

A craft response to Revive: a place for every story, a story for every place

The Revive report lacks support for the skills that underpin creative practices.

I am a knowledge worker for the crafts. For the past 32 years, it has been my privilege to write, manage and curate projects that present Australian craft on the national and international stage. I am currently Vice-President of the World Crafts Council - International. This gives me an appreciation of the role that Australia plays in craft diplomacy.

Recently my service to the crafts has been through editing Garland magazine. Garland is a platform for stories about what we make across the wider world. Each issue of the magazine reaches more than 40,000 readers. So far, we've published 1514 articles by 755 writers from 74 countries. See <https://garlandmag.com>

Given the brief of Garland magazine, I welcome the focus on stories and place in *Revive*.

But with an eye to craft, I find the report lacking reference to the skills that underpin creative practice.

The framework for the report seems political. There is an emphasis on giving voice to different interests in the Australian nation, particularly those that are marginalised, including artists themselves. This is essential, but not enough.

I recognise that the reference to skill in creative practice is clouded by a previous emphasis on "excellence", which is perceived as elitist. Besides skill as a dimension of individual achievement, it is also a shared knowledge within a creative community. In many cases, it reflects a knowledge that has been passed down through generations. This is especially true of crafts and their role in First Nations communities.

Besides the role of skill in specialisation, it also has important creative value. In the crafts, a skilful use of materials opens up the creative process to a dialogue with materials. Skill includes the implicit knowledge about the capacity of the materials, especially their breaking points.

Done well, the material then becomes a language for expression. There are certain forms of expression in clay that are unique. Modern Australian ceramics has evolved as a quest to understand the unique features of our soil. Modern Australian jewellery demonstrates that there is more to show for our time on the land than holes in the ground. Modern Australian fibre art is unique in the world for its use of found materials, etc.

The craft focus of the Australia Council has been steadily reduced since the establishment of the Crafts Board in its initial formation. The de-funding of Craft Australia in 2011 completed its absorption into visual arts. While there is much crossover, it lost specific programs for skill development such as mentorships.

Of course, there is a craft dimension of all arts. But this is not reflected in the report. Without skill, we are in danger of a cacophony of voices. Art becomes instead another political forum for the interests of the day.

There are occasional bouts of anxiety about whether Australia is still “a nation that can make things”. This was academic when we were fully immersed in the global supply chains. But the challenge of the future, initiated by COVID and now demanded by climate change, is to re-localise production. There is great potential for creative practices linked to industry, which can create products that give meaning to everyday life.

A report that acknowledges the value of skill would give more detail to the section on education. There would be potential to develop inter-governmental programs including apprenticeships.

In the programs that will flow from Revive, I urge that consideration be given to the support for the skills that ensure our arts have an intrinsic value. Well-made products give meaning to our lives beyond the heat of the day.



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Dr Kevin Murray