



LET'S TALK ART:

Listening to Yukon artists and art supporters

A report from the

Yukon Prize for Visual Arts Committee

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One of the core values of the Yukon Prize for Visual Arts is to be artist-centred. We want to make choices that benefit the careers of Yukon visual artists and encourage their creative confidence. This requires listening to artists and understanding what they need to develop and advance their careers in art.

To give life to these values, the Yukon Prize committee organized an opportunity for artists and art-lovers to come together to discuss their aspirations for themselves and for visual arts in the Yukon as a whole.

This report describes what we did, what we heard, and what we will do with the advice we received.

What we did

We invited artists, appreciators, art advisors and administrators to gather at the Gold Rush Inn in Whitehorse on Wednesday evening, May 24, to discuss the current state of the Yukon visual arts scene. The invitation was extended through social media, supplemented by posters distributed at arts-friendly locations in Whitehorse.

Approximately 25 people attended, representing a variety of roles in the Yukon visual arts world, including artists, arts administrators and art teachers. The session was led by Jacob Zimmer, Artistic Director of the Nakai Theatre and a professional facilitator. In addition, two individuals asked to be involved but could not attend in person, so each was interviewed by telephone.

A session like this is essentially a focus group. It produces qualitative insights into what participants are thinking. It asks open-ended questions, so the responses indicate what is most important for each participant. It encourages the participants to interact and to respond to each others' thinking.

Because it is based on focus group research, this report does not claim to be statistically representative of the entire visual arts community in the Yukon. One limitation is that, because the session was held in person in Whitehorse, communities other than Whitehorse were underrepresented. Nevertheless, the total number of participants (29) represents a substantial portion of the Yukon visual arts community.

What we heard: A summary

The overall message we heard was:

Participants are looking for ways to build connections that will help visual artists thrive and will make visual arts an essential part of the Yukon's economic and social future.

Participants have ambitious visions of how visual arts could contribute more to the quality of life of all Yukoners, and they recognize these visions cannot be achieved by artists acting alone.

Places to make art

Artists repeatedly raised the problem of finding suitable studio space at an affordable rent. This was the most common request we heard. Artists need space to work on current projects and store art supplies and works that have not yet sold. Finding studio space is generally done by word-of-mouth. Rents have increased because of inflation and the general rise in real estate prices. Property owners may not be aware that their vacant spaces – such in a commercial building or warehouse – could be attractive as a studio. Shared studios could make good use of larger spaces and build connections among artists. Several artists said they would value more spaces to facilitate connection and collaboration.

What's needed: People who know how to connect artists with owners of suitable studio space.

Places to display and sell art

Artists want their work to be seen. They said they appreciate the public, co-operative and private for-profit spaces now available for showing art. Some wanted to see more spaces downtown where art could be sold and shown.

Some envisaged a community where art would be more visible in people's everyday activities. This could involve permanent installations such as street art or a sculpture garden, or temporary pop-up galleries using space that is temporarily vacant (such as retail or office space that is awaiting a new tenant). Partnerships between business and artists might be one route to making creative use of space.

There were also suggestions for visual arts events that are open to the community, such as collaborations to make art outdoors, or an international festival to create art.

What's needed: People with the vision and resources to make art more visible in the community, through permanent or temporary installations, part and visual arts events.

Developing the business of art

Many artists want to make a business from their art. They recognize that the skills to run a business are different from the skills to create art. They want to sell their art through a gallery, or directly to collectors, or both. Skills required may include marketing, negotiating contracts with agents, e-commerce, transportation, and more. Artists need to either acquire these skills or partner with others who can supply these skills. Several participants also saw an opportunity for a retailer to sell a fuller range of art supplies than is currently available.

Several participants noted the lack of connection between artists and people in other parts of the business community. Some specifically mentioned that they would like to see more connections between artists and the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce.

What's needed: People who can bring together artists and business people in productive discussions that lead to joint ventures and opportunities to supply goods and services to artists.

Developing art as part of the Yukon's tourism strategy

Some participants had a vision of marketing the Yukon as a cultural centre with an active gallery scene and arts events, to complement the long-standing promotion of the Yukon as a destination for wilderness tourism. Some specifically mentioned that they would like to see more connections between artists and TIA Yukon.

What's needed: People who can develop and promote tourism packages and promotions that feature arts activities and events.

Developing an export strategy for Yukon art

Some participants advocated for better ways of marketing Yukon art and selling it to collectors outside the Yukon. Yukon art has limited visibility in the national arts media and is expensive to transport and show. Only a few Yukon artists are represented by a gallery in southern Canada.

What's needed: People with resources and marketing experience to assess and carry out a plan for exporting Yukon art

Building and sharing artists' skills

Many participants had suggestions for areas where they would like to gain additional skills or where artists might want to share skills. Topics include how to navigate funding programs and how to sell art via e-commerce. Participants acknowledged the work YG has done to offer online instruction on these and other topics, but there is a continuous appetite for learning more.

There were also comments that artists would like more in-person instruction, workshops, mentorship opportunities and events. Creating art is typically a solitary activity, and artists appreciate the informal learning and networking that happens at in-person events.

Several participants noted the important role of art instruction in elementary and secondary education as a way of developing talent and building understanding of visual arts.

What's needed: People who can develop and fund a regular curriculum of courses and workshops where artists can learn how to develop skills, including skills in how to make a living from art.

What's next?

We promised participants that we would write a report that summarizes what we heard and circulate it widely in the Yukon arts community.

Some of the advice we received is directly relevant to the mission of the Yukon Prize for Visual Arts.

- In planning the 2023 Yukon Prize Celebration Weekend and related events, we especially want to consider the participants' advice with respect to options for bringing artists together in person, having sessions where arts professionals can learn from one another, and hosting events that will attract people from the community as a whole.
- The Yukon Prize has been an advocate for showing and selling Yukon art to people from outside the Yukon, through a cultural tourism strategy and an export strategy; the advice from participants in this session encourages us to continue this advocacy.

Much of the advice from participants is pertinent to other actors in the visual arts community.

- We are circulating this report for the consideration of the Yukon Government, the City of Whitehorse, the Tourism Industry Association of the Yukon, the Whitehorse Chamber of Commerce and individual businesses and not-for-profits that may have a role.
- We encourage each of them to consider this report in their planning.