

National Cultural Policy Consultation

Office for the Arts

Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development, Communications and
the Arts

Commonwealth Government of Australia

Submission to the National Cultural Policy Consultation

Notes from an Independent Artistic Life

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May 2026

Dear Consultation Team,

Introduction

I welcome the broad scope of this consultation and the willingness to ask larger questions about culture, artistic life, infrastructure and national identity. Rather than attempt to respond to every aspect of the paper, I want to address the areas I can speak to directly through lived experience across almost thirty-nine years as an independent visual artist and writer.

My response speaks most directly to Pillars 2, 3 and 5 of the consultation paper: A Place for Every Story, Strong Cultural Infrastructure, and Engaging the Audience.

I was born in the United Kingdom to an Indian father and Chinese mother, and built my artistic life in Australia. I am now based in Perth, Western Australia. Since 1987 I have worked primarily as a painter and visual artist, exhibiting in solo and group exhibitions mainly in Australia, while developing an interdisciplinary practice moving between visual art, literary writing and policy.

I never studied painting formally. I trained as a graphic designer in Perth in the early 1980s, gaining a grounding in design and life drawing, and later studied history. Working at The Bridge Gallery in Northbridge during the 1990s gave me a hands-on education among artists, while history gave me another way to think about cultural objects as clues to a wider collective story. That mixture of design, history, artist community and self-taught painting shaped the practice I still carry.

Over time my work expanded into questions of migration, war memory, detention, religion, sexuality, race and Australia's relationship with Asia and the Asia-Pacific region. My artistic and multicultural background also increasingly shaped my public writing and national critique published both inside and outside Australia. These were not separate activities. They emerged from the same creative life.

Independent Practice and Invisibility

About twenty years ago I gradually stopped trying to fit neatly into local institutional pathways and began developing my work through other conversations and communities. Some of this happened by necessity. Commercial gallery doors closed to me as aspects of my work became more politically difficult after the post-9/11 period and the wars that followed. Over time I found that some of my ideas, particularly around civilian war memory and diaspora, were more legible internationally than they were inside Australian institutional structures.

I am grateful those opportunities existed.

My work and ideas were able to develop through editorial, literary and intellectual communities in the United Kingdom and United States including the Blake Society in London, Critical Military Studies published through Routledge London, Collateral Journal, Tikkun Magazine, Australian Policy and History, and reviews connected with Cambridge University circles. Much of this labour was entirely self-funded and developed outside conventional institutional art pathways.

This matters because international editorial and conceptual development is also artistic labour. Building ideas, archives, essays, collaborations, websites and long conversations across cultures takes time. In Australia, however, artistic legitimacy is still often measured primarily through institutional exhibition pathways, commercial galleries and funded visibility. Artists whose work develops through interdisciplinary or independent pathways can remain structurally difficult to recognise within those systems, even while sustaining serious bodies of work over decades.

Multicultural Artists and Lived Experience

Over the decades I have noticed that Aboriginal artists have rightly opened important national conversations around race, exclusion and historical inheritance. Migrant artists, however, are often still directed into narrower "multicultural" frameworks which may support inclusion symbolically while lacking the same depth of career infrastructure or critical seriousness.

For many migrant artists, politics, war and memory are not external themes attached to the work. They are lived inheritance carried through families and communities. My own work around war and civilian memory emerged from this space. War was never simply “policy” or activism to me. It was part of family history, migration and cultural memory.

My ideas around civilian war memory developed more freely through overseas and independent cultural bodies than through Australian institutional structures. In Australia, civilian critique of war can still sit awkwardly beside official commemorative traditions and military-centred understandings of “war art”. Yet for many migrant and civilian communities, war is not strategy or abstraction. It is inheritance, displacement, memory and survival.

Supporting Mid- and Late-Career Artists

Like many independent artists, I have spent long periods close to poverty while continuing to make work. Day jobs become necessary for survival but they also interrupt continuity, energy and visibility. Over time this affects archives, travel, networking, mental health and the ability to build competitive institutional CVs.

Merit can begin reflecting unequal access to infrastructure rather than simply artistic seriousness or originality.

Mid-career and older artists are especially poorly understood within Australian cultural policy. There is strong attention around emerging artists and flagship institutions, but much less understanding of the long middle decades where artists continue working quietly with little security, unstable housing, little storage and limited support.

This has shaped my own artistic life. At a certain point I stopped knocking on doors that did not open. My practice continued through other pathways instead: essays, interviews, overseas journals, independent archives, smaller communities and self-built infrastructure.

Exclusion shaped me, but persistence shaped me too.

Storage, Archives and Material Visual Arts

For visual artists, infrastructure is also physical. Paintings, drawings, sculpture and archives take up space over a lifetime. Without affordable studio and storage infrastructure, works are damaged, dispersed, sold cheaply or simply given away. Cultural memory is quietly lost this way.

Australia often speaks about culture through performance, activation and events, while

material visual arts carry long archival lives and very different infrastructural pressures, especially for ageing artists. Retirement also rarely arrives neatly for artists. Many continue working indefinitely while carrying the physical burden of decades of accumulated work with very little support.

I also believe Australia should encourage broader community and business purchasing of art through tax incentives and cultural policy settings that widen participation beyond grants, elite collectors and institutional gatekeeping. Artists need multiple pathways to survive and develop.

Audience Disengagement and Cultural Risk

The consultation paper asks how audiences can be more deeply engaged with culture. My own feeling is that audiences are not necessarily hostile to art itself. Sometimes they are disengaging from cultural environments that have become overly managed, cautious and administratively safe.

Work that is politically awkward, emotionally ambiguous or difficult to categorise can struggle for institutional space. This can produce cultural conversations that feel increasingly smoothed over and predictable. Independent and hybrid artistic voices often remain difficult to absorb into systems built around administrative readability and reputational safety.

AI, Archives and Independent Artists

One final issue should now be acknowledged. AI systems are intensifying problems many independent artists already experienced before AI arrived. Artists with large online archives and decades of publicly accessible work can now be absorbed into machine systems detached from provenance, livelihood or recognition.

Yet many independent artists already felt culturally mined, peripheral or structurally unread long before AI accelerated these conditions. Australia risks losing independent artistic memory twice: first through institutional neglect, and then through technological absorption without meaningful recognition or preservation.

Closing Reflections

I offer these reflections not as grievance, but as lived evidence across a long artistic life.

My artistic life ultimately developed through pathways that were often more international, independent and interdisciplinary than I expected when I began. In some ways exclusion also forced growth. It pushed me to develop ideas and relationships outside Australia and then bring those perspectives back into Australian public discussion through essays, interviews and cultural critique.

These are still Australian ideas shaped by an Australian life.

I believe Australia would benefit from a broader understanding of cultural value and artistic legitimacy, especially before entire bodies of independent work disappear quietly through exhaustion, ageing, invisibility or lack of infrastructure.

A healthy culture should be able to recognise difficult, hybrid and independent artistic lives



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About / Practice Overview

<https://www.carlgopal.com/about>

Collateral Journal Interview (2024)

<https://www.carlgopal.com/blogs/collateraljournal-carlgopalkrishnan-nov2024>

Earth & Altar Feature (2025)

<https://www.carlgopal.com/blogs/earth-altar-feature-2025>

Tikkun Daily Interview (2011)

<https://www.carlgopal.com/blogs/featured-interview-tikkun-daily-blog-july-2011-usa>

Lady Jane's Miscellany Interview (2010)

<https://www.carlgopal.com/blogs/featured-interview-lady-janes-miscellany-usa-2010>

Review by Jocelyne A. Scutt (2012)

<https://www.carlgopal.com/blogs/art-review-jocelyne-a-scutt-cambridge-university-politics-journal-may-2012-uk>

“My Country” Project Archive (2026)

<https://www.carlgopal.com/blogs/my-country-2026>