

## NATIONAL CULTURAL POLICY SUBMISSION

### Who We Are

**Karul Projects Dance Theatre** is a self-determined First Nations contemporary dance-theatre company based on Minjungbal Country on the Southern Gold Coast, founded in 2017 by Artistic Director Thomas E.S. Kelly (Minjungbal, Wiradjuri, Ni-Vanuatu) and Associate Artistic Director Taree Sansbury (Kurna, Narrunga, Ngarrindjeri). We create and present original works grounded in Australian Indigenous stories, cultural knowledge, and lived experience, spanning stage productions, site-specific performance, artist development, and community engagement.

Karul is based here because this is Thomas's ancestral Country, within the Yugambah Language Region on Bundjalung Nation. Our connection to this place is not incidental. It is the foundation of our practice, our governance, and our responsibility to community. We are a registered not-for-profit with charitable status, governed and led by First Nations people.

This submission is made in alignment with the Blak Futures Collective and First Nations Performing Arts Companies Network (FNPAC) overarching submission and the Self-Determined Organisations submission. We endorse the collective priorities articulated in those documents. This submission speaks to our specific circumstances as an emerging self-determined company with a distinctive regional role.

### What We Are Building

In July 2026, Karul will launch the Karul Ensemble: four First Nations performers employed on permanent part-time contracts. This is a significant structural commitment and a deliberate organisational choice. The performing arts sector has long relied on episodic engagement of First Nations artists. The Ensemble is a direct response to that pattern, and to Thomas and Taree's own experiences as emerging artists navigating a sector that offered limited pathways to sustained employment and creative development.

The Ensemble makes possible things that were not possible for Karul before: works of greater scale and ambition, a choreographic practice built on genuine continuity with the same artists over time, deeper investment in community engagement, and a model of employment that reflects what we believe First Nations artists deserve. The Ensemble has been made possible through philanthropy and carefully structured program delivery. The groundwork is laid, activity is scoped, and onboarding is underway. From our understanding, the Karul Ensemble will be only the second permanent First Nations performing arts ensemble in Australia.

### Artist Pathways in Practice

Two of the Ensemble's inaugural members illustrate the kind of artist pathway the sector needs and currently lacks the structural support to sustain at scale.

██████████ first came to Karul's attention while she was producing for BlakDance. Thomas invited her onto the floor, offered her the opportunity to perform in Silence, and she went on to tour that work nationally. What began as a single opportunity became a creative relationship, and that relationship has now become a permanent position.

██████████ graduated from NAISDA and was offered a secondment with Karul during the development of The Mighty Mob in 2025. That secondment became an invitation to join the inaugural Ensemble. These are not exceptional stories. They are the kinds of pathways that should be routine across the sector, and that require organisational infrastructure to sustain.

### Place and Regional Significance

Karul is the only professional First Nations performing arts company across South East Queensland and Northern New South Wales. The Gold Coast and its surrounding region has a substantial First Nations community, deep cultural significance within the Yugambah Language Region, and no equivalent organisation doing this work.

This is not a gap waiting to be filled by policy. It is a reality that Karul has been building within for nearly a decade. What regional presence requires is not just recognition but structural support: investment that reaches beyond major metropolitan centres and that recognises the costs and conditions specific to companies working outside capital city infrastructure.

### The Funding Pathway and What Policy Must Do

Karul has recently been successful in receiving a Creative Australia Capacity Building investment for June-December 2026. This is a meaningful development. It represents the federal funding system beginning to see and respond to what Karul is building. The Capacity Building program, and the potential two-year bridging investment that follows, is the right instinct. It is an acknowledgement that organisations like ours exist in a stage of development that previous funding architecture did not adequately address: beyond episodic project funding, not yet inside multi-year recurrent investment.

The investment figures are stark. Of the multi-year federally funded First Nations performing arts companies in Australia, three are theatre companies and only one is dance. For a practice the sector has consistently identified as essential cultural infrastructure, this gap demands attention.

What the next National Cultural Policy must do is make this kind of thinking permanent rather than exceptional. A clear, transparent, and sustained pipeline from project support through capacity building to multi-year investment would allow emerging self-determined organisations to plan, develop, and grow with confidence rather than uncertainty. This pipeline must be available to organisations across the country, including in regions that have historically been underserved by federal cultural investment.

As the Blak Futures Collective and FNPAC have articulated, self-determined First Nations performing arts organisations are not supplementary to Australia's cultural system. They are foundational cultural institutions, sustaining governance, workforce, cultural continuity, community relationships, and artistic innovation across generations. Policy must now be structured to reflect that reality at every stage of organisational development, not just at the top.