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The Ian Potter Museum of Art. Photography by Jesse Marlow.

INTERVIEW

## The Hidden 26%

by [Toby Fehily](#) | Posted 08 Feb 2016

Tucked away in leafy campuses across the country, Australia's university art museums have been around for more than 150 years, building collections, mounting exhibitions and carving out an important niche in the visual arts sector. And yet the 42 museums, which represent 26 per cent of Australia's art museums, are sometimes left unsung, lost amid the noise of big blockbusters and sold-out commercial shows.

Ted Snell is the director of the Cultural Precinct at the University of Western Australia and the chair of University Art Museums Australia, a body established in 2008 to represent the sector. He spoke to *Art Guide Australia* about the unique role university art museums play and why we should be paying closer attention.

**Toby Fehily:** How did university art museums first come about in Australia? Do they all have a similar story or is each slightly different?

**Ted Snell:** Some museums came about because they inherited a collection. For instance, numerous collections were held by teacher colleges, and when those teachers colleges were combined into universities, they discovered that they had quite an important resource and a resource that needed to be developed, so they created a gallery to house their expanding collection. Other universities, from their establishment, started to buy artworks to enhance the campus: Curtin University was one of those; Monash, another. They focused on contemporary Australian art as a way of building the collection and making the environment for education more enjoyable and dynamic. Almost every university has its individual story, but mostly they have started from a collection they needed to look after and then to present exhibitions of that collection and to enhance that through traveling exhibitions.

**Fehily:** How has their role evolved over the intervening years?

**Snell:** In many cases they have taken on roles they identified as missing from whatever is happening in their particular state. Quite a number of university art museums are showing mid-career artists in important survey exhibitions. We know that emerging artists are well looked after, as are, of course, established artists, but it is often that mid-career artist group that is overlooked. And one of the roles that university art museums have taken on is to showcase the work of important contributors to Australia's cultural life but in that tricky area of mid-career.

**Fehily:** You've said in the past that the university art museum sector itself – the so-called 'Hidden 26%' – is often overlooked too. Why do you think that is?

**Snell:** One of the reasons is that they're not funded directly by state and federal governments. So when it comes to a list of clients who are included for discussion, meetings, mentoring or other aspects of professional development, the university art museums don't appear on the list. There is also a sense – and it is wrong – that universities are very wealthy and that they look after these museums extremely well and that therefore they're a side issue in the big game of how culture is managed and overseen in this country. In fact, many university art museums are on a relatively tight budget; they seek external funding through project grants; they have to develop relationships with commercial galleries and other sectors of the community to try to build a really strong program.

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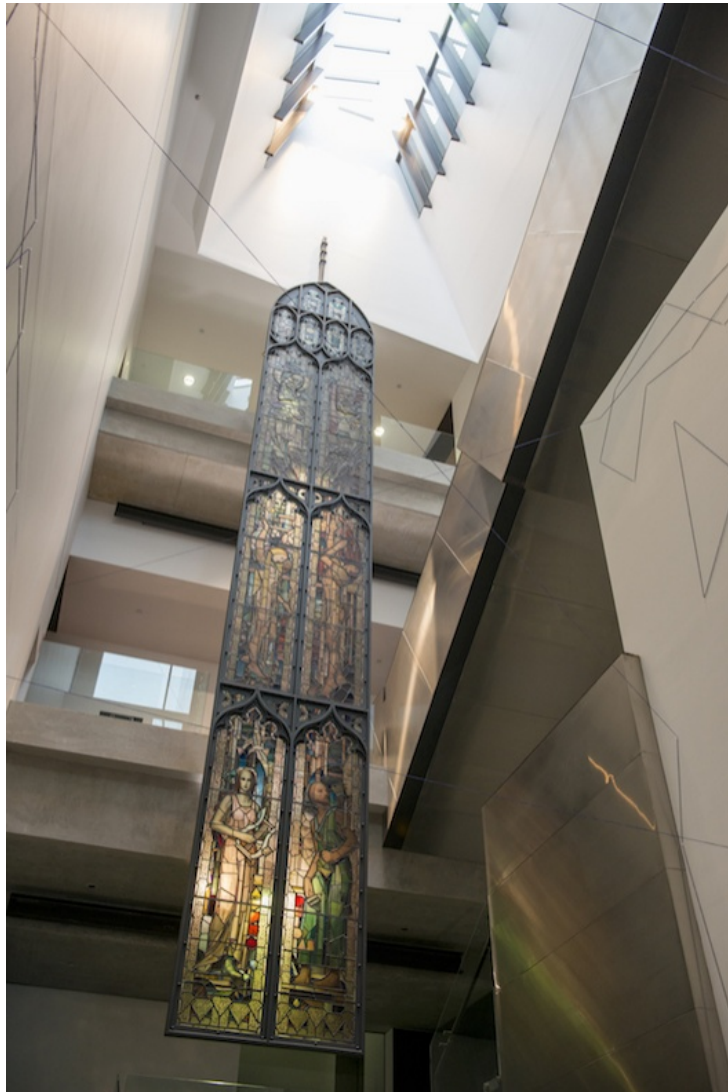
**Snell:** The reduction in funding to the small-to-medium sector is going to have an impact on university art museums. As those funds are reduced, we become more reliant upon the corporate sector and private philanthropy. So there's an increased level of urgency about raising funds external to the university, and we're in direct competition with our colleagues in the small-to-medium sector.

**Fehily:** What would you say to someone who visits the public galleries, who maybe even visits the commercial galleries, but hasn't been to a university art museum?

**Snell:** What I'd say is, do go, because you'll be surprised, firstly at the range of exhibitions that you'll see, but you'll also be quite delighted by the scope, the scale and the vision of the university art museums in this country.

For instance, Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery's [recent exhibition of work by Elise Blumann](#), a German émigré artist who came to Western Australia in 1938 and, in the decade up to 1948, produced a body of quite extraordinary work, well-informed, personally informed, by German modernism. She created that work in Western Australia during the 1930s and 40s, which was a very hostile and very anti-German environment during the war. In fact, Elise Blumann's husband was interned in 1939.

So there's a body of very adventurous, avant-garde body of work that many people are unaware of, created in Perth in a period in which most people would've imagined little was happening. That example is replicated in university art museums around the country. They provide a different take on situations by using very significant collections to tell alternative or unheard stories. Another thing that you'll see if you go to university art museums are many wonderful artworks that are little known, yet imperative inclusions in the national heritage of Australia. It's an opportunity to see a parallel narrative of Australian art and the cultural life.



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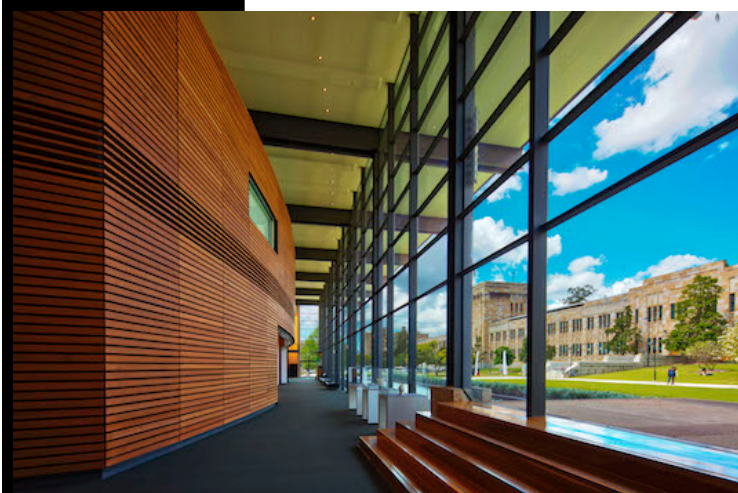
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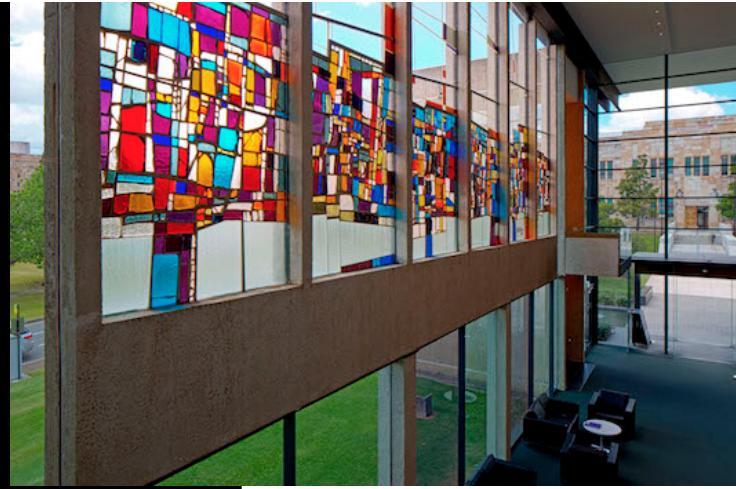
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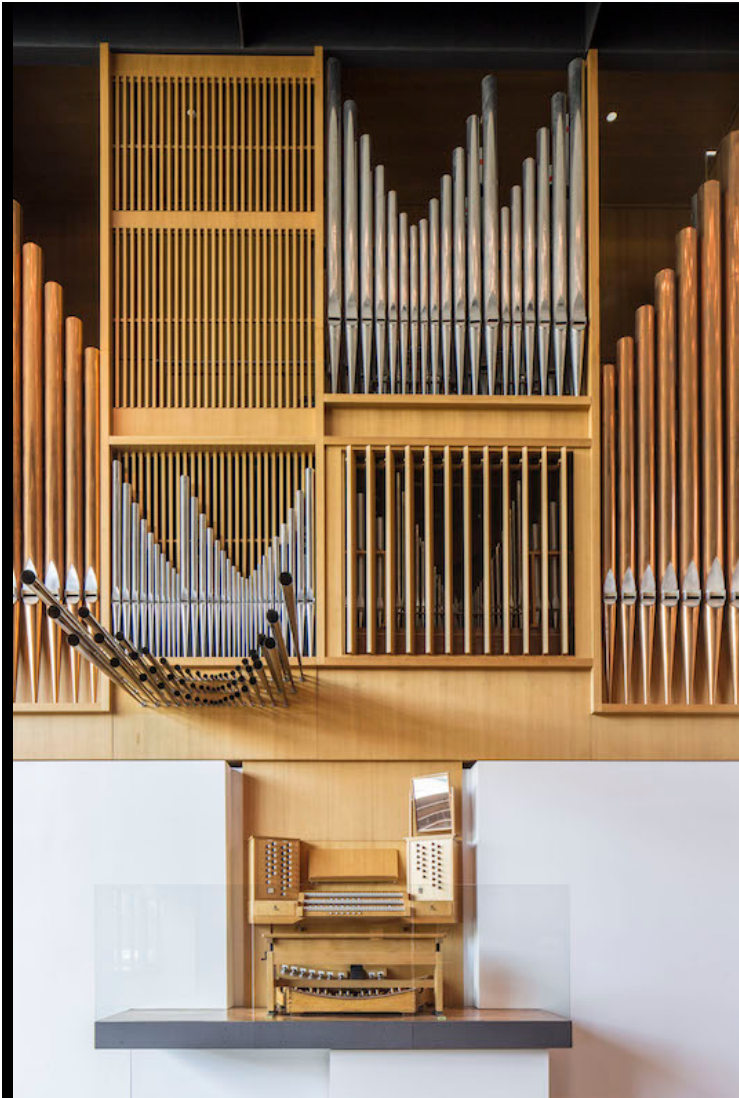
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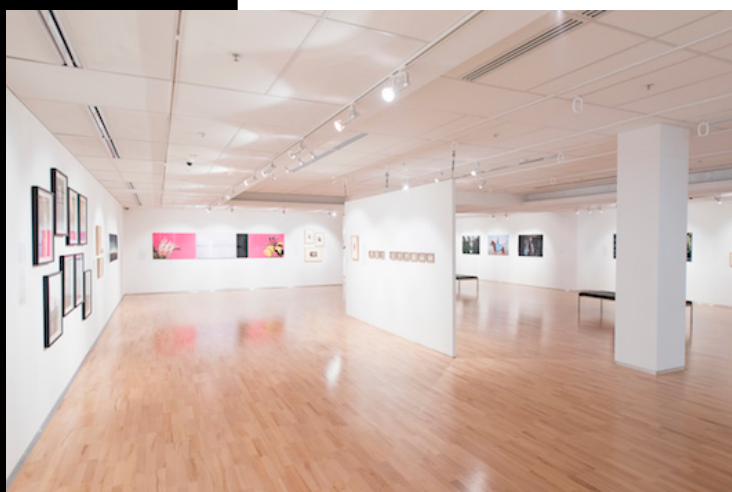
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