

## Making it as a regional artist – the realities and the wins

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Nicole Welch bypassed Sydney, moving from London to Bathurst. Fourteen years on, she talks about the changes and the challenges for an artist living regionally.



*Nicole Welch outside her studio by the Macquarie River Bathurst, photo credit Bill Moseley 2018*

Artist Nicole Welch makes the obvious point: 'It is hard breaking into any community, and tapping into any art network is difficult'.

Why then does regional practice come with the perception of being especially difficult for creatives, when the same barriers exist everywhere?

Working across photography, video and installation, Welch moved to Bathurst in regional NSW in 2004 after living in London for a decade. She said that London was 'impossible' to break into. 'I felt like an outsider,' she added.

While it was her health that saw Welch return to her hometown, she admitted that she was totally resistant to the move. 'I was sure that there wouldn't be an arts community there; that there wouldn't have been anything worthwhile. I had left at 19 and had this [common] mindset that there wasn't enough here, and when I did get back, I found that wasn't the case.'

Her first move was to find the local artist-run space, where she was offered a show.

'This was about three-fours years after art school and I hadn't really made anything as it was too hard in London, and suddenly I had a space where I could start creating and making mistakes in. Regional spaces give you that opportunity.

'And then a small community of people come to see it and just show by show I started connecting into this place here. People really support you here – community is so interwoven into your practice – it is really holistic.'

Welch laughed that she later married the space's founder.

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## PROFESSIONALISM HAS NO GEOGRAPHY

Welch is a great example of how an artist can be professional and active in their practice while living outside of our major cities.

She was one of the featured artists at this year's Artstate Bathurst, where she unveiled a major two-channel video installation, *Transformations* (2018). Concurrently, she had solo exhibitions at the [May Space in Sydney](#) and [Glasshouse Regional Gallery, Port Macquarie](#).

There are widely held misconceptions that when an artist moves their practice to "the country" it's either to join the Sunday painters or fall off the map, and that their practice is somehow diminished because they've move away from "the centre".

One options is to work against that, to work double time to ensure that the standard of the work and the professional way in which it is presented cuts through such views. Welch told ArtsHub: 'Maybe I feel because I am regional I have to work hard to set that standard - to be taken seriously - or maybe it just comes down to the individual.'

She continued: 'It is an expectation I place on myself, and it might have something to do with my time in London - which I refer to in my life as "the lost years in art," as I wasn't making anything. But I got to see a lot of great art and I think that influenced the expectation I placed on myself when I started creating.'



*Nicole Welch's Magnificent Prospect #1 (2015), courtesy the artist and May Space, Sydney*

## IT'S A GLASS WALL, NOT A GLASS CEILING

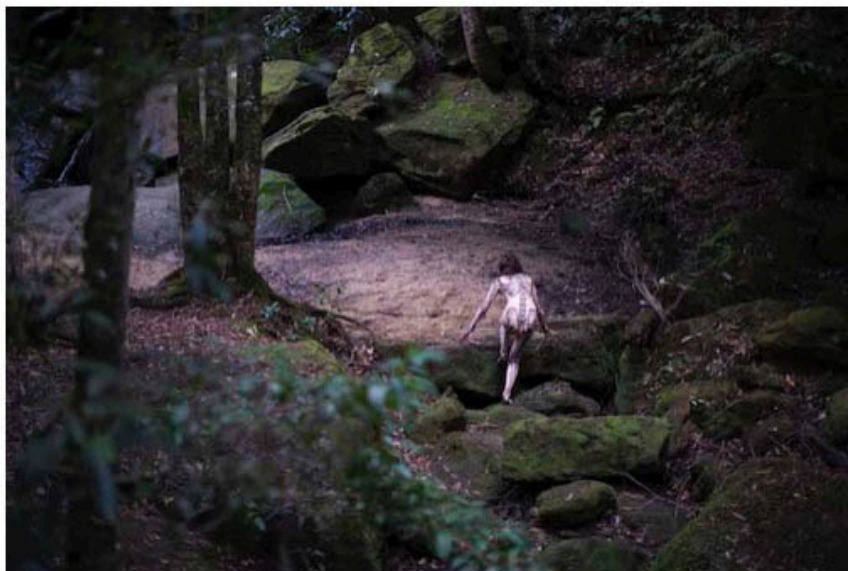
Welch suggested the attitude towards regionally practicing artists has changed quite a bit since she relocated 14 years ago.

'Up to around 2011-12 I felt it wasn't about a glass ceiling - it was a glass wall that appeared somewhere near the bottom of the Blue Mountains, around Penrith [in Sydney's West]. If you were regional you would be tapping on it saying, "Hey, we are over here, I can see you". There was that sense we were not being seen or heard,' Welch told ArtsHub.

She said it was getting gallery representation that helped get her through that "glass wall", when Brenda May of MAY SPACE signed her in 2013.

Welch said that about five years ago there was a fashion for commercial galleries to come out and hold a session of "speed dating" between local artists and gallery directors.

'It was demeaning,' she said. 'After that experience I thought there is no chance I will ever get a gallery - just wipe it off the list - and that's what bought me back to holding the focus of "let's just make good work", and that brings me back to why I put so much time into presentation and I do the best with every opportunity I am given, as that is my voice.'



Nicole Welch's *Transformation*, production still, Bill Moseley 2018

### RISING ABOVE PATERNALISM

A word that came up regularly at the Artstate regional conference was "paternalism", concerning the role held by larger city organisations and city-based administrators whose advice helps guide regional practitioners into the "national" (aka city-based) conversation.

More often the sector has been witness to breakthrough moments, usually within a conference or symposium format, where such organisations have the light bulb moment – "hang on, these guys are living what we are preaching."

While there wasn't a huge flow of arts administrators from those peak organisation present at Artstate Bathurst, Welch believes that there 'will be in the future, because there is a groundswell.'

Only this week the National Gallery of Australia saluted its 11th million visitor engaging with its touring exhibition program, one that largely ensures the national collection is shared to regional and metropolitan galleries.

When asked what her interest was in showing regional artists, gallerist Brenda May was rather perplexed by the question.

She told ArtsHub: 'Being that the Australia market only supports a relatively small selection of visual artists, living in a big city in Australia is simply out of the question financially for a lot of artists, so if you intend on showing Australian art, as MAY SPACE does, you have to be open to artists living all across Australia.'

She added: 'Great art should be shown everywhere.'

Welch continued: '[MAY] is one of the few galleries that will take on emerging artists. My career continues to grow because of that support.'

### THE FUNDING DROUGHT IS NOT EXCLUSIVE TO OUR CITIES

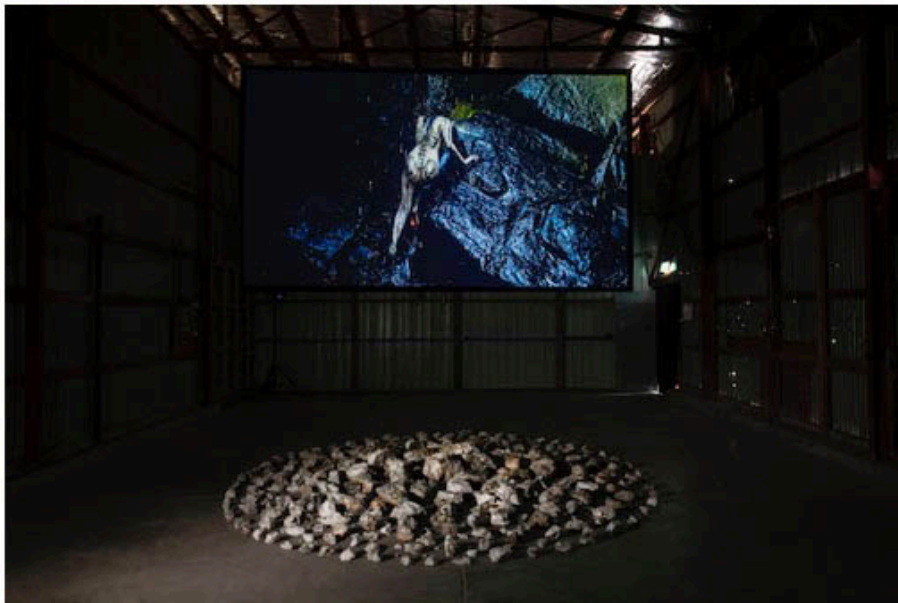
'Funding out here is tough,' said Welch. She said that in her 14-year career she had only received a grant of \$5,000 to support her practice, from the Windmill Trust.

'From that I made and launched a new breakthrough series – \$5,000 did it. It might as well have been \$50,000 at the time in terms of its impact. I bought a camera, and that led to the next three bodies of work.'

Welch's most recent work, *Transformation* was shown locally first, at Tremains Mill, a new philanthropic-driven arts precinct in Bathurst. Again it is about relationships, and working with what you have.

It is not dissimilar to my own experience working in Southeast Asia for a decade, where artists had no money or funding structures to call on, and if they wanted to do something they just made it happen by whatever means necessary. It is amazing what you can do and how you can amplify yourself if you are in the right frame of mind. That is a great lesson to artists not only working in regional centres, but also our cities, where the pressure of the grant cycle can skew how we approach our practice.

Welch's two-channel video floated within an old tin sawmill, a pile of quartz rock collected from nearby mountains sitting under the screen, seeming grounding it to the landscape. A lone female figure moves through the landscape, a skeleton painted on her back.



Nicole Welch's Transformation - arrival, *Tremains Mill installation*, ArtState Bathurst 2018

'I wanted to show the female connection to environment, that spoke to our mortality and strength and the cycle of life. I want the local to be a universal one,' she explained.

'I am thinking how can it be seen in other spaces in a similar way and for different audiences. I feel this is a significant work in my career,' she said.

Since speaking with Welch, she has been in conversation with a metropolitan gallery to show the piece in 2020. It proves that location has little to do with the recipe of professionalism plus good work and a just do ethos.

### ADVICE FOR REGIONAL ARTISTS TO RISE AGAINST THE CHALLENGES

Welch said her travels in the 2000s, seeing a wide range of art and different gallery presentations, had a huge impact on how she works today. 'But that was back when the Internet was there but not as influential as it is now. I think you can achieve the same level of education through accessing online sites.

'To my younger self I would say definitely see as much as you can, and being regional I try to get to Sydney to see work but not as often,' she added.

And having just finished a body of work and holding aspirations for it to be shown elsewhere, Welch said that the hardest thing is 'trying to remind myself to stay in the moment and not to think too far ahead.'

FIRST PUBLISHED ON FRIDAY 16 NOVEMBER, 2018

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gina Fairley is ArtsHub's National Visual Arts Editor. For a decade she worked as a freelance writer and curator across Southeast Asia and was previously the Regional Contributing Editor for Hong Kong based magazines *Asian Art News* and *World Sculpture News*. Prior to writing she worked as an arts manager in America and Australia for 14 years.

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