

## National Cultural Policy Submission: Immigration and the Arts

by Creatrix Tiara (Tiara Shafiq)

The Australian arts and cultural industries need to do better with integrating immigrants and advocating for the rights of immigrant artists.

I am a creative producer, performance artist, media-maker, writer, activist, and artswoker based in Melbourne. I first came to Australia as an international student in 2006 to study Creative Industries at Queensland University of Technology. After graduation, I decided to start the process of living in Australia permanently, and started my artistic career at about the same time. The first five or so years of my creative career was on a bridging visa awaiting permanent residency; I am now an Australian citizen. However, I faced so many roadblocks in my early career due to my bridging visa that still haunt me to this day, 20 years and one whole citizenship later.

My bridging visa allowed me full working rights. The trouble was, hardly anybody would hire me. Some employers cited the bridging visa itself as an issue - "what would happen if Immigration rejected you?" (despite having to wait 5 years for any sort of activity on my application) or assuming that I wasn't allowed to work. Some jobs were legitimately limited to only permanent residents and citizens - but not just public service jobs, where at least that limitation made some sense. Some people saw my ethnic name and international background and made assumptions about my command of the English language - never mind that I had to sit multiple IELTS tests to even be allowed into Australia. (Indeed, for a long time I refused to use my full last name in job applications because of this preconceived bias.) The adage of "get a day job" did not work - I mainly survived on piecemeal freelance income, the odd temporary contract, and family support. I also volunteered a lot and supported the local arts industry however I could, even if I could not obtain a steady job.

The Australian arts industry is 99.999999% built on Government grants - grants that I was not allowed to apply for simply by technicality, because of my bridging visa. It did not matter that I had been an "Australian resident for tax purposes" since my first day as an international student, and in some cases would be subsidizing locals through higher fees and paying taxes without receiving any benefits. I could not even qualify for non-grant mentorship or career development programs because *those* programs were grant-funded. I also could not access concession pricing, because that required being able to access Centrelink, and Centrelink required being physically resident in Australia as a permanent resident for at least 4 years *before even thinking* of applying - none of my time on my student visa and bridging visa counted. (This limitation was removed during the early COVID lockdowns and is honestly the only reason I was even able to access Jobseeker, but it may be back)

Due to those limitations, I ended up having to build an unconventional artistic practice largely out of necessity, including spending a few years in the United States to complete my MFA when I kept hitting walls in Brisbane. My career portfolio is diverse and interdisciplinary - by many outside metrics, it should have been a dazzling asset. However, this non-traditional path is seen as more of a hindrance in Australia. I get knocked back from jobs that I would be a shoo-in for because I "don't have specific enough experience" - a.k.a. I have not done that exact job before, precisely because no one would have hired me back then (and now I'm also too "over-experienced" and also potentially

too old, at 40). I found it ironically much easier to be accepted as a grant assessor for Creative Australia and Creative Victoria in recent years, than it was to actually receive a grant - because I could not demonstrate "past success of receiving funding" (because again, a technicality). I have aged out of initiatives for "emerging" artists and chronologically speaking I count as "mid-career", but I missed out on a lot of milestones that my peers experienced because of my early visa history - the milestones I *did* accomplish do not seem to count.

Part of the reason my permanent residency took five years to process was because very soon after I applied, the arts and creative industries were removed from the list of "skilled occupations" used by the Department of Immigration and Citizenship for people applying for longer-term visas or residency. (One of my university friends, a product design student from Norway, had graduated a semester after me and missed her opportunity to apply for permanent residency via the skilled occupation route; despite winning awards and building a strong career, it was ultimately a partner visa that allowed her to remain in Australia.) The skilled occupations list changes capriciously and does not take into account the realities of the creative industries (especially interdisciplinary work or the fact that many artists & artworkers tend to hold multiple job titles at once), but there is no energy from the arts & cultural sector around making the visa process fairer for immigrant artists.

I have seen some cultural organisations widen their program eligibility to include refugees on humanitarian visas. However, this approach is still short-sighted. Many refugees spend years on bridging visas, often much more restrictive than mine, and would still struggle to support themselves while awaiting that humanitarian visa (also a capricious process). It also does not acknowledge the fact that many immigrants and visa holders, including bridging visa holders, are already paying taxes - and thus would not be "stealing taxpayer money" as some may assume. They would still be locked out of seemingly minor things such as concession pricing because of sheer technicalities.

I would like the National Cultural Policy to take into account the needs of immigrants and visa holders that are contributing to the arts and cultural sector of Australia even despite all these limitations. My major recommendations would be:

- Removing residency limitations for jobs, grant funding, and other support programs - if you are an Australian resident for tax purposes (according to the ATO), you should be eligible
- Removing Centrelink eligibility as the only metric for concession pricing
- Providing options for artistic and professional support for immigrant artists who have or are currently facing limitation due to their visa status but may have aged out of "emerging artist" programs
- Encourage arts employers to look beyond traditional career progression during the employment process
- Advocate for the arts and creative industries to be recognised as skilled occupations permanently by the Department of Home Affairs - including potentially advocating for a long-term Artist Visa similar to the O-1 visa in the United States
- Making it easier for people to come to Australia and be paid for short-term engagements (such as speaking at conferences) without needing to go through the working visa rigamarole
- Talk to more immigrants and visa holders to learn about their experiences navigating the Australian arts industry