding and placemaking initiatives had been generating opportunities for visual artists prior to Covid-19. The Adnate Hotel<sup>20</sup>, opened in October 2019, was the first of Accor's Art Series hotels to feature a street artist. 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 artists.<sup>21 22</sup> These opportunities 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. A construction boom and resilient housing market may bode well for visual artists operating in this space in 2022.

## Workforce Development Strategies

### Sector professional development

The sector continues to prioritise career sustainability as a core issue. Sector strategy tends to be directed through peak organisations, with several arts organisations in Western Australia offering a range of professional development services to the workforce- including the Chamber of Arts and Culture WA, 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 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 have mitigated some of the immediate pressures faced by artists.<sup>23 24 25</sup>

### Aboriginal Arts Centres

Estimates of the dollar value of the current Aboriginal visual arts market vary, with a figure between \$2-300M being a reasonably modest evaluation.<sup>26</sup> Art sales have been identified as "the primary or only source of non-government income" for many remote indigenous communities.<sup>27</sup> As well as the broader contribution the sector makes to the Australian economy, community goals around financial 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 2020-21, when

many were isolated at the community level. Lucrative tourist markets were inaccessible, forcing the Centres to shift focus to online marketing and sales. This trend is likely to continue in the medium-term and it will therefore be important for Aboriginal Art Centres to be able to access ecommerce and online marketing training. Several factors have historically inhibited remote communities from accessing training<sup>28</sup>, however an initiative coordinated through peak body AACHWA- Aboriginal Art Centre Hub WA- to deliver target units of competency from the Certificate II in Creative Industries to artists from remote communities may be a first step to alleviating some of these barriers.

## **Broadening skills needs**

Artists and arts workers have an increased need for skills relating to career management; small business and contract management; online engagement, marketing, sales, and brand management; personal resilience and mental health management; and digital production methods including 3D printing and augmented reality. Units addressing these skills have been built into relevant vocational qualifications in recent years, however 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.

## **Arts and Health**

FutureNow will work with key stakeholders in 2022 to better identify demand for these skills, and opportunities for a WA provider to offer the qualification.

Given the great difficulty visual artists face in building sustainable careers, this growing field of demand should be maximised in order to underpin the overall visual arts ecosystem across the state, and also to create the best possible environment for recovery for Western Australians facing health challenges.

## **Please get in touch with FutureNow**

FutureNow is continually seeking broad input from stakeholders and representatives in the Western Australian visual arts 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 25.1.2022

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