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Productivity, income and gender: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists

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Australian Government
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Business Cooperative Research Centres Programme

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Shortened forms

CRC-REP	Cooperative Research Centre for Remote Economic Participation
AEVC	Art Economies Value Chain project

Glossary

Artist: An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person who produces art products

Art businesses: Any party that sells works of art to customers, on behalf of artists, using one of the following models:

- *Publicly funded Art Centre or Cultural Centre:* Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander–owned and/or governed art businesses providing a range of artistic, cultural and entrepreneurial services to a group of artists. Business operations include wholesale, retail and gallery (has exhibition space separate to retail space and holds exhibitions).
- *Private art business:* A business that trades in Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander art products for commercial gain and may also support the development of artists. Private art business operations includes Retailer – Gallery (exhibiting and non-exhibiting, i.e. shop); Retailer/Wholesaler – online only; Retailer/Wholesaler (exhibiting and non-exhibiting, i.e. shop) and Wholesaler (on-sells to other art businesses).
- *Mixed business:* This is the same as a private business but with a broader focus: art plus another business activity, such as a restaurant, accommodation or tourist outlet.

Art product categories:

- Paintings and drawings: on canvas, linen, bark, paper, watercolours
- Textiles and fashion: fabrics, leather, garments, jewellery
- Works on paper: limited edition prints
- Sculpture: wood (yidaki/didjeridoo), metal, glass, fibre/weaving, dance machines / dance boards, ceramic, soft sculpture, shell
- New media: photography, film (video), digital mixed-media, installation

Primary markets: This is the market for artworks that are passing through the value chain for the first time, that is, the first sale from artist/Art Centre to gallery, dealer or customer. Money from this sale goes back to the artist/Art Centre rather than passing from one dealer to another, or from an auction house to a gallery, or one collector to another.

Secondary markets: The market for works that are transacted further along the value chain, among collectors, auction houses, galleries or dealers. Apart from potential resale royalties, money from these sales is not returned to the artist. This market is not included in this research.

Executive summary

The Art Economies Value Chain research (AEVC) aims to understand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art production from communities in remote and very remote Australia and its sale into Australian and global markets. Further, it is intended that research findings contribute to the development and resilience of art enterprises from remote Australia.

The AEVC project is a central activity of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Economies project, commissioned by CRC-REP and supported by Southern Cross University and Curtin University. This study developed from a finding of earlier AEVC research that female artists receive a lower average value for their art products than male artists:

> The mean value for female artists' art products in 2008–12 was $414; for males it was $661. The higher mean value that male artists are achieving is because male artists produce fewer low value products than female artists during their career. Male artists are not necessarily achieving higher prices for individual art works than females.

The focus of this case study is to further understand artist productivity. Can artists' productivity (number of products produced for sale), analysed by gender, explain the differences in the value of art products by male and female artists? What, if anything, characterises artists who achieve a high average and total values for their products? This case study explores artist productivity and product value to understand the differences in artist productivity by gender.

Summary

The production of art products supports social inclusion, skills development and cross-cultural integration.	Social inclusion, where economic growth includes both genders, is the objective of most societies. There are over 14,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists in remote Australia. Based on the sample of the Art Centre artists with gender data (n=3,406), over 70% of artists are female. Income from the sale of art products supports the development of the artists' career and generates art production and management skills in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The story behind the art product (e.g. landscape and culture), introduces non–Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art buyers to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and traditions.
Artists' income	
A small number of artists earn significant returns from the sale of art.	A small number of artists received high returns from the sale of art. Only eight (Art Centre) artists had a total sales value of more than $1,000,000, just 0.27% of artists. The vast majority of artists' total sales value was less than $10,000, (70.80% of artists). Only 157 (5.40%) artists earned more than $100,000.
The average value of art products increased over time for artists.	The average value of the first and last art products that artists produced and the minimum and maximum values of products were highly variable for all artists. Most artists' first product (and minimum value products) were significantly less than their maximum product value and the value of their last product.
Artist have highly variable income.	Six artists' production and value data were analysed over time. Each artist had highly variable income, and variable average value of art products over their careers. There are a number of reasons this might be the case: • All artists produced more than they sold. However, some artists had significantly more stock (Artist 3 completed 348 art products, with 100 sold) than other artists (Artist 5 completed 171 art products, with 161 sold). • Productivity (number of products received for sale) was variable across years. • There are annual peaks and troughs of total sales and productivity.

Productivity and gender	
The majority (87%) of artists produced between 5 and 99 art products.	The sales value of artists who produced from 5 to 99 art products (n=2533, 87% of artists), represents a quarter ($22,450,675) of the total value ($84,119,895) of the artist's production in this study. The 24 artists that produced over 499 art products, had a total product value of $20,478,566.
Productivity categories were an indicator of the value a female or male artist received for an art product. **Highly productive females also received a higher average value for art products.**	The number of products produced by an artist was an indicator of the average value of art products. Artists who had higher productivity (more than 399 art products) had higher total sales value but many had lower average values. Artists with higher average values usually produced fewer art products. These points are highlighted about gender: • Females who produce fewer than 100 art products received a lower average value ($7,312) than males ($14,253) for art products. • Highly productive female artists' (producing over 399 art products) average sales are more than 50% higher than for equivalent male artists. • Of the artists who produced more than 499 art products, females received a total value of $947,744 and males received a total value of $623,846.

This case study highlights the importance of artist productivity, the number of art products produced, in attaining a higher total sales value over time. While some may achieve high average value for art products, it is those artists that produce higher numbers of art products over time that are able to achieve higher returns.

Introduction

Over the past four decades, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island artists have become an important part of the Australian art market (Myers 2002, Ryan & Batty 2011). This creative economy contributes to livelihoods and employment in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities (Altman 2001, 2005). The visual art economy in remote Australia generates tens of millions of dollars in sales income for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists (Woodhead & Acker 2014a). However, the average value of art sales was noticeably different for males and females. Between 2008 and 2012, female artists were selling art products for an average value of $414, which was $247 less than male artists ($661). While it was logical that younger, less experienced artists earned less than established artists, why was there a difference between sale prices received by male and female artists? This case study examines this situation by exploring the gender data from the Art Economies Value Chain research (AEVC) project in more depth.

This research builds on the AEVC research into understanding the scope and scale of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art production. This case study analyses the number of art products produced for sale by male and female artists and the total and average sales value generated by these artists. To support the whole-of-industry analysis, the study also examines the production over time by six (anonymous) artists representing a range of sales values.

To establish the background context of this gender productivity analysis, the next section introduces two concepts, social inclusion and productivity.

Art production supports social inclusion

Social inclusion happens where economic growth includes both genders and is the objective of most societies. The Australian Government's policy on social inclusion (PMC 2014) defines an inclusive society as one in which every individual has the capabilities, opportunities and resources to participate in the economy and their community, taking responsibility for their own lives. 'Closing the Gap' for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians is one of six social inclusion priorities. The creative economy can play a role in overcoming the challenges of gender bias (and, more broadly, social inclusion) in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with over 14,000 artists participating in the sector over recent years (Woodhead & Acker 2014b). With more than 70% of artists in remote and very remote Australia being female, the circumstances of the creative sector can perhaps provide some insights into gender and social inclusion.

Artist productivity

Productivity is a measure of the efficiency of production. Typically work or labour productivity measures are expressed in economics as 'output per hour'. According to the Productivity Commission:

> Overall economic efficiency is attained when individuals in society maximise their utility, given the resources available in the economy. In other words, an increase in economic efficiency improves the wellbeing of the members of the community the ultimate goal of most policy or regulatory endeavours. (2013, p. 2)

What is productivity in terms of an artist's career? Gender aside, the success of an artist's career is dependent on both situational and intangible factors (health, talent, style), the quality of their work, marketing, and ability or luck in attracting commercial patronage.

Key factors that define the value of art products include aesthetic quality and craftsmanship (which have not been tackled in this study) and the number of art products produced over time. While quality is, to some extent, reflected in the sales price, efficiency is harder to correlate with value: for example, an artist may be very efficient at producing large numbers of poor quality, low value products, consistently on time. However, this artist's products may also undermine the credibility of other artists in the community and the community's brand or reputation for quality. Conversely, a less efficient artist may deliver a small quantity of high quality art products that enhance the community's reputation, inspire collectors and ultimately help ensure the longevity of art production in that community. In this latter scenario, the development of an artist's reputation – through exhibitions, marketing and industry networks – can increase the sales value, provide access to new markets and create demand.

Notwithstanding these definition dilemmas, to maintain income an artist needs to produce and sell enough art products for a price that meets market expectations and with aesthetic qualities that appeal to buyer interest and perceptions at those price points.

Methods

Two data sources inform this research:

1. Art Centre production data
2. Public and private business survey data.

For a detailed explanation of the data, methods and analysis, see the AEVC reports:

- *Synthesis* (Woodhead & Acker 2014b)
- *Methodology and Art Regions* (Woodhead & Acker 2014c)
- *Art Centre finances* (Acker & Woodhead 2014)
- *Artists and Art Centre production* (Woodhead & Acker 2014a)
- *Art business trading practices and policy views* (Woodhead 2014)

The artist population and gender sample

The total number of artists estimated to be working with Art Centres is 13,196 (see Woodhead & Acker 2014c, section 3 for distribution of all artists – Art Centre and freelance – by art regions and by gender). Detailed Art Centre data were available for 78% (n = 10,338) of all Art Centre artists. Gender data were recorded for 2,425 female artists and 981 male artists (n = 3,406), representing 33% of the artist population in the Art Centre data.

Participating artists in this case study were defined as artists:

- about whom gender data had been supplied
- who sold more than five art products between 1980 and 2012 inclusive
- who have art products with a sales value recorded.

These conditions applied to 2,911 Art Centre artists. To put this in context of the artist population, 5,103 artists had produced five or more art products, or 39% of all Art Centre artists. Therefore, this analysis of

2,911 artists with gender data is representative of 57% of the Art Centre artist population who produced five or more art products, or 22% of all Art Centre artists.

Results

Artist productivity and total value

This section explores artist productivity (products received by the Art Centre), gender and value. Here 'value' is the sales price the Art Centre sets; these works are not necessarily sold, so this may not be the final sales price.

Table 1 shows that while more than three-quarters of the artists are female, the value of their art products is just over two-thirds of the total value. When this is averaged across artists, the average value of art products produced by a female artist is $25,645, which is $14,520 less than the average value of art produced by a male artist ($40,165).

Table 1: Number of artists with five or more art products, total value and average value

Gender	Artist		Total value of art products		Average value of total art products by artist	
	Number	%	$	%	$	%
Female	2,259	77	$57,932,044	68	$25,645	39
Male	652	23	$26,187,851	32	$40,165	61
Total	**2,911**	**100**	**$84,119,895**	**100**	**$65,810**	**100**

Analysis indicates that that there are important correlations between gender and productivity. Further, the total value attained by artists for art products is linked to the number of products produced over time – that is, artists need to be productive over a continuous period in order to achieve solid financial returns.

To understand the story behind the gender difference, a set of 'artist productivity' categories were created to count the number of art products produced by artists. Art products received for sale between 1980 and 2012 inclusive were grouped into six categories (Table 2). The vast majority of Art Centre artists (2,533 artists or 87%) produced between five and 99 art products, with only 38 artists producing 400 or more art products over their careers.

Table 2: Artists by number of art products category

Productivity category (Number of art products)	Number of artists	Percentage of all artists	Percentage of artists in each category	
			Female	Male
5–99	2,533	87.0%	77.7%	22.3%
100–199	228	7.8%	79.8%	20.2%
200–299	79	2.7%	75.9%	24.1%
300–399	33	1.1%	72.7%	27.3%
400–499	14	0.5%	64.3%	35.7%
> 499	24	0.8%	70.8%	29.2%

Figure 1 shows the distribution of gender by productivity categories. There was a slightly higher percentage of female artists in the lower productivity categories, with the percentage of male artists increasing in the higher productivity categories. However, overall, the distribution closely mirrors the general artist population distribution of 77% female and 23% male (Table 1). In summary, the proportion of male or female artists in each productivity category is similar to that in the other categories.

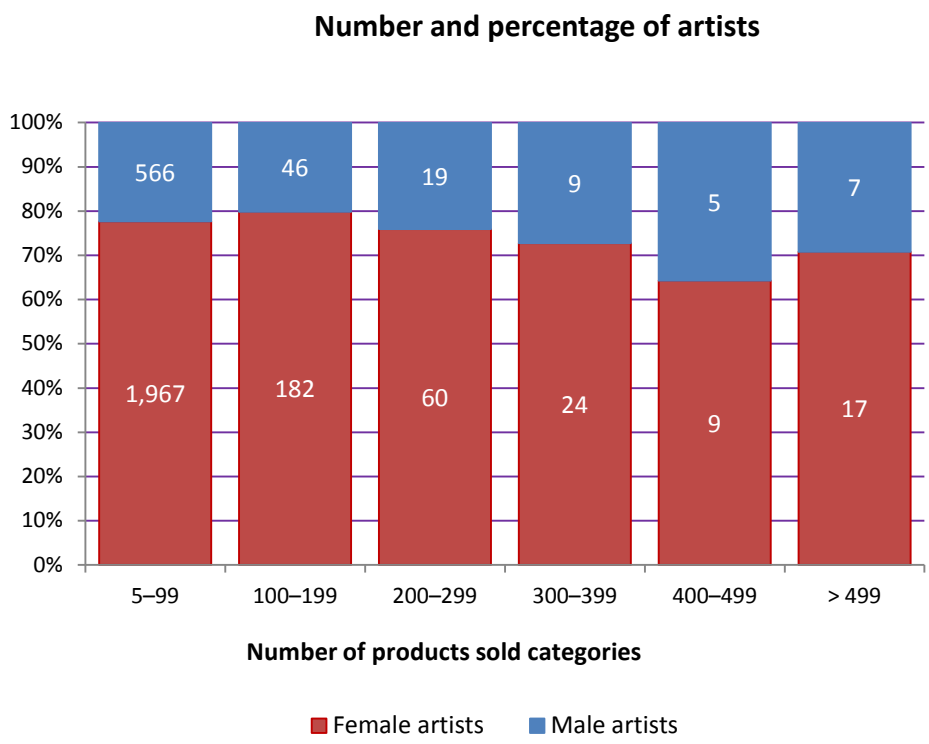
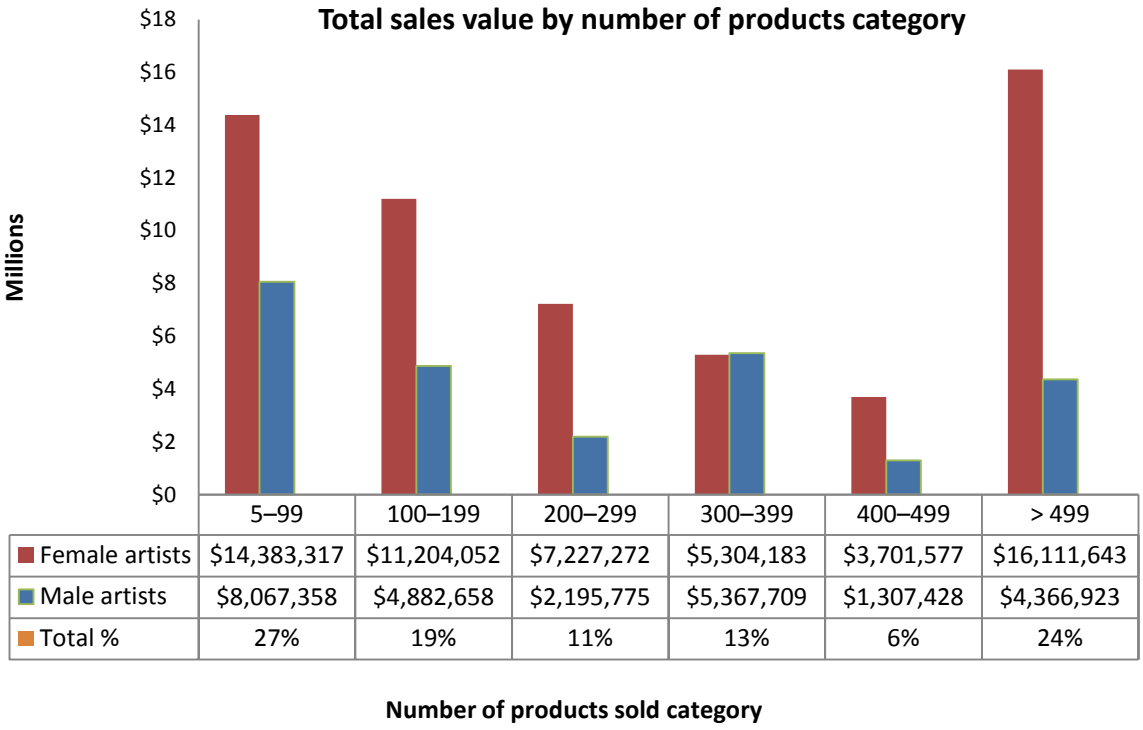


Figure 1: Number of products categories by artist gender, number and percentage

Artist productivity was further analysed by comparing the value of art production, as received by the Art Centres, for each gender (Figure 2). The distribution of the total value of art products shows two peaks. One peak (for both genders) is for the lower category (5–99 products) and the other for higher (over 499) numbers of products. (The high result for male artists producing 300–399 works is likely due to the small [n=9] sample size and distortion within that sample.)

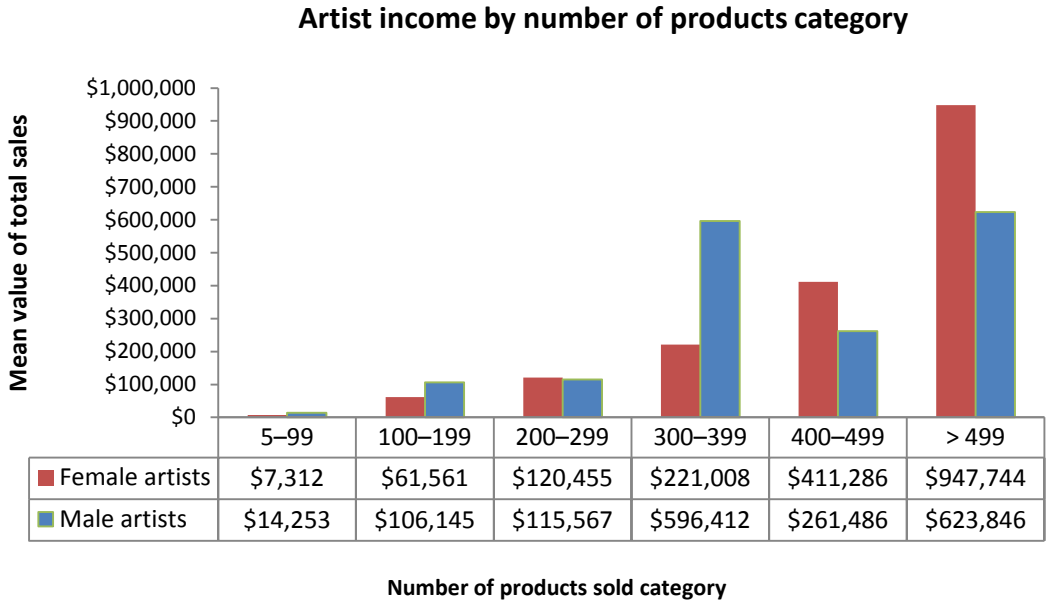
To understand these two peaks, it is important to consider that the majority of artists (87%) produce fewer than 100 art products; in total, these artists produce 27% of all value, though their individual incomes are modest. This is reversed for the 24% of total value generated by the 0.8% of artists who produced 500 or more works.



	5–99	100–199	200–299	300–399	400–499	> 499
Female artists	$14,383,317	$11,204,052	$7,227,272	$5,304,183	$3,701,577	$16,111,643
Male artists	$8,067,358	$4,882,658	$2,195,775	$5,367,709	$1,307,428	$4,366,923
Total %	27%	19%	11%	13%	6%	24%

Figure 2: Total sales value by gender and products sold category

An alternative way of understanding the production value generated by female and male artists is shown in Figure 3 and Table 3. Here, the average value for the total art products of male and female artists is shown across the six productivity categories.



	5–99	100–199	200–299	300–399	400–499	> 499
Female artists	$7,312	$61,561	$120,455	$221,008	$411,286	$947,744
Male artists	$14,253	$106,145	$115,567	$596,412	$261,486	$623,846

Figure 3: Artist production value derived from average value of total art product value by gender

Table 3: Average value for male and female artists across production categories

Production category	Total average value female artist	Total average value male artist	Total average value	% of total (female)	% of total (male)
5–99	$7,312	$14,253	$21,565	34	66
100–199	$61,561	$106,145	$167,706	37	63
200–299	$120,455	$115,567	$236,022	51	49
300–399	$221,008	$596,412	$817,420	27	73
400–499	$411,286	$261,486	$672,772	61	39
> 499	$947,744	$623,846	$1,571,590	60	40

For total value, females represent a higher percentage in the over 499 number of products category (28%, compared with 17% for males) and a lower percentage in the 5–99 product category (25%, compared with 31% for males) (Table 4). This indicates that individual male artists are actually not earning a higher total income; rather, the larger number of females producing fewer than 100 art products is lowering the overall average value of art products for female artists.

Table 4: The percentage of total value by gender for each production category

Number of art products	Percentage of total female artist product value	Percentage of total male artist product value	Percentage of total production of each production category	
			Female artists	Male artists
5–99	24.8%	30.8%	64.1%	35.9%
100–199	19.3%	18.6%	69.6%	30.4%
200–299	12.5%	8.4%	76.7%	23.3%
300–399	9.2%	20.5%	49.7%	50.3%
400–499	6.4%	5.0%	73.9%	26.1%
> 499	27.8%	16.7%	78.7%	21.3%

Building on this understanding of the artists' productivity, the value of these products by gender was further assessed. To understand the distribution, eight 'value categories' were used, and the total production value of artists was allocated to one of these categories (Figure 4).

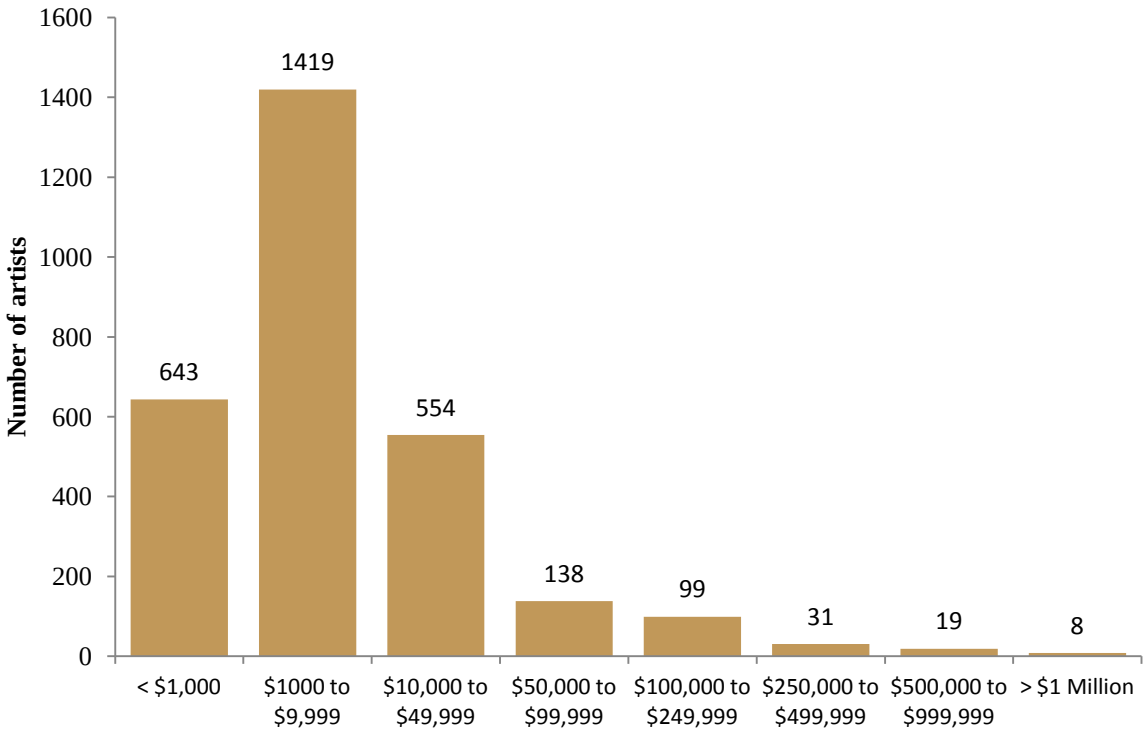


Figure 4: Total value of artist production

Only eight artists (0.3%) had a total value of more than $1 million. Nearly three-quarters (70.8%) of artists made less than $10,000. One hundred and fifty seven artists (or 5.4%) earned more than $100,000.

From these data, the following observations are made:

- At the lower end of art production (5–99 art products), male artists receive around double the average return of female artists: $14,253 compared to $7,312 (Table 3). For the second lowest production category, male artists received over 70% more.
- However, at the higher end of production (more than 400 art products), female artists earn more than males. In the highest category (>499 art products) female artists received, on average, $947,744 compared to $623,846 for the male artists. For the top two production categories, the total value of the average female artists' work is over 50% higher (Table 3).
- Around a quarter of female artists and a third of male artists produce fewer than 100 art products; at the other end of the production categories, around a quarter of female artists produce 500 or more art products, while only around a sixth of male artists are that productive (Table 4).
- Productive female artists earn more over their careers than equivalent male artists.
- Only a small number of artists receive significant returns over the course of their careers. Nearly three-quarters (71%) of artists receive less than $10,000 in total sales. Only 5.4% of artists receive what could be called a wage from their artistic practice – $100,000 or more over their careers.

Profiles of six artists' careers

The section provides further context and detail on the 'money story' for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists by looking at artist productivity and sales over time. The preceding analysis does not account for the length of time an artist is producing art products – this section investigates the total productivity of six artists' careers. Artists were selected using two criteria: the 'number of products received category' (with a representative from each category, although Artist 2 straddles the top two categories) and gender (three females and three males).

The story of these artists' careers is told using:

- the number of years of productivity, the number of products received and sold during this period
- the total, annual and average sales value and the average value of art products during this time period.

The six artists are listed in order of the number of items that Art Centres received from them, from highest to lowest. The analysis of artist sales reveals a unique career for each artist and that 'success' in terms of production, sales and income are often not interconnected and are subject to a wide range of influences; however, there are several trends and commonalities:

- The number of art products received each year is highly variable, for example, production quantity ranged (products per year) from:
    - 15–242 (Artist 1)
    - 4–99 (Artist 2)
    - 19–105 (Artist 3)
- There is an unstable ratio of art products received by Art Centres to art products sold. Artist 2 produced more in their early career but sold more in their later career. This pattern is evident with other artists, notably Artists 1 and 5.
- Efficiency – defined as selling as many art products as are produced – is unrelated to price and productivity: artists with the two best ratios of production to sales are also in the lowest production categories.
- None of the artists had a consistent income from art product sales.[1]
- The average value of art products for all artists varies across years.

[1] Art product sales data represents the total value, not the actual income received by the artist.

Artist 1: Female

Production years:	1997–2010
Total number of products received:	1,008
Total number of products sold:	851 (84%)
Range of productivity (number of products received per year):	15–242
Total sales value (14 years):	$ 2,535,810
Annual sales value (average):	$ 181,129
Art products sales value (average):	$ 2,980

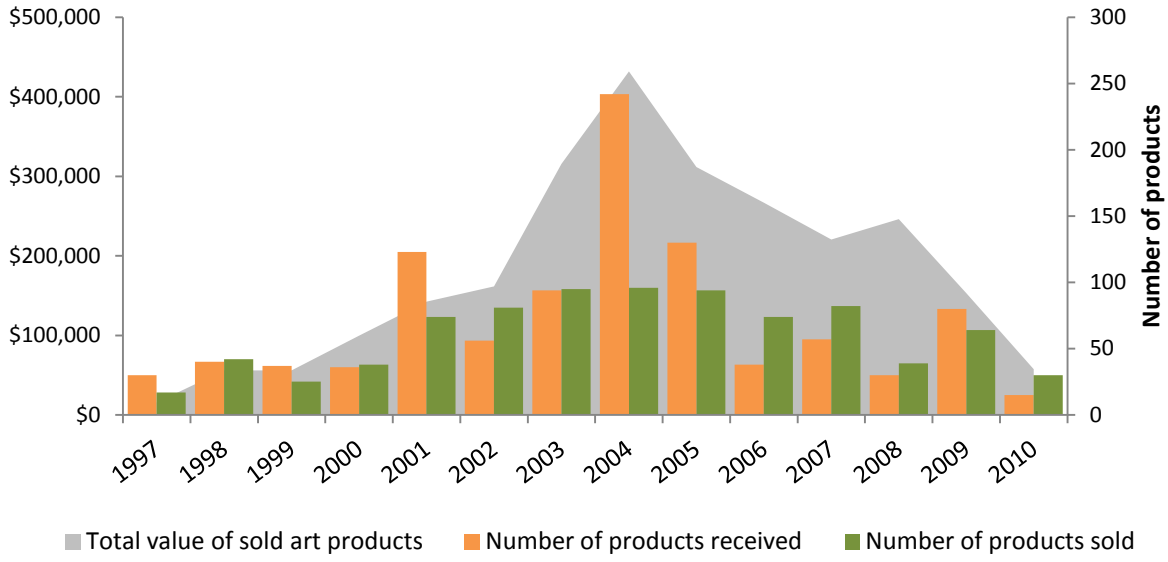


Figure 5: Artist 1, Female, productivity and total value sold art products

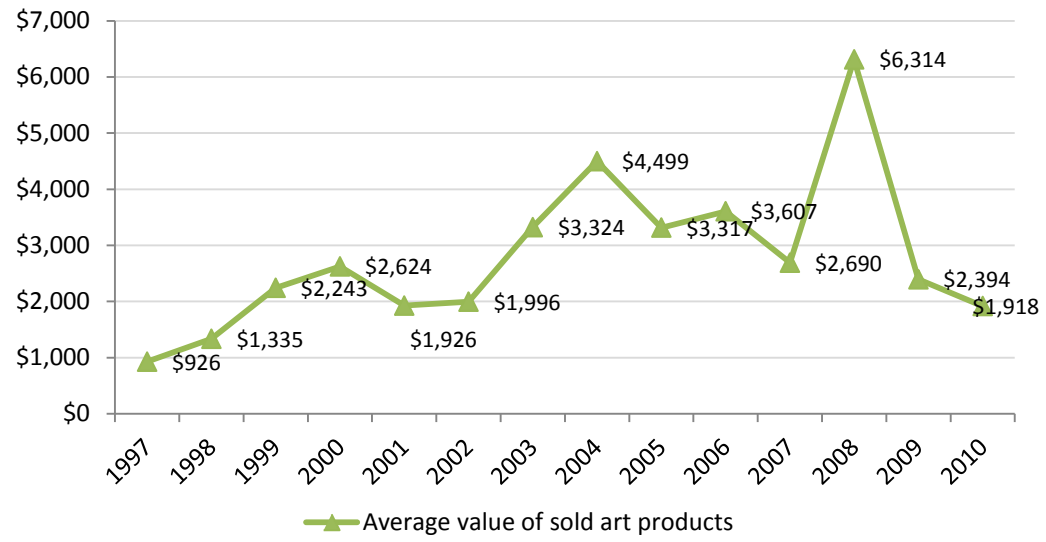


Figure 6: Artist 1, Female, average value of sold art products

Artist 2: Male

Production years	2000–2012
Total number of products received:	536
Total number of products sold:	477 (88%)
Range of productivity (number of products received per year):	4–99
Total sales value (12 years):	$ 751,867
Annual sales value (average):	$ 57,836
Art products sales value (average):	$ 1,531

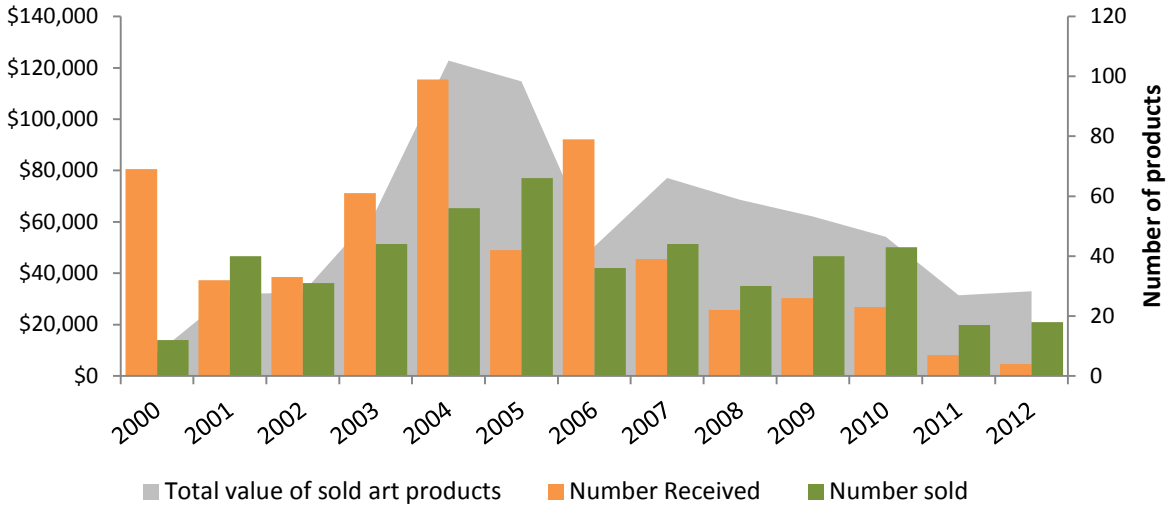


Figure 7: Artist 2, Male, productivity and total value sold art products

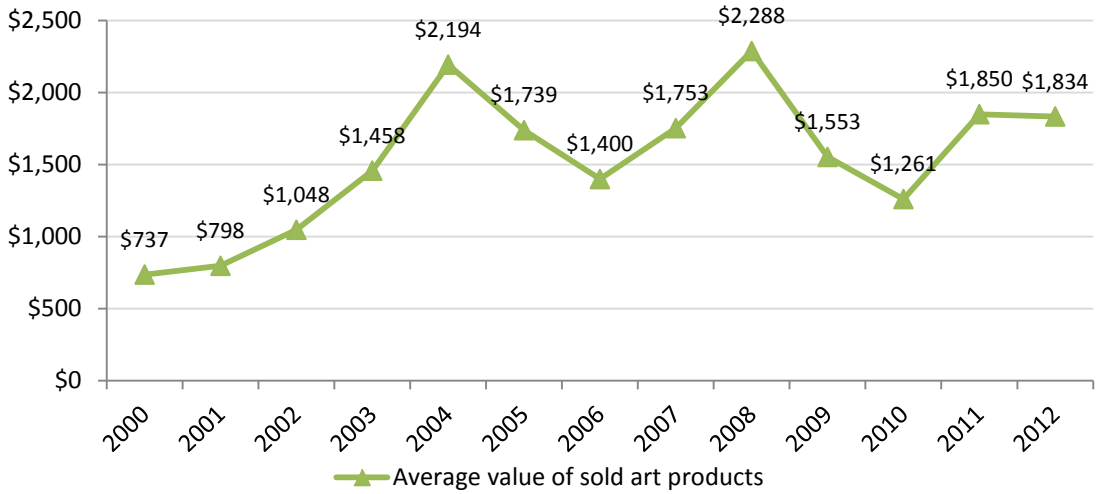


Figure 8: Artist 2, Male, average value of sold art products

Artist 3: Female

Production years:	2008–2012
Total number of products received:	348
Total number of products sold:	100 (28%)
Range of productivity (number of products received per year):	19–105
Total sales value (5 years):	$ 63,278
Annual sales value (average):	$ 12,656
Art products sales value (average):	$ 633

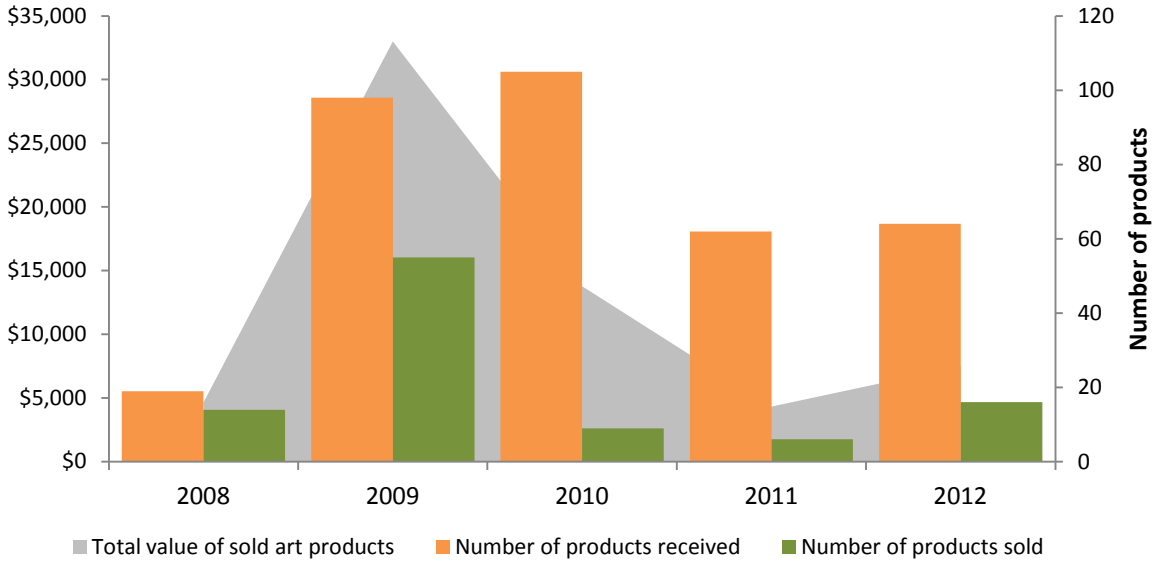


Figure 9: Artist 3, Female, productivity and total value sold art products

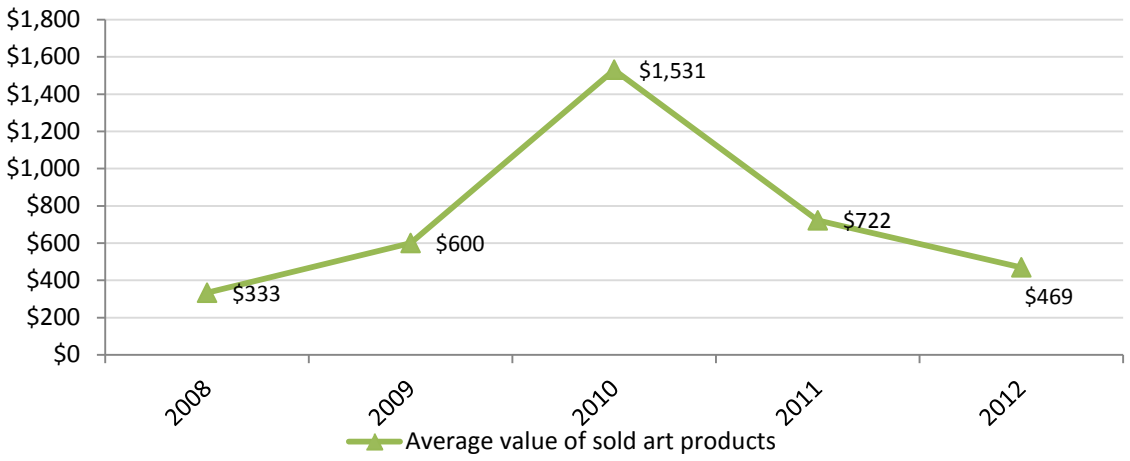


Figure 10: Artist 3, Female, average value of sold art products

Artist 4: Male

Production years:	1997–2007
Total number of products received:	274
Total number of products sold:	202 (73%)
Range of productivity (number of products received per year):	0–67
Total sales value (8 years):	$ 48,374
Annual sales value (average):	$ 6,911
Art products sales value (average):	$ 239

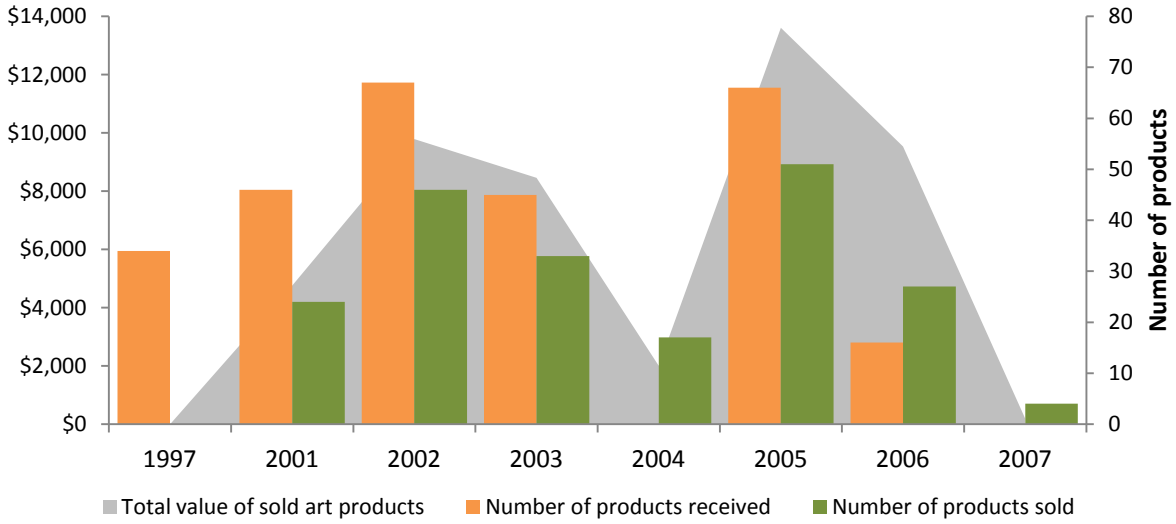


Figure 11: Artist 4, Male, productivity and total value sold art products

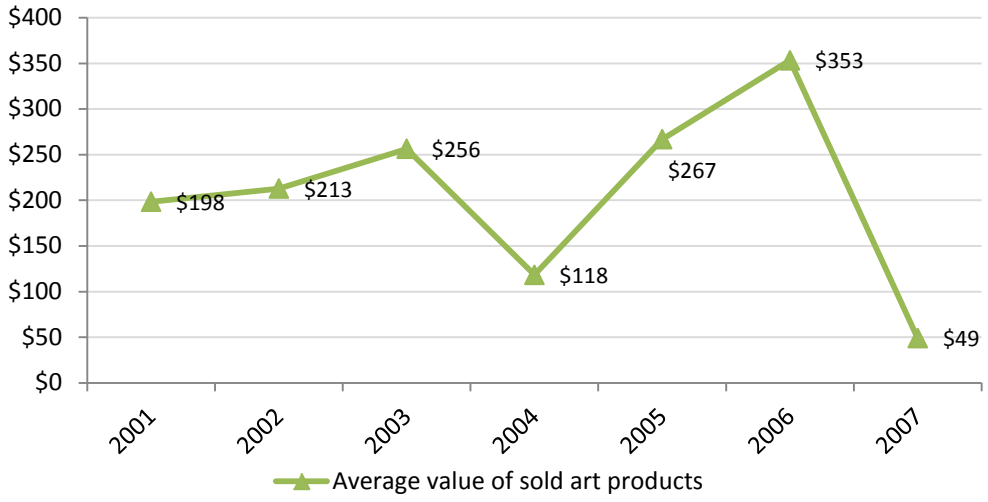


Figure 12: Artist 4, Male, average value of sold art products

Artist 5: Male

Production years:	1997–2010
Total number of products received:	171
Total number of products sold:	161 (94%)
Range of productivity (number of products received per year):	0–50
Total sales value (14 years):	$ 202,891
Annual sales value (average):	$ 15,607
Art products sales value (average):	$ 1,260

Figure 13: Artist 5, Male, productivity and total value sold art products

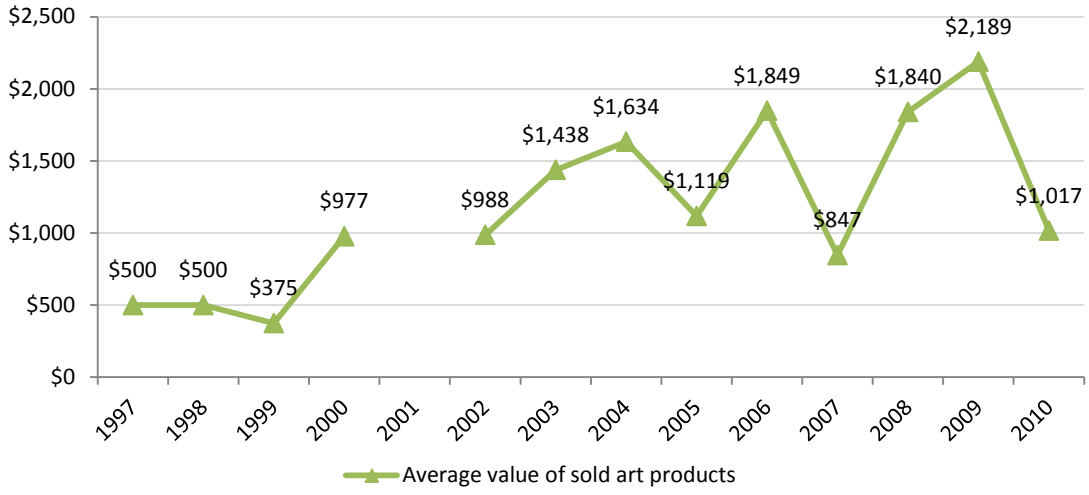


Figure 14: Artist 5, Male, average value of sold art products

Artist 6: Female

Production years:	2006–2012
Total number of products received:	88
Total number of products sold:	87 (98%)
Range of productivity (number of products received per year):	1–29
Total sales value (five years):	$ 51,140
Annual sales value (average):	$ 12,656
Art products sales value (average):	$ 8,523

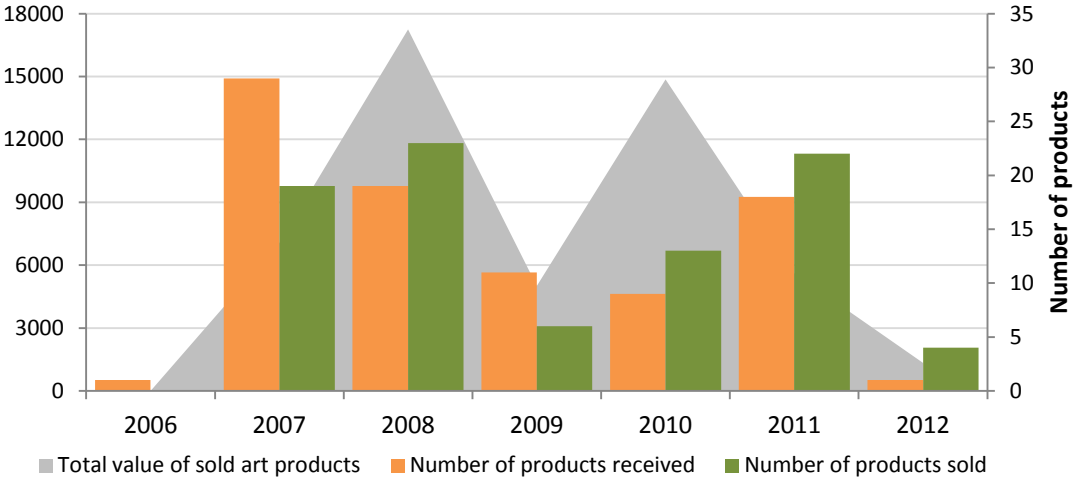


Figure 15: Artist 6, Female, productivity and total value sold art products

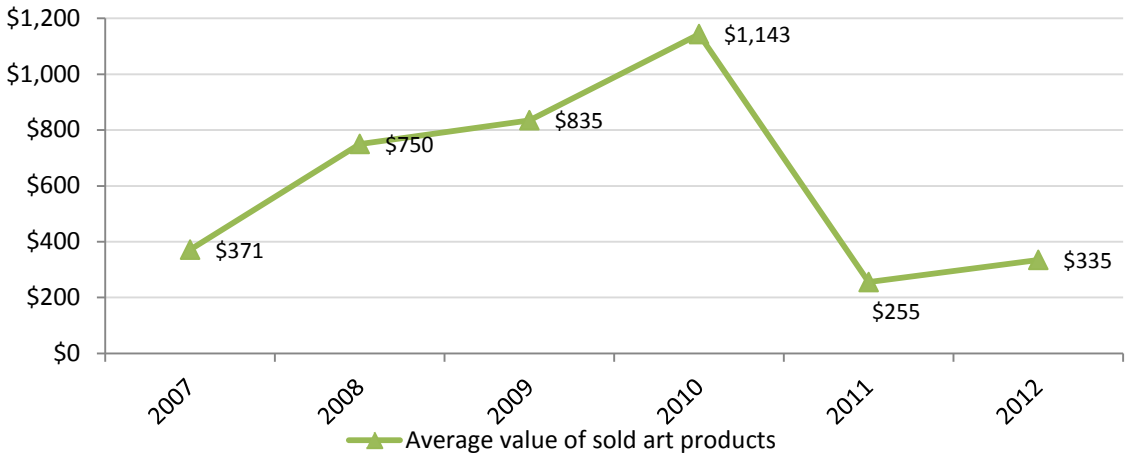


Figure 16: Artist 6, Female, average value of sold art products

Discussion

This study illustrates that, regardless of gender or age, artists face challenges in achieving a consistent income and a stable professional career. This study also shows clearly that perceptions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art as being lucrative are misplaced. The overwhelming majority of artists receive irregular income and, over the course of their arts practice, small returns.

This analysis of artist productivity has highlighted the small number of high earning artists. Only eight artists had a total sales value of more than $1 million (0.3%) and only 157 artists (5.4%) earned more than $100,000. The vast majority (over 70%) of artists' total sales value was less than $10,000. When spread over all the years of an artists' career, this income is, at best, modest; however, in the context of remote community life, art sales remain an important means of accessing non-welfare income and the benefits of independent economic activity. Further, the cumulative impact on the economic and social life of a remote community from a group of artists earning income from art sales is also important.

To further understand the issues related to an artist's career, productivity was explored by gender. This analysis revealed that while female artists do receive on average less for their art products, when analysed by the level of production, female artists received more than male artists, as they produce more.

Broadly, there are two types of female artist. The first produces fewer than 200 art products and has a lower average value for their art products than male artists. The second produces over 400 art products and achieves a higher average value than male artists. The inverse is true for male artists; they receive higher average values at lower levels of production, but lower average values at the higher levels.

The data indicate that the most successful artists (those with a high level of sales) are also the most productive artists, not those who sell a smaller number of higher priced products.

Given the variety of artists, creative practices and Art Centres across remote Australia, there are multiple ways of defining an artist's career; 'success' is likely to be both variable and locally specific. Similarly, there is no one characteristic that defines the professional trajectory of male or female artists. Despite this variability, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander visual art is an important feature of remote Australia. The work of artists and their enterprises provides broad ranging social, economic and community benefits for remote communities and for Australian art businesses.

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