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‘Closed shop’: Sculpture by the Sea artists lash arts body over lack of funding



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A group of international and Australian artists who have regularly shown their works on the famous Bondi to Tamarama walk have made an “urgent” plea for funding after the event’s near-death experience this year.

More than 100 artists who have repeatedly exhibited at the Sculpture by the Sea event have come together to accuse the federal funding agency of acting like a “closed shop” in the way it operates, and highlighting the agency’s disconnect with the popular exhibitions in Bondi and Perth which boast 700,000 visitors annually.



April Pine, here with her work Sway, was one of 100 artists to sign the letter. JANIE BARRETT

Signatories to the letter include acclaimed artist Ken Unsworth; this year’s \$70,000 winner of the Sculpture by the Sea Prize, Walcha sculptor James Rogers, who has exhibited for 21 years; Australian luminary Ron Robertson-Swann; and Sydney-based sculptors Lucy Humphrey and Clara Hali. Some 85 per cent of eligible artists have signed the open letter.

“Few, if any, Australian art exhibitions have Sculpture by the Sea’s international reputation with artists around the world,” states the letter, which was directed to Arts Minister Tony Burke and circulated to at least eight federal MPs.

“We wish to express our surprise and great disappointment that Creative Australia does not provide any funding or appear to have any interest in Sculpture by the Sea, despite the response to the exhibition by artists and the Australian public.

“How can Creative Australia, just like the Australia Council before it, ignore our work year after year and not provide multiyear core funding?”

A year short of its 30th anniversary year, Sculpture by the Sea was days off [being cancelled](#) because of a \$200,000 funding shortfall, addressed only at the eleventh hour when [NRMA](#) came on board as a sponsor.

The federal funding agency Creative Australia said organisers did not apply for federal funding this year, and in any event Burke ruled out federal funding for the exhibition, saying he had been advised Sculpture by the Sea did not pay its artists.

“The last information I have received was to have your works included in Sculpture by the Sea you are not paid. In fact, you had to pay them,” Burke said at the time. “And I think that should be a question that should be put directly to Sculpture by the Sea.”

On average, each artist spends \$15,000 to be in the exhibition, *the Herald* can reveal, often climbing to around \$25,000 for more monumental works of scale, sometimes far less.

Queanbeyan sculptor Peter Spelman, who created the abstract painted metal work *Cyan Forest*, which is currently positioned on prime real estate on the Bondi headland, spent \$12,000 making his exploration of positive and negative space.

The artist representative on Sculpture by the Sea’s board, Spelman helped organise the open letter.

“There are other exhibitions, but this is the best opportunity to sell work and to have public impact,” he said. “No other exhibition has the volume of people coming through the exhibition. I’ve sold into international collections and sold multiple large-scale sculpture overseas, and into private and public collections in Australia over the past 20 years on the back of Sculpture by the Sea.”

Exhibiting artists pay a commission to Sculpture by the Sea of 40 per cent for works sold, which organisers say goes towards exhibition staging costs.



Peter Spelman's work, *Cyan Forest*, is currently on display in Marks Park as part of this year's Sculpture by the Sea. GETTY IMAGES

Each artist has the installation of their work subsidised by \$1250, and up to \$3500 if they do not sell or receive other awards. Not all artworks are for sale – some are ephemeral and are only made to last a short time – so these artists are looked after, Spelman said.

As well as the Australians, international sculptors from New Zealand, London and China penned their own letter, saying that no other country has exhibitions that are as appealing to artists from around the world.

For a relatively small amount, subsidies of freight and travel costs would lead to a “great many” overseas senior and emerging artists participating.

The open letters show growing discontent around public arts funding priorities, and comes amid revelations that artist Khaled Sabsabi has received a [\\$100,000 grant](#) from Creative Australia for a new exhibition, months after the agency reinstated him as Australia’s Venice Biennale representative for 2026, following his controversial axing.

The grant will allow the western Sydney-based artist to create a major new work for the Samstag Museum of Art in Adelaide in 2027.

The Australian signatories said very few of them applied to Creative Australia because it acted as a “closed shop” with assessors chosen by Creative Australia from a “pool of friends and colleagues who understand what is expected of them to keep the pool of Creative Australia’s funds available for the same group of friends and colleagues”.

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Creative Australia stood by its previous statement that Sculpture by the Sea had not applied for any recent funding opportunities, including its recent Arts Project Investment for Organisations program, which closed on September 2. Applications were assessed and based on independent expert advice and according to published criteria.

“We welcome applications to our investment programs and encourage organisations to draw on the feedback provided on past applications.”

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