

SSI ARTIST VOICES

Experiences of the pandemic
and a desired future

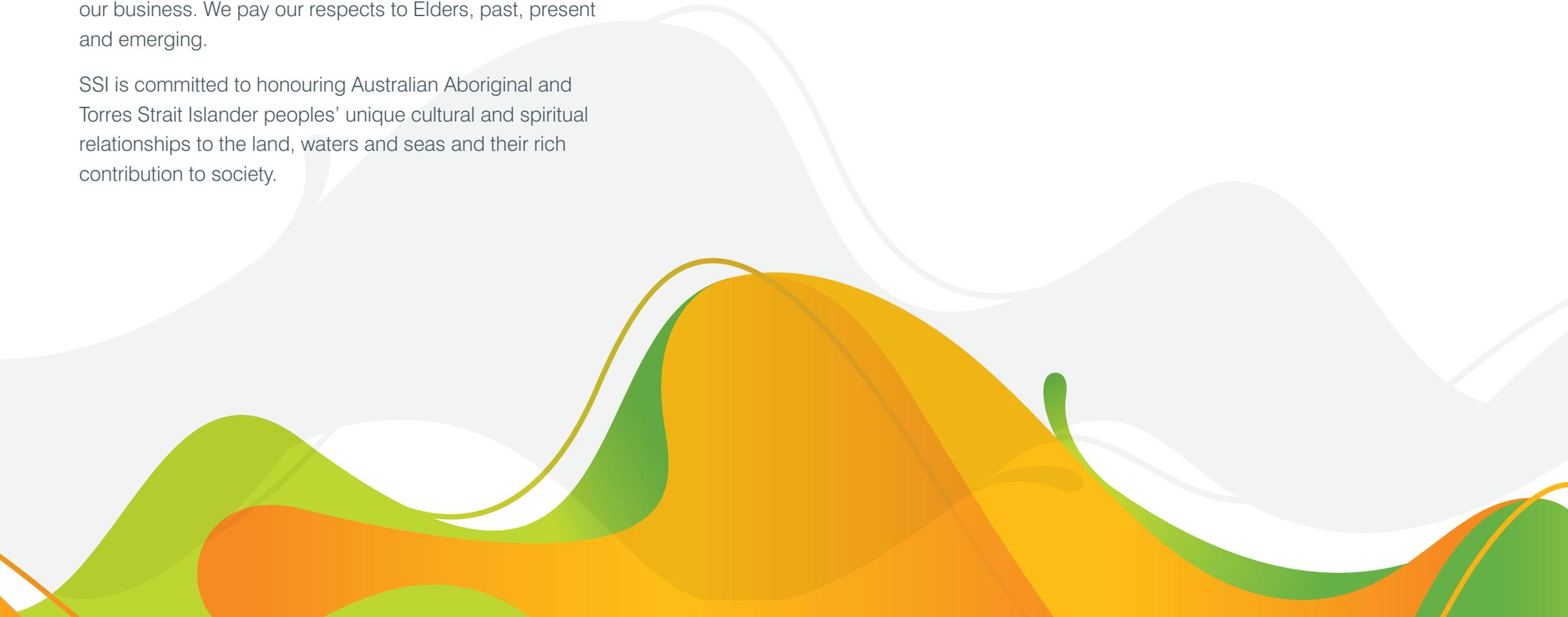


Acknowledgment of Country

SSI acknowledges the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this nation.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which our organisation is located and where we conduct our business. We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and emerging.

SSI is committed to honouring Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.



About SSI

Settlement Services International (SSI) is a leading community-based, social-purpose organisation that provides services in NSW across areas including refugee settlement, asylum seeker assistance, support for people with disability and multicultural foster care. SSI's vision is to achieve a society that values the diversity of its people and actively provides support to ensure meaningful social and economic participation and to assist individuals and families to reach their potential.

About SSI Arts & Culture

SSI's innovative Arts & Culture program is inspired by the belief that everyone deserves the opportunity to develop their creative potential and participate meaningfully in Australia's cultural life — no matter where they come from, what language they speak, or their level of ability.

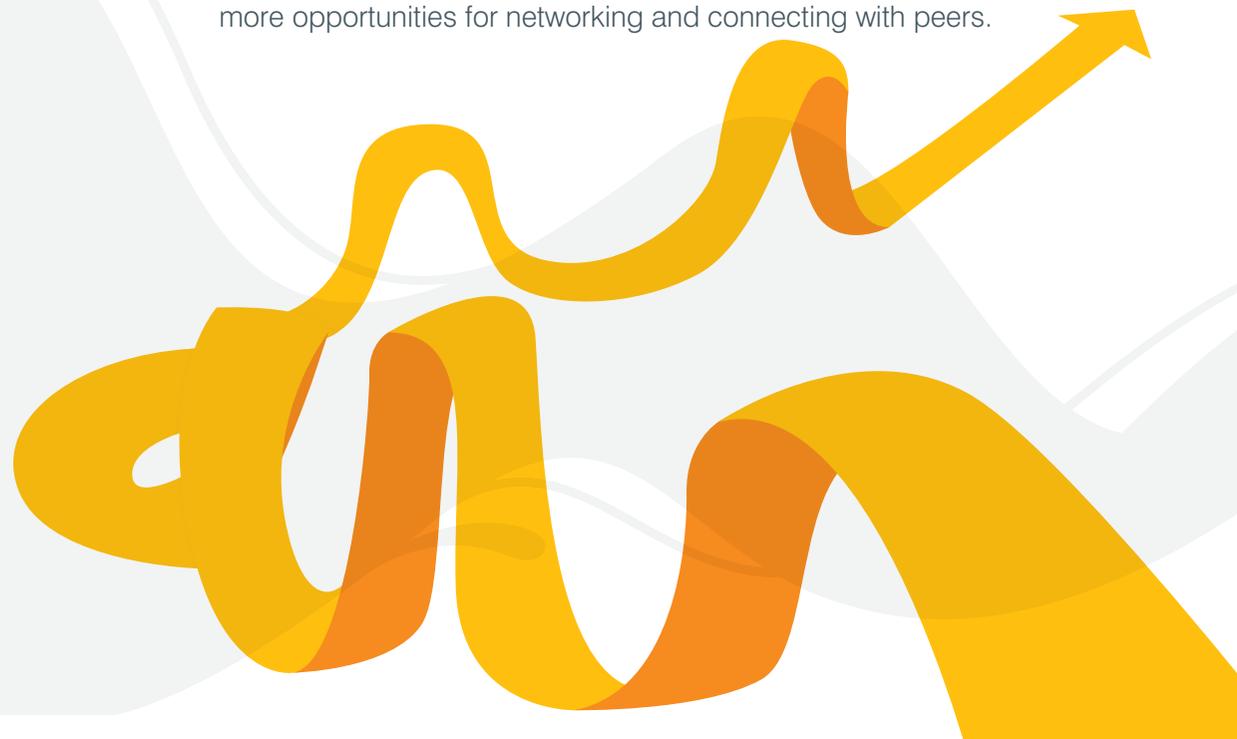
SSI's self-funded Arts & Culture program is a unique initiative creating pathways to meaningful engagement and inclusion in the Australian community through artistic and cultural expression. Founded in 2014, the program aims to facilitate diverse artistic expression and cultural participation by enabling refugee and new migrant artists to develop their creative potential while fostering cultural exchange, social cohesion and appreciation of our cultural diversity. This is achieved through creative projects and events with a local, regional and national scope.

Executive Summary

This document examines how artists and cultural practitioners associated with the SSI Arts & Culture program were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic – and how they now view their own futures and that of the sector. It is based on research conducted through a series of virtual events, and gives voice to participants' concerns and struggles, as well as their successes, personal victories and ideas on future-proofing their professions.

Common themes raised by interviewees include struggles with financial hardships, challenges with both mental health and new technology, and a desire for networking opportunities. Those interviewed felt arts and culture had an important role in a post-COVID world and expressed a strong desire to communicate their experiences to government in order to ensure they received support going forward.

SSI has worked hard throughout the pandemic to support artists and help them to pivot and find new ways of reaching audiences. The organisation is now proposing a range of measures to ensure Australia continues to develop an arts and culture sector that truly reflects the nation's cultural diversity and that is underpinned by principles of equity and inclusion. Some of these measures include building digital capabilities among artists and creating more opportunities for networking and connecting with peers.



Background

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and the resulting lockdowns and social-distancing measures have had impacts on every part of Australian society. Many Australians lost their jobs, with vulnerable individuals and those with insecure employment among the hardest hit.

During 2020, SSI reached out to many of the multicultural communities it supports to gain a better understanding of their experiences of this tumultuous time and to provide practical ongoing support. By gaining an appreciation of the 'community voice', we aimed to put ourselves in the best possible position to advocate for positive change.

Part of this process involved consultation with artists and cultural practitioners participating in the SSI Arts & Culture program via a series of Virtual Artist Roundtables. This exercise was intended to provide an opportunity for artists to discuss the future of the arts and their own artistic practice and to define what recovery and support would look like for them.



Methodology

The research for this report was conducted by SSI's Community Engagement team. The team used a specialised consultation tool developed by SSI to provide systematic structure to 'community voice'. A total of 17 artists with diverse backgrounds and settlement experiences were engaged in consultations which included three virtual roundtables between August and September 2020. Consultation followed four primary lines of inquiry, namely:

Experiences:

The current experience of artists during COVID-19;

Aspirations:

The hopes of the artists in a COVID-19 environment;

Concerns:

The perceived challenges to overcome the hardship experienced due to COVID-19 for artists; and

Assets:

The strengths that artists are using during this time, such as knowledge, skills, networks and resources.



What We Heard

The following are quotes from some of the 17 arts practitioners interviewed during the roundtables staged for this report.

Experiences

“People say, ‘don’t make excuses’ – [that] you can work from home. But you are facing a lot of different emotions about stuff. I went flat on my creativity.”

“I lost my contracts and gigs overnight. I do song writing and poetry workshops in schools which stopped, and so did the gigs. I was forced to move out of my place.”

Aspirations

“Artists need more support, respect and acknowledgement from the government. Artists shouldn’t have to figure it all out themselves.”

“Networking is important. There is value being linked in with other artists and using those connections and it inspires other work. How do we get that artists community together?”

Concerns

“I worked on a project where I put in a lot of effort. [But] what was the point if no one could see it in person?”

“With the pandemic there is no events, no income, and no activity. For the first few months it was a nightmare and I was in a really dark place.”

Assets

“It has been good to stop and see where work is coming from and how to structure things in the future. Be able to see where can I do collaborations. A chance to think about the business structure.”

“We have the power to listen and advocate. Because of the pandemic the artists have been raising all these issues. We need to educate, including about the importance of arts and culture.”

Common Themes

The following is a summary of the common themes expressed by roundtable participants.

Financial insecurity and hardship:

The cancellation of public events and group activities due to social distancing resulted in many artists losing part or the whole of their income, severely impacting their financial security. The fact that a large proportion of artists are sole traders and work on a freelance basis meant that many were ineligible for government support. While many artists adapted to online mediums to showcase their work, the financial rewards have been small as most digital arts content is offered free of charge.

Negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing:

This financial insecurity negatively impacted on artists' mental health, with many reporting feelings of anxiety, depression, exhaustion and fear. Some found it difficult to be creative for the first time in their lives. Many artists also had family or cultural connections abroad and were concerned for their welfare. Artists who normally work in their homeland as well as Australia felt disappointment that their transnational experience was not acknowledged more broadly in society.

A desire for increased networking and social connection:

Artists and cultural practitioners expressed a powerful desire to connect with peers and other members of the broader community. Newly arrived artists, in particular, reported feelings of isolation, with many stating they wanted to connect with other artists and their work as they settled into Australia, but they found this challenging due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Loss of creative and engagement opportunities:

Artists reported high rates of isolation, with many stating they wanted to connect with other artists to share experiences and creative ideas but they found this challenging. Many spoke of the loss of live audiences and the detrimental impact this has had on their arts practice as well as their enjoyment and satisfaction.

Common Themes (continued)

Challenges and opportunities of online engagement:

Every artist consulted talked about the pressure of converting their practice to online formats. Many found the experience frustrating, emotionally draining, and artistically unsatisfying, due to small audience numbers, the limitations of online platforms, and the lack of spontaneous and direct interaction. Many spoke of their lack of technical skills and access to equipment. However, the pandemic also provided opportunities for some artists to reflect, restructure or reassess their artistic practice, with technology providing opportunities to collaborate and reach out to international audiences.

Role of the arts in society:

Artists highlighted how the arts have historically played an important role in society and how that role has become even more apparent during the pandemic. They stressed that as we move forward as a society, arts and culture will play an even more crucial role in connecting communities and maintaining social cohesion.

Role of government and advocacy/service organisations:

Artists called for more government support and suggested sector organisations could play a major role in advocacy, capacity building, and in providing mental health support. They also believed systemic barriers in the arts sector, such as limited appreciation of non-western art forms, exacerbated their situation. They saw the potential for diverse artists and arts organisations to join together to address these barriers. Artists raised the need for organisations' such as SSI to advocate on their behalf. And they stated they need to be connected to decision makers in order to garner the support and financial investment.

SSI's Response

As well as undertaking the research contained in this paper, SSI has been involved in a wide range of initiatives aimed at supporting artists and cultural practitioners through the pandemic. These include:

The Artist Support Initiative. Launched in April 2020, this initiative matched art lovers with visual artists who had lost work due to COVID-19, resulting in increased artwork sales. This project was particularly important for artists on temporary visas relying on short-term, project-based work to sustain themselves.

The New Beginnings' Freedom Sessions. This self-funded initiative involved a series of five live-streamed performances and artists' talks which took place during 10 weeks from July to September 2020. The free series not only generated income for 15 artists but also for production crew who have been affected by event cancellations across the country.

The Creative Pathway and Community Arts programs. These existing programs were adjusted to allow for online delivery. SSI was able to pivot and deliver its Artist Development Program – originally planned as face-to-face scheme – via virtual means, supporting nine artists through tailored professional development workshops and mentorships.

Advocacy. SSI has made a submission to the Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's creative and cultural industries and institutions, and continues to participate in consultations at the state and national level.

Moving ahead, SSI plans to continue to ensure the voices and experiences of culturally diverse artists and communities are at the forefront of its programming decisions and advocacy. We will work with artists and partners in the arts and culture sector to develop initiatives that create positive change.

SSI will also advocate for more support for individual artists and cultural practitioners from culturally diverse backgrounds, in particular for artists on temporary visas and for newcomers. And we will incorporate digital arts training and mental health support when co-developing creative pathway plans with artists.



Recommendations

Based on its discussions with artists and its own experience in the sector, SSI has a number of recommendations to ensure that Australia continues to develop an arts and culture sector that truly reflects the nation's diverse nature.

These are:

To establish funding programs to build artist capacity to create digital arts content and to engage with audiences online, while supporting a safe return to live venues;

To substantially increase financial support packages for the creative and cultural sector, in particular for individual artists and for grassroots and small organisations;

To provide culturally diverse artists with increased access to safe and inclusive spaces for networking and creative development. This may include virtual and physical spaces where artists are able to come together and develop communities of practice;

To permanently increase the base rate of JobSeeker and other income support for individuals and to expand JobKeeper eligibility criteria, beyond March 2021, to include those creative workers currently left out of the scheme, including temporary migrants;

To support organisations that are assisting and advocating for newcomer artists during the pandemic. SSI and other migrant and settlement providers across the country have proven expertise, extensive networks and frontline services that should be used to inform arts and cultural policy and action.

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Thank you

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Authors:

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Cover photo:

Chemon Theys performing with JamarzOnMarz at the SSI New Beginnings Festival, 16 November 2019, Darling Harbour. Photo by Danish Ravi.