

Seen / Unseen: Late-Career Practice and the National Cultural Policy

Across Australian society, the ageing population is reshaping how we understand participation, contribution, workforce engagement, and public life. National research identifies older Australians as a growing, skilled, and experienced cohort whose participation remains significant, while also documenting persistent structural barriers to employment and opportunity. The 2023 Australian HR Institute and Australian Human Rights Commission report, *Employing and Retaining Older Workers*, notes that workers aged 55 and over now comprise a substantial and growing part of the Australian workforce, while continuing to experience reduced access to opportunity and age-related exclusion across employment settings.

Within the creative and cultural industries, this broader social condition is intensified. The creative and cultural industries do not sit outside broader labour market and social conditions. In many respects, they reflect and amplify them.

Australia's national cultural policy, *Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place*, places artists and creative workers at the centre of cultural life and affirms the importance of sustaining creative practice across all stages of a career. This is an important and widely supported direction. At the same time, there remains a significant gap between this policy intention and how creative careers are currently structured and supported in practice.

Across funding, commissioning, programming, and policy settings, there are clearly recognised pathways for *new and emerging* and *mid-career* practitioners. These categories shape eligibility, opportunity, investment, and visibility across the sector. By contrast, there is little explicit recognition of late-career practitioners as a distinct cohort with specific structural conditions, barriers, and contributions.

The term *established practitioner* is often used broadly across policy and funding settings. However, this category is inconsistent and imprecise. It may refer to prior recognition, professional standing, or market visibility, but it does not adequately account for practitioners who have sustained long-term creative practice and continue to produce work of depth, authority, and cultural value beyond the peak of market attention.

Many late-career practitioners continue active practice while experiencing reduced access to commissioning, funding, representation, publishing, programming, and professional networks. In many cases, practitioners adapt, redirect their careers, reduce their practice, or leave the sector altogether—not because creative capacity has diminished, but because structural support and visibility have contracted.

This condition is intensified by broader changes across the creative and cultural industries, including increasing market concentration, accelerated production cycles, and growing dependence on digital self-promotion, platform visibility, and self-managed professional presence. These conditions do not affect all practitioners equally.

The consequences extend beyond individual careers.

Late-career practitioners carry accumulated cultural knowledge, technical mastery, lived experience, and continuity of practice across decades of social and cultural change. They contribute to intergenerational exchange, artistic continuity, mentorship, experimentation, and the long-term development of cultural forms. When these practitioners become less visible within public cultural life, the cultural field itself narrows. Important forms of experience, memory, and creative knowledge become less represented within Australia's cultural record.

The next phase of the national cultural policy presents an opportunity to more clearly recognise late-career creative practice as a legitimate and necessary part of Australia's cultural ecology.

Creative practice extends across a lifetime. Sustaining cultural life requires policy, funding, and institutional structures that recognise, support, and retain practitioners in the later stages of their careers.