

Seven career lessons from intergenerational artists

Career journeys offer many pathways. A group of artists aged from 26 to 66, share advice on managing the options and the opportunities.

20 Aug 2023 – Gina Fairley

Career journeys are about flows and entry points across time.

Often, when we consider intergenerational conversations, it is within the framework of a mentorship. But the reality is that, when formalised, mentoring – for both parties – requires a significant time commitment. However, mentoring can also happen organically. A recent panel discussion hosted by Canberra Contemporary Art Space (CCAS), 'BACK AND FORTH: An Intergenerational Conversation at CCAS', touched on some of those pathways for sharing knowledge, how creating relationships with more experienced artists can offer a focus and whether it's still necessary to go to art school.

Ranging from 26 to 66 years in age, artists Alison Alder, Dean Cross, Ham Darroch, Saskia Haalebos, Zora Pang and Wendy Teakel shared what it takes, in their view, to harness opportunities for career development, and how to forge a thriving career in a tight arts community like Kamberri/Canberra, where they have all worked. Their advice, however, was for emerging artists wanting to demystifying career pathways – regardless of location or age.

1. Can I pick your brain? Always say yes.

[Saskia Haalebos](#) is a neurodiverse artist working across animation, text, performance, experimental music printmaking and low-fi books. She described how she was hungry for understanding possible career pathways when in her final year at ANU School of Art and Design (2016).

'I didn't really know art school was a thing until I was in my 20s and didn't get to go until I was in my 40s. I felt as if I was playing catch-up the whole time,' said Haalebos. 'So I interviewed people who were already active to get some intel and to help me catch up.'



top (L-R) Alison Alder, Ham Darroch, Wendy Teakel; bottom (L-R) Dean Cross (photo by Dario Hardaker), Saskia Haalebos (photo by Georgina Holt), Zora Pang (photo by Natsuko Yonezawa) Image: Supplied.

She added that she was amazed by how generous people were with their time. They ‘answered my really rudimentary questions and didn’t make me feel at all ridiculous. I was asking questions like, “How do you pay rent and also find time to make art?” Haalebos said, adding that the response to her questions was often just about showing up and participating and, importantly, showing respect for your community and giving back. ‘What I have taken from the last five years, where I’ve [interned here and volunteered here](#), is that everyone’s pretty grateful, and I learned a lot by being in the room, especially when you are freeing them up.’

Her interviews revealed that many artists had opportunities via word of mouth, emphasising the importance of building your community, she said. Her advice was that opportunities come ‘from trying to be responsible, reliable and kind – you know just basic human stuff. And giving back too, like when people ask, “Can I pick your brain?” You say yes ... give it a crack.’

Her other wisely piece of advice was: ‘Have an art saving fund because it’s expensive. It’s really expensive!’

2. Moving sideways is OK

First Nations dancer-come-choreographer-come-visual artist [Dean Cross](#) (b. 1986) said of his career trajectory: ‘I achieved almost all the things that I’d set out to do, and I was wanting to find new thresholds.’ Cross started his career in contemporary dance and choreography, moving across to the visual arts. ‘I went through a period of feeling limited in my body ... and its capacity to communicate the ideas that were starting to bubble up.’ Cross described dance as being at the ‘bottom of [the food] chain [of] arts infrastructure in Australia – in arts education, arts literacy. We’re a long, long way behind the rest of the world. So, it’s very difficult as a young dancer, much more so than a visual artist, because you need a lot more money to produce the work that you want to make.

‘You want to pay a minimum wage to your five dancers that you may need, plus hiring a studio, and suddenly two weeks’ work equals \$10,000 that you’d have to earn before you can make the work. I realised very quickly it wasn’t sustainable,’ continued Cross, adding that rebranding as a visual artist was ‘completely transformative’.

A key to his career journey has been collaboration. ‘I wouldn’t have got anywhere without it. It is those networks that you build, and the people that you meet, that grow you as a person, but also inform you about the world, which helps you make work.’

He continued: ‘When I left art school, I saw a lot of those collaborations as a post-secondary education, because that is learned stuff, and it was through collaboration that I learned about the work I wanted to make.’

3. Move out of your comfort zone

Printmaker [Alison Alder](#) (b. 1958) left Canberra after finishing art school, moving to Melbourne. She said simply, ‘I was unemployed a lot in Melbourne.’ But it wasn’t geography that pushed her out of her comfort zone and on a career pathway. Rather, it was being forced to make a decision between two opportunities. ‘Two things came up and both were funded by the Australia Council. This was in the early ‘80s and back then they had a thing called the [Art and Working Life Program](#), which was to embed artists into unions. I put in an application and, to my surprise, was selected to work with the Australian Railways Union. But at the same time, another opportunity came up with the Community Arts Board, to work as a trainee artist in residence at [Redback Graphix](#) in Wollongong. So I had this conundrum, which job do I take?’

Alder took the job in Wollongong in 1984 and ending up doing a project with the [Miners’ Women’s Auxiliary](#). ‘It was pretty terrifying, because I knew nothing about mining, and these women were just kick-ass activists. I was

about 25, and these women were in their 50s. They were really battle hardened, amazing women. It was my job to represent them in a visual way they could be happy with.'

Alder returned as an established artist to work on [The Future Feminist Archive](#). 'I realised how much I didn't know [on that first visit]... Part of my working at Redback Graphix was a huge educational thing for me, because I got to work with people that I never normally would have met.' It shaped Alder's career long journey.

4. Residencies can unsettle you in the best way

Multidisciplinary artist, sculptor and academic [Wendy Teakel](#) (b. 1957) spoke about how residencies influenced her art practice and mindset and, like Alder, pushed her to question how she works, and encourage a reflection on her sense of place.

'I find residencies are really interesting because, when you arrive, it takes you a while to realise you need to give it about four days [to settle]. It's scary. And through that process, you can grow because you have to fall back on yourself. And you have to stop being a princess.'

Teakel has done residencies in Central Australia, Japan and Thailand. 'One thing I learned during my first residency in Thailand was that it's just really incredibly bad manners to ask directly for things. I think all of us can benefit from not demanding – not wanting – and actually asking if things are possible, rather than saying "I want".'

Teakel spoke of a residency in Thailand, where the president of the university told her the artists used Belgian linen and oil paint. 'And I went, "That's a bit tricky, I don't use either those." I asked for an oxy welder and some other things. And they just didn't get it. So I started up lighting a fire in the middle of the courtyard, making things. And all of a sudden, all this equipment arrived.' I suppose her lesson was "don't demand, do and your making will find its own solutions".

She continued: 'The other thing is that I learned to barter. A lot of people talk about not having the money to buy things, and that they have to work in order to get something for their practice. But sometimes, you can actually just do a bit of cheeky barter with somebody.' She spoke of negotiating for patinaed objects – a skill that artist Rosalie Gascoigne taught her.

Teakel said that residency lessons can also be found at home. 'The first thing I noticed, when on a residency in Central Australia, was this feeling that "this isn't my Australia". I was very aware of how kind of naked I felt in Central Australia, because I didn't understand the environment. I mean, I had all the picture postcard knowledge of it, but it wasn't my landscape; I didn't embody it.'

She added: 'I think residences make you grow; they make you think more about your place and can really sharpen your idea of the here. So, instead of just going, "I don't know this place, I want, I need..." just try to sit down, shut up and look, and only *then* start making.'

5. Learning through unlikely collaborations

[Ham Darroch](#) (1972) learned about making from his grandfather in his home workshop, an intergenerational connection that he continues today with his father-in-law. It is not surprising, then, that many of his sculptures are inspired by a use of everyday objects. That tacit knowledge of making led him to working as a preparator, and in turn learning from other artists. That eventually took Darroch to London (2004-2010), where he was studio assistant to the celebrated painter Bridget Riley, and continued to work for her for two decades. This relationship of working with other artists started when he moved to Sydney. 'I met quite formal sculptors, Jan King in particular, and those artists let me into their studios to help on the weekends,' he said.

Darroch eventually went to art school in Canberra to get that conceptual grounding, and to learn, 'how to formally make it work, but also to help push that to the edge to make a body of work'. In his fourth year at art school he met Fiona Hall, who was a visiting artist, and he had the opportunity to assist her. 'I made myself available, to experience other artists and their practices, and I saw the highs and the lows of that,' said Darroch. 'All through that period of time, I'd been thinking about what makes a good painting; what makes a body of art?'

Darroch became an installer at the MCA (Museum of Contemporary Art), working alongside many senior artists. He said, however, his 'main collaborator now is my father-in-law, who shares my studio. In his kind of non-art way, he comes out asking technical questions, or asks me what I'm doing. And that kind of alien view is really useful. What can I learn, from listening to someone who's trying to problem solve with me? That's one of the things that I find really interesting – at the moment they're the richest collaborations for me.'

6. Open the door, and your tribe will enter

[Zora Pang](#) is a community-driven artist, organiser and creative producer, and recent ANU graduate (2020) with a Master of Art History and Curating. In 2021 she was artist-in-residence with the [Live Art Lab](#) at Ainslie and Gorman Arts Centres (Canberra), when she cold-approached US artist Caroline Woolard to be her mentor. 'Live Art Lab was one of those amazing developmental opportunities I came across as an emerging creative. We had a little funding to pay for a mentor for whatever development goals we wanted. I had been reading her book, [Art, Engagement, Economy: the Working Practice of Caroline Woolard](#), and I loved the way she worked. I didn't know who Caroline Woolard was, and I felt like that was exactly the direction I wanted to go with my practice, so I stalked her online and wrote her a long email asking if she could be my mentor. It is one of the best things I have done for my career,' explained Pang.

'A mentorship, when you find the right person, it really gives you the energy and lots of hope and new directions to go forward,' she added.

Pang spoke of the [Solidarity Economy](#), which picks up from Gascoigne and Teakel's earlier version of a barter system and of volunteering. 'It is just another name for it, to find your community that is on the same path. There is this organisation called [Art.coop](#), which educates people about this movement.'

Pang continued: 'For my career, I'd say that collaboration has been absolutely crucial, key. I wouldn't have gone anywhere without CCAS. It's those networks that you build, and the people that you meet, that grow you as a person, but also inform you about the world. And that's what helps you *make* work.'

Pang spoke of another collaborative project: 'Back in 2020, when COVID first hit, we had a group collaboration at [Tuggeranong Arts Centre](#) (TAC) with eight Chinese artists, from all different kinds of mediums. And we went through 14 weeks of workshopping with each other, making things. Some of these artists ended up becoming roommates or forming collectives. And then, earlier this year, at [Tributary Projects](#) we did a second version of this collaboration with some of the same artists making an exhibition called [WARMER-WARMER: DUMPLING WORLD](#) (2023) So, that's the story that is still continuing.

'I think, when you leave art school, I saw a lot of those collaborations as being like a secondary, post-secondary education to me – the time where I learned stuff – that's where I learned about what work that I wanted to make.'

Pang said that if aspiring artists don't have the money to go to art school, then they should become involved in an ARI (artist run space).

7. Going to art school is a personal choice, not a necessity

'How important is art school to making it as a contemporary conceptual artist?' – was a question put to the panel of intergenerational artists. Haalebos answered: 'I did the full year preparation course, two or three years before actually going to art school, and I remember showing a [senior artist] my stuff, and he said, "Why do you want to go to art school? You're already doing it?" and it was just, "Well, I want to be in the thick of it, in my community. I want to be challenged, and I want to learn more." So my advice is, if you want to go, just bloody go.'

Darroch also found value in going: 'I learned to make things before I went to art school. It might be a tsunami of conceptual stuff to wade through for a while.'

Teakel, however, made the point that art schools are not what they were. 'When I went to art school it was very different. I am not sure it's what I would recommend, as art schools have changed. In the past, you would definitely have to go to art school, but I don't think so today. I would say "do a residency".'

Teakle continued: 'There used to be lots of people at school; there was a very rich dialogue of disagreement, camaraderie and a whole lot of things. And when I look at how much people have to pay in [HECS](#), I just go "wow". I know quite a few young people who are doing some very smart things, like online courses, learning off YouTube, knocking on artists' doors. I have had people knock on my door and go, "Hey, can you tell me how to do this?" and that's a delight to share your knowledge with somebody else.'

'So, really pick your community that you want to connect with, and picking your mentors, I think is really essential,' Teakle concluded.

Alder offered her view: 'I remember somebody saying to me a few years ago, when I was working at art school, "What's the point of going to art school? I can go and do a weekend course and learn how to do screen printing, for example," which is true. You can absolutely do that. But that's actually not what art school is about. It's about being part of a community of people who are committed to the ideas behind a practice, and trying to push an agenda. There are lots of different people coming in and out, and I think that's where art schools have their value.'

This conversation was delivered as part of [Uncharted Territory](#), a festival that celebrates creativity, experimentation and groundbreaking ideas, and in partnership with the ANU School of Art and Design. The talk was hosted by Canberra Contemporary Art Space (CCAS) on Saturday 8 July 2023. The panel was co-chaired by Janice Falsone (Director CCAS) with Dr Raquel Ormella (artist, and Senior Lecturer at the Australian National University School of Art and Design).



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