

Landmark report shows men still dominate Australian arts



Linda Morris

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KEY POINTS

- The latest *Countess Report* monitoring gender equity in the visual arts sector has found that male artists are much more likely than women to have their art acquired by state galleries or be represented by commercial galleries.
- The National Gallery of Australia had among the highest representation of women artists as a result of its national program of exhibitions and programs referred to as *Know My Name*.
- Women dominated art prizes, winning 4 out of 6 richest prizes, in 2022, but men received a higher amount of prize money on average.
- Among Australia's major museums, female representation was at the lowest level across all gallery types, with the exception of the Museum of Contemporary Arts which achieved 50 per cent gender equity.



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The glass ceiling remains alive and well for the nation's female artists, with progress on key levels of representation in public and commercial galleries stalling according to a landmark report into the gender gap in Australia's arts world.

Among state galleries, male artists continue to outnumber women for shows, including solo exhibitions – generally considered markers of an artist's professional career development and regard – according to the third *Countess Report*.



Co-authors of the Countess Report Shevaun Wright and Miranda Samuels. LOUISE KENNERLEY

It found men are much more likely than women to have their art acquired by state galleries or be represented by commercial galleries, although women comprise the vast majority of art school graduates.

The report, conducted by independent researchers, is funded by the Sheila Foundation, the Copyright Agency, and Creative Australia. It is regarded as a comprehensive benchmark for gender equality in the visual arts. Its researchers have been counting and monitoring gender participation since 2008 and data relating to more than 21,000 artists and arts workers across more than 450 galleries was collected for this version of the report.

The benchmark report shows women received greater recognition for their talents, winning four out of the six richest prizes in 2022, but men banked a higher amount of prize money on average (\$44,947 versus \$51,818).

Archibald Prize winner Wendy Sharpe has an upcoming show with the Art Gallery of NSW, one of four by female artists this year featured as part of the gallery's proactive push for female equity.

She was surprised the statistics showed such slow progress given the proactive attempts by major cultural institutions to redress gender bias.

“I would have thought, right now, being a straight, white middle-aged man in the art world would be more difficult because of the thousands and millions of years of women being left out, but maybe it's not always the case,” she said. “I do think most of us in the art world and those interested in art have changed less than we think. Sometimes perception and reality are not the same thing.”



Wendy Sharpe pictured in her studio in Sydney. DOMINIC LORRIMER

The overall trend has worried the report’s authors who fear that without equal opportunities to showcase their work, the wage gap between the genders will become even further entrenched. The latest findings have sparked calls for an overhaul of state collections policies which can limit acquisition to those artists in a gallery’s collection, perpetuating historic biases.

“Overall, there has been a plateauing and backward slide across the sector in terms of gender,” *Countess* co-author Miranda Samuels said. “There are exceptions within every group – the MCA did not show the same kind of bias as other museums for example.

“We looked more closely at the numbers and women don’t have the same opportunities to exhibit solo shows, they are also under-represented by commercial galleries and they have fewer acquisitions by state galleries.”

Across Australia’s major museums, it found levels of female representation – defined as works exhibited or programmed – fell from 37 per cent in 2016 to 30.6 per cent in 2022, the lowest level of representation across all gallery types.

The proportion of female shows at state galleries – not including the National Gallery of Australia – remained steady at 34 per cent compared with 2019 but down on levels of 37 per cent in 2014.

The National Gallery performed well showing a high proportion of women (84 per cent) across their programs. This compares with the National Gallery of Victoria where less than one-third of featured artists in 2022 were women.

The findings come as entries opened for this year’s Archibald Portrait Prize, historically dominated by men but which for the first time in its history showcased more women painters

than men [last year](#).

This year's edition of the report was the first to count Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representation across exhibitions, programs and acquisitions. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island artists, state galleries showed 26 per cent, with men outnumbering women in terms of solo shows.

The report's findings offered little cause for celebration, said Penelope Benton, executive director of the peak lobby group the National Association for Visual Arts.

"The numbers suggest that progress in gender equity within the visual arts has stalled since the last count. Male artists continued to dominate solo shows in state galleries, commercial galleries and major museums."

Among Australian museums, two privately funded galleries – White Rabbit Gallery, run by philanthropist Judith Neilson and which concentrates on Chinese contemporary art, and Tasmania's Museum of Old and New Art – showed the least number of women artists, the study said.

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