Grainger Gallery
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Submission to the National Cultural Policy:

Australia’s visual arts sector depends not only on publicly funded institutions and grants, but also on a vibrant commercial gallery ecosystem that enables artists to build sustainable careers through direct market engagement and private sales.

As Director of Grainger Gallery, I write on behalf of nearly 100 Australian artists we represent whose livelihoods depend primarily on the commercial visual arts market. These artists are not necessarily represented in major state institutions, nor are they reliant upon ongoing government grants. Instead, they rely on the ability of commercial galleries to connect their work with private collectors, businesses, and communities who value Australian culture enough to invest in it directly.

Historically, Australian arts policy recognised the importance of stimulating demand for visual art, not merely funding its production. Policies such as Artbank, strong public acquisition programs, corporate collecting, and more flexible taxation settings around art ownership helped create a healthy culture of collecting in Australia. Importantly, these mechanisms supported a middle market where working artists could earn meaningful income through sales.

Over time, however, the private collecting environment has weakened. Corporate collecting has diminished significantly, acquisition budgets have tightened, and regulatory changes, particularly around self-managed superannuation funds and collectable assets, have reduced incentives for private Australians to invest in living Australian artists. At the same time, cost-of-living pressures have made art purchases increasingly difficult for middle-income households who might otherwise become long-term collectors.

The result is that many commercial galleries now operate within an increasingly fragile ecosystem, despite being one of the primary pathways through which Australian artists actually earn income.

If Australia is serious about building a sustainable cultural economy, policy must not focus solely on grants and institutions. It must also rebuild the market mechanisms that encourage Australians to buy Australian art.

One practical and achievable initiative would be the establishment of a federally supported interest-free art purchase scheme modelled on the successful Art Money framework and the Tasmanian Government’s Collect Art Purchase Scheme. Such programs reduce the upfront financial barrier to purchasing original artwork by allowing buyers to pay in instalments over time, while artists and galleries receive payment immediately.

These schemes are highly effective because they stimulate real market activity rather than dependency. They support artists earning income from their work, encourage new collectors to enter the market, strengthen commercial galleries, and increase the visibility of Australian cultural production within homes and businesses.

Importantly, these programs also democratise art collecting. They allow younger Australians and middle-income households to participate in supporting Australian culture, rather than limiting collecting to only wealthy buyers and institutions.

Commercial galleries play a critical cultural role in Australia’s arts ecology. They take risks on emerging artists, invest in exhibitions, develop audiences, mentor careers, and create direct economic pathways for creative practitioners. In many cases, commercial galleries act as the bridge between emerging practice and eventual institutional recognition.

A strong national cultural policy must therefore recognise that artists do not simply need opportunities to exhibit, they need opportunities to sell.

Supporting the commercial visual arts market is not contrary to supporting culture. In fact, it supports all five pillars, and is one of the most practical and sustainable ways of ensuring Australian artists can continue to live and work as artists in Australia.