

Showcasing Creativity



Programming and presenting First Nations performing arts

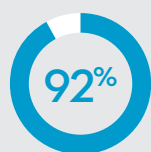
“Our theatres need to tell contemporary Australian stories and it’s incumbent upon us if we’re telling those contemporary Australian stories, to tell the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story.”

Research participant, *Showcasing Creativity*

First Nations performing arts are unique, contemporary and diverse expressions of the world’s longest continuously living cultures. They embody a proud tradition of telling stories to connect generations and communities.

Showcasing Creativity is the latest study in a series commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts with the aim of supporting the sector to close the gap between interest and attendance; thereby connecting more Australians to First Nations arts experiences and increasing opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists.

Australians’ attitudes¹



Agree Indigenous arts are an important part of Australia’s culture



Show a strong or growing interest in Indigenous arts



Agree Indigenous arts are well represented



Attend Indigenous arts

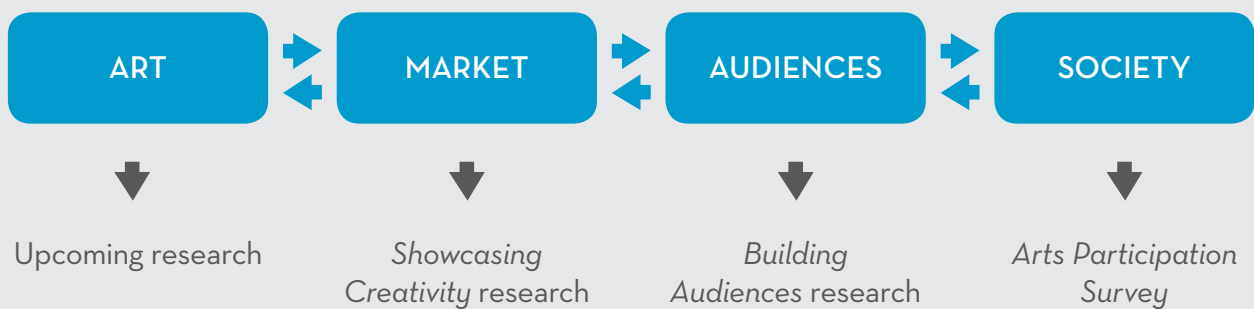
1. Australia Council 2014, *Arts in Daily Life: Australian Participation in the Arts* (national *Arts Participation Survey* results).

The previous study, *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*² explored this opportunity from the perspective of audiences, both existing and potential.

Showcasing Creativity: Programming and Presenting First Nations Performing Arts explores the gap from the perspective of those who facilitate works being made public and promoting works to audiences: presenters (venues and festivals) and producers (those that sell or represent First Nations arts to presenters).

A third study will explore the creation of artistic works. The national *Arts Participation Survey* will enable periodic tracking of Australians' interests, attitudes and attendance, with the next edition fielded in late 2016.

The First Nations performing arts supply chain and Australia Council research. The two central research studies are complete. The *Arts Participation Survey* is conducted at 3-4 year intervals.



The *Showcasing Creativity* research involved national mapping of the publicly available programs of 135 mainstream presenters across Australia, for 2015 seasons.³ Presenters ranged from small independent performing arts venues in regional Australia, to state-based arts organisations and major festivals. *Showcasing Creativity* also presents survey results from 44 mainstream presenters, and insights from 40 interviews with producers and presenters. It reports on the level and types of First Nations performing arts programming in Australia's mainstream venues and festivals; the presenting of works to audiences; and the motivations and obstacles for presenters and producers.

It provides an opportunity and evidence base for the broader arts sector to examine decision making processes about programming, presenting and marketing First Nations works to Australian audiences.

“I thought it was too hard hitting a work for this community. I didn't have the courage to do it. And I probably should have... It was such a strong, brave, fabulous work.”

Research participant, *Showcasing Creativity*

It aims to promote and inform discussion about what is needed to achieve a culturally ambitious nation that cherishes First Nations arts.

KEY FINDINGS

1. National mapping of the programs of 135 Australian presenters found that First Nations performing arts are under-represented in Australia's mainstream venues and festivals. They comprised around 2% of the almost 6000 works programmed in 2015 seasons.
2. Almost half of Australian presenters did not appear to program works with First Nations creative control, involvement or content in 2015, including major venues and festivals that presented over 100 works each.
3. Some presenters program a comparatively large number of First Nations works. Just 12 presenters (9%) were responsible for more than a third of all First Nations programming in 2015. Personal motivations, organisational leadership and exposure through peers are key motivations for programming.
4. The *Building Audiences* research found that audiences have a strong image of First Nations arts as 'traditional,' but that they are highly motivated to engage with 'contemporary' works.⁴ The national mapping showed that in 2015 more than eight in ten First Nations works were contemporary.
5. Over one third of works were small in scale with less than five performers. Presenters tend to select either accessible works with a known brand, or smaller works which are low cost to stage. Smaller works can enable presenters to show riskier content.
6. Presenters and producers interviewed said decision-makers can be tokenistic when considering First Nations works. Some lack the knowledge or interest to source small-to-medium works. Building sector capacity for First Nations creatives to connect to presenters through showcases and networks is critical to growing the presentation and programming of First-Nations works. Presenters called for long-term funding support for small, medium and large works, and First Nations companies.



Cut The Sky, Marrugeku. Credit: Jon Green.

7. According to presenters, audience satisfaction is high irrespective of box office. The artistic excellence or integrity of First Nations works are key motivations for programming. Shortfalls in box office are not about the likeability of works, but about marketing reach. There is a need to build marketing skills to reach new audiences.
8. Presenters who are motivated to challenge and build their audiences are more likely to program First Nations works. Opportunities for increased audiences lie in 'potential audiences', 'risk-taking audiences' in metropolitan areas and the 'schools market'. Regional presenters could tour popular artists, whilst investing in long-term community engagement, and works with a local angle.
9. Presenters said that financial risk is the main deterrent to programming First Nations work. Available, brand-name First Nations works are often too expensive, whilst smaller works are considered financially risky because they lack brand recognition.
10. Concerns about serious themes are both an obstacle to programming and a marketing challenge for First Nations arts. Presenters called for more entertaining and accessible works as an entry point for audiences, and new or 'fresh' approaches to difficult content. Some presenters spoke of ways to engage non-Indigenous audiences in works with political content or a willingness to challenge audiences.
11. Many presenters are afraid that they will get the process of selecting, staging, presenting and marketing works to audiences 'wrong'. There is a need to build sector capacity for cross-cultural engagement both ways; between mainstream presenters, and First Nations artists and communities. E.g.,
 - marketing skills and opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists and arts workers
 - marketing and community engagement skills for presenters
 - increasing exposure and connections between presenters, creatives and communities
 - initiatives to build performing arts centres' understanding and confidence for programming First Nations work.
12. Presenters and producers stated that Australia's underlying race relations impact programming decisions, and are an obstacle to presenting First Nations works. Through this research, they called for:
 - proactive initiatives, long-term planning and support to build First Nations representation across the sector and in programming; and
 - personal, organisational and sector-wide leadership and commitment to an important two-way cultural conversation.

For the full *Showcasing Creativity* report, and to view related resources, see: www.australiacouncil.gov.au/research/showcasing-creativity

2. K. Bridson, M. Clarke, J. Evans, B. Martin, R. Rentschler and T. White (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.
3. The reference year was either 2015, or 2014-15, depending on the presenter's program.
4. K. Bridson, et al. (2015), *Building Audiences: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts*, Sydney.