Safe & Sustainable Visual Arts Practice
Empowering Wood Buffalo Artists as Environmental Changemakers

Arts Council Wood Buffalo (ACWB) & SCALE-LeSAUT 2026

1. How Visual Arts Differ from Craft

While craft often focuses on functional objects and intimate material processes, visual arts — particularly sculpture and installation — frequently involve:

- Larger scale works
- Heavy materials
- Temporary exhibitions
- Freight shipping
- Fabrication shops
- Institutional venues
- Public art infrastructure
- International exhibition circuits

The environmental footprint in visual arts is often driven by:

- Shipping and crating
- Single-use exhibition builds
- Heavy substrates
- Solvent-based paints and finishes
- Energy-intensive galleries
- Temporary installation materials

The scale and circulation of the work, not just the studio process, determine impact.

2. Why Sustainability Looks Different in the North

Northern and remote visual arts contexts involve:

- Long shipping distances
- Limited fabrication infrastructure
- High freight costs
- Seasonal weather constraints
- Limited hazardous waste services
- High heating loads in studio and gallery spaces

- Wildfire smoke affecting ventilation

Shipping and building often exceed studio energy use.

Sustainability must address both material choice and exhibition systems.

3. Studio Practice & Material Impact

Visual artists work across a wide range of materials:

- Oil and acrylic paints
- Solvents and mediums
- Plaster and concrete
- Resins and epoxies
- Steel and aluminium
- Foam, MDF, plywood
- Found and industrial materials

Many of these carry toxicity or high embodied carbon.

Studio Health & Exposure

Exposure pathways include:

- Solvent inhalation
- Resin off-gassing
- Sanding dust
- Silica from plaster and concrete
- Heavy metal pigments

Northern winters increase recirculated indoor exposure.

Safer Practices

- Retain and review Safety Data Sheets (SDS)
- Improve ventilation during solvent use
- Use low-VOC alternatives where feasible
- Wet-sand instead of dry-sand
- Avoid aerosolized finishes
- Separate food and studio space

Resource
• CCOHS – WHMIS Overview

Protecting artist health is long-term sustainability.

Further reading
• CCOHS – WHMIS (GHS) Overview
• Environmental Defence – Healthy Artist Guide to a Less Toxic Studio

4. Paints, Resins & Chemical Use

Oil painting and resin-based practices can involve:

- Turpentine and mineral spirits
- Synthetic varnishes
- Epoxy systems
- Hardening agents
- Aerosol fixatives

Lower-Impact Substitutions

- Water-mixable oils
- Citrus-based solvents
- Low-VOC acrylic mediums
- Avoid unnecessary resin encapsulation
- Reduce aerosol fixatives

Never pour solvents or resin waste into drains.

Further reading
• Natural Pigments – Safer Solvents for Oil Painting

5. Sculpture & Embodied Carbon

Sculpture and installation frequently rely on:

- Steel
- Concrete
- MDF
- Foam
- Plastics

- Large timber builds

These materials carry high embodied carbon.

Reduce Material Impact

- Design for disassembly
- Use mechanical fasteners
- Prioritize reclaimed materials
- Minimize concrete where possible
- Avoid excessive MDF
- Share fabrication resources regionally

Large-scale work demands large-scale planning.

Further reading
• Architecture 2030 – The Embodied Carbon Problem
• Ellen MacArthur Foundation – Circular Economy Overview

6. Installation & Temporary Exhibitions

Temporary exhibitions often generate:

- Single-use walls
- Vinyl graphics
- Custom crates
- Foam packing
- Short-term builds

Strike often equals landfill.

Sustainable Exhibition Strategies

- Modular wall systems
- Reusable plinths
- Local fabrication rather than shipping
- Reusable crating
- Shared regional equipment inventories
- Plan deinstallation pathways in advance

Exhibition design should include end-of-life planning.

Further reading
• SCALE-LeSAUT – SAGE: Sustainable Arts & Green Ecosystems Toolkit Sustainability

7. Shipping & Crating

Freight is often the largest emission source in visual arts.

Impact areas include:

- Air freight for exhibitions
- International shipping
- Custom-built crates
- Heavy packaging materials

Reduce Shipping Emissions

- Consolidate shipments
- Avoid rush air freight
- Exhibit regionally where possible
- Use digital documentation instead of shipping small works
- Share crates between institutions

Resource
• Gallery Climate Coalition – Shipping Guidance
Shipping strategy is climate strategy.

Further reading
• Gallery Climate Coalition – Packaging Guidance

8. Galleries & Energy Use

Northern galleries face high heating loads.

Energy-intensive components include:

- Track lighting
- Climate control systems
- HVAC
- Standby equipment

Reduce Energy Demand

- Switch to LED lighting
- Reduce lighting intensity where appropriate
- Use timed systems
- Close unused gallery areas
- Monitor temperature tolerances realistically

Perfect climate control is often energy-intensive.
Balance preservation with sustainability.

Resource
• Natural Resources Canada – Energy Efficiency

Further reading
• Gallery Climate Coalition – Our Tools (Carbon Calculator)

9. Public Art & Outdoor Installations

Public art introduces additional environmental considerations:

- Concrete foundations
- Heavy equipment
- Long-term maintenance
- Transportation of large components

Lower-Impact Public Art

- Reduce foundation scale where possible
- Use local fabrication
- Design for longevity
- Avoid high-maintenance materials
- Consider lifecycle impact during proposal stage

Public art remains in place for decades.
Material choices have long timelines.

10. Waste & Disposal in Remote Contexts

Hazardous waste infrastructure may be limited in northern regions.

Never:

- Dispose of solvents in drains
- Discard resin waste in regular garbage
- Burn treated wood

Instead:

- Seal and label chemical waste
- Use municipal hazardous waste programs
- Coordinate disposal with other artists
- Reduce toxic inputs upstream

Upstream reduction is the most effective strategy.

Further reading
• Environment & Climate Change Canada – Hazardous Waste
• Alberta Environment – Hazardous Waste
• Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo – Waste Services

11. Digital & Media-Integrated Installations

Contemporary visual art often includes:

- Projection systems
- Monitors
- Servers
- Interactive hardware

Impacts include:

- Energy use
- Rare mineral extraction
- E-waste

Sustainable Digital Installation

- Turn off equipment when not in use

- Avoid continuous idle projections
- Repair rather than replace hardware
- Reuse cables and components
- Dispose of electronics responsibly

Digital does not mean low impact.

Further reading
• e-Stewards – Find a Certified Electronics Recycler

12. Land, Extraction & Cultural Accountability

Visual artists in northern regions frequently work with:

- Industrial remnants
- Landscape materials
- Extraction-site references

Responsible practice includes:

- Avoiding harmful site disturbance
- Ethical material sourcing
- Respecting Indigenous land protocols
- Consultation when working with culturally significant sites

Environmental practice must be relational.

13. Scale & Intention

Visual arts culture can incentivize:

- Monumentality
- International circulation
- High-production spectacle

Consider:

- Is scale proportionate to purpose?
- Can work circulate regionally instead of internationally?
- Can installations be lighter, modular, or reusable?
- Can documentation replace freight?

Scale is an environmental decision.

14. Institutional & Curatorial Practice

Galleries and artist-run centres can:

- Track shipping distances
- Establish crate-sharing systems
- Include sustainability in exhibition briefs
- Develop green exhibition policies
- Share fabrication inventories regionally

Curatorial decisions influence material flows.

Further reading
• Gallery Climate Coalition – Resources & Guidelines
• albert – Carbon Calculator & Certification Toolkit (BAFTA)

Closing

Safe and sustainable visual arts practice in northern and remote regions requires:

- Attention to embodied carbon
- Freight reduction strategies
- Health-conscious material use
- Reusable exhibition systems
- Institutional collaboration
- Respect for land and place

Visual art is powerful precisely because of its material presence.

That material presence carries responsibility.