

Arts Project Australia: Submission for National Cultural Policy

Australia is home to some of the world's most exciting and distinctive contemporary art — and much of it is being made by artists the mainstream art world is only just beginning to take seriously.

Organisations like Arts Project Australia (APA) have spent decades nurturing this creative energy, and our national cultural policy has a tremendous opportunity to champion it at scale.

The two key pillars that relate to our organisation are Pillar 2: A place for every story and Pillar 3: The centrality of the artist but all pillars are relevant to our organisation and our artists.

Founded in 1974, Arts Project Australia was the first full-time not-for-profit art studio in Australia for artists with intellectual disabilities — built on the belief that every artist deserves access to the same resources, materials, and exhibition opportunities as their peers.

Fifty years on, that founding vision has been proven right in the most compelling way: through the extraordinary art it has produced, and the lives it has transformed.

APA's Northcote studio welcomes 130 artists who are neurodivergent and / or with an intellectual disability each week, providing an environment where artists develop an original and authentic voice, supported by arts workers who provide critical feedback and professional guidance.

APA has always been driven by artistic excellence rather than a therapeutic model. Yet discourse around its artists too often highlights disability over the aesthetic and conceptual qualities of the work itself. Artists with intellectual disabilities and neurodivergent artists are not participating in a side conversation within art history — they are part of art history, and they deserve the same critical engagement as any other practising artist.

Works by APA veterans like Alan Constable, Lisa Reid and Chris O'Brien are held in major public and private collections in Australia and overseas. APA's booth at Melbourne Art Fair sells out year after year. TarraWarra Museum of Art's recent exhibition *Intimate Imaginaries* featured over 160 works by 13 APA artists — a landmark moment in Australian cultural life. And in 2026, APA has artists represented in the prestigious Archibald and Wynne prizes.

Internationally, San Francisco MOMA recently acquired over US\$500,000 worth of artwork from Creative Growth, APA's Oakland-based sister studio. In December 2025, [REDACTED] an autistic, learning disabled artist with limited verbal communication won the Turner Prize. [REDACTED] who has worked with her for 25 years, said on stage at the ceremony: "This is a major, major moment for a lot of people. It's seismic."

Australia's public galleries and museums have every reason to follow suit.

A forward-thinking national cultural policy can accelerate this shift. Dedicated, multi-year funding for disability-led arts organisations would allow artists to focus on their practice, arts workers to build sustainable careers, and institutions to take genuine curatorial risks. Importantly, such funding should be accompanied by a broader commitment from public galleries to acquire and exhibit work by neurodivergent and intellectually disabled artists — not within access initiatives or community programs, but in their main galleries, permanent collections, and flagship exhibitions.

It's important to note the crucial role the NDIS plays in supporting artists to participate in programs offered by APA and others. The positive social and mental wellbeing impacts are easily demonstrable – but beyond that, many artists are able to access opportunities for work, financial return and real agency. Saying nothing of the enrichment to the creative industries.

Australia already has the artists, the organisations, and the proven model. What is needed now is the policy confidence to back them fully — not as a gesture of goodwill, but in recognition of the importance, longevity, and influence of their work.