

## 2020: THE YEAR IN REVIEW

As I sit down to write my CEO report to reflect on 2020, I am struck by how much has changed in our world in just 12 months. The coming of the coronavirus has fundamentally changed how we live, make, connect, celebrate, work, rest and hope. I am grateful, however that the need to feel part of a community has endured.

As you read the pages of this annual report, you will see the many successes of the Craft ACT community – member artists, staff, sponsors, board members, donors and collaborators. These achievements become more impressive given they were delivered in the context of continuing uncertainty.

Our artistic program withstood not only the buzzwords of 2020 – pivoting, unprecedented, the new normal - but was able to be reimagined to uphold the quality of our award-winning exhibition program, and expand its reach and legacy by moving to deeper digital engagement. As the Craft ACT team was in lockdown in Canberra's beautifully designed suburbs, we learned to create and edit videos, design and share online catalogues, interviews and photo libraries, and grew our ambition for critical engagement by inviting one of the world's leading craft curators Glenn Adamson to pen an essay for the 2020 members exhibition.

We did not stop – we continued to deliver the exhibition program physically in the gallery and virtually online. This ensured that artist's cv's continued to build, that diverse audiences could engage with new work, that we could promote the value of contemporary craft and design, and we could support artists to make a living from their practice by offering exhibition works for sale online. Although some artists needed to defer their exhibitions because they were unable to gain access to workshops during lockdown, other artists were able to step into the opportunity when their own international commitments were cancelled or delayed. We found cherished silver linings in the pandemic.

Our strength was our size – we are small and agile, and to be honest we are familiar with operating in uncertain environments. Australia's small-to-medium (S2M) arts sector attracts larger (and faster growing) audiences than its better-funded counterparts in the major institutions<sup>1</sup>. When restrictions were eased, we returned to our gallery and office immediately, thanks to a detailed business continuity plan which shepherded us through different stages of restrictions and responsible health management.

The commitment and stability of our team was among our greatest strengths. Sadly, we didn't learn to make sourdough, but we did check in every morning to see how each member of the team was coping with isolation, learnt how to collaborate and present an AGM on Zoom, to support each other as we learned new skills, listened to the needs of our members and community, and found new and creative ways to meet them.

At the time of greatest uncertainty, we built a new website and online shop from our living rooms, growing our online sales and helping to meet the growing demand for quality online content from people in lockdown, wherever they lived. We created a campaign promoting 'hand-made, hand

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<sup>1</sup> K. Larsen, 'Changing the culture of arts governance', *Overland*, 2020, <https://overland.org.au/2020/06/changing-the-culture-of-arts-governance/>



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wrapped, hand delivered' to generate sales when our gallery and shop were closed. Our online sales continue to build now the physical shop has reopened.

As a result of this, access to Craft ACT's programs performed well despite border closures, cancellations, venue capacity limits and lockdowns. Our major annual outreach program DESIGN Canberra was very well received by audiences, designers, media and stakeholders. The program required the development of new knowledge and expertise in delivering Covid-safe and online events, and this was handled professionally by the Craft ACT team and our collaborators. Our communications channels, including digital and traditional mediums, have grown significantly over time and have become an invaluable tool to connect with a community of makers, sister organisations, collectors and craft and design enthusiasts. To engage with audiences who couldn't physically make it to DESIGN Canberra events, we launched a new DESIGN, Anytime program of self-guided tours, online exhibitions and articles. This content builds on the natural linkages of craft and design practice to actively contribute to urban planning, placemaking and design conversations, including nominating Canberra as a UNESCO City of Design.

Craft ACT's commitment to embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Craft and Design practice into Australian arts and culture, with increased representation and participation, deepened in 2020. We were delighted that the first week of DESIGN Canberra coincided with NAIDOC week whose theme was 'Always Was, Always Will Be' to recognise that First Nations people have occupied and cared for this continent for over 65,000 years. With care as the 2020 DESIGN Canberra festival theme, we are grateful to the record number of Indigenous artists who participated in the festival program so we can learn from First Nations peoples' care for Country, for community, culture and for their craft and design practice.

After surviving the devastating bushfires in Namadgi National Park in early 2020, the historic Ready-cut cottage, home to our annual artist residency with ACT Parks, was closed due to Covid. Fortunately, thanks to the awesome team at ACT Parks, and the experience of the two selected artists in 2020 - Jennifer Kemarre Martiniello (Arrente) and Sharon Peoples – the residency finally went ahead before the end of the year. The exhibition of work by the 2019 artists in residence was displayed online during lockdown and we have negotiated to show it at the Tidbinbilla Visitor Centre later this year, for an encore performance.

DESIGN Canberra's international debut, the Italian tour of *Glass utopia*, premiered at Venice Glass Week (5-13 September 2020). This was an extraordinary achievement thanks to close relationships built since 2018 between Craft ACT, the Italian design curator Annalisa Rosso (Mr Lawrence) and the Italian embassy in Australia. The tour was generously supported by Intesa Sanpaolo and the Prosecco Consortium. Covid interrupted the original plan to premier at Milan Design Week but Glass Utopia will show at the world's most important design fair when the 2021 Milan Design Week is next presented, most likely in September this year.

The sustainability of Craft ACT grew over 2020, thanks to increasing and diverse sources of revenue to support the organisation: retail, exhibition sales, artist income, membership income, fundraising, sponsorship and ticketing sales. This increase can be attributed to Craft ACT's growing visibility to diverse audiences and strategic marketing. This growth enables us to pay appropriate practitioner, staff and artist fees, and to introduce paid development opportunities for our members, including the new CO:LAB program, in 2021.



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2021 is our golden anniversary year: Craft ACT turns 50! Since 1971 CraftACT has played a vital role in sustaining Australia's high-quality studio practice and supporting craftspeople, designers and audiences. We're proudly one of Australia's longest continuous-running membership organisations in the visual arts and we celebrate the many ways our close-knit community has nurtured and transformed artists' practice for half a century. Following a successful fundraising campaign of matched funding with Creative Partnerships Australia, Craft ACT will implement a program of member development and capacity building in its anniversary year.

The 2020 annual report reveals Craft ACT's vital role in our region's arts ecology and our sector's growth, even during adversity, or perhaps especially so.

I could not imagine getting through this year without the wisdom, tenacity and good humour of the small but mighty Craft ACT team. It is my privilege to work beside our core team of Kate Nixon, Madisyn Zabel and Meagan Jones. The Craft ACT Board of Management has provided valuable support, advice and encouragement and I thank them all, especially chair Rebecca Coronel and outgoing member representatives Julie Ryder and Gilbert Riedelbauch. Huge thanks to the team at the Australia Council for once again awarding competitive four-year funding to Craft ACT (2021-24) and to the staff members and peers who supported our application, especially Rebecca Coronel and Stephen Cassidy. I'd like to thank the ministers and the dedicated staff at ArtsACT who support Craft ACT not only through ACT Government funding but in a multitude of ways, as well as the many generous and energetic sponsors who believe in us and connect us with likeminded people.

Finally, I thank each and every member of Craft ACT for their support, especially Kirstie Rea, our 2020 designer-in-residence. I'd especially like to thank the members who participated in our 2020 program of exhibitions, residencies, committees and public programs for their time and goodwill. I thank everyone who has been part of our changing but beautiful program, who has paused to help or give thanks, to support a fellow member, to share what they've learned or sympathised when things got tough.

By all accounts, 2021 will be yet another year of uncertainty. Craft ACT's 50th anniversary is expressed in the 2021 DESIGN Canberra theme of Transformation which arose from our planning for Craft ACT's 50th golden anniversary. I remain constantly inspired by the ways that artists and designers transform raw materials and ideas into objects, spaces and buildings to creatively express layers of meaning, history and connection from the domestic to the public sphere. It is an honour to serve this community.

Dr Rachael Coghlan  
CEO and Artistic Director  
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