

What becomes of the Broken Hill artists?

The latest report from the Regional Arts NSW Audience Development program reveals some surprising facts and fascinating figures about the outback arts scene in the far west of NSW.

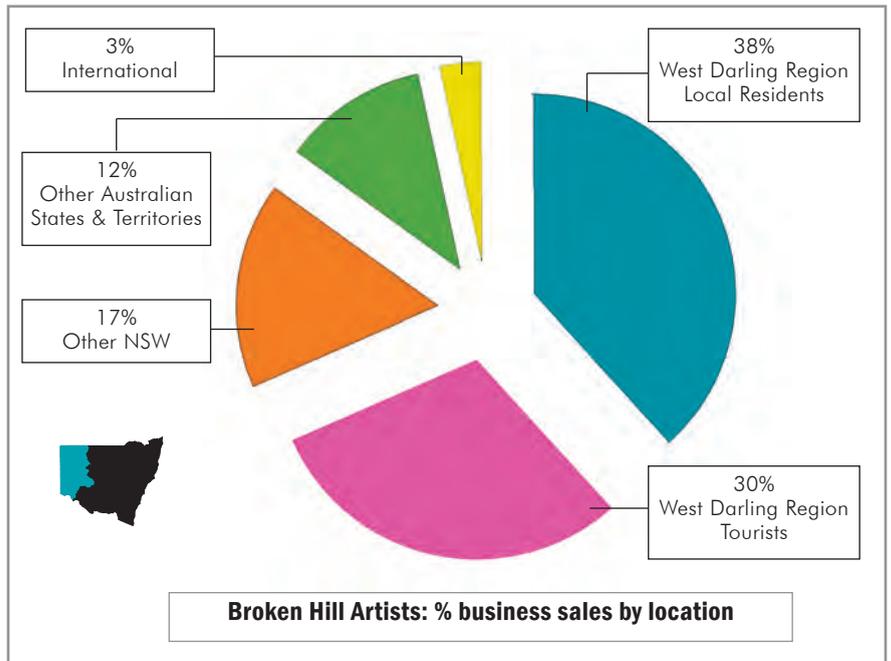
by LISA ANDERSEN

BEYOND THE WELL-KNOWN FIGURES OF PRO Hart and the Brushmen of the Bush, Broken Hill has a 'mob' of artists. This city of 20,000 people has about 30 private galleries — no one is sure about the actual number but two have popped up since Christmas — and the oldest regional art gallery in New South Wales. It is where locals collect art and most people have a shed where they create, build or 'fix stuff', and where tourist brochures enthuse about 'magical light' in a 'mecca for artists.' Here, saying you are an artist is as normal as saying you are a builder or run the local newsagent.

But who are these artists? What are they worth to the region? And what do they need in this remote community hundreds of miles from major arts markets?

A just completed research project designed by Jane Andrew (University of Adelaide) and me (Regional Arts NSW and University of Technology, Sydney) — with a 'mob' of partners that included the Department of State and Regional Development NSW, the Far Western Regional Development Board, Regional Arts NSW and West Darling Arts — spent the last year trying to find the answers; looking at the value of arts businesses in and around Broken Hill and consulting on ideas about ongoing growth for this sector.

We began last April by researching a database of all the local professional artists and arts businesses then got them to fill in a detailed (21 page!) survey about their



practice, markets, income and business. Over the next few months, interviews were recorded and focus groups were run. Secondary research on useful models to support future development was also part of the mix.

The report — to be launched on 4 April in Broken Hill with a multi-sector roundtable considering 'the way forward' — contains a number of findings that locals expected, but also a big surprise.

Most predictable was that 50% of local professionals are either visual artists, craft practitioners or designers. Smaller groups include musicians, writers and film workers.

The big surprise was that local consumption was the largest part of the market at 38%. Not — as everyone had told us — visitors to the region; who still account for 30% of sales.

But it is the local buyers who sustain the artists throughout the low and shoulder tourist seasons. As one artist said, "December to March are pasta and salad days, but when April comes, bringing tourists, it means steak for dinner."

There are also healthy inter-regional (17% of total) and interstate markets (12%). The US and Europe account for most international sales. *(Continued on page 30)*

April

6 – 9 April

Tullamore Irish Festival Poetry, singing and dance workshops, performances, activities and stalls, celebrating the local Irish heritage. Across **TULLAMORE** Tel 02 6893 7229

6 – 9 April

Oxley Downs Open Day, The set for the ABC reality TV series, 'Outback House' will open its doors to the public **DUBBO** Tel 02 6887 7264 Email tourle@oxleydowns.com.au

6 – 21 April

Warrumbungles Easter Discovery Program A range of interactive nature based and cultural heritage activities for all ages. Warrumbungles National Park, **COONABARABRAN** Tel 02 6825 4364

7 April

Country Energy Hilston Australian Bush Festival The unique flavour of the Western Riverina characterised by bush bands, champion whip crackers, camp oven cooking, bush poets and local produce stalls. **HILSTON** Tel 02 6967 2787

Broken Hill artists *(cont'd from p.4)*

An artist in Broken Hill is likely to be a man or women, older than 45 years, who was born in the Far West or been there longer than 21 years. Of the 27% had moved to the area in the past five years many had come — after having fallen in love with the landscape on a visit — to have more time to spend on their arts practice and because living is cheaper.

S/he spends 54% of work time on creative work and 28% of time on earning income from non-artistic work. Like the Brushmen of the Bush themselves, many are self-taught or learned 'on the job'. The average annual income from cultural practice is higher than the national average at \$27,000.

The arts businesses employ an average of just under three employees and these creative micro-enterprises are optimistic about future prospects; with 36% describing their business as 'growing' over the next three years, 38% as 'sustainable', 17% are 'commencing' with only 9% considering their business 'in decline'. And three years from now they expect to be employing one more person.

Fuel prices, tourist numbers, market opportunities, lack of recognition, and travel and freight costs are the factors expected to have the greatest impact on business profit over the next three years.

Artists are aware that they need to spend more time and resources on building markets and outlets for their work. They also see the need for more knowledge sharing, networking and cooperative effort amongst artists in the region to build audiences outside the region and to promote the brand of Broken Hill as an 'arts place'.

There is clear need for micro-enterprise training programs — especially in marketing and business planning — and for cooperative and collaborative marketing efforts to be increased. The research recommends a future focus on building and sustaining partnerships — which have not always proved successful in the past — between the creative businesses, the tourism sector, training providers, local government and state and national economic development and trade agencies to support ongoing development.

Almost all the artists feel that living in a remote region has had a positive effect on their artistic practice. The physical beauty of the region, the 'magic light', feelings of 'peace' and 'freedom', the real sense of community and the support from friends and family are important factors for their creativity. One artist commented, 'Artemaking in context of desert rather than more lush conditions provides a timeless context.' ■

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