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Home / Lifestyle

Auckland art gallerist on why NZ urgently needs a cultural gifting programme



By Dan du Bern

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I work in the arts, as a gallerist. I support artists – and their families – by exhibiting their work, connecting them with collectors and curators, and building opportunities that allow their careers to grow. Like many of my peers, I began as an artist myself. And like many, I found my main calling was in the support of the work of others, rather than my own. I've come to see that art can't survive on talent alone. It survives when networks of support exist: curators, critics, educators, collectors, dealers, and institutions – all of whom believe in the long-term value of the work being made.

Central to those networks are collections. What gets collected – especially by public institutions – matters. Collections are not just repositories of artworks; they are instruments of knowledge and mechanisms for cultural belonging. By collecting, museums and galleries build critical context over time. Without a strong collection, institutions cannot effectively reflect or shape cultural discourse. And without that, we lose the ability to help the wider public – both the art-interested and the general population – understand what matters, and why.

While resources for collecting have always been tight, over the past two decades we have noted a steady decline in institutional collecting. Across the country, museums and public galleries have seen their acquisition budgets progressively cut, with a greater reliance on donor or artist gifts; or through the laborious and arguably problematic task of petitioning their patrons to finance specific acquisitions via (tax-deductible) cash donations.

At the same time, we have witnessed a steady rise in prices for certain artists in the secondary market, with blue-chip works going for prices that would swallow whatever budgets [these public galleries](#) might still have available to them. This has led to the unfortunate situation where precious funds are funnelled into expensive gap-filling, while responsibilities to collect widely, deeply and speculatively have steadily diminished.

This is a serious situation, which is leaving artists at all stages in their careers unsupported and audiences unable to appreciate the full complexity and richness of art being produced in Aotearoa. In years to come, when narratives of art in this country are produced, these will inevitably be flawed and inadequate, disabling future generations from being able to fully understand their artistic legacies.

But there is a fix. And it's not radical, expensive or untested.

A Cultural Gifting Programme (CGP) would allow individuals or organisations to [gift artworks to public institutions](#) and receive tax relief equivalent to the work's fair market value – just as they would for cash donations. These programmes exist across Australia, the UK, Canada and the US. They are carefully regulated, well understood and demonstrably effective. New Zealand is a notable outlier. We are one of the few countries in the OECD without such a scheme.

Introducing a cultural gifting programme would make a meaningful difference. It would allow public collections to grow again. It would encourage collectors to place important works in public hands. It would [support artists](#) at critical points in their careers. It would send a clear signal: that Aotearoa values the long-term cultural contribution of contemporary art and help grow – as it has in Australia – a robust philanthropic culture that effectively supports our public institutions.

Sir Nicholas Serota, former director of the Tate Modern, identified the adoption of a CGP in the early 1990s as a game-changer for Britain. He stated it was instrumental in allowing their cultural institutions to remain relevant and keep pace with other major galleries and museums across wider Europe and globally.

A cultural gifting programme is a sensible accompaniment to the recently implemented [Resale Royalties Scheme](#) (RRS), which came into effect late last year as part of a tranche of reciprocal policies under New Zealand's free trade agreement with Britain. Like this scheme, a cultural gifting programme would directly benefit artists and their families. A well-designed and implemented programme would be particularly beneficial to senior artists – especially women and indigenous practitioners whose work has been historically overlooked and underpriced – enabling them to materially benefit by giving significant works

to public institutions. For younger artists, a CGP would help ease the pressure on acquisition budgets often consumed by landmark “gap-filling” purchases, thus making it easier for public institutions to proactively collect current work by emerging and mid-career practitioners. Moreover, it would allow these artists to consider donating works from exhibitions should they so wish – knowing that such gifts could be properly valued, recognised and rewarded.

Significantly, it would also reward those rare collectors with vision, ambition and aptitude who have chosen to collect more challenging work that is deemed significant by museums and their curators but perhaps is less well understood or appreciated by the general public. By doing so, the collectors help institutions broaden public understanding and deepen knowledge by exposing audiences to a wider range of art.

Critics will argue that a CGP only benefits the wealthy. But that argument misses the point. Wealthy donors already receive tax relief for cash gifts. A CGP simply extends this same principle to cultural assets. The real beneficiaries are institutions, artists, and the public – who gain access to significant works that might otherwise remain hidden, in private homes or sold offshore.

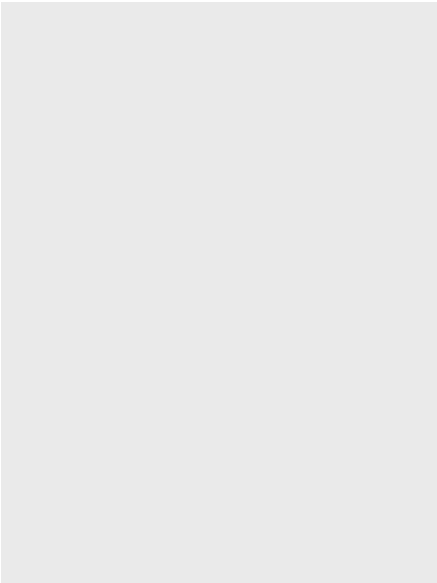
A Cultural Gifting Programme won't solve every problem in our art ecosystem, but it is a necessary and overdue step in developing a well-functioning, thoughtful nation. It will empower institutions to collect, collectors to give and audiences to have access to art that challenges, reflects and expands their understanding of the world.

Dan du Bern is director and co-owner of Sumer Fine Art, a commercial gallery in central Auckland, opened in mid-2023. The gallery represents artists from across Oceania and beyond. An inaugural graduate of Massey College of Creative Arts, Wellington, Dan has lived and worked in both Melbourne and London, and has collaborated with galleries across Europe, North America and Asia.



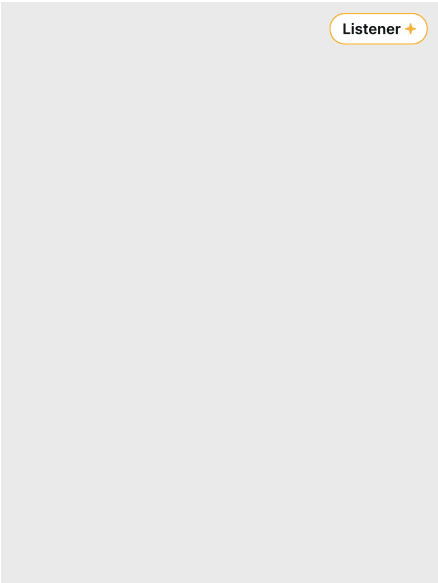
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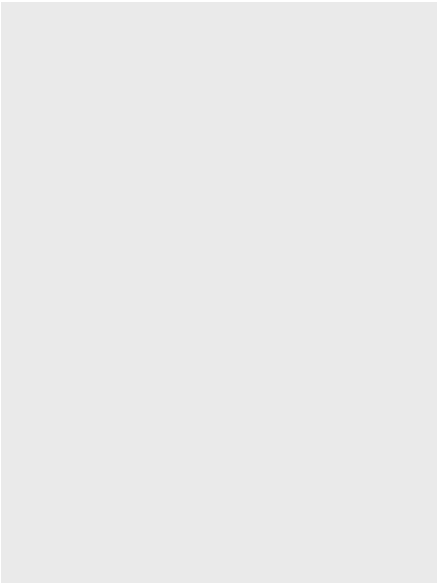
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