

SHOWING UP!

Prof. Ted Snell, Chair, Visual Arts Board for the Australia Council (OzCo) provides valuable insights and recommendations, encouraging you to “get in the game” of attracting OzCo funds.

Woody Allen once said that ninety percent of success is just showing up. Sadly when the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council meets three times a year to allocate grants, very few Western Australians are on the field. Knowing how many really good artists there are in the State and how competitive they would be if they would just pull on a Guernsey, it's extremely disappointing each round to see so few in highlighted territory when the funding league table is drawn up at the end of discussions.

All right! Enough of the football analogy, even though the visual arts grant rounds do raise an interesting comparison with sport. Whereas Western Australians are keenly competitive in many areas of sporting and athletic endeavour, why is it they hardly even show up in the VAB grant rounds?

One reason may be that the Department for Culture and the Arts in WA has a program of grants that are easily accessible, and for good projects proposed by artists with ability, not difficult to secure. This is also the case with Queensland and to a lesser extent South Australia, while NSW doesn't provide well for individual artists and hence each VAB round has a heavy weighting of artists from that State. Well, if this is the case why should artists from the West bother to compete nationally?

Firstly, because the State Government has invested in the program through the Visual Arts Craft Strategy and there are a number of grants that are earmarked for Western Australian artists.

Another reason for applying is because there is a credentialing aspect to winning a nationally competitive grant. In developing a professional career in the arts an important step is to gain national recognition and Australia Council grants are an effective way of achieving that milestone. It is also an excellent forum for making an impression on the select band of artists, arts administrators and curators who sit on the panels. A strong body of work presented to this group can lead to unforeseen opportunities.

Of course applying for a grant takes time. Every application is a project that must be attended to thoughtfully and each requires an allocation of financial and professional resources. Despite the effort to 'harmonize' forms for State and Federal agencies, it is true that each has its own idiosyncrasies and different grants demand different approaches and often a unique set of requirements. It is therefore important to set aside some time to thinking about your project and to identify a space in your calendar for preparing the application. Ideally this should be done in tandem with studio work; do not see it as a tedious form filling exercise but as an extension of your creative work.

A great deal of time has gone into making the VAB application process less arduous and now it is on-line it is even easier. The VAB staff are keen to talk candidates through the

application process – that’s really true, it isn’t just a bit of fluff to make you feel supported – indeed it’s encouraged because you can save a lot of time by talking a project through with sympathetic individuals who know the pitfalls. Of course your images or video must be of good quality and that’s not always done without cost, but again new technologies are making this both easier and cheaper.

Excellence is the benchmark, if the idea and work is good it will be funded within the constraints of the budget, and the best way to access the merit of the work in this forum is on the quality of the support material. Show your images to friends, get feedback from other artists, and don’t just send in snaps or photographs of people at your last exhibition opening or long unedited videos.

Australia Council grants are designed to assist in the creation of new work, in the presentation and promotion of innovative and excellent work by Australian artists in local and international fora, and to provide opportunities for professional development, both technically and intellectually. Because excellence is the benchmark the Board no longer requires artists to have a fallow year following a successful application. We don’t believe creativity comes in two-year cycles, so if you have acquitted your grant from the year before you can re-apply the following year. This is an important innovation.

Now to the bottom line; if you want a hint to get your first grant, read the Chair’s report published after each grant round and identify which are extremely competitive and which less so. Skills and Development grants are less competitive than New Work grants, some overseas studios are less popular than others leading to considerably less demand and so good applications are almost guaranteed success. Be strategic!

With one VAB grant to your credit and the boost of confidence that inevitably follows, and with a range of experiences behind you and increased acknowledgement of your practice, it’s much easier to apply a second and third and fourth time. If you’re not successful, get feedback from the VAB staff and begin to re-craft your application immediately for the following year. If you’ve been working for many years and exhibiting regularly think about applying for a two-year Fellowship, now \$60,000 a year for two years.

In other words, get in the game. It’s clear from anyone who does the rounds of galleries in Western Australia that there are a great many very committed, talented and ambitious artists doing work that is inventive, thoughtful and pertinent. It’s not about re-building WA’s tarnished reputation or engineering some kind of bellicose local pride, it’s about getting appropriate support and recognition for the excellent work that goes on here and ensuring that the funds allocated to local artists are accessed and supplemented by other available funding. It’s about showing up!

Ted Snell
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