

Visual arts: Advice on establishing an art career

While the Australian creative industries grow stronger and more varied with each decade, it is still difficult for artists to become established. The sector contributes \$4.2 billion to the GDP and includes over 44,000 professional working artists, with 14,442 people operating art businesses; 1,166 of these located in Western Australia (Australian Council for the Arts, 2015; Murray, 2014). Due to the nature of arts work, careers are often non-linear and it takes time, energy and regular skills development to sustain a career. Statistics from art graduates show that, a year after graduation, 55% of people are working part-time or in casual roles as they pursue their careers. This mix of roles is known as a portfolio career, and for artists it is common across the career lifespan.

Work as a visual artist is likely to involve multiple concurrent roles that form part of a small business; some of these roles may be unrelated to the visual arts. Work is most often secured through reputation and networks, so it is crucial to be known, to be visible, and to know the market.

A locally, nationally and internationally renowned ceramic artist, Graham Hay's incredible career has spanned over two decades. His work has featured in over 130 exhibitions worldwide. Graham's research and expertise has led to invitations to teach and demonstrate on over 220 occasions and in more than twelve countries. As a celebrated Western Australian paper clay expert, Graham has come a long way from his humble beginnings, growing up on a farm with four brothers and a sister in small-town New Zealand.

We asked Graham for advice about establishing an arts career. As with many creative industries occupations, visual arts work can be very versatile and unpredictable. Graham's suggestion is to broaden your perspective and engage with the arts community, know yourself and your industry, don't be afraid to create, and prepare for sacrifices. You can learn more about each of these points below.

Broaden your perspective and engage with the arts community

Get involved early in your studies and consider the start of your degree as the start of your career.

You should:

1. Read the news; Twitter is a great platform to keep up-to-date.
2. Go to exhibitions and talk to artists; begin with [John Curtin Gallery](#) or [PICA](#)
3. Join the boards and associations; take a look at art associations relevant to their field, like the Ceramic Arts Association of WA or Artsource, which provides a number of artist residencies and studios at their various metropolitan and regional locations
4. Volunteer; to get started, take a look at the Volunteer Challenge

Graham's illustrious career forms the backdrop for a series of practical tips, cultivated from three decades of experience. The resource begins with a sectoral overview that enables students to situate themselves within the wider context of the creative and visual arts. This is followed by anecdotes from Graham's activity during his studies, with examples of how he utilised his time, resources and opportunities to kick-start his career. One of our favourite stories is that Graham treated the three and a half years of his degree as the first years of his career!

Topics include: broadening your perspective and engaging with the arts community, knowing yourself and your industry, not being afraid to create and preparing to make sacrifices.

What does it take to succeed?

Commit time and resources

For Graham, it took a certain amount of risk-taking to pursue excellence in ceramics. The 6–8 hours minimum requirement a week expected of the course was not enough, so he decided to “treat the university as my studio.” Even with part-time work he made sure to devote as much time as possible to practising before class or work, and staying late into the night. The commitment to the course and his career was a huge risk to take, but as Graham said, “I was doing something I really enjoyed.”

Get involved

Graham’s formal art major taught him many strategies on developing, cultivating and focusing his ideas, which added structure to his techniques. But he attributes his engagement with the Perth art community as what put him ahead of his peers:

“I actually got involved with a lot of organisations, both on and off campus, and went out to find practitioners and attend exhibitions.”

He talks about how he always did far more than the students who just did what was necessary.

“Universities can be so engaged with themselves; that’s a whole world to itself.”

Be active

Graham describes the art community like “a school of fish”: the members tend to support each other and work as a unit. He volunteered and worked for many art organisations during his studies, and by doing so he interacted with the industry and got his own work known.

If it doesn’t exist, create it

Graham’s devotion to his studies encompassed a need to be involved and connected to the wider art community. This wasn’t always easy: “There is actually an active arts community in Perth, but they aren’t particularly well connected, as most art communities aren’t.” Graham was concerned about his situation as a new graduate and feared that he might find himself “falling off a cliff”: that is, becoming irrelevant and disconnected to the industry.

To combat this notion head-on, Graham saw a gap in the university art community and formed his own art group from fellow first and second year art students. The group, known as the ‘Thermal Shockers’, had a modest beginning in 1992, but evolved into a transformative experience for both the students-turned-artists and the university.

Be persistent

The group began to exhibit their work in public, and initially the university refused to support their bid to include this work as part of their formal studies, but Graham continued to lobby and negotiate. This persistence resulted in the university acknowledging their work.

Bring passion and commitment to your work

The [‘Thermal Shockers’](#) ran regular exhibitions on top of their existing workload, but were motivated by their love of making and sharing art. Their passion fuelled their commitment.

Work and learn together

Due to restricted funds, members brought their unique skills to the task. Graham did his part by developing a basic website to showcase the works of the collective and digitizing their exhibition catalogues. The group worked together to curate exhibitions, secure sponsors, network, cater for events, and design marketing materials.

“We were quite proactive, and opportunities came up for us that we could share with one another.”

The ‘Thermal Shockers’ was one of many groups and events initiated and enhanced by Graham, and he describes it as a critical milestone early on in his fruitful art career. The group went on to exhibit for over a decade and the members established themselves not as students, but as nationally and internationally renowned artists in their own right.

Graham knew that the degree alone wouldn’t make him stand out of the crowd. By extending himself and taking every opportunity, he developed a broader perspective: this allowed him to connect with the real art community beyond the campus and get his name out there.

Know yourself and your industry

Find something that you really enjoy and let it lead your creative pathway. If it’s something a little different or unusual, zoom in on it as soon as you can. For Graham, paperclay was an area little explored at the time, and he was able to quickly establish his credibility.

But he mentions two important things to remember:

1. Do your research beforehand: the market and climate will vary depending on where you’re based, so it’s important to understand where the demand for your particular skill-set lies.
2. Follow your enthusiasm until it dies, and then move onto something else. luckily for Graham, the medium offers so much experimentation that he’s yet to get tired of it!

Don't be afraid to create

As an artist you need to take initiative and try your hand at creating, even when they're not confident. "Try to be a creator and not just a consumer. Don't just admire a book cover, go out and design a book cover," he suggests. The experience will be both instructive and rewarding.

Prepare for sacrifices

"Prepare for compromise" Graham says, as he admits the road to being an artist meant sometimes not having many savings and getting by on the minimum. He recommends knowing what you're getting into, and to expect to be in the studio seven days a week. If students are happy to put in the commitment then they should pursue their passions to their full extent.

Make it count!

Look at Graham's suggestions. Can you commit to starting three of these within the next three months?

This resource was developed by Dawn Bennett.