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Powerhouse slammed over Kylie Kwong's new $440,000 ambassador role



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(With Linda Morris and David Barwell)

Celebrity chef Kylie Kwong has been handed a controversial new ambassador role worth almost half a million dollars by the Powerhouse Museum, just a month after it confirmed her tenure was over.

The appointment has sparked anger within the arts sector as the beleaguered museum is under scrutiny for overspending and grappling with an executive procurement investigation that has been referred to the Independent Commission Against Corruption.

A contentious $2.6 million "Associates" program that included Kwong and eight other creative identities hired by the Powerhouse was terminated on June 30. "Following the conclusion of the program, Associates will not be given continuing roles," then-chief executive Lisa Havilah told the *Herald* on June 4.



Chef Kylie Kwong and Lisa Havilah when they worked together at Carriageworks, posted in 2019. FACEBOOK

However, a NSW government contract notice published on October 3 reveals that one month after the program's end date, Kwong was awarded the new role of Powerhouse's culinary industry leader/ambassador in a two-year deal worth $440,000 of public money.

This role, which is believed to be part-time, does not involve catering or the operation of food venues.



Kylie Kwong in a photo with friends and colleagues including Lisa Havilah (front centre) posted to mark the final service of her restaurant Billy Kwong in 2019. FACEBOOK

Havilah stood aside from her chief executive position on August 27, pending a departmental investigation into "governance and procurement practices". The shock move came just 72 days before the billion-dollar Parramatta museum was due to open.

But Kwong's ambassador contract was effective from August 1. The pair have a long-running creative partnership, with Havilah – in her previous role as director of Carriageworks – inviting Kwong to curate the Redfern venue's Night Market from 2017 to 2019. Kwong has described Havilah on social media as her "great mentor". The *Herald* is not suggesting either person acted improperly.

The Powerhouse refused to be drawn on who at the museum approved the ambassador contract, with a spokesperson saying: "The contract was awarded through an open request for quote process advertised on Buy NSW, in line with the NSW Procurement Policy Framework, and was approved under the Powerhouse's financial delegations."

Invitations have gone out for Powerhouse Parramatta's November 6 previews before its long-awaited public opening the following day.

Kwong's lucrative appointment comes at a sensitive time, following revelations of a $70 million spending spree by the museum in the lead-up to its opening and an admission from Treasury Secretary Michael Coutts-Trotter that he was concerned by its overspend and work was under way to help find ways "for the institution to live within its budget".

The contract was greeted with dismay by the Public Service Association (PSA) of NSW, which represents workers at the Powerhouse and other cultural institutions. A salary of $220,000 is categorised as executive level in the NSW public service.

"We have been raising concerns with the minister [Arts Minister John Graham] for years about expenditure of the Powerhouse Parramatta site and engagement of consultants – both their necessity and their cost," PSA assistant secretary Troy Wright said.

"The release of this new contract will only confirm our members' concerns that the new museum is transforming into an entertainment precinct and not a museum at all."

Wright said the museum's operating model was "completely incongruous" with the Minns government's efforts to cut public expenditure on consultants.

The Associates program – which included artist Agatha Gothe-Snape, photographer Zan Wimberley and former cookbook publisher Julie Gibbs – cost $2.6 million over five years. The museum has refused to reveal how much each associate received.

Former Powerhouse trustee Leo Schofield is concerned with the emphasis on food, pointing out it is the museum of applied arts and sciences. “I think it’s entirely inappropriate that the Powerhouse has concerned itself to this extent with food,” he said. “By no stretch of the imagination can culinary pursuits be seen as part of the collection of significant objects in arts or science.”



(Left to right) Julie Gibbs, Kate Gibbs, Guy Grossi, Lisa Havilah, Neil Perry, Louise Keats, Suzanne Gibbs, Peter Gilmore and Kylie Kwong, gathered to celebrate the Powerhouse’s announcement of the Australian Culinary Archive in 2020. Louie Douvis

Gibbs, who in a previous role signed wellness influencer Belle Gibson to write a cookbook that was pulled when she was subsequently exposed as a cancer fraud, is also continuing to work at the Powerhouse, with her culinary archive adviser contract expiring in July next year.

In a statement to the *Herald*, the Powerhouse said the Associates program was specifically tasked with developing programs for the Parramatta museum and confirmed this was “now complete”.

Kwong’s contract would focus on “industry engagement, participation in public programming and advocacy”.“The public will benefit from Ms Kwong’s extensive experience and professional industry standing as she contributes to the design and delivery of public programs, including workshops, masterclasses, industry forums and food experiences for Powerhouse Parramatta,” a spokesperson said.

Sydney restaurateur Simon Sandall will lead operations of the museum’s cafe, restaurant and bar. Procurement records show another consultancy contract worth more than $200,000 was issued to an advisory group to “support the successful operational readiness” of commercial food and beverage offerings. Kwong and Havilah did not respond to requests for comment.