

Research Compass Sessions

Consolidated Reports

February-March 2025

Oliver Smith

February 2025

Oliver, it's so interesting to hear about how your research trajectory is evolving, particularly this intersection between traditional goldsmithing and medical device development. I have summarised some of my reflections and thoughts, which I hope may serve to support your thoughts and may assist you structuring a longer-term (3-5 year) research program for yourself.

KINETIC JEWELRY MECHANISMS

From our chat I've learnt that your research trajectory is opening up entirely new territory in how we understand and value the relationship between precious metals and the human body. Your work engages with a profound cultural paradox: We typically think of precious metals in jewellery as being explicitly about display -- designed to be seen, admired, and understood as markers of value and status. This external presentation of worth is deeply embedded in our cultural understanding, from engagement rings to family heirlooms. Yet some of the most valuable metal objects we might ever possess are designed to be completely hidden from view: our medical implants, joint replacements, and internal devices.

The potential of this work extends well beyond technical innovation. As populations age and medical implants become increasingly common, your work offers a timely critique of how we assign value to different forms of bodily enhancement. By applying traditional goldsmithing 'craft' to artworks that reference or reimagine medical devices, you're challenging the cultural hierarchy between visible adornment and invisible necessity. This investigation feels particularly relevant given contemporary discussions around human enhancement, medical accessibility, and the commercialisation of "wellness". Your approach suggests new ways of understanding the 'precious' in relation to the body -- where value might be measured not in carats but in restored mobility, where craft serves not display but function, and where the hidden becomes worthy of the same material excellence as the seen.

INDUSTRY PARTNERSHIPS

Through your combination of exhibition work, material research, and potential industry collaboration, you could develop a new visual and material 'language' for understanding the relationship between precious metals and the body. Your artistic practice could help bridge

the gap between clinical and cultural understanding of medical devices. By creating works that make internal medical devices visible and 'valuable', you could help patients better understand and accept these interventions.

Consider how your artistic practice could transform the way people understand and relate to medical devices. Currently, most people's experience with internal medical devices is primarily through technical diagrams, X-rays, and perhaps plastic models in doctors' offices. These clinical representations, while accurate, often fail to capture the profound relationship between these devices and the human experience of having them.

Your work, through the lens of G&S expertise, could tell a different story. By applying the cultural language of precious metals and jewellery -- materials and techniques that humans have used for millennia to mark significant life moments and relationships -- you could help reframe how we think about medical implants. (ie Think about how engagement rings are not just metal and stones, but carry deep cultural meaning about commitment and transformation.) Similarly, your work could help people understand medical devices not just as functional objects, but as precious artifacts that mark significant transformations in people's lives. A hip replacement isn't just a mechanical joint -- it's a precious object that returns freedom of movement, independence, and quality of life to its recipient.

RESEARCH LEADERSHIP

Your recent international successes - exhibiting at the Silver Triennial in Hanau for example - have positioned you perfectly to take on the leadership role in Australian gold and silversmithing, as you suggested. A major curated exhibition could be an ideal vehicle to formally establish this position. By taking the curatorial lead on a significant national (touring) exhibition, you would be doing more than just organising a show - you would be actively shaping the narrative of contemporary Australian metalwork practice.

The intergenerational aspect of your proposed exhibition - bringing together established artists with emerging talents - would position you as a bridge-builder in the field. This is particularly significant given what you've observed about the dissipation of traditional knowledge in craft practice. By creating dialogue between generations of practitioners, you would be taking an active role in preserving and evolving these crucial traditions. Your suggestion to include student work alongside established artists is great, positioning you not just as a curator but as a mentor figure in the field.

A potential touring component would extend your influence nationally, allowing you to build relationships with institutions and practitioners across the country. A well-produced catalogue would further support this, creating a lasting document of your curatorial vision and contribution to the field. This exhibition could serve as a platform for articulating your vision for the future of Australian gold and silversmithing - how traditional craft practices can engage with contemporary concerns, and how the field might evolve in coming decades.

Also, I noticed there's just been a call out for the first round of internal SACE funding:

SACE will be providing funding support through two funds: Mobility and Engagement Fund and Research Grant Development & Support Fund. Application forms and guidelines will be sent out when the scheme opens (due March 31st).

As I mentioned, I'd love to touch base down the line (around mid year) to see if there's any particular way I might be able to support you further, and/or please feel free to reach out to me any time.

Very best, Sanné

Jane Gavan

March 2025

Hi Jane,

Thanks so much for chatting this morning. I've summarised my thoughts -- a sort of snap shot of what we were chatting about. I've formatted this into the framework I've been using to guide these sessions. It's just a start to building a richer, more meaningful understanding of your research profile. At the bottom I've included some points for further discussion and development. I'd love to pick this up with you when you're ready. Presumably around July.

I hope to see you IRL sometime soon!

Very best, xS.

What's currently energising you in your research? / What aspects of your research would you like to explore or develop further?

- Leading UNESCO grant development (\$1M USD)
- Museum development projects in Vietnam
- Cross-cultural capacity building initiatives

Key Achievements from Past Year:

- New office opening in Sydney/Saigon (July)
- Secured UNESCO funding commitment
- Established partnerships with Vietnamese cultural institutions

Current Research Landscape

Potential discussion points:

- UNESCO grant writing (\$1M, 5-year span)
- Two major exhibitions: Food and War (August); Coco Design (November, tentative) (I can't recall what this is called -- Coco??)
- Cultural development workshops
- Government policy engagement

Strategic Connections

Explore relevant possibilities:

- Power Institute collaboration (meeting scheduled February) What was the name of your contact person? I cannot recall.
- University of Sydney fine art (theory dept?)
- UNESCO creative industries partnerships
- Vietnamese government cultural ministry

Post-Session Documentation

Action Points for Mestrom:

1. Support ARC Linkage development (second half of year)
2. Help frame Australian benefits narrative
3. Facilitate internal SCA connections (how can I support Jane to clarify the significance of her research to the SCA/SACE research ecology?)

Action Points for Gavan:

1. Meet with Power Institute contact
2. Develop government briefing papers
3. Consolidate current projects before expansion (step back for 6 months to consolidate yourself and regain energy)

Further conversation:

In the second half of the year let's meet again to discuss potential ARC linkage:

Potential research outcomes for ARC linkage:

1. Policy change at government level for museum curation
2. Establish curator positions in major Vietnamese museums
3. Develop replicable cultural competency framework for other developing East Asian countries (I believe this is the central 'hook' in the research, that can be further developed).

Questions to contemplate when developing ARC framework:

1. Why are you uniquely positioned to do this work
 2. Why there is urgency to do this work now
 3. What the specific benefits to Australia would be in developing this framework in Vietnam
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Andrew Sully

February 2025

Hi Andrew,

Thanks for meeting this morning!

I've mapped out a summary of our meeting, with some suggestions for next-steps. As you can see down the bottom, it'd be great to have a follow up 'Detailed ARC strategy session' when you return to Au. Feel free to book a time with me here: [Book time with Sanne Mestrom: Sanné Mestrom's availability for meetings](#)

Very best, Sanné

Current Projects/Trajectories

1. Timor-Leste Projects:
 - Female resistance fighters documentary
 - Museum exhibit development
 - Online curriculum component
2. Alternative Housing Project:
 - Documentary development (early stages)
 - Potential Victorian Department funding
 - A short form documentary could form a pilot study for a larger project

Obstacles/Challenges

- Difficulty engaging Sydney architecture academics
- Funding uncertainty

Resources/Support Needed

- Research funding (~\$10,000 for short film)
- Grant writing support

Funding Opportunities

- DFAT grant (pending March)
- Potential ARC Discovery Project (???)
- Script/development funding
- Victorian Department funding

Action Points

For Research Facilitator:

- Schedule 1-hour follow-up meeting
- Share Research mentoring opportunities

- Assist with ARC strategy development

For Academic:

- Begin literature review on housing research as a project-scoping exercise
- Develop international networks
- Consider ARC application timeline

Timeline

- Schedule detailed ARC strategy session Next meeting: Early morning (9:00/9:30 AM) after return
- DFAT grant outcome: March
- Conference: July

Follow-up Framework: Detailed ARC strategy session

- Review housing project specifics
- Discuss research gap identification
- Plan network development strategy

Strategic Connections

- Timor-Leste university partners
 - Victorian Department of Planning and Transport
 - European housing networks
 - Architecture/Urban Planning departments
 - International housing researchers
 - Documentary funding bodies
 - Government departments
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Stuart Baily

March 2025

Exhibition concept provided by Stuart:

The exhibition is inspired by the strident approach of extreme music genres such as Black Metal, Grindcore, Death Metal and Thrash Metal. This encompasses reflections on and responses to the music, performance tropes and the visual language of these subcultures. I am interested in presenting a range of artworks that tackle the breadth and complexity of expression in extreme music and its social and political resonance. Political expression within these musical subgenres, ranges from the overt and direct, to the abstract and secretive. Expressions of rage, frustration, terror, hopelessness and melancholy seem to have renewed relevance in the contemporary moment, but the layers of expression embodied in these genres can be cloaked, full of irony, or even denied. This presents a wealth of issues for contemporary artists to reflect upon and critique.

Artists in the exhibition might be fans, they might aim to expand and build on the tropes of a subculture, or they may aim to critique genres and recontextualise them within the space of the gallery. The exhibition will include images, objects and importantly a schedule of live performances.

My response:

Dear Stuart,

Following our conversation about your upcoming SCA Gallery exhibition on extreme music subcultures, I wanted to share some thoughts about how your project could make a significant contribution to contemporary cultural discourse.

Your curatorial approach -- combining gallery works with live performances, examining genre tropes critically, and exploring different modes of political expression -- offers a sophisticated framework for understanding how subcultures maintain political agency in our current moment. This feels particularly urgent when considered alongside the current landscape of claimed "subversion" in digital spaces.

I want to highlight a parallel that makes your project especially relevant: figures like Andrew Tate and Joe Rogan position themselves as outsiders speaking truth to power, co-opting the language and posture of counterculture. However, their "resistance" ultimately reinforces existing power structures through algorithmic amplification, monetisation of manufactured outrage, and parasocial relationships masquerading as community. Their performance of authenticity is highly commercialised, and their "alternative" viewpoints often reinforce regressive ideologies.

Your exhibition offers a genuine alternative to this commodified resistance. Where social media figures claim to be "underground" while chasing viral attention, your project demonstrates how extreme music subcultures maintain authentic spaces for resistance through:

- Multi-layered artistic expression that resists easy consumption
- Physical gatherings that build real rather than parasocial relationships
- Complex political positions that avoid reactionary simplification
- Critical self-reflection rather than performative opposition

What strikes me as particularly compelling is how your exhibition demonstrates layered forms of resistance:

The historical evolution from 90s "edgelord" sensationalism to more complex contemporary engagement shows how the subculture learned from its own history, developing sophisticated strategies while maintaining its political edge. Unlike the inflammatory rhetoric of social media personalities, these communities have moved beyond simple provocation while retaining their critical force.

The example of Richard's work examining "desire and objectification of men through the lens of his fandom" demonstrates how these scenes can turn a critical lens on themselves. This kind of self-reflection shows how subcultural spaces can engage with complex issues like masculinity and power without falling into reactionary positions.

Looking forward, to strengthen these aspects in the exhibition, you might consider:

- Creating clear curatorial framing that highlights these layered meanings
- Documenting how artists transform subcultural strategies into gallery contexts
- Demonstrating how political messages operate differently across contexts
- Making explicit the contrast with simplified social media discourse

This framework positions your project not just as documentation of a scene, but as an urgent critique of commodified resistance and an exploration of how communities maintain sophisticated political dialogue in an age of polarisation.

This framework would position the project not just as a documentation of a subculture, but as an examination of how communities maintain complex political and artistic dialogues outside mainstream channels - a particularly relevant question in our current cultural moment.

I definitely think this SCA project could be delivered as an iterative project across states in Australia. The iterative nature of the proposed exhibition plan (moving between different cities) could allow you to build a comparative study of how these dynamics play out in different contexts, strengthening both the theoretical and practical aspects of the research. It would also position you as a leader in this specific area of research, gathering artists, voices, insights as the project moves across Australia.

I'd be very interested in discussing how these ideas might inform your curatorial approach while staying true to the artistic and musical communities you're working with. This framework could also strengthen future funding applications and help position the project for touring to other institutions.

Rebecca Beardmore

February 2025

Hi Bec,

Thanks for our discussion yesterday. Our conversation revealed some fascinating threads in your research that I believe could develop into something quite significant. While the immediate goal is to shape these ideas for your conference proposal, I see this as a potential foundation for deeper research, hopefully even leading to a PhD project.

I've taken some time to reflect on our discussion and have organised my thoughts below. My hope is that these notes might help you frame your proposal in a way that authentically represents your research interests while meeting the conference theme. What particularly struck me was how you described landscape in your work - not as a subject matter per se, but as a "carrier" or "vehicle" for exploring deeper ideas. I think this is crucial: landscape functions in your work as a universal space for investigating relationships between language, vision, and space.

Moreover, your focus on materiality through print processes offers a compelling connection to the conference's 'landscape and place' theme. The act of converting an 'image' into a material object through print is fundamentally about establishing place - it physically anchors the viewer in a specific moment, location, and duration. This material engagement with place sets your work apart from more traditional landscape approaches.

Rather than trying to adapt your research to fit conventional landscape discourse, I believe you could develop this distinctive perspective into something quite powerful.

Here are my notes:

UNDERSTANDING YOUR RESEARCH EVOLUTION

Core Foundation

Your research has consistently explored the relationship between text, image, and materiality. This through-line becomes particularly relevant when we consider contemporary questions about AI and image generation.

Early Work: Text and Description

Your early work focused heavily on text-based explorations - creating fields of text that described unseen images. This approach is fascinating because it seems to prefigure current AI image generation processes. Both your work and AI use text descriptions to generate or evoke images, though through fundamentally different means.

Evolution of Subject Matter

The progression from portraits to landscapes in your work reveals that subject matter was never the primary focus. Instead, landscape became a universal space to explore deeper relationships between language, vision, and space. As you noted, "anyone looking at a work, their head fills the space."

Print and Photographic Discourse

Your argument about print being the overlooked foundation of photographic discourse is particularly compelling. While theoretical discussions focus on photography, you identify that the actual manifestation and circulation of images happens through print. This gap in critical discourse - between how we theorise photography and the material processes that make images accessible - becomes especially relevant as we grapple with AI-generated imagery.

POTENTIAL CONNECTIONS TO AI

Material vs Virtual Processes

Your focus on print's materiality offers an intriguing counterpoint to AI's virtual image generation. While both systems translate text into images, they do so through fundamentally different material (or immaterial) processes. This contrast could provide rich territory for exploration.

Your Unique Contribution

Your deep understanding of how material processes shape our relationship with images could offer valuable insights to the AI conversation. While AI generates images virtually from text, your work explores how physical print processes mediate between description and image, between language and materiality.

Future Research Directions

These themes suggest rich potential for exploring how traditional print processes might inform or critique our understanding of AI image generation, particularly around:

1. Questions of materiality
 2. The role of description
 3. The relationship between text and image
 4. The physical versus virtual manifestation of imagery
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Yvette Hamilton

March 2025

I wanted to follow up our Research Compass session with a detailed summary of our discussion and my advice for your career development. Before diving into the specifics, I need to emphasize something crucial we discussed: you're in a unique and time-sensitive position as a recent PhD graduate. The next five years represent a critical window of opportunity that won't come again.

As an Early Career Researcher (ECR), you have access to numerous opportunities specifically designed for academics within five years of PhD completion. These include prestigious fellowships like the DECRA, postdoctoral positions, and significant residencies like the Samstag scholarship. While these opportunities might seem far off right now, five years passes incredibly quickly, and once this window closes, the funding and development landscape changes dramatically. Many of these opportunities won't be available to you again, so it's crucial to make the most of this period.

This timing adds another layer of importance to your goal of transitioning from your current education-focused workload to a balanced 40-40-20 arrangement in two years' time. Not only will this transition support your career development, but it will position you to take advantage of these ECR opportunities while they're still available to you.

First, I want to acknowledge how fascinating your current work is: Your research linking photography to black holes, your artist residency at Linden Observatory, and your emerging focus on sustainable photographic practices shows a clear theoretical and practical trajectory, one that can form a really robust broader research program for yourself.

As you mentioned, while your current position allows for this transition after two years, it won't happen automatically - you'll need to prove why you need that 40% research time through evidence of high-level research output. To achieve this, as I emphasised in our discussion, I recommend you are very focused on how you utilise your current research day. I know from personal experience as a single parent how precious this time is - I have to pack so much into those school hours. Your situation with course development and getting used to Sydney's systems makes this even more crucial.

The SSSHARC collaboration you're developing with Alex Yuan and your colleagues is promising, but I want you to think bigger. Instead of viewing it as a single project, consider how it fits into a larger research narrative. Remember what I said about not letting colleagues just say "Oh, it'll lead to something" - you need to tell the situation what it's going to lead to.

Building Your Research Profile

Let me share how I've approached this in my own career. My own DECRA project, "Art Play Risk," wasn't just about public art, and therefore I'm not bound solely to fine art discourse - I deliberately developed it to connect with broader themes, issues and fields: urban planning, child development, and social sciences. This approach has led to numerous opportunities: running international symposia, conducting community engagement projects, and being

regularly contacted by media for expert commentary. Just last Friday, I was interviewed for a newspaper article about alternative forms of play in public spaces.

Which brings me to an important point about research in academia versus the art world. As I mentioned, we need to shift away from the artistic mindset of being open to the "whatever happens" approach. Academia is a meritocracy - if you put in strategic work, you will get results. It's not like the art world where success might depend on curatorial relationships.

SOME PRACTICAL TOOLS:

You were asking about the mind mapping tool I was using - Miro. I use this to visualise my entire research ecosystem. For instance, my current Discovery project proposal is mapped out showing:

1. Potential funding sources (marked in green for applied, white for potential)
2. Strategic alliances and external partners
3. Links to already-submitted seed-funding applications
4. Summaries of which aspects of the research were applied to each funding opportunity
5. Advisory committee members across art, sport, and urbanism
6. Strategic research activities, including how my recent symposium served both my DECRA and laid groundwork for the new project
7. Potential publications from each research activity

This visual approach helps me stay focused and see connections that might otherwise be missed. When I'm feeling lost in my project, I can return to this map and reorient myself.

The suggestion from your PhD examiner, Michelle Smith, to publish one of your chapters is an excellent opportunity. This kind of publication can form part of your evidence for the workload transition. Similarly, your work at the Linden Observatory and the sustainable photography project could be developed into significant research outputs.

FUNDING OPPORTUNITIES:

While we discussed the DECRA (which is incredibly competitive in visual arts) I want to emphasise that there are other pathways. The Discovery project I'm currently applying for includes funding for a postdoc position. These opportunities exist, though they're rare in our field, and often require looking beyond Australia.

Moving forward, to achieve your goals I would suggest you focus on evidencing research quality and reputation, external collaborations, and industry/community engagement. I've attached the FASS aspirational research benchmarks document for you - it provides clear targets for Level C academics.

1. I recommend starting your own Miro board to map out your research ecosystem. Begin with your current projects (SSSHARC collaboration, observatory work, sustainable photography) and map potential connections and outcomes.
2. Look carefully at where your PhD chapter could be published - this is an immediate opportunity for a significant output.
3. Start documenting everything - every collaboration, every research activity. You'll need this evidence when applying for the workload transition.

4. Consider applying for seed funding through the faculty - Lee Wallace might have suggestions about what's available.
5. Take full advantage of USyd's ECR support programs. The university offers several targeted development opportunities that could be invaluable for your career progression. These include structured writing retreats where you can focus on developing publications, professional development workshops tailored specifically for ECRs, and formal mentorship programs that pair you with senior academics in your field. These programs are designed precisely for academics at your career stage, and they can provide both practical support and important networking opportunities. I strongly encourage you to look closely at what's available through the university's ECR support framework - it's a fertile time for professional development, and these programs can help you make the most of your five-year ECR window.

I'm happy to continue our discussions as you develop these plans. As I mentioned, you can book time with me through the calendar link in my email signature. Remember, you're in a precious time period post-PhD with unique opportunities available. Let's make sure you're positioned to make the most of them!

Best regards, Sanné

P.S. I'll attach those FASS research benchmarks - they'll be crucial for your planning.

Vicky Browne

February 2025

Hi Vicky,

Thank you for meeting last week to discuss your research trajectory. I've been reflecting on our conversation and wanted to share some thoughts about developing your academic career at Sydney.

I understand that a 20% research workload allocation presents certain constraints, but I believe we can develop strategies to maximise its impact within the university context. The key might be finding ways to blend different aspects of your practice - your work with sculpture and sound, your curatorial achievements (like the successful SCA Gallery exhibition), and your engagement with art education. When these elements are woven together thoughtfully, they can create a compelling research narrative.

This idea of a research narrative is crucial in building a sustainable academic career. Think of it as the intellectual thread that connects your various activities - not to limit what you do, but to help others understand the deeper questions driving your work. A clear narrative makes your research more accessible to colleagues, more appealing to funding bodies, and more impactful within the academic community.

I can already see how this might work with your current projects. Your SCA Gallery exhibition, for instance, could be positioned not just as a standalone curatorial achievement, but as an exploration of [potential research focus]. This same framework could inform your upcoming VADEA conference presentation and even enrich your teaching diploma studies in 2025. Each activity becomes an opportunity to deepen your investigation of core research questions.

This approach would be particularly valuable as you prepare for your PhD in 2027. Instead of starting fresh, you'll have already built a body of work that naturally evolves into your doctoral research. This kind of strategic groundwork also strengthens your position for internal university funding opportunities.

Looking even further ahead, developing a strong research narrative now becomes particularly valuable for academic promotion opportunities in the next 5-10 years. When promotion committees evaluate applications, they look for evidence that an academic has made sustained and significant contributions to their field. A coherent research narrative helps demonstrate how your various projects, exhibitions, and teaching initiatives build upon each other to create meaningful impact in your area of expertise. Rather than seeing isolated achievements, the committee can understand how your work has systematically developed and advanced knowledge in your field. This is especially important in creative practice, where having a clear theoretical framework can help contextualise your artistic and curatorial work within academic discourse.

To help develop this narrative, we might consider:

1. What fundamental questions drive your practice across different media and contexts?

2. How does your work with sound and sculpture connect to your educational interests?
3. What unique perspective do you bring to contemporary art practice and pedagogy?
4. How might your curatorial experience shape your future research direction?

If you'd like to schedule another meeting to explore these ideas further, please reach out any time. I believe developing a clear research narrative now could really shape your approach to upcoming projects and strengthen your position within the FASS research community.

Hope to speak more soon.

Very best, S.