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People gathering at Artlands 2023, hosted by Regional Arts Australia. Photo: Tim Ngo.

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Diversity and the regional arts sector

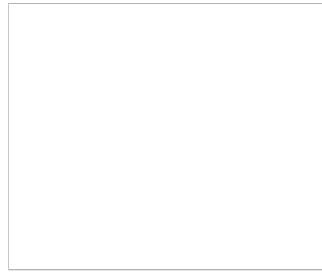
Key administrators of arts in regional Australia speak about diversity in the regional arts sector and reflect on why we think of it as monocultural.

Görkem Acaroğlu

In September 2023, this writer had the privilege of attending Regional Arts Australia's (RAA) **Artlands** in Canberra. The immense cultural diversity in that room was testament to the diversity of artists and arts workers in the regions.

RAA reports that, in the past year, 12% of its total funding submissions have been from people who identify as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) and 8% as First Nations. Yet the view of regional Australia is still largely one of a homogenous culture with homogenous political views, lifestyles and education.

ArtsHub speaks with Jo Porter, CEO of Regional Arts Victoria, on the perceptions around diversity in regional arts. Porter says: 'The diversity of regionally-based Australians is as complex, but not the same, as in cities – genders, cultures, political opinions, class, life experience and barriers to participation vary in every regional community. One of our challenges is communicating this complexity to people who lump regionally-based people into one category. It is easy to "other" people whose lives are unfamiliar, and effort is required to appreciate and consider the opportunities and challenges associated with regional diversity. The cliché is that it's further from the city to the country than the country to the city.'



Scott Howie, General Manager of Regional Arts Australia, shares a similar view: 'There is a structural problem in how the stories of regional Australia get told outside of regional Australia. It's important to consider, who thinks regional arts is monocultural? Because I certainly don't and those of us who practise out here don't. So, I think if there is that view being pushed, it has to be coming from a stereotyped cliché of what regional Australia looks like.'

'We know there is a huge migration influx into regions and refugee communities, so if there is that perception it is a misperception based on old stereotypes of what life is like out "in the bush, the sticks, in the country".'

Diverse cultures in the regions

In Bendigo, Multicultural Arts Victoria (MAV) had a five-year engagement with culturally diverse communities living there. Forest Keegel was employed as the Coordinator from 2017. Keegel says: 'Bendigo has a thriving Karen [also known as Kayjin] population now, as well as Hazara and South Sudanese communities, which contribute to the economic prosperity and cultural life of the city.'

MAV did some initial consultation with communities and found that what people wanted was a development and connecting space around culture.

Outgoing Executive Director and co-CEO of MAV, Andy Miller, says: 'For people in diverse communities in the regions, their cultures aren't on show. There is no point of connection for their community. It is this connection with arts offerings that is absolutely critical in regional towns. At the moment, these are not being resourced. Even a small amount of multi-year funding can make a lot of difference.'

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Miller speaks on the value of having a physical presence in regional towns that enables people from diverse communities to get involved and the broader community to see these communities' presence.

In the absence of designated arts and community cultural development organisations, settlement services like Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Service (LCMS) play a huge role. LCMS runs **Zinda**, an annual multicultural arts festival that fills a gap by making visible the diverse communities of the region, as well as engaging newer communities. For example, this year LCMS worked with the Solomon Island community, people who come from very remote regions of the Solomon Islands to earn money for their families, working in meat processing plants in Castlemaine.

LCMS Operations Manager Deanna Neville explains: 'We first started working with the Solomon Islander community because they experienced flooding, and then through that relationship, they presented performances in the Zinda Festival. That community is on short-term visas, but maybe they will find a way to stay. Regional towns want people to stay, especially those that are on short-term visas.'

Neville continues: 'The engagement in the arts and celebration in culture needs to be part of the appeal for people to stay – not just a job and a house. It's actually having a sense of place and belonging, and knowing their kids are safe and that they have a way to grow and to sustain important values, that make people stay.'

Why do we think of the regions as monocultural?

When *ArtsHub* asks Keegel why she thinks the regional arts sector is seen as monocultural, she says: 'It's to do with people's perception of what art is. Audiences and the general public don't put everything into boxes. They just have experiences – "Let's go to this festival, this theatre show or this art gallery." But in the arts sector, organisations, creatives and funding bodies put things into boxes.'

Having worked with many regionally-based Council-run venues across NSW and Victoria, this writer is aware there is a perception that regionally-based diverse communities don't want to engage in the arts. Oftentimes though, this is based on assumptions rather than an actual question being posed to those communities. Miller describes this by saying, 'The projection is monocultural – the offerings are monocultural and notions of contemporary arts presentation is large theatres and big galleries that don't acknowledge where culture manifests in particular communities.'

He speaks about the importance of supporting ideas to happen in diverse regional communities. This includes providing platforms to promote and manifest cultural activity, and opening up new conversations so people think differently about what art is – so it's not just imported from the city. Often the problem is that councils and organisations that work with diverse communities and artists in regional areas are not diverse themselves.

Miller adds: 'We don't have opportunities to see those communities reflected in the arts.'

The situation in NSW

Tracey Callinan is the CEO of Regional Arts NSW. She says there is an unevenness in the diversity across regional NSW, with highly diverse populations in some areas, and less so in others. From her perspective though, lower levels of diversity shouldn't mean less inclusion.

'It puts more pressure on us to make sure all programming is inclusive and it makes us more aware that marginalised people do not stay marginalised,' says Callinan.

Every community has diversity. Some regional towns have a university, such as Bathurst, where Callinan lives, and others have large hospitals, like Orange, for example. And these institutions bring in large diverse populations. She adds: 'People don't only go to work. They become part of the community and contribute in other ways.'

However, if the cultural offering is monocultural, 'then you know something must be missing,' continues Callinan. 'When things become invisible, you have to make an extra effort to make sure that something is addressed, so that it becomes visible. Not everyone starts on an equal playing field, so we need to give a leg-up to some people.'

When asked what it is about the regions that gives the impression there is little or no diversity, Callinan explains it's the look of a country town. 'You go down a street that is full of traditional buildings and old banks and everything about it says this is a remnant of colonisation and white men's culture, so the town itself visibly says that to you, but that doesn't mean that it really is the case.'

Porter feels that things are slowly changing. 'There are nodes of activity and what's quite exciting is that communities are not looking for inspiration from capital cities, but finding inspirational practices that investigate form from their own communities and they take pride in that.'

It also takes organisations working in the regions to make a concerted effort, as Regional Arts Australia has been doing. Howie says: 'Artlands really indicated the diversity of who is working out there in the regional arts sector. It was really reassuring to see that level of engagement both by people who identify as First Nations and CALD, and people with disability.'

And why was Artlands so diverse? Howie responds: 'It didn't just happen. It was embedded into the design. It demonstrates the way in which RAA has been growing our connection through the wider network. We are growing the people that we reach, support and work with, and therefore we are growing the diversity of our network.'

'To ensure access and inclusion at Artlands, instead of saying, "You can only come if you can afford it, you can pay to attend and pay your travel," we flipped it. We said, "If you want to come, tell us why you want to be there and we will get you there and put you up." That made a significant difference to who was in the room.'

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Identifying obstacles for equitable engagement is probably the logical first step to genuine engagement. Perhaps it is up to those who have access to resources to make a determined effort to open the doors to more diverse communities and artists, and therefore change perceptions of regional arts as monocultural. Leadership is about access and equity and about shifting power.

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[Görkem Acaroğlu](#)

Dr Görkem Acaroğlu is a theatre director, writer and dramaturg, an interdisciplinary artist, educator and diversity consultant. She has over 25 years experience making all forms of theatre, privileging marginalised and lesser heard perspectives and artists. She has worked as Arts Participation Manager at City of Melbourne, Program Producer at Fed Square, Art and Performance Lecturer at Deakin University and Artistic Director and Programmer of The Mechanics Institute in Brunswick from 2013-2017 when her theatre company, Metanoia Theatre, won a tender to convert the then hall-for-hire into a contemporary arts space.

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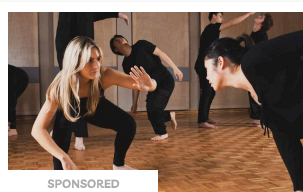


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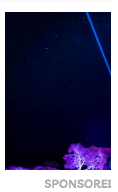


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