

A pop-up art gallery in the village — born of the Covid years

A vacant shopfront, three local artists, and eleven Covid-era months. The Pop Up Gallery grew into a social enterprise of 71 artist contributors and returned more than \$90,000 in sales, directly to the artists.

Short-form summary

For use in project listings, newsletter blurbs, or council briefings.

A socially fruitful venture born of the Covid period. In mid-2020, when a vacant shop in the Smiths Lake village commercial strip became available, a small group of local artists opened a pop-up gallery with the support of the shop owners, who agreed to a nominal rent while seeking a replacement commercial tenant. The gallery opened on 25 July 2020 with works by three local artists, on a co-operative basis. Within days, previously unknown local visual artists began arriving — to meet, to contribute, and to ask whether they too might exhibit. Over the eleven months that followed, the gallery developed a steady following among locals and visitors who purchased artworks, crafts and small gift lines, returning over \$90,000 directly to the participating artists on a nil-commission basis. By the time it closed on 30 May 2021, the pop-up had grown into a social enterprise of 71 local arts contributors and had given the village a cultural identity it had not previously seen of itself.

When the leaseholder of a shop in the Smiths Lake village commercial strip closed the business in mid-2020 to work from home — itself a quietly characteristic Covid-era shift — a small group of local artists saw in the vacant premises an opportunity that the moment seemed to call for. The shop owners, supportive of the idea and patient about finding a new commercial tenant, agreed to a nominal rent. On 25 July 2020 the doors opened on a minimalist, elegant presentation of works by three local artists, on a co-operative basis.



What followed surprised everyone involved.

Within the first weeks, previously unknown local visual artists began arriving at the gallery — to meet, to talk, and to ask whether they too might exhibit. The pop-up had touched something the village had not realised was there. Over the eleven months that followed, the gallery developed a steady following among locals and the holiday-makers who continued to reach Smiths Lake under the shifting Covid travel rules of late 2020 and early 2021. Visitors came not only to look but to buy. Works sold. Crafts and small gift lines found homes. Sales over the eleven months totalled more than \$90,000, all of which went directly to the artists on a nil-commission basis.

A minimalist three-artist gallery had become something else.

The keen interest of other artists, the consistent patronage of locals and visitors, and the particular sensitivity of the period — months in which the small pleasures of a village shopfront mattered more than they would in ordinary times — prompted a change of intention. The gallery opened its walls to many more contributors, accomplished and developing alike, responding to what had become an obvious community need: for recognition as an arts contributor, for an arts venue in the village, and for an opportunity to participate.

By early 2021 the gallery had grown into a social enterprise involving 71 local arts contributors. Monthly after-hours “meet the artist” evenings brought the community in to talk with the makers. Desk and presentation duties were shared on an entirely voluntary basis.



The closing chapter

The evident community support and enthusiastic patronage suggested that the pop-up might endure indefinitely — and may, in fact, have been deterring commercial offers on the premises. The shop owner, while pleased and supportive of the gallery's success, eventually sought through their agent a more commercial rental arrangement with the gallery participants, in the hope of retaining the gallery in place, even if not on a fully commercial basis.

The owner's request prompted a group discussion among the artists about formally structuring an arts co-operative beyond the initial patronage of the local initiators. An association was established to include the artists, but its leadership ultimately concluded that the group could not responsibly take on the financial risk of

a commercial lease and the consequential liabilities and costs of an ongoing tenancy. The association was disbanded. The gallery's last sale was recorded on 30 May 2021, and the doors closed shortly afterwards.

Some of the local artists transferred their memberships to the Forster gallery and continue to contribute and exhibit there.



What remains in Smiths Lake is the memory of an unlikely eleven months in which a vacant shop, a difficult moment, and the goodwill of a sympathetic landlord gave the village a cultural identity it had not previously seen of itself — surfaced a cohort of artists who discovered one another as colleagues, and demonstrated, for those who were paying attention, that the appetite for such a thing was here all along.

Smiths Lake Pop-Up Gallery — Key Facts

Opened	25 July 2020
Closed	30 May 2021
Duration	11 months
Founding artists	3
Total contributing artists	71
Monthly events	After-hours “meet the artist” evenings
Artist commission rate	Nil
Total sales returned to artists	Over \$90,000
Premises	Smiths Lake village commercial strip
Operating model	Volunteer-run; co-operative basis
Origin	Vacant shopfront, mid-2020

Outcome	Some artists continued at Forster gallery
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Sources: Smiths Lake Village community project — content supplied for Villagefirst. This is a living entry; the community is invited to contribute photographs, recollections, and further detail through the Villagefirst feedback form.