

Senior Artwise

Visual Arts 11–12

SECOND EDITION

Glenis Israel



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Artwork on cover:
Jonathan Jones
untitled (the tyranny of distance) 2008
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney

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About Senior Artwise

The selection of artworks in this book can be explored by theme, as suggested in the chapter titles, or by an alternative group of artists — for example:

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Throughout the book, colour coding and icons indicate key syllabus concepts and direct students to other resources.

eBookPLUS icon refers students to eLessons and weblinks.

Jonathan Jones

(b. 1978, Indigenous Australian)

Issues/interests: abstraction, spatial relations using lights to create Aboriginal motifs and links with the landscape, a sense of being part of a community

Form: sculpture

Frame: Postmodern — Underlying the formal aspects of his work (repetition and patterning), contemporary technology is used to restate Indigenous pattern making.

Conceptual Framework: The audience becomes involved in the artwork through its large scale and use of light. In these works Jones interprets his world, both past (from his upbringing) and present.

Artworks in this unit
white lines 2005
68 Fletcher, Bondi, 20:20, 8.6.03 2003
untitled (the tyranny of distance) 2008

 **eLesson: Interview with Jonathan Jones**
Jonathan Jones gives insights into his work and inspiration.
SEARCHLIGHT ID: ELES-0444



white lines 2005 first appears as a new interpretation of minimalism and the fluorescent light work of American Dan Flavin. There is a formal regularity in the pattern of 'lines', but their creation in light, with the resulting softening of the edges and surrounding glow, adds a new dimension. The open and closed patterns suggest points of tension and connection. The impact is further enhanced when the cultural links

white lines 2005
fluorescent tubes and fittings
300 x 824 cm
Photo: Scott Strothers
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery
Barry Keldoulis, Sydney

Chapter 2 Abstraction: JONATHAN JONES 77

Introductory section to each artist's study includes icons to reference:

- the relevant frames using the following colour coding:
Subjective Frame — pink
Structural Frame — yellow
Cultural Frame — green
Postmodern Frame — purple
- the significant relationships between artwork, artist, world and audience.

and investigate. The multiple 'walls', their repetitive positioning at diagonals within the space, draw us in, enfolding and engulfing us, but also suggest by the narrow spaces left and the unnatural light that we are in a 'forbidden' area. Yet Jones wants a true interaction with his audience, rather than giving them just a 'peek through the door'. It is as though he wants us to experience the spaces between things, perhaps to recognise that there is more to understand than is at first apparent (hidden spaces and lost histories come to mind, as well as freedom and the notion of control of movement and intervention).



To experience *untitled (the tyranny of distance)* you must walk into the small space left along the walls to find the narrow sightlines that have been left between the structures, but you cannot navigate these narrow corridors of blue light. The diagonal spaces echo the diagonal lines of light within the blue tarpaulin. The texture of the tarpaulin, the soft, filtered glow of the neon lights within and the intensity of the blue hold our visual interest while our mind wanders to further associations.

The layers of meaning include a powerful political message. Blue tarpaulins are routinely used on construction sites, but they are also used in temporary shelters following natural disasters. The title alludes to the continuing Northern Territory 'intervention', issues of access and prohibition, and the changing policies surrounding Indigenous housing. It operates as a symbolic statement on the relationships between private and public space, individuals and communities.

untitled (the tyranny of distance) 2008
aluminium, tarpaulin, fluorescent tubes and fittings
6 walls, each 3.4 x 1.9 x 8.27 m
Commissioned by Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Barry Keldouli, Sydney



Writing that relates specifically to one of the four frames is highlighted with the respective colour.

Writing that relates to the Conceptual Framework is signalled by the  icon.

Sample study notes or student responses for essay and short response questions can be found at the end of some artists' studies.

By reducing his imagery to geometric abstraction he aims to widen the audience's vision.

Jonathan Jones' artmaking is ethereal, weightless, yet energetic and visually beautiful.

Influences

Jones has stated that he has been influenced by the Modernist artists Jackson Pollock (*Blue Poles*) and Tony Tuckson, and that his work *untitled (the tyranny of distance)*, in its use of blue, is a homage to Michael Riley's *Cloud* series. There are obvious links to Indigenous art, particularly the notion of 'brilliance' or shine — that the more detailed the pattern or Rarrk (cross-hatching), the deeper the spiritual ancestral power the work contains.

Rather than direct referencing, Jones takes a small detail or pattern from an object such as a wooden shield and blows it up into a pattern of lines created with, say, fluorescent tubes.

Artist's statements

'What [my work] comes down to is trying to capture the notion of a community. It's an idea that perhaps there is one point of light and it's producing a body of light. What if you put another light with it? There's an overlap, a linking ...

'That idea starts to feed into the idea of how we define the question, what is it to be part of the community? To be part of Australia? How do we communicate? How do we operate? We get this notion of the massing of light, but in the end we're all individuals ...

'There are two ideas of culture, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture. There is an overlap even if people don't admit it. At the very least, we're sharing this country so there's an overlap there. People constantly focus on things that are not shared. I'm interested in how we can look at that connection.'

Quoted in Andrew Frost, 'Aid of the dark', *Australian Art Collector*, issue 42, October-December 2007, p. 137.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Conceptual Framework

'Neon lights along with digital lights are the twentieth century's contribution to the art palette.' Comment on this statement, referring to Jones, Flavin and Janet Burchill.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Cultural and Postmodern Frames

'Indigenous artists are making powerful statements using contemporary media/approaches yet referencing traditional symbols and imagery.' Evaluate this statement with reference to at least three artists. You might consider Michael Riley, Tracey Moffatt, Adam Hill, Destiny Deacon, Gordon Bennett or Jonathan Jones.

2. Structural Frame

'Abstraction, symbolism and light are the building blocks of the individual artist's visual language and can be used to infer meaning.' Discuss in relation to the works of Jonathan Jones, Marion Borgelt and one other artist of your choice. You might consider Matthew Johnson, Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko.

3. Postmodern Frame — Conceptual Framework

'The notion of artists working in collaboration to create artworks is indicative of our times.' Investigate the 2007 collaborative work of Jonathan Jones and Rarrk Lewis titled *Homelands*, illumination and his work with Maori artist Jim Viviesere and one other collaborative team.

SAMPLE STUDY NOTES FOR JONATHAN JONES

Jonathan Jones — Indigenous contemporary artist

Media/form: lights in installations, fluorescent tubes and bulbs, cords and fittings part of artwork

Frame: Postmodern (lights as a new technology), experimental approach

Conceptual Framework: audience involved through scale and light; interpretation of his world — past and present; large scale captures audience

Artist's practice

Intentions/meaning: abstraction; spatial relationships; repetitions; geometric patterns; links with landscape and culture; sense of community — fluid yet connected; aesthetically pleasing; references to Indigenous art; ancient traditions and understanding, and hope for future

Background: Sydney/Tamworth

Influences: grandfather (embracing Aboriginal identity); TAFE, COFA, AGNSW, Donald Judd, Jackson Pollock (*Blue Poles*), Tony Tuckson

Artist's quote: 'What [my work] comes down to is trying to capture the notion of a community.'

Examples: *untitled (the tyranny of distance)*, *white lines* 2005

Study notes prepared by Alice Mercer, Year 11 student

Short response and essay questions at the end of each artist's study also include icons to indicate when questions relate to specific frames or to the Conceptual Framework.

About eBookPLUS

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- **Katrina Israel:** page 262/'2008: A Space Odyssey' (review)
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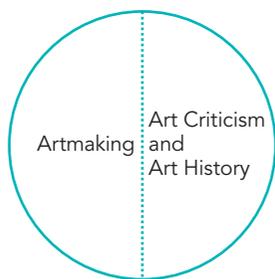
Introduction

This textbook is designed to help Visual Arts students understand and interpret HSC syllabus content areas through the study of a range of artists. A consistent structure, clear headings and subheadings, and colour coding have been used to make it easier to recognise text content that relates to the syllabus content areas:

- the three practices — artist’s practice, critical practice, historical practice
- the conceptual framework — the agencies in the artworld
- the frames — subjective, structural, cultural and postmodern.

The book is divided into chapters that focus on particular sources of artistic inspiration, artists’ conceptualisation and artmaking media. Selected artists are presented in chronological order within each chapter. This organisation suggests an approach for grouping the featured artists in case studies, and also some ways artists might be linked to artmaking programs for the Preliminary course. ‘About Senior Artwise’ (page iv) offers a different way of grouping artists.

The content areas



The three practices

Artist’s practice

Artist’s (or artmaking) practice relates to the choices and decisions made by the artist. We look at the ideas, concepts and intentions they work with in creating their artworks, as well as their aesthetic considerations (the visual qualities, techniques and methods). To make sense of the judgements and approaches or positions of an artist, it is necessary to understand something of the traditions and conventions of art. Conceptual strength (ideas, intellectual strength, creativity), meaning (on various levels) and resolution (refinement, use of media) are important considerations for an artist. Think about whether the artist works with commissions or displays their work in public or private exhibitions. Does the artist work with assistants, technical experts or as part of a collaborative team, or is the artist *part* of the artwork?

Critical practice

Art critics evaluate and explain an artist’s work. They speculate about the meanings of artworks. They often present a point of view or judgement, and may be instrumental in persuading an audience, thereby influencing an artist’s career.

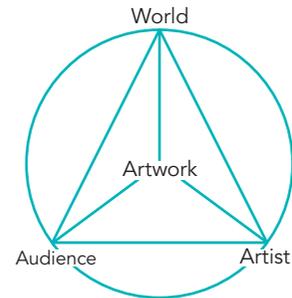
Historical practice

Art historians consider the context of an artwork — the time and place in which it was created as well as the traditions that may have influenced the artist. This background information may affect interpretation; for example, prevailing beliefs and technologies can influence the creation of an artwork.

The Conceptual Framework — the agencies in the artworld

We need to consider the relationships between the artwork, artist, world and audience in order to form opinions, make judgements and develop an understanding of artworks and the artworld in general. Throughout the book, the *Conceptual Framework* diagram at the start of each artist's study indicates the main channels of these relationships, while an icon in the written activities (see 'About Senior Artwise', page v) signals an activity that relates directly to the *Conceptual Framework*.

We also indicate other writing that specifically bears on the *Conceptual Framework* by placing the icon beside it, as shown in 'About Senior Artwise' (page v).



Artworks

Artworks are 'real' objects that may be material, physical or virtual in form. Material relates to the raw materials used to create the artwork; physical relates to its presence — size, weight and form; the virtual artwork, which may be computer-based and interactive, has an implied form that exists in space and time.

Artist

The changing role and nature of the artist needs to be considered.

World

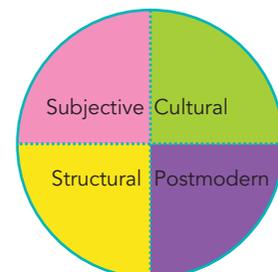
How is the world represented in the artwork? Is it expressed through the immediate environment or experiences of the artist? Does it relate to the artworld and past art, or is it commenting on wider world issues?

Audience

The relationship between the artwork and the audience is also important. We need to ask questions such as: Who did the artist intend the audience to be? Has the audience changed over time? How does the audience view and react to or with the artwork?

The frames

In this book we introduce colour coding to help you remember and identify these four different approaches. The four-frame icon (see opposite page) indicates when the artmaking practice of a particular artist, as represented by the artworks featured, closely relates to one or more of the frames. Similarly, an icon in the written activities signals the relevance of one or more frames to a particular activity.



We also indicate other writing that specifically relates to a frame by highlighting from the margin, as shown in ‘About Senior Artwise’ (page v).

Subjective Frame



The *Subjective Frame* deals with personal (e.g. emotional) responses. It is colour coded pink to remind us of such feelings as love, passion and anger (think of hearts and blood). Within the *Subjective Frame* we consider imagination, sensory experiences, human consciousness, deep feelings and personal expression — an artist working from the heart.

Structural Frame



The *Structural Frame* relates to communication and the system of signs. It is colour coded yellow (think of street signs). Artists develop a visual language using such art elements as line and colour, paying careful attention to the arrangement or composition of the artwork. Conventions and codes are considered in this frame.

Cultural Frame



The *Cultural Frame* considers social issues such as politics, economics and environmental concerns, so the colour green is used. Meaning in cultural artworks is understood from a social perspective and may relate to such issues as race, cultural identity, multiculturalism, gender, beliefs and values.

Postmodern Frame



The *Postmodern Frame* challenges the traditions and conventions in art. Postmodern artists often set out to shock, so the colour purple has been chosen. Postmodern artworks raise questions and use such devices as appropriation, pastiche, irony, parody and satire. They may also use new technologies to challenge the notion of artworks as unique, precious, long-lasting objects.

Preparing for the HSC exam

Note taking

Start preparing for your HSC in your Preliminary year.

Making summary notes on content areas

Make sure you thoroughly understand the terms *Practice*, *Conceptual Framework* and *Frames*.

Example 1: Artist's practice

Definition: the intention and working methods of the artist; the way artists go about making their art

Key words: *why*, *what* and *how* they communicate (often influenced by their values, beliefs, social context). Consider the decisions artists make.

Artists with unique artmaking practice: These artists may convey or imply many meanings and use a range of forms and techniques. Examples include:

- Eugène von Guérard — painted what he saw
- James Gleeson — drew from his imagination (traditional oil paint)
- Xu Bing — creates interactive installations using calligraphy
- Janet Laurence — draws on nature, history; uses found objects, photography on clear panels
- Gordon Bennett — comments on racial issues, appropriation; uses text, various forms
- Tony Oursler — explores psychological states, mass media; uses video and sculptural installations.

Example 2: The Conceptual Framework

- *The agencies of the artworld:* The agencies embrace the artists, artworks, audience and the wider world. It is no longer enough to look at the artwork as a discrete object in isolation; we need to consider the relationships or interactions between artist, artwork, world and audience.
- *The artist:* The artist may in fact *be* the artwork, or be linked closely to it on an emotional level. The artist may create the concept rather than the artwork itself. Some artists collaborate with others or employ technical (or technological) assistance. Stelarc, for example, is himself the artwork, which may be controlled or manipulated by the audience. The artist's intention must also be identified — for example, to inform, record, shock, challenge, critique past art or raise questions.
- *The artwork:* The changing nature and role of the artwork means it may no longer be a long-lasting physical object, but rather a transient work, idea or virtual object. The context (time, place, art historical style) and the way an artwork is displayed are important, not just its physical properties. Consider how and where it is displayed. Is documentation important? What is the artwork?
- *The world:* How are the artist's interests in the world communicated? What is the influence of historical events, place and society? Changing social values — in both the culture of the artworld and mass culture — need to be considered.
- *The audience:* How are viewers affected or involved in the artwork (including interactive art)? Who is the main audience — the art critic or historian, the knowledgeable art viewer or the wider public? How is the artwork presented to the audience, or curated? How is it experienced?

Example 3: The Frames

Definition of Subjective Frame: personal response or experience by artist — feelings, fears, dreams, emotive artworks, intuitive, imaginative, inner consciousness

Key words: emotion, expressive, psychological

Artists who work mainly from this frame: Van Gogh, Munch, Peter Booth, Gleeson, Bill Henson, De Kooning etc.

Making summary notes on the artists

Underline key points and use a highlighter and symbols to work out which information is needed for the syllabus content areas (Frames, Practice, Conceptual Framework). Try using the colour coding adopted in this textbook for the frames:

-  Subjective Frame — pink
-  Structural Frame — yellow
-  Cultural Frame — green
-  Postmodern Frame — purple.

Here is an example of summary notes made by a Year 11 student on Mark Rothko (see page 60). Other examples of summary notes made by Year 11 students can be found on pages 76 and 82.

(Study notes prepared by
Angela Rinaldo, Year 11 student)

SAMPLE STUDY NOTES FOR ROTHKO

Form:	painting
Frames:	Subjective — meditative, creates personal emotion Structural — developed own visual language relying on balance and tension between colour and surface qualities
Conceptual Framework:	spiritual response from audience; artwork — art for art's sake
Style period:	Modernist — American Abstract Expressionist

Artist's practice

Intention:	abstraction — wanting to give his painting the same kind of expressive power as music/literature
Technique:	Painted on untreated (unprimed) canvas, brushed thin layers of binder into which he mixed colour pigments. Also: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• applied individual layer of paint with light and fast brushstrokes• built up the intensity of colour• increased canvas size to involve the viewer• reduced the titles of his works, leaving it to the audience to interpret meaning

Artist's statement

'I paint large paintings. I realise historically the function of painting large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however . . . is precisely because I want it to be intimate and human . . .'

Update!

Update your information on contemporary artists by going to their websites or the representing gallery websites. Look for art reviews in the newspaper, and keep an eye out for upcoming exhibitions at public and local galleries. Look at current art magazines such as *Art Collector* and *Art World*.

Further hints for Preliminary and HSC examinations

Section 1: Short answer questions

- Read the question carefully to decide if it relates to a frame, practice or conceptual framework, or a combination. Underline the key words.
- Look carefully at any caption information given underneath or beside the plates:

Artist's name: It's an advantage if you know of the artist, as you can include your knowledge of them. Is it a collaborative work involving more than one artist?

Country: This will help you identify the style and period (e.g. Italian Baroque, German Expressionist, French Impressionist).

Title of artwork: This may help you determine the intended meaning.

Date: The date it was produced will help you identify the style and influences. Important considerations include: Was the camera invented then? Could it have been influenced by television? Could it have been created with the help of computers? Were environmental concerns, war, globalisation or feminism important issues then? (Familiarise yourself with the relevant dates and historical periods as part of your general knowledge!)

Materials: What is it made of (e.g. traditional art materials, found objects)? Is it an installation or a documented work (a photograph of a site-specific, transient work)?

Size: How would the viewer feel standing looking at it?

Writing paragraph responses

Following is an example of how to plan a paragraph response.

How do Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro comment on contemporary life?

Introduce the topic, explaining rather than restating the question.

The Australian collaborative artists Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro explore the contemporary issues of consumerism and changing notions of the home.

Develop the idea with reference to an artwork.

In *The Cordial Home Project* Healy and Cordeiro reconstructed a home destined for demolition, rearranging the materials in various layers into a solid oblong block.

Example

First sentence

First sentence

Third and fourth sentences

Explain further the methods and meaning.

By removing the space (where people lived), the artists question the preciousness and permanency of the contemporary home. Organised into tightly stratified stacks from foundation blocks to roof tiles, the materials take on a new identity and purpose.

Last sentence

Conclude the idea.

Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro comment through their artmaking on changing understandings of home ownership, which is less prevalent today than in the past, particularly with many people (including artists) travelling or working overseas.

Other useful hints

- You should refer to each piece of information given (e.g. artist's statements, artworks), but you do not need to rewrite a whole quotation.
- If you are given a photograph of the artist in the process of making their art or in their studio, you may be able to deduce certain things about their artmaking practice: Do they work in a traditional studio set-up? Is there a lot of space? Note what objects/books/other influences are evident in the studio, including the range of art equipment, size of artworks, brushes or other artmaking tools, and work on the floor, wall or easel. Do they use reference materials such as drawings or photographs for their work?
- Keep to the time limits.

Section 2: Essay question

- Use your reading time to decide on your choice of essay in Section 2.
- It is crucial to choose the 'best fit' between your artists and the information you have. Can you write a strong argument with relevant information?
- To help you choose, identify the key words in the essay.
- Are you asked for a *range* of artists? If so, your artists should be drawn from different styles/periods/cultures and, according to the question, may use different forms or techniques.
- How many artists/critics/historians do you need to include?

Practising essay skills

Do's

- Underline key words in the question.
- Explain or interpret the question, don't repeat it.
- Refer back to an aspect of the question in each paragraph to keep your argument clear, rephrasing it or using similar words.
- Place the artist in their art historical context — mention the time period (e.g. Renaissance, Modernist, contemporary).
- Note the artwork style (e.g. Cubist), the country in which the artists work and, if relevant, their country of origin (e.g. Valamanesh was born in Iran but lives and works in Australia).

- Mention the form used by the creator (e.g. sculpture, video art, photography, installation).
- Analyse and interpret — don't just describe — the artwork, and name at least two, and preferably three, works by each artist to show their style or development.
- Give your interpretation of the meaning of an artwork in a definite manner (e.g. 'It suggests...'; 'It has the affect of...'; 'It can be interpreted as...'; 'There are various layers of meaning, such as...'; *not* 'It probably means...'; 'Maybe he intended...').
- Discuss what ideas, concepts or feelings the artist is trying to communicate. Is the audience being challenged? Is the intention to shock?
- Discuss how the artist achieves these aims. What visual language is being used (e.g. symbols, scale, colour, expressive brushstrokes, tonal contrast, dynamic movement, ordering or layering of imagery)?
- Refer to what frame the artist is working from, and why.
- Consider how the artist interprets their world.
- Think about what effect the artwork has on the audience.
- Include statements from artists and quotes from art critics/historians.

Don'ts

- Avoid very long general statements in an introduction.
- Don't number the artists in your essay (e.g. 'The first artist I am discussing... The second artist to use colour in this way...').
- Don't refer to the artist by just his or her first name.
- Don't use colloquial or subjective language (e.g. 'It is amazing', 'I was bowled over', 'It is good', 'I love this work').
- Don't write about a well-known artist unless you have a good knowledge of them and more than two of their most famous artworks.
- Don't write for more than 50 minutes (45 is better), leaving insufficient time for Section 1.

Essay planning

Following is an example of how to plan your essay.

'Text is a significant code system that affects the form and meaning of works of contemporary artists.' Discuss.

Question

Explain the question by giving a definition of key words.

Introduction

Define text (e.g. calligraphy, personal annotations, advertising signage) with reference to your chosen artists.

Introduce your artist (name, country, frame, style of working) and the relevance of text to their culture or artmaking, analysing at least one of their works.

First paragraph

(*Example: 'Xu Bing challenges our perceptions of China and universal communication through his use of calligraphy in *Book from the Sky...*'*)

Second and possibly third paragraphs

Review further evidence of relevance to the question, interpreting the meaning and the techniques/methods the artist has used in at least two more artworks.

Fourth paragraph

Introduce the next artist and how their work relates to the question.
(*Example:* Gordon Bennett's appropriation of text from Basquiat; how words such as 'Abo' and 'Boong' add to the meaning of his work regarding racism.)

Fifth paragraph

Give more examples of artworks by your second artist, analysing and interpreting them in relationship to the question.

Conclusion/summary

Make a statement in response to the essay topic, reviewing how it is supported by your chosen artists and their artworks.

Surviving the senior years

In your senior studies the workload will increase, but with a little planning and by adopting sensible coping mechanisms it does not have to be stressful. Remember, your Preliminary year is a time to practise for your HSC, a time to make mistakes, move out of your comfort zone, aim high, and set up good working and studying habits.

Setting up your homework schedule

Be realistic and make the schedule work for your individual style.

- Analyse when you work best. Do you find you are more productive in the early afternoon, after dinner, late at night or early in the morning?
- For how long can you realistically focus? It is no use sitting at your desk for two hours if you lose concentration after an hour.
- Organise your workload. Know when assignments are due and whether they can be tackled over several nights (does research need to be done at school?), or if you need a longer time span to work on them.
- Keep a planner — fortnightly is probably best — as well as a diary.
- Plan to do your most challenging assignments (those you have most difficulty with) when you know you will have the best concentration, rather than putting them off until the last minute.
- Set aside reward breaks. Vary these so that some nights they are minimal while on another night you can do something meaningful or totally relaxing.

Looking after the rest

Setting up your study space

- Organise your work space so it is comfortable to be in, there are minimal distractions and you can leave work-in-progress on the desk (the kitchen table is no longer good enough).

- Keep folders of study notes, an ‘extra research’ file and a ‘to do’ folder or in-box.
- Keep all assignments that the teacher has handed back and make a backup copy of work ready to be handed in.

Keeping up to date with study notes and required work

- Try to read over the work done at school each night, and make study notes so you can ask your teacher next day about anything you don’t fully understand. Or set aside in your planner at least one session a week to draw up your summary/study notes.
- Don’t leave the task of creating study notes until the week before exams. You need to work consistently, regularly and with attention to detail.
- Complete and submit all required work, not just assessments, as often it is the regular homework that provides you with the skills, understanding and practice that will see you excel in exams.

Thinking about your learning style

- Look for what you don’t know; don’t be content with just memorising what you do know.
- Think about how you learn best. Do you remember diagrams, mind maps or comparison charts, or do you prefer point form or list format? Do you learn best by talking things through with someone else, or do you need to repeat the information to yourself?

Keeping healthy

- Consider improving your diet. This is not a time to be run-down and to suffer bouts of sickness. Avoid coffee, tea and sugar. Drink plenty of water as dehydration affects memory. Don’t miss breakfast and do eat three to five regular daily meals. Increase your intake of fruit and vegetables, but keep a balance by including both protein, such as eggs, fish (salmon is an excellent brain food), meat or soy products, and carbohydrates (whole-grain bread, pasta, brown rice, porridge, muesli). Snack on nuts or fruit.
- Find time for regular exercise, even if it is only a walk around the block. It increases the oxygen to your brain and improves concentration, as well as relieving stress.

And finally...

Believe in your ability to learn and strive to reach your optimal potential.

Chapter 1 Nature

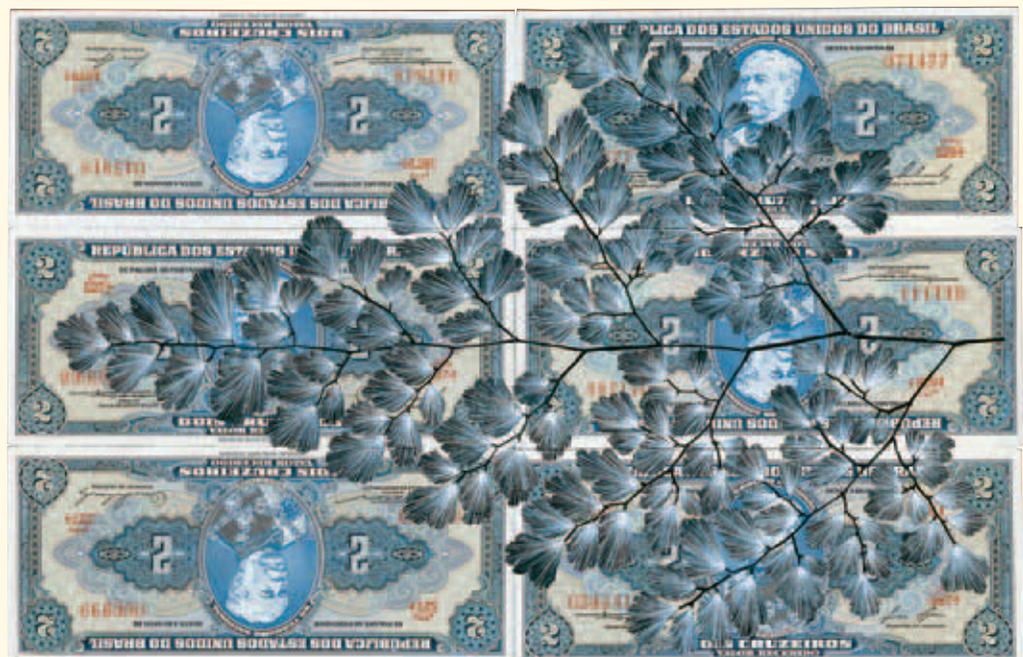
SYLLABUS FOCUS: Conceptual Framework

In this chapter we look at artists who have interpreted their world (*Conceptual Framework*) mainly from the *Cultural Frame*.

Land (and our relationships with it) has a profound effect on humanity. It offers sustenance and shelter, overwhelms with its beauty and terror, and has links to spirituality. Australian artists have always had a special affinity with the land, expressing a strong sense of place. Early colonial artists tried to record its distinctive character and vastness. Artists from the Heidelberg School interpreted it from a Modernist viewpoint while seeking to identify a national image. Indigenous artists have responded to the land from a spiritual perspective and through their personal connection and attachment to place.

Contemporary artists using a variety of forms continue to explore nature. Through their artworks they investigate issues such as scientific and historical classification and control, medical uses of plants, links to culture, introduced species, threats to species due to urbanisation and global warming, and natural life cycles.

Technology has also enabled contemporary artists to investigate the transitory aspects of nature, such as melting, dissolving and decaying through the elements of fire and water as well as time.



Leaf Litter 1999–2003
(detail)
Adiantum raddianum,
maidenhair fern
gouache on banknotes
National Gallery of
Australia, Canberra
Courtesy of the artist and
Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery,
Sydney

Eugène von Guérard

(1811–1901, b. Vienna, Australian colonial artist)

Issues/interests: landscape, a sense of place, the beauty and grandeur of God's creation

Form: oil painting on canvas

Frames: *Cultural* in depictions of the uniqueness and sense of space of the Australian landscape; *Structural* in his use of symbols, such as hovering birds and rays of sunlight as symbols of God's presence, and kangaroos and Aboriginal figures as symbols of cultural identity. He followed the codes and conventions of the Romantic European tradition, adapting them to the Australian landscape. He shows great concern for detail and the wide view, and establishing distance through perspective devices.

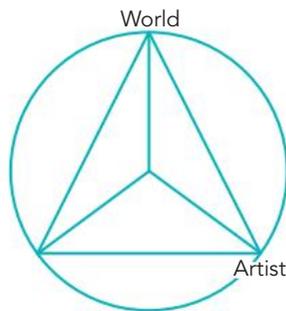
Conceptual Framework: Von Guérard's work reflects the values, theories and beliefs of his time, which helped shape the way he interpreted what he saw.

Artworks in this unit

North-east View from the Northern Top of Mount Kosciusko 1863

Mt William from Mt Dryden, Victoria 1857

Spring in the Valley of the Mitta Mitta with the Bogong Ranges in the Distance 1863



eBook plus

Artist's footsteps — Eugène von Guérard

Use the **Artist's footsteps** weblink in your eBookPLUS to discover the work and adventures of Eugène von Guérard.

VOCABULARY

monochromaticism emphasis on tones of one colour

parochialism tendency to a narrowly restricted or local outlook

proprietary relating to a sense of ownership

sublime awe-inspiring

The panoramic *North-east View from the Northern Top of Mount Kosciusko* 1863 (opposite) shows the view from the top of Australia's highest mountain, Mt Kosciuszko. Although the view feels timeless, the inclusion of the human figures gives it a historical context. It records a scientific expedition von Guérard joined on 18 November 1863 (his fiftieth birthday) with a scientist and a small group of his assistants. At this time, many artists were trained as scientists or worked with

them. It was widely believed that both science and art were ways of understanding and making a closer connection with God. As God created nature, it was important for scientists to study nature and for artists to represent its beauty, capturing every detail of pebble, cloud or leaf.



Although von Guérard drew sketches on the mountain, this painting was produced back in his studio. He recorded the experiences he had on that day, including the impending storm coming in from the left of the painting. He interpreted the landscape through his own individual perception of nature — its **sublime** beauty, grandeur and potential for danger or terror. His interest in the sublime aspects of nature is evident in his depiction of the majestic mountains and the mood of the sky. The human figures not only place it historically but act as a compositional device to create a sense of scale. Dwarfed by their surroundings (at first glance they are hardly noticed), the figures attest to the magnitude and power of nature. This work exhibits von Guérard's meticulous style — the painstaking detail in the foreground against the broad, rhythmical sweeps of the middle ground and distance.

It is interesting to look at a Postmodern appropriation of this work by Imants Tillers titled *Mount Analogue* 1985.

In the painting *Mt William from Mt Dryden, Victoria* (page 4), von Guérard reverses normal expectations of left-to-right movement, forcing the eyes to travel diagonally back into space. We also see how he uses symbols to add layers of meaning to his paintings: the bird hovering above the mountain both draws attention to it and adds

***North-east View from the Northern Top of Mount Kosciusko* 1863**

oil on canvas

66.5 × 116.8 cm

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Purchased 1973

a spiritual dimension to the work. The glow of the sun behind the mountain adds to the splendour and drama of the scene.

We appreciate von Guérard's interest in art and beauty, and in how art can heighten the viewer's awareness and appreciation of nature. The kangaroos in the foreground help locate it as an Australian landscape, as well as providing a reference point to establish the scale of the mountains. The delicate light enhances the majestic forms of the mountains and casts shadows over the valley, occasionally highlighting the curve of tree trunks and the texture of the foliage. The sense of harmony and tranquillity reflect von Guérard's deep reverence for nature.



**Mt William from Mt Dryden,
Victoria 1857**
oil on canvas
76.2 × 106 × 7 cm (framed)
State Art Collection
Art Gallery of Western Australia
Purchased 1971

In *Spring in the Valley of the Mitta Mitta* (opposite) a peaceful landscape is enriched by the compositional decisions made by the artist, particularly his chosen viewpoint. The boulders in the foreground are our starting point, leading us through the trees to the river and on to the valley below. The trees on either side of the foreground frame the vista. The patch of light catching the diagonal slope of the foreground adds movement and interest. The inclusion of the horse and rider gives the painting a narrative aspect and historical context, and there are hints of dogs and sheep in the first line of trees.

Typically, von Guérard has chosen a wide view with majestic ranges in the background. We appreciate the sense of distance he creates and

his skill in rendering mountains, but despite his attention to detail of the foliage, the colour of the trees suggests European varieties rather than our own grey-green gums. Artists of the Heidelberg School (Tom Roberts, Arthur Streeton) in the 1890s were the first to fully appreciate our native trees and plants and the way the sun bleached colour from the landscape.



Historical background

Through the work of von Guérard we are able to plot the development of colonial art, considering such issues as **parochialism**, isolation and European tradition. This can help us shed light on our cultural heritage, sense of place and search for national identity. We see in Australia a colonial outpost, where artists were influenced by European styles of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Eugène von Guérard began his artistic training in Italy and went on to study landscape painting in Germany. In his work we can see the influence of the seventeenth-century artistic traditions of Claude Lorraine and Salvatore Rosa (the enchanted landscape inspired by Italian myths and the poetry of nature in Virgil). We can also see the influence of the German Romantic tradition of the early nineteenth century, in which the powerful arrangement of forms signified God's organisation of nature. The work of Caspar David Friedrich also follows this tradition. The Romantic view of nature held that through the silent contemplation of the landscape, man could embrace the

Spring in the Valley of the Mitta Mitta with the Bogong Ranges in the Distance 1863

oil on canvas

43.3 × 69.0 cm

National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne

The Joseph Brown Collection
Presented through the NGV
Foundation by Dr Joseph
Brown AO OBE, Honorary Life
Benefactor, 2004

universe, and so find God. By glorifying nature, artists were also glorifying God. The accuracy of von Guérard's observations and rendering of surfaces reveals his dedication to creating beauty and spiritual meaning.

Von Guérard contributed to the movement away from the English landscape tradition (still evident, for example, in the paintings of John Glover).

The landscape as subject was of profound importance in the formation of the Australian identity. Von Guérard provided a unique interpretation of our heritage. He was primarily a recorder of the Australian landscape as wilderness. However, his work goes beyond merely recording place. He painted the larger view of nature, encompassing evaporation and precipitation, the death and regeneration of plants and trees, the cycles of agriculture and the effects of civilisation.

Artist's practice

Von Guérard was primarily an artist but also an explorer. Combining these roles, he spent months trekking in Australia and New Zealand, seeking breathtaking panoramic views of a landscape unknown to most Europeans. From his trips he brought back sketchbooks filled with finely detailed pencil drawings, which he later used as the basis for paintings that expressed nature as he remembered it. He sometimes drew larger sketches that included his observations of colour and light. He can therefore be appreciated as a topographical artist who studied and recorded the new land realistically and in fine detail. He was also an observer of European settlement in Australia and its impact on nature and the Indigenous people.

Von Guérard's artworks are a reflection of his responses to the beauty of particular places, especially landscapes. He makes us aware of the different textures and surfaces of vegetation, trees and rocky outcrops with almost scientific accuracy. He also appreciated and understood the way light is reflected in water and glows on and through clouds.

Historical practice

'Von Guérard had patrons among the Western District pastoralists who, as well as commissioning homestead portraits, asked for landscape views. Having built grand country houses and produced families that were growing up in this new country (though often educated in England), the squatters had begun to look towards a probable future in Australia and to feel a **proprietary** interest in the country they had settled. The many poetic images of the Western District by von Guérard ... fed this newly proud identification with the land ... Moreover the combination of scientific description and the poetry of divine power was understood and appreciated.'

Mary Eagle and John Jones,
A Story of Australian Painting,
Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1994,
pp. 52, 55, 56.

Critical practice

'In addition to the painting's formal compositional devices such as the trinity of large trees through which we see a water-laden plain, the triangle of eagle, kangaroos and fox, the "magic" circle of boulders, and the pale clouds echoing the dark foliage, it is the ordered zones of texture and an overall transparent **monochromaticism** which appeal to me . . .

'In *Mount William from Mount Dryden* von Guérard marries, perhaps a little uneasily, the finely realised appearance of the landscape with a personal, symbolic narrative, together with a vision of infinite space.'

Brian Blanchflower, 'Artist's Choice No. 34: Eugène von Guérard: *Mount William from Mount Dryden*', in *Art and Australia*, Fine Arts Press, Sydney, Autumn 1988, p. 384.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. An art critic offers opinions but can also help us to appreciate aspects of the artwork and suggest interpretations. What did you learn about von Guérard's painting from the critical review by Brian Blanchflower?

2. Cultural Frame — historical practice



Refer to *Mt William from Mt Dryden* (page 4) and the historical information provided below to evaluate the artist's significance to Australian culture.

The painting was purchased by John Blakewell, part owner of a wool sorting business. It was reproduced twice in contemporary journals of the time and received lavish praise for von Guérard's skill and delicate warm feeling as well as his handling of the gum trees. In 1870 von Guérard became the curator of the Melbourne Gallery and first master of the painting school at the National Gallery of Victoria, where his students included Frederick McCubbin, Tom Roberts and Rupert Bunny.

SAMPLE SHORT RESPONSE

Conceptual Framework



Explain how von Guérard interprets his world with reference to one of his artworks.

Von Guérard's *North-east View from the Northern Top of Mount Kosciusko* 1863 uses oil paints in a large-scale work to create an aesthetic, realistic view of the untouched wilderness. It is a picturesque representation of the grandeur of the Australian landscape. By adopting a high viewpoint, the artist has captured a sense of the vastness and endlessness of the landscape. The rich purples and oranges and lush greens, matched with the brutality of the rocks and the blankness of the white snow, capture a natural beauty that changes with the time of day and weather conditions. The billowing rainclouds entering from the left create dark shadows over the foreground, the crisp greys and blues suggesting the cool temperatures of the area. The inclusion of the human figures signals both the sense of isolation and the peacefulness of the scene, while also highlighting the vastness of the mountain.

(Written in 10 minutes under examination conditions)

Explains the devices and art techniques used by von Guérard to interpret his world ('realistic view', 'high viewpoint', 'rich purples'). Composition is considered, as is the mood created.

ESSAY QUESTIONS



1. Conceptual Framework — historical practice

Looking at a range of artists, including von Guérard, assess the importance of considering the historical context and the knowledge, values and attitudes of the intended audience when interpreting the intention of the artist and how the meaning of artworks can change over time.

2. Cultural Frame — historical practice



Von Guérard's paintings suggest more than just a detailed record of a particular place. Discuss the relevance of nature as a subject for cultural or political statements, referring to a range of Australian artists. Include quotes by art historians where possible.

3. How do artists express the values, attitudes and beliefs of their society in their artmaking? Discuss, making reference to a range of artists including von Guérard.

4. Structural Frame



Evaluate the use of symbols as part of the artist's visual language to convey meaning in the work of von Guérard and at least one other artist of your choice.

5. Postmodern Frame



Investigate the appropriation of historical Australian artworks by Postmodern artists, including von Guérard's *Mt Kosciusko* by Imants Tillers.

Fiona Hall

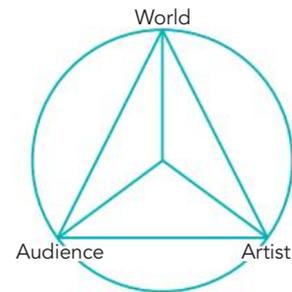
(b. 1953, Australian contemporary artist)

Issues/interests: human and plant life, classifications, opposites

Forms: sculpture, installations

Frames: *Postmodern* in her use of non-traditional media and methods of display and the way her art challenges yet involves humour; *Cultural* — Because she comments on social issues involved with colonialism, trade and world economics, her works are political as well as social comments.

Conceptual Framework: Fiona Hall responds to the world, including its plant life, and to its history, including the colonial obsession with classifying 'finds', genetic engineering and global warming. Her works engage the audience on an emotional as well as a cerebral level. She challenges artwork conventions through her use of non-traditional materials such as sardine tins, soap and plumbing pipes.



Artworks in this unit

Nelumbo nucifera 1999

Dead in the Water 1999

Cash Crop 1998–99

Leaf Litter 1999–2003 (detail)

Cell Culture 2002 (detail)

Hidden treasures — Fiona Hall

Use the **Hidden treasures** weblink in your eBookPLUS to watch a video exploring the link between Fiona Hall's artwork and the natural world.

VOCABULARY

colonialism control and exploitation of a weaker country, especially its land and resources, by a stronger one

displacement removal from one's place or home, particularly through war or revolution

vitrine glass display cabinet

Nelumbo nucifera 1999 (page 10) is part of a series relating to the place humanity has in earthly nature. Hall has investigated various plant specimens, researching not only their form and growth patterns but also their botanic classifications and historical medicinal uses. Each piece is named according to the botanical, common and Aboriginal

names for the plants. This type of sardine can, with a key to unroll the lid, is no longer produced. At the time, sardines were a commonplace cheap form of food for human consumption. Hall has transformed this mundane object into works of art through adding intricate plant forms that emerge from the top of the tin and by hinting at an erotic view of the human body. They have not only taken on the luxurious, decorative surfaces of the jeweller's craft but have been imbued with layers of meaning. Through the artist's skill and wit, these everyday, readymade items have become precious artworks that are both aesthetically and intellectually stimulating.



Nelumbo nucifera; nelum (Sinhala); thamareri (Tamil); lotus 1999

From the series *Paradisus*

Terrestris 1999

aluminium and steel

26 × 18 × 4 cm

Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Dead in the Water (opposite) consists of a **vitrine** cabinet similar to those found in museums; above an imaginary waterline, PVC piping (not a traditional art medium) has been delicately pierced with a pattern of holes. The pipes no longer resemble the 'masculine' material used by plumbers but have been transformed into delicate, feminine, lace-like shapes. Hall's work challenges the viewer, reflecting the Postmodern preoccupation with systems of display and classification encoded in Western thinking.

The theme of white preciousness continues beneath the imaginary waterline as the pipes evolve into growing, root-like structures made of finely sewn glass beads. We are reminded of coral and icicles, yet also of beaded evening bags. Hall has continued her theme of exploring values and attitudes through the association of opposites — nature versus humanity, old versus new, good versus evil. There is a sense of mystery; the contrasting surfaces and textures invite us to look beyond the forms and materials to discover deeper meanings.



Dead in the Water 1999 (detail)
 PVC pipe, glass beads, wire,
 vitrine
 Vitrine dimensions:
 106.5 × 128 × 128 cm
 Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn
 Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

In *Cash Crop* (below) fruit and vegetables have been exquisitely carved from coloured soap, arranged by size and displayed with accompanying classification details. But here is where Hall wittily injects political meaning into the work — for example, a peanut is labelled ‘tax return’ while a runner bean has been classified as ‘venture capital’. Further reference to our consumer culture and volatile, sharemarket-driven economy is made in the vitrine’s floor covering of banknotes.

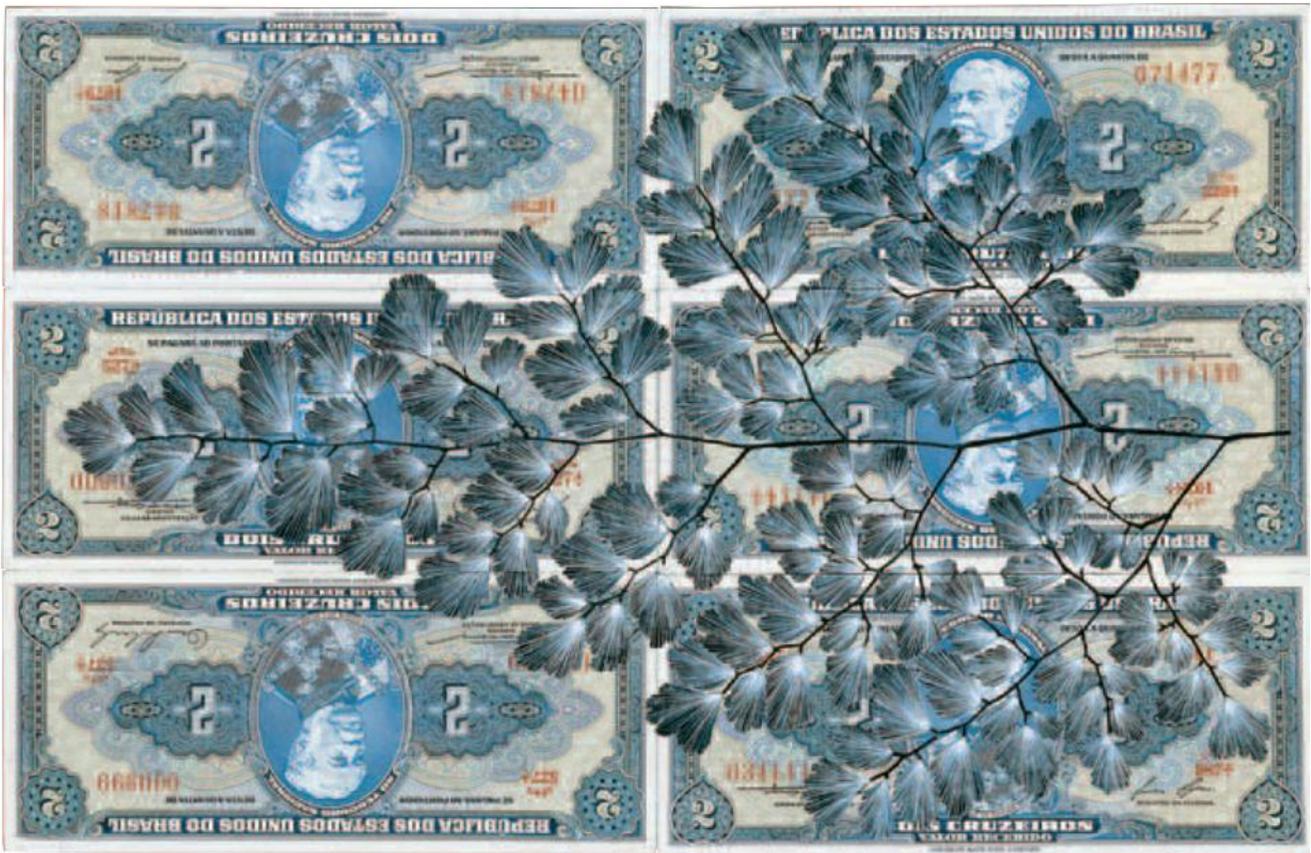


Cash Crop 1998–99 (detail)
 carved soap, painted banknotes,
 vitrine
 Vitrine dimensions:
 115 × 130 × 55 cm
 Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn
 Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

In another work, *Understorey*, also displayed in a museum case, the three-dimensional objects are made from glass beads, the delicate, luxuriously coloured objects on the top shelf reminding us of tropical flowers and fruit, while those on the lower shelf are given a surface of

camouflage patterning, a symbol of hostility and conflict. *Understorey* brings together two versions of a tropical environment — the lush, pristine jungle of the eighteenth century, and a contemporary view of ongoing civil unrest and **displacement** of people as a result of land clearance, urbanisation and the effects of **colonialism**.

Continuing the theme of commerce and money, the *Leaf Litter* series (see below) consists of 200 highly realistic and detailed gouache paintings of botanically specific leaves on foreign paper currency. Here Hall asks us to consider the role plants have played in the history of colonisation and the development of the world's economies.



Leaf Litter 1999–2003 (detail)
Adiantum raddianum,
maidenhair fern
gouache on banknotes
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn
Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

This idea is extended in her artwork *Tender* 2003–05. Consisting of bird's nests woven from shredded US dollar notes, each bearing the official declaration 'This note is legal tender', it draws a connection between the fragility of nature and of economic life. It works on various levels of meaning. As the US dollar is still the most valued currency in many developing countries, it suggests people scavenging for the dollar like a bird scavenging for materials from which to build its nest. One implication is that we need to consider the price we pay for the unchecked capitalism that underpins our advanced economies — specifically, the destruction of the environment and ever-widening gap between rich and poor nations. In the exhibition information leaflet from the Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Hall has challenged us with the question, 'Money doesn't grow on trees — or does it?'

Cell Culture (below) is one of a series of sculptures exhibited in a large glass display case similar to those used in museums. Hall has created a collection of whimsical creatures and plants using Tupperware containers (plastic storage ware) as the starting point to which she attaches delicate beaded forms. The natural world meets the constructed, consumer world. Amazingly, at first glance they work together as an entity, the translucent, milky-white plastic complementing the delicate woven structures of glass beads. Hall has cleverly combined an old form of commercial currency (glass beads) with a modern commercial material. Represented are two systems of trade, socialisation and exchange, objectified and classified as a collection of specimens. The preciousness of the objects is emphasised by the method of display, which suggests a jeweller's case or a museum specimen case.



Cell Culture 2002 (detail)
glass, metal, PVC, beads in
vitrine
Vitrine dimensions:
158.1 × 250.2 × 90.2 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn
Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

The concepts in this work are further developed in her 2007–08 work *Mourning Chorus*, which consists of the beaks of birds (most of the species depicted now extinct) that have been attached to household cleaning products. One doesn't need to think hard to work out a relationship to expulsion or domestic cleaning processes.

Artist's practice

Background

Fiona Hall is an innovative artist whose work can be admired on an aesthetic level for its delicacy and individual skill. But it is when you investigate a range of her works that you appreciate the force of her social and environmental concerns and her thorough research. It is the diversity of her practice that makes it essential to look at several of her works to appreciate her control of different media and the depth of her recurring concerns.

Hall was trained as a painter, but her career really began with her photographic works in the early 1970s. She began using recycled aluminium in the late 1980s, cutting into drink cans, rearranging them and photographing them (the *Purgatory, Paradise and Hell* series and the *Word* series). With *Medicine Bundle from the Non-born Child* 1993, Hall used Coca-Cola cans as her medium, creating a rattle and adding rubber nipples to a six-pack of cans as well as knitting a matinee jacket, booties and bonnet out of the shredded cans. This work has social and political undertones, as Coca-Cola originally used the South American coca leaf and the African cola nut, both of which have been used in developing countries for their contraceptive properties. The associations with American big business commodities and the irony of the harsh, rough handmade garments for the soft newborn leaves us questioning life values.

Intentions

Like many Postmodern artists, Hall is concerned with issues relating to ecology (the interrelationships of organisms in the environment) and, associated with this, the extinction of species. Science, the role of the collector, and the methods of and reasons for display and categorising in museums are also issues that inform her artmaking practice, adding levels of meaning according to the knowledge and understanding of the audience. Her primary focus is the point where humankind and nature meet — our place and our plight within the world as represented in history and mythology. Hall often juxtaposes forgotten knowledge with artefacts and attributes of contemporary life.

Hall is deeply concerned with the state of the world and the need for us to take responsibility for it, and her works often carry strong social and political messages. She has used plant forms as complex metaphors or symbols for a wide range of issues and interests. In her 1995 commissioned work for the opening of the Museum of Sydney, titled *Occupied Territory*, Hall used beads, wire and nails, items that were first brought to the 'New World' for trade, to create objects representing the seeds of plants (both native and introduced species), such as fig and banksia, growing in the grounds of the first Government House in Sydney. This work is a comment on the human dependence on nature, and the cultural and environmental consequences of trade, exploration and location.

Fiona Hall's work encourages us to look beyond its delicate beauty and sensuous surfaces to discover meaning. Her artworks thus reach beyond their poetic and lyrical qualities, their beauty as exquisite, delicate, intricately detailed imaginative creations, to make powerful statements about our time and world. Behind the complex relationships between natural and manufactured objects, the sense of profusion and passion, is an underlying order and serious purpose — to reflect on what we have lost as well as what we may still lose. They therefore challenge the audience on both an emotional and an intellectual level with their wit and multiple layers of meaning. Through mixing systems of thought as diverse as science, history, religion, horticulture and commerce, she opens up new ways of thinking about the world.

Materials/methods/choices

Hall uses non-traditional materials, mostly expendable and discarded materials, and transforms them into intricate and enticing art objects. She paints, models, carves, sews and assembles discarded items of consumer culture into witty objects and installations. Although her work is not explicitly feminist, her choice and use of materials (such as beading and soap) have feminine connotations. Her work often incorporates materials from the domestic sphere or involves traditional craft or female pursuits (knitting, weaving).

The artist's skill and craft is unmistakable in her work; she employs no assistants in the time-consuming and meticulous production of her works. The attention to detail and concern for precise craftsmanship is always apparent, whether in the fine beading, delicate gouache painting, soap carving, or cutting and manipulation of aluminium.

Hall has also reinvented the garden as an art form, as it was understood in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, although such a view is unusual in contemporary practice. *Fern Garden* 1998, at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, was her first large-scale garden project. It incorporates tree ferns, curving pathways, fountains, benches, lighting and wrought iron. As is her usual practice, Hall employs a layering of meaning and use of symbols. The spiralling pathways suggest an opening palm frond. The overall plan and wrought-iron gates refer to nineteenth-century medical drawings of the female reproductive system. The fern is one of our most ancient plants and provided food for Aboriginal peoples. In the main path, pavers contain an Aboriginal name for the fern together with the language group to which it belongs. Also mentioned is Destiny Deacon, an artist friend of Hall's, and the twins Deuchar and Tasmin Davy (they died in a light plane crash), whose family helped fund the project. The use of the medium of plants was carried into her temporary work *Gene Pool*, erected at Government House using some of the most ancient plant species still in existence. In this work Hall challenged the viewer to consider the processes by which nature has been tamed and changed by human activities, and at the same time to review humanity's survivability through adaptation to change as a result of colonisation.

Display

Hall plays with the idea of displacement, of bringing into the art gallery or museum unfamiliar materials and forms that break art traditions, and challenging audiences to reconsider these materials and techniques, and their history and significance to cultural practices. She is intrigued and perplexed by the processes of naming things in the natural world and how institutions order and categorise their knowledge. The naming of her works, the labelling of the plant species and the symbols used trigger various levels of awareness.

Main concerns

In her exhibition *Force Field* at the MCA 2008, a survey of her work from the 1970s to 2008, Hall's art was organised according to her main series or phases, which range from the intimate to the global. In summary, they are:

- *Consumption*: the ethics and values associated with everyday domestic life and objects
- *Symbiosis*: connections between various life forms — animal, insect and plant — and to humans
- *Body*: sensuality, privacy and morality as part of nature and culture
- *Paradise*: humanity's relationship to nature (Garden of Eden), links to religion, culture and science
- *Territory*: territories of power, politics and the environment, the disappearance of species and the degradation of bio-systems
- *Trade*: global trade, finance and colonial history. This past decade of her work with plants, banknotes and issues of consumption links back to earlier works.

Artist's statements

Quoted in catalogue *Fiona Hall: Force Field*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2007, p. 19.

'I tend to choose materials already loaded with meaning ... Having selected a medium, I then devise a way to make it take on the forms I want, so my work usually ends up looking highly crafted.'

Quoted in catalogue *Fiona Hall: Force Field*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2007, p. 41.

'As soon as you make a work it becomes history. That is something I am aware of. The media I use seem to have their time and then they go very rapidly. Videotape is now obsolete. Within a few years of my first sardine tins in the early 1990s, the tins with the old-style keys were replaced with ring-pull tins. Banknotes are being replaced increasingly by plastic transactions.'

Quoted in catalogue *Fiona Hall: Force Field*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2007, p. 46.

'In my art I am finding ways of bringing together the astounding, magical, uplifting world with the very sobering realisation that we are putting that world in peril.'

Quoted in Tim Morrel and Jim Moss, 'Fiona Hall', *Photofile*, Summer 1988–89, p. 27.

'Perhaps the ongoing exploration, the systematic working through of ideas and reaching out for different approaches and so on is the epic voyage.'

Critical practice

'[Fiona Hall] seems incapable of making work that doesn't endear [make attractive] itself to the viewer — even if the viewer doesn't "get it" ... Hall makes beautiful objects — in the case of *Dead in the Water*, mutant fusions of porous pipes and underwater flora suspended in glass vitrines. Her materials are eccentric, but obscurely suggestive: glass beads, PVC pipe, mother-of-pearl buttons. Hall has just finished a residency at Brisbane's Botanic Gardens, where she pursued her interest in economic botany. *Cash Crop* — a sort of inventory of commodity plant life — is the clearest expression of her research: it lines up life-sized models of seeds, fruit and roots carved from yellow soap with punning phrases borrowed from economic jargon: seaweed gets "offshore trading"; the cola nut gets "global liquidity"; coffee gets "consumption level" and so on. It's very witty, very likeable ...'

'The complex, ingenious, labour-intensive artworks made by Fiona Hall arouse great wonder, delight, incredulity [unwillingness to believe] and thoughtfulness in the viewer ...

'The intensity of Hall's making is never about craft, in the sense of serving a craft or tradition or skill. Rather there is a sense that she invents ways of doing things, of combining materials and techniques in order to strike the viewer with a freshness, an exclamation of wonder that will make them see afresh the combinations and juxtapositions of material and intellectual languages that she combines. Her soap carvings for *Cash Crop* (1998), carvings that can be worn away by water, carvings that are fragrant with soap scents, juxtapose seeds with terms from the world of trade and finance.'

'Fiona Hall imbues her work with the thrill of discovery, inviting the viewer to share her excitement ... On even the briefest acquaintance with her work, viewers should be able to recognise the signs of an unusually fertile imagination, an offbeat sense of humour and a work ethic that would put the pyramid builders to shame.'

Sebastian Smee, 'Concepts take root', *Galleries, Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 October 1999, p. 15.

While voicing his opinion of Hall's work, Smee also provides us with valuable information on the variety and uniqueness of her material practice.

Stephanie Radock, 'Fiona Hall', *Artlink*, vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 48, 51.

John McDonald, 'A force to be reckoned with', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 19–20 April 2008, p. 16.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Postmodern Frame — artist's practice



In what ways does Fiona Hall challenge traditional artmaking practices?

2. Structural Frame — artist's practice



'Hall suggests meaning through her choice of materials, wit and symbolism.' Discuss this statement.

3. Critical practice

Discuss the role of the art critic, using the above reviews on Fiona Hall as examples to substantiate your argument. (You might consider some of the following concepts: persuasion, opinion, judgement, interpretation, justification, information, entertaining, challenging.)

ESSAY QUESTIONS



1. Conceptual Framework — artist's practice

How do Fiona Hall and one other contemporary artist of your choice confront and involve the audience through their choice of material and form?

Cultural Frame



2. Explain how at least two contemporary artists create cultural comments through the subject matter of plant life or nature in general. (You might consider the work of Janet Laurence, Simryn Gill or Hossein Valamanesh.)
3. 'Traditions and conventions can influence artmaking practice.' Discuss this statement with reference to artists who either follow them and/or challenge them.

(Written in 10 minutes under examination conditions)

Fiona Hall's approach to her world is explained, including the issues that concern her and are her main artistic focus.

Reinforces the explanation by analysing and interpreting an artwork

SAMPLE SHORT RESPONSE



Conceptual Framework

How does Fiona Hall respond to her world? Discuss, referring to ONE of her artworks.

Fiona Hall constantly searches the world for her ideas and images, striving for understanding and meaning. In her works she loves intensity and intricacy in construction while using non-traditional materials. She addresses and comments on important current political and social issues, such as the trafficking of plants and plant products, environmental pollution, diminishing of animal habitats, effects of colonialism, consumerism and experiments in bio-engineering. Hall focuses on the relationship between humans and nature. She is concerned with the state of the world and the need for human responsibility, as seen in her work *Tender* 2003–05, which relates to conflict and destruction, focusing on connections between natural habitats and systems of trade.

This artwork consists of dozens of bird's nests of different shapes and sizes that are made out of American one-dollar bills. She has shredded the money to represent the twigs used for nests in the natural environment. The work conveys to the audience the idea that the environment has been destroyed by human greed. With deforestation, birds, animals and people are losing their homes. The audience shares her despair at the way the world is being destroyed for profits, the nests representing homes built with care and tenderness now empty and abandoned due to so-called progress.

Deon Pazzinis, Year 11

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY

Conceptual Framework



Discuss the work of two artists in relationship to the art object in contemporary art and its relationship with the audience.

Contemporary artists Andy Goldsworthy and Fiona Hall investigate nature as the main theme of their works, exploring new ways to break the expectations of art by working with non-traditional materials to address contemporary issues. The artists challenge their audiences to interpret the artworks in their own fashion based on personal experiences and knowledge. This relationship with the audience is derived from contemporary ideals and structures.

British artist Andy Goldsworthy attempts to understand nature by directly participating in it, placing himself within an environment and challenging himself to grasp and capture the beauty of the site. 'That's what I'm trying to understand, not a single isolated object but nature as a whole.'

Goldsworthy uses non-traditional materials direct from nature such as leaves, pebbles, sticks, thorns, berries, ice and snow. Using these natural elements, Goldsworthy simply rearranges what the environment already provides. He creates his works without marking or disturbing the land. In *Dandelions & Hole* 1985, Goldsworthy has formulated an artwork using a field of dandelions and grass, restructuring the materials to create a new image, yet without damaging or impacting on the environment.

Like many contemporary artists, Goldsworthy is sensitive to environmental issues when constructing his works, using natural 'found' tools, such as thorns, rocks and saliva to put together his works without permanently damaging the land. 'I take nothing out with me in the way of tools, glue or rope, preferring to explore the natural bonds and tensions that exist within the earth.' *Icicle Star* 1985 demonstrates this approach to artmaking, as the work is constructed of a number of frozen icicles bonded together using spit to create a freestanding star positioned on top of a rock.

As Goldsworthy works in the open air and natural elements he is fascinated by the concept of deterioration. His works are subject to sun, wind, rain and snow, and have a short-term life. 'My sculpture can last for days or a few seconds — what is important to me is the experience of making.' This concept contradicts the historical idea of the permanence of art. To 'preserve' his works, Goldsworthy records them photographically, capturing the process of the works coming alive, at their peak, and their deterioration.

As well as the concept of art as a permanent fixture, Goldsworthy challenges the notion of art institutions and art as a valuable object. He avoids traditional means of exhibition by constructing his works in public spaces outside galleries. In doing so Goldsworthy prevents people from being able to buy his works, challenging the idea that an artwork must be a valuable object.

In *Midsummer Snowballs* 2000, several large-scale snowballs constructed of snow and concealed natural elements were positioned

(Written in 45 minutes under examination conditions)

Introduction states how the question is to be interpreted

Artist's intentions are stated and reinforced with a quote

Techniques and materials are outlined generally before a specific artwork is described

Artmaking process

Second artwork example

	<p>at sites across the city of London. The element of surprise was most important in this work, as viewers were shocked to come across giant snowballs in the middle of summer. Goldsworthy confronted the audience by displaying these natural elements in the unnatural environment, leaving viewers to touch, laugh or simply gaze at the constructions.</p>
Third artwork example	<p>In <i>Cow Dung on Glass</i> 2007, cow dung frames a clear serpent shape across a sheet of glass. The audience can look through the clear glass areas to the sloping hills in the background. This installation allows the audience to view the work from multiple positions, each presenting a new aspect of the artwork. By doing this, Goldsworthy indicates the way contemporary artworks allow for various interpretations to create different meanings. This work encourages the audience to reconsider what art can be constructed of and to respond to the light humour.</p>
Summing up relevance of artist to question	<p>Goldsworthy recognises that the audience is an essential part of his work, yet one that he has no control over. By exhibiting outside of traditional art galleries, Goldsworthy stimulates direct involvement from the audience, encouraging them to see the relationship between the energy and space surrounding his works.</p>
Second artist introduced	<p>Contemporary Australian artist Fiona Hall uses biological features in her artworks to make political and social statements on contemporary issues and the history behind them.</p>
Materials/techniques	<p>Hall also works with non-traditional materials, such as soft-drink cans, candles, pipes, sardine tins, beads, soap and Tupperware. She recontextualises these everyday objects, inviting us to look beyond the materials to explore deeper meanings and think about why she used the selected materials. Hall's <i>Dead in the Water</i> 1999 is constructed of PVC pipe and glass beads. The pipes have been transformed to resemble growing, living organisms, allowing us to identify once lifeless objects as biological features.</p>
First artwork explained	<p>Like many other Postmodern artists, Hall communicates environmental concerns and the consequences and damaging effects that humans have on the environment. In <i>Occupied Territory</i> 1995 she conveys through her delicately beaded and labour-intense creations the dependence of humans on nature, forcing the audience to consider contemporary issues of sustainability and our carelessness with regard to preserving natural resources.</p>
Frame, intentions	<p>In <i>Leaf Litter</i> 2001 Hall comments on social aspects of contemporary society, drawing references to consumerism and commenting on the role that plants and other biological elements have played in colonisation. Hall has said of <i>Leaf Litter</i>, 'Money doesn't grow on trees — or does it?' Here the artist challenges the audience to consider the price we are now paying for over-taxing the environment and for permitting an ever-widening gap between rich and poor nations.</p>
Second artwork	<p>Fiona Hall's works can be admired by the audience on an aesthetic level for the fine craftsmanship and skill of the artist, yet they simultaneously encourage the viewer to look deeper to find meaning behind the delicate forms. Through her research Hall ensures that her</p>

work suggests biological references as well as political undertones. *Medicine Bundle for the Non-born Child* 1993, constructed of Coca-Cola cans, comments on the use of the coca leaf, once an ingredient in the soft drink, which in Third World countries was used as a form of contraceptive. This intellectual insight makes the work more than just an object to admire; here as elsewhere Hall uses her art to comment on relevant social and political concerns.

In common with several other contemporary artists, Hall's work reflects a preoccupation with systems of display, often playing with different methods to complement and categorise her arrangement. Her well-thought-out installations are categorised to trigger awareness in the audience and capture the layering of her conceptual concerns.

By using found objects Hall encourages the audience to feel a sense of connection to and identification with the works and to comprehend the transformation of the materials into the complex and allusive artworks they have become. The use of found objects is a common practice among contemporary artists who choose to turn away from traditional materials to investigate the qualities and potential these found objects possess.

Contemporary artists Andy Goldsworthy and Fiona Hall challenge traditional perceptions of art in approach, techniques and practice by continuously breaking down barriers and pushing expectations. In doing so they also change the way the audience connects and interacts with the art object, allowing for individual interpretations and different meanings to be perceived.

Sophie Stanton, Year 11

Third artwork analysed
to support the argument

Relating back to question

Conclusion

Hossein Valamanesh

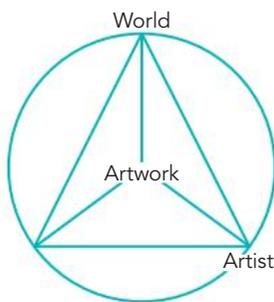
(b. 1949 in Iran, emigrated to Australia 1973,
contemporary artist)

Issues/interests: cultural identity, active engagement with natural environment/place

Forms: sculpture and installations

Frames: *Cultural* — His heritage underpins much of his art practice, in particular Sufi poetry, calligraphy in the Persian language of Farsi and the rich mythology of Persian culture. *Structural* in his use of symbols

Conceptual Framework: Valamanesh creates subtle, poetic works that communicate a sense of wonder to the viewer. His artworks cleverly entwine the two cultures of his native Iran and Australia. He explores humanity's essential connection to place. His works are both contemporary Australian and universal. He makes artworks that challenge what art is and how it is created, yet their appeal is to a broad audience.



Artworks in this unit

On the Way 1990

Lighting the Shadows 1999

Miniature with Italian Pine (2) 2001

Fallen Branch 2005

Madmen Have Seen the Moon 2005



Artist's voice — Hossein Valamanesh

Use the **Artist's voice** weblink in your eBookPLUS to watch an interview with Hossein Valamanesh.

VOCABULARY

alienation feeling of hostility, estrangement, foreignness, a common theme in Postmodern art

philosophical concerned with the principles of knowledge, beliefs, values and ideas about existence

Valamanesh's themes of identity, cultural experiences and personal journeys are evident in *On the Way* 1990 (opposite). It suggests a growing up and a going away. A tension is created between the real objects and the painted shadow, thus taking the use of found objects one step further than its use earlier by the Modernist Marcel Duchamp. The shadow is an important symbol in his work, being an image that changes by following things and, according to the light, connecting and uniting.

On a higher level, light provides a sense of gravity, linking the universe with the earth, the divine light with the human. This work links with the artist's main theme of vulnerability — inner weakness, loneliness, displacement and **alienation**.



On the Way 1990

earth, synthetic polymer paint on jute, pigment, Persian shoes, silk scarf, bread, walking stick, cedar
270 × 270 × 97 cm

Private collection

Photo: M. Kluvanek

Courtesy of Grant Pirrie/Hossein Valamanesh

© Hossein Valamanesh, 2005

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In *Lighting the Shadows* 1999 (below) everyday objects are carefully selected and arranged: a well-used wooden table, set askew by a shortened leg, admits light through a cluster of holes in the outline of a person onto a Persian rug below. Here Valamanesh uses light rather than shadow to suggest a presence. The little dots of light also link to another work, *Dot Painting for Beginners*, influenced by Aboriginal dot paintings.



Lighting the Shadows 1999

wooden table, Persian carpet,
240 × 100 × 77 cm

National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne

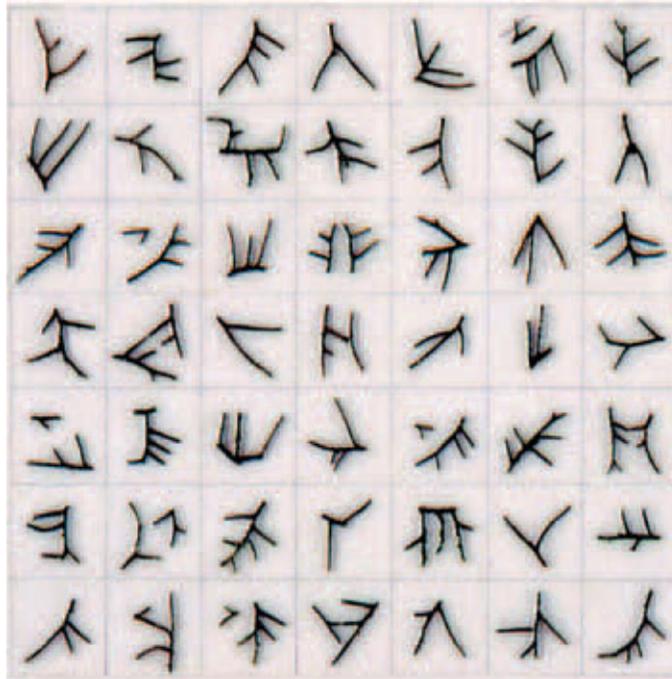
Photo: M. Kluvanek

Courtesy of Grant Pirrie/Hossein Valamanesh

© Hossein Valamanesh, 2005

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It is the relationships between the objects and with space that gives them their allure and sense of mysticism and produces a healing calmness. The objects have their own cultural history and associations. It is a powerful piece suggesting many layers of interpretation.



Miniature with Italian Pine (2)

2001

leaves, wax, varnish on paper

Paper: 57 × 57 cm

Private collection

Photo: M. Kluvanek

Courtesy of Grant Pirrie/Hossein

Valamanesh

© Hossein Valamanesh, 2005

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Out of tiny natural objects in *Miniature with Italian Pine (2)* (above) Valamanesh has imposed a sense of order, creating a delicate pattern that suggests a type of calligraphy. As in all his works, there is precision and attention to detail. It is an object for contemplation. This work is delicate, clever and visually beautiful, and suggests intriguing references.



Fallen Branch 2005

bronze

160 cm diameter × 7 cm deep

Edition of 3

Art Gallery of South Australia,

Adelaide

Photo: Paul Green

Courtesy of Grant Pirrie/Hossein

Valamanesh

© Hossein Valamanesh, 2005

Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

In *Fallen Branch* 2005 (opposite) one recognises that the branch has been manipulated by a master craftsman to render nature even more perfect, more spiritual in feel. Order in the form of symmetry has been applied, the branch's extremities cut to form a circle, the branches fused. This natural object has been transformed into an art object, cast in bronze. Yet we still appreciate the irregularities of nature, the gentle twists and thickenings of the twigs and their sense of unity. The shadows projected onto the pristine gallery wall are more obvious and rely on the movement of the viewer rather than the passage of the sun. Our senses have been fine-tuned to appreciate nature, while at the same time we are aware of the artist's presence. This work is a continuation of his 2004 exhibition including the piece *Converge*, consisting of two horizontal branches along a gallery wall, the tips of the branches merging into one like fingertips touching.



Madmen Have Seen the Moon

2005

Casuarina, American Cherry,
perspex, granite

414 × 80 × 60 cm

Collection of the artist

Photo: M. Kluvanek

Courtesy of Grant Pirrie/Hossein
Valamanesh

© Hossein Valamanesh, 2005

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The title of the work on page 25 is taken from a poem by the great Persian poet Rumi (1207–1273): ‘The madmen have seen the moon in the window; they are running to the roof with ladders.’ Valamanesh used the symbol of the ladder in several earlier works. Various layers of meaning can be interpreted by the audience: a spiritual ladder to the hereafter, a journey, a slow climb to awareness and self-identity, a bridge or joining point, a way forward.

The choice of these objects, of materials and of placement — in this case, the almost magical interweaving of the objects — is evidence of the artist’s ingenuity and craftsmanship, the attention to detail that creates a sense of wonder as we question which way up the ladders should go and how they are interlocked.

Artist’s practice

Influences

Valamanesh’s work is inspired particularly, in both its themes and titles, by Persian poetry. The themes of personal identity, spiritual enlightenment and love — especially as explored in the verse of Rumi — underlie many of his works. Much Persian poetry has an underlying moral purpose, being designed to guide the reader through life. The influence of Sufism, an ancient mystical branch of Islam, is also significant. His work synthesises his cultural background, his personal experiences from the past as well as his experiences in his adopted South Australia and his innate interest in the natural environment.

Intention/meaning

The products of his influences are sensitive and elegant sculptures and installations that explore the ideas of identity and connectedness to place. They suggest memory, cultural dislocation and loss. What makes his works special is their sense of integrity. Their cultural references are by no means superficial. Valamanesh’s work is imbedded in history and personal experience. He manages to create cultural depth by representing cultural history but with contemporary references. If you look closely at his works, his quiet presence — in profile, body outline or shadow — often becomes visible. Journeys and the notion of displacement are concerns in his work, as suggested in the titles *Recent Arrival* 1998 and *Longing, Belonging* 1997. Valamanesh relates to childhood experiences, spiritual references and experiences of different cultures, exploring these connections in visual form. His works are thus about felt experience on the part of the artist and create a heartfelt experience for the viewer.

The overriding concerns in his work are **philosophical**, relating to the human spirit, self-knowledge and how best we might live our lives. It is poetic and rich in meanings and associations, encouraging the viewer to reflect on the fragility of life through the prism of their own memories and experiences.

Materials/methods/choices

Valamanesh's means of expression include the use of natural materials such as branches, leaves, mud and stone, juxtaposed in many instances by manufactured items such as carpets and tables, and often imbued with a sense of the progression of time and mood by the inclusion of candles and fire. Some of his works seem at first glance whimsical or playful, yet there is an underlying meaning to this extreme simplification, this reduction to the poignant essence. He has carefully selected his materials and their arrangement. Sand is an important element in several of his works, symbolising and linking his experiences in the Australian desert landscape and sand's cultural significance for the Aboriginal people with that of the landscape near his childhood home of Khash, a remote dry area near the Pakistan border. His work suggests a respect for, as well as a desire for reconciliation between, the two cultures, drawing together his experiences and responses to each place.

The raw beauty of these natural materials displayed in unique, imaginative ways creates a mystique and interpretive complexity. An example is *Untitled* 1999, a sculpture consisting of a carefully selected piece of lavender bush, upturned so it is supported by its delicate branches, with an oil burner at its apex. The flame from a candle or oil burner is an intimate light that is both comforting and illuminating, creating a mood of contemplation. References to light in connection with the divine are found in the mystical teachings of Sufism.

Valamanesh has a parallel career as a public sculptor. His commissions include the sculptural installation in the grounds of Hyde Park Barracks, *Memorial to the Great Irish Famine*, his project for the Adelaide Convention Centre, *Knocking from the Inside* 1989, and *Faultline* 1996, on Riverside Quay, Southbank, Melbourne.

Symbols

Symbols are an important aspect of Valamanesh's work; symbols and conscious combinations of objects add rich meaning. The fingerprint represents individuality, ladders suggest links or pathways (possibly to heaven), mirrors symbolise the soul, and a flame symbolises spirituality or renewal. The ladder relates to the scale of the body. It also suggests a climb or transcendence, and we are persuaded that to escape to a higher state requires an act of faith. The human figure, and in particular its shadow, symbolises identity. Human shadows, normally fleeting and immaterial in Valamanesh's works, may be constructed of lead or crushed rock to create a form made heavy and solid. Valamanesh uses the inherent qualities of materials to convey complex ideas, using whatever methods and media are appropriate to the idea he is engaged with. He uses different textures and materials as metaphors — for Valamanesh charcoal is not just a drawing material; it also represents something burnt and therefore lost.



Conceptual Framework

Valamanesh has a fascination with real objects, their intrinsic quality, presence and suggestiveness. The viewer reacts instinctively to these materials according to their own experience, but Valamanesh carefully and gently challenges the viewer's perceptions through his selection and positioning. His concern for precision of placement and relationships between forms can perhaps be attributed to his interest in pure forms of geometry and his skill as a craftsman.

Valamanesh's artworks combine personal experiences, choices, skills and ideas, resulting in artistic concepts that reflect imaginative inquiry and raise questions for his audience.

Artist's statement

'What I find fascinating is a certain attitude towards looking at the world. Where do we come in, how do we deal with nature in, say, architecture? The way we build, the way we grow gardens? We're inspired by nature but at the same time we have to have our own image in it as well — we'd like to be in charge of it. That's why you see in my work this order. I don't let leaves just go where they want.'

Quoted in Deborah Bogle, 'The face', *Weekend Australian*, 19 April 2003, p. B03.

Critical practice

'Valamanesh is a poet of the very highest order, one whose tools of trade are not words, but objects that surround us in daily life, selected and combined to evoke certain reactions and sensations.

'Here is an artist who speaks with compassion for everything inside us that is scarred or unresolved.'

Benjamin Genocchio, 'Master of vulnerability', *Weekend Australian*, 14–15 July 2001, Arts, p. 21.

'Hossein Valamanesh has definitely left his mark on the Museum of Contemporary Art. In a grand act of self-portraiture, this Iranian-born artist has created a giant imprint of his forefinger laid out in earth and stones on the MCA's grass forecourt. This use of natural materials presages much of the content of his exhibition inside the gallery. Incorporating assemblage, installation, drawing and sculpture, the artist creates subtle and poetic works that connect his cultural history to his new sense of place in Australia . . .

'It's difficult not to feel a kind of reverential awe while wandering through the exhibits. Valamanesh's work possesses simultaneously an earthiness and a quiet mysticism, heaven and earth brought together through the medium of art.'

Victoria Hynes, 'Earth and fire: Iran and the outback meet in Hossein Valamanesh's art', exhibition review, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 March 2002, Metro, p. 26.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Structural Frame — artist's practice



Examine Valamanesh's use of symbols and media to convey meaning.

2. Conceptual Framework



Investigate two artists' expressions of identity connected to their response to place. Refer to the second work by Valamanesh and the first by von Guérard.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Cultural Frame



1. Explore through the work of at least two artists the cultural perspective on the notion of identity.
2. Explore the cultural relationship between religion and nature through a consideration of the work of Valamanesh and others. You might consider Aboriginal art or the New Zealand artist Colin McCahon.

3. Conceptual Framework



Investigate how artists have used 'found objects' to create a new art form, the 'installation'. You might consider the work of Valamanesh, Ken Unsworth, Ai Weiwei or Fiona Hall.

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY

Structural Frame



Discuss how artists represent issues and ideas through a visual language.

Hossein Valamanesh's artmaking reflects an interest in cultural identity through an active engagement with the environment and a strong sense of place. Del Kathryn Barton has an interest in how females are perceived in various contexts and guises and in the imaginative world. Both artists represent these issues and ideas through their visual language, in particular through their choice of media, symbolism and imagery.

Hossein Valamanesh works mainly with installations and sculptures to represent his ideas. He once said, 'What I find fascinating is the certain attitude towards looking at the world'. He explores his ideas through visual metaphors and symbolism. Valamanesh's works are mainly based on his feelings and personal responses and his twin heritages of his native Iran and Australia. He creates subtle and poetic works that instil a sense of wonder in the audience.

Hossein Valamanesh frequently uses the four elements of earth, water, fire and air, combining them with simple objects, such as a ladder or a Persian carpet, to create symbolic meanings. In his work *Longing, Belonging* a carpet is used to suggest renewal and cleansing. The work is highly spiritual and poetic. Personal memory is a major component of Valamanesh's artmaking. He weaves his two heritages together through the use of symbols. In *Day by Day* Valamanesh uses two traditional Iranian shoes filled with red sand, making an obvious connection between his two cultures. Layers of meaning are suggested, such as a journey, possessions, hardships, nature and a sense of place, but are left slightly ambiguous, allowing

(Written in 45 minutes under examination conditions)

Introduces the artists and their main intentions

Visual language introduced — 'symbolism' and influences on visual language of the artist

Further reference to symbols through analysis of two artworks

the viewer to contemplate their own relationship with self, others and the environment.

With his use of humble objects and raw materials, Valamanesh suggests the fragility of life. In *Untitled (Palm Leaf)* a dried palm leaf is used to signify his Iranian heritage but is also an expression of the patterns and beauty of nature. Many of Valamanesh's works act as metaphors for the search for personal identity and the wider issue of humanity's connection to place.

Del Kathryn Barton is a contemporary Australian artist working in Sydney. Her ideas for her artmaking spring mainly from her imaginative world and emotions rather than the real world. Her works are distinctive for her attention to surface and her treatment of the figure. Her paintings are very visually appealing because of her use of layering, detailed patterns and choice of colours. Barton's works are very personal: as a female and mother she has been drawn into the world of childhood innocence. (In 2008 she won the Archibald Prize for a painting of her children.)

Del Kathryn Barton has said 'a lot of my works are self-reflective', as she shows layers of self and changes over time. In her artwork *The Last Girl* a female figure is playing with her pets — a bird and a young deer — which suggests fantasy and the mystical realm. The painting is highly detailed, with the patterns on the figure's clothing creating balance as the treatment of the flesh is very subtle. There is a suggestion of witchcraft, but the approach is poetic or lyrical.

Del Kathryn Barton has an interest in the shallowness of fashion, the unnatural poses and the way personality is negated in the styling process, as well as the fantasy and mystical aspects of makeup. Barton often allows the watercolour to run in her artworks (around lips and eyes in particular), suggesting the unravelling of makeup rather than perfection. In her work *She Appeared as a Lover Might* there is evidence of the influences of Egon Schiele in the erotic and ambiguous figure. Red is used symbolically to suggest lust, love and desire, which is seen in the way the figure has been placed and is reflected in the title. Although most of her paintings explore beauty not only in the faces but also in the sumptuous surfaces, this figure verges on the ugly with its large eyes, no hair and body mutations. The lips suggest seduction, drawing the audience into the work, while the hands and arms are, in contrast, white, symbolising remaining innocence.

Valamanesh and Barton both represent ideas and issues through very individual visual language: Barton uses intricate painted detail and line drawing to represent notions of beauty and innocence, while Valamanesh uses found objects, symbols and metaphor to explore his cultural identity as a journey.

Margaret Chan, Year 12

Third artwork introduced

Meanings suggested by choices and visual language of artist

Second artist introduced

Visual language of pattern and colour choices, relating back to the question

Quote supports the image

First artwork analysed

Further explores the artist's meanings and the visual language used to create them

Second artwork and influences

Conclusion

More information on Del Kathryn Barton can be found in *Contemporary Artwise 2* (Wiley, 2009).

Janet Laurence

(b. 1949, contemporary Australian artist)

Issues/interests: art and nature; relationships between nature, memory and culture; site-specific works related to architecture

Forms: mixed-media installations, site-specific works, wall pieces on Duraclear

Frames: *Cultural* in her references to place and memory; *Postmodern* in her approach and use of materials

Conceptual Framework: Much of Laurence's work is interactive and engages several of the audience's senses, which creates a different involvement between audience and artwork. Her site-specific works have cultural relevance, but the concepts and themes also relate to issues of history and alchemy and the links between science and art, art and architecture.

Artworks in this unit

Ashen Salt 2006–07

Liquid Green No. 5 2008

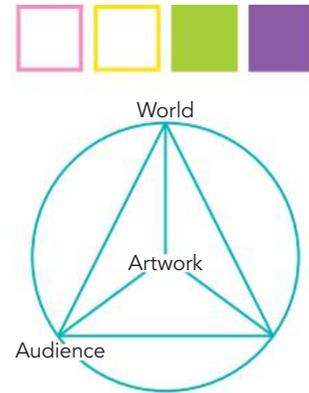
Natural History (Landscape and Residue series) 2008

Edge of the Trees 1994

eLesson: Interview with Janet Laurence

Janet Laurence gives an insight into her work and inspiration.

SEARCHLIGHT ID: ELES-0642



VOCABULARY

alchemy a medieval forerunner to chemistry whose main objective was to transform metals of little value into gold

ephemeral existing for only a short time

rejuvenative having the ability to make young or come alive again (e.g. plants after a fire)

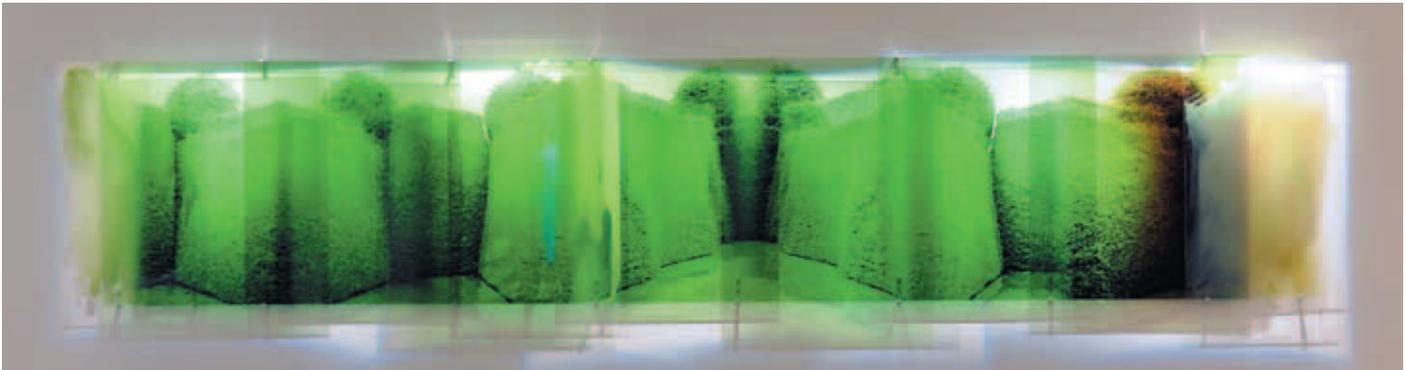
Ashen Salt 2006–07 (page 32) is part of a series relating to bushfires, exploring the fragility of nature and its **rejuvenative** capacity. This work carries on Janet Laurence's interests since 2004 in investigating and honouring threatened or destroyed landscapes in both Australia and Central America. Her unique vision of environmental catastrophe is conveyed to the audience, inviting them to reflect on the fragile ecology of the natural world.

Ashen Salt 2006–07

Duraclear, shinkolite acrylic,
aluminium, oil, pigment
5 panels
100 × 146 × 9.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and
Arc One Gallery, Melbourne



By overlapping layers of transparent panels, some with opaque areas where liquids have been poured over the surface, Laurence sets up a mood of transformation and mutation. It is a cross between landscape painting and photographic documentation, enticing the viewer not only to react to its beauty but also to consider ecological and environmental issues.



Liquid Green No. 5 2008

From *Greenspace* series
Duraclear + oil on shinkolite
acrylic
100 × 482 × 10 cm
Exhibited at Galerie Düsseldorf
2008
Courtesy of the artist and
Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

Liquid Green No. 5 suggests that Laurence's concerns run deeper than simply showing the decorative nature of lush green bushes. As in many Postmodern artworks, the artist is challenging us to consider our values and the potential impact of our actions and beliefs. The vivid green verges on the toxic, thus linking the inherent beauty to some of the uglier results of human intervention in the landscape. The viewpoint of the images emphasises the geometrical organisation and pruning of the hedges. The relationship between the overlapping panels sets up a slow forward motion as the eye moves from one level to the next, which has an almost meditative or reflective influence on the viewer. The way they are displayed as panels on brackets projecting slightly from the gallery wall, so adding shadows, suggests a shifting of

time. This work, as with many of her works, explores the way humans respond to space, be it natural or artificial, and how this has shifted through history.



Natural History (Landscape and Residue series) 2008 (2 units)
glass vials, botanical specimens,
wood, steel, polished aluminium
mirror
Variable dimensions
Courtesy of the artist and
Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

The sculptural *Natural History* (above) combines several of her interests, including the damaged or carbonised landscape, the mysteries of the natural world and the suggestion of scientific intervention and classification that one hopes is an attempt to understand the loss and work towards prevention.

Although there is the inference that these are specimens of damaged plants, there is also a beauty in the way they have been displayed, their reflections in the mirror below suggesting rejuvenation. The natural and artificial materials offer contrast yet suggest an interconnectedness.

Many contemporary artists work in collaboration with other artists to combine their creative powers and expertise, either working as one unit or team, such as Ms & Mr or the Kingpins, or coming together for particular projects, especially commissions, as in the case of the work *Edge of the Trees* (page 34), where Laurence worked with Fiona Foley on an installation for the forecourt of the Museum of Sydney. Each of the artists brought to the project their individual knowledge, research and artmaking practice concerns. The result is a poetic and evocative installation representing the meeting of cultures and the passage of history. It is an interactive piece not only because of its scale and the suggestion of a forest created by the 29 pillars, enticing the audience to wander among them, but because the columns emit sound and contain text and substances that require closer inspection.

The materials and text evoke cultural memories and are of historical significance appropriate to the site. The pillars are engraved with archaeological and historical texts, including the names of the First Fleeters. Engraved into one of the pillars are the names of all the clans of the Eora, who were the Indigenous people of Sydney. These names can also be heard in whispers, just audible above the traffic noise as you move among the pillars. Some of the pillars have a split or seam that is filled with substances behind glass pertaining to the life of the Eora people, such as oyster shells, seeds, honey (a food source and also a binding agent in art), bones, ash, resin (a healing agent) and hair (used in Aboriginal ceremonies). The sandstone pillars are engraved with extracts from the notebooks of Lieutenant William Dawes (a First Fleeter who attempted to write down the Eora language).



***Edge of the Trees* 1994**

Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley
Museum of Sydney on the site of
the first Government House
Courtesy of the artist and
Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

I have been working with archaeologists, botanists, linguists, historians, writers, engineers, architects; everybody is assisting one another ... it has this fantastic atmosphere of collaboration. You are

not just an isolated artist who is doing this thing; you are actually working with the whole museum and this is why it is such an unusual piece, in that it is a curated museum exhibit. (Artist quoted in Bronwyn Watson, 'Building on rare harmony', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 June 1994, p. 30)

In 1999 Laurence worked in collaboration with Jisuk Han on the Sydney Sculpture Walk in the Domain: the work *Veil of Trees* involved the planting of native grasses and forest red gums and glass panels embedded with organic materials, including seeds, pollen, ashes and honey, engraved with the names of indigenous trees and sections of text from Australian literature. Memory and the cultural and historical significance of nature are linked.

Artist's practice

Intentions

Janet Laurence's continuing focus is the relationship between the natural world and the architectural context, which at times involves collaborations with architects, environmental scientists and landscape architects. Her works thus depict or suggest organic qualities while referencing or echoing architectural forms. They often contain a sense of transience, fluidity or instability as images dissolve, are reflected or overlap in transparent and translucent layers. Her works often respond to a particular site or environment, reflecting past usage or memory. They may suggest the **ephemeral** while in fact being permanently installed. Underlying themes include history, alchemical transformation, and perception combining concepts from art, science, horticulture, imagination and memory.

Laurence's artmaking practice is a personal reflection of her world. Her artworks invite us to pause and share the experience.



Janet Laurence
Courtesy of the artist and
Arc One Gallery, Melbourne

Materials/choice/display

In her early installation work — for example, the *Periodic Tables* series of 1992–93 — Laurence used the basic elements of sulfur, salt and mercury and the principles of **alchemy**. These works showed links with concepts of scientific analysis and categorisation. The materials are laden with cultural associations: salt is associated with food and preserving, as well as erosion over time; salt mining has a long history; ashes are linked with cremation and ceremonies. These substances appear again in *Edge of the Trees* 2004.

Increasingly Laurence has been working with transparent materials, in particular Duraclear, a photographic acrylic sheet and glass. In *Unfold* 1997, photographic images of captive wild animals are transferred onto Duraclear, while over these images she has spilt substances and materials such as salt, carbon, seeds and sulfur, suggesting the flow of time and the destruction of the images. In her work *Translucidus* 2002, which is on display in the Qantas Club Lounge, Sydney, she combines overlapping layers of subtle images suggestive of nature, printed on Duraclear, text referring to scientific classifications in nature (e.g. cumulus) and sections in which substances have been poured down, resulting in more opaque areas. She has said that she likes the reflective qualities of glass — the way the viewer is reflected into the artwork.

Laurence's 2004 *Verdant Works* consists of 11 overlapping panels, some clear, some aluminium, most Duraclear on which appear images from the natural world (hedges, fallen leaves, grasses) as well as significant architectural structures from Europe, including the Barcelona Pavilion by architect Mies van der Rohe and the Kroller Moller Museum. We are reminded of transformations, slippage and material transformations. The works appear as metaphors for our ever-changing world. Colour is an important element, the acid greens and russet browns bringing us back to aesthetic considerations.

Laurence works with contrasts, such as earth and water, or plants and breath, and with the transmutation of one substance into another, which is part of the appeal of glass, which can be transparent, translucent, revealing or reflecting. Recently she has been working with glass-blower Gabriella Bisetto. Placing such organic materials as pine cones, seed pods and seaweed into the vessels as they are being blown has resulted in interesting transformations of matter as a result of the heat involved in the process of blowing glass. These investigations have led to a series of works titled *Carbon Futures* 2008.

Artist's statements

'From as early as the '70s, I was always interested in the idea of how art worked in a space — how art could contribute to the definition of a space and make the viewer participate holistically within that space ...

'The more I started playing with glass, the more it started to interest me as a material that would reflect you the viewer into it and the environment in which it was; the fact that it could be translucent, transparent, reflective ... could represent water, solids, liquid. It is also

Interview with the artist by Denise Salvestro, Galerie Dusseldorf, Perth.

a material that so much of our world has been built in today — an architectural material. I use it as a medium ... I can pour substances over it and you can see their passage, their dispersal, their action ...'

'For me the veil is the space between perception and memory.

Still space, slow space.

A dissolving membrane, a hesitation.

A way of looking within the world rather than at it.'

Quoted at www.zulenet.com, 2003.

Critical practice

'The distinctive artworks and installations of Janet Laurence reflect her lifelong interest in the interconnectedness of all living things and her ecological understanding of the world. Her works — in museums and galleries as well as outdoor sites and domestic spaces — are as much poetic and alchemical as they are scientific and art-historical, but they are always grounded in nature.'

Laura Murray Cree, 'Poetry and alchemy', in *Art World*, August/September 2008, p. 71.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Conceptual Framework



'Site-specific works not only reflect the world but become part of a particular site, in either a permanent or a transitory way.'

Analyse this statement, making reference to the artworks *Edge of the Trees* by Laurence, *Leaf Line*, *Town Head Burn*, *Dumfriesshire 2003* by Andy Goldsworthy, and one work by Tim Silver.

2. Critical practice

If possible, visit either *Edge of the Trees* at the Museum of Sydney or *Shadow 2000* created for the Sydney Olympic site, her work in the Domain (Botanical Gardens), Sydney, opposite the Boy Charlton Pool, or in the Qantas Lounge at Sydney airport, and write a critical review of the work with particular reference to its connectedness to the site.

3. Conceptual Framework



Evaluate the intentions, symbols and techniques used by von Guérard in *Mt Kosciusko 1863* and by Janet Laurence in *Natural History 2008* to interpret their world.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Artist's practice

1. Evaluate the work of Janet Laurence and at least one other artist who creates individual interpretations of the theme of nature.
2. Choice of materials and methods of display are important considerations for Postmodern artists. Discuss this statement with reference to the work of Janet Laurence and one other artist of your choice. Consider the changes that have resulted in the artwork–audience relationship as a result of these practices.

3. Cultural Frame



At first glance artists may appear to be concerned only with aesthetics, yet a closer study will often reveal layers of meaning relating to issues of global concern — deforestation, the fragility and interconnectedness of our environment, endangered species and the effects of consumerism, to name a few. Discuss the work of a range of artists who approach their work from the *Cultural Frame*, challenging our views on ecology and the environment.

(Written in 10 minutes under examination conditions)

Forms, intentions illustrated by artist quote

Three artworks referenced to explain choices of media and effect achieved

Another artist quote supports argument

Working methods elaborated

SAMPLE SHORT RESPONSE

Discuss the artmaking practice of Janet Laurence.

Janet Laurence's combination of media, techniques and working methods effectively convey strong meaning related to nature and portray a unique visual language.

Janet Laurence works with mixed media and installations, her work reflecting cultural and experiential relationships with nature, often from an architectural context. 'For me the veil is the space between perception and memory, still space, slow space, a dissolving membrane, a hesitation, a way of looking at the world from within it, rather than at it.'

Laurence explores the properties of the natural environment through her art, working with an array of diverse media including wax, glass, ash and minerals. She suggests meaning through her choice of media and her compositions. For example, in the 2007 work *After Burn* her combination of natural phenomena and man-made materials such as glass brings together the concept of built and natural environments. The effect is mesmerising; the transformation of trees melting into the transparency of the glass creates an intangible effect. Her use of glass in *Liquid Dream* and *In the Shadows* creates a sense of transformation of matter.

Laurence's suggestion of material transformation metaphorically represents the ever-changing environment surrounding us. Laurence states, 'I made a conscious decision to make work which was about relating to our environment'.

Her works have personal as well as cultural significance, making reference to the historical context of the media as well as the environment surrounding the artwork. She works methodically, first establishing a sound understanding of her art's purpose, and then transforming simple materials into an emotional visual language.

Alexandra Teo, Year 11

Emily Kam Kngwarreye

(c. 1910–1996, Northern Territory; language group: Anmatyerre)

Form: painting

Frames: *Structural* in their abstraction; *Cultural* in their references to Dreaming stories and particular places

Conceptual Framework: Kngwarreye represents her world and culture.

Artworks in this unit

From the Alhalkere Suite 1993

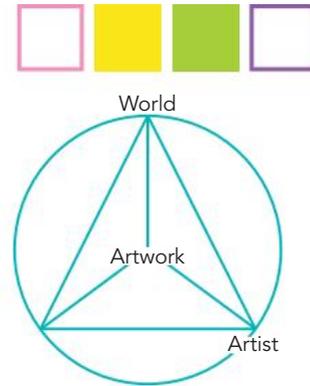
Big Yam Dreaming 1995

Kam (pencil yam seed) 1988

eBookplus

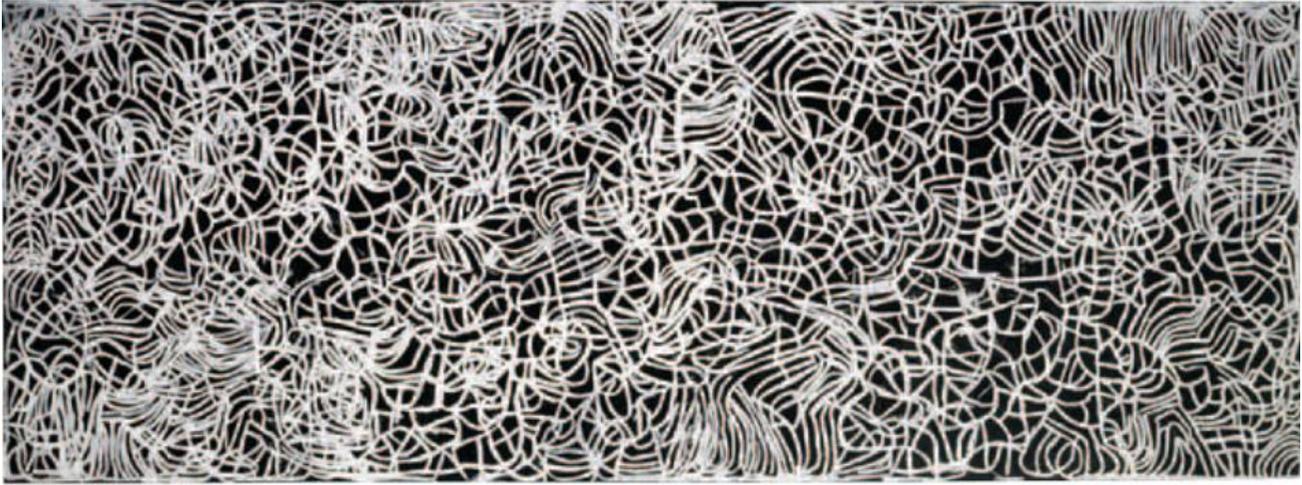
Alhalkere, Paintings from Utopia

Use the **Paintings from Utopia** weblink in your eBookPLUS to discover more about the life and work of Emily Kam Kngwarreye.



Emily Kam Kngwarreye
(from the *Alhalkere Suite*) 1993
synthetic polymer paint
90.0 × 120.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra
Purchased 1993
© Emily Kam Kngwarreye
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

As in much of her work of the early nineties, a profusion of dots activates the surface of this painting from the *Alhalkere Suite*. Dots are a traditional motif of the Utopia Aboriginal art style, but rather placing them side by side to create a shimmer on a flat background, Emily Kam Kngwarreye overlaps the dots, mixing the colours and creating a sense of depth and a feeling of energy. Our eyes are led around the work in a gentle unending rhythm. The paint quality is lush, the colour vibrant.



Big Yam Dreaming 1995
synthetic polymer paint on
canvas
291.1 × 801.8 cm
Place of creation: Delmore
Downs, Northern Territory
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Accn no. 1995.709
Presented through The Art
Foundation of Victoria by
Donald and Janet Holt and
family, Governors, 1995
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

In *Big Yam Dreaming* there is a rawness and an intensity of concentration expressed in the rapid, expressive brushstrokes that is typical of Emily Kam Ngwarreye's later works. It shows her directness and the confidence she gained through experimenting and developing her technical expertise. The painting has no perspective, no right way up, yet it is rich in meaning related to the yam story.

The pencil yam of her story is a creeper with bright green leaves, yellow flowers and edible roots. Her rhythmic tracery of interconnected lines can be interpreted as relating to the growth patterns of the yam's arterial roots, which reach deep for water under the dry desert sands. These lines also symbolise ancestral connections.

We are attracted first by this painting's abstract vitality, its exuberant quality, but it also appeals to our curiosity. We try to interpret the spirituality expressed, its source in ancestral beliefs, and the sense of connectedness to the growth patterns of nature and the land.

It has a vibrancy and physical presence reminiscent of the layering and scale of Abstract Expressionist paintings.

Kam (pencil yam seed) (page 41) is an example of the adaption of her Dreaming story to the non-traditional medium of painting dyes on silk. She has interpreted the yellow flowers of the yam in a dense, all-over rhythmic pattern. The overlapping of her confident strokes suggests the movement of the flowers in the wind as well as a sense of depth.

Artist's practice

Intentions/subject matter

Utopian desert Aboriginal painter Emily Kam Ngwarreye only started painting commercially when she was about 80 years old, but by the time she died in her late eighties she had produced more than 3000 paintings and had achieved international fame with her strongly patterned abstractions. As an initiated Anmatyerre elder, she had also become a great provider for her Indigenous community, painting to maintain and interpret her country — the sacred stories attached to plants and animals in their spirit guise, the desert's bountiful bush foods.



Kam (pencil yam seed) 1988

batik on silk

191.3 × 116.9 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance
of the H. J. Heinz II Charitable and Family Trust, Governor, 1994

Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Her Dreamtime stories (*awelye*) involve the mountain desert lizard, the emu, the dog, grass seed, yam seed, green beans, wild figs, the desert raisin and emu food plants. Her name *kam* means the seeds and flowers of the pencil yam plant, which grows in the creek banks. Naming a person after a particular feature of a Dreaming indicates their personal connection to the Creation story and thus their attachment to that place.

Just two weeks before she died she produced a series of 22 works of vibrant, almost fluorescent colours. Throughout her development her only subject matter was her country.

Materials/methods

Although she had long painted in ochres on the torsos of her clanswomen for ceremonies, it was not until 1978 that she joined a Utopian women's group and widened her artistic experience and use of media. She began using batik dyes, decorating silk shawls with an all-over, loose style of vibrant rhythmic imagery. A project led by Rodney Gooch at Utopia in 1989 introduced Emily Kam Kngwarreye to acrylic painting on canvas. Her canvas painting style also underwent developments. The first consisted of loose grids of root structures overlaid with tiny dots, developing into multicoloured stippled tracks or lines of the roots of plants almost hidden under the thick dotting, creating a shimmer effect. She moved into using larger brushes and layering a profusion of colour as flowers and seeds burst across the canvas. In her later work, a more gestural linear style of the underground network of roots and tubers engages the audience with its boldness. Her paintings depict nature's fertility and seasonal abundance. Her shift from complex layering of lines and dots to striking work in either vibrant colours or graphic, expressive brushstrokes in black and white reflect her creativity, a constant striving for new means of expression. The horizontal (sometimes also seen vertically), broad brushstrokes of browns and black on white backgrounds are her simplified translations of women's ceremonial body painting.

Emily Kam Kngwarreye's working methods are intriguing. She was able to work on a large scale, retaining a sense of harmony and unity yet with no preliminary drawings or compositions. In her earlier work, the layers of dots were applied by finger, brush or stick. She generally painted on unstretched canvas laid directly on the ground, seated cross-legged as she would to prepare food, working from the edges inwards although for large canvases she sat in the middle. She painted with her whole body engaged in the movement of applying the paint, with no separation between body, mind and spirit as she worked. The scale of her work ranged from small canvases to huge works of eight metres in length. It is interesting to note that she would have rarely viewed her canvases on a vertical surface, yet this is the way they are exhibited in galleries.

Although her work underwent changes and developments, there are recurring themes and motifs related to her Dreaming stories, the

expression of her spiritual relationship with her country, Alhalkere. Her main theme is the life cycle of the yam, its seasonal variations and the accompanying women's ceremonies that celebrated its importance and their responsibilities as custodians. She also painted the mountain devil lizard, grass seed, dingo, small emu plant food, green bean and yam seed. Her stunning sense of colour and vitality are her response to the vivid hues, light and beauty of the Australian red desert.

Stylistically, Kngwarreye's work differs from the typical Utopian style of art. Her work is a lot freer than their clearly defined areas and formal pattern designs. Her sense of colour is also more vibrant.

Although Kngwarreye's art draws on a long tradition of Indigenous mark-making and spirituality, it is also truly contemporary and innovative. Throughout her career her work had a distinctive style, an individual creativity with a visual intensity and a universally recognised beauty.

Aboriginal art

Aboriginal art works on various levels. Foremost is its role in depicting inherited forms, techniques and stories from the Dreaming. This works on a general mythological or spiritual level and as part of a particular artist's Dreaming as a type of map making or recognition of ownership of a place by the artist's community, including journeys across it by the sacred originators or spirits and by the artist. It is a restatement of the title or deed to the land and a way of keeping alive the stories and traditions, working as a visual record or language. Thus Aboriginal artists paint their histories as passed down from one generation to the next as a continuation of their spiritual link with their country.

Utopia

The Eastern Desert community of Utopia lies 230 kilometres north-east of Alice Springs. Utopia is the traditional land of the Anmatyerre and Alyawarre peoples and was returned to its original owners from white ownership in 1979. It was initially established, not as a government settlement or mission, but as a pastoral station for the cattle industry. The cattle provided jobs for the Aboriginal community as stockmen and domestic servants but also, in an area where native grasses and wildlife were once abundant, upset the delicate environmental balance.

Kngwarreye was born at a soakage, Alalgura, on Utopia Station and spent most of her life in this area, pursuing a traditional education and life while working on the cattle station.

Utopia's modern-day art movement started in 1977 with the establishment of batik classes to accompany a women's adult education literacy course set up earlier by Toly Sawenko and Jenny Green. Although the Utopian art movement consisted of several hundred

painters, carvers and batik artists, it was Emily Kam Ngwarreye's art that brought it international fame. In 1992 she received a federal government Artist's Creative Fellowship, and she was one of three Aboriginal artists to represent Australia at the Venice Biennale.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Cultural Frame



How is her work an expression of traditional Aboriginal beliefs and artmaking practice?

2. Structural Frame



Analyse her painting purely in terms of the art elements and principles.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Emily Kam Ngwarreye represented what she knew and saw of her country. It could be argued that Monet in his water lily paintings was also expressing his joy in, memories of and reactions to his 'country', in his case a personal retreat, his garden in Giverny, France. Explore how a range of artists represent and interpret their 'world'.
2. Emily Kam Ngwarreye was instrumental in Aboriginal art being judged on its artistic merits, not merely its storytelling properties. Discuss why you think this could be so, and particularly the links with Modernism (consider Georges Seurat, Bridget Riley, Jackson Pollock) and how one other Indigenous artist's work is similarly respected in the international art arena.
3. Both Emily Kam Ngwarreye and Mark Rothko express a spiritual dimension in their painting. How are their approaches different yet similar? Consider how the viewer reacts.

Andy Goldsworthy

(b. 1956, British)

Issues/interests: new ways of dealing with nature; exhibiting outside the art gallery; concerns with time and space and the ephemeral (temporary) quality of materials; the concept of deterioration

Forms: natural installations, sight-specific art, land art

Frame: *Postmodern* — Goldsworthy is classified as a Postmodern artist because of his unconventional working methods and use of non-traditional materials. He challenges the notion of the art object as permanent and valuable. Because of the ephemeral nature of his work (the ice melts), documentation in the form of photographs is essential.

Conceptual Framework: Goldsworthy relates to the world of nature in a direct way by working with materials on site.

Artworks in this unit

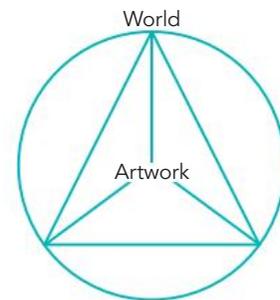
Derwent Water, Cumbria 8 March 1988

Leaves wrapped around several sticks/Joined 12 October 1999

eBookplus

NGA — Andy Goldsworthy

Use the **National Gallery of Art** weblink in your eBookPLUS to discover more about the life and work of Andy Goldsworthy.



Derwent Water, Cumbria

8 March 1988

Cibachrome print and printed text

44.0 × 40.5 cm

Government Art Collection, UK
Courtesy of Haines Gallery

Poem accompanying the artwork:

*Out early to work the morning
calm
knotweed stalks
half a hole
made complete by its own
reflection
second attempt
became windy on the first try*

Group or class discussion

In his *Midsummer Snowballs* project, 2000, Goldsworthy unloaded 13 huge snowballs from refrigerated trucks at sites across the city of London during the middle of summer. They took up to six days to melt, slowly revealing such natural elements as river pebbles, twigs, feathers and barley. This artwork elicited strong reactions from the public. How do we consider this example of art in the community compared with, say, a religious statue or a war monument? Consider the cultural contexts and purposes of art in the community. (Share ideas by creating a cluster diagram on the board.)



Andy Goldsworthy
Courtesy of Haines Gallery

Goldsworthy arranges natural elements, in this case twigs, in subtle ways without the help of human-made utensils, yet the effect is startling. We can appreciate Goldsworthy's sensitivity to nature and the gentle yet planned character of his artworks. He is interested in the randomness and irregularities of nature (the twigs are not perfectly straight), as well as a tightness, order and regularity (the geometry that can be found and created in nature). Other works in this series include standing circles made of wedges of snow and screens with cut-out patterns.

Goldsworthy combines unexpected elements, encouraging the viewer to appreciate the inherent properties and beauty of natural objects. By 'wrapping' a stone in a twirling envelope of goose feathers, we become more aware of the toughness and weight of the stone as it is juxtaposed by the delicate linear patterns and purity of the white feathers. He used a similar approach with his *Boulder wrapped in poppy petals*, but here it is the solidity and brightness of the now orange-red boulder that surprises, visually lifting it from the surrounding grey-brown rocks.

This work is similar to his *Seagull Feathers* 2002 in Dumfriesshire, where Goldsworthy laid seagull feathers in an interlocking pattern that gently fanned out over a river of stone before the incoming tide.

Leaves wrapped around several sticks/Joined (opposite) is part of a series of works using the vibrant colours of autumn leaves carefully wrapped around tree branches and sticks. This one creates a random pattern of colour; others follow an ordered sequence, progressing from, say, yellow through orange to earthy brown.

Artist's practice

Andy Goldsworthy exhibits mostly outside the gallery, finding new ways of creating transient artworks from nature. Having worked on a farm from boyhood, he is aware of our manipulation of nature — drawing lines on a field by ploughing it, the sculptural quality of bales of hay. Born in England, he works mainly in Scotland but has exhibited as far away as Japan and the North Pole. He has been described as an environmental artist, as his work reflects deepening global concerns about the human role in environmental degradation. His choice of materials and techniques is of utmost importance to his creative process. Goldsworthy seeks to understand nature by directly participating in it, working with reeds, thorns, twigs, berries, pebbles, ice and snow. He tries to get beneath the surface of things by being aware of the energy and space around an object as well as how weather conditions affect it. Changes in light and in his materials are implicit in his work. He makes us aware of the colours, surfaces and textures in nature, contrasting the solid or rough with the delicate or transparent, often introducing a hole or curtain for us to look through. His works are generally transitory and fragile, reflecting the energies of nature, through wind, water or the passage of day (ice melts, leaves are nibbled by insects) or the seasons. Goldsworthy works mainly close to where he lives, responding to the richness and uniqueness of the site.



Leaves wrapped around several sticks/Joined 10 October 1999
© Andy Goldsworthy
Courtesy of Galerie Lelong,
New York

Other works by Goldsworthy include curtains and trails of leaves attached together with thorns, plaited, creased and polished reeds that form snakelike structures, floating patterns of interlocking blades of iris, the spaces between filled with bright red berries. Arches and spirals are recurring shapes in his works, in particular made from rocks or ice. He is concerned with change (growth and decay) and atmospheric conditions (mist, snow reflections).

Environmental issues are a main concern of many Postmodern artists, including Goldsworthy. During the course of his career he has gradually developed certain 'rules', including to:

- rely on touch
- use, if possible, 'found tools' (e.g. a sharp stone, the quill of a feather, thorns)
- make no permanent mark on the land
- ensure his creations make sympathetic contact with the natural world (at first he used only fallen branches and leaves or dead grass stalks).

The viewer is drawn to the beauty and unexpected nature of his artworks, which are generated by his heightened perceptions and creative ideas.

In 2008 Goldsworthy returned to Yorkshire Sculpture Park, near Wakefield, where he first worked in 1983, to exhibit new works along with photographs of many of his ephemeral works. The new works include, inside the gallery, a curtain made by pinning together 10 000 horse chestnut leaf stalks and, outside, a dry-stone enclosure that cradles giant fallen oaks.

Artist's statements

'Learning and understanding through touch and making is a simple but deeply important reason for doing my work.'

'I want an intimate, physical involvement with the earth. I must touch ... I take nothing out with me in the way of tools, glue or rope, preferring to explore the natural bonds and tensions that exist within the earth ... Each work is a discovery.' (Quoted in *Causey* 1980)

'When I began working outside, I had to establish instincts and feelings for Nature ... I needed a physical link before a personal approach and relationship could be formed. I splashed in water, covered myself in mud, went barefoot and woke with the dawn.' (Quoted in *Rain* 1985, p. 4)

'When I'm working with materials it's not just the leaf or the stone, it's the processes that are behind them that are important. That's what I'm trying to understand, not a single isolated object but nature as a whole.' (Quoted in *Sinden* 1988, p. 28)

'I often work through the night with snow or ice, to get temperatures cold enough for things to stick together. You approach the most beautiful point, the point of greatest tension, as you move towards daybreak: the sunlight which will bring the work to life will also gradually cause it to fall apart.' (Quoted in *Baginsky* 1989)

Hand to Earth: Andy Goldsworthy Sculpture 1976–1990, Henry Moore Centre for the Study of Sculpture, Leeds, UK, 1990. Quoted in *Aspects* 1986.

‘My sculpture can last for days or a few seconds — what is important to me is the experience of making. I leave all my work outside and often return to watch it decay.’

Quoted in the introduction to *Rain sun snow hail mist calm*.

‘Snow is stone — it is white stone. Snow is like sand, ice is like slate ... I have always considered snow and ice to be one of the most ephemeral of materials I have ever worked with, but here it has a feeling of permanence and it makes me realise how rhythms, cycles and seasons in nature are working at different speeds in different places ...’

Goldsworthy's thoughts while working in the Canadian Arctic in March 1989. Quoted in Andy Goldsworthy, *Midsummer Snowballs*, Introduction by Judith Collins, Thames and Hudson, London, 2001, pp. 8, 33.

‘I dislike the way that nature is perceived by some as peripheral to and separate from the city ... Part of the reaction to the snowballs is likely to be a sense of shock and bewilderment provoked by the feeling that nature has emerged in a place where it doesn't belong, similar to the reactions when a heavy snowfall brings a city to a standstill. For me, unexpected occurrences of this sort are evidence that nature is never absent, just not seen ...’

Introduction to *Andy Goldsworthy*, Viking/Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1990.

‘I need to work in a wide range of scale, reflecting what I find in nature. Working small with grasses or leaves is a strain. A sudden gust, a hungry robin, even a worm can cause collapse. I enjoy these delicate tensions, but they cause an occasional need to work large and physically hard. One scale releases energy for the other ...’

‘My approach to larger, more permanent work is longer-term. There is a process of familiarisation with site through drawings that explore the location and the space. This is the only time I use drawing to work through ideas; for me it represents a change in approach. I often live with a site at the back of my mind for months, sometimes years — a target for energies and ideas.’

‘Every stone that I place on a sculpture contains some of my own energy: the lifting, the cutting, the placing. Part of me stays with the stone, just as part of the stone stays with me ...’

Goldsworthy, in his book *Passage*, documenting the building of the West Coast Sea Cairn (a cone shape) on a tidal beach in California. Quoted in Jan Mackey, ‘Sticks and stones’, in *POL Oxygen* magazine, issue 12, 2005.

‘I loved seeing the waves hitting the cairn — each one a test but also a great sculptural combination — black wet stone and white water splash ... It was as if the sea had eaten and digested the work.’

Critical practice

‘There's a calm intensity of focus, an unfiltered immediacy that recalls the clear gaze of a child. Andy Goldsworthy collects autumn beech leaves and layers them in paint-like bands of green, yellow and russet over a small pool — intensely vivid colour splashes which wash away after rain. He collects thin panes of ice from a river pool and freezes them, like broken glass, to river rocks. Or creates an icicle row, standing sentinel on a rock.’

Jan Mackey, ‘Sticks and stones’, in *POL Oxygen* magazine, issue 12, 2005.

‘Goldsworthy's vision of the natural world and its cycles of flux and ebb is enchanting, in the old, fairytale sense of the word. To look at the play of light and water, wind and waves on the artist's creations seems to demand that one sit and consider as the erosion of time wears or tears at his works ...’

'Goldsworthy's works form part of their environment: they are designed to flare in sunshine, sparkle when covered in snow, snuggle into shadows. He makes nests of sticks with slits, draws lines through the circular, flat-leafed butterbur using threads from rushes, grinds chalk and makes a three-kilometre chalk path through a forest, the path only open when the moon is full and the path is shining.'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Read the critical review by Jan Mackey and explain how she entices the reader into the world of Goldsworthy, going beyond mere description of his works. Refer to at least one of Goldsworthy's works in your response.
2. Describe Goldsworthy's working techniques, processes and materials. What do you think would be some of the problems he would encounter?
3. Why is Goldsworthy's art described as Postmodern? (How does it challenge past traditions, expectations and methods of display?) Why does Goldsworthy (like many Postmodern artists) need to photograph or video his work?

4. Structural Frame



Use the **Andy Goldsworthy** weblink in your eBookPLUS to explore images and artist's statements linked to the following elements of Visual Arts — line, shape, form, space, value, texture. Use this as the basis of an argument to analyse Goldsworthy's work from the *Structural Frame*.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Using nature as a sculptural means has a long tradition. Think of the many fountains in Europe, such as the famous Trevi Fountain in Rome. This tradition was passed on to Australian sculptors and has been continued in modern times — for instance, in the Gerald Lewers Fountain, 1958, outside the ICI Building in Melbourne. What are the fundamental differences between the way water is used in traditional fountains designed for public spaces and the way Goldsworthy uses water as his art medium?
2. Andy Goldsworthy can be linked to other artists who have taken their work outside the gallery space, such as Christo, Michael Heizer, Walter De Maria and Robert Smithson. Discuss the similarities and differences between the approach of Goldsworthy and one other artist whose works respond to nature in a direct way.
3. Goldsworthy's works are concerned with life cycles. With this in mind, analyse his work and the work of at least one other artist with similar concerns (e.g. Marion Borgelt or Janet Laurence).

Chapter 2 Abstraction

SYLLABUS FOCUS: Structural Frame, Subjective Frame, critical practice

Abstraction is a general term for non-representational art. While it suggests an absence of subject, it in fact allows for multiple interpretations. Generally seen as deriving from the Modernists' pursuit of the avant-garde and the growing interest in 'art for art's sake', abstraction can be approached from both the *Structural* and *Subjective Frames*. But abstraction is not confined to such artists as Kandinsky and Miró (*Subjective Frame*) or to Malevitch and Mondrian (*Structural Frame*). It is seen in the large canvases of the American Abstract Expressionists, but it is also a major component in contemporary artmaking practice.

Strobe Series No. 17 2009

oil on canvas

180 × 280 cm

Exhibited at Dominik Mersch Gallery
in 2009 (*Moonlight in my Veins*)

Courtesy of the artist and
Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

© Marion Borgelt

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Mark Rothko

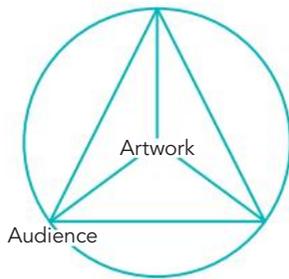
(1903–1970, Russian, moved to United States in 1913)

Issues/interests: abstraction (non-representational art) using the expressive power of colour alone

Forms: watercolour, acrylic and oil painting

Frames: *Subjective* — meditative, creates personal, emotional and spiritual response from the viewer; *Structural* — developed his own visual language, relying on balance and tension between colour and surface qualities

Conceptual Framework: The link between Rothko the artist and how he wished his audience to view his work was very strong. He demanded control of where and how his works were hung, particularly the lighting conditions. He also disliked showing his works alongside anyone else's and would not sell his work unless he could control how it would be seen. Rothko's use of powerful colour, monumental scale and a contemplative quality demands the spectator's participation in the work.



Artworks in this unit

Untitled 1955

No. 207 (Red over Dark Blue on Dark Grey) 1961

eBook plus

Mark Rothko

Use the **Rothko** weblink in your eBookPLUS to explore an illustrated timeline and biography of the Russian-born abstract artist.

VOCABULARY

automatism involuntary action, unthinking routine

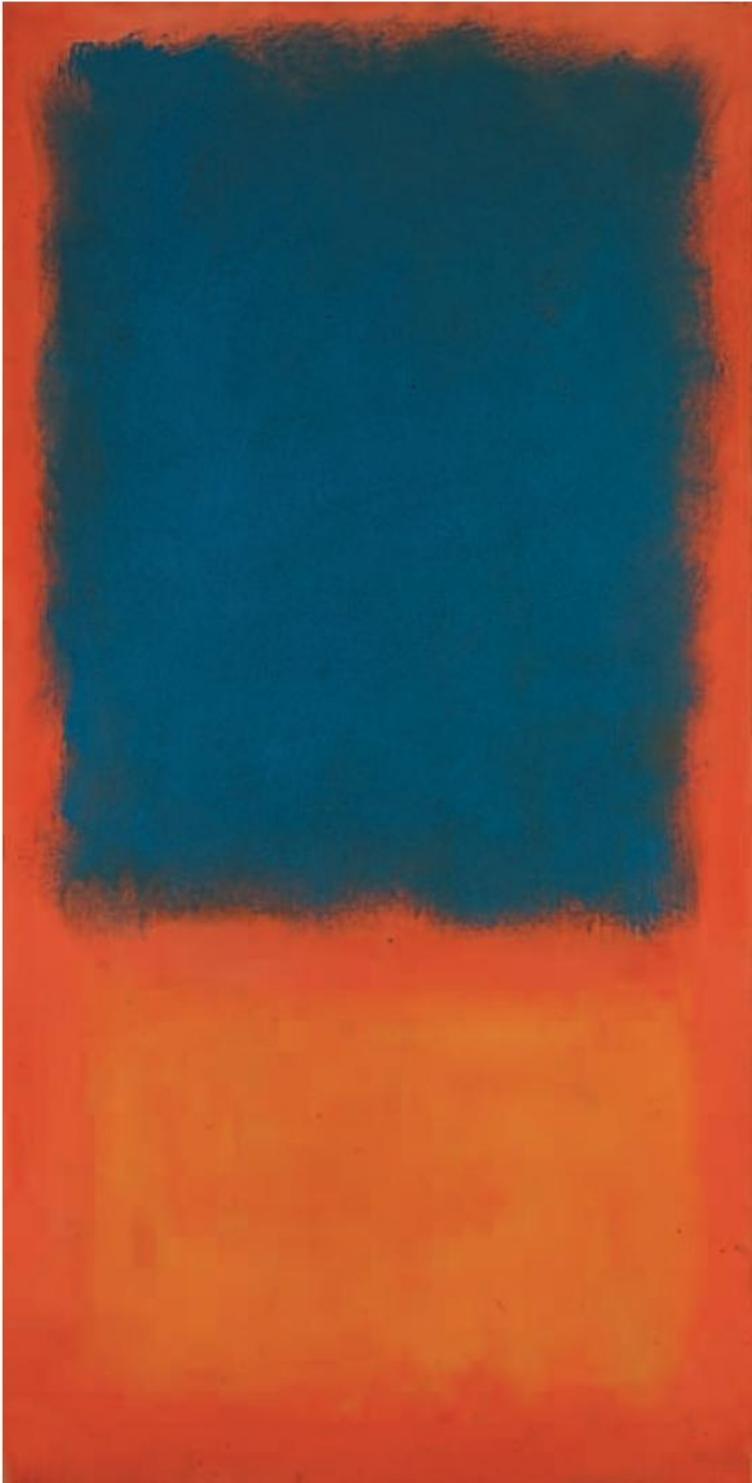
biomorphic suggestive of changing living forms; combination or variant of biological forms

Jungian a philosophy that asserts that certain core myths and beliefs are common to different societies at various times

motif distinctive feature, dominant element or image

The blue 'rectangle' in *Untitled* 1955 (opposite) has an imposing weight and seems to be compressing the thin area between it and the hovering rectangle of yellow wash below, as if falling in space. The reaction between the principal colours, blue and orange, is vibrant (they are, after all, opposing colours on the colour wheel). There is a feeling of impermanence, of matter being transformed, the edges of the shapes dissolving or melting as they react with the outer areas. The difference

in intensity of colour between the background and lower shape is subtle, enhancing the sense of mystery or of the metamorphosis of matter. Our eyes perceive change, small optical tricks occurring as we focus on different areas: space recedes, radiant colours advance, while we become aware of the slight variations in colour and texture, particularly at the edges. Colour is used in an emotive way to draw the viewer into an almost meditative state.



Untitled 1955
acrylic and mixed media on
canvas
The Israel Museum, Jerusalem
Gift of the Mark Rothko
Foundation/The Bridgeman Art
Library
© Mark Rothko/ARS
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Here the roles are reversed compared with the previous work: the blue at the bottom miraculously has less ‘power’ than the red. This highlights how colours are affected by surrounding colours, positions and distance. The dark grey seems to have drained the light out of the blue, whereas the red hovers on top, the more brilliant because of glimpses of the contrasting dark hue behind. Is the colour spreading out or receding? As with most of Rothko’s work, a gentle movement is implied, a straining of dominance, an alluring tension that allows our mind to empty of everyday thoughts, to bring self-awareness and contemplation of life’s bigger issues.



Number 207 (Red over Dark Blue on Dark Gray) 1961
oil on canvas
235.6 × 206.1 cm
University of California,
Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific
Film Archive. Museum purchase
Photo: Benjamin Blackwell
© Mark Rothko/ARS
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Historical background — biography

Mark Rothko (born Marcus Rothkovich) moved to the United States in 1913, at the age of 10. Between 1921 and 1925 he studied at Yale University and the Art Students League, New York. He was interested in mythology and **Jungian** theory and did research in colour. He was the leading colour field painter (others include Clyfford Still and Barnett Newman) of the Abstract Expressionist school. In 1960 the first permanent, public Rothko Room was created in the Phillips Collection, Washington. From 1965 to 1967 he worked on a set of paintings for the de Menil family to hang in the chapel of the Institute for Religion and Human Development, Houston, Texas. In 1970 Mark Rothko took his own life by opening his veins with a razor and taking an overdose of barbiturates.

Artist's practice

Choices/intentions/techniques

Rothko's early paintings in the 1930s were expressionistic in style, the subjects generally within the conventions of the nude, everyday life, landscape, street scenes and interiors. The works were of contemporary life but contained a feeling of tension. His first one-man show, in 1933, was at the Contemporary Arts Gallery, New York. He became interested in Greek, Jewish and Christian myths.

In the early 1940s Rothko, like many of his contemporaries such as Ashile Gorky, experimented with **automatism** and Jungian philosophy, leading to his Surrealistic **biomorphic** paintings of 1942 to 1947. These linear, symbolic **motifs** gave way to pure abstraction. In a world still reeling from World War II and murderous racism as well as global destruction, the realistic image held too much pain of association for many artists, who sought the inner world, the subconscious or the expression of ideas of universal significance through abstraction. Rothko sought a simpler expression of his feelings and complex thoughts on the universality of humanity. He now expressed physical conflict in terms of colour, texture and the division of the canvas into large floating rectangles of colours. Rothko began reducing the titles of his works to the barest description, identifying them with a number or colour. At the same time he increased the size of his canvas to create an intimacy with the viewer. Rothko believed in an immediate transaction between painting and viewer: it takes you into it. He referred to his paintings as 'dramas', stating that the ideal distance from which to view them, to feel their inner movement, discern the luminosity of the colour and experience a sense of awe, was 45 centimetres. In 1949 he established his signature form, and, with minor variations, his best-known abstract works would continue to use soft-edged rectangular areas of powerful colour directly applied to raw canvas. There is no central point of attention. His rectangles fill the picture space, and the texture of the canvas shows through the washes of colour, acting as a unifier.

Rothko focuses on spatial relationships, and the weight and emotive power of colour. The weight of colour itself becomes the only structure in the paintings. The relationship between the colours sets up a rhythmic pulsation. Red, with its elemental power and symbolic emotional effect, dominated his palette in the 1950s. He built up the intensity of his surface by staining the canvas (similar to the technique of using watercolours on paper), scumbling it as he applied successive layers of thin pigment wash. Warm colour is soaked over cool, cool over warm, light over dark or dark over light. These roughly rectangular shapes (usually two or three) are stacked vertically, one on top of the other, with intervals in between creating ambiguous depth that suggests horizons, mists or cloud banks. There is thus a link to landscape or even the architectural division of space of subways and street scenes; so although abstract these works carry implications of meaning. The works had an architectural feel, the rectangles placed vertically suggesting columns or windows, giving a mood of confinement.

Rothko, like Kandinsky, wanted to give painting the same kind of expressive power as music or literature (there is a link here with the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who believed music was the true language of emotion). Rothko was greatly inspired and consoled by listening to music. He was particularly concerned with controlling the display of his work, recognising that context and the way an artwork is displayed can affect its meaning or emotional effect. He always preferred to hang the paintings and arrange the lighting himself in exhibitions, insisting on muted illumination, which he felt added a mysterious quality to his works. This at times caused tension between the artist and galleries and their curators. A plan to send his work on a European tour, after the 1952 *Fifteen Americans* exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, was cancelled due to Rothko's objections. With the Rothko Room in the Phillips Collection, Washington DC in 1960, he was finally able to realise his dream of controlling the room in which his works hung, creating a space in which the viewer could experience his paintings as a series on a physical as well as an emotional level.

These large masses of luminous, vibrant colour that merge into or hover over one another overwhelm the viewer. His colour evokes mood; his reds can be either dark and oppressive, suggesting death, or light, suggesting blood or flames; his blues suggest mists or empty places; his yellows create a more buoyant feeling. This pure type of painting, whose colours seem to emit an inner glow, is expressive yet holds a sense of the mystery of divine power, inviting a contemplative state. The works are at once overbearing yet lyrical, imbued with a timeless quality but with a hint of the tragic — a sense of impending doom, suspended at the point of transformation, or instability, like the sky before a storm. The tension between colour areas seems to hold each colour in check; in other paintings the vibrating colour areas are pulled apart by the outside colour frames. Both result in an electrifying tension or suspense — what Rothko has referred to as 'violence'.

Rothko believed that art must reach out to deep spiritual levels. His works expressed his ideals with passion and emotional intensity. The colour became progressively darker and the bright, blazing colours gave way to sombreness, hinting at Rothko's growing pessimism and poor health.

Conceptual Framework

With Modernism, and particularly Rothko's Abstract Expressionist art, there was a change in the relationship between artwork and viewer.

From catalogue to exhibition
Mark Rothko 1903–1970,
17 June – 31 August 1987,
Tate Gallery Publications, London.

Technique

Rothko painted on untreated (unprimed) canvas, first brushing a thin layer of binder into which he had mixed colour pigments. He fixed this foundation with oils, allowing them to spread around the unframed edges of his canvases. He then applied thin, almost transparent colour, allowing the luminance of the colour below to shine through. He applied these individual layers of paint with very light and fast brushstrokes.

Artist's statements

'We [Abstract Expressionists] favour the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal [certain, unquestionable]. We wish to reassert the

picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.’ (1943)

‘Today the artist is no longer constrained by the limitation that all of man’s experience is expressed by his outward appearance. Freed from the need of describing a particular person, the possibilities are endless. The whole of man’s experience becomes his model, and in that sense it can be said that all of art is a portrait of an idea.’ (1943)

‘I paint very large pictures. I realise that historically the function of painting large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however ... is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn’t something you command.’ (1951)

‘It was with the utmost reluctance that I found the figure could not serve my purposes ... But a time came when none of us could use the figure without mutilating it.’ (1958)

‘The abstract artist has given material existence to many unseen worlds ... For art to me is an anecdote of the spirit, and the only means of making concrete the purpose of its varied quickness and stillness.’

‘You might as well get one thing straight. I’m not an abstractionist ... I’m not interested in the relationship of colour to form or anything else. I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions — tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on. And the fact that a lot of people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions ... The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you, as you say, are moved only by their colour relationship, then you miss the point.’

Historical practice

‘The artist has abandoned the illusions of three-dimensional recession; there is not even the space between various overlaid brush-strokes. The surface texture is as neutral as possible. Seen close up and in a penumbra [partial shadow], as these paintings are meant to be seen, they absorb, they envelop the viewer. We no longer look at a painting as we did in the nineteenth century; we are meant to enter it, to sink into its atmosphere of mist and light or to draw it around us like a coat — or a skin.

‘But to repeat, they also measure the spectator, gauge him. These silent paintings with their enormous, beautiful, opaque surfaces are mirrors, reflecting what the viewer brings with him. In this sense, they can even be said to deal directly with human emotions, desires, relationships, for they are mirrors of our fantasy and serve as echoes of our experience.’



Rothko speaking at the David Porter Gallery, Washington, 1945, reprinted in *Mark Rothko* (exhibition catalogue), Galerie Beyeler, Basel, 1990.

Rothko, Jacob Baal-Teshuva, Taschen, 2003, pp. 50–7.

Rothko increasingly refused to be identified with the New York School. He hated just as much to be classified as a great colourist, as indicated in this extract from an interview with Selden Rodman.

Peter Selz, *Mark Rothko*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1961, pp. 9–10.

Edward Lucie-Smith,
Movements in Art since 1945
(new rev. edn), Thames and Hudson,
London, 1984, p. 42.

'Rothko, like several other leading American artists of the post-war period — Gorky, de Kooning, Hofmann — was born abroad; he came to America from Russia in 1913, when he was 10. He began as an expressionist, felt the influence of Matta and Masson, and followed the standard pattern by having an exhibition at the Art of This Century Gallery in 1948. Gradually his work grew simpler, and by 1950 he had reached the point where the figurative element had been discarded. A few rectangles of space are placed on a coloured ground. Their edges are not defined, and their spatial position is therefore ambiguous. They float towards us, or away, in a shallow space of the kind that we also find in Pollock — it derives, ultimately, from the spatial experiments of the Cubists. In Rothko's paintings the colour relationships, as they interact within the rectangle and within this space, set up a gentle rhythmic pulsation. The painting becomes both a focus for the spectator's meditations and a screen before a mystery. The weakness of Rothko's work (just as the subtlety of colour is its strength) is to be found in the rigidity and monotony of the compositional formula. The bold central image became one of the trademarks of the new American painting — one of the things that differentiated it from European art. Rothko was an artist of real brilliance imprisoned in a straitjacket; he exemplifies the narrowness of focus which many modern artists imposed upon themselves.'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Both critics and art historians provide information about artworks and artists, but their approach, viewpoint and language differ. Explain the role of the art historian by analysing the writing on Rothko by Edward Lucie-Smith.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Conceptual Framework



'By eliminating realism or any recognisable subject, modern artists allowed a more personal, individual response from the viewer.'

Discuss this statement with reference to at least two Modernist or contemporary artists, including Rothko.

2. Subjective Frame — artist's practice



'Colour has always been an important element in artmaking, but to some artists it is the essence of their work, providing meaning and emotional intensity.' Discuss this statement with reference to at least two artists, including Rothko. You might consider Kandinsky, Peter Booth, James Turrell, Yves Klein or Yayoi Kusama. As a start it could be helpful to list all the descriptive words used in relation to Rothko's use of colour (e.g. luminous, brilliance, oppressive).

3. Subjective and Cultural Frames



Look again at this extract from Jacob Baal-Teshuva's Rothko (Taschen, 2003):

I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions — tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on. And the fact that a lot of people break

down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I communicate those basic human emotions . . . The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them.

Discuss the work of a range of artists who express human emotions to create a religious or transcendental experience for the viewer. You might consider Piero della Francesca, Michelangelo, Bernini and a contemporary artist of your choice.

STUDENT SAMPLE ESSAY

Discuss the role of the art critic in promoting Abstract Expressionism.

The role of the art critic is to interpret a piece of art, judge it, inform the audience of its meaning or their opinion — to persuade or dissuade the audience. This method of art criticism is clearly shown in the writings of American art critic Clement Greenberg and Australian art critic and historian Robert Hughes. Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko were written about by both Greenberg and Hughes, greatly influencing their careers.

Clement Greenberg is a well-known Modernist art critic. He is most notable for his promotion and defence of Abstract Expressionism during the 1950s. He was also among the first critics to support Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning and Clyfford Still. Greenberg once claimed, 'Modernist art has a means to resist the levelling of culture produced by capitalist propaganda'. At the peak of his power in the artworld, it was once said that the number of paintings sold by an artist was a coefficient of the number of paragraphs Greenberg had bestowed upon the artist's work. This shows his influence in the Abstract Expressionist art culture.

Greenberg once said about Jackson Pollock, 'Pollock's superiority to his contemporaries in this country lies in his ability to create a genuinely violent and extravagant art without losing stylistic control'. Jackson Pollock was an abstract artist whose style was unique and passionate. He used layer upon layer of paint and usually laid the canvas down flat and splashed the paint on. One very famous painting is *Blue Poles*, which is part of the Australian National Gallery's collection. The painting clearly shows off Pollock's distinctive 'drip' technique. It has been said that it was Clement Greenberg who launched Pollock's career by heavily promoting him within the artworld.

Australian-born Robert Hughes, a very significant art critic mainly writing for the *New York Times* as well as an art historian who has published several books, has also commented on and paved the careers of many artists. Hughes has a very interesting background. He made a name for himself through the 'Sydney Push', an underground movement consisting of artists, writers and intellectuals, including Germaine Greer. Robert Hughes was also a huge influence on the abstract artist Mark Rothko, famous for painting large blocks of colour. Hughes has praised Rothko as 'one of the last artists in America to believe, with his entire being, that painting could carry the load of

(Written in 45 minutes under examination conditions)

Defines what a critic does and introduces two famous critics

Explains the critic's approach and notes the artists he wrote about

Introduces revealing quote from critic

Relates the critic's writing to the work of an artist, introducing one artwork example

Introduces second critic, giving context and describing critic's style

Names an artist the critic promoted

Describes artwork example

Refers to critic's view of artist

major meanings ... Being commended by such a prominent art critic was significant when Rothko was just becoming known.

Throughout his career, Rothko believed the link between the artist and how the artist wished his audience to view the artwork was very strong. In *Number 207 (Red over Dark Blue on Dark Grey)* Rothko placed the blocks of colour very specifically so that the blue (on the bottom) had more power over the red (on the top). It shows the intensity of the red contrasting with the blue and dark grey. In many works by Rothko, there is an immense amount of tension in the dark grey space between the red and blue. This suggests Rothko was heading towards the dark era of his life. Robert Hughes described Rothko's artworks as 'rhapsodic' and spoke well of him throughout his art career.

Alice Mercer, Year 11

Study notes prepared by Angela
Rinaldo, Year 11 student

SAMPLE STUDY NOTES FOR ROTHKO

Form:	painting
Frames:	Subjective — meditative, creates personal emotion Structural — developed own visual language relying on balance and tension between colour and surface qualities
Conceptual framework:	spiritual response from audience; artwork — art for art's sake
Style period:	Modernist — American Abstract Expressionist

Artist's practice

Intention:	abstraction — wanting to give his painting the same kind of expressive power as music/literature
Technique:	Painted on untreated (unprimed) canvas, brushed thin layers of binder into which he mixed colour pigments. Also: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• applied individual layer of paint with light and fast brushstrokes• built up the intensity of colour• increased canvas size to involve the viewer• reduced the titles of his works, leaving it to the audience to interpret meaning.

Artist's statements

'I paint large paintings. I realise historically the function of painting large pictures is something very grandiose and pompous. The reason I paint them however ... is precisely because I want it to be intimate and human ...'

'I am not interested in the relationship of colours to form or anything else. I'm interested in expressing basic human emotions — tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on ...'

Jackson Pollock

(1912–1956, American)

Issues/interests: abstraction, self-identity, personal language, art as extension of self or as an inner necessity

Frames: *Subjective* in emotional intensity and personal language; *Structural* in use and development of personal symbols and innovative methods

Conceptual Framework: There was a close involvement between the artist and the artwork, the whole body being used in its execution. Pollock widened the methods of artmaking and the notion of the art object. By looking at the role critics played in promoting Pollock's reputation, we also consider the *agencies* of the artworld.

Artworks in this unit

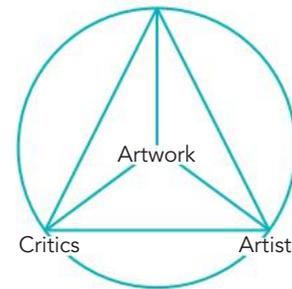
Pasiphaë 1943

Blue Poles 1952

eBookplus

Pollock and his time

Use the **Pollock and his time** weblink in your eBookPLUS for an interactive look at Jackson Pollock, his life and work.



VOCABULARY

action painting a gestural style of painting in which paint is dripped, splashed or smeared onto the canvas

avant-garde experimental, striving to be new or different

gesture marks created as extensions of arm or body movements

idiom form of expression, style

In *Pasiphaë* 1943 (page 62) the mood is of mystery, perhaps anger. The sombre colours and heavy black lines add to the feeling of aggression and confusion. Fragments of feet, ribs and legs are scattered across the painting, but it is hard to decipher if they are animal or human. They seem to operate as symbols rather than telling a story or representing reality. One can see the logical progression from this work to the abstraction of his later work. There is a richness to the surface, with layers of colour applied thickly. Colours appear to be smeared together rather than blended, with patterns of lines sitting on top, adding to the sense of frenzy and denseness of the work. The painting seems to extend beyond the frame, yet there is a subtle focus in the centre caused by the hint of an oval shape and the intensity of the black jagged lines.



Pasiphaë 1943

oil on canvas

142.6 × 243.8 cm

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Purchase, Rogers, Fletcher, and Harris Brisbane Dick Funds and Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 1982, accn no. 1982.20

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Image © The Metropolitan

Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY

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In *Blue Poles* (opposite) the 'poles' create a secondary rhythm across the myriad spidery lines and the feeling of frenzy below. Had the poles been arranged regularly in a parallel row, the effect might have to produce a sense of order. Pollock instead suggests another, more disquieting narrative, or level of consciousness, while at the same time creating places of rest for the viewer. The composition is still open, however, the 'action' seeming to continue off the picture plane, engulfing and intriguing the viewer who has already been drawn into the space by the grand scale of the work and its sense of energy.

Historical background — biography

Paul Jackson Pollock was the youngest of five children of an unsuccessful farmer in a small town in the state of Wyoming. The family moved around various parts of California and Arizona. Partly as a result of this nomadic life, Pollock became interested in Eastern philosophy, Jung and psychoanalysis as a means of exploring his self-identity. After undergoing Jungian analysis his work became more abstract. By 1937 Pollock was drinking heavily and undergoing psychiatric therapy. In 1940 he married Lee Krasner, also an influential abstract painter.

In 1943 art collector Peggy Guggenheim gave him a five-year contract. That November he held his first one-man show at her Art of This Century Gallery. After his one-man show in 1948, Pollock exhibited in 1950 at the Venice Biennale with de Kooning and Gorky. In 1953 he exhibited in Paris and Zurich.

Pollock died in a car crash at the age of 44.



Artist's practice

Influences

In the 1940s Jackson Pollock led the Abstract Expressionism movement that saw New York displace Paris as the world art capital. Pollock's early work was realist, but then he became aware of the work of the Surrealists Miró and Masson and the German Expressionists Klee and Kandinsky. Pollock's greatest influence was Picasso and his idea that conventional rules of painting could be broken.

Pollock generally painted while listening to the music of John Cage, Morton Feldman, Varèse and Stravinsky. He was also influenced by the poems of Dylan Thomas and the psychiatric analysis of C. G. Jung, which he undertook to control his drinking problem. Jung's view was that the unconscious naturally created myths and symbols, which needed to be expressed through art. Jung encouraged the study of primitive art and encouraged artists to turn inwards for inspiration.

Methods/technique

Pollock developed his own semi-figurative language. This led to semi-abstract works based on biomorphic forms related to plants, animals and primitive symbols. Pollock created a sensation internationally with his original **action painting** technique of laying his large canvases on the floor and walking around them, dripping, splashing and pouring paint. He generally painted when he was in a heightened emotional state, but also when in a state of deep concentration. When Pollock was painting, it was as though he was almost performing a personal ritual, involving himself in the act of moving in free response to his inner needs. The result was expressive yet controlled paintings of swirling, expanding space with intertwining patterns and tangles of lines. The painted surface was now the subject of the art; depth was now not the illusion of space but the actual build-up of paint.

Blue Poles 1952

oil, enamel, aluminium paint,
glass on canvas
212.1 × 488.9 cm

National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra

Purchased 1973

© Pollock-Krasner Foundation
Licensed by ARS, New York &
Viscopy, Australia



Jackson Pollock at work in his Long Island studio.

Photo: Martha Holmes/Time Life Pictures/Getty Images

Intention/meaning

Pollock's paintings are suggestive of the two sides of his personality, indicating both a wildness and a sensitivity. His works reached total abstraction, with the elimination of any hint of representational forms. He disregarded the traditional painting rules. With their imposing scale and visual impact, his paintings reflected the vibrancy and vitality of American culture at the time — big Cadillacs, jazz music and the actor James Dean.

Significance

Jackson Pollock's work is the culmination of many of the ideals of Modernism. These include the **avant-garde** notion of striving to create a new style or approach, which ultimately led to abstraction. It also involved the notion of 'art for art's sake', with its emphasis on the importance of the brushstroke and the quality of the paints themselves, rather than painting to imitate reality. The function of art was extended to include self-expression and the search for understanding of the self. This led to the importance of the **gesture** and the influence of philosophy and psychology on modern art. Jackson Pollock was one of the first American artists to be recognised internationally as a master of modern art.

Historical practice

H. H. Arnason, *A History of Modern Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1985, pp. 523–4.

'Jackson Pollock has become the world-wide symbol of the new American painting after World War II ... His paintings of the mid 1940s, usually involving some degree of actual or implied figuration, were coarse and heavy, suggestive of Picasso, Max Ernst, and, at times, Miró or Masson, but filled with a nervous, brutal energy of their own. By 1947 — even earlier in his drawings — the artist had begun to experiment with over-all painting, a labyrinthine network of lines, splatters, and paint drips from which emerged the great drip paintings of the next few years. These paintings, generally executed on a large canvas laid out on the floor, are the works most popularly associated with the phrase *action painting* ...

'Aside from their intrinsic quality, Pollock's drip paintings contributed other elements that changed the course of modern painting. There was, first, the concept of the over-all painting, the painting seemingly without beginning or end, extending to the very limits of the canvas and implying an extension even beyond. This, together with the large scale of the works, introduced another concept — that of wall painting different from the tradition of easel painting, even as it existed in Cubism and geometric abstraction. This was the final break from the Renaissance idea of painting detached from the spectator, to be looked at as a self-contained unit ... although he had no direct stylistic followers, he affected the course of experimental painting after him.'

Critical practice

The Nation, 27 November 1943 (review of exhibition), vol. 1, pp. 165–6

'The smaller works [including] *Conflict* and *Wounded Animal*, with its chalky encrustation, are among the strongest abstract paintings I have yet seen by an American. Here Pollock's force has just the right amount of space to expand in; whereas in larger format he spends himself in too many directions at once. Pollock has gone through the influences of Miró, Picasso, Mexican paintings, and what not, and has come out at the other side at the age of thirty-one, painting mostly with his own brush. In his search for style he is liable to relapse into an influence, but if the times are propitious [favourable], it won't be for long.'

The Nation, 20 January 1945 (review of exhibitions of Edgar Degas and Richard Pousette-Dart), vol. 1, pp. 6–7

'American painting is much in need of all three qualities (that is, "boldness, breadth, and the monumental"), and it is significant that Pollock, who manifests all three, has already begun to exert an influence, though he has been before the public hardly more than a year.'

The Nation, 7 April 1945 (review of exhibitions of Mondrian, Kandinsky and Pollock; of the annual exhibition of the American Abstract artists), vol. 1, pp. 16–17

'Jackson Pollock's second one-man show at Art of This Century establishes him, in my opinion, as the strongest painter of his generation and perhaps the greatest one to appear since Miró. The only optimism in his smoky, turbulent paintings comes from his own manifest faith in the efficacy [effectiveness], for him personally, of his art.'

The Nation, 13 April 1946 (review of exhibition), vol. 1, pp. 74–5

'Pollock's superiority to his contemporaries in this country lies in his ability to create a genuinely violent and extravagant art without losing stylistic control . . .

'What may at first seem crowded and repetitious reveals on second sight an infinity of dramatic movement and variety. One has to learn Pollock's **idiom** to realise its flexibility.'

The Nation, 1 February 1947 (review of exhibition), vol. 1, pp. 124–5

'Jackson Pollock's fourth one-man show in so many years at Art of This Century is his best since his first one and signals what may be [a] major step in his development, which I regard as the most important so far of the younger generation of American painters. He has now largely abandoned his customary heavy black-and-whitish

'**Clement Greenberg**: Quotations on Jackson Pollock, 1943–49', <http://132.229.192.124/www.let.data/Arthis/Modernism/43-IGR.HTM>.

Conceptual Framework — artworld—the critic

Through the writing of the critic Greenberg, we can trace the development of Pollock's artistic practice. We learn the importance of the critic to modern art and the art establishment (galleries, curators, investors) in setting up attitudes towards art.

The role of the art critic

Clement Greenberg, a Modernist critic, strongly supported Abstract Expressionism and was largely responsible for the growing reputation of Jackson Pollock within art circles. He helped determine the reaction to the artwork by the audience. Greenberg had been involved in the Lower Manhattan Left literary politics of the 1930s with Harold Rosenberg. In the 1940s they became more and more purely theorists, critics and aestheticians. Greenberg believed painting's domain should be the two-dimensional surface, so the exploration of the various aspects of flatness was the proper concern of the Modernist painter. He advocated that the Modernist painter avoid all associations with objects in three-dimensional space. He wanted painting to have its own independence as a pure art form. Greenberg wrote for the first time on Pollock's work in 1943. The following extracts are from Clement Greenberg's critical writings on Pollock.

Here we have evidence of the critic giving an opinion, in this case praise.

or gun-metal chiaroscuro for the higher scales, for alizarins, cream-whites, cerulean blues, pinks, and sharp greens. Like Dubuffet, however, whose art goes in a similar if less abstract direction, Pollock remains essentially a draftsman in black and white who must as a rule rely on these colours to maintain the consistency and power of surface of his pictures.'

The Nation, 24 January 1948 (review of exhibition), vol. 11, p. 201

Here Greenberg tries to convince the audience of the worth of abstraction and places it in historical context with an already renowned painter, Mondrian, to give Pollock's work validity. Greenberg mixes critical writing (judgement) with historical writing by placing his work in context.

'As before, [Pollock's] new work offers a puzzle to all those not sincerely in touch with contemporary painting. I already hear "wallpaper patterns", "the picture does not finish inside the canvas", "raw, uncultivated emotion", and so on, and so on. Since Mondrian no one has driven the easel picture quite so far away from itself; but this is not altogether Pollock's own doing. In this day and age the art of painting increasingly rejects the easel and yearns for the wall. It is Pollock's culture as a painter that has made him so sensitive and receptive to a tendency that has brought with it, in his case, a greater concentration on surface texture and tactile qualities, to balance the danger of monotony that arises from the even, all-over design which has become Pollock's consistent practice.'

Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*, Mayfield Press, New York, 1994, pp. 11–12, 114.

'In the *New York Times*, critic Deborah Solomon [wrote of Greenberg]: "No American art critic has been more influential" ... "the high priest of formalism" ...

'Greenberg vigorously championed Abstract Expressionism and created a new language for following generations of art critics. His aesthetic mission was set within a political agenda. He wanted to bring about social progress through revolutionary change and he looked to the artistic avant-garde to lead such a revolution. For him, the early Abstract Expressionists were revolutionary in their courage to internally draw upon their individual consciousness ...

'To Greenberg, painting should be stripped of illusion, subject matter, artists' feelings, storytelling, or anything else that distracts from the *form* of a painting ...

'Because [Greenberg's] formalist conception of art is so narrow and forceful, he is often challenged. Tom Wolfe ridiculed him ... Rosalind Krauss and T. J. Clark "resent the critic for presenting art as a seamless, self-contained bubble floating high above the world of politics". Some of his practices are also questionable. He paid studio visits to artists and freely offered them advice on how to paint. This practice seems beyond the boundaries of professional criticism and raises questions about critical distance and objectivity.

'Clement Greenberg ... tried to separate and elevate art from daily life ...

'Greenberg particularly championed the work of Pollock, and the artist and critic in tandem are generally credited with moving the centre of the high art world from Paris to New York.'

'When Greenberg spoke, it was as if not merely the future of Art were at stake but the very quality, the very *possibility*, of civilisation in America. His fury seemed to come out of an implacable insistence on *purity*. He saw Modernism as heading toward a certain inevitable conclusion, through its own internal logic . . . And just what was this destination? On this point Greenberg couldn't have been clearer: *Flatness* . . .

'Earlier abstract artists had understood the importance of flatness in the simple sense of painting in two dimensions, but they hadn't known how to go beyond that . . . What was needed was *purity* — a style in which lines, forms, contours, colours all become unified on the flat surface.'

Tom Wolfe, *The Painted Word*, Bantam Books, New York, 1975, pp. 48–50.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Identify how Greenberg convinces his readers of Pollock's importance as an artist. Refer to actual quotes and discuss the type of language used.

Critical/historical practice

2. Refer to the artworks of Pollock and the writing by and about Greenberg to explain the influence a critic can have on an individual artist's reputation, the development of an art style and even the reputation of a nation's art. How does an art historian then reaffirm this reputation (refer to the Arnason quotation on page 64)?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Structural Frame — artist's practice



Evaluate how the choice of materials and working methods can affect the intentions, and the artworks themselves, of Pollock and Emily Kam Ngwarreye. Refer to the following quotes and artworks by the artists. You may, if you wish, refer to one other artist of your choice.

My painting does not come from the easel. I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting. I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or the floor. I need the resistance of a hard surface. On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more a part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be *in* the painting . . .

I continue to get further away from the usual painter's tools such as easel, palette, brushes and so forth. I prefer sticks, trowels, knives, and dripping fluid paint or a heavy impasto with sand, broken glass and other foreign matter added. (Jackson Pollock, quoted in Edwin Mullins (ed.), *Great Paintings*, British Broadcasting Commission, London, 1981, p. 70)

2. Subjective Frame



Pollock's work reflects the modern obsession with one's own inner life. By a leap of insight, he developed the idea of painting as a pure psychological event — supposedly eliminating the gap

between the subjective world of the artist's thinking and feeling and the objective world of paint and canvas. (Jack A. Hobbs, *Art in Context* (3rd edn), Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Orlando, Florida, 1985, pp. 200–4)

Explain the work of Jackson Pollock and one other artist of your choice who approaches their artmaking through their 'inner life' of emotions and personal mark-making.

SAMPLE ESSAY

Discuss the work of Jackson Pollock, considering his painting as an expression of his times, with the growing interest and awareness of psychology and psychiatry and of the subconscious.

Introduction — context

Jackson Pollock was an American Abstract Expressionist who screamed defiance of every rule of harmony and good taste in the 1940s. He not only 'broke the ice' in American art, but set a canon of artistic intensity for generations to come.

An overview of intention/style

Characteristic of postwar art, his work demonstrated intuition and spontaneity and drew much of its inspiration from the subconscious. In their quest for self-realisation, many artists of the time turned to the philosophical influences of Freud and Jung. These new ideas gave justification to abstract and non-figurative art — psychoanalysis became the key that unlocked the meaning of symbols to be interpreted by the subconscious.

Pollock prided himself on the rawness and even brutality of his work. *Cathedral* 1947 is born of passionate subjectivity; tangled threads of pigment are dripped and splattered on the canvas, and there is an endless maze of pattern and movement.

Analysis of examples/meaning —
effect on viewer

One cannot fail to be excited by the work's vitality and its explosive release of painterly forces and kinetic power. His atmospheric painting *Lavender Mist* 1950 depicts fog, vagueness, translucency and tiny incidents pulsating in a large field. Critic Harold Rosenberg's notion was that Abstract Expressionism was not really painting at all, not paint on canvas, but a series of exemplary 'acts'.

Include quotes by artist or critic

Pollock's unconventional method of painting was named 'action painting' in 1952 by Rosenberg, referring to the nature of Pollock's creative process. 'When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I am doing. It is only after a sort of getting acquainted period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise, there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well' (quoted in Jack A. Hobbs, *Art in Context*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Florida, 1985, pp. 200–4).

Rosenberg explained that the canvas became an arena in which to act, rather than a space in which to produce. Hence the function of art was altered from the emphasis on 'the finished product' to the actual process of creation.

Jung believed in the psychological idea that the artist has at all times been the instrument and spokesperson of the spirit of his age. Through his work, Pollock aimed to express personal feelings of anxiety, fear, happiness or disgust that were, to him, impossible to represent objectively. Psychoanalytic art allowed artists to paint private images or symbols that came from within.

They were not necessarily obvious to the general viewer and led to the 'art of the inward eye', where artists looked introspectively to find the answers to questions that had for so long been overlooked or avoided. Over time, these 'private symbols' became 'social metaphors' as the subjective subject matter of paintings such as those of Pollock keyed into feelings that affected many other people and so became universal symbols or archetypes.

Despite the fact that these non-figurative artworks do not depict everyday objects or human beings or animals, there is a human bond that strikes a chord between the viewer and the work. Jung stated that 'fascination arises when the unconscious has been moved'. It is evident that modern artists touch the subconscious of the audience. These paintings work on a more intense level of interpretation than objective and sensory art that makes a direct appeal to the feelings.

After curiosity has been satisfied, the formal qualities of the work reach out to the subconscious, which picks up on the vocabulary of art. This links with Jung's idea that the aim of the modern artist is to give expression to the inner vision of man, to the spiritual background of life and the world.

Modern art performed the same functions as art of the past. It continued to satisfy personal needs for expression and the social needs of communication. But the rise of psychology and psychiatry made it possible to interpret art in a new dimension.

Jackson Pollock, with his energy, imagination and interest in psychology, was an instrument and spokesman of his time. Thus we can ask: was he, as reported, a wild and angry man, or simply the subconscious mind of every human being?

Influences, background information on artist's practice

Back to question

Conclusion — 'expression of his times' and 'psychology' from the essay question

Own interpretation — strong ending

Marion Borgelt

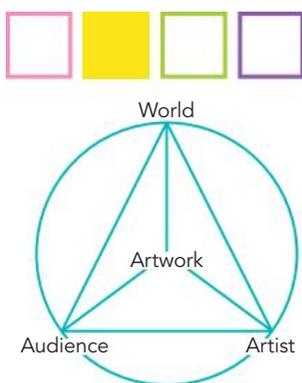
(b. 1954, Australian, lives and works in Sydney)

Issues/interests: abstraction, spatial relations, precision, symbols, universal significance, life and lunar cycles; main objective to create a balance between conceptual strength and aesthetic sensibility

Forms: sculpture, painting

Frame: *Structural* in her emphasis on precise technique, sensitivity to materials and use of symbols

Conceptual Framework: Borgelt responds to the world, its structures, patterns and movement. Viewers' reactions depend on their experiences and levels of perception. The art object entices, puzzles and interacts with the audience, appealing to their minds as well as their emotions. By creating artworks that range from small, fragile objects that can be bought separately or in series, to monumental canvases, commissioned pieces for buildings and site-specific outdoor works, Borgelt has positioned herself within a wide art market.



Artworks in this unit

Bottled Histories: Suite No. 11 Figures 1–30 2000

Lunar Circle: Figure D 2007

Strobe Series No. 17 2009

Liquid Light: Gold Eclipse 2009



eLesson: Interview with Marion Borgelt

Marion Borgelt offers insights into her work and inspiration.

SEARCHLIGHT ID: ELES-0643

Bottled Histories: Suite No 11, Figures 1–30 2000 (detail)

beeswax, wood, glass, oil,

photographs, perspex

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist and

Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

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Marion Borgelt's *Bottled Histories* series (above) consists of small artworks that exist as pairs, complementing each other with a related motif or symbol, but having a life of their own as painting and sculptural objects. Careful thought has been given to relating the shape and size of the canvas to 'play' with the shape of the found object, the bottle. Both have been sensitively transformed with wax and paint. The symbols allude to past cultures (an interlaced Celtic symbol), ancient myths and religions (the cross, spiral), the beginning of matter or of the life cycle

(seeds splitting), and nature in general. There is a sense of mystery and depth as we glimpse patterns and surfaces below the translucent surface created by the gentle blending of white oil with a top coat of polished wax. Each work is perfect in its symmetry, pattern, fine, even lines, sharp tonal contrasts and subtle shading. They are delicate, precious objects with an allure that works on the viewer's inner psyche. 'I wish to express the power within the intimate scale, the ability to leave impressions on the memory' (Borgelt, from an interview with the artist).



Lunar Circle: Figure D 2007

hoop pine ply, mirror polish
stainless steel, pearl oil paint,
polyurethane

160 cm (diameter)

Courtesy of the artist and
Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

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Lunar Circle: Figure D (above) epitomises the themes and concepts Borgelt has investigated over the years: the idea of the life cycle and its rhythmic movement, the lunar cycle, the duality of light to darkness, spatial ambiguity, symbolic representations of time passing and metamorphosis, oppositional elements and the beauty of different surfaces. We become aware of the slow movement and power of the forces of the lunar cycle as a mediator of our day, the tides, our emotions and rhythms. The strong contrast of black against the sheen of the surface adds visual interest and symbolic meaning. Each 'circle' creates a unique shadow according to how much the inner circle is bent (the height of the relief) and the position of the viewer. The motto of the Modernist architect Mies van der Rohe, 'less is more', can be applied to this artwork, as it is its simplicity, refinement and attention to materials that give it its beauty and symbolic resonance. This concept was further explored in *Lunar Warp*, and *Lunar Circle F* 2009, the surface this time covered in broken duck eggshells (grouted, sanded and wax-polished), producing a delicate cracked surface, suggestive of the surface of the moon when partly in shadow.

Strobe Series No. 17 2009

oil on canvas

180 × 280 cm

Exhibited at Dominik Mersch
Gallery in 2009 (*Moonlight in my
Veins*)

Courtesy of the artist and
Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney

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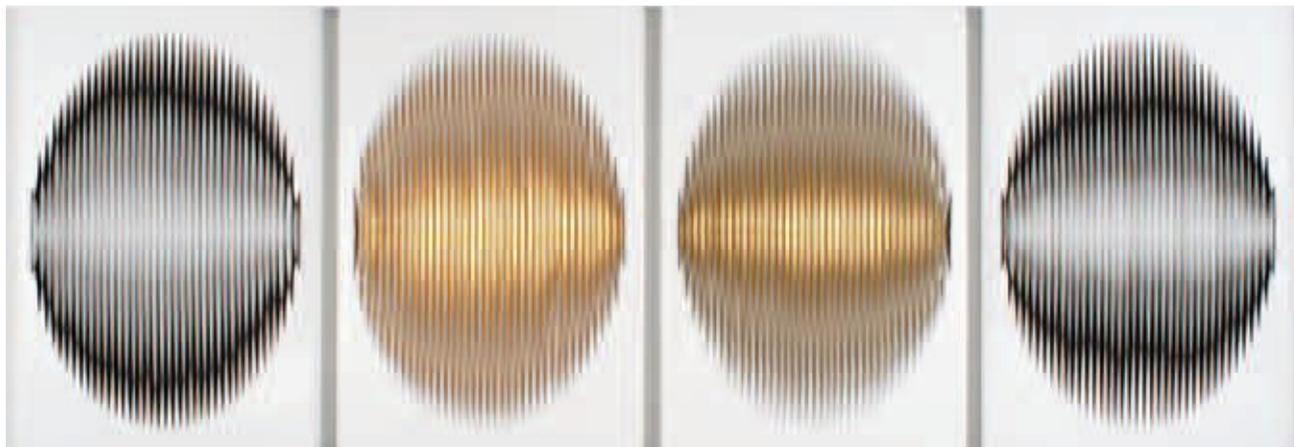


At first glance, *Strobe Series No. 17* gives the illusion that it has been airbrushed or spray painted, but in fact Borgelt is displaying her considerable painting skill, gently blending colours with wide brushes to create an optical illusion. The surface pulses with energy, suggesting tidal currents, heartbeats, electric pulses, continuous movement that records the passing of time. This is a development from her 2007–08 series, in which lime green and purple (‘adventurous’ colours for Borgelt) predominated. In this work we see the return of her signature red hue, but it has been used as an accent or halo effect and has been blended with more muted pinks and grey combined with the lemon yellow employed in her *Liquid Light* series. In *Strobe Series No. 16* 2009, Borgelt has added a 3D rendition of the line in pink, a visual link to the title, as it suggests an engorged vein throbbing.

The colour reflects a new way of bringing life into my work, getting it to radiate and become active on an optical level. It’s bittersweet ... I like to hit that point at the edge of bad taste and still get it to work. I also like the nuances, the soft vibrancy as well as the stridency. (Quoted in Laura Murray Cree, ‘Marion Borgelt’, *Art World*, April/ May 2009, p. 100)

The four canvases of *Liquid Light: Gold Eclipse* (opposite), each oval in shape, can be interpreted on various levels. They appear more scientific than natural, but with associations with the eye, the sun or moon, and also to more abstract or universal symbols such as orbs, spheres or voids. As you move, the ‘eye’ seems to blink, a mesmerising effect that links back to Op (optical) art of the late 1960s (such as that of Bridget Riley). This artwork is a continuation of her 2004 exhibition *Sol y Sombra* in which she used the same technique of a precisely slit and twisted outer layer of canvas that reveals an underlay of another colour. Because the ‘twist’ creates a sculptural relief effect, the amount of underlying colour shown varies as you move. In the outer canvases it is the underlying surface that is ‘coloured’; in the inner two it is the

underside of the slit. It dazzles the eye, creating undulating rhythms; adding to the puzzle, the two inner canvases use slightly different golds. In this version she has moved away from the subtle greys of *Liquid Light* 2007 or her earlier *Liquid Light 32 Degrees* 2004 in white and pale lemon to these metallic colours linking to the title and theme of the 2009 exhibition (*Moonlight in My Veins*), as one thinks of the shimmer of moonlight. One of her latest commissions is for Macau's Grand Hyatt Hotel lobby, a work within this series but on a larger scale.



One can see underlying links in concept, shape and sense of movement (light to darkness, lunar cycles, time passing) with *Lunar Circle: Figure D* as well as *Strobe Series No. 17*, but each interpretation has a unique expression owing to the choice of media. Borgelt uses a poetic artistic language of contemporary significance to explore universal symbols of rhythm and nature.

Liquid Light: Gold Eclipse 2009
acrylic, metallics, canvas, timber, pins
95.5 × 271 cm (diameter)
Dominik Mersch Gallery,
Danks Street

Historical background — biography

Marion Borgelt was brought up in the Wimmera district of rural Victoria. She believes this early experience of living close to nature and seeing the cycles of the land and of nature was formative to her work and her concern for the metaphysics of change. She has studied in South Australia and New York, and has spent long periods in Paris. She travels widely, drawing on these experiences in her artmaking.

Artist's practice

Materials/intentions/display

Marion Borgelt seeks new ways of expressing her ideas and new media and expert artisans to help bring her ideas to fruition. But her artmaking is also cyclical, often referring to past work, so we can see great conceptual strength as she continues to evolve and refine her artmaking. At first her work appears abstract, but we can discover links to nature and culture, a layering of meaning and a tension between forces and surfaces as we discover references to universal symbols, language and life rhythms.



Marion Borgelt at work in her studio, 2009

At different times Borgelt has shown an interest in the concept of lightness versus darkness, in life cycles and in the formal imagery of the slit, the void, the cocoon, the strobe and the sphere. However, her underlying strength is in the surface, be it dry-brushed oil overlay on jute, highly polished stainless steel, wax-covered objects or smoky hand-formed glass. She has also transformed found objects such as shoes, bottles and books. Each has a highly evocative, tactile quality and is made with intricate care. They are at times illusive, with subtle layering or blending of colour. Although her colours are often restricted to one or two per artwork (red, black, white and lemon come to mind), they have a luminous rich glowing presence, creating a meditative quality that hints at psychological and mythical ideas. There is an exploration of dualities and an underlying sense of order and symmetry. Borgelt's artworks appear timeless, bringing together past and future and suggesting the big issues in life, while possessing their own life as beautiful, elegant, refined objects worthy of admiration as well as speculation.

Borgelt is unique in her approach to her artmaking practice. She exhibits in solo exhibitions in leading galleries in Sydney, Melbourne and Perth, while fulfilling large-scale commissions within the landscape in country areas and corporate commissions for commercial foyers, universities and restaurants. She is a well-organised professional artist as well as being highly creative and passionate about her work.

Technique, methods and choices

Marion Borgelt works in a variety of media, scales and forms, carefully selecting each medium according to her intentions in regard to communicating meaning and the relationship with the viewer. When questioned on this subject in an interview in 1999, Borgelt replied:

Jute has become my trademark, but it also has limitations. I wished to avoid the purely decorative. The dry, hairy, jute surface came from my need and desire to explore the most visceral, organic realm in painting. The jute surface has its own reality and nature . . . I paint with a dry brush methodology, the paint applied lightly on the surface of the opaque black background. Thus the top layer does not penetrate but sits translucent on top. It breathes and is almost chalky, like a cocoon . . . hinting at what lies within, preformed matter just taking shape. The white becomes an articulate overlay of containment . . .

Wax has its own organic nature, it is the most seductive material. It is possible to build it up to create a smooth transparent surface. It has associations with natural preservation, sealing and healing, yet also of civilization — it was used in early Coptic art, signature seals and jam making.

Artist's statements

'I trained as a painter, but the question in my mind is always "what sort of materials can I use to express this idea?" I really want all the works to have life, but the medium I use will determine what kind of life it has . . .

Quoted in Betsy Brennan,
'Optical allusion', *Vogue Living*,
September/October 2007, p. 65.

‘This work requires millimetre precision. I don’t need to fill in the centre panels, just the beginning and the end because the template has internal logic. It’s an exacting process — I need my assistant here to make sure I don’t slip in terms of where I hold the ruler when I am cutting.’

On her use of an assistant for her *Liquid Light* series. Quoted in Laura Murray Cree, ‘Marion Borgelt’, *Art World*, April/May 2009, p. 100.

‘I enjoy the dialogue between art and science ... order within chaos, the concept of fractals, yet this then leads to disorder (chaos theory). I like to stop at order. My works reflect the evolution of contemporary culture — the binding together of different cultures, styles, belief systems, ways of life to create a melange [medley], a pattern or way of being that is new and different, yet still bears traces of the original sources.’

Quoted from an interview with the author, July 1998.

‘I’m exploring the idea that everything in our lives is in a constant state of flux ... We try to find a still point in a turning world ...’

On her 2007 exhibition *Flux and Permanence*. Quoted in Betsy Brennan, ‘Optical allusion’, *Vogue Living*, September/October 2007, p. 65.

‘Time, change, cyclical movement (in particular, the moon’s cycle from new to old, light to dark), the idea of the metronome (a rhythm or pulse) ...’

Quoted from interview with author about her main concerns with this 2007 body of work.

‘Abstract painting has greater difficulties on certain levels than figurative painting. The elements are reduced and you have to get them right. In my case, the bands of colour, the edges, the movement, the shifts and changes and the texture all have to be right. Some bands are translucent, some are solid, some shift in a fugitive way, some in a sharp way.’

Quoted in Laura Murray Cree, ‘Marion Borgelt’, *Art World*, April/May 2009, p. 100.

Referring to her *Strobe* series

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Examine the way two artists from this chapter have explored the visual qualities and formal elements of art.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Marion Borgelt’s artmaking practice involves a variety of media and processes. Discuss the diversity of her artmaking practice and that of one other artist who works across a range of media.

2. Structural Frame



‘Communication through a system of signs, symbols, colour and their formal arrangement is often the primary way artists explore meaning.’ Discuss with reference to at least two artists including Marion Borgelt.

3. Conceptual Framework



‘Artworks that exist as material, physical objects may be symbolic representations of ideas and the artist’s interpretation of their world.’ Evaluate this statement with reference to a range of artists.

Study notes prepared by Georgia Elliott Swanborough, Year 11 student

SAMPLE STUDY NOTES FOR BORGELT

Marion Borgelt — Australian contemporary artist

Forms: painting, sculpture, installations

Frame: Structural — emphasis on precise techniques, sensitivity to materials, use of symbols linked to nature and culture

Conceptual Framework: responds to the world (structures, patterns, movement); entices, puzzles and interacts with audience; from small, fragile works to large-scale commissions

Style period: abstract

Artist's practice

Intentions/meaning: aesthetics, sensitivity to surface and materials, lunar and life cycles, universal symbols

Artist's statement

'I'm exploring the idea that everything in our lives is in a constant state of flux. We try to find a still point in a turning world.'

Media: variety, including blown glass, beeswax, wood, oil paint on canvas

Examples:

Primordial One: Figure F, C, A, E

Borgelt's use of a wide range of materials — wood, wax, resin, muslin. Uses restricted colours (browns, white). Wax adds sense of mystery and suggests something living inside. Extremely delicate and subtle — gives the effect of relaxation, quite meditative.

Imbol Painting: Coptic, Celtic, Kubic No 11

A structured approach, again restricted colours. Large-scale canvas. Lines coming from side of canvas moving into the centre draw the audience in and entice.

Jonathan Jones

(b. 1978, Indigenous Australian)

Issues/interests: abstraction, spatial relations using lights to create Aboriginal motifs and links with the landscape, a sense of being part of a community

Form: sculpture

Frame: *Postmodern* — Underlying the formal aspects of his work (repetition and patterning), contemporary technology is used to restate Indigenous pattern making.

Conceptual Framework: The audience becomes involved in the artwork through its large scale and use of light. In these works Jones interprets his world, both past (from his upbringing) and present.

Artworks in this unit

white lines 2005

68 Fletcher, Bondi, 20:20, 8.6.03 2003

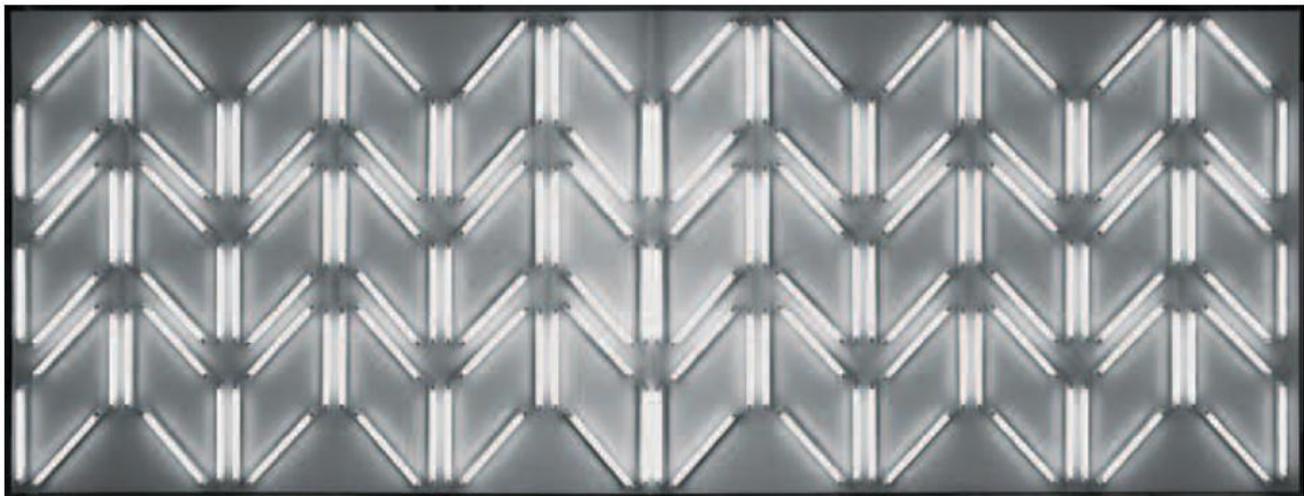
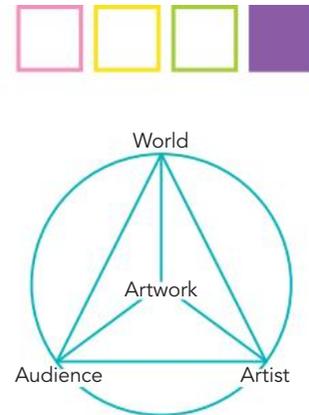
untitled (the tyranny of distance) 2008

eBookplus

eLesson: Interview with Jonathan Jones

Jonathan Jones gives insights into his work and inspiration.

SEARCHLIGHT ID: ELES-0644



white lines 2005 at first appears as a new interpretation of minimalism and the fluorescent light work of American Dan Flavin. There is a formal regularity in the pattern of 'lines', but their creation in light, with the resulting softening of the edges and surrounding glow, adds a new dimension. The open and closed patterns suggest points of tension and connection. The impact is further enhanced when the cultural links

white lines 2005
fluorescent tubes and fittings
300 × 824 cm
Photo: Scott Strothers
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery
Barry Keldoulis, Sydney

are considered. These linear patterns reference the natural patterns of the Australian landscape and Aboriginal motifs as seen in body painting and shields, rock carving and traditional Aboriginal painting, also embodying Jones' strong ideas on community and connectedness. We are also reminded of humanity's urge to control nature through fire and creating light, and the symbolism of light-as-knowledge and darkness-as-ignorance. This artwork was commissioned by Westpac in Sydney's CBD and was a result of the artist's research into the history of the site.



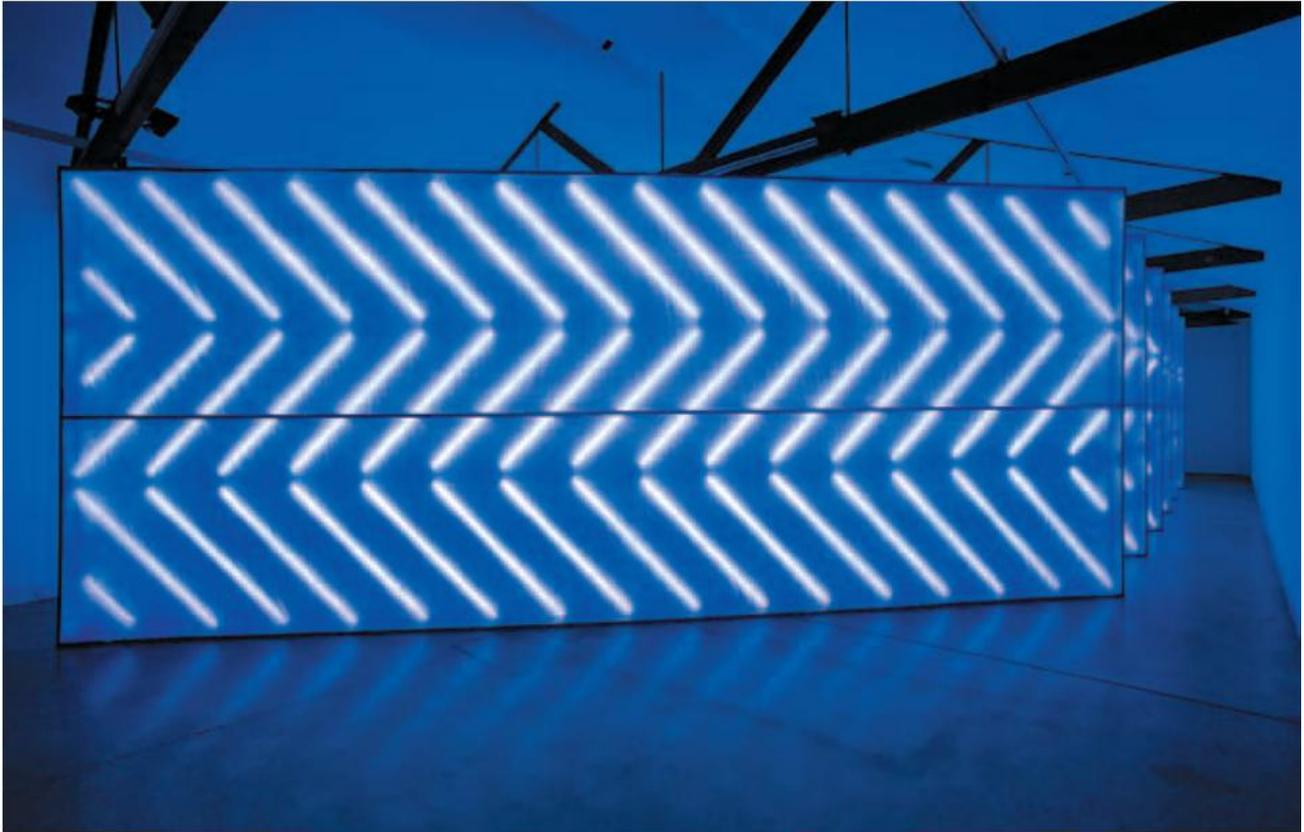
**68 Fletcher, Bondi,
20:20, 8.6.03** 2003

extension cords, household light
bulbs, movement sensors
200 x 900 x 50 cm
Collection: Newcastle Region Art
Gallery. Photo: Paul Green
Installed at Museum of
Contemporary Art, Sydney
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery
Barry Keldoulis, Sydney

As you walk along the line of dangling lights of *Fletcher, Bondi* (above), the glow from the bulbs creates an aura or sense of spirituality as the bulbs take on an independent life. The syncopated rhythm of the uneven suspension of lights suggests a dance, or musical notation, with some bulbs in a line like joined notes while others hang lower, stating their individuality. The audience is invited to delve into their imagination in their response to the experience. In fact, the position of the hanging lights represents Bondi Headland three-dimensionally. What at first appears as a simple piece is complex, as the artist has used light to articulate the connection between people and place.

The unifying feature of *untitled (the tyranny of distance)* 2008 (opposite) is the relationship between light and space. The blue light extends into the space, which has the effect of dissolving the solidity of the gallery walls, making the space ambiguous. Jones has made reference to the 'endless sky'. Installed in the Sherman Gallery Space, its immense size, the glowing lines within the blue structure, its eerie blue radiating into the whole room, entice the viewer to enter

and investigate. The multiple 'walls', their repetitive positioning at diagonals within the space, draw us in, enfolding and engulfing us, but also suggest by the narrow spaces left and the unnatural light that we are in a 'forbidden' area. Yet Jones wants a true interaction with his audience, rather than giving them just a 'peek through the door'. It is as though he wants us to experience the spaces between things, perhaps to recognise that there is more to understand than is at first apparent (hidden spaces and lost histories come to mind, as well as freedom and the notion of control of movement and intervention).



To experience *untitled (the tyranny of distance)* you must walk into the small space left along the walls to find the narrow sightlines that have been left between the structures, but you cannot navigate these narrow corridors of blue light. The diagonal spaces echo the diagonal lines of light within the blue tarpaulin. The texture of the tarpaulin, the soft, filtered glow of the neon lights within and the intensity of the blue hold our visual interest while our mind wanders to further associations.

The layers of meaning include a powerful political message. Blue tarpaulins are routinely used on construction sites, but they are also used in temporary shelters following natural disasters. The title alludes to the continuing Northern Territory 'Intervention', issues of access and prohibition, and the changing policies surrounding Indigenous housing. It operates as a symbolic statement on the relationships between private and public space, individuals and communities.

***untitled (the tyranny of distance)* 2008**

aluminium, tarpaulin, fluorescent tubes and fittings

6 walls, each 3.4 × 1.9 × 8.27 m

Commissioned by Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Sydney

Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



Historical background — biography

Jonathan Jones grew up in Sydney and a small town outside Tamworth, moving between members of his extended family. He is of Kamilaroi/Wiradjuri heritage of south-eastern Australia. His grandfather, a Wiradjuri man, had a great influence on Jonathan, not only in his embracing his Aboriginal identity but as an artist.

After dropping out of high school he went to TAFE and to NSW College of Fine Arts. He then worked as a curator at Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative. In 2002 he was awarded the NSW Ministry for the Arts Indigenous Arts Fellowship and in 2003 his work was included in the Museum of Contemporary Arts *Primavera* exhibition. He has worked in collaboration with several artists, including Darren Dale and David Page for the Australian Centre for Moving Image in Melbourne and an eight-year partnership with artist and poet Ruark Lewis.

Jones currently works at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

Artist's practice

Materials and intentions

Jones has always experimented with materials at hand, whether Vegemite, corrugated iron or light bulbs. Each of these seemingly mundane materials resonates with personal meaning and metaphor. The blackness of the Vegemite was its appeal, while his grandfather had been an itinerant fencer who frequently found shelter under corrugated iron, that symbol of Australian county life. It was his grandfather who taught Jones how to wire up light fittings. Artificial light has become the focal point or 'recognisable style' of his art. Light bulbs may be suspended side by side or strung in a pattern. Multiple incandescent bulbs in fluorescent tubes may be arranged in repetitive, geometric patterns reminiscent of Modernist Donald Judd. He will often allow the cords and fittings of his lights to show, thus becoming an integral part of the work. The individual units of the pattern suggest a tension, pinpointing, radiating or connecting. These units work within larger structures, an echo of Jones' upbringing in a fluid yet connected community existing within a wider community.

Connections, links coming together and moving apart, interest the artist. It is this duality of meaning, suggested through the choice of materials and dynamism of the works, that is so intriguing in his practice, which references ancient traditions while promoting understanding and hope for the future.

Jones uses readymade materials not usually associated with art in an architectural articulation of space. He adopts an essentially abstract form that is aesthetically pleasing and conceptually strong while alluding to Indigenous art and humanity in general, articulating how light can pull things together. By working on a large scale he immerses the audience, challenging the viewer to interpret the cultural meanings.

By reducing his imagery to geometric abstraction he aims to widen the audience's vision.

Jonathon Jones' artmaking is ethereal, weightless, yet energetic and visually beautiful.

Influences

Jones has stated that he has been influenced by the Modernist artists Jackson Pollock (*Blue Poles*) and Tony Tuckson, and that his work *untitled (the tyranny of distance)*, in its use of blue, is a homage to Michael Riley's *Cloud* series. There are obvious links to Indigenous art, particularly the notion of 'brilliance' or shine — that the more detailed the pattern or Rarrk (cross-hatching), the deeper the spiritual ancestral power the work contains.

Rather than direct referencing, Jones takes a small detail or pattern from an object such as a wooden shield and blows it up into a pattern of lines created with, say, fluorescent tubes.

Artist's statements

'What [my work] comes down to is trying to capture the notion of a community. It's an idea that perhaps there is one point of light and it's producing a body of light. What if you put another light with it? There's an overlap, a linking ...

'That idea starts to feed into the idea of how we define the question, what is it to be part of the community? To be part of Australia? How do we communicate? How do we operate? We get this notion of the massing of light, but in the end we're all individuals ...

'There are two ideas of culture. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal culture. There is an overlap even if people don't admit it. At the very least, we're sharing this country so there's an overlap there. People constantly focus on things that are not shared. I'm interested in how we can look at that connection.'

Quoted in Andrew Frost, 'Afraid of the dark', *Australian Art Collector*, issue 42, October–December 2007, p. 137.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Conceptual Framework



'Neon lights along with digital lights are the twentieth century's contribution to the art palette.' Comment on this statement, referring to Jones, Flavin and Janet Burchill.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Cultural and Postmodern Frames



'Indigenous artists are making powerful statements using contemporary media/approaches yet referencing traditional symbols and imagery.' Evaluate this statement with reference to at least three artists. You might consider Michael Riley, Tracey Moffatt, Adam Hill, Destiny Deacon, Gordon Bennett or Jonathan Jones.

2. Structural Frame



'Abstraction, symbolism and light are the building blocks of the individual artist's visual language and can be used to infer meaning.' Discuss in relation to the works of Jonathan Jones, Marion Borgelt and one other artist of your choice. You might consider Matthew Johnson, Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko.

3. Postmodern Frame — Conceptual Framework



'The notion of artists working in collaboration to create artworks is indicative of our times.' Investigate the 2007 collaborative work of Jonathan Jones and Ruark Lewis titled *Homelands illumination* and his work with Maori artist Jim Vivieaere and one other collaborative team.

Study notes prepared by Alice Mercer,
Year 11 student

SAMPLE STUDY NOTES FOR JONATHAN JONES

Jonathan Jones — Indigenous contemporary artist

Media/form: lights in installations, fluorescent tubes and bulbs, cords and fittings part of artwork

Frame: Postmodern (lights as a new technology), experimental approach

Conceptual Framework: audience involved through scale and light; interpretation of his world — past and present; large scale captures audience

Artist's practice

Intentions/meaning: abstraction; spatial relationships; repetitions, geometric patterns; links with landscape and culture; sense of community — fluid yet connected; aesthetically pleasing; references to Indigenous art; ancient traditions and understanding, and hope for future

Background: Sydney/Tamworth

Influences: grandfather (embracing Aboriginal identity); TAFE, COFA, AGNSW; Donald Judd, Jackson Pollock (*Blue Poles*), Tony Tuckson

Artist's quote: 'What [my work] comes down to is trying to capture the notion of a community.'

Examples: *untitled (the tyranny of distance)*, *white lines* 2005

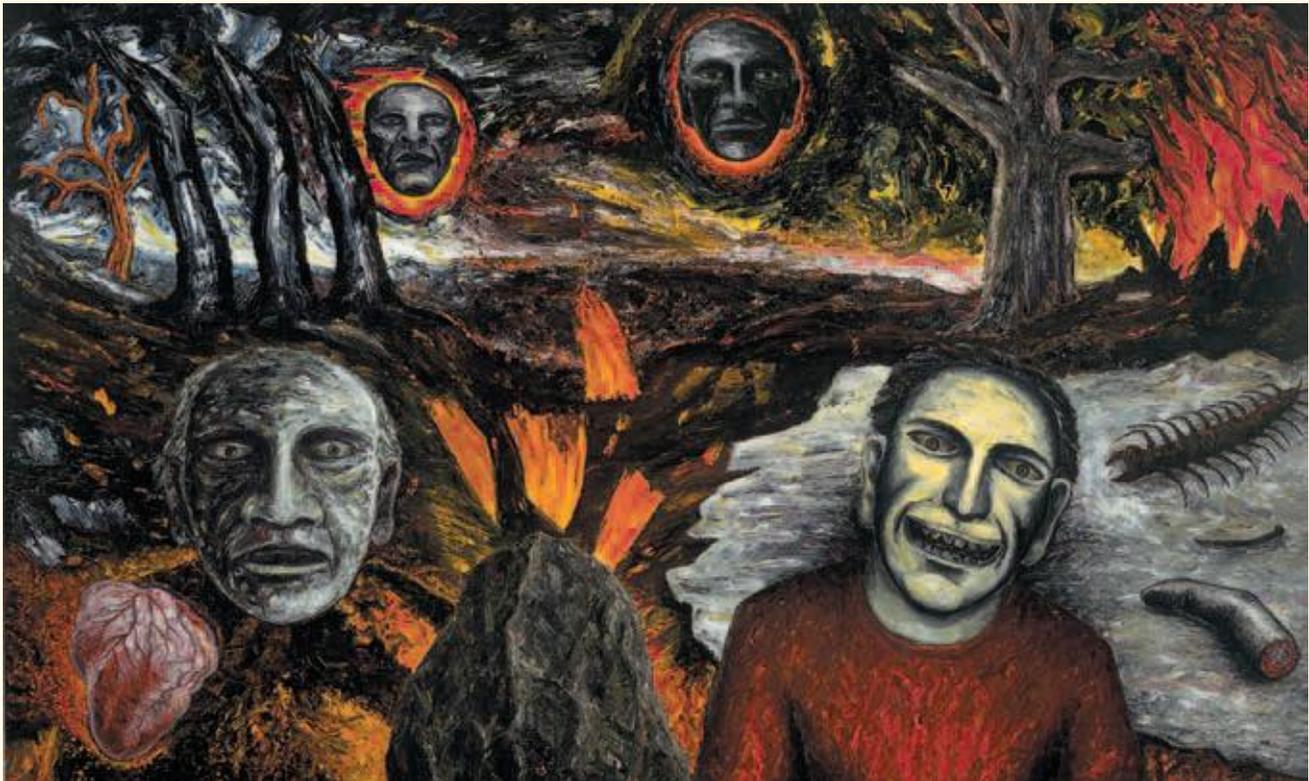
Chapter 3 The imagination

SYLLABUS FOCUS: Subjective Frame

Many artists, like poets and musicians, express their innermost feelings and emotional responses through their art. Visual communication can allow artists to convey their subconscious dreams and fears, the world of their imagination. Artworks often evoke the artist's personal memories while also resonating for the audience, triggering their own memories of experiences and feelings. Some artists, working from both *Subjective and Cultural Frames*, respond in a very personal way to issues in their society.

The *Subjective Frame* involves originality, intuition, suggestion and the interconnectedness of human experiences. It explores sensory and perceived experience rather than objective reality. Although a highly personal expression, a subjective artwork can have a deep effect on the viewer.

Painting 1979
oil on canvas
182.5 × 304.5 cm
Private collection, Melbourne
© Peter Booth
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010



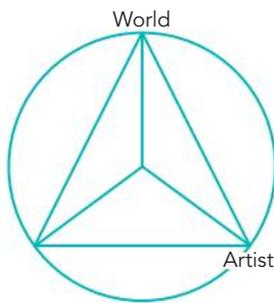
Francisco de Goya

(1746–1828, Spanish)

Issues/interests: bizarre, fantastic imaginings; satires of high society and the Church; emotive, confronting images of war

Forms: painting, printmaking

Frames: *Subjective* — personal, emotional interpretations of experiences; imaginative artworks of fears and dreams that affect the viewer; approaches subjects in an intuitive way rather than from the consciously political; *Cultural* — strong social comments



Conceptual Framework: Goya creates very personal, imaginative interpretations of his immediate world. His works are extremely emotive warnings about society, in particular Church and class, that provoke a direct reaction from the audience, who are drawn to question their own society. His work thus transcends time. Goya stands as a universal commentator on humanity, an artist who sought to bring about a new moral understanding.

Artworks in this unit

Execution of the Defenders of Madrid, 3rd May, 1808 1814

The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters 1799

Yinka Shonibare, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Australia)* 2008

A Heroic Feat! With Dead Men! 1810



Complete works — Francisco de Goya

Use the **Complete works** weblink in your eBookPLUS to explore an online gallery of works by Goya.

Execution of the Defenders of Madrid (opposite) is Goya's personal response to war and occupation. Commissioned by the Spanish government and completed six years after the event, it depicts a mass execution of Spanish hostages by Napoleon's French soldiers in retaliation to a Spanish resistance action against the occupying forces the day before.

This scene of an execution in wartime is emotionally heightened by the close-up focus, dramatic lighting with carefully arranged tonal contrasts and a strong diagonal direction. The main attention is on the man in the white shirt (itself a symbol of surrender), his arms outstretched. One is reminded of Christ on the cross; Goya has even put a mark on the palm of the man's right hand that brings to mind the stigmata, or wounds of Christ. The viewer is close enough to feel empathy and 'read' the expression on the man's face. On the

ground to the right a figure lies facing us in a pool of blood. Other hostages cover their faces in fear. Goya has not shown the faces of the executioners, thus dehumanising their actions while focusing our attention on the faces of those about to die, on their terror, anguish or defiance.



In *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (page 86) the artist is depicted sitting at a desk with his head resting on his folded arms, as if asleep. Behind him are swarming nocturnal creatures that suggest his nightmares. The flapping vampire bats and demons reflect Goya's fascination with fantasy and the irrational. Below the drawing Goya wrote, 'The author dreaming. His one intention is to banish harmful beliefs commonly held, and with this work of *Los Caprichos* to perpetuate the solid testimony of truth'.

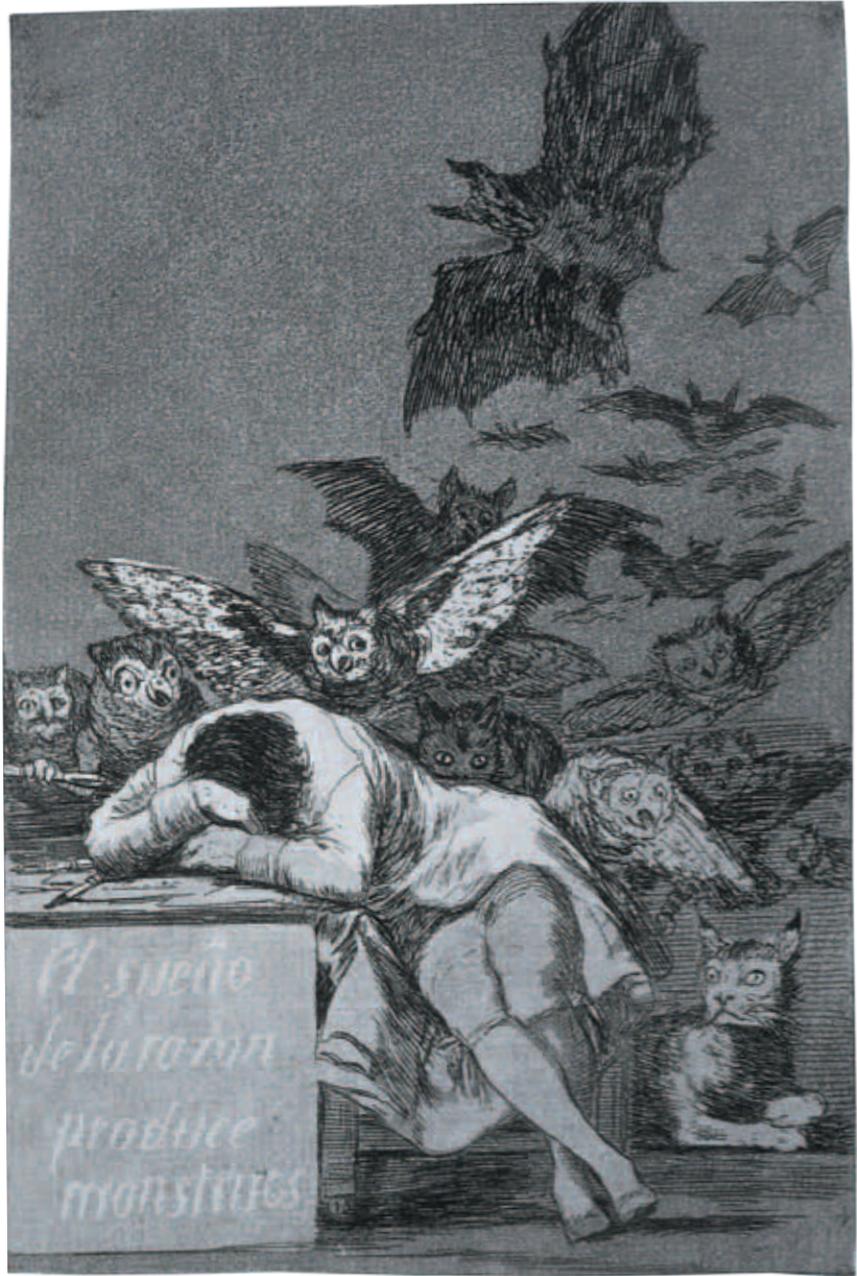
It was originally intended as the frontispiece to his *Caprichos* series. Goya believed Spain's best hope lay in progressive thinking, and this work stands for Goya's humanistic view. When reason sleeps, monsters of the irrational world take over. It is a darkness of despair. If the Enlightenment dozes off, its clear thinking will be perverted into a nightmare.

Execution of the Defenders of Madrid, 3rd May, 1808 1814

oil on canvas
268 × 127 cm
Museo del Prado, Madrid/
The Bridgeman Art Library

***The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* 1799**

Plate 43 of *Los Caprichos*, 1799
etching and aquatint
Private collection/Index/
The Bridgeman Art Library



Yinka Shonibare
***The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Australia)* 2008**

C-print mounted on aluminum
182.9 × 125.7 cm
Edition of 5
© 2008 Yinka Shonibare
Courtesy of James Cohan
Gallery, New York

This work symbolises the end of the rationalist century. Although Goya tried to disguise his attacks on the Court and Church by cloaking them in dreamlike situations, he was forced to withdraw this series from circulation under threat of the Inquisition.

The contemporary appropriation of Goya's work by Yinka Shonibare (left), an artist born and based in London of Nigerian parents, attests to the relevance of Goya's work across cultural boundaries and across time.

Shonibare uses costumes (made from Dutch wax fabrics he designs, with their reference to African as well as Indonesian cultures) generally displayed on headless mannequins in elaborate theatrical installations. His main themes relate to the effects of colonialism on cultures, class structures and rationality versus irrationality.



Despite the gruesome subject of *A Heroic Feat! With Dead Men!*, Goya has drawn the figures with sensitivity. The severed head stuck on top of the branch has an expression of dignity. The horror of the subject is even more poignant because of the realistic approach to the drawing, the contrast of the severed pieces of flesh with the delicacy of the foliage of the tree. This image of violence, torture and dismemberment is a timeless reminder of man's inhumanity to man.

A Heroic Feat! With Dead Men!
1810
Plate 39 of *The Disasters of War*,
1810–14, pub. 1863
etching with aquatint
16.5 × 21.5 cm
Private collection/Index/
The Bridgeman Art Library

Historical background

Biography

Francisco José de Goya y Lucientes was born in a village in the north-east of Spain. In 1766 he moved to Madrid. He soon visited Rome, where he was attracted by the work of Tiepolo. His earliest commissions were for church murals and tapestry cartoons. In 1783 Goya became a portraitist to the nobility. In 1789, at the age of 43, he was appointed court painter to Charles IV, king of Spain. He was married and had many children, but only one survived to maturity.

In 1792 a serious illness left the artist almost totally deaf. He suffered another near-fatal illness in 1819, which increased his inclination for

isolation and his pessimistic, morose outlook on life. It was at this stage that he produced the *Black Paintings*, with their sense of despair and dark tones.

Cultural context

Goya lived in the eighteenth century, which in the history of the European world has been called the Age of Enlightenment. This was a time when reason overcame the superstitions of the age of feudalism, and there were widespread reforms in manners and institutions. The Enlightenment was a European movement that aimed to banish intellectual, religious and political darkness in favour of the light of knowledge, inquiry and freedom. Yet this progress was often accompanied by great pain and turmoil. In Spain the masses suffered great poverty and oppression. The Roman Catholic Church was all-powerful, intolerant and despotic, and held the threat of the Inquisition over the people (which resulted in many being condemned as heretics or witches, tortured and burnt at the stake).

Goya was part of the Enlightenment movement. His work does not present its certainties, however, but rather the inner doubts and terrors he experienced.

In his drawings and etchings, Goya records the social conditions in Spain, the unrest surrounding the events leading up to and during Spain's War of Independence, the artist's reaction to the horrors of the Napoleonic invasion and the fall of the monarchy. It was a time of social turmoil, a revulsion against the diseased institutions of the monarchy and the Church, which resulted in a rise of 'republicanism'.

Goya's artworks reflect this cultural upheaval as well as his hatred of hypocrisy, oppression and tyranny.

Artist's practice

Techniques

Goya produced almost 300 etchings over his career, frequently combining methods and reworking areas. The etching medium requires exceptional draftsmanship (skill at drawing), as line work has to be decisive as mistakes cannot be changed. An etching is created by scratching through a protective layer on a metal plate, then submerging the plate in acid, which 'bites' into the exposed lines. Next the plate is inked up and rubbed back so that only ink remains in the 'lines'. Damp paper is used so that when placed in the printing press under pressure it is pressed into the lines on the plate and picks up the ink. Although line can be used to add tone, Goya sometimes also applied aquatint (darker areas by adding a powder that produces fine dots on the plate that catch the ink).

Goya drew constantly both as a record of observations, particularly the grotesque and bizarre, and as a memory aid. He had notebooks made that he carried with him so he could make quick sketches on the spot. Some of these drawings are realistic, others humorous or satirical, verging on caricatures, yet all are sensitively and decisively

executed. Although he could draw landscape beautifully, his main subject was people.

Goya fuses objective observation with subjective denunciations of the forces of oppression in his society, in particular the Church. He attacks no one personally, however, but uses caricature (well known in Europe during the eighteenth century, particularly from the paintings and engravings of Hogarth). Only in this way could he achieve artistic freedom for his explosive political critiques.

Goya's works are varied and complex, from realistic portraits, including self-portraits, casual studies of people's customs and humble pleasures, and the beauty of a reclining nude (painting nudes was actually banned in Catholic Spain), to biting social satire, dramatic recordings of events and mystical dreams. His imagery could be shockingly gruesome or revealing. His court paintings, although presumably expected to flatter their subjects, often suggested their greed and stupidity. He managed to fuse psychological insight with exactly the right formal qualities called for by the subject.

Goya moved Spanish painting into the modern era with his bold yet sensitive brushstrokes, applying fragmented and broken colour rather than carefully blending it, even at times using his fingers. He was a major influence on Manet. The way he used distorted human forms and facial expressions, and his imaginative interpretations of the subject also heralded the work of the Expressionists.

Intentions/meanings

Goya's work is a passionate examination of the joys and sorrows of humankind, its tenderness as well as its cruelty. His work was a search for beauty and justice. When looking at his body of work as a whole, we become aware of the conflict between Goya's desire for individual, rebellious self-expression and his need to follow traditional conventions for the sake of his career. We also see his recurring preoccupations with certain themes and his practice of working in series.

Influences

Goya carried on the traditions of the great Spanish painters El Greco, Ribera, Zurbaran and Velazquez, with their emotional intensity and sense of drama.

Other artworks

In 1814 he produced two paintings expressing the anguish and hopelessness of the people's uprising — *The Citizens of Madrid Fighting Murat's Cavalry in Puerta del Sol 2 May 1808* and *Execution of the Defenders of Madrid, 3rd May, 1808*, which has become a universal symbol of war and violence.

Two major series of prints, each comprising about 80 images, were *Los Caprichos* (caprices), satirically revealing the follies of human nature, and *The Disasters of War*, a brutal record of cruelty in wartime.

Los Caprichos, published in 1797 although engraved some five years earlier, consisted of 24 plates divided into two main series. One was devoted to satires ridiculing the priesthood, superstition and the flirtations of women; the other was composed of fantasies of witches, ghosts and sorcerers. All are bathed in a half-light that adds tragedy to the despair, violence and grotesqueness of the scenes. This was Goya's vision of a society riddled by deceit, hypocrisy and social madness. *The Disasters of War*, a series of 85 etchings not published until 1863, includes a number of etchings depicting the endurance of the people during the terrible famine of the winter of 1811–12. Others show scenes of violence, horror and atrocities committed by French troops and the heroism of Spanish countrywomen.

The *Black Paintings* (1820–23), a bleak series of 14 oil paintings, and his etching series *Los Disparates* (follies) from around the same period, with their strange, fantastic visionary subjects, attest to his extraordinary imaginative creativity. But the paintings were seen by very few of his contemporaries, and the etchings were not published until 1864.

Goya's etchings on the disasters of war and his fantasy/horror paintings had a profound influence on the modern art styles of Expressionism and Surrealism.

Critical practice

Robert Hughes, *Goya*, Harvill Press, London, 2003, p. 171, on *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* 1799.

'The "monsters" are bats and owls flying around the sleeper in his dream. The owl, here, is not an image of wisdom; it is the stereotype of mindless stupidity, which was how owls were seen in Spanish folklore in Goya's time. The bats are creatures of night, and thus of ignorance — and possibly of bloodsucking evil as well, in their association with the devil. A sinister-looking cat glares directly at us over the small of the man's back. That this dream-haunted sleeper is not Jovellanos but Goya himself is shown by the owl on the left that offers him an artist's chalk in a holder — the better to draw incorrect and misleading images with. The assault of the forces of darkness (you can almost hear the sibilant discord of their flapping wings) is watched by an emblem of perceptive wisdom, the lynx at lower right. (We know it is a lynx, not merely a big cat, by the pointy, two-tone ears.) The lynx, it was believed, could see through the thickest darkness and immediately tell truth from error . . . There is, one need hardly add, no exact parallel to this haunting and marvellously strong image in other art.'

Robert Hughes, *Goya*, Harvill Press, London, 2003, p. 295, on *A Heroic Feat! With Dead Men!*

Do a Google search for the 1994 sculptural version of this image by contemporary British artists Jake and Dinos Chapman.

'Bits and pieces of human bodies — a headless and armless trunk, two arms tied together, a bodiless head, and a castrated corpse — are hung on a tree, to terrify the passerby. They remind us that, if only they had been marble and the work of their destruction had been done by time rather than sabers, neoclassicists like Mengs would have been in aesthetic raptures over them.'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Analyse the writing style of art critic and historian Robert Hughes in the extracts opposite. What do you learn about Goya's practice and place in art history?
2. Read the following two quotes by the art historian Sarah Thomas, then look at his artworks to make an argument that Goya worked mainly from either the *Subjective* or the *Cultural Frame*.

... he was a troubled artist whose doubts, fears and convictions were expressed in the widely imaginative and private realm of his etchings, drawings and 'black paintings'.

Goya had lived through some of the seminal events in the birth of modern Europe: the age of Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars. His life had spanned the turbulent and bloody years of Europe's transition to the modern age. Goya had a rare ability to see beyond his own time, and to express concerns which remain deeply relevant today. (Sarah Thomas, *Dark Visions: The Etchings of Goya*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 1996, pp. 4–7)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Goya was an influence on modernists Dali and Manet (Manet did a similar painting to *Execution of the Defenders of Madrid*), and Goya's artworks have been appropriated by several contemporary artists, including Yasumasa Morimura (of Goya's *Saturn Devouring His Son*), The Chapman Brothers and Yinka Shonibare. Analyse at least two Postmodern versions of Goya's work to evaluate Goya's significance in the history of art.
2. **Cultural Frame** 
Evaluate the work of at least two artists who have represented violence or war in their artmaking.
3. **Subjective Frame** 
Analyse the way a range of artists have used dramatic lighting or dark tones to evoke an emotional response from the audience. You might consider Goya, Artemisia Gentileschi, Bernini, Louise Hearman or Bill Henson.
4. Investigate a range of artists, including Goya, who have shocked or confronted audiences. Suggestions: Ai Weiwei, Sophie Calle, Stelarc, Tracey Emin.

Marc Chagall

(1887–1985, Russian)

Issues/interests: dreams, imaginary world using expressive power of colour

Form: painting

Frames: *Subjective* in depicting his personal memories, imaginary world, individual vision of emotions; *Cultural* in reflecting his Russian Jewish heritage

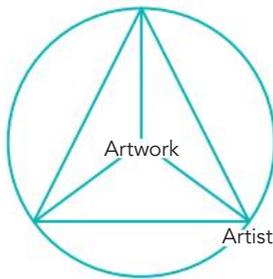
Conceptual Framework: His artworks are personal interpretations of his life, feelings and imagination.

Artworks in this unit

I and the Village 1911

The Soldier Drinks 1911–12

The Couple of the Eiffel Tower 1938–39



Marc Chagall

Use the **Marc Chagall** weblink in your eBookPLUS to explore more of the work of this artist.

I and the Village 1911 (opposite) combines Chagall's poetic sensibility, outbursts of feeling and melancholic memories in an imaginative fantasy world. It is rich with symbolism: the cross, the ring, the church, and imagery from his past, including the Russian village, the farm worker, the cow being milked — all represented in varying sizes and juxtaposed or merged into each other in unexpected ways. Note the large head of the woman inside the church as well as the woman who floats upside down. There is a naïve charm to some of the imagery, particularly the houses (why are some upside down?), but there are also very sophisticated painted surfaces (look at the top left corner). This painting is a poetical statement of his homesickness for Russia and for his fiancée Bella, who waited for him there until his return in 1914. Their happy marriage was the inspiration for many of his paintings.

We can see the influence of Cubism in the geometrical fracturing of space; the circles and arc shapes hint at the work of Delaunay, while the colour palette has the boldness of a Matisse. The artist's use of vibrant green for the face on the right immediately places the artwork outside of conventional reality, drawing the viewer into the world of Chagall's unique imaginative vision. It is a painting of enchantment, a whimsical fusion of village life, folk art and fairy tale where people and animals live together in harmony. There is a feeling of contentment in this rural scene, as symbolised by the blossoming tree. Chagall has created a magical world where gravity, reason and normality no longer exist.



***I and the Village* 1911**

oil on canvas

192.1 × 151.4 cm

Museum of Modern Art, New York

Mrs Simon Guggenheim Fund. 146.1945 © 2009

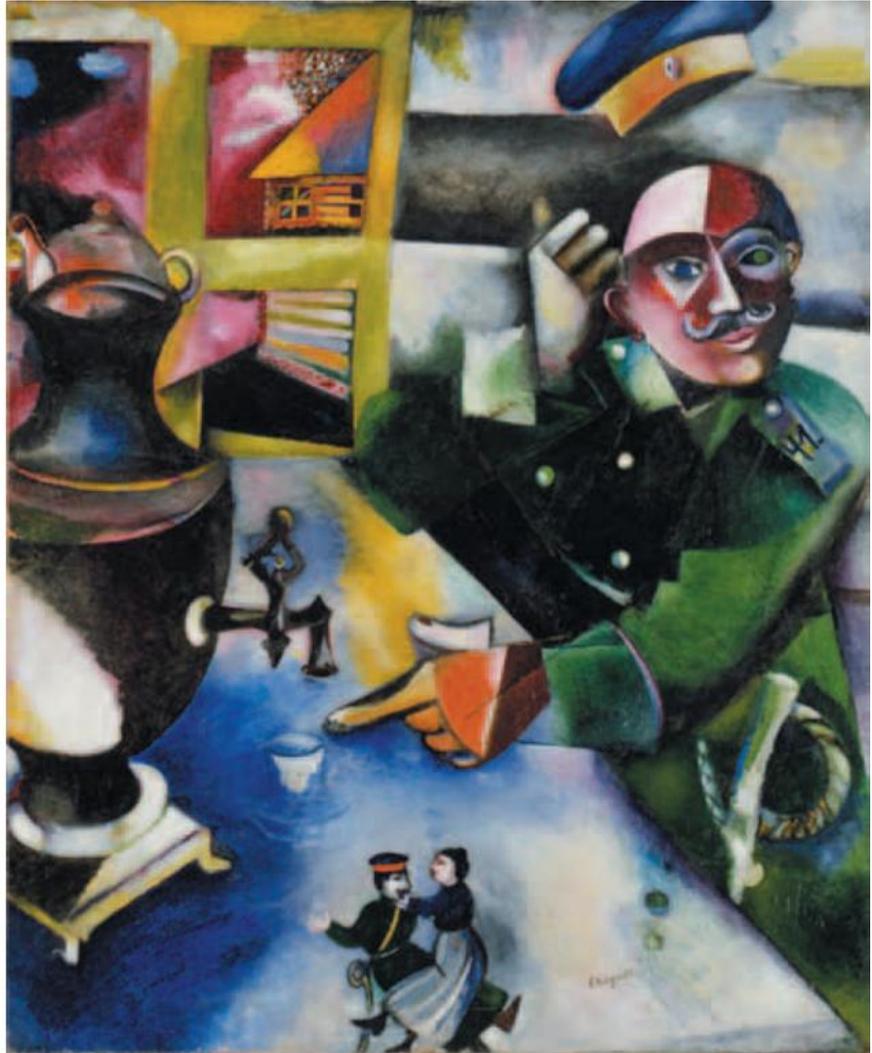
Digital image: MoMA/Scala, Florence

© Marc Chagall/ADAGP. Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

In *The Soldier Drinks* (page 94) Chagall brought new life to the formalism of Cubism in Paris at the time. His imaginative vision bears the imprint of his native culture. Although there is a sense of geometry underlying his compositions and a hardness to the outlines and division of the face into planes, the vibrancy and radiance of his colours and the fantastical composition and imagery were totally new in French painting.

The love Chagall felt for Bella overflows in *The Couple of the Eiffel Tower* (page 95). It is painted in a lyrical, dreamlike style in which gravity, scale and time are irrelevant. As in many of his paintings, fragments of memory become easily identified. Concrete objects

such as the cow, the rooster, the village buildings and the fiddler are recurring images in Chagall's work — elements of his personal feelings and memories of his small hometown of Vitebsk. Further symbolism is found in the wedding bouquet, a symbol of love and marriage; the candlestick, representing the wedding service as well as the Jewish religion; and the postman, the bearer of news between himself and Bella when they are separated.



The Soldier Drinks 1911–12

oil on canvas

109.2 × 94.6 cm

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Solomon R. Guggenheim Founding Collection, 49.1211

© Marc Chagall/ADAGP. Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

The Eiffel Tower, which occurred in many of his works following his move to Paris in 1910, is a prominent image in this work, and indeed features in the title. Chagall became a French citizen the year before this painting was created, but we still feel his mixed loyalties between France and Russia.



The Couple of the Eiffel Tower
1938
oil on canvas
148 × 145 cm
Musée National d'Art Moderne,
Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris
© 2010. BI, ADAGP, Paris/Scala,
Florence
© Marc Chagall/ADAGP
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Historical background — biography and cultural context

Chagall's paintings reflect his memories of his homeland, his Jewish upbringing, his relocation to Paris and his overwhelming love for his wife, Bella. To understand the imagery in his artworks, it is useful to appreciate his biography in some depth.

Chagall was born Moshe Segal to Yiddish-speaking Hassidic (strictly religious, observing the traditions) Jews at Vitebsk, Belorussia, near the Lithuanian border, in the years before the Russian Revolution. Although Jewish children were banned from state school from the age of 13, a bribe gained Chagall entry and he extended his Hebrew education into Russian and later French. At age 19 he began a two-month apprenticeship at the studio of a painter of landscapes and portraits. At this stage Chagall painted familiar, humble scenes in bright, vivid colours.

As the oldest of nine children, for years Chagall used members of his family as models, along with friends and neighbours, the local grocery store, the bank, the butcher, the policeman, drunken soldiers, the barbershop, the pedlars, small carts and animals. His works are thus a personal record of his memories.

In 1907 Chagall set out for the Russian capital, St Petersburg, where he enrolled at the School of the Imperial Society for the Protection of the Fine Arts. He lived in great poverty but gained high marks and recognition. He eventually found a mentor and was accepted by the head painter at the Zvantseva School, an art school open to the ideas of modernity. During his two years of study there he was introduced to the work of Van Gogh and Cezanne. In the spring of 1910 Chagall exhibited for the first time.

In 1909 Chagall fell in love with Bella Rosenfeld in Moscow, but it would be six years before they could marry because in 1910 Maxine Vinaver, who had been a patron for several months, offered him a small allowance to study in Paris, considered at the time to be the world centre of art. Separated from his home and his love, Moshe Segal also felt the widespread prejudice against Jews in Paris, which led him to change his name to Marc Chagall.

In Paris he came into contact with several art groups and artists who became influential: the Cubists (a modern art movement seeking a new way to represent reality by using multiple viewpoints and fragmenting form); Fauvism (a modern art style favouring bold colour and decorative line over strict realism); Delaunay (an artist interested in symbols of modernity, such as the Eiffel Tower, and who developed an abstract art style using colour circles); and the Surrealists (a modern art group interested in dreams and the subconscious who used unexpected juxtapositions and images). In various forms Chagall adopted the fragmented structure of the Cubists, the dazzling colours of the Fauves, the colour disks and Eiffel Tower of Delaunay and the dreamlike quality of the Surrealists, yet his work remained unique and he worked independently. In the peaceful ambience of Paris his paintings manifested an increase in light, colour and lyricism.

In 1914 Chagall left Paris to attend the opening of an exhibition of his paintings in Berlin. Caught by surprise by the outbreak of World War I, he set off for Vitebsk to see his family and Bella, who by that stage had been waiting for him for four years. They soon married and a year later had a daughter. Trapped in his own country although excused from military duties, Chagall was inspired by the war, the wounded, the poverty, the cold and famine to produce some expressive, bitter ink drawings. He also painted several views of his town and domestic paintings with his relatives that were infused by a mood of tenderness and a sense of mystery. Paintings of Jewish refugees reveal his respect and compassion. Between 1916 and 1917 Chagall exhibited his work several times and received generous recognition for an artist not yet 30.

After the October Revolution of 1917, Chagall was appointed Commissar of the Arts in Vitebsk. Later he became the director of the Vitebsk Academy. This success combined with his great love for his wife meant the war years held some happiness for Chagall, as seen in his paintings of lovers. In 1920 Chagall and his family moved to Moscow, the new Soviet capital. Here he produced several theatre designs. At this stage Chagall experimented with geometric shapes but did not join the

Revolutionary Russian movement of Suprematism. Chagall's designs for the Jewish Theatre were not well received, however, and he was compelled to accept a minor post as a drawing teacher. He decided to go into exile.

In 1922 Chagall renounced his nationality and returned to Paris. This period between the wars was a tranquil one for Chagall and his family. His style developed a softer effect using subtle 'rounded' brushstrokes. The glittering world of the circus became a favourite subject. Although Chagall was recognised throughout Europe, owing to his enforced travel, he no longer possessed any of the works that had earned him fame. From 1923 to 1927 he set about creating new versions of his earlier work. Between 1923 and 1925 he created 107 drypoint and aquatint etchings to illustrate one of the masterpieces of Russian literature, *Dead Souls*, by Gogol. Chagall depicts the corrupt humanity described by Gogol through sharp caricature. He also illustrated the *Fables* by the French poet La Fontaine, a series of gouaches that he worked on for five years before returning to the Bible for inspiration.

From 1924 Chagall was once again successful and comfortably well off, as is reflected in the glow of happiness projected by his paintings. Couples, flowers and pastoral scenes are common, suggesting an inner peace. From 1931 he was engaged in an extensive work, *The Bible*, which did not appear until 1956. He was greatly moved by the biblical world and visited Palestine twice for inspiration. Chagall has said that he thought of clowns, acrobats and actors as tragic human beings who were like the subjects of some religious pictures.

Between 1925 and 1940 Chagall travelled extensively both in France and further afield, including Poland in 1935, Italy in 1937 and New York in 1941. In Mexico in 1942 he was commissioned to produce stage illustrations and costumes for a ballet. During World War II Chagall and his wife escaped to America. Bella died of an unidentified viral infection in the United States in 1944. Chagall's days in America were a waiting period for his return to Paris, which finally took place in 1948.

Artist's practice

Intentions/interests

Chagall was a painter of humanity, a unique artist who worked outside the boundaries of nationalism and current art trends, yet was aware of and sympathetic to these influences. The real and the imaginary merge in his subjective artworks, revealing a childlike sense of wonder, a delight in the joys of love and the simple pleasures of flowers. He creates enchantment, surprise and playfulness, a place to escape to.

Many of Chagall's paintings are familiar scenes and well-loved landscapes from his childhood, important images and moments in his life that he draws from his deeply felt memories. Yet they are also illusions — cows play fiddles, donkeys fly and angels watch over all. Allusions to fun and fantasy also suggest human tragedy. He sees and remembers from a poet's perspective, creating a sensual reality reinvented in a series of metaphors. Chagall's themes include the

circus, his hometown of Vitebsk, the Bible, Jewish customs, the war years, his dreams and his love for his wife. Chagall has stated that his paintings were arrangements of inner images that possessed him. His poems were also greatly admired. From 1910 he produced a number of self-portraits, both to present himself proudly as a painter and as a means of coming to terms with his identity in a foreign land.

Chagall was an artist who drew creative inspiration from within himself and the world around him and from his recollections.

Technique

Chagall worked rapidly on small sheets of paper, sketching his ideas for compositions in pencil or ink. Owing to a lack of money he would then create small but elaborate gouaches on card as a basis for the later development of large canvases using oil paint.

Chagall kept a diary of his daily life as a series of large drawings with a hint of watercolour. He filled notebooks with handwritten notes and poems.

In his later works, Chagall applied a dominant tone, such as green or red, to the entire picture. His figures rarely touch earth. He extended his work more and more into other media such as ceramics and stained glass.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the close link between artist and artworks in relation to the work of Chagall.
2. 'Chagall stirs our awareness by displacing the familiar, immersing us in a world of memories and dreams.' Evaluate this statement in relation to two of his artworks.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Subjective Frame



'Artists who work from the *Subjective Frame* are intuitive, creatively expressing their personal experiences and imaginings.' Discuss with reference to a range of artists. You might consider Chagall, Del Kathryn Barton, Cherry Hood, Emily Portmann, Bosch, Goya, Booth or Gleeson.

2. 'Love, death, suffering, the dramatic aspects of life, have been key themes for artists.' Discuss in relation to three artists (e.g. Chagall, Van Gogh, Munch, Klimt, Kokoschka, Modigliani, Rodin).

3. Cultural Frame — Conceptual Framework



'An artist's representation of his world may be a result of his personal experiences or religious upbringing, or may be influenced by wars or political upheavals.' Discuss, referring to Chagall and at least one other artist. You might wish to consider George Grosz, George Gittoes, Mona Hatoum, William Kentridge, Shirin Neshat, Guan Wei or Ai Weiwei.

James Gleeson

(1915–2008, Australian)

Issues/interests: Australian Surrealism, the haunted depths of the human psyche, an imaginative world of the subconscious using the seascape and its organisms, at times abstract and sometimes including a self-portrait

Form: mainly oil painting

Frame: *Subjective* — emotive paintings, highly imaginative works drawn from his inner self

Conceptual Framework: Gleeson creates his own imaginative world, drawing particularly on his own poetry. His artworks have an emotional impact on the viewer. His works reflect his interest in the artworld through his contact with Surrealism and his writing as an art critic.

Artworks in this unit

The Arrival of Implacable Gifts 1985

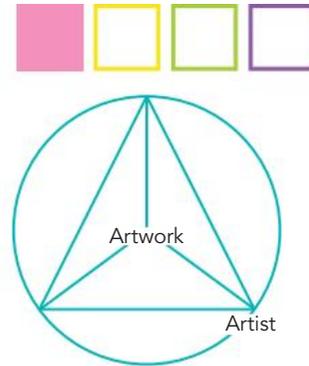
Manoeuvres 2006

An Active Barrier 2005

eBookplus

A revolution in the arts

Use the **A revolution in the arts** weblink in your eBookPLUS to discover more about the life and art of James Gleeson.



The Arrival of Implacable Gifts

1985

oil on canvas

198 × 245 cm

Purchased 1985

Art Gallery of New South Wales,
Sydney

© Gleeson/O'Keefe Foundation

In the foreground of *The Arrival of Im placable Gifts* 1985 (page 99) we see glowing reflections of shallow water, with delicate brushwork depicting fine ripples in the still surface. Our eye is led back into a deep space with soft clouds hovering over the horizon. But all is not as it should be. Rearing out of the shallows are organic growths, a swarming mass of rocks, monsters and shells, in a twisting state of metamorphosis. This state of ambiguity is further emphasised by the turbulent surf above, which also contains creatures in what appear to be upturned boats. Which is the right way up? What is reality?

The imagery is both beautiful — with the gentle blending of tone, subtle colours and delicate line work — and horrific. Incongruity exists between the sensuous, curving shapes and the horns, teeth and dark crusty skin of the forms entwined in rope-like webbing. It is a vivid exploration of another reality, the work of the human subconscious. The final touch to the irrationality of this painting is the realistic portrait of Gleeson himself peeping from behind one of the monsters.



Manoeuvres 2006

oil on canvas

113 × 150 cm

© Gleeson/O'Keefe Foundation

Courtesy of United Galleries,

Perth

An Active Barrier (opposite) was exhibited to celebrate Gleeson's ninetieth birthday, yet it is far from the work of a fainthearted man in his last years of life. There is a dynamic strength to both composition and colour scheme, and certainly no loss of control of the painted surface. As is characteristic of Gleeson's work, the viewer is mesmerised by the sense of grandeur of the 'landscape', dazzled by his imaginative powers as we struggle to decipher the inspiration for the 'organisms' that emerge from mist and water, and intrigued by the minutely detailed areas and expressive fine lines. A mood has been set, drawing the viewer into his vision.



Artist's practice

James Gleeson was perhaps best known as Australia's leading Surrealist artist. He was also a poet and a respected art critic. Working as a Surrealist in the late 1930s, he wrote the first definition of Surrealism in Australia, in *Art and Australia* in 1940:

Surrealism is a word that is applied to those forms of creative art which are evolved, not from the conscious mind, but from the deeper recesses of the subconscious. The theory of surrealism is based upon a belief that the logical mind, with its prescribed formulae of thought, is incapable of expressing the entire range of human experience and aspiration. To express such a range, the complete mechanism of the human mind must be utilised.

Although greatly influenced by the methods of Dali, such as the miniaturesque 'sharp focus' technique and the juxtaposing of unrelated objects. Gleeson's work stresses the importance of the imagination rather than the notion of irrationality and paranoia. He used the

An Active Barrier 2005

oil on linen

76 × 89 cm

Exhibited at Watters Gallery,

2–26 November 2005

© Gleeson/O'Keefe Foundation

Photo courtesy Watters Gallery

subconscious as a path to self-knowledge and an understanding of humanity as a whole. There is always an element of chance in his artmaking practice, which is one of the main links of his approach to artmaking with the Surrealists.

Intention/meaning

The overriding idea behind Gleeson's work is that humanity is driven by subconscious forces. The mood and imagery have changed over time, from portents of malice and morbid responses to war and states of metamorphosis in the late 1930s and 1940s, to cosmic gardens, beautiful lyrical abstractions and richly coloured land- and seascapes with biomorphic creatures (suggestive of living organisms) from the 1980s until his death.

Gleeson's paintings generally explore undercurrents of the psyche — imagery that emerges from the shadowy depths of the soul, inducing us to question reality. He presents us with a mysterious world of wonder where the incredible and unexpected suggest infinite possibilities. The artist has stated that he always felt that much goes on beyond what you see with your eyes and that in his art he tried to break through the limits of what is generally thought of as reality. Gleeson's works may defy analysis, but they certainly inspire the imagination of the viewer.

Although he began painting in the 1940s, Gleeson's main output was from 1983, just short of his sixty-eighth birthday — after he gave up working as a critic, publishing books, curating exhibitions and serving on art committees to return to painting full time — until 2008. He produced 477 paintings in that time, most on a large scale. In his last 15 months, when the pain from his cancer prevented him working on large paintings, he produced more than 500 drawings.

Technique

Gleeson worked in the studio attached to his house five to six days a week from early in the morning, stopping at midday only in the last couple of years. Unlike many artists, he avoided working in sunlight, preferring artificial light in which to paint his dreams and surreal landscapes.

Technically, his works impress with the variety of their luxurious textures of oil paint, from translucent glazes to rich encrustations. The colour harmonies are both subtle and surprising. Gleeson's superbly detailed renderings owe much to his use of a large palette — usually 80 to 90 different colours, which he rarely mixed. He overlaid colours with thin glazes of their complements. Gleeson applied his paint in small touches, often drawn together with a soft blending brush. He used to begin the process with a fully developed charcoal drawing as a tonal model, but later he found this too restrictive, preferring to play with the charcoal on the paper, allowing forms and shapes to emerge in a more random, spontaneous way, then placing a piece of perspex over it with a grid drawn in felt pen in order to transfer it onto the canvas. It was a gradual process. Sometimes the original 'scribble' suggested possibilities, so that what he sensed in the original subtly

evolved, but he still allowed chance to take a part in the development of the drawing. Once the painting was started, he followed the drawing only up to a point, depending on the way the paint formed and flowed on the canvas.

This basic composition was then transformed through his exacting oil painting method and skill with colour. The large scale is an essential part of the work's impact. Often the process from drawing to finished painting took a matter of weeks. Gleeson's works are noteworthy for their painting quality and compositional devices alone. His use of imagery is also multifaceted, from finely detailed, precise realism to bold, expressive, suggestive forms.

Gleeson said his major influences included the way T. S. Eliot expresses 'glimpses of the world through little snatches', the way Turner paints sea and sky, often with a sense of threat coming from the sky, musical experiences such as listening to Schubert and, perhaps most importantly, the fascination he always felt looking into rock pools and discovering the strange creatures that dwell there.

Gleeson's inspiration and method of working, from his original thoughts and feelings, through the hand onto the paper and thus to the painting, can best be summed up by one of his own poems titled 'On Starting a Painting'.

Artist's statements

Dispensed on the palette the ointments of light await
and the whiteness aches for the unction of a loaded brush.
A latent image waits transmission by the acting hand.
Something shapes through the hurry of laid colour,
a form hovering on the edge of identity, but still unnameable,
a constituency freed from the age of fact
like a phoenix risen out of ash, of a thought-lotus
sprung from the compost of forgotten memories
yet still fed from darkness.
If the light is right the darkness will remain
to hold the form in stasis.
Something will be that had not been before.
But is it possible to side-step the seen
and surprise the unseen in a sudden flash of recognition?
From the known a newer resonance
shaking old doors open to a separate incarnation.
Can mere ointment and the working mind
elicit bold unknowns?
Always there is some mistake,
a small false move
when the guide-dog in the mind forgets
at the curb of a sudden corner.
The step is irreversible.
Where you were heading is not where you're going;
the road is not the one you wanted
or ever planned to follow.

James Gleeson, 'On Starting a Painting', from *ALONG THE FAULT LINE: Late slippages and abrasions*, The Northwood Press, 2005.

A sudden snap and then the quick re-drawing of the map.
The light tells lies and falsifies the travelling shadow,
making East or West in a maze of yet-to-be-invented signs.
Meanwhile the evidence is mounting
that the activating tremor started with the certainty of an answer
to a question that should never have been asked.
The attempt will surely fail
but not to attempt is the ultimate defeat.

Quoted in John McDonald, *Studio Australian Painters on the Nature of Creativity*, Ian Lloyd Productions, 2007.

'No experience we've had is totally lost, it remains lodged somehow in the subconscious mind, and at dark moments will reappear spontaneously. When it does it is often to good effect.'

Critical practice

Lou Klepac, *James Gleeson: Landscape out of Nature*, Beagle Press, Sydney, 1987, pp. 9–10.

'James Gleeson's late paintings will ... be interpreted as the world reduced to an illogical and disturbing state as a punishment for something that mankind has done. The paintings do have an air of prophecy and many will interpret them as reflecting our fear of global extinction since this has become a universal anxiety ...

'Gleeson aptly says that his aim is to paint as carefully as he can the things he cannot see ...

'Where does he find his inspiration? He does find that there are moments when his imagination is stirred and he jots down notes and motifs into sketchbooks. One of his favourite places for these receptive moods is in his sitting room in the late afternoon where he rests with a drink after having completed the day's painting. At that time, the rays of a low sun come into the room filtered through leaves and they play a game of shadows on his switched off television screen. Resting, but still receptive, he finds that images are summoned up by this play of chance. They are jotted down and recorded to emerge later in the large drawings and eventually become part of his paintings.'

John McDonald,
'Mysteries and Majesty',
Arts, Sydney Morning Herald,
18 November 1995, p. 16A.

'"Indistinctness is my forte," J. M. W. Turner quipped, when his paintings were being criticised for their lack of definition. James Gleeson, who turns 80 next week, is a great disciple of such Turneresque "indistinctness", and of those swirling, vortex-like compositions that set Turner apart from every other landscapist of his era.

'In his new paintings, Gleeson's familiar retinue of slimy monsters, crustaceans, and anonymous presences struggle to free themselves from the prevailing mists. Constantly changing states, they are never distinct, self-contained entities ...

'Despite all the grotesquerie, Gleeson's misty landscapes are extraordinarily seductive. Whether he gives us a field of diffused light, as in *The Strait*, or a dramatic rent in the clouds in such works as *Storm Warning* or *The Beginning of the Rain*, such atmospheric effects provide the correct emotional key by which we read each picture.'

Historical practice — Conceptual Framework

'Gleeson presented the art world with a completely new kind of image. Monumental in scale and approach, they truly lifted the "veil to reveal what the eye could not see alone". Writhing forms where land becomes flesh and sky becomes sea, littoral zones had always fascinated him, his work being executed with a rich painterly technique reminiscent of Turner and the great painters of history. The works redefined surrealism in Australia and inspired a new generation of painters and critics.'

Robert Buratti, 'James Gleeson: 1915–2008', in *Australian Art Review*, issue 18, February–April 2009, p. 27.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. What did you learn from the artist's poem 'On Starting a Painting' (page 103) about Gleeson's artmaking practice — his intentions, choices and methods of working?
2. How has the art critic John McDonald in the quotation above suggested the importance or value of Gleeson's work? How has he made them sound so intriguing as to entice the reader to view the exhibition?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Subjective Frame



Discuss how a range of artists have worked from their emotional response towards landscape/seascape, creating a mood to involve the viewer. Include Gleeson and Turner in your answer.

2. Artist's practice

For some artists, precision and careful modelling are important aspects of their practice. Consider a range of artists over time. Suggestions: Dürer, Vermeer, Gleeson, Marion Borgelt.

3. Subjective Frame



Discuss the significance of the imagination in Modern and Postmodern art.

Peter Booth

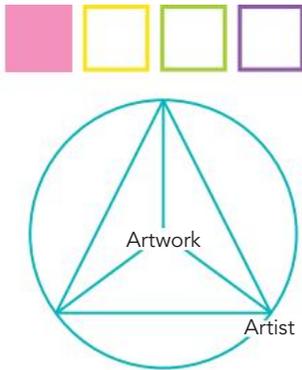
(b. 1940, England, arrived in Australia in 1958)

Issues/interests: human behaviour, the figure associated with fear and violence, imagination and the subconscious, the expressive landscape

Form: painting

Frame: *Subjective* in its emotional intensity

Conceptual Framework: Through his imagination and subjective response to his world Booth leads the viewer on an open-ended journey of their own, into another reality.



Artworks in this unit

Painting 1977

Painting 1979

Russia 1 1994

Painting 1996



Audio: Human Nature

Curator Jason Smith offers insights into artworks by Peter Booth.

SEARCHLIGHT ID: AUD-0003

VOCABULARY

cathartic purifying or purging

Expressionist an art style in which the work emphasises emotion and the projection of inner feelings

turbulent wild, suggesting a storm

Painting 1977 (opposite) is generally acknowledged as the starting point in a return to figuration among younger painters in Australia. Here is a striking image of a man on a deserted road staring out from a blood-and-fire landscape. The work is confronting, yet confusing. Is the figure becoming one with this macabre landscape, his eyes already transformed to an evil red? The light is otherworldly and inescapable. This dream world exhibits an unnerving combination of bleakness and lushness, with its barrenness and bleak architectonic structures on the left, yet rich colour and texture. The threatening mood is heightened by the gestural use of thick paint and the restricted colour palette.

Booth is an artist who displays a heightened imaginative and emotional response to his surroundings and experiences.



The confronting *Painting* 1979 (below) belongs in Booth's oeuvre of nightmarish works. As if the faces themselves were not menacing enough, with their disturbing expressions, we have symbols of a heart, a dismembered, blackened limb and a centipede-like insect to decipher. The macabre landscape background seems to crowd the space, while the light is otherworldly and suggestive of hell. The sense of the irrational is reinforced by the floating faces surrounded by balls of fire.

Painting 1977
oil on canvas
182.5 × 304.0 cm
National Gallery of Victoria,
Melbourne
Gift of the artist in memory of
Les Hawkins, 1978
© Peter Booth
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010



Painting 1979
oil on canvas
182.5 × 304.5 cm
Private collection,
Melbourne
© Peter Booth
Licensed by
Viscopy, 2010



Russia 1 1994
oil on canvas
35.5 × 56.0 cm
Private collection, Melbourne
© Peter Booth
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Russia 1 1994 (above) is characteristic of the distinctive thick, tactile, buttery paint quality in Booth's work. The muted colours give a subtlety to the otherwise heavy handling of the surface and the crudeness of the barren trees. The artist has subtly arranged the trees either side of the road, leading the eye gently towards the right, drawing the viewer into the space. It is an image of desolation but there is also a sense of silence. Is the sky a symbol of hope, a gentle sunrise, or is it just a reminder of the fire that has scoured the landscape? The mood communicated depends on the sensibilities of the audience.

Painting 1996 (opposite) is a frighteningly bleak painting. A decapitated head has been planted on a wooden post. A nail protrudes from the wood. The head is somehow all the more horrific because it wears glasses, giving the corpse individuality, its teeth bared, perhaps in pain. When we recover from the initial horror of this image we realise there is another head lying on the ground behind it. As in many of Booth's works, there is an overwhelming feeling of tragedy and humiliation. This painting has a disturbing yet intriguing power. The black/white palette, thick, buttery application of paint and angular, sharp-edged rocks add to the sense of violence. Yet the softly falling snow perhaps is a sign of hope, a promise of renewal.

Peter Booth has developed a unique visual language of symbols, a luscious textural paint application and strong tonal contrasts to represent and communicate his dreams and fears. His works are subjective in approach, stimulating an emotional response from the audience.



Painting 1996
oil on canvas
182.8 × 122.0 cm
Presented through the NGV
Foundation by the artist and
Magda Matwiejew, Governors,
2004
© Peter Booth
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Artist's practice

Background

Born in Sheffield, Peter Booth grew up among the many-chimneyed, soot-blackened townscapes of the industrial north of England.

Intention/subject

Peter Booth creates powerful visions of emotional intensity. He is an artist of exceptional imagination. His paintings and drawings suggest a complex and mysterious narrative or story, exploring in particular the pitfalls of life. He portrays the journey or progress of humanity through darkness, spiritual turmoil, threat, loneliness and isolation to possible hope. Booth appeals to universal human emotions and needs, fears and anxieties, but at times he also evokes a feeling of calm and compassion. His works in the 1980s were of terrifying, bizarre hybrid creatures of bird or insect life, bleak images of urban chaos. Humans were in a constant state of mutation and metamorphosis into other living things, often resembling mutants or animal-headed monsters.

In the late 1990s Booth turned increasingly to landscapes, in particular the forests and alpine areas of Victoria. In recent work the landscape is a dramatic setting for human folly. He expresses a deeply felt personal reaction to the natural environment while he explores the interconnectedness of all living things.

Peter Booth exposes the darker side of the human condition, notably humiliation, violence and fear. His human figures are often awkward, lumbering and ungainly, at times crawling beastlike, their spirits broken. Their faces are chunky with close-set eyes.

Although he claims his personal memories, anxieties, dreams and experiences inform his work, he is also aware that meaning is bestowed by the onlooker. The suggestion is that society is accountable for its own crimes.

Technique

Booth generally produces about 100 drawings in preparation for each painting. He works in a variety of media, including charcoal, pastel, crayon, oil and acrylic. Whatever the medium, Booth manages to create a rich, sumptuous surface. His work is distinctive for its use of black, both for its symbolic value as representing anxiety, death and suffering, and linking back to childhood memories of being raised in the soot-blackened city of Sheffield. Dark industrial landscapes and harsh environments are central to his art, black being used as a base colour or mixed to form subtle shades of grey. His main contrasting colour is red, which adds to the emotional intensity but also symbolically suggests the life force, blood, fire and hell.

Most of his works express a bleakness but also a harsh kind of beauty with their rich textural surfaces and strong tonal contrasts. Whether Booth is painting a human figure, a dog or a tree, there is a monumental, timeless quality, an awareness of weight and solidity.

Critical practice

'In December 1976 Peter Booth made a series of drawings in memory of his friend Les Hawkins, who had died in a road accident. Many of these drawings show a figure looking into a funnel of light which pours down a road between houses or in the open landscape. The perspective is such that one has the sense of the road narrowing, the darkness closing in before a burst of light at the top of the picture. In one drawing the figure holds his hands before his eyes, dazzled by light, and in another, his arms are outstretched as if to embrace it. In these **cathartic** pictures, the symbolism of light and dark, life and death, hope and despair prefigure the work of the succeeding 12 years, in which Peter Booth developed an art of great maturity and skill, transforming his own sense of personal loss into a more universal vision.

Rupert Martin, 'Peter Booth: The inner landscape', in *Peter Booth: drawings 1977–87*, exhibition catalogue, Deutscher Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, Victoria, 1989.

'This series directly inspired his first large-scale figurative painting in 1977 ... Here the figure stares straight out of the picture frame, as if from another world. The road curves back to a burning city, a **turbulent** sky and a blood-red sun. With its haunting imagery, its vigorous brushstrokes and its vertiginous [dizzying] perspective, the composition recalls Munch's painting *The Scream*, in which man becomes part of "nature's great scream".'

'One painting is dominated by a central image of a man with blazing red eyes which screech an appeal to the viewer. Nearby sits a white dog and further back a city is engulfed in flames. These images have a direct emotional impact generated by their spontaneous style and their uncompromising simplicity, which is undiluted by extraneous detail. The gestural impasto use of paint which rips across the canvas emphasises the physical and emotional involvement that Peter Booth has with the images. Their placement on the picture plane and the almost crude method of their execution find parallels in Australian art only perhaps in the early work of Sidney Nolan, who also used unsophisticated simple images to evoke an emotional response. Peter Booth's paintings are, however, personal documents [the white dog once followed his daughter, Melissa, up a Carlton street], not social comments; they are an almost automatic response to a psychological demand. Few Australian artists have ever had the bravery to present works which contain so much *angst* and personal expression and which stand so far outside the boundaries of acceptable art taste ... Their value lies in their direct and unguarded form, their undoctinaire method of visualising an emotion, and their powerful expression. They are, in a sense, visualisations of a personal journey, the mirrors of a soul in search of "self", but perhaps they can also be mirrors to society and the realm of human expression and therefore relevant beyond personal subjectivity and introspection ...'

'Booth's land is not an idyllic, fertile land, a vision of heaven on earth such as [the artist Samuel Palmer] saw, but a harsh, unyielding desert with isolated boulders and occasional trees, a territory of the subconscious. In his pictures, there is an economy of form with a few recurring elements, clearly defined. The picture of the man on the cliff, with the sea and the smudged streak of a comet in the night sky, shows a sense of yearning for the infinite in the gesture of the man's outstretched arm and his rapt face ...

'These various interpretations of the land inform Peter Booth's imaginative terrain, at once recognisable and unfamiliar, real and imaginary, observed and dreamed, and reveal a land that is timeless through conventional pictorial perspective or in abstract patterns of energy resembling the contours of Aboriginal art. Peter Booth's landscape is primarily one of the subconscious imagination, an elemental landscape full of atavistic [ancestral] energy, overwhelmed

Frances Lindsay, 'Peter Booth',
Art and Australia, vol. 16,
issue 1, 1978, p. 47.

Rupert Martin, 'Peter Booth:
The Inner landscape',
in Peter Booth: drawings 1977-87,
exhibition catalogue, Deutscher
Gertrude Street, Fitzroy, Victoria, 1989.

by darkness, fire and storm, eroded to the bone, and yet spiky with life; a place of insects, thorn bushes and jagged rocks, inimical [hostile] to man but capable of sustaining life . . .

Technique 'Peter Booth's work is rooted in observation and inspired by dreams. He taps sources of energy and imagery which go beyond the conscious mind and beneath the earth's material surface. He represents the awkward, the disjointed and the disquieting aspects of life and landscape in a style that is both vigorous and disciplined. His handling of line, colour and texture is appropriate to the scenes depicted, fluctuating between a smooth pastel surface for fluent forms, and an encrusted coagulated surface for violent or animated marks. Some of the images have the clarity of dreams, others the confusion of nightmares; a tension which is central to his visionary experience.

Influences 'However much he has learnt from English and Australian artists, as well as from Breughel, El Greco and Goya, he is not constricted by such precedents or inhibited by social or artistic convention.

Artist's practice 'He seeks to communicate profound, often severe truths about the nature of existence in an often hostile environment, and his images probe both our deepest fears and aspirations.'

John McDonald, 'Dreams of hope and menace', review of Booth's works on paper at Rex Irwin's Gallery, Sydney *Morning Herald*, 18 March 1995, p. 13.

'Booth produces relatively few major paintings, but he draws constantly, with examples ranging from the smallest notations to elaborate, large-scale compositions. It is drawing which lies at the heart of Booth's work, with many of his very best pieces being works on paper.

Opinion 'This show includes several powerful examples of the nightmare visions that the artist has been producing since the late 1970s, but perhaps the most outstanding pieces are his serene, lyrical pastels of densely wooded forests and snowy foreign landscapes. The abiding tranquillity of these works throws his more grotesque pictures into sharper relief.

Interprets image

Opinion 'Never have I seen an exhibition of Booth's works where there was such a decisive split between the daytime world of close observation and the subconscious, turbulent world of dreams. Never has Booth seemed more Jekyll-and-Hyde.

Judgement

'If some of the menace of the visionary works occasionally rubs off on the more realistic pictures, on the whole it is a remarkably optimistic show. Booth has been stereotyped as a maker of "post-nuclear holocaust" images, but many of the works in his show are replete with symbols of hope. The most luminous is a coloured pastel drawing in which, from within a forest, one sees a blaze of light awaiting behind a final screen of trees . . . The inspiration for many of these drawings comes from Booth's recent travels — to north Queensland, India, Britain, France and Russia . . .

Informative

'What sets Booth apart from so many other artists who could be classed as symbolists or fantasists is the absolute simplicity of his style. Nothing is mapped out too exhaustively, no narrative is so detailed as to sacrifice its universal echoes. A group of tramps mill around on a

barren piece of ground under a starry sky. They are animated, perhaps even angry with one another, but we will never know the exact nature of their dispute, which is, after all, mocked by the infinite vault of the heavens. Another drawing shows a procession of weatherbeaten men and women, marching into the wind. It might be nothing more than a food queue in Russia, but it is also a symbol of every forced march, every migration, the plight of every refugee.

'I imagine that Booth himself could not fit exact meanings to many of his images, since they are said to be records of his dreams.

'This can result in pictures as violent as *Three Heads in a Landscape*, a vision of hell in which grimacing faces sway like plants on stalks, amid a sea of flame; or as eerie as *Head in Landscape*, in which a head sprouting long gnarled roots rests in a landscape where a tongue, an ear, and fangs sprout from the earth. Alternatively, Booth can summon up a scene as pristine and beautiful as *Dream*, showing a lone cyclist at the gate of a long fence beneath a cold but blazing star. With the mysterious insistence of a dream, symbols such as birds, moths, stars, fences and ponds recur in many of these works. One always feels there is some very deep meaning which thwarts our attempts to extract a simple narrative.'

'There must be a few moments of trepidation for Peter Booth's dealers as they await the delivery of a new exhibition. Will there be serene, snow-covered landscapes (highly saleable) or scenes of horror and degradation (not so easy to sell)? ...

'Take, for instance, *Painting 2004 (Head with Nails)*. Although nothing could be more grotesque than this head, lying flat on the ground, staring sightlessly into a jet black sky, the work is such a virtuoso [highly skilled] piece of painting that one could almost forget the subject matter while studying the flecks of silver, grey, red and flesh-tone, piled on with a busy palette knife ... it is the reason Booth's collectors will purchase even the most gruesome pictures. His figures may be ugly, but they are always beautifully painted.

'... there is an intensity to his work that is rarely found anywhere in the ultra-cool world of contemporary art. While he may be loosely described as an **Expressionist**, he does not splash paint wildly in all directions ...'

John McDonald writes in a clear, precise style about his personal reactions to the visual impact of Booth's work. He analyses the works individually and places them within the development of Booth's work as a whole. McDonald tends to avoid complicated jargon and complex theorising. His general writing style is one of informed objectivity, yet he includes value judgements, when relevant making historical references in order to validate his responses.

Symbols

John McDonald, extract from 'Opposites impact' (review of exhibition 'Peter Booth', July 2005), *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9–10 July 2005, 'Spectrum', p. 28.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Critical practice

- Art critics evaluate the worth of art, often giving personal opinions. Can you find any such statements in the reviews by John McDonald?
- Art critics also give you information to help you appreciate and understand an artist's work. What have you learned about Booth's painting techniques, style and subjects from his reviews?

(c) The last review above suggests that making saleable paintings is not Booth's major intention, although this exhibition was a success in that respect. Do you think saleability should be the major concern for an artist? What else is important?

2. Subjective Frame



Consider Booth and one other artist in this chapter as examples of artists who work within the dream or irrational side of art.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Subjective Frame



1. Evaluate the effectiveness in drawing an emotional response from the viewer of Peter Booth and at least one other artist of your choice.
2. 'Both Anselm Kiefer [pages 208–13] and Peter Booth interpret the landscape with an emotional intensity suggesting a narrative.' Explain with reference to particular examples.

3. Structural Frame — artist's practice



Booth's visual language includes an emphasis on tone, texture and form, often incorporating personal symbols. Elaborate on this statement with reference to particular examples by Booth, and compare his style and methods with one other painter of your choice. You might consider Ben Quilty, George Gittoes, Edvard Munch or Sydney Nolan.

ICT RESEARCH TASK

In intention and subject Peter Booth's works have been linked to the work of Bosch, Fuseli, Blake, Goya and, in more recent times, Phillip Guston. Do a Google search on two of these artists and consider any similarities you notice to the work of Booth. Share your conclusions with the class in the form of a PowerPoint presentation.

Chapter 4 The figure

SYLLABUS FOCUS: Cultural Frame, Postmodern Frame, Conceptual Framework, historical practice

The figure has been the main subject in art throughout the ages, whether to represent a deity, to glorify humanity, to explain human relationships or to tell stories, be they mythological, religious or personal. By observing the artist's approach in depicting the figure we can to some extent decipher the cultural context and so learn the values, beliefs and way of life of the artist's society.

Venus of Urbino (Reclining Venus)
c. 1538
oil on canvas
120 x 165 cm
Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence
Photo: Scala, Florence
Courtesy of the Ministero Beni e Att.
Culturali



Piero della Francesca

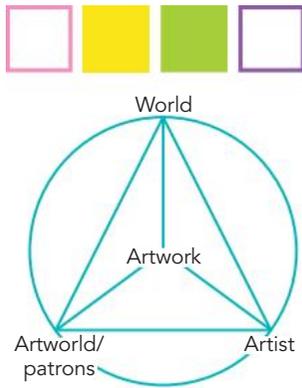
(c. 1415–1492, Italian — Early Renaissance)

Issues/interests: mathematics and religion

Form: painting, fresco technique

Frames: *Structural* in his attitude towards painting; *Cultural* in reflecting the society and beliefs of his time

Conceptual Framework: Piero della Francesca uses his mathematical sensibilities to create a perfected, ordered world, presenting his individual interpretation of the religious stories he painted. His work epitomises (shows the essential characteristics of) the Renaissance style, using linear perspective, representing human achievement (humanistic ideals), enacting religious stories in real landscapes of deep space with visual references to ancient Greek and Roman architecture and sculpture.



Artworks in this unit

Federigo da Montefeltro (1422–82) Duke of Urbino c. 1465

The Queen of Sheba Worshipping the Wood of the True Cross and the Reception of the Queen of Sheba by King Solomon 1452–57

Legend of the True Cross: Finding of the Three Crosses and Verification of the True Cross c. 1452

The Resurrection c. 1463

eBook plus Great masters

Use the **Great masters** weblink in your eBookPLUS to take an in-depth look at the life and works of Piero della Francesca.

Federigo da Montefeltro (1422–82) Duke of Urbino (opposite) is one panel of a double portrait (diptych) of husband and wife. The portrait of the ruling Duke of Urbino was painted about 1465, while that of his wife, Battista Sforza, was painted only in 1472 after her death. This is one of the finest Early Renaissance portraits, showing the principles of humanism and the importance of the individual personality, along with the growing interest in nature and a sense of perspective or depth of space.

The landscape depicted behind the duke shows the view from the tower of the Ducal Palace in Urbino. It is rendered with a calm clarity, the expanse of water and the arable land of the ducal estates lead the eye to the soft focus of the far distance. The duke is shown in profile in the manner of a classical medallion. He is depicted with honesty and realism, down to the warts, broken nose and hooded eyes. The profile is severe in approach with a crispness to the outlines, including the fine curly hair. The colour of the robe, which signifies his status as a ruler, contrasts with the landscape.



**Federigo da Montefeltro
(1422–82)**

Duke of Urbino c. 1465
tempera on panel
45.5 × 33.0 cm
Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy/
Giraudon/The Bridgeman Art
Library

The frescos in the San Francesco chapel at Arezzo, Italy, date from 1452 to 1464. *Finding of the Three Crosses and Verification of the True Cross* (page 119) is to be found in the middle tier on the left of the fresco cycle in the nave of the chapel. In this work, Piero della Francesca combined his own interpretation of the medieval story ‘The Golden Legend’ with allusions to contemporary political events.

This painting has two parts. The left-hand side shows Helena, the emperor Constantine’s mother, finding the True Cross and the crosses of the two thieves. This occurs in a ploughed field, with the walls of Jerusalem in the near distance. On the right-hand side the scene takes place in front of the Temple to Minerva (in Renaissance style). The empress and her retinue are huddled in a semicircle around the bier of a corpse, which is miraculously brought back to life on being touched by the True Cross.



***The Queen of Sheba
Worshipping the Wood of the
True Cross and the Reception
of the Queen of Sheba by King
Solomon*** 1452–57

From the *Legend of the True
Cross* cycle, completed 1464
fresco

336 × 747 cm

San Francesco Chapel, Arezzo,
Italy/The Bridgeman Art Library

The composition is carefully conceived, the soft light giving it a sense of solemnity. As is typical of Early Renaissance art, the figures have a sense of solidity and individuality, acting out human dramas in a somewhat shallow but real space. Piero della Francesca's individual style is apparent in the luminous quality of light, the clarity of his coloured surfaces, his attention to detail and the calm monumentality.

The *Queen of Sheba* fresco (above) is situated opposite *Finding of the Three Crosses* and has some obvious similarities in composition and approach, adding to the narrative as well as the symmetry of the chancel (curved alcove).

On the right, in the ordered, receding space between the Corinthian columns, King Solomon, with his dignitaries, welcomes the Queen and her ladies. The clasping of hands between the Queen and Solomon is believed to symbolise their hopes in the fifteenth century for the reunification of the Western and Eastern churches. (At this time, the Western Church extended from Italy to France, Spain, Germany and beyond, while the Eastern Church was based in Constantinople. The fall of that city, and with it the Eastern Church, to the Ottoman Empire in 1453, just when this painting was created, would have been hugely significant. This event saw the end of hopes of reunification.) In this painting, we gain an insight into the dignified courtly society of the time.

The work is carefully composed, the architecture balanced by the landscape and the grouping of the figures on each side. The eye is drawn by the curve of the ladies' trains and the downward thrust of the compositional pyramid that leads to the wood. Piero della Francesca has managed to turn this complicated narrative into a sacred play.

This fresco (painting on plaster) shows two distinct scenes: the Queen recognising the wood of the cross, and her meeting with

Solomon. Piero's figures stand rather than move, in a rigidly controlled composition. The two grooms on the left adopt symmetrically opposed poses, one seen from the front and one from the back. Their outfits are both red and grey but, once again, are set in opposition to each other. Similarly some of the poses of the ladies-in-waiting on the left have been reversed and reused on the right.



There is a striving for realism but not for drama. This, like many of the artist's works, is impersonal; there is an absence of emotion, the figures appearing almost haughty (aloof, arrogant). Even his landscapes, here with the two finely rendered and balanced trees and open spaces, reveal a dignified severity. These aspects produce a calm, timeless quality and perfection.

The figures are painted with a sense of mass and solidity, with heavy folds in the garments, yet the artist is also capable of rendering the finely detailed delicacy of the Queen of Sheba's transparent veils, the wavy tendrils of hair of the women and the decorative pattern of King Solomon's garments.

The Resurrection (page 120) is organised around the central figure of Jesus, who stands erect and statuesque in suspended motion. As in many of Piero's works, the figures are placed as close as possible to the front of the picture plane. Jesus holds the labarum, a standard or flag of victory — over death, in this case. The robe falling gracefully from one shoulder and sweeping across the body acts as a balance to the flag. Piero has created a sense of religious reverence, despite the dishevelled, fitfully sleeping figures of the soldiers in a variety of poses. Although the usual religious symbols — the halo, wounds in hands, blood dripping from the spear wound in his side — are present, the power of the figure and the compelling expression on his face (the eye sockets are deep and shadowed, suggesting sleeplessness and torment) leave us in no doubt that he is the Risen Christ.

***Legend of the True Cross:
Finding of the Three Crosses
and Verification of the True
Cross*** c. 1452

fresco

356 × 747 cm

San Francesco Chapel, Arezzo,
Italy

Photo: Scala, Florence, © 2010

Courtesy of the Ministero Beni e
Att. Culturali

The Resurrection c. 1463
fresco
225 x 200 cm
Pinacoteca, Sansepolcro, Italy/
The Bridgeman Art Library



There is a precision to the outlines and a subtle use of colour. We see here also Piero's skill in foreshortening, with his great understanding of perspective applied to the human body. The pale light of early morning falls diagonally from the top left in keeping with the fresco's position in the building, which has windows above and to the left. Much of the painting is in tempera (pigment mixed with egg yolk), rather than the true fresco technique of painting on wet plaster, allowing the pigment to soak in. After an underpainting of warm brown he applied his finishing touches with a very fine brush, creating shadows with hatching (crisscross strokes), except for Christ's head, where the shadows have been smudged or softened. Christ's body is given a noble, ideal form. The anatomy is defined by the play of light, and attention has been given to realistic details such as the three folds on the lower abdomen caused by the lifting of his leg. The purposeful action of the foot represents the liberation of the body from the tomb but it is a suspended motion, a timeless immobility intensified by the simplicity of the landscape background. Although we seem to be viewing Christ at eye level, our point of vision of the sleeping soldiers is from below. This and the triangular composition focus our attention on Christ. Piero della Francesca has created a world of clarity, dignity and order.

Art historian Kenneth Clark has suggested that the Risen Christ is part of a dream weighing heavily on the sleeping soldiers. Yet only two of the men are asleep, one perhaps covering his eyes from the vision. The trees on the left are dry and lifeless, while those on the right are young and green with new growth, perhaps symbolising rebirth, linked to the Resurrection of Christ. Another possible interpretation is that a choice between good and evil is presented, as the green trees on the right follow a downward path to a villa (the easy, sinful choice), while the trees on the left lead upward to a hill, the ascent symbolising virtue.

The Resurrection was a particularly important subject in della Francesca's hometown of Borgo San Sepolcro (on the border of Tuscany and Umbria). According to legend, the town was founded in the tenth century when two pilgrims, who had brought back relics (scrapings from the Holy Sepulchre, the tomb of Christ) from their pilgrimage to the Holy Land, decided to settle there. The artist has created a unique, personal version of the established artistic convention for painting the subject of Christ near an open tomb holding a flag and accompanied by military guards.

Artist's practice

Background — patrons

Piero della Francesca's patrons were monastic houses, wealthy citizens and courtly lords of his home district. His most celebrated work — the fresco cycle for the choir of San Francesco at Arezzo, was commissioned by members of the Bacci family, who were merchants long associated with the patronage of the Church.

Technique

Della Francesca was interested in the mathematical aspects of perspective. This reflects the interest in learning of the time, a desire among Renaissance thinkers to understand and control their world, as in the related fields of science, archaeology and architecture. Piero not only wrote on the mathematical implications of perspective, but also perfected in his art the means of creating and defining space in three dimensions through his understanding of perspective. His love of and skill with perspective caused him to organise his subjects within the most simple and monumental outlines.

Piero della Francesca's style is characterised by the use of pale, bright colour with flat, even lighting and grave, simple figures, reflecting Sieneese taste rather than Florentine, probably because in his hometown there were many examples by artists from Siena. (Sieneese artists were concerned with brilliant, decorative colour and the use of gold; whereas Florentine artists tended to concentrate on naturalism and solidity.) He often used an oil glaze over the fresco once it was dry or over tempera.



To his peers the mathematical purity of Piero's works would have been inseparable from their spiritual function of representing God's perfect order. The prime importance of his work in his time and world would have been religious communication. But with the rise of Modernism, after attention from the structuralist art historian Kenneth Clark, and after the restoration of the Arezzo Chapel in 1960, his work achieved broader historical significance for its ordered composition, logical perspective and austere beauty.

Historical significance

Alberti, a Renaissance architect, referred to Piero della Francesca as the greatest geometrician of his age and praised his skill in perspective. Piero's treatise on perspective guided such painters as Leonardo da Vinci and Dürer and artists up to the time of the break with realism by the Impressionists. Piero exemplified the expectation that the Renaissance man should be adept and conversant across a range of fields of knowledge, just as Leonardo da Vinci was an artist, scientist and inventor interested in such ideas as movement in water, flying machines and weapons of war.

Historical practice

Kenneth Clark, *Piero della Francesca* (2nd edn), Phaidon Press, London, 1969, pp. 24, 25, 44, 46.

Kenneth Clark writes from the *Structural Frame*, concentrating on the artist's painting technique and use of colour rather than on any personal or cultural interpretations of the images.

'A warm tint always balances a cool one. Underlying his designs is an almost heraldic symmetry, but, as with all his applications of theory, this is usually disguised. A section in which it is obvious is the group to the left of the Sheba–Solomon episode, where the two pages [grooms] balance each other almost like playing cards, one facing us, one showing his back, one in a white hat, one in a black, one in red doublet and grey horse, the other the reverse, and so forth through every detail. Usually the correspondence is much more subtle, so that we come to accept this perfect balance as a natural consequence of Piero's harmonious world, instead of a carefully calculated means by which that world was created . . .

'... the chief way in which Piero achieves his pictorial architecture is through his power of assimilating what he sees to certain simple geometric forms . . . And although a geometric framework underlies most of his designs, he is careful to prevent it becoming obtrusive or barren.'

Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, *Piero della Francesca*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1992, pp. 10–12.

'In fifteenth-century Italy these commissions, both private and institutional, were for religious subjects, serving specific religious functions. As a result we must bear in mind that the austere beauty of Piero's paintings could not have been understood by his contemporaries on aesthetic grounds only. Rather, to the fifteenth-century viewer the crystalline world of mathematical purity present in all his works would have been inseparable from the subject represented and mystical function it served . . .

'In the early fifteenth century, painting was still considered a craft, since it was done with the hands. Boys were apprenticed out (living

with their masters) sometimes before they reached their teens, and they were taught to grind colours, draw, and finally to compose. Advanced learning from books was for them quite rare. Piero, on the other hand, studied Latin. He surely knew the classics, and the work of Euclid in particular . . . He reinvented two Euclidian theorems, the manuscripts of which were not discovered until the sixteenth century, many years after his death . . .

'The logical conclusion is that painting was not his full-time occupation . . . by 1442 he had been elected to one of the governing bodies of Sansepolcro . . . one begins to suspect that he was not a lowly craftsman but a member of the upper class, moving in circles where thought, learning, and elevated forms of expression were the essence of daily life.'

Art historian Marilyn Aronberg Lavin writes mainly from the *Cultural Frame*, placing Piero's work in its social context and the expectations of its time, giving us valuable factual information on fifteenth-century art practice and how the audience of the time would have interpreted his work (Conceptual Framework).

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Art historians examine original source material, such as documented and recorded dates and knowledge of the time and place in which the artist lived and worked. They often draw conclusions as to the meaning or importance of the artist's work. Look at the writing of Marilyn Aronberg Lavin and one other art historian of your choice to explain how historians provide factual information and give a historical context to an artist's work.
2. **Conceptual Framework** 
Evaluate one artwork by Piero della Francesca with reference to how he depicts his world and what effect he intends for his audience.
3. It has been said that della Francesca created a world of 'clarity, dignity and order'. Use this in your heading and write a critical review of one of his works.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. **Structural Frame** 
Discuss the work of Piero della Francesca and two other artists of your choice as artists who work primarily from the *Structural Frame*, concerned with a visual language based on order and structure. You might compare the influence of mathematics on the art of della Francesca, a Modernist and a contemporary artist.
- Cultural Frame — historical practice** 
 2. Write as an art historian discussing the work of Piero della Francesca and one other Renaissance artist within their historical context (time and place) to explain their work and suggest their importance to the history of art.
 3. How do artists express the values, attitudes and beliefs of their society in their artmaking? Include della Francesca, one Modernist and one Postmodernist in your answer.

Titian

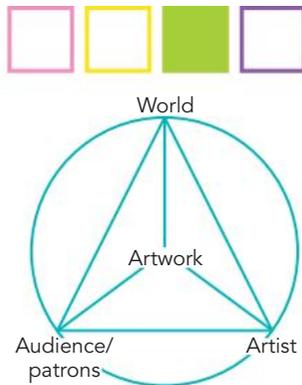
(Tiziano Vecelli, 1490–1576, Italian,
Venetian Renaissance)

Issues/interests: the human form, particularly known for establishing a code of idealised beauty with reclining nudes in mythological narratives

Form: oil painting

Frame: *Cultural* in reflecting the attitudes and values of the Renaissance

Conceptual Framework: the concept of the viewer and the relationship of the work to the world at the time as well as its significance to later art



Artworks in this unit

Sacred and Profane Love c. 1514

Venus of Urbino (Reclining Venus) c. 1538

Bacchanal 1523–26

Venus and Adonis 1553



A closer look — The Madonna of the Rabbit

Use the **A closer look** weblink in your eBookPLUS to explore many aspects of a major work by Titian.



Sacred and Profane Love c. 1514
oil on canvas
118 × 279 cm
Galleria Borghese, Rome
Photo: Scala, Florence. © 2009
Courtesy of the Ministero Beni e
Att. Culturali

In *Sacred and Profane Love* (above) we see Titian's virtuoso skill in depicting different textures — the delicate folds of the rich satin dress of Terrestrial Venus and the soft glowing flesh of the Celestial Venus (holding a lamp). Titian has placed the three main figures in this mythological tale in the foreground of a rich landscape setting that reveals glimpses of cities in the distance. Note how the legs of the two

figures slope outwards, leading your eye to the smaller, central figure of Cupid. But Titian avoids pure symmetry by placing Cupid slightly closer to the left figure and by setting Celestial Venus's head slightly higher. He also has each figure gazing in a different direction.



Venus of Urbino (Reclining Venus) c. 1538

oil on canvas

120 × 165 cm

Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence

Photo: Scala, Florence

Courtesy of the Ministero Beni e

Att. Culturali

Venus of Urbino (above) was painted for Duke Guidobaldo II of Urbino, during Titian's mid period. Venus, the goddess of love, is shown here lying peacefully in a natural pose, radiating a sense of grace and calm. She symbolises female Renaissance beauty: soft glowing skin, a well-rounded figure, small breasts, strong neck and smallish head. Venus is depicted languidly reclining, propped up on comfortable satin pillows, seemingly available for pleasure yet with her hand in a traditional position of modesty. She appears relaxed, submissive and composed as she absently holds a posy of red roses. She gazes out seductively yet meekly, showing an awareness not only of the viewer but of her own beauty. To reinforce her femininity, she is adorned with a bracelet and earrings; her status is indicated both by the evident grandeur and luxury of the house and by the presence of her maids in the background. The small dog curled up on the bed not only symbolises her fidelity but acts as a visual link to the servants beyond. The soft outline and golden glow to her skin create a sensual appeal, the fairness of the body standing out against the dark background. Titian has used a warm colour harmony of deep red and dark green, with broken white in a painterly manner.

It is a painting of warmth and sensuality in a secular, everyday environment. The realistic rendering of the body creates an atmosphere of intimacy, yet she still appears as an unattainable goddess, a timeless symbol of ideal female beauty. The way this image is interpreted thus depends on the viewer's attitudes, experiences and expectations. A male viewer of the time would have 'seen' it differently from a female viewer of our own time, for example.

High Renaissance Venetian Art (c. 1490–1520)

An art style in which the emphasis was on humankind (as compared with the God-centred art of medieval times) and nature, and was therefore called a 'humanist style'. It was a time of rediscovery of Greek and Roman mythology and classical ideals. The aim was to depict a perfect world. There was an understanding of perspective, resulting in deep space being represented. Venetian art is known for its rich, glowing colour and surface effects, possible through the direct use of oil paints.

Bacchanal 1523–26
oil on canvas
175 × 127 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado,
Madrid
Photo: Scala, Florence. © 2010



Bacchanal (above) is part of a series about the joys of life. Here the Roman god of wine, Bacchus (the bearded man in the middle), frolics with relaxed figures in an ideal landscape. A mood of uninhibited gaiety pervades the scene as the dancing figures almost tumble over each other.

The female nude in the foreground who stretches back in a state of abandonment contrasts with the active, muscular male figures, whom she seems to be inviting to appreciate the pale beauty and translucency of her flesh. It is a painting of sumptuous colour, with rich contrasts of warm and cool tones and skilful rendering of different surfaces.

In *Venus and Adonis* (opposite) the soft whiteness of Venus's flesh contrasts with the rich textural surface of the red velvet robe of Adonis. This, along with the use of diagonal directions within the bodies, helps create a focus and a sense of drama. A distinction between male and female flesh has been achieved not only by a change in colour and attention to contour and musculature, but also in the very texture of the flesh. In this mature artwork Titian displays his amazing skill at rendering different surfaces, from the roughness of the tree trunk to the sheen of plaited golden hair and the dogs' pelts.

Historical background — training and patrons

Titian was probably trained by Giovanni Bellini in Venice. It is believed that Titian collaborated with Giorgione in the latter's famous painting *Pastoral Concert*. Titian learned from Giorgione to paint figures in ideal settings, creating moods such as mystery, fear or passion. But

Titian's handling of colour and rendering of textures soon surpassed his teacher's. From 1515 he worked for the d'Estes, Gorzaga, Farnese and Rovere dynasties as well as King Francis I of France. In 1533 he became court painter to Emperor Charles V and to Pope Paul III. At the Pope's request he visited Rome and met Michelangelo. In his late period he worked almost exclusively in the service of Phillip II.



Venus and Adonis 1553
oil on canvas
186 × 127 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado,
Madrid
White Images/Scala, Florence.
© 2010

Artist's practice

Techniques

Titian was the first artist to explore the potential of oil paint (a relatively new medium developed in the Netherlands) with its richness of colour achieved through layering of colours in glazes, moving from lean to fat, and the variety of possible textures. Titian was influenced by the rich, glowing colours of the East (Venice was then a significant trading centre).

With oil paint Titian was able to create a soft blending of brushstrokes while leaving some free, vibrant brushstrokes. He was equally capable of depicting shimmering satin, velvet drapery, soft wavy hair and sensuous glowing flesh. He built up forms with colour, rather than lines, working directly on the canvas with little underdrawing and often without preliminary sketches. He used life models rather than classical statues, as was then normal in Florence. He had a strong command of composition, confidently creating a sense of harmony and balance. Titian's subjects included religious themes, striking portraits (*Man with a Glove*) and richly coloured works of pagan mythology set in rich landscapes.

Representation of the female and values of the society

Powerful patrons commissioned artworks to demonstrate their culture (education and social status). The female form was idealised, the current taste favouring modesty, with no body hair, pale skin, small breasts and well-rounded stomach and hips. She was shown as calm, passive, submissive in a relaxed pose, her gaze mildly encouraging, showing an awareness of the male viewer (husband or lover). Titian represented the themes of the Renaissance with originality, through mood and a new sense of beauty, establishing the reclining nude as a convention for the representation of females in Western art. He created a new iconography for the goddess of love that carried through into Modernism and was finally challenged during Postmodernism.

Symbols

The reclining Venus was a symbol of love — the unattainable goddess. The nude was generally portrayed within a mythological context, a way of respectably distancing the viewer from the nudity.

The dog was included as a symbol of fidelity (faithfulness). The rose was a symbol of beauty and had associations with matrimony. A marriage chest represented a domestic setting and possession.

Historical practice

'The distinction between Early and High Renaissance art, so marked in Florence and Rome, is far less sharp in Venice ...

'Titian's *Bacchanal* of about 1518 is frankly pagan, inspired by an ancient author's description of such a revel. The landscape, rich in contrasts of cool and warm tones, has all the poetry of Giorgione, but the figures are of another breed: active and muscular, they move with a joyous freedom that recalls Raphael's *Galatea*. By this time, many of Raphael's compositions had been engraved, and from these reproductions Titian became familiar with the Roman High Renaissance. A number of the celebrants in his *Bacchanal* also reflect the influence of classical art. Titian's approach to antiquity, however, is very different from Raphael's; he visualizes the realm of classical myths as part of the natural world, inhabited not by animated statues but by beings of flesh and blood. The figures of the *Bacchanal* are idealized beyond everyday reality just enough to persuade us that they belong to a long-lost golden age. They invite us to share their blissful state in a way that makes Raphael's *Galatea* seem cold and remote by comparison.'

'Titian became the most celebrated painter in Venice, following the premature death of Giorgione from the plague. Both were trained by the Bellini brothers, but Titian found them uninspiring and had joined Giorgione's studio once his apprenticeship was over. The pair were so compatible that sometimes people could not tell their work apart.

H. W. Janson, *A History of Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1977, pp. 434–6.

Charlotte Gerlings, *100 Great Artists*, Arcturus Publishing, London, 2006, pp. 132–3.

'Titian evolved rapidly as a pure painter ... *The Assumption of the Virgin*, painted for the Franciscans [an order of monks], attracted Alfonso d'Este, Duke of Ferrara, who ordered three mythological studies from Titian's workshop for his personal gallery ...

'Later in his career, when his work had matured throughout the demands and adulation of so many kings, princes and popes, Titian came to value the exploration of colour above any other aspects of art. All his life he had known how to extract the best from his materials and he advanced to a tonal painting style, using not only brushstrokes but also his fingers and pieces of rag ...'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Structural Frame



Analyse Titian's artmaking practice from the *Structural Frame*, referring to more than three artworks.

Cultural Frame



2. Evaluate the respective concerns, attitudes and values of mid-sixteenth-century Venetian society and mid-nineteenth-century Parisian society by analysing Titian's *Venus of Urbino* and Manet's *Olympia*.
3. Look at the two pieces of historical writing and analyse some of the historical methods used — for example, quoting of dates, listing influences and comparison with other artists.
4. What have you learned about an artist's practice in the late fifteenth century in Italy?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Historical practice

Investigate how the female has been depicted through history in art as a symbol of sexuality, an object to be viewed. You might consider Titian, Modigliani, Klimt or Brett Whitely.

2. Artist's practice

Discuss how art critics and art historians take different approaches and provide different types of information to help audiences understand artworks and the artist's practice.

3. Postmodern Frame



Postmodernism generally involves challenging conventions, such as the reclining nude, the female as an object of beauty. Investigate ways this convention has been challenged, from appropriating the image (Yasumasa Morimura) to representing the male as a reclining nude.

4. Cultural Frame



The attitude and values of a society, particularly towards females, is often evident in the artworks of the time. Discuss with reference to a range of cultures/religions and time periods.

Édouard Manet

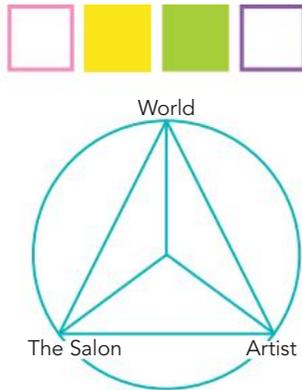
(1832–1883, French)

Issues/interests: the figure in everyday contemporary settings; urban life in Paris, painted with bold contrasts of light

Form: painting, oil on canvas

Frames: *Structural* in his concern with new approaches to painting; *Cultural* in recording changes in society's values

Conceptual Framework: Manet commented on and interpreted his world, breaking with artistic tradition to create his own style. He was considered an avant-garde innovator, a forerunner of Modernism.



Artworks in this unit

Déjeuner sur l'Herbe 1863

Olympia 1863

A Bar at the Folies-Bergère 1881–82

eBook plus

Manet: works

Use the **Manet: works** weblink in your eBookPLUS to explore an online gallery of the works of Édouard Manet.

VOCABULARY

allegory symbolic story or fable

bohemian unconventional (as of lifestyle of artist, writer or musician)

juxtaposing placing together, side by side

plein-air in the open air; of painting done outdoors

The composition of the three figures in the foreground of *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (*Luncheon on the Grass*) (opposite) is based on an engraving by Raphael, *The Judgement of Paris* (a work influenced by a Roman relief), but interpreted in the manner of the paintings of Giorgione and Titian (for example, Titian's *Concert Champêtre* with its two nude females in an idyllic landscape with two males in courtly attire), but Manet has given it a modern twist. A nude woman in a landscape was not atypical in the times of these earlier paintings but was unusual in nineteenth-century Europe. What's more, Manet's nude looks out boldly at the audience, while the two men in contemporary clothes beside her appear to ignore her. One wonders why one female is nude while the one bathing in the river in the middle ground is dressed. Some believe Manet is symbolically presenting us with a philosophical choice between sensual and spiritual experience.



Although the river landscape is based on sketches Manet made of the area, the painting was created in his studio. The stark lighting, strong use of black and broad application of colour reduces the modelling of tone to a minimum, making it all the more striking and avant-garde in approach. This work therefore combines a striving for a new style, with its reduced tonal subtlety, and portrayal of the **bohemian** lifestyle of the time, with the scale and subject matter of Renaissance (or Classical) art. Manet has concerned himself with visual qualities and the surface of the painting rather than creating the illusion of depth as if looking through a window or storytelling through **allegory**, history or mythology. This painting, along with *Olympia* (page 132), was shown at the famous 1863 *Salon des Refusés* exhibition of works rejected by the official Paris Salon. So many works had been turned down that year that the government had been prevailed upon to set up a parallel exhibition of rejected works.

The critics at the time thought Manet a rebel and at first criticised his paintings as he sought to liberate artists from the conventions relating to appropriate subjects and painting techniques that had been established by the French Academy. This criticism greatly upset Manet, but he continued to paint Parisian society and leisurely lifestyle.

Déjeuner sur l'Herbe

(*Luncheon on the Grass*) 1863

oil on canvas

208 cm × 264 cm

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

© The Gallery Collection/Corbis



Olympia 1863
oil on canvas
130.5 × 190 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris
© The Gallery Collection/Corbis

Édouard Manet's direct, realistic approach contrasts with earlier nudes by Titian and Boucher, with their curvaceous bodies and warm, glowing skin, modestly turning away with slight, shy flirtation. In this he deliberately flouted artistic conventions of the time.

For *Olympia*, Manet used a professional model (19-year-old Victorine Meurent), who was said to be his mistress and was also depicted in *Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*. Her body is slender, her skin milky white in the manner of Spanish paintings Manet had admired, and her demeanour that of an unconventional, liberated modern woman. Manet has broken with tradition and painted her as neither an ideal goddess nor a startled nymph; she is real, natural in her nakedness as if she has just taken off her clothes, rather than a modest, timeless nude, symbol of female beauty, subject of the male gaze and desire. It was therefore viewed at the time as a threat to public morals and the social order.

By this time Manet had established his own individual style of thick strokes of colour and bright light against dark shadows, creating a flat, somewhat graphic effect. His palette (range of colours) is limited and paint is applied freely (allowing brushstrokes to show). Critics at the time were shocked not only by his approach to his subjects but also his technique, finding his painting surfaces too flat and the brushstrokes too pronounced.

A Bar at the Folies-Bergère (opposite) was Manet's last great masterpiece, showing the interior of one of the most fashionable cafés

in Paris at the time. The artist was already ill. As a model he used a waitress, named Suzon, who actually worked at the Folies-Bergère.

We see the sparkling effects of light, although here it is artificial rather than the sunlight that was of such importance to the Impressionists. Manet's brushstrokes are vigorous, producing a glistening surface effect as glass and mirrors are rendered to reveal their true reflective properties. Although the girl stands impassively, looking detached, pensive, weary, almost melancholy, there is a liveliness to the artwork. The variety of surfaces and textures fascinate the viewer as our focus shifts from the foreground objects to the lively scene reflected in the mirror. The girl's reflection, placed too far to the right to be a true mirror reflection, prevents the artwork from being symmetrical and static. Manet typically chose worldly but unusual subjects, such as groups of people on a balcony, café scenes, a horse race or a group in a park.



Historical background

Biography/cultural background/influences

Born to a magistrate and a diplomat's daughter, Édouard Manet belonged to the well-off bourgeois class. He married his piano teacher, a young Dutchwoman. With a friend he joined a studio, that of fashionable artist Thomas Couture, staying for six years.

A Bar at the Folies-Bergère

1881–82

oil on canvas

96 × 130 cm

© Samuel Courtald Trust,
The Courtald Gallery, London/
The Bridgeman Art Library

Each year from 1748 until 1890 the Fine Arts Academy of Paris staged an exhibition, referred to simply as the Salon, which was considered to be the greatest art event in the world. A jury selected or rejected the artworks submitted for inclusion, and were therefore the official arbiters of what was considered good art. So not only did the Salon establish artists' reputations and careers, but it was the main channel through which they could sell their works. Two of Manet's works were accepted in 1861, but as his style matured he lost the support of the Salon.

Manet was generally thought of as a man-about-town (often seen at the new cafés and nightclubs) rather than as a wild, struggling art student. His friends included some of the great intellectuals of his time, such as Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Zola. He travelled widely in Europe, learning how to paint by copying many masterpieces he saw in museums but adapting them according to his own style. He was particularly impressed by the Velasquez works he saw in Vienna, noting his sparing use of colour and limited tones, and admiring the clarity achieved. After his trip to Spain in 1865 we see the influence in his technique and some of the borrowed compositions, but he mainly painted contemporary Parisian scenes until around 1870, when he favoured **plein-air** landscapes, adopting a more Impressionist technique and colour range.

Although he has been called the leader of the Impressionists (he met them frequently in the Café Guerbois, and he certainly did break from past traditions), he never actually exhibited with them, mainly because he still sought acceptance from the official Salon. Manet's solo exhibition at the gallery of the dealer Martinet certainly inspired the Impressionist artists Monet, Renoir and Sisley.

Manet's last works, produced while suffering from illness, were pastel portrait studies.

Intentions/historical importance

Manet's work marks a turning point in the history of art: in his painting we can distinguish the beginnings of Modern art, in that he created a new freedom from past conventions, expressing what he saw as an 'impression', rather than its literal detail, which to him meant bold swatches or dashes of colour. The invention of the camera meant that artists no longer felt they needed to strictly reproduce reality, with all its volume and depth. Manet responded by rejecting modelling of form, preferring to paint in a broad, direct manner, focusing on the interplay of light, colour and texture.

Although he respected tradition, he wanted to be a man of his time. He sought to respond to and record his city and its people at rest and play. It was, however, a time when artistic tastes were still ruled by the main patrons of art, the bourgeois, and what they didn't understand they rejected. Manet's paintings often caused scandals. Although he borrowed compositional ideas from such respected artists as Raphael, Titian, Watteau, Rembrandt, Goya and Velasquez, his approach to representation and his painting technique was new and, to some, shocking.

Artist's practice

Manet eliminated the transitional tones between light and dark, **juxtaposing** bold dashes of colour, rather than executing the traditional gentle blending. He suggested form through broad flat areas of colour. He broke from the method of painting on a dark ground, preferring to build up layers of pure colour and then reintroduced black — not to add tone, but used in its own right to add contrast and clarity. We see evidence of the influence of Japanese prints, particularly in the strong colour and flat patterning. Rather than working in the traditional manner of starting with the dark tones and working towards the light, Manet painted the light areas directly, adding a fat medium (to add flow), then adding in halftones while the paint was still wet. His sketchy brushstrokes, and his habit of often leaving small patches of canvas unpainted, gave his paintings an unfinished look. Like the Impressionists, he was interested in patterns of light and shade.

Manet was a realist, painting what he saw around him, or adapting compositions from past artworks to give them contemporary relevance, rather than working from his own imagination or giving his paintings a romantic mood. To some extent he also shared the Impressionists' interest in representing a fragment of the world as if caught in a casual moment, rather than in a composed arrangement. His works gradually became lighter in palette (colour scheme) and sketchier in his approach to paint application.

Manet was ruthlessly self-critical and would repaint again and again or even destroy a canvas and begin again. He carried notebooks with him everywhere, constantly sketching. He relied heavily on family and friends to pose for him. His sister-in-law Berthe Moriset, herself a painter, appeared regularly in his paintings.

Historical practice

'Today it is somewhat difficult to understand why *Luncheon on the Grass* caused such a fuss. After all, nudes in art were quite acceptable [at the time] . . . Moreover, the painting is reminiscent of and directly based on a distinguished sixteenth-century painting in the Louvre, *Pastoral Concert* by Giorgione, which also shows two naked women in the company of two clothed men in an outdoor setting. However, Manet's painting is neither a sermon on Roman decadence nor a classical fable. The figures in his painting are not Greek goddesses romping about a pictorial, fairytale scene with Venetian troubadours, but two young women — one clothed and wading in a pond, the other completely naked — in a contemporary picnic setting, accompanied by two young men dressed in contemporary clothing. Such behaviour was considered extremely indecent; therefore the painting itself was looked upon as indecent. But perhaps what shocked the public most was that the naked woman shamelessly stared (or worse, smiled) directly at the viewer.

Jack A. Hobbs, *Art in Context*, 3rd edn, Illinois State University, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Orlando, Florida, 1985, pp. 237, 238.

'Manet's painting also upset viewers because it ignored the basic rules of composition to which they were accustomed . . . [traditionally] the artist took care to pose each character, to set off the central group, and to arrange everything so a viewer would not miss the point — Manet, on the other hand, presented a casual scene without heroic gestures or a contrived composition.

'But equally controversial — and ultimately more important to the future of art — were Manet's methods of painting. *Luncheon on the Grass* does not strike us today as unusually colourful, but for a painting of 1863 it was. Ordinarily, bright hues — such as we see in the clump of clothing and basket of fruit — were not placed side by side without gradations or intermediate hues. Manet also took liberties with the lighting and the time-honoured method of chiaroscuro, flattening out the forms of things, especially the nude, that people were accustomed to seeing as soft and sculptural.'

H. W. Janson, *A History of Art*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1977, pp. 607–8.

'The world of painting has "natural laws" that are distinct from those of familiar reality, and the painter's first loyalty is to his canvas, not to the outside world. Here begins an attitude that was later summed up in the doctrine "Art for art's sake", and became a bone of contention between progressives and conservatives for the rest of the century. Manet himself disdained such controversies, but his work attests his lifelong devotion to "pure painting" — to the belief that brush strokes and colour patches themselves, not what they stand for, are the artist's primary reality.'

Helen Gardner, *Art Through the Ages*, 7th edn, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Orlando, Florida, 1980, p. 762.

'The *Déjeuner* is the valedictory of the world of present fact to the world of the mystic past. The public expected the latter world and was overwhelmed by the former; defeated expectation is part of the shock tactics of modern art in its unceasing effort to force the public to face a reality that modern art defines for it.

'Manet suffered, almost through his whole career, the hostility of the critics as surrogates of the public. He never understood their animosity, and most often sought their approval, but the doses of the real that he administered were too harsh. His contemporary, the philosopher and historian Ernest Renan, may have been expressing what the public feared from the new realism in art when he said "It is possible, then, that the ruin of idealistic beliefs is destined to follow the destruction of supernatural beliefs, and that a real abasement of human morality dates from the day it saw the reality of things."

'Hardly less than the subject, the public and the critics disliked the new method Manet used to present his figures. His light is photographic, but in a novel way, throwing a harsh, strong illumination directly on the figures so as to produce a flashbulb effect, similar to that seen in newspaper photographs of night scenes.'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Find evidence to evaluate the practice of historical writing in the above quotes (explanation, facts, primary evidence, comparisons, historical context).

2. **Structural Frame**



'Manet's painting intensity results from the strong contrasts of colours, the flattening of forms and his use of black.' Use this statement as a starting point to analyse Manet's paintings from the *Structural Frame*.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. **Postmodern Frame**



Manet was a Postmodernist before his time, appropriating past artworks but changing their context for contemporary relevance. Choose three artworks from different artists who have appropriated past artworks to challenge art traditions and enhance their meaning. (One suggestion: Anne Zahalka.)

2. **Cultural Frame — Conceptual Framework**



'Artworks give us clues to the values and attitudes of the time, as artists are often more perceptive to changes in their world.' Explain with reference to a range of artists including Manet.

3. **Artist's practice**

'Artists choose to follow or challenge art traditions and conventions.' Evaluate this statement with reference to a range of artists including Manet.

Willem de Kooning

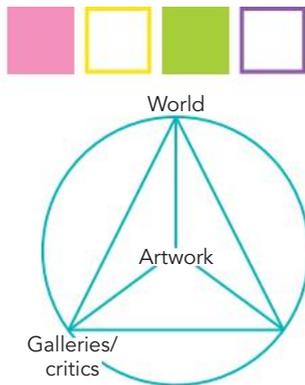
(1904–1997, American, born Rotterdam,
The Netherlands)

Issues/interests: expression of the female form, the painted surface

Form: painting

Frames: *Subjective* in imaginative approach, expressive brushstrokes; *Cultural* in Modernist approach to the female form

Conceptual Framework: De Kooning expresses his view of the world. The United States at this time was not only playing a major role in politics but setting out to be a global player in the artworld. There was a definite shift of focus from Paris to New York. Artists sought to break away from European traditions through new imagery, a boldness of approach, a new energy and an increase in scale, involving the audience in a more personal, powerful way. In World War II 'reason' had not prevailed, so artists sought a new, subjective viewpoint of humanity. Supporting this new movement in art were collectors and gallery owners such as Peggy Guggenheim, the curators of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the magazine *ARTnews*, and critics such as Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Dore Ashton.



Artworks in this unit

Excavation 1950

Woman V 1952–53

Venus of Willendorf c. 25 000 BCE

Woman 1953

eBook *plus*

Willem de Kooning on painting women

Use the **Kooning on women** weblink in your eBookPLUS to watch a video of Willem de Kooning discussing his paintings of women.

VOCABULARY

gestural of marks made by the action, including free hand and body movement, of the artist as he or she paints

monochromatic having, or appearing to have, tones of only one colour

vernacular characteristic language of a particular group or community

Excavation 1950 (opposite) is a pivotal work, the largest of his abstractions, which de Kooning finished just in time to enter in the Venice Biennale of 1950. This is also the year he began painting his

Women series. In *Excavation* we see hints of anatomical features, an evocation of the body, a suggestion of flesh with some Cubist influence evident. Although suggestive of distorted, grotesque figures, it is essentially an abstract work with no real focus. The canvas has become an all-over field by means of a lattice of brushstrokes and intertwining images, almost like a jigsaw. The brushstroke itself seems to be of prime importance. The large scale draws the audience into the work. No longer can the spectator 'take it in' or frame it in a single glance. The colour is restricted, almost to the point of being **monochromatic**, but draws the viewer's eye around the work, adding to the sense of rhythm created by the frenzy of lines. It is lively, intriguing and dense, with body parts jostling for attention amid the ambiguous shapes and expressive lines.



Excavation 1950
oil on canvas
205.7 × 254.6 cm
Mr and Mrs Frank G. Logan
Purchase Prize Fund; restricted
gifts of Edgar J. Kaufmann, Jr,
and Mr and Mrs Noah
Goldowsky, Jr, accn no. 1952.1
The Art Institute of Chicago
Photo: The Art Institute of
Chicago
© The Willem de Kooning
Foundation, New York/ARS
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Woman V (page 140) is **gestural** and avant-garde in approach, yet retains the tradition of the human figure as subject matter. De Kooning has broken down the figure into planes and symbols. The female here is monstrously ugly and overbearing, but strangely seductive — de Kooning's own version of a fertility goddess. We can see obvious similarities to the 'Venus of Willendorf', but interpreted on a monumental scale — the general proportions emphasising heavy breasts and full hips, the legs somewhat 'dumpy'. These proportions combined with a frontal stance and lack of any movement at the hips or knees make the images into rather terrifying, objectified symbols, lacking any of the grace or gentle allure of a Greek goddess. We also see a break from the traditional code of the passive, vulnerable reclining female as established by the Renaissance artist Titian (p. 125); instead the bared teeth are a symbol of aggression or the vulgarity of city life.

Woman V 1952–53
oil and charcoal on canvas
154.5 × 114.5 cm
National Gallery of Australia,
Canberra
Purchased 1974
© The Willem de Kooning
Foundation, New York/ARS
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010



Venus of Willendorf
created c. 25 000 BCE
limestone statuette
Photo: Gerhard Trumler, 1990/
Imagno/Getty Images



Critic Robert Hughes has described de Kooning's women as 'shark-grinning popsies before whose dumpy and threatening torsos so much critical rhapsody has been laid . . .'

De Kooning's expressive lines not only act as an edge to an area but suggest volume. The layering and smearing of paint in *Woman* 1953 (opposite) is more subdued, with the result that the areas of bold colour are larger and more intense. The yellow dress has a vibrancy and sense of vitality, the movement ending in the serrated 'frill' just above the knee. The arm on the left has 'meatiness' although the flesh colour has been applied flatly. It is an emotional depiction of the female although a little less ferocious than the frontal and confronting, heavy-breasted *Woman V*. Note the eye contact with the viewer is also less direct and menacing. But there is still a power to the stance and image.

Artist's practice

Influences/development

Picasso was a major influence, but de Kooning was also influenced by Kandinsky, Klee, Gorky and Matisse. By analysing his influences we come to see the importance of cultural exchange and the spread of Western ideas.



Woman 1953

oil and charcoal on paper
mounted on canvas
64.9 x 49.8 cm

Hirshhorn Museum and
Sculpture Garden,
Smithsonian Institution
Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn,
1966

Photo: Lee Stalsworth, accn no.
66.1199

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Foundation, New York/ARS
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In the mid 1930s, during the Depression, de Kooning was working mainly in abstraction. In 1935 he was accepted into the Federal Art Project, under the Works Progress Administration (WPA), working mainly on murals, but at least this allowed him to devote himself solely to being an artist. During the late 1930s to 1940s (prior to his well-known *Women* series) his females were particularly influenced by Picasso's work, but also by the prevailing image of the modern woman as seen in advertising (especially cigarette ads) and the dazzling smiles of movie stars. De Kooning's women had grimacing faces; they were rather harshly treated. He was trying to find a contemporary version of the beauty of female icons in art through the centuries, such as Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (page 125). Although some of his work of this period was quite abstract, he still seemed to be obsessed with the woman's gaze or facial expression. He produced a drawing of Marilyn Monroe before Warhol's version. In the 1940s his work was abstract but with hints of figuration and biomorphic shapes, as in *Excavation*. He first exhibited alongside Pollock in 1944. His painting took a new direction in 1950 when he began painting a series of deliberately provocative images. In 1953 he received public recognition with his controversial exhibition of the *Women* series at Sydney Janis's New York gallery.

Abstract Expressionism

Abstract Expressionism was an American painting movement that emerged in the 15 years after World War II. This style aimed to express or arouse emotions. Although de Kooning did not work solely in abstraction as did Pollock, Lee Krasner, Kline, Motherwell and Rothko, he shared these artists' love of the spontaneous gesture, large scale and personal expression.

In the late 1950s and into the 1960s his preoccupation with the female figure gave way to large abstract works with broad brushstrokes, some loosely modelled on landscapes but with the same mood of aggression and emotional intensity as his *Women* series.

Intention/style

As one of the Abstract Expressionists, Willem de Kooning expressed himself freely and subjectively in his paintings with sensuously handled paint. Although de Kooning's works often began with the subject of the figure (usually female) or a landscape, the act of painting itself seemed to take over, with the evident need for felt experience — intense, immediate and rhythmic. De Kooning's great achievements lie in exploring personal content in a unique style and combining figuration with an expressive gestural application of paint.

Technique/media

When he first arrived in America he worked mainly in thin layers of tempera or a drawing medium such as chalk pastel or charcoal. Only later, when he could afford it, did he turn to oil paint and his lavish, painterly style. There is a close relationship between his drawings and paintings, although the drawings were not just preliminary sketches for his oil paintings, but rather a way of working out his ideas.

De Kooning applied his paint with maximum spontaneity, the paint dripping, slipping and sliding across the canvas. The image is thus built up by layer upon layer of paint applied by swift, forceful movement of the brush and palette knife. He would often finish a painting in a day, only to later scrape it off and start again on the same canvas. As he reworked them a layer of thick impasto was built up, areas then scraped off to reveal earlier underlying elements.

Artist's statement

'Flesh was the reason oil painting was invented.'

Quoted in Barbara Hess,
Willem de Kooning, Taschen
Publications, Germany, 2004, p. 8.

Critical practice

Robert Hughes, 'Desire at full stretch:
Willem de Kooning, 1904–1997',
Time, 31 March 1997, p. 78.

'He [de Kooning] studied at the Rotterdam Academy of Fine Arts in the 1920s . . . he wanted to be . . . a commercial artist, an illustrator — to do the kinds of illustrations he had seen in American magazines.

'This early background helps explain the irresistible fondness for popular culture — cigarette ads, Marylins and so forth — that kept surfacing in his work in the 1950s, to the annoyance of some American critics. De Kooning was never a "pure" artist, partly because he was not trained to be one. But that was what enabled him to connect with America in a way few avant-garde painters had. He loved the lushness, the grittiness, the obtrusive weirdness of American cultural **vernaculars** . . .

'His best work had a wonderful libidinousness [lustfulness], a way of using the body of paint to access and encompass the body of the

world. To call it abstract, even when it was most so, is to ignore this. In what was probably his finest painting, *Excavation* 1950, one sees desire at full stretch: every form carries its physical freight — elbow, groin, folded belly, thigh, slipping and jostling in the paint as though mud wrestling in pigment. De Kooning could find metaphors of energy that none of his contemporaries could rival. And when he carried his “impurity” beyond the decorum of abstraction, as in the great women of the early to mid 1950s, he produced some extraordinarily intense images — funny, monstrous and laden with anxiety, rendered with a kind of desperate verve [spirit or liveliness]. “I find I can paint pretty young girls,” he remarked, “yet when it is finished I always find they are not there, only their mothers” ...’

‘The discussion of de Kooning has long been hampered by the efforts of American critics to turn him into a mythic figure, the American answer to Picasso ... it was on de Kooning’s work that Harold Rosenberg based his idea of “Action painting”, whereby the work of art was an act rather than a configuration, a by-product of some existential face-off between Will and Fate; ordinary questions like the style, sources, and syntax of his art had no place in this drama ...

‘[I]t is the “Women” that bring one aspect of the European Expressionist tradition to its close in America. “I look at them now,” de Kooning remarked of paintings like *Woman and Bicycle* 1952–53, “and they seem vociferous [loud and insistent] and ferocious. I think it had to do with the idea of the idol, the oracle, and above all the hilariousness of it.” De Kooning’s interest in idols and oracles was of a piece with the primitivising trend in early Abstract Expressionism — Pollock’s she-wolves and guardian figures, Rothko’s totems ... As such it was hardly unique, but de Kooning gave it a peculiarly vivid edge by connecting it both to Expressionism and to the then indigestible vulgarity of American mass images ...

‘Perhaps because he was a foreigner and could see America as curious, even exotic, de Kooning took frank pleasure in the admass imagery of *Life* magazine and Times Square billboards. This is reflected in the “Women”, whose toothy and disturbing grins were de Kooning’s version of the girl in the Old Camel cigarette ads ... In creating this Doris Day [a demure actress of the 1950s and 1960s] with shark teeth ... de Kooning had come up with one of the most memorable images of sexual insecurity in American culture.’

‘However lethal to the male, the late 19th-century femme fatale of Munch, Klimt and Moreau ensnares by her physical beauty and sexual allure. In the 20th century, she becomes bestial, carnivorous and visibly grotesque. In images of monstrous females by Picasso, Rouault, the Surrealists and de Kooning, the dread of woman and male feelings of inferiority are projected, objectified and universalised. Yet here too the devouring woman implies her opposite, combining features of both the powerless and the threatening ... De Kooning, in his continuing

Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (updated edn), Thames and Hudson, London, 1991, pp. 292, 294, 296, 314.

Robert Hughes’ writing can be difficult to read owing to the depth of his historical art knowledge and his encyclopaedic vocabulary. But he does inspire his readers with his obvious love of art and his, at times, quirky humour. He tends to place the artist within his cultural context, drawing on the artist’s background, development and place within a style. Hughes readily offers his opinion and judgements of artworks, often from a conservative and masculine viewpoint. He has strong powers of persuasion; his comments can be either cutting or eloquent in their praise. Whatever his reaction to an artwork or artist, it is always intense, written with a sense of personal conviction in an emotive style. He often combines the roles of art critic and art historian.

Hughes writing for *Time* magazine began in 1970. He has written several books including *Shock of the New*, *The Fatal Shore*, *Culture of Complaint* and *American Visions*.

Carol Duncan, *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1993, pp. 115, 194–5, 197, 198–9.

Carol Duncan writes from the *Postmodern Frame*, questioning the authority of past historical writing. She writes from a feminist perspective, being concerned with the way females are depicted in art as well as the way they are chosen by male curators and displayed, giving prominence to certain artworks.

In these extracts on de Kooning, Duncan examines the image of the female nude particularly in the context of the modern museum, being concerned with the relationship between artwork and audience.

“Woman” series, ritually invokes, objectifies and obliterates the same species of goddess-whore [as seen in the work of Picasso] . . . The pose his figures usually take — a frontal crouch with thighs open to expose the vulva — also appears in the *Demoiselle d’Avignon* (in the lower right figure), which, in turn, derives from primitive art. Like Picasso’s figures, de Kooning’s women are simultaneously inviting and repelling . . . obscene modern whores and terrifying primitive deities.

‘De Kooning’s *Woman 1* and Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon* are two of art history’s most important female images. They are also key objects in the MoMA’s [Museum of Modern Art’s] collection and highly effective in maintaining the museum’s masculinised environment . . .

‘Both before and after the 1984 expansion [of the museum], de Kooning’s *Woman I* hung at the threshold to the spaces containing the big Abstract Expressionist “breakthroughs” — the New York School’s final collective leap into absolutely pure, abstract, nonreferential transcendence: Pollock’s artistic and psychic free flights, Rothko’s sojourns in the luminous depths of a universal self, Newman’s heroic confrontations with the sublime . . . and so on. And always seated at the doorway to these moments of ultimate freedom and purity and literally helping to frame them has been *Woman I*. So important is her presence just there, that when she has to go on loan, *Woman II* appears to take her place. With good reason, de Kooning’s “Women” are exceptionally successful ritual artifacts and masculinise the museum’s space with great efficiency.

‘The woman figure had been emerging gradually in de Kooning’s work in the course of the 1940s. By 1951–52, it fully revealed itself in *Woman I*, as a big bad mama — vulgar, sexual, and dangerous. De Kooning imagines her facing us with iconic frontality, large, bulging eyes, open, toothy mouth, massive breasts. The suggestive pose is just a knee movement away from open-thighed display of the vagina, the self-exposing gesture of mainstream pornography.

‘These features are not unique in the history of art. They appear in ancient and tribal cultures as well as in modern pornography and graffiti. Together they constitute a well-known figure type. The Gorgon of ancient Greek art . . . bears a striking resemblance to de Kooning’s *Woman I*, and, like her, simultaneously suggests and avoids the explicit act of sexual self-display that elsewhere characterises the type . . . In her guise as the Gorgon witch, however, the terrible aspect of the mother goddess, her lust for blood and her deadly gaze, is emphasised. Especially today, when the myths and rituals that may have suggested other meanings have been lost — and when modern psychoanalytic ideas are likely to colour any interpretation — the figure appears especially intended to conjure up infantile feelings of powerlessness before the mother and the dread of castration: in the open jaw can be read the *vagina dentata* — the idea of a dangerous, devouring vagina, too horrible to depict, and hence transposed to the toothy mouth . . .

‘De Kooning was aware, indeed explicitly claimed, that his “Women” could be assimilated to the long history of goddess imagery.

By choosing to place such figures at the centre of his most ambitious artistic efforts, he secured for his work an aura of ancient mystery and authority.

'The *Woman* is not only monumental and iconic. In high-heeled shoes and brassiere, she is also lewd, her pose indecently teasing. De Kooning acknowledged her oscillating character, claiming for her a likeness not only to serious art — ancient icons and high-art nudes — but also to pinups and girlie pictures of the vulgar present. He saw her as simultaneously frightening and ludicrous. The ambiguity of the figure, its power to resemble an awesome mother goddess as well as a modern burlesque queen, provides a fine cultural, psychological, and artistic field in which to enact the modern myth of the artist-hero — the hero whose spiritual ordeal becomes the stuff of ritual in the public space of the museum. As a powerful and threatening woman, it is she who must be confronted and transcended — gotten past — on the way to enlightenment. At the same time, her vulgarity, her "girlie" side — de Kooning called it her "silliness" — renders her harmless (or is it contemptible?) and denies the terror and dread of her Medusa features. The ambiguity of the image thus gives the artist (and the viewer) both the experience of danger and a feeling of overcoming it. Meanwhile, the suggestion of pornographic self-display — more explicit in his later work but certainly present here — specifically addresses itself to the male viewer. With it, de Kooning knowingly and assertively exercises his patriarchal privilege of objectifying male sexual fantasy as high culture.'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Evaluate the writing of three art critics/historians, with reference to artists and the frame from which they write. You may consider Robert Hughes on de Kooning (*Cultural Frame*), Griselda Pollock on de Kooning (*Postmodern Frame*) and Clement Greenberg on Pollock (*Structural Frame*).

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Artist's practice

Evaluate the depiction of the female in the artworks of three Modernist artists, commenting on the artists' practice and what constitutes 'Modernism'.

2. Historical practice — Conceptual Framework: artwork–world

How has the role of the female changed in art over time? Refer to a range of artists and cultures.

3. Structural Frame

The primary interest of many artists is in exploring the visual qualities and formal elements of art. Discuss with reference to three artists.

Cindy Sherman

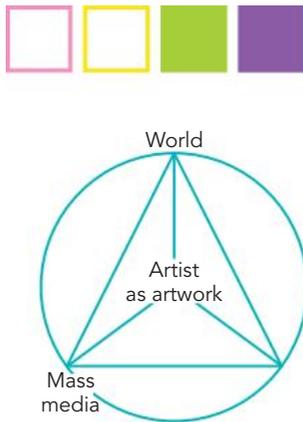
(b. 1954, American)

Issues/interests: the artist as model and the notion of identity and disguise; social critique and feminist comment; notions of beauty

Form: photography

Frames: *Postmodern* in challenging social standards and gender stereotypes, use of appropriation, mass media techniques and imagery; *Cultural* in challenging social values and attitudes

Conceptual Framework: The artist is often the artwork, commenting on her world of popular culture and world situations, promoting a questioning response from the audience, including awe and at times disgust.



Artworks in this unit

Untitled #188 1989

Untitled #224 1990

Untitled #352 2000

Untitled #465 2008

eBookplus

Cindy Sherman interview

Use the **Cindy Sherman interview** weblink in your eBookPLUS to discover more about this artist's work.

Untitled #188 1989

From *Disaster* series

colour photograph

111.8 × 165.1 cm

Museum of Contemporary

Art, Chicago. Gerald S. Elliott

Collection

Courtesy of the artist and Metro

Pictures



In the *Disaster* series Sherman challenges us to consider the violence that is a condition of society. Here the plastic, commercial aspect of the doll is a reference to contemporary, throw-away society, but it also reminds us of old films (Sherman is a fan of old B-grade horror movies), the open mouth and wide staring eyes reminiscent of the pleas for help from the 'demoiselle in distress' tied to a railway line.

The blow-up doll, partly hidden among human debris, is an obvious fake surrogate or symbol of the violence inflicted on females. The pointy breasts reflect her sexuality — this is no children’s plaything, the smearing of the lipstick and prostrate position of the body being signs of sexual activity. As is often the case in her work, Sherman questions our perceptions of reality while challenging us on social and gender issues. The diagonal position and contrast of the smoothness of the plastic to her confused surrounds adds drama. The ‘doll’ has been abandoned, no longer of use. Yet the clear, turquoise lighting, while taking the image beyond the ordinary, almost adds a disquieting beauty.

We are both repelled and intrigued by the image. Sherman manages to create an image of horror, while using the device of humour — after all, this is just a discarded, partly deflated plaything, isn’t it?



Untitled #224 1990
colour photograph
121.92 × 96.52 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Metro
Pictures

In *Untitled #224* Sherman has used the Postmodern method of appropriation. This photograph is an artificial replica of the painting *Bacchus* by the seventeenth-century Italian Baroque artist Caravaggio. We, the audience, are meant to recognise the original artwork, not only through the position of the body, clothes, head adornment and symbolic grapes (Bacchus was the Roman god of wine), but also through the lighting and mood created. Sherman has thus created a deliberate copy so that we recognise the artificiality of it yet bring to it the meaning of the original. As in many of the artworks of another

Postmodern artist, Yoshimura Morimura, gender boundaries are blurred and other cultural issues are raised.



Untitled #352 2000
colour photograph
68.58 × 45.72 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Metro
Pictures

Untitled #352 (above) presents us with a stereotype, the falseness of the wig, nose ring and false breasts emphasising this. Yet we are drawn by the direct gaze (of Sherman), challenging us to think of the life and personality of the subject. The black lips, dark areas under the eyes and badly drawn, bright red eyebrows suggest the uglier, seedier side of life, but we are also aware of the richness of the hair colour against the background and the delicate pattern of lace and ribbon against her shoulders.

A prosthesis, latex and heavy makeup were required to transform Cindy Sherman, herself in her mid fifties, into the society woman who stands in front of her mansion in *Untitled #465* (opposite), aloof, proud yet wary and vulnerable. Her face bears the evidence that she has undergone every procedure that money can buy in an effort to keep her youth and beauty. Wearing a strapless dress and pearls, she looks mournfully over her shoulder: there is the suggestion that she lives a lonely, sad existence. It raises questions about identity: has she remained the same person inside despite the changes on the outside? Sherman says:

I wanted to make characters that looked like they were women trying to present themselves in this way that is appealing. Showing off what they have. But also allowing some bits of pain or some of the past,

something from their subconscious, to leak through the façade. They all wound up being older but that wasn't necessarily a plan. I was thinking, 'Well, yes, they have to be older women because they're supposed to be wives of important men.' (*Sunday Times* magazine, 12 April 2009, p. 18)



Untitled #465 2008
colour photograph, edition of 6
163.8 × 147.3 cm
Sprüth Magers Gallery, Berlin
and London
Courtesy of the artist and Metro
Pictures

On why she has increased the size of her work with this series, Sherman states:

In some cases I didn't even quite understand myself what was happening until I projected [the images] — I used a projector to see how big I wanted them, before I printed them. And when I blew them up, a number of them struck me as so much sadder than I even anticipated. I realised they were characters who had built a façade of what they were projecting to the world of how happy and successful and useful they were trying to be and yet . . . In the [portrait], you see behind all that need to show off, and you see something more poignant, all the stuff that they've had to sacrifice. (*Art Review*, issue 31, April 2009, p. 75)

Artist's practice

Intentions/approaches/subject matter

Sherman shrewdly examines and challenges the 'image', exploring a myriad constructions of female identity and the body in contemporary culture. She explores the nature and impact of representation. She investigates the expectations (particularly of females), fears, obsessions,

desires and taboos of this age. Her art deals with the ways women have traditionally been seen by men — the voyeur-posing questions about self-esteem and appearance, expressing the malleability of identity. None of her photographs include the image of a man (although Sherman sometimes morphs herself into one), but there is always the uneasy sense of imminent male threat. She demonstrates an uncanny sense of the cultural concerns of our image-based society.

Sherman's works are confronting, partly because they so cleverly depict recognisable situations, examining our culture and its clichés. She challenges and deconstructs the conventions and visual codes of gender. She also questions, often with a hint of humour, notions of beauty and ugliness.



Sherman's photographs have an amazing ability to grip the beholder, so intense and penetrating are they in meaning, atmosphere and social connotations. They are provocative and engaging.

Methods/decisions

Sherman enjoyed dressing up even as a young girl, although unlike most young girls, it was not to make herself grown-up or pretty, but to explore possible transformations. She often recreated herself as an ugly, gnarled woman or witch. One is amazed that it is Sherman herself in each photograph, so diverse are the guises, the purpose of her work being far from a self-portrait.

Cindy Sherman works with the notion of contradictory messages, what is known in Postmodern terms as 'double coding'. She slips in and out of art history images, blurring the boundaries of gender, confronting the division between original and copy, high art and popular culture, using a medium that lies between representation and reality.

On her change to shooting digitally, she has said:

Working alone in my studio, it's just so much more helpful. Being able to check out what I'm doing as I'm doing it, it's really changed my whole style of working ... but I don't want it looking fake. I want to be in control, I guess, of what looks fake and what doesn't. (*Art Review*, issue 31, April 2009, p. 75)

Influences/historical context

Throughout history artists have been interested in the grotesque, fanciful or horrific. One need only look at the work of Goya (pages 85–7) and Bosch to appreciate this fascination with monsters and hybrid forms. Both of these artists created creatures that were half-human, half-animal or bird. (Look also at the paintings of Australian artist Peter Booth, pages 106–8.) Sherman created grotesque creatures in her *Fairy Tales* and *Horror and Surrealist Pictures* 1994–96 series, and in her *Sex Pictures* series of 1999 she used hybrids or constructs of gender through the use of artificial body parts, GI Joe dolls and Barbie dolls. We can also see the influence of the Surrealist Hans Bellmer.

Artist's statements

'A photograph should transcend itself, in order to have its own presence. These are pictures of emotions personified, entirely with their own presence — not of me. The issue of the identity of the model is not more interesting than the possible symbolism of any other detail.'

'Untitled statement',
Documents 7 Kasel, 1982,
quoted in Brandon Taylor, *Art Today*,
Laurence King Publishing, 2005, p. 95.

'I'd like people to fantasise about this person's life or what they're thinking or what's inside their head, so I guess that's like telling a story ...

Quoted in exhibition catalogue,
*Her Bodies: Cindy Sherman and
Vanessa Beecroft*,
1 September – 21 November 2004,
Arario Press, Korea, 2004.

'The world is so drawn toward beauty that I became interested in things that are normally considered grotesque or ugly, seeing them as more fascinating and beautiful. Also, I like making images that from a distance seem kind of seductive, colourful, luscious and engaging, and then you realize what you are looking at is something totally opposite. It seems boring to me to pursue the typical idea of beauty, because that is the easiest or the most obvious way to see the world. It's more challenging to look at the other side.'

'Finding beauty in things other people would find disgusting or repulsive. It's almost my style of working. I'm not interested in trying to capture or re-create any of nature's beauty, because it already exists and it already is perfect. I'm more interested in discovering beauty that is not where you expect to find it.'

Quoted in Sebastian Smee,
'Barbie suffers a meltdown',
Sydney Morning Herald,
2 June 1999, p. 13.

Overview of Sherman's work

Late 1970s: *Untitled Film Stills* series

In these works, photographs the size of film stills, she thinly disguises herself as she dresses to suit the part of female stereotypes (housewife, librarian, office girl, pin-up). The use of 'Untitled' in the title emphasises the loss of individuality. Each photograph is staged with extreme attention to detail to create the mood (anxiety, vulnerability, apprehension) and atmosphere of the time. These photographs not only imply our own and the camera's gaze, but at times hint at the presence of another person watching the subject of the photograph.

1980: *Rear Screen Projections*

In these larger format colour photographs, Sherman explores how the media shape viewers' perceptions of reality and the female image. Her introduction of colour enhances her range of moods. These works are suggestive, allowing the viewer to dream or interpret.

Sherman photographed herself in front of projected slides. The closely cropped images of Sherman contrast to the fake and somewhat blurry backgrounds. Here once again she mimics mass media roles. These youthful, middle-class women remind us of 1970s American television shows and reflect the struggles of working women at the time.

1981: *Centrefolds or Horizontals*

Sherman again uses herself as the model and incorporates theatrical devices. This time she uses the horizontal format of pornographic

magazine centrefolds. The young women depicted are passive, weak and vulnerable. Sherman wanted the viewer to feel embarrassed or disappointed in themselves when realising they were invading a private, personal moment in an individual's life. She held various poses as she imagined herself the victim of abuse, rape or rejection. Sherman was exploring female identity, the image of woman, through a critical examination of the recurrent stereotype of the female body as expressed in popular culture.

1982: *Pink Robes*

In these vertical-format, ambiguous images solitary females pose in a pink chenille bathrobe.

1983, 1984, 1993, 1994: *Fashion*

These four groups of works were influenced by fashion photography, but they are Sherman's own, singular version of fashion spreads. The images are of bizarre, freakish, unglamorous characters. They raise questions about the conventions of fashion photography while continuing her theme of masquerade.

1985: *Fairy Tales*

The mythical, morbid and horrific aspects of the fairy tale are explored through scenes of death, metamorphosis and decay. Humour and repulsion intermingle. There is a shift from Sherman's earlier focus on the ideological representation of women to darker, psychological concerns. The images take on a surreal quality with dramatic lighting, the vivid colour turning these disturbing images of grotesque ugliness and horror into violent yet somehow appealing narratives.

1986–89: *Disaster* (see *Untitled #188*, page 146)

These photographs depict large, vividly coloured, almost abstract images of rotting food, garbage and vomit — symbols of disgust, horror, fear and dread. Hybrid human-doll creatures have been utilised. The theatrical devices once again create a sense of the contradictory in contemporary culture: a beautiful display on one hand, an outlandish scene of violence and excess on the other.

1989–90: *History Portraits* (see *Untitled #224*, page 147)

Sherman appropriates elements of Old Master paintings (often the costumes, poses and backgrounds of certain periods rather than individual works). She injects her own quirky humour with the addition of artificial body parts to achieve absurd and at times grotesque effects, exaggerating the conventions of male and female stereotypes as expressed in Western art. She masquerades as a male in some of these works.

1992: *Sex Pictures*

These are big colour photographs of artificial limbs, medical dolls, dummies and body masks, creating hybrid, often grotesque dolls against lush materials. They are staged in explicitly grotesque and at

times ridiculous scenes sometimes suggesting nightmarish sexual fantasies, a reaction to pornography and the double standards of American conservatism.

The controversial work of Jeff Koons and the photographers Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe was influential. The 'sex pictures' are blatantly confronting, even though she has used artificial body parts. Despite the feeling of shock and disquiet created, Sherman's attention to lighting, colour and surface gives them visual appeal. These more topical and political works (some with reference to censorship and AIDS), with their large format and rich colour, also question the relationship between high culture and the 'low' images of mass media.

1994–96: *Horror and Surrealist Pictures*

These images include grotesque representations of metamorphoses and dislocations of the human body. The horrifying theatrical masks (such as a pig's snout, extended tongue or wart-like nose) have a surrealistic, nightmare quality. They suggest violence as seen in the TV news.

2000 (see *Untitled #352*, page 148)

These individual portraits of Sherman as 'personalities', achieved through use of makeup, wigs and added body parts, suggest particular 'types' or stereotypes.

2004: *Clown series*

This series featured key developments in Sherman's work. With the use of digital photography, she was able to appear as more than one character in a single image, as well as to enhance her colours, as seen in the almost gaudy backgrounds. Sherman has stated:

I took out the pyjamas and a couple of other eccentric things that I had been saving, although I didn't have any particular thing I could apply them to. Then, when I started looking up clown pictures on line, I realised I could almost use anything, any item of clothing, T-shirts, jeans, and it could be a clown. And I had a couple of multicoloured wigs that I'd never used for a picture. So many things suddenly made sense for the clowns, for the whole idea . . . I still wanted the work to be the same kind of mixture — intense, with a nasty side or an ugly side, but also with a real pathos about the characters — and [clowns] have an underlying sense of sadness while they're trying to cheer people up. Clowns are sad, but they're psychotically, hysterically happy.' (Exhibition catalogue, *Her Bodies: Cindy Sherman and Vanessa Beecroft*, 1 September – 21 November 2004, Arario Press, Korea, 2004)

2008–09

Sherman transforms herself into Aging Rich American Women, the types of ladies who organise functions for charities, who do lunch with the 'girls' and rely on Botox and facelifts to hold back the

passage of time. These works are presented as commissioned works by the sitters, reminiscent of oil portraits destined to hang in their halls or above the fireplace for generations to revere, but also hinting at their bad taste.

Critical practice

Rosalind Krauss, Cindy Sherman, 1975–1993, Rizzoli International Publications Inc., New York, 1993, pp. 56, 89–96.

Rosalind Krauss is a Postmodernist critic writing from a feminist perspective. She explores the theory of how images are perceived, dealing in particular with signs of gender stereotypes as a reflection of our mass media culture. Postmodernists are often interested in semantics, the study of the meanings of words (or signs/images) and changes in them.

'In 1981, when Sherman had her first one-person exhibition . . . critics welcomed the vehicle Sherman was using because photography was itself the very medium of the image world's production of the stereotype, and so photography, shorn of its associations to the "fine print" and dragging its relations to mass-culture behind it, breached the walls of the art world in a revolution that belonged to Sherman's artistic generation . . .

'Not surprisingly, given the fact that Sherman's "Untitled Film Stills" focus exclusively on women, on the roles women play in films, on the nature of those roles as pre-set, congealed, cultural clichés — hence their designation as "stereotype" — and, by implication, on the pall that the real-world pressure to fill these roles casts over the fates of individual women, feminist writers have embraced Sherman's art . . .

'Sherman, of course, has a whole repertory of women being watched. From the very outset of her project, in *Untitled Film Still #2*, of 1977, she set up the sign of the unseen intruder. A young girl draped in a towel stands before her bedroom mirror, touching her shoulder and following her own gesture in its reflected image. A door jamb to the left of the frame places the "viewer" outside this room. But what is far more significant is that this viewer is constructed as a hidden watcher by means of the signifier that reads as graininess, a diffusion of the image that constructs the signified — the concept of distance — a severing of the psychic space of the watcher from that of the watched and of the camera's concomitant [accompanying] construction of the watcher for whom it is proxy . . .

'But in *Untitled Film Still #81*, of 1978, there is a remarkably sharp depth of field, so that such "distance" is gone, despite the fact that doorways are once again an obtrusive part of the image, implying that the viewer is gazing at the woman from outside the space she occupies. As in other cases, the woman appears to be in a bathroom and once again she is scantily dressed, wearing only a thin nightgown. Yet the continuity established by the focal length of the lens creates an unimpeachable sense that her look at herself in the mirror reaches past her reflection to include the viewer as well . . .

'The narrative impact of these images tends to submerge the elements through which the situation is constructed, elements such as depth-of-field, grain, light etc., which, it would seem, are too easy to dismiss as merely "formal" integers, whereas they function as signifiers crucial to the semantic effect . . .'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Artist's practice

Discuss the artmaking practice of Cindy Sherman, her intentions, working methods and choices with reference to two artworks and the following two quotes.

I try to get something going with the characters so that they give more information than what you see in terms of wigs and clothes. (Artist quoted in exhibition catalogue, *Her Bodies: Cindy Sherman and Vanessa Beecroft*, 1 September – 21 November 2004, Arario Press, Korea, 2004)

Despite the subject matter, these photographs are richly coloured and elaborately composed. They have an aesthetic sophistication that pulls them into the here-and-now of painting rather than the there-and-then of photography. (Sebastian Smee, 'Barbie suffers a meltdown', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 1999, p. 13)

2. Conceptual Framework — the world of mass media



Discuss Cindy Sherman's work as a reflection or comment on the role the mass media plays in shaping personal identities. Refer in particular to the exploration of female stereotypes as a cultural construct.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Cultural Frame



Analyse the work of at least two American artists who have responded to cultural change and issues from the 1970s to the present. You might consider the work of Cindy Sherman and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

2. Postmodern Frame



'In both Britain and New York contemporary artists have shunned the tradition of aesthetics, preferring to communicate their meaning through shocking subjects and media, what is now referred to as the "object".' Discuss this statement referring to a range of artists. Suggestions: Sarah Lucas, Tracey Emin, Damien Hirst, the Chapman brothers and Carolee Schneemann.

3. Artist's practice

Investigate the work of Cindy Sherman and one other artist of your choice who incorporates his or her body as an essential part of their artwork. You might consider Orlan, Julie Rrap, Yayoi Kusama, Yasumasa Morimura or TV Moore.

Vanessa Beecroft

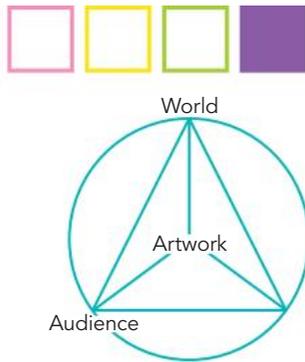
(b. 1969 in Genoa, Italy; father British, mother from Milan; now lives and works in New York)

Issues/interests: body image, nudity, audience reaction

Form: performance works documented by photography and video

Frame: *Postmodern* in challenging traditions and social codes, influence of mass media expectations

Conceptual Framework: Beecroft reacts to our contemporary world with performances that demand audience attention as the artist works with real time, real space and real flesh.



Artworks in this unit

VB55 2005

VB61 8 June 2007

VB56 2005



Vanessa Beecroft

Use the **Vanessa Beecroft** weblink in your eBookPLUS to visit this artist's official website.

VOCABULARY

documentation record of art performances or transitory works in the form of photography or video; often a part of Postmodern practice, with the documentation replacing the art object's role as 'the saleable item'

voyeuristic relating to the gratification experienced by looking at sexual objects or situations. The voyeur in art can be the artist painting a model but is more particularly the viewer of the artwork.

Vanessa Beecroft's performance piece *VB55 2005* (opposite) consisted of one hundred women standing still for three hours, oiled from the waist up and wearing nothing but a pair of pantyhose. Her use of the nude female in her artmaking has always been contentious, suggesting a feminist perspective on the nude in art and the female as object in our contemporary society. There is a direct relationship between the viewer and the live female models, verging on the **voyeuristic** in her live events. The women appear motionless and unapproachable within their performance space. As in most of Beecroft's *VB* series, nudity is the key feature, the models chosen for their basic similarity, which is heightened by the addition of 'props' — in this case pantyhose, but in other works it is high-heeled sandals, bikini briefs, wigs or uniform underwear. As the viewer

moves, complex figurative compositions become apparent, as in a painting. Although simple in their execution, Beecroft's concepts are often quite complex, provoking questions about identity, exploitation and the agencies of the artworld.



VB55 2005
VB55.004.nt
Performance
National Galerie, Berlin, 2005
Courtesy of Galleria Lia Rumma
and Massimo Minini
© 2010 Vanessa Beecroft

VB61 8 June 2007 (below) took place in the Pescheria del Rialto in Venice. About 30 Sudanese women lay face-down on a white canvas on the ground, simulating dead bodies piled on top of one another. It represented a statement on the genocide in Darfur, Sudan. This is one of Beecroft's stronger political works, although all of her works have an underlying social focus. The work is disturbing yet provocative.



VB61 8 June 2007
VB61.045.vb
Performance
VB 61 Still Death! Darfur Still Deaf?, Venice 2007
Courtesy of Galleria Lia Rumma
and Massimo Minini
© 2010 Vanessa Beecroft



VB56 2005

VB56.panoramic.nt (top)

VB56.609_09.vb

LVMH, Paris

Courtesy of Galleria Lia Rumma
and Massimo Minini

© 2010 Vanessa Beecroft

VB56 2005 was a staged performance for the opening of the Louis Vuitton store on the Champs Elysées in Paris, in which models were placed on the shelves next to the Louis Vuitton bags. In conjunction with this event, a book was produced featuring the letters ‘VBLV’ created with nudes. This 2007 book, of eight letters forming the Louis Vuitton name and logo, was recalled when it was discovered that the concept was too similar to the Naked Ladies Alphabet, created in 1970 by the Dutch graphic designer Anthony Beeke.

Apart from raising issues of originality and copyright, this collaboration highlights the close link between fashion and art in our contemporary society, with fashion houses such as Prada and Louis Vuitton promoting artists, and vice-versa.

Beecroft has also collaborated with hip-hop singer Kanye West at a party to promote his album *808s & Heartbreak* in Los Angeles. About



forty skinny, mixed-race models wearing nothing but black stiletto heels stood against a blue light panel. As the music began, blue, red and yellow lights flashed across the panel while the models randomly changed position, sitting down or stretching as the tracks changed.

Artist's practice

Termed conceptual art, Beecroft's live events and performance sculptures of carefully arranged group poses are recorded through photography and video recordings, to be exhibited as **documentations** of the performances but also sold as separate works of art as limited edition photographs/DVDs/video films. Each performance is staged twice, once for the audience and once for photographing and filming.

Beecroft's first exhibition (*VB01*), in Milan in 1993, included drawings along with eight pages of her 'food diary', a record of every morsel of food she had eaten, the time and how it made her feel. This white, cube-shaped book was accompanied by 30 young women, many chosen for their resemblance to Beecroft and their similar struggles with eating disorders. They were dressed in Beecroft's own clothes and instructed to move around the space in an aloof manner.

Beecroft's works usually involve living displays of people in 'costume' — generally groups of young women, nude or almost nude in their underwear or with scanty accessories. The girls are generally chosen for their likeness to each other, and are sometimes dressed in identical wigs. The costumes vary from high-heeled red shoes and stockings, as in *VB40* 1999, performed at the Museum of Contemporary art in Sydney, to similar flesh-coloured underwear, as in *VB16* 1996 in New York, to *VB35* 1998, where the models were dressed in Gucci bikinis and high heels (except for four interspersed among them, who were totally nude). There is always a degree of control by the artist of their garments and stance. Their positions within a space are orchestrated, like objects or figures in a sculptural piece. The audience can walk around the models or view the work from one vantage

point, but they cannot avoid becoming part of the piece, as humans will always react to the presence of other humans. Beecroft challenges the audience's perceptions of the female body in art. The body has become a symbol or sign to be interpreted by the audience. Beecroft's work evokes criticism of the body as model, both in the traditional sense of the artist's nude model, and in the sense of the mannequin of parades and models in fashion magazine shots. We are aware of the way people are objectified, a tense mood being created as the live models return the viewers' gaze while performing. After a few hours of standing in formation they gradually relax their pose, slump, crouch or sit down, once again becoming individuals, humans with normal imperfections. Yet Beecroft's work is also a celebration of the body, just as the nude has been appreciated throughout the history of art. Beecroft translates reality into something artificial. The young women in these performances seem to be held in an undefined state with no relationship to time. Beecroft asks the girls to 'disconnect' in order to give them the power to bear the gaze of strangers as they stand naked. Her work thus seems to lie somewhere between life and sculpture.

Each performance is created for a specific location, often referencing social, historical or political associations of the place. For example, in *VB48 2001*, in Genoa, on the occasion of the G-8 summit meeting in the Ducal Palace, she used an all-black group of women to reflect the presence of African sex workers in that city. In the performance Beecroft challenged accepted codes of female sexuality, the models being covered head to toe in brown paint and wearing rust-coloured wigs.

Beecroft's early work mainly involved nude females, but she has since extended her practice. In *VB39 25 US Navy Seals* from the San Diego base wear their summer white uniforms. The group stood in ceremonial formation within a white square in the San Diego Museum of Contemporary Art, representing the core military values of honour, courage and commitment.

More recently Beecroft has lent towards a more theatrical approach. In *VB64 2009* sculptural pieces and female nudes interact. Twenty models completely covered in white makeup posed on pedestals alongside white gesso body casts of women.

She has also extended her work to include period clothing and food. Beecroft herself has struggled since the age of 12 to control eating disorders ranging from bulimia to anorexia; at 40, it is still a controlling influence. Married with two children, she lives in a rural retreat on Long Island, chosen in part for its distance from 24-hour convenience stores in New York and also for its indoor swimming pool. Beecroft also suffers from what is called 'exercise bulimia'. Her strict physical regime to control her weight has included swimming 100 laps a day and, more recently, practising ashtanga yoga daily.

Beecroft's work has references to the long tradition of figure painting and sculpture from the Renaissance to the Baroque and Canova, and the radical performance work of such artists as Gilbert and George

and Yves Klein, yet it also has an awareness of contemporary culture, from high fashion to reality TV shows. Add to this mix her feminist standpoint, the intimidating aspect of her imagery, the way she has depersonalised the female body and the sexual power of her events. Despite the nudity, these works are not erotic; rather, they challenge and provoke the audience. She considers her works self-portraits but rarely appears in them. Vanessa Beecroft is an artist of contradictions, and in this she reflects contemporary society.

Her work is Postmodern in the way it challenges the definition of art and in the way she critiques, raising questions, rather than providing answers.

Artist's statements

'I like to display nudity to provoke the fear or embarrassment or confusion of the audience.'

Quoted in Robert Knafo, 'Economy of desire', *New York Times*, 9 September 2001.

The following are statements circulated for *Show* at New York's Guggenheim Museum:

'Nude is the ideal portrayal since it is defenceless, powerful, athletic, outrageous and classic.'

Quoted in 'SHOW the performance', Yvonne Force, Inc., 1998 at www.yvonneforceinc.com.

'Beauty is an intent which society deals with and beauty creates shame.'

Critical practice

'As Beecroft's recent contribution to the Whitney Biennial — a formation of US Navy Seals — makes clear, her use of nakedness is not to do with nudity as much as it is to do with uniform. What Beecroft's performances expose is the extent to which an aesthetic of sameness, ritual, order is seductive, but taboo . . .

'Through . . . the slow dragging of time and the artificially exaggerated variations in sameness — she exposes a more dangerous human impulse. I was alarmed to detect a degree of fascination on my own part with which of their bodies approximated more closely to the supermodel ideal, partly thinking it would make a better picture if they looked more exactly the same. Recent history and the imminent breakthrough in the human gene project warn that we should still check that tendency. With this in mind, can we kid ourselves that the Will to Undiversified Beauty is okay?'

Catherine Wood, 'Untitled', review of the exhibition VB43 at Gagosian Gallery, London, 9 May 2000.

'Yet for all the images in art that these girls may be related to, Beecroft does something no one else does — she does images live . . .

'She uses real girls but takes them out of real life. She creates performances in which no one performs yet in which everyone has a role to play. She makes installations that are performances in slow time, that are at once, like painting, billboards, beauty pageants, sex fantasies and pure technology wrapped into a strange production

Jan Avgikos, 'Let the picture do the talking', *Parkett*, no. 56, September 1999, pp. 106–9.

number of “take notice” images — naked bottom girls in high heels . . . While the work is super-charged with erotic texture, Beecroft’s style is subliminal [below the surface] and cool. Its edginess is the bait that brings the audience to the work. But it’s the humanness of the girls that brings the picture ultimately, to its knees.’

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

The critic Catherine Wood (see page 161) has used the device of ending the review with a question or confronting idea. What effect does this have on the reader, and what other devices do art critics use to entice or involve the reader?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. **Conceptual Framework — Postmodern Frame** 
‘Vanessa Beecroft is quite radical in using live nude females in her works. But her work can be considered an extension of the use of the body as art that began with Yves Klein and has been taken up by various Postmodern artists, particularly with the use of their own body.’ Discuss with reference to a range of artists.
2. Discuss the trend in contemporary art to increasingly involve the audience and to pose questions for the audience to respond to. Mention at least three artists in your essay, including Vanessa Beecroft.
3. Postmodern artists often set out to shock or challenge the audience. Explain with reference to particular artists and their artworks.

Ms & Mr

(Stephanie nova Milne, b. 1980, Sydney, and
Richard nova Milne, b. 1977, Toronto, Canada)

Issues/interests: re-examination of their past, joined lives

Forms: drawing, video, multimedia installations

Frame: *Postmodern* in rewriting their own history, challenging scientific and philosophical notions of time

Conceptual Framework: Not only is there a close relationship between the artists and the artworks, but they are generally within the artwork, thus encouraging a personal response from the audience. Their artworks thus blur the distinctions between art, life and performance.

Artworks in this unit

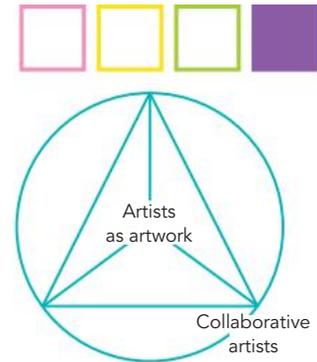
The wedding portrait 2003

Two Figures in a Landscape 1997/2008

Macbeth Adulterations #3 1992/2008

Ms & Mr

Use the **Ms & Mr** weblink in your eBookPLUS to visit these artists' official website.



VOCABULARY

collaboration working together cooperatively on the same project

The Wedding Portrait [page 164] is both a redux of the traditional wedding portrait, but also a ritualisation of the formalisation of our **collaboration**. In the work our attire has us stitched together. At the time we were very interested in the conjunction thing, the extended monstrous physicality of a group mind. (Ms & Mr)

The 'matching' of their outfits is not merely a costume decision for the artwork but an expression of their close relationship and joint way of working as well as living. Their art is thus an extension of their day-to-day experiences as well as the history of their joined lives. One thinks of the term 'soulmates' as partners, yet this couple have taken it to new levels in their artmaking. They do not have separate roles, such as one doing the drawing and one the video editing, but rather work seamlessly. Their art explores themselves as the subject, investigating the relational aspects of being distinct entities, yet combined, both in life and in artmaking.

The Wedding Portrait 2003
Lambda print
81 × 100 cm
Courtesy of the artists and
Kaliman Gallery, Sydney



Two Figures in a Landscape
1997/2008
Archived VHS rotoscoped with
composited HDV and animation
Silent, 1080p, 16:9
Duration: 1:20 min (loop)
Courtesy of the artists and
Kaliman Gallery, Sydney

In 2006 they re-edited the entire VHS video footage shot by a relative at their own wedding, transferring it into digital. In a playful manner they erased themselves from the document and reintroduced themselves as guests/spectators. It is an artwork that not only investigates aspects of their relationship but also plays with the traditions and social conventions of marriage. The video was manipulated into an artwork seven years after the event, thus it is a re-examining, or rethinking, not only of the event but of their reasons for entering into marriage at this generally perceived young age.



With *Two Figures in a Landscape* (opposite) Richard appears in the present as an adult, while Stephanie appears as a time-traveller, generally only seen as a shadow. He beckons to her, attempting to pull her out of the snow, but in the attempt to reach for her he dissolves into the surface. We feel the connectedness between them, yet wonder if what we are witnessing is a record of a dream or a vivid imagination delving into contemporary technological issues concerning virtual reality or philosophical questions regarding being and spirituality. It holds the viewer in suspense, being both visually beautiful and intellectually confronting.

An extension of, but also a departure from, our home movie interventions. An incidental hand-held pan of a winter scene is captured outside of Mr's family home in Toronto. The scene is transformed into a scene of disappearance and longing as Mr attempts to wade through the footage, only to sink deeper. (Ms & Mr)



In *Macbeth Adulterations #3* (above) the dashing figure with blue cape has been transformed into an image of the husband, Richard, while the kneeling demoiselle holding the flag is indeed his now-wife, Stephanie. The naive drawing with its narrative style and crude symbols of violence and honour, through its manipulation, has gained layers of meaning, the fantasy blending from different times.

These are part of an extended series of retroactive collaborations. We've selected drawings that either demonstrate a possible

Macbeth Adulterations #3

1992/2008

ink, pencil and watercolour, adulterated drawings from future wife's Year 6 art diary

20 x 33 cm

Courtesy of the artists and Kaliman Gallery, Sydney

precognition of future events or make a plausible narrative. The Macbeth adulterations are interventions into a series of drawings Ms did to illustrate the story when she was 11. We were attracted to this source for a few reasons. Firstly, we liked the passing resemblance to Mr that some of the characters had. Secondly, the original story of Macbeth has an underlying theme of predestination, with Macbeth himself having the future revealed to him on a number of occasions. (Ms & Mr)

Artist's practice

Background/intention

Ms & Mr have virtually turned their marriage, love and lives into artworks. Meeting as teenagers at a house party in 1998, both avid art students in high school, their love blossomed and they 'plotted' not only to marry as soon as possible — Stephanie was just 19, Richard 21 — but also to attend the same Fine Arts course at the College of Fine Arts in Sydney. Working collaboratively since 1999, their work blurs the distinctions between art, life and performance. They refer to their projects as retroactive collaborations, because they work together not only in the present but also with each other's former and future selves. They therefore explore their relationship across time, proposing that they have always been in a relationship, blurring the notions of past, present and future. They use their love and marriage as a creative bank for their artmaking. Luckily both sets of parents had kept photos, VHS cassettes and drawings from their respective childhoods. Ms & Mr have manipulated these archives using contemporary technologies to insert themselves into each other's early lives, thus extending the length of their relationship, 'rewriting' history (as do many Postmodernists).



Ms & Mr outside their studio
Courtesy of the artists and Kaliman
Gallery

The suggestion that their destiny together was decided when they were still children is explored in the video in which Stephanie's face has been digitally inserted into old footage of Richard as a young boy sleeping (*Heavy Sentimental* 2007, a series of four videos). In *Videodromes for the Alone: the Lovecats*, Stephanie is seen as a child performing a ballet routine, while Richard has been inserted into the video at age 28, attempting to mimic her moves. These adaptations or transformations of the original footage highlight the awkwardness of youth and suggest childhood fantasies. One feels a sense of empathy. The past and present merge, creating a sense of nostalgia and playful reflection not only in the videos but in the accompanying drawings. A page from a high-school year 7 Visual Arts Process Diary of Stephanie's crayon reproduction of a Dobell portrait, *The Cypriot*, became the basis of a 2008 work, as it became apparent to Stephanie that the image she drew resembled Richard. An enlarged version of her high-school drawing was exhibited as *Stephanie 93 — Teenage Telepathetic Portrait of Future Husband after Dobell* alongside a diary page-size drawing of Richard (*Teenage Telepathetic — Portrait of Husband Wearing Armband*). Another reference to her high-school art studies at St Catherine's, Sydney, is included in the form of a large oil stick version of Munch's *The Scream*, exhibited falling off the wall with a glass of orange juice spilt over it. Stephanie's romantic nature and interest in creating mood and the suggestion of the slow passage of time was already evident in her HSC Body of Work, which consisted of a series of sensitive paintings playing with the transparent layering of glazes of oil paint, beautifully built up from lean to fat, suggesting clouds gently moving in a night sky. Their appeal lay in their ambiguity and sense of timelessness, and as a wistful, evocative response to nature.

This 'playing' with time and memories has recently led to their shared interest in philosophical and scientific investigations of time. Their artworks are not just about their close relationship; they also delve into deeper issues. The new video works created for Primavera 2008, *I Need You Here and Not Here Too* 2008, show a fracturing and slowing of time, combining actual and imagined events, being more suggestive of future time travel than past nostalgic altering of narratives. In *Study for Retrograde Motion* 1998/2008 Stephanie as an adult and Richard as a child, dressed in identical hooded yellow raincoats, are slowing running towards each other.

As figures in motion, each seems to have a physical force upon their lover, landed amidst an environment erased to lunar qualities. This intersection of composite video formats is perceived simultaneously, so whether they are moving forward or in reverse appears indeterminate; acting to suspend or displace the directions of time. They orbit in a time-like curve, the inevitable romantic paradox of time. (Ms & Mr)

Techniques/media

The artists manipulate old footage and employ new technologies. To accelerate and slow time they use such structural devices as looping, repetition, layering and distortion. They have also created a fracturing, non-linear effect by using viewing devices such as crystal formations.

They often display their work as installations, exploring spatial relationships, further emphasising their connectedness, the complexity of their shared memories and interests, and the collaborative nature of their work. The audience becomes intrigued by the interplay within the space and a little confused as to whether they are in the past, present or future. Time seems suspended within the 'world' that is uniquely Ms & Mr, an undeniable oneness, both personally and artistically.

Kerrie-Dee Johns 2006,
Extract from 'Mind Games'
catalogue essay.

Critical practice

'For every scientist's search for truth and evidence, there is an artificial soul that wanders the earth and yearns for his likeness. It is this delicate balance of horror, beauty, and science fiction, which inhabits the work of Ms & Mr . . . In a sequence of illustrated experiments testing the frontiers of parapsychology, *Sensory Perception Experiments* (2003), Ms & Mr perform intellectual burlesque. Their science is based not on reason but on mysticism. They test the limits of their matrimonial and collaborative relationship in an amusing series of mind games based on sensations such as the phantom limb and phenomena like telekinesis.'

Interview with the artists

Interview with the author
conducted via email, 18 March 2009.

Do you have your own studio, do you share a space or do you work mainly from home?

We currently work out of a large open studio that we use as both a studio and home.

Do you employ any technical assistance with your video work?

No, we learn everything that we want to know how to do as we go. Working with video, for us, is like working in any other medium: it has a materiality that is specific to it, and we find that by knowing the process and making things ourselves we are able to play with ideas that otherwise we wouldn't think about purely at the point of preconceiving the ideas.

Can you provide some technical information on your video work, the software you use etc.?

Our process has become increasingly complicated and specific to the way we work, not dissimilar to the way painters or sculptures develop their own ways of approaching artmaking over time. We use a combination of archive footage and footage we may shoot using HDV, but the formats vary from work to work.

We use a number of different programs that range from domestic to professional grade software for compositing, sound and animation. Because we utilise various video formats, including archival VHS footage, people sometimes confuse the work as being low-fi (and it has been misleadingly referred to sometimes in these terms). However, this isn't accurate; it's sort of part of the illusion because it is in fact a combination of new and old technologies. We tend to exploit the innate material qualities of both. The process of the video works often involves meticulous frame-by-frame animation or rotoscoping, so it can take weeks or months of work to finish them.

I have recently been writing about Chagall and am struck with some similarities to your work, the theme of overpowering love for his wife being the obvious one, but he also seems to merge past and present as you do. Has he ever been an influence or do you feel any relationship to his work?

No. If we're to think of early Modernist influences, we'd be more interested in the active collaborative discursive dialogues that often existed between artists like, off the top of our heads, Duchamp and Man Ray or Duchamp and Picabia, or later Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, because their works also reflect a dialogue and in the latter case a romantic one also.

Can you share some of your influences?

Science fiction, cinema, popular developments in theoretical physics, neurology, the marginal activities of the 'group mind' in history, mystics, charlatans, mythmakers and oddities. Essentially we're interested in narrative clashes between truth and fiction and or the plausibility of science with the philosophical possibilities of it. Important is our admission to, and sometimes misappropriation of, scientific theories that remain in the realm of practical fiction.

How do you work out your ideas, given that you work so closely — do you keep separate diaries, recording thoughts and imagery or is it mainly developed through conversation?

Ms & Mr is the cumulative dialogue between us. We're interested by the relational mechanics of functioning as a composite, and we acknowledge this pursuit as a Romantic proposition.

We record a lot of things, ideas, images etc. and the conversation that develops around these is where the ideas develop. We spend most of our time (and increasingly so) in each other's company, and this means the process is blurred into a lot of activities. Vast influences get sifted through our collective filter.

Some of our recent projects are the result of what we've developed as Retroactive Collaboration. We think of this in terms of the possibility to work and relate not only in our present state, but also with our own and each other's former and future selves. This is sublimated through material created at a time (chronologically speaking) in which we didn't know each other. This elaborates the

notion that distinctions between the past, present and future are an illusion, allowing for the proposition that we were always in relationship. Essentially we are attempting to create alternate, more complicated relational scenarios otherwise impossible, or that can't exist beyond the screen or pictorial plane.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Postmodern artists often challenge notions of time and history. Discuss.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Explore the nature of contemporary collaborative artists as a reaction to the Modernist notion of the artist genius. Refer to at least three 'collaborative teams'. You might consider Gilbert and George, the Chapman Brothers, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, the Kienholzes or Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro.
2. 'Video art often has close links with the biographical, at times being a contemporary version of the self-portrait.' Evaluate this statement with reference to Ms & Mr and two other video artists of your choice.

Chapter 5 Technology

SYLLABUS FOCUS: The Postmodern Frame — Conceptual Framework

The new media emerging from technological developments have given artists many new tools to work with. As a consequence, the art object itself has been redefined, the possibilities of form and expression extended and the audience involved in new, interactive ways. Technology's impact on humanity, and concerns about potential future interventions, have led many artists to respond to contemporary issues, values and attitudes in this rapidly changing world of 'instant' communication and bombardment of the senses.

Big Eyes 2003
fiberglass sculpture, Sony VPL CS5
projector, DVD, DVD player
61 × 61 × 30.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Metro
Pictures



Bill Viola

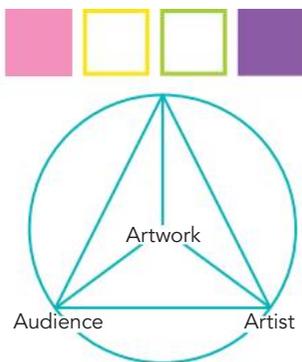
(b. 1951, American)

Issues/interests: art and technology — video as an art medium; art and nature — landscape, natural elements of fire and water; art and the body — the artist's body as subject; art and belief — religion and philosophy, both Western and Eastern

Forms: videotapes, video and sound installations

Frames: *Postmodern* in its use of technology and interactivity; *Subjective* in the mood and sense of personal memory of the artist

Conceptual Framework: His works have personal significance but are presented to a public audience using mass media technology. His videos, by their size, slow motion, sound and context (as installations), have an intentional impact on the audience. Viola's videos draw the viewer into them, engaging both visual and auditory senses. They encourage private contemplation and can be interpreted in various ways by the audience. Viola's works are of international significance, as they reflect issues of concern to all humanity. Viola explores perceptions of the world and our particular place within it.



Artworks in this unit

The Messenger 1996

The Fall into Paradise 2005

The Reflecting Pool 1977–79

The Crossing 1996



Bill Viola

Use the **Bill Viola** weblink in your eBookPLUS to visit this artist's official website. Your eBookPLUS also contains links to interviews and works by Bill Viola.

VOCABULARY

aesthetic concerning beauty

Postmodern a widely used term for progressive, unconventional art starting around the 1980s. It generally challenges the traditions of art, particularly the concept of originality and acceptable media. It is often characterised by the use of technology and may draw on other art traditions.

The Messenger (opposite) was a video originally commissioned to be shown in Durham Cathedral, England, although it has since been exhibited in various art museums around the world including the Art Gallery of New South Wales. There is often a spiritual aspect to Viola's

work, as he seeks to draw connections between our inner and outer lives. His influences include various philosophies and belief systems, such as Taoism, Zen Buddhism and Sufism, and poetry.



The Messenger 1996
colour video projection on large
vertical screen mounted on wall
in darkened space, amplified
stereo sound
7.6 × 9.1 × 9.8 m
Video Still
Photo: Kira Perov

The work consists of a continual action video disk showing the slow rising to the surface of a naked male figure in a body of water. As he emerges, slowly twisting at an angle, the sound increases and the camera zooms in so that you focus on the head and upper body. He slowly opens his mouth and takes a breath. His eyes stare blankly, but not directly at you. His face never totally breaks free of the lapping water. He sinks again while exhaling from his right nostril. The cycle appears inevitable, yet it is not a struggle for survival. The silvery reflections and clarity of the blue of the water create a feeling of spirituality, not doom. The accompanying sound effects, with their underlying regular beat, suggest a heartbeat. The recurring 'ping' sound suggests bursting bubbles or an underwater sonic detector representing the life force.

As the male figure slowly submerges, the zooming out of the camera gives the impression of great depth. The body not only straightens but also moves away from you. At first there is an accompanying feeling

of loss. The figure appears to disintegrate into vibrating particles of light. The reflections seem to shimmer like angel's wings. Matter has become spiritual, the bubbles now representing the essence of the person. Although you have been distanced from the body, you still feel connected. The viewer remains transfixed to the screen as the particles of light slowly begin to merge and the body gently floats to the surface. The cycle continues with subtle variations. It is a metaphor for birth, reincarnation, renewal, emergence of an individual and personal journey. One is left to contemplate the meaning of life, as well as to dwell on memories and, perhaps, fears.

The concept of submergence in water occurs in several of Viola's works, stemming from a personal experience of nearly drowning in a lake when he was 10 years old. Yet his memories of the experience are of the sense of mystery and peace below the surface.



The Fall into Paradise 2005
video/sound installation
Screen size: 320 × 427 cm
Photo: Kira Perov

In *The Fall into Paradise* (above), Viola combines the real with the imaginary world, taking as his 'subject matter' the epic love story of *Tristan and Isolde*. In this work, the couple's love is so spiritually profound that their desires can never be fulfilled in this world. Viola represents them making the ultimate sacrifice to live an ethereal existence as they fall into Paradise in an eternal embrace. The action, as is often

the case in a Viola video, is almost painfully slow. You watch a dot of light that gradually grows, forming into an entwined couple drifting slowly upwards until with a crescendo of sound they burst through a seemingly invisible barrier to slowly float and descend into the blue luminous water. Reaching a point of equilibrium, they climb back up to the surface as if defying gravity. This video explores the question raised in many narrative traditions in both East and West, including Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*: would you be willing to die for love?

Viola's art often deals with such threshold decisions between life and death, joy and sorrow, waking and sleeping and, more fundamentally, day and night.

The Fall into Paradise was shot underwater in high-definition video. The three videos from the Tristan Project that visited Sydney in 2008 required a crew of 60 people, including the performers, chief cameraman Harry Dawson and his crew, lighting, grip stunt coordination, special effects teams, and the editing and sound design team.



The Reflecting Pool 1977–79
videotape, colour, mono sound;
7 minutes
Photo: Kira Perov

The Reflecting Pool explores Viola's expression of the beauty of nature and his singular vision of being in the world. It is structured around a solitary movement of plunging into a pool. The figure slowly becomes apparent in the landscape, poised at the edge of the swimming pool, itself a reflection of the lush green surrounds. One blink and you have missed the figure plunging into the pool and you wait and wait for it to reappear, only to see a reflection. The viewer is 'forced' to slow down and look carefully to try to decipher the rift between reflection and reality, waiting for the figure to reappear and return to the foliage. The audience is left in awe, trying to unravel the richness of meaning, its poetic resonance, and anxious to revisit the video to make sure they have not missed the subtle nuances of seeing and being.



The Crossing 1996

video/sound installation

490 × 840 × 1740 cm

Two channels of colour video projections from opposite sides of large dark gallery onto two large back-to-back screens suspended from ceiling and mounted to floor; four channels of amplified stereo sound, four speakers

Performer: Phil Esposito

Photo: Kira Perov



In *The Crossing*, the two elements of fire and water appear not only as destructive forces but also as agents of renewal and spiritual liberation.

This is a double projection work (two screens are positioned back to back, as displayed in the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao). A larger-than-life male figure walks slowly towards you, his image gradually filling the screen. In one screen flames begin to gently lick his feet. As you watch, mesmerised, the flames slowly rise and grow until they engulf the figure. In the other screen a small trickle of water gradually becomes a powerful downpour, submerging the figure in a torrent of water. The slow movement and accompanying sound draw the viewer into the experience.

Viola's video work heightens our awareness, making us realise what we already know, helping us to assess our fears as well as our place in the world.

Artist's practice

Intentions/influences

Viola's video installations investigate life itself, unfolding the layers of human consciousness and self-knowledge. His approach to life and his work has been especially influenced by Eastern philosophy, which places humanity in the context of nature's ongoing cycle and recognises the whole as being represented in the parts. He sees nature's power

in interacting opposites (the Chinese Taoist idea of yin and yang), light and dark, fire and water, spiritual and physical, life and death. The illusions create a sense of grandeur, with a hint of romanticism. His installations move one to stand in patient expectation, watching, contemplating for a long time.

Viola creates a link between dreams, the imagination and reality as he investigates the functioning of human sensory systems. His works often suggest violence and death, but the violence is inherent to life itself, as in the birth of a child. His work is often linked with beauty. Death in his videos is always interpreted as a state of transition and transformation, as in the blowing out of a candle — as his mother dies, his child is born. Viola is thus concerned with issues of creation, death and renewal, the links between the divine and the mundane, and the knowledge that is contained in every small space and particle. He uses imagination as the key to reveal or heighten our perceptions.

Materials/methods

Bill Viola has been a pioneer in the use of video and the moving image since the 1970s. He uses state-of-the-art electronic technology, his multimedia installations exploring the phenomenon of sense perception.

Viola uses elements of painting (space, colour, movement) transformed into the video medium. His use of double projections (two or more screens arranged in a room), in suggesting a narrative (story), reminds us of multi-panel altar paintings. He strives for technical perfection in his chosen medium, in the way an oil painter might. His manipulation of focus and sensual colour effects creates an **aesthetic** experience for the viewer just as a painting does.

Images are left on the screen just long enough to be unsettling and to challenge viewers' expectations. Time is often slowed down so the viewer feels drawn into the experience. The accompanying sounds often become deeper and more obvious as time and the image are expanded or compressed. Shifts in scale are another technique used by Viola to overwhelm or disconcert the viewer. The viewer is placed in the elusive area between the present and the timeless as images dissolve, objects and people slowly appear, come into clear focus, then resubmerge into the landscape, water or some unexpected end point, such as a billboard or the eyes of an animal, gradually disappearing again.

Viola always uses the medium of video with restraint and dignity, rather than as an opportunity to display tricks. The effect is one of grandeur and deep understanding.

As part of his artmaking process, Viola keeps a collection of notebooks in which he records and develops his ideas. These include quotes from writers and philosophers and transcripts from books on history, memory and religion, as well as his workings for his videos and installations.

Symbols

Structural Frame

Viola represents the world through symbols, ideas and spiritual phenomena, searching for a greater understanding of the spiritual heritage of humankind. His main symbols are fire and water. Yet simple, everyday images, such as chairs and buckets, and simple actions, such as crying and laughing, are important to the reality of his dramas.

Conceptual Framework — Subjective Frame

Viola draws upon the audience's imagination, as well as their memory, dreams and subconscious. He shows us reality through his poetic vision in such a way that we re-evaluate our perceptions of reality and realise that we are looking at something out of the ordinary. The physical is transformed into the psychological as we become more aware of ourselves and of the many layers of human consciousness, as the rational and the intuitive are combined in his videos.

Postmodern Frame

In a sense, artistic creations make references to every other artwork that has ever been made. Artworks derive meaning through built-up systems of codes, conventions and traditions. **Postmodern** artists frequently break these traditions or purposely recontextualise the codes in order to challenge our perceptions. The following are some of the ways in which Viola breaks with tradition:

- He works with new media and a new form — the video installation.
- He has developed a new interpretation of the concept of the 'timeless art object'. Viola manipulates the viewer's concept of time. He uses sequences of events, but not in the conventional narrative form.
- His art is a programmed experience that appeals to all senses and the subconscious.
- Viola's works are neither two-dimensional nor bound by a frame. He creates a new spatial dimension.
- He uses landscape, a traditional subject, not as a representation of nature but as a trigger to the imagination and experience of the spiritual.
- Instead of the female nude, he features the male nude as subject.
- His works often operate at the edge of consciousness, which may waver between dream, memory and the subconscious, so meaning is derived from the response of the viewer.

Artist's statements

'Recording something, I feel, is not so much capturing an existing thing as it is creating a new one. I want to have more of an input in this process of creation than simply to determine where to point the camera. An active position enables me to exceed my own physical limitations and manifest my imaginings, which then serves more to

Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House: Writings 1973–1994*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1995, frontispiece and pp. 33, 40, 60, 78, 79, 85.

really transform myself than just to change the images existing within the confines of the monitor screen. Each time a tape is finished it is like the release of a long-held breath, and with it, naturally, is signalled the need for another ...

‘The spectrum of electromagnetic energy vibrations that make up the universe at large far exceeds the narrow band-width, or “window”, open to us through our sensory receptors. As philosophers through the ages have stated, the human senses can thus be considered “limiters” to the total amount of energy bombarding our beings, preventing the individual from being overwhelmed by the tremendous volume of information existing at each and every instant. Imagination is our key to the doorway of perception. The television medium, when coupled with the human mind, can offer us sight beyond the range of our everyday consciousness ...

‘I want to look so close at things that their intensity burns through your retina and onto the surface of your mind. The video camera is well suited to looking closely at things, elevating the commonplace to higher levels of awareness ...

‘This sense of seeing — or seeing the sense of an object — is what I have been after ...

‘My interest in the various image systems of the cultures of the world involves a search for the image that is not an image. This is why I am not interested in “realistic” rendering. Sacred art seems very close because of its symbolic nature. Its intrinsic interwoven meaning on other planes makes it more “conceptual”. I am interested not so much in the image whose source lies in the phenomenal world, but rather the image as artefact, or result, or imprint, or even wholly determined by some inner realisation.’

Historical practice

‘Though the tools Viola uses are at the cutting edge of technology, his work is firmly rooted in the history of art, both Western and Eastern. Viola argues that the most powerful frescoes in the churches of Renaissance Florence could be seen as “a form of installation; a physical, spatial consuming experience”. However, in today’s culture, with electronic images omnipresent, his work surprises us with its emphasis on the symbolic. Viola explores the suggestive power of the image and man’s metaphysical relationship with his surroundings. Connections can be seen between Viola’s work and such figures as Bosch, Goya or Blake, artists whose work plays on the crossover between the real and the fantastic.

‘Some of the earliest artists to make use of video — such as Bruce Nauman and Vito Acconci — were drawn to the medium as a means of documenting their performance work. Soon, however, they began to perform for the camera. An early Viola video, *The space between the teeth* 1976, shows a similar spirit of self-inquiry and some of the confrontational elements of Acconci and Nauman.

Quoted from exhibition catalogue
Bill Viola: Unseen Images, Whitechapel
Gallery, London, 17 December 1993 –
13 February 1994, p. 1.

Here the writer places Viola within
the wider context of art history.

In his last paragraph the writer informs us of Viola's relationship to the history of video art. The writer has switched to critical rather than historical writing, as factual statements and historical significance are replaced by opinion and value judgements.

'Viola's extraordinary achievement, however, lies in his ability to sculpt sound and image in such a way as to stimulate within us an awareness of our physical and mental presence.'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Artist's practice

Refer to one of Viola's artworks and a quote from the artist to explain the intentions and methods in his artmaking practice.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Postmodern Frame — artist's practice



Video art has the advantage of allowing the artist not only to work with a visual language (appealing to our sight) but to enhance this communication of meaning through the addition of sound. How do Viola and one other artist use sound to add to the mood or meaning of their work?

2. Conceptual Framework



Analyse the similarities and differences between large-scale murals of historical art and contemporary video art. Consider scale, involvement and effect on the audience. Refer to a range of artists. Suggestions: Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Bosch, Michelangelo, Bill Viola, Ms & Mr, Daniel Crooks, Tony Oursler, Susan Norrie.

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY

Conceptual Framework

'With Postmodernism and technological developments, the artist is able to involve the audience in new ways.' Discuss.

Technological advancement has been one of the key contributors to the changing conceptual framework of contemporary art. Technology allows the artist much more scope for innovation in developing art and how it interacts with its audience and the world. This can be seen in the works of Stelarc, Bill Viola and Tony Oursler.

Australian artist Stelarc uses technology to confront the audience and challenge the concept of art. He unites the artist and artwork physically by transforming his own body into the artwork itself. He also unites artwork and audience by allowing the responder to literally make of the art whatever he/she likes. This is done through allowing the responder to physically control the artwork, which in some cases is the artist himself, and thus Stelarc physically connects the agencies of artist, artwork and audience.

This can be seen in his work *Factal Flesh* 1995, where he connected his body to specially designed electrodes that moved his muscles involuntarily and could be controlled by people through the internet in Paris while he was in Luxembourg. Another interactive artwork is *Prosthetic Head* 2005. This is another example of Stelarc's involving himself directly as the artwork establishes a connection between audience and artist. The three-dimensional

(Written in 45 minutes under examination conditions)

Introduction expands on question and introduces the artists

First artist's approach in relation to the Conceptual Framework

First artwork example

Second example

animated head can interactively respond on a fairly intellectual level to questions asked by viewers about philosophy, general knowledge and religion, while showing synchronised facial expressions.

Stelarc comments on technology's capabilities and how advanced the interaction between humans and computer-programmed personalities has become, as well as posing the questions: what is to come, and in what direction is the world evolving? There is also a moral quality about his artworks.

Bill Viola's work extends the relationship between the artwork and the audience in a much more subtle way. His artworks also reflect on technology and its effects on humanity as well as its direction for the future. However, where Stelarc physically engages viewers in a forceful way, Viola entrances the audience through engaging directly with their visual and aural senses. He works with digital media through the *Postmodern Frame* using video installations and videotapes.

In his work *Reflecting Pool* 1997–99 Viola, through the use of video technology, fuses images of nature and a body to demonstrate the connection between the two. The audience becomes completely immersed in the slow and subtle video footage of a man falling in and out of transparency and reality, watching intently for the body to appear, disappear then reappear. The uncertainty of the work creates an electrifying atmosphere and demonstrates that viewers can be engaged and entertained by video art without a harsh and overwhelming assault on the senses.

Tony Oursler also increases the intensity of the relationship between artwork and audience. He works from the *Cultural* and *Postmodern Frames* and, through the use of videos, sculpture installations and performance, comments on our bombardment with technology, and the resulting trauma suffered. The artworks are extremely confronting and psychologically violent.

In *Getaway #2* 1994 Oursler presents a head whose features are somewhat distorted, which adds to the effect of its fragmented and fractured speech. The voice that accompanies the sculpture and projected video is obviously distressed as it tries to inform viewers of the pain and confusion it is experiencing. The head, with the video image projected onto it, is positioned under a mattress, contributing to a sense of vulnerability and fragility. The artwork engages the audience directly by forcing it to empathise with these technologically created personalities.

The *Influence Machine* 2000 is a projection of talking heads onto natural objects such as trees and clouds of smoke. The characters are all in distressed states of emotional instability, often screaming, shouting or moaning, or quietly and laboriously trying to construct sentences. Each struggling character reflects negatively on contemporary technology, and Oursler encourages his audience to question the relevance, reliability and dangers of engaging with such a technologically focused society.

The interaction between artists, artworks and audience has dramatically evolved through advances in technology, as is evident in the works of Stelarc, Bill Viola and Tony Oursler.

Alexandra Teo, Year 12

Summing up the artist's use of technology

Introduces second artist and how his approach differs from first artist's

First example analysed, along with how audience is involved

Introduces third artist — intentions and relationship of artwork to audience

Artwork example explained to reinforce argument

Second example — artist's meaning/intentions

Conclusion

Tony Oursler

(b. 1957, American, has worked in New York since 1983)

Issues/interests: society's misfits, disturbed people explaining their fate

Forms: combination of video, sculpture installation and performance

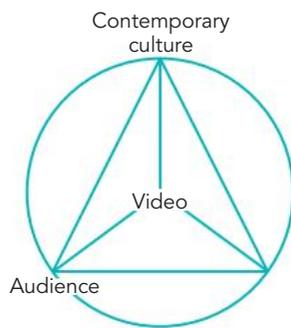
Frames: *Cultural* — comments on aspects of contemporary culture, in particular the violence and trauma associated with mass media and technology, and their ability to infiltrate our consciousness; *Postmodern* — non-traditional art form, using technology in a challenging way

Conceptual Framework: Oursler strives for an active emotional involvement from his audience.

Artworks in this unit

Hello? 1996

Big Eyes 2003



Tony Oursler

Use the **Tony Oursler** weblink in your eBookPLUS to visit this artist's official website. Your eBookPLUS also contains links to interviews and works by this artist.

Hello? 1996
video installation
Photo: Bernhard Schmitt
© Tony Oursler



A 'doll' lies trapped in a wooden box. The expressions of the projected image on the face match the piercing voice, which variously whispers, curses and screams.



Being projected onto a sculptural form resembling a simplified but warped kewpie doll intensifies the bizarre effect of this video projection. The bloodshot eyes with accentuated lashes engage you while the mouth smiles in a beguiling yet disturbing way. She seems to be pleading with the viewer. Among the mumblings can be deciphered the word 'Please'. The sculptural shape draws our attention to the emotions being expressed.

Big Eyes 2003

fiberglass sculpture, Sony VPL CS5 projector, DVD, DVD player
61 × 61 × 30.5 cm
Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures

Artist's practice

Background

Tony Oursler is a pioneering video artist who began working with single-channel videotapes in the 1980s. Rather than showing faces on TV screens or projected onto a gallery wall, Oursler's faces are projected onto real objects (often a solid white oval with an attached, doll-like material body handmade by Oursler) and so have their own reality and form. These projected faces speak, or rather rant and complain, often directly to the viewer. They express extreme psychological states.

Oursler is perhaps best known for his 'talking head' video sequences projected onto bent or corrugated surfaces around 1995. The heads' features appeared swollen or abbreviated as they mumbled randomly and repetitively as if in a trance, whether indicating anxiety or pain or making sexual innuendos or jokes. These works were highly disquieting to the viewer, as eyes (as in *Eye in the Sky* 1997) would appear without any other facial feature, or a mouth would 'speak' from under furniture. The disjunction between speech, facial features and objects suggests ventriloquism or even a ghost in a séance. At times the 'voice' itself is fractured in its tonal and semantic registers. In 2000 he projected faces that seemed to float over trees and clouds of smoke in Madison Square Park in Manhattan. All his 'characters' are distressed (often moaning, crying or muttering); many are tormented, demented, even paranoid. A feeling of tension is generally created: faces contort, eyes shift, lips purse, eyebrows furrow, all emotions accented and expressed. Some of his 'characters' manifest extreme emotional states, screaming wildly or from the pit of despair, or evincing a heavy blankness like a lost soul. We, the viewers, are invited to share their misery. Oursler's works both disturb and fascinate.

Intention/meaning

Perhaps Oursler's main purpose can be expressed as an attempt to draw empathy or identification rather than just pity or sympathy from the viewer.

His central theme of existential despair is expressed through facial expressions and a monologue emitted from his 'heads'. The position of the 'head' or 'doll' emphasises their predicament. In *Getaway #2* 1994 the 'talking head' is trapped under a mattress. In *Insomnia* 1996, he works with just a head. The projection on the head explains her problem of not being able to sleep. In *Underwater (Blue/Green)* 1995 the head is gasping for breath. We, the viewers, are drawn to relate personally to the anxiety and despair of these projections, particularly as they often speak directly to us, pleading or abusive.

The contrast between the dolls and the aggressive, often vulgar language with which they speak adds dramatically to the emotive power of the work.

Oursler uses video technology to comment on the insidious link he sees between media, particularly television, and our psychological states. He believes its power to mesmerise 'numbs' the mind, and that some of its common themes, such as violence and abuse, can become lodged in a viewer's mind. But he sees television viewing as just one of the insidious obsessive behaviours of contemporary society. 'The medium [TV] has long ago expanded out, and it got exploded by the internet and now what we have is a whole diversified delivery system of mood altering electronic devices' (Oursler, in *Art World*, issue 5, October–November 2008, p. 96).

Techniques/materials

Oursler's videos are usually displayed as installations, projected onto white sculptural components (often referred to as his 'dolls') generally created by assistants. Often his works look like theatre sets, incorporating everyday (often rather worn) objects. Video tends to neutralise our emotions: we have become used to seeing great violence, horror, loss and grief in movies and videos, yet by projecting his videos onto sculptural surfaces Oursler creates an active emotional engagement with the viewer. His 'dolls' generally recite a rambling, stream-of-consciousness narrative to illustrate the depths of despair of the human psyche.

Oursler has collaborated with other artists, musicians and actors such as David Bowie, the band Sonic Youth, Tracey Leibold and Joe Gibbons (a film and video maker), and like many contemporary artists he often employs assistants. He also considers the viewer as a collaborator in the work. He has recently extended his practice with video installations to include 3D hologram-like images, web art and CD-ROMs.

Artist's statements

'To me, the body is being dematerialised and rematerialised all the time. Technology alters life. Technology is an amplifier of instinct.'

Quoted in Brandon Taylor,
Art Today, Laurence King Publishing,
2004, p. 242.

Oursler sees his work as 'an empathy test for the viewer'. To achieve this goal, he says, 'I attenuate these emotions like musical notes, just to see what happens. They are worked almost to the point where they fall apart. That's how they transcend being a special effect in a movie, or part of a good performer's repertoire, or an insult from someone in the street.'

Quoted in Linda Weintraub,
Making Contemporary Art,
Thames and Hudson, 2003, p. 305.

Other artworks

The Loner 1980

The Loner expresses loneliness in the setting of a nightmarish fantasy of the search for love, the elusive 'Her', in a singles bar. It suggests both sexual obsession and personal failure.

EVOL 1985

This work ('Love' spelt backwards) explores the erotic dreams of a young man, jumping from cultural stereotypes to childhood expectations and adult reality.

Judy 1994

This is a multiple 'head' installation, in which each of the trio of speaking dummies expresses a form of emotional trauma. There is also a silent figure, withdrawn as if in a deep psychotic depression. One dummy weeps constantly, which has a disturbing effect on the viewer. This work is all the more poignant as the installation's environment is filled with flowers, which, although they reinforce the feminine, certainly don't make the artwork more relaxing to experience. 'Oh

no, not that!’ she cries, invoking fear as well as anguish. All the video projections are manifestations of the same person, suggesting mental dissociation. Oursler has stated that he has used only one individual as a symbol for a cultural condition. This work is based on a medical study of a patient who suffered from Multiple Personality Disorder.

We Have No Free Will 1995

Two dolls sit in ‘conversation’ on a wall; their relative size suggests a father/son relationship. Oursler has commented that he wanted to express a state of mind rather than a structured narrative, and that his main aim was to trap the onlooker in the emotional scenario.

MMP1 (Red) 1996

A little man is trapped under a fallen chair. He seems to be resigned to his fate as he mumbles, ‘Time is irrelevant’.

Streetlight series 1997

This is a series of video sculptures of eyes with television screens reflected in the pupils. *Eye in the Sky* consists of a fibreglass sphere onto which is projected a single eye watching television. Its twitching movements relate to the sounds of weather forecasts, commercials and so on, as Oursler comments on our media-saturated world and its effects on the human condition.

The Influence Machine 2000

Images were projected in Soho Square in London using ‘ghosts’ of key figures in media history as subject matter. Oursler’s projections made the trees appear to take on human form and talk. This work commented on the cultural influence of communication technologies such as the telephone, TV and the internet. It also involved sound and light and suggested links with the spirit world.

Burst 2005

As the name suggests, parts of faces try to burst out of the confines of the irregular, organic shape on which they are projected.

Cell Phones Diagrams Cigarettes Searches and Scratch Cards 2009,
Metro Pictures Gallery, New York

Themes include obsessive desires, phobias, socially acceptable addictions, self-help culture and the influence of technology on our lives.

September–October 2009, London’s Lisson Gallery

Projections on giant sculptural objects representing such common objects of today’s society as scratch cards, mobile phones, playing cards and cigarettes. Elaborating on his New York show, it also investigated vices such as gambling, compulsive cleaning and overeating but in a humorous way (the cigarette burns down to the sound of a sucking breath, the mobile phone screen shows dancing girls). Oursler feels we all try to hide the ‘little madness’ in us. These new works make a more dynamic and theatrical use of space.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Conceptual Framework

'Oursler combines sculptural objects, moving image and text (voice), thus involving the viewer in a variety of ways.' Discuss the changing nature of the Postmodern artwork with reference to Oursler and one other artist.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Postmodern Frame — Conceptual Framework

Postmodern art often challenges or shocks the viewer into considering contemporary social issues and human relationships. Explain with reference to three artists including Oursler. Other artists might include Tracey Emin, Vanessa Beecroft, Cindy Sherman and Sophie Calle.

2. Postmodern Frame

'Artists are finding in new technology suitable media through which to examine contemporary issues.' Evaluate this statement. You might consider Piccinini, Oursler and Stelarc in your response.

3. Conceptual Framework

Video art has gone beyond early experiments using a PortaPak and displaying imagery on TV monitors. How do recent video artists work in innovative ways to engage the audience?

Stelarc

(Stelios Arcadiou, b. 1946, Cyprus, raised in Australia)

Issues/interests: art and the body, art and technology

Forms: performance, art events, interactive artworks

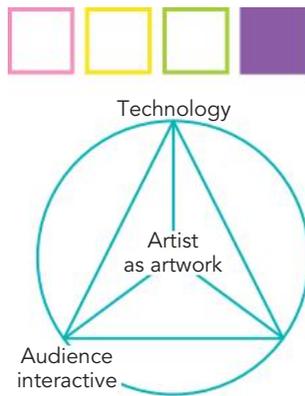
Frame: *Postmodern* in challenging what an artwork is and integrating technology into art

Conceptual Framework: The audience interacts with and at times controls the artwork. The artist is part of the artwork.

Artworks in this unit

Amplified Body, Laser Eyes and Third Hand 1990

Prosthetic Head 2002

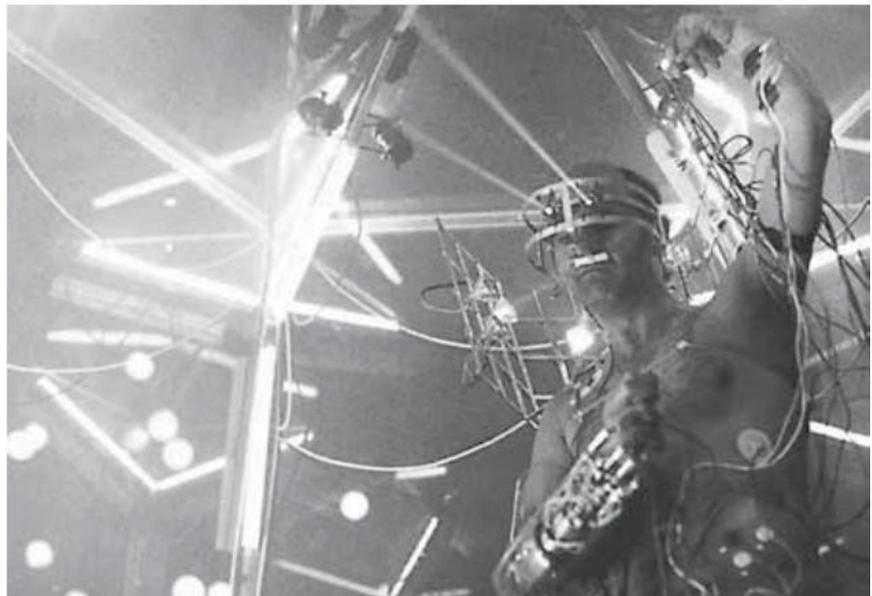


Audio: Human/machine interfaces

Stelarc discusses his pioneering human/machine interfaces. Your eBookPLUS also contains links to interviews and works by this artist.

SEARCHLIGHT ID: AUD-0004

Amplified Body, Laser Eyes and Third Hand 1990
multimedia performance
Melbourne International Festival
Photo: Anthony Figallo
STELARC



In Stelarc's performance piece *Amplified Body, Laser Eyes and Third Hand* (above), the third hand could operate independently of or in sync with the other two hands. If the electrodes were placed on the flexor and extensor muscles on the arm, the third hand did whatever the arm did. If the electrodes were placed on the leg and abdominal muscles, the actions would be independent. In this performance, not only were the actions of the body amplified, but the gaze of the eyes was projected with the use of lasers.

The idea of using lasers came from experiments at the time with robots. By blinking and moving the muscles of his face, Stelarc could scribble in space with light. This performance linked with Stelarc's interest in prosthetic attachments and bionics as evolutionary experiments on the modification of the body. Stelarc sees a future in which the distinction between what is synthetic and what is biological is blurred. The audience was involved in various ways in this performance. Charts and diagrams were projected onto screens; video recordings and recorded bodily sounds were also played. At the same time, Stelarc explained his philosophies on the future of the body, injecting into his 'lecture' his sense of humour and infectious laugh.



Prosthetic Head (above) is an interactive, technology-generated artwork created by Stelarc to explore the narrowing divide between human and intellectual intelligence. Stelarc believes this is a forerunner to the way humans in the near future will converse with computerised systems such as home entertainment systems and communication and security devices. But it is not just the developments in technology that excite Stelarc. He also investigates through this work the notion of intelligence itself and issues of identity.

This three-dimensional animation of a head (the image is of Stelarc himself), generally exhibited on a large screen, has been programmed to 'answer' audience questions typed onto a keyboard, replying with synchronised facial expressions and lip-sync. It is a 3000-polygonal

Models for **Prosthetic Head**
2002
interactive, computer-generated speaking head
— a computer-generated 3D head projected 5 m in height
Image: Barrett Fox
STELARC

structure with a skin constructed of digital images of the artist's head. It is 'constructed' with an IBM text-to-speech engine; its brain is a modified, customised and personalised Alice chatbot engine.

Prosthetic Head can hold a conversation on religion, philosophy or general knowledge questions, explain Einstein's Theory of Relativity and even tell jokes. Each verbal response appears appropriate and relates to Stelarc's personal history and sense of humour. It also has embedded algorithms that enable it to generate poetry or sing. If asked a question it cannot answer, it will change the subject or reply that it is a 'silly question'.



The intent was to construct an ambiguous and unpredictable agent that is somewhat schizoid in its projected personality ... As the *Prosthetic Head* increases its database, it will be more autonomous in its responses. The artist will then no longer be able to take full responsibility for what its Head says. (Pamphlet from Sherman Galleries, Sydney, 2005)

This is an ongoing project that Stelarc intends to refine as technology, particularly in voice recognition, develops. It is hoped that eventually the *Head* will be able to 'hear' the questions asked by the viewer as well as reassess information and respond with a degree of intelligence.

Historical background — biography

Stelarc (Stelios Arcadiou) left Cyprus with his parents when he was two years old. He trained as an art teacher in Melbourne and after two years of teaching left Australia to teach at the Yokohama International School. He stayed in Japan for almost 20 years.

Stelarc is a pioneer of performance art. He has engaged with the theme of the body, particularly during sensory deprivation and physical stress, since the 1970s.

Artist's practice

Intention

As a Postmodern artist, Stelarc has always set out to shock people; for example, his early work included having large hooks inserted into his naked skin before being hauled by a crane over city streets. His work concentrates on suspensions, simulations and interventions of the body, going beyond the body's occupation of space, time and reality, suggesting that mental states can be altered or extended. His art has always been at the forefront of technology, employing existing technologies as well as pre-empting new developments. His main concern is with the exploration of the relationship between new technologies (including medical inventions) and the body. Stelarc sees the human skin as the interface, allowing the body to interact with a cybernetic world, raising questions about the limitations and design of the body. His artworks are a visually creative means of expressing

his optimistic ideas on the future incorporation of technology and the body. He questions our present way of life, what it is to be human and the limitations of the body, suggesting what technology may provide in the future.

Techniques/materials

Stelarc uses technological means to explore artistic ideas. He uses his body as a site-specific object in his pursuit of the idea of enhancing the body's operational capabilities. He treats the body as biological architecture, as 'an object for redesigning'. Stelarc is not interested in the metaphysical concerns of the body, its gender or emotions, but rather in the body as sculpture or technological interface. He is more interested in the notion of the body as a means of experience and an art form in itself (he has compared his work to that of a ballet dancer). In order to extend and enhance the body as a performance element, he has used prosthetics, medical instruments, virtual reality systems, lasers, the internet, and computer-generated and interactive artworks.

Other examples of Stelarc's work

Stelarc's early works were performance suspension series, his body suspended or supported in space with harnesses or ropes. This developed into works performed in Japan, Europe and Australia (e.g. *Tree Suspension* and *Shaft Suspension* in a lift well), in which his body was supported in space by means of large metal hooks, inserted with no anaesthetic through the skin (this idea was inspired by ancient Hindu rituals).

***Third Hand* 1980**

This work involved the attachment of a state-of-the-art prosthesis to the body. The third hand's movement was activated by Stelarc's own abdominal and leg muscles. With the addition of this extra hand, Stelarc was able to simultaneously draw a circle, a triangle and a square, developing his skills so that he was able to write the word 'Evolution' on a glass sheet between himself and the audience. He wrote the word, three letters at a time ('Evo' with one hand, 'lut' with the second and 'ion' with the third), backwards so it could be read by the audience. The third hand had the capabilities of pinching, grasping and rotating 290 degrees.

***Virtual Arm Project* 1992**

In this work Stelarc virtually augmented his body.

***Stomach Sculpture* 1993**

Stelarc had inserted inside his body a small 'sculpture', a miniature electronic device that recorded his bodily sounds. This sculpture consisted of a retracting, non-corrosive metal outer device (made by a jeweller) with internal workings he had made by a medical instruments specialist. It thus combined expertise and specialist skills beyond those

of the artist. The 'sculpture' was specially built for implanting inside the body and was inserted through the mouth 80 centimetres into his alimentary canal. One cable was inserted to control the sculpture while another was for the endoscope to film the insertion. Stelarc was conscious throughout the insertion, lying on his side and directing the procedure. To create approximately 15 minutes of video it took two days and six attempts at the procedure. His body was 'invaded', not for medical reasons, but to further his art.

Factal Flesh 1995

While in Luxembourg he invited internet users to log on and take control of his body's involuntary muscle movements by means of electrodes. In this online 'performance', people in, say, Paris could touch different parts of Stelarc's body as shown on their computer screen to activate involuntary movements by Stelarc a minute later. Thus people were projecting their presence onto a body elsewhere in space, the body acting as host.

Exoskeleton 1998

Here the body (Stelarc) controlled the movement of a cumbersome, jerky machine (resembling a large mechanical spider, but with only six legs) through the use of arm gestures. In this way he was able to control the machine, making it move, turn on the spot or walk.

Muscle Machine 2001–02

This time one leg controlled three of the robots, the other controlled the other three. There was also a link between the sounds it emitted and the movement. This work was more intuitive, providing a closer link between man and machine.

Extra Ear Project

Beginning in 2003, Stelarc had first proposed adding an extra ear behind his own. He designed a soft prosthesis made of skin and cartilage, but the project had to be abandoned as no surgeon would attempt it. He then planned to have an extra ear attached to his arm, and this operation took place in April 2009. He envisaged that it would emit sounds as a person came close, but there have been problems with this aspect of the project. No doubt he will continue to pursue new technological avenues to further extend this project. Google his website for updates and to view imagery of the project.

Critical practice

Steve Meacham, 'Man with two heads puts his best face forward', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 5 May 2005, p. 3.

'Stelarc is the man with two heads. There's the one he is born with. And there's the incredible computerised "prosthetic head" he has created to explore the narrowing divide between human and artificial intelligence.

'Stelarc's false head — based on the features of his original one — could also be called the "face of the future". It looks disturbingly like

Orwell's Big Brother and sounds exactly like HAL, the talking computer that goes insane at the end of Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece, *2001: A Space Odyssey* . . .

'It can hold an intelligent discourse on an infinite number of subjects, speaking in perfect sync with appropriate facial expressions . . .

'His prosthetic head is the climax of more recent works, examining robotics and human movement. It was developed in California with the help of three programming experts. Since it first went on show in Glasgow in 2003, the head has been exhibited in London, Toronto and Melbourne.

'The only flaw is that questions have to be typed on a keyboard — though improvements in voice recognition technology will one day make it possible for the head to "hear" questions.

'Soon, Stelarc says, "talking heads" will be the normal way that humans will converse with phones, computers and home-entertainment systems.

'What interests him more than the technical breakthroughs are the philosophical repercussions: "This is an installation which explores issues of identity, the idea of what it is to be intelligent."

'Like a human, it doesn't always give the same answer to the same question — it constantly reassesses updated information in its database. In other words, it can "rethink". Also like a human, it tries to change the subject if it doesn't know the answer.

'But the prosthetic head does have one limitation. "It's only as intelligent as the person asking the questions," admits Stelarc.'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. What are the pros and cons of talking to Stelarc through the medium of the artwork *Prosthetic Head*? What three questions would you ask it to discover his personality, identity and values?
2. Analyse the critical review by Meacham and one other piece of writing by an art critic quoted in this book to explain the role of an art critic.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Postmodern Frame



Examine the innovative work of Stelarc and one other artist who uses technology to challenge artistic conventions.

2. Conceptual Framework



Consider Stelarc's *Prosthetic Head* as a contemporary version of the self-portrait. Investigate a range of self-portraits as reflections of society at the time they were created.

3. Cultural Frame — Conceptual Framework



Explore the work of at least one Modernist and one Postmodernist artist to show how ideas, methods and forms of artworks have changed as a result of changes in society.

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY

Analyse how technology has changed the role of the interaction between artist, artwork and audience.

(Written in 45 minutes under examination conditions)

Interpretation of the question with relevance to two artists

Contemporary technological advancements and innovations have opened the doors to a world of augmented interaction between the artist, their artwork and the audience. Australian artist Stelarc and American artist Bill Viola are two contemporary artists who have embraced this new and forward-thinking methodology, adopting technology and new technological developments to create postmodern, interactive artworks. These artworks show how technology is revolutionising the relationship between audience and artist, expanding the possibilities of form and expression and redefining the art object itself.

First artist introduced

With technological advancements the artist uses his own body as sculpture or as an interface for technology. In Stelarc's early work the artist allowed metal hooks to be inserted into his skin and then attached to one of his robotic inventions, which would then hoist his body into suspension and often move the body around in space. For his work *City Suspension* 1985, Stelarc's body was connected to steel cables, hoisted to the midpoint of a crane arm, shuttled to the end, then rotated four times around a building in Copenhagen for a 24-minute suspension. These suspension performances demonstrate how technology has given the artist the ability to use his own body as a performance element. Stelarc has since developed his artmaking practice, further embracing the use of technology to enable him to interact to a greater extent with his artworks. *Muscle Machine* 2001–02 is a six-legged human-machine robot that is controlled by the artist, whose body stands on the ground within the chassis of the machine. Encoders positioned at the artist's hip-joints transmit data to allow the human controller to move and also to direct the six-legged machine to move. The operating system of *Muscle Machine* is dependent upon the movements of the artist's body, simulating human-machine choreography and demonstrating a closer link between man and machine. Here it can be seen that technology has enhanced the interactive capabilities of artmaking so that direct artist-artwork interaction becomes a fundamental feature of the artwork.

First artwork example

Second artwork example

Relationship to technology links back to question

Second artist introduced — his individual approach to the use of technology

Quote from artist strengthens essay

American artist Bill Viola similarly embraces technology to allow for new artmaking methods that expand the possibilities of direct interaction with the artwork. Many of Viola's works have personal significance such as relating to his exploration of spirituality and religious ritual and wide travels; hence, they already relate directly to the artist's personal thoughts and emotions. The birth of his first son in 1988, the death of his mother in 1991 and the birth of his second son were the personal inspiration for his work, *The Passing* 1991. The artist's involvement in video work goes beyond the choice of subject matter, mood and technique; the artist now becomes the director. 'I want to have more of an input in the process of creation than simply to determine where to point the camera. An active position enables me

to exceed my own physical limitations and manifest my imaginings, which then serves more to really transform myself than just to change the images existing within the confines of the monitor screen.'

The Messenger 1996 by Viola presents the slow rising to the surface of a naked male figure in a body of water. He emerges slowly as the camera zooms in to focus on the head and torso. The mouth slowly opens and takes a breath, the eyes stare upward, penetratingly, but the face never breaks free of the lapping water. As the man slowly submerges, the camera zooms out, losing sight of the body as it disappears from the line of sight. The concept of submergence is repeated in a number of Viola's works, stemming from his personal experience of nearly drowning as a child. The artist has successfully embraced technology as a means of involving the audience in a personal interaction with the artwork due to the way it reacts on the viewers own personal fears.

Contemporary technological advances and innovations have given artists the means to further enhance the interaction between the artwork and the audience. Stelarc is a prominent artist in this field. His latest artworks are based on audience interaction, and at times the audience serves as the controller of the artwork and determines the nature, form and action of the work. Stelarc's *Prosthetic Head* is an interactive, technology-generated artwork that explores the narrowing divide between human and technological intelligence. The artwork is a three-dimensional, animated representation of the artist's head that has been programmed to 'answer' any question the audience asks by typing onto a keyboard. The head is able to answer with synchronised facial expressions and lip-synchronisation. The head's brain is modified, customised and personalised so that it has the capability to hold a conversation on a variety of topics as well as tell jokes. Through the audience asking questions, the head effectively learns new concepts and develops its intellect. As the head increases its database, it will be more autonomous in its responses, and the artist will then no longer have full responsibility for what the head says. This idea is revolutionary, as the audience effectively takes charge of developing the artwork and furthering its development. Stelarc has employed technology by means of the internet to allow his audience to view and control an artwork from anywhere in the world. In *Factal Flesh* 1995 the artist invited internet users to log on and take control of his body's involuntary muscle movements through being hooked up to electrodes. The audience became anyone who was in front of a computer screen and participating in commanding the movements of the artist's body. People were therefore projecting their presence onto a body elsewhere, the artist's own body acting as a host. Stelarc's latest project, *Ear on Arm*, 2003 onwards, sees the artist replicate his ear and then surgically attach it to his left arm. Although the attachment has been successful, the latest operation in April 2009, when the artist planned to implant a microphone to enable a wireless connection to the internet, making the ear a remote listening device for people in other places, has had some technological problems. An alternate functionality, aside from this remote listening, is the idea

An artwork example explained

Relates back to the question

Further explanation of significance of the question

First artist — third example

First artist — fourth example

First artist — fifth example

Relationship of the artist/
artwork to audience

of the ear as part of an extended and distributed Bluetooth system, where the receiver and speaker are positioned inside Stelarc's mouth. If you telephoned the artist on your mobile phone he could speak to you through his ear, but he would hear your voice 'inside' his head. If Stelarc keeps his mouth closed, only he would be able to hear your voice. This ground-breaking use of technology, when perfected, will enable both audience and artist to interact directly with the artwork to a greater extent than ever before.

Second artist — second example

Relationship to audience

Bill Viola's artworks also encourage audience interaction through the artist's use of technology as a means to create allusive and hypnotic video installations. His videos, by their size (generally projected onto a wall or large screen), slow motion, sound and context, have an intentional impact on the audience, absorbing the viewers and engaging them through aural and visual sensations. The videos encourage private contemplation and can be interpreted by the viewer in various ways based on the viewer's memories, perceptions and ideas. Viola's *The Reflecting Pool* 1977–79 is a video structured around a male figure and a swimming pool. In this visual narrative, the audience is captivated by the sounds of nature while being hypnotised by the slow and poignant imagery. The viewer is forced to slow down and identify with the slow-paced, peaceful sounds and to look carefully to try to decipher the rift between the reflection in the pool and reality. The viewer is left in awe, anxious to rewatch the video to make sure they didn't miss the subtle nuances of seeing and being. By slowing down time and shifting focus and scale, viewers' concept of time is distorted and they feel drawn to the experience as they are placed between the present and the timeless as images dissolve before their eyes. Through Viola's effective manipulation and crafting of video, the audience feels a strong connection to the artwork, interacting on a personal and subjective level.

Conclusion

Developments and innovations in technology allow artists such as Stelarc and Bill Viola to experiment with new techniques and artmaking practices which enable them to further develop the interactive capacities of their artworks. Through the use of technology, artists are able to redefine how they, as artists, interact with their own artworks, as well as the interactive relationship between the audience and the artwork. Technology has therefore revolutionised the interaction between artist, artwork and audience.

Sophie Stanton, Year 12

Patricia Piccinini

(b. 1965 Sierra Leone, Africa; lives and works in Australia)

Issues/interests: technological intervention in producing, maintaining and enhancing life; the relationship between the natural and the artificial; family love, maternal and children's relationships with products of technology

Forms: digital media, computer-manipulated photography, video, sculpture

Frame: *Postmodern* in use of technology, confronting subject matter

Conceptual Framework: Her artworks are her personal response to ethical issues of the contemporary world. Her works elicit an **emotive** response from the viewer.

Artworks in this unit

Nature's Little Helpers — Bodyguard (for the Golden Helmeted Honeyeater) 2004

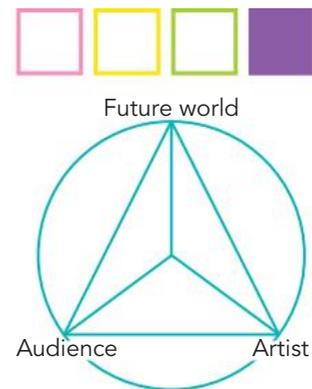
Doubting Thomas 2008

The Stags 2008

eBookplus

ABC Arts: Patricia Piccinini

Use the **ABC Arts** weblink in your eBookPLUS to watch an interview with Patricia Piccinini about her work and inspiration. Your eBookPLUS also contains links to other works by this artist.



VOCABULARY

contemporary of our time, generally taken as referring to the past 10 years

emotive exciting or expressing emotion

found object natural or manufactured object not originally intended as art but used by an artist for its aesthetic value

Piccinini's *Nature's Little Helpers* exhibition contained a series of photographs; a rather disturbing video of a hairy creature with a very malleable face with egg-type shapes crawling under its skin; relief metallic automotive-finish sculptural panels; sculptures that looked like high-tech, beautifully designed, fibreglass motorcycles cum jet-skis that have taken on lifelike, alligator/tadpole-type characteristics (Piccinini calls them 'cyclepups'), with one that had seemingly half crawled up the wall. But by far the most compelling, or perhaps

repelling, feature was the ‘family’ of ‘creatures’ she calls bodyguards. At first it is hard to see the links between these strangely believable ‘bodyguard’ creatures with saggy skin, wrinkles, moles, freckles and scarce hair, and the perfect, padded-leather, metallic-finish sculptures. After browsing the whole exhibition, subtle links appear, other than the most obvious one of the ‘bodyguards’ being in the photographs. We see the egg shapes in the wall relief repeated in the video, while the creatures’ tent-shaped leather homes link not only to the leather of the sculptures but also to a human’s tent in one of the photographs. In this witty exhibition a builder crouched on top of the frame of a house while a ‘bodyguard’ looks on in one of her photographs. She seems to be bringing the different aspects and interests of her artmaking practice together.



***Nature's Little Helpers —
Bodyguard (for the Golden
Helmeted Honeyeater)*** 2004
silicon, fibreglass, leather,
plywood, hair
150 × 40 × 60 cm (detail)
Photo: Graham Baring



Doubting Thomas 2008
silicon, fibreglass, human hair,
clothing, chair
100 × 53 × 90 cm
Photo: Graham Baring
(See Jinman, p. 203)

In the artist's statement that accompanies this exhibition Piccinini writes:

Creation, birth, responsibility, babies, the changing nature of the environment and our relationship with it, the increasingly nebulous boundaries between the technological and the natural world — each of these works explores these same ideas in different ways ...

There are a few main stories that intertwine in this show. The first, told primarily through the figurative silicone sculptures and photographs, is about doing the wrong things for the right reasons and whether we can use technology to solve environmental problems. The second story is more general and can be found in all the works. It is about the way that some stuff begins to take over places where it doesn't belong. A third story is about babies. Actually it is not really a story; it is more a recurring image. Everywhere you look in this show there are babies. I have just had a baby myself ...

Crossing the borderline between machine and animal, Piccinini continued her work inspired by highly sophisticated designed objects, beginning with *Truck Babies* 1999, in which she explored the nature of desire in our world of technological commodification and global consumer culture. A related series, *Car Nuggets* 1999, consisted of shiny coloured duco objects suggesting a morphing between organic

rock shapes and the sharpness, sophistication, precision and gloss finish of manufactured design. In these works Piccinini questions the uniqueness or essence of such objects, the quality that makes consumer products so appealing.



The Stags 2008

From the *Wellspring* exhibition
fibreglass, auto paint, plastic,
stainless steel, leather, rubber
tyres
196 × 224 × 167 cm
Photo: Graham Baring

The Stags 2008 (above) brings to mind sleek, finely tuned, individually created bikes. Although more akin to industrial design than the future genetic explorations of her wrinkled, sparsely haired, humanoid creatures, the sculptures still suggest a life force. They are an extension of earlier works of shiny metal and superbly crafted leather such as *Sandman Leather* 2002, in which the front of a car mutates into segmented moulded leather and other 'bikes' that suggest lizard-like creatures, which begin to slither up walls. In these 2008 works the 'creatures' suggest deer with 'antlers' made from rear-view mirrors.

Artist's practice

Intention/influences

Piccinini is a Postmodern artist both in her use of technology and in her creation of artworks that grapple with some of the big ethical issues of our **contemporary** world. She has stated that she tries in her art to connect to and reflect something of our times and what is happening in them. Her works comment on the increasingly artificial nature of contemporary life, from plastic surgery and genetically modified food to IVF programs and stem cell research (genetic engineering).

This interest in and exploration of medical research and technological intervention developed from her personal experience of watching her mother die early from cancer.

Piccinini's 'creations' challenge us to contemplate the consequences of scientific intervention in the natural world. Her fascinating creations are cutely grotesque rather than frightening or threatening. The medical research into cloning, such as the celebrated Scottish sheep Dolly, the first cloned animal in history (which died in 2003), and other experiments to synthetically create human parts have acted as stimuli to Piccinini's art.

Piccinini's first artworks that involved 'invented' life forms were the *LUMP* (lifeform with unevolved mutant properties) works of 1994, a line of genetically superior, custom-built babies. With these *LUMPs* she parodied the IVF market and eugenics research (the science of improving the gene pool of a population by controlling inherited characteristics). She also focused on the *LUMP* as a commodity and on its relationship to advertising. This series of artworks of digital photographs featured Piccinini's technological version of a baby — a comical, shiny, plastic model with stick-on organs, blue eyes and full lips — held lovingly by a TV personality. This work seemed to combine the dream world of advertising with the technological future.

Technique

Piccinini is highly creative and her works have a slickness that reflects her concern for precision. They also celebrate the power of plastic as an infinitely transformable substance.

Although she employs a variety of media, nearly all (her drawings are an exception) rely on the language and methods of the computer (sculpture, photography, video). The artist has explained that she feels the computer is the most appropriate medium for commenting on our contemporary world. After extensive research she fuses digital imagery with her understanding of complex scientific and cultural processes. Her practice could be called conceptual, since it is her imaginative ideas that are the focus; she chooses the media that can best express those ideas.

She works from a Postmodern perspective, 'directing' the production of her ideas so she can employ various new technologies and specialist expertise in a wide range of forms.

Conceptual Framework

Piccinini's artworks are her response to our changing world. She encourages us to recognise that technology and technological intervention now play crucial roles in our lives, and that this raises important moral issues. She does not offer us easy answers to these moral challenges, but she does want us to be aware of them. She seems to encourage a feeling of compassion towards the offspring of technology, her works suggesting an acceptance rather than a conflict between humans and machines.

Critical practice

Katrina Strickland, 'Mother Love',
Weekend Australian Magazine,
3–4 May 2003, p. 17.

'Each of [Piccinini's] collaborators is a specialist in their field ... Though Piccinini is not handling the paintbrush, she is firm about what she wants and exactly how she wants it done ... Finding the right people and being able to talk their language ... are important components of the modern artist's skill set.

'Piccinini rejects the notion that artists should always make their own work, that art is somehow about the hand of God coming through the hand of the artist. [She says] "I could spend a lifetime being a car modeller or sculptor, but I haven't because I'm not interested in the process ... for me that's not really engaging. It might look nice but it doesn't tell me about the world I live in, and I am fascinated and elated and upset by the world I live in."

Peter Hennessey, 'Patricia Piccinini: plastic realist', in Blair French (ed.),
Photofiles: an Australian photography reader, Power Publications/Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, 1999, p. 247.

'For several years, Patricia Piccinini has been charting the changing fortunes and status of "the natural" in the increasingly technologically mediated world of the late 20th century. Her work is grounded within the experience of the western, urban culture from which she comes. It makes no grandiose claims to represent universal or spiritual truths, rather it attempts to convey the realities and issues of the complex culture of its times. Working with images and technologies drawn from the contemporary media environment, Piccinini has developed a practice that in many ways owes more to the traditions of social realism or surrealism than Pop ...'

Dominique Angeloro, 'Freakshow Frodo', *Sydney Morning Herald*,
'Metro', 2–8 September 2005.

'Patricia Piccinini is again tinkering with genetic engineering ... Her multimedia practice combines a compelling mix of fact and science fiction.

'In the series *Nature's Little Helpers*, the artist cross-breeds politically correct concepts of environmentalism with a Frankenstein logic of mad science. She appears to be in the business of making the world a safer place for the golden helmeted honeyeater ... an endangered bird native to her home state of Victoria.

'The centrepiece to *Unbreaking Eggs* is a sculpture of a creature that Piccinini has designed as a "bodyguard" for the honeyeater. Half-monkey, half hobbit, the creature has been meticulously engineered from silicon, fibreglass, leather, plywood and hair. It has horns sprouting from its chin and a seriously large set of fangs. Despite these intimidating quirks, the critter has more than a touch of warmth, sporting a rash of freckles across its nose and an endearing paunch.'

Margaret Mereton,
Harper's Bazaar,
November 2008.

'A Piccinini show is not to be missed. Her work always unnerves the viewer with its focus on imaginary creatures that begin human, then veer into something disturbingly non-human. In this latest body of work she continues to explore the outer limits of manipulating the human form.'

'Shock. Disgust. Fascination and something approaching love. Patricia Piccinini's bizarre, lifelike sculptures can elicit all these emotions when you meet them face to face.

'What are we to make of an old woman with a dugong's body sleeping peacefully in the arms of a six-year-old boy? Or a baby with parchment skin and brown eyes the size of cricket balls gazing anxiously from a crib?

"I think they're beautiful," said Piccinini, a Melbourne artist whose exhibition, *Related Individuals*, opens at Sydney's Roslyn Oxley9 gallery tonight. "This show is about our relationship with the stuff we create — and a lot of that stuff is alive."

'Piccinini, 42, has long been fascinated with genetics, cloning and transgenics. The works in her show may look like ghastly mutations — but spend some time with them and they become strangely empathetic.

'That is partly because they enjoy calm, affectionate relationships with children.

'For example, a work called *Doubting Thomas* [page 199] shows a young boy putting his hand into the gaping mouth of a pink creature that looks like the wombat from hell.

'On closer inspection, one or more of the creature's offspring can be seen cavorting inside their mother's well-lubricated maw.

"This boy is curious — he has no disgust or malice," Piccinini said. "It's tender and soft the way he is approaching it. There's mutual trust."

'All of the show's creatures were made from silicone by the Sydney company Makeup Effects Group. The hair — most of it human — was punched into the scalps strand by strand.

'The young boy in *Doubting Thomas* boasts some hair clippings — and cast-off clothes — from Piccinini's three-year-old son, Hector. The dugong in *The Long Awaited* has a head of yak's hair because, apparently, grey human hair is hard to come by.

"The work is about empathy," said Piccinini, who gave the bug-eyed baby, *The Foundling*, wrinkled skin and imploring eyes to elicit concern and tenderness.

"She does look different but she's still beautiful."

Richard Jinman, 'A lovable lump in the lap of luxury', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 12 November 2008, p. 3.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

Conceptual Framework



1. How does Piccinini reflect our present world and challenge us to consider the future? How does this work relate to our consumer world or TV shows?
2. How has Piccinini created a feeling of unreality and of a future world?
3. In Piccinini's work repulsive, threatening creatures are merged with the cute and endearing. What is your reaction to *Nature's Little Helpers — Bodyguard* and *Doubting Thomas* 2008?
4. Look up Piccinini on the internet to find the artwork *The Young Family* 2002, which was exhibited at the 2002 Venice Biennale. Write your own response to this work.

DISCUSSION

Piccinini is the ideas person, working collaboratively, acting as the director or administrator of her artworks. This raises the question: does an artist need to be physically involved with all aspects of their artworks' creation? It is also interesting to consider studio practice historically: compare Piccinini's practice with that of, for example, Renaissance artists, who were supported by apprentice assistants, or the 'art genius' reputation of Modernists such as Matisse and Mondrian.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Conceptual Framework — Postmodern Frame



After the invention of photography an artwork no longer had to fulfil the purpose of recording reality. The art object changed again with the introduction, in the art of Picasso and Duchamp, of **found objects**. How has the development of computer-manipulated photography once again changed the idea of what an art object is?

2. Artist's practice

Consider the similarities in technique and materials of Piccinini and Duane Hanson and Ron Mueck. How do their intentions and meaning differ?

3. Postmodern Frame



'The use of new technology in the visual arts is significant as it has enabled the visual arts to mirror the information technologies that have become a necessity in our contemporary society.' Discuss this statement with reference to the art practice of two artists including Piccinini.

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY

How is the use of technology in art a reflection of contemporary society?

(Written in 45 minutes under examination conditions)

All works of art inevitably reflect the society or context in which they are produced. Conversely, changes in society, such as the role of technology, provide opportunities for artists to respond and challenge using unconventional means.

First artist — quote suggests intention — relationship to society

Artist Patricia Piccinini claims that she is 'merely responding to my world . . . It's something to reflect upon'. Encompassing a wide range of media, from her hyper-realistic sculptures to video installations, Piccinini uses mainly high-end technology to examine medical developments in society and the ethical implications that can emerge from them. This is not to say that she is anti-technology, rather she critiques the commercialisation of industries that drive and subvert ethical standards. Her view of technology is therefore impartial: she is interested simultaneously by the 'unknown' ambiguities that can result from technology as well as by the artificialities of companies.

Piccinini has claimed that she is most interested in the concept of 'customisation' in her works. Her *Car Nugget* series was a celebration of individuality allowed through technological means, in the literal sense. The series, verging on the 'sleek', representing a duality of artificiality and organicness, were 'consumer fetishes', reflecting our society's drive towards 'must have' consumable goods. Their shiny, metallic glossings epitomised the 'essence of car'.

First example — analysed to support argument

Piccinini wants her audience to confront the role of technology in society. She achieves this through the medium that best suits her original ideas. In *Protein Lattice* she reflected a science laboratory experiment that had occurred with the transplantation of a human ear onto a mouse. Again in this composite photograph Piccinini was aware of the formal exigencies and composition techniques that advertising agencies use to 'lure' their audience. However, the viewer is simultaneously repelled by Piccinini's hypothetical hybrids, which is not always her aim. In works such as *The Young Family 1999* she deliberately superimposed human features onto her hybrids, the hypothetical result of producing 'Frankenstein'-like creatures for organs. As the viewer can relate to the human features, such as hands and feet, they are inclined to empathise with its 'fatalism' and to take responsibility for human endeavours and interventions in science.

Artist's choices — second example to explain intentions and meaning

Third example to explore technology in the contemporary world

Piccinini works collaboratively, reflecting the norms of digital art in society, where art often involves the collapse of boundaries between the disciplines of art, science and technology, challenging the role of the sole 'skilled' artist.

Conceptual Framework statement

Carnal artist Orlan uses her performance and surgical 'interventions', challenging Duchamp's idea and instead insisting that the body is no longer the ideal readymade ... 'It is a blank canvas to be explored and manipulated.' In one of her earliest performance works in 1977, Orlan sought to expose the gender hypocrisy of both the artworld and society. In *The Kiss of the Artist* she wore a reproduced torso that allowed passers-by to insert a coin into the slot in her 'cleavage'. By doing so, Orlan would allow the chanced-upon person to receive a kiss. By publicly enacting the concept, Orlan exposed the constraints of her society by comparing the art object to a profitable commodity, and therefore women to a commodity — 'the merchandising of the artist's personality replaced the merchandising of art'.

Second artist introduced in relation to question

First artwork example explained

Orlan has consistently reflected, explored and challenged the role of technology in society, insisting that 'I am not looking for an improvement or rejuvenation, but a complete change of image'. She seeks to transform herself both inside and out, using technological developments such as plastic surgery. In her *Transformation of Saint Orlan* series, from 1990 onwards, she explored and challenged the virgin-whore dichotomy of traditional art. Her body literally became a site for public exploration as she underwent nine surgical procedures, borrowing features of figures considered the pinnacle of beauty in Western art and transposing them onto her own face, for example the chin of Botticelli's *Venus*. This sub-plantation expressed Orlan's view that in a few years physical identity will be as easily changed as hair colour.

Artist's use of technology to comment on society

Second example

Conceptual Framework	Her works further challenge the role of technology through confrontational means (just as Damien Hirst’s installations rely on ‘shock as a composite factor’). In her procedures, the viewer is simultaneously overwhelmed and repelled by her performances,
Changes in ‘artwork’ linked to changes in society	which play on the audience’s expectations and senses. She juxtaposes the carnal, bloody extreme of her surgery, documented in video and artefact form afterwards, with absurdist costumes and sexually liberative overtones such as strip dancers.
Summary	Orlan not only reflects her society but challenges it, her body acting as a non-permanent, transitory performance space, leaving it physically vulnerable, raising questions such as what is left of her identity after such extensive technological intervention.
Third artist — restating of question in light of artist’s practice	Stelarc similarly uses medical and digital interfaces to communicate and reflect upon the role of technology in society. He takes a similar approach to Orlan, claiming that the human body has become obsolete (just as Orlan claims that we no longer have to rely on the body that God and genetics gave us). He insists that a man–machine symbiosis is already occurring in society, and thus the notions of cyborgs and cybernetics frequently appear in his works. Although he uses his own body, this does not form one of the main concerns of his art practice — rather it is a ‘non-objective’ tool, a ‘structural element amongst other architectural elements’.
First artwork example	This depersonalisation formed a large component of his early <i>Suspension</i> works (1978). In his later works, which are visually immersive and quasi-fantastical, he used medical imaging and technology to communicate his ideas about physical ‘improvement’.
Second example	In <i>Ekoskeleton</i> (1999) he extended the utility of his limbs using kinetic digital transmission signals, and in <i>Third Arm</i> he used a similar means, this time raising audience interaction with the ‘art object’ to a new level by allowing remote audiences to coordinate and manipulate his movements. Similarly to Piccinini and Orlan, his work challenges the traditional role of the artist as ‘sole creator’, reflecting the progress of the artworld from the influence of movements such as Dada and Fluxus.
Conclusion — argument linked back to question	His work transgresses the boundaries of art, as his experiments to ‘dissolve limitations’ dissolve the boundaries between art, technologies and science. Contemporary artists use the context of their society not only to reflect upon their environment, but to challenge and subvert traditional boundaries and to provoke a reaction from their audience. In this way the audience, too, is forced to reconsider the role of technological developments in their society.

Sophie Schmidt, Year 12

Chapter 6 Cultural comment

SYLLABUS FOCUS: Cultural Frame, Postmodern Frame, society

When we consider a culture we think of the values, beliefs and attitudes of the people who make up the society at a particular time. In contemporary society, popular culture, commercialism and the debris of society are commonly contested areas of concern. Artists' subjects often reflect these issues. Artists are recorders and interpreters of their culture. Many contemporary artists respond to their society by questioning their cultural history to comment, for example, on issues of race, gender or violence.



Through 2007–08

Installation view

iron wood (Tieli wood), of Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), tables,
parts of beams and pillars from dismantled temples of the Qing Dynasty

400 × 800 × 1340 cm

Commissioned by Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2008

Photo: Paul Green

© Ai Weiwei

Anselm Kiefer

(b. 1945, Germany)

Issues/interests: art and belief — expressive reference to the past, particularly the Old Testament, including Jewish doctrine, moral lessons; art and politics — comments on past politics as well as contemporary social issues; art and nature — expressive, textural, haunting landscapes generally with high horizons; art and its objects — objects such as hair, ashes, straw and lead aeroplanes operate as symbols; art and the built environment — buildings as symbols of the past

Forms: painting with inclusion of found objects, sculpture

Frames: *Cultural* in content, *Postmodern* in approach

Conceptual Framework: Kiefer's artworks reflect his views on German history, the landscape and religion.

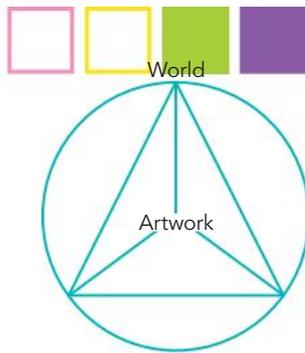
Artworks in this unit

Departure from Egypt 1984

Lilit's Töchter (The Daughters of Lilith) 1990

Women of Antiquity: Myrtis, Hypatia, Candidia 2002

Palmsonntag (Palm Sunday) 2006



eBookplus

Anselm Kiefer on mythology and human experience

Use the **Mythology and human experience** weblink in your eBookPLUS to watch Anselm Kiefer discuss the relationship between mythology and human experience. Your eBookPLUS also contains links to interviews and works by this artist.

VOCABULARY

mythology body of stories, myths and legends associated with a particular culture

symbolism use of signs or visual images to represent ideas

The ravished landscape of *Departure from Egypt* (opposite) is impressive not only for its huge scale and exciting textural qualities but also for the way it evokes history and associations for the viewer. The high horizon, a distinctive feature of Kiefer's 'landscapes', creates a haunting quality, expressive power and a forceful presence. The viewer is led towards the horizon along the meandering channels or ruts in the earth. The original starting point for this work was a photograph of a desert, but Kiefer has created his own distinctive surface with the introduction of 'foreign bodies' into the paint, in this case straw.



Departure from Egypt 1984

oil, straw, lacquer and lead on canvas

379.7 × 561.3 cm

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Purchased with funds provided by Douglas S. Cramer,
Beatrice and Philip Gersh, Lenore S. and Bernard A. Greenberg,
Joan and Fred Nicholas, Robert A. Rowan, Pippa Scott
and an anonymous donor

We can almost feel the earth between our toes, so powerful is the image. Yet this is more than just a representation of place — Kiefer has evoked history and spirituality. After a trip to Israel in 1984, the Old Testament became an important source of inspiration for his work, adding a layer of meaning to his paintings. Thus historical and textural references are interlaced in an Abstract Expressionist approach to landscape combined with the use of collage and found objects. Bits of debris and other found objects create a narrative and add symbolic meaning. Lines curve towards us, but are suddenly interrupted by a found object seemingly out of scale with the vista in front of us. It evokes a cultural symbol of belief or power such as the rod of Moses, a shepherd's staff or a pharaoh's emblem of power. This leads us to question just what this landscape represents — ploughed fields, a lava flow or some other destructive force.



Lilith's Töchter (The Daughters of Lilith) 1990
fabric, hair, skin, snake skin, lead
on canvas
380.4 × 280 cm
Marian Goodman Gallery,
New York

Lilit is mentioned in the Kabala, an ancient, mystical Jewish doctrine. Kiefer has created an atmosphere of melancholy and time past. Lilit, the wife of Saturn, represents the dark side, and both Lilit and Saturn are commonly represented by a snake. In Kiefer's work the snake represents the possibility of attaining knowledge as it follows its course. But Lilit has other facets: the great mother, or the figure of evil who kills and gives birth to demons. Lilit represents rebellion against God; she is a counterforce against meaninglessness.

The ashen dresses envelop emptiness. Perhaps they represent the ancient Jewish ritual of mourning, their associations extending to the Jewish holocaust, since hair shorn from the victims and abandoned clothes have become symbolic of the holocaust. Similarly, the lead aeroplane has multiple levels of meaning. Lead is the base material from which alchemists believed gold and silver could be created; it therefore suggests magical powers. The aeroplane in a later work becomes a huge lead propeller symbolising German militarism during World War II.



Women of Antiquity 2002

Purchased 2005
 Art Gallery of New South Wales,
 Sydney
 © Anselm Kiefer

Myrtis (front)
 painted bronze, lead
 144 × 133 × 128 cm

Hypatia (centre)
 painted bronze, glass, iron, ash
 202 × 118 × 117 cm

Candidia (back)
 painted bronze, iron
 177 × 130 × 125 cm

Kiefer created the three sculptures of *Women of Antiquity* 2002 to investigate his interest in strong women of the past whose intellectual capacities led them into trouble. Kiefer has used symbolism from **mythology** to convey their identity and downfall, each head being transformed to add meaning. Myrtis was a poet who dared compete with the ancient Greek poet Pindar and is represented with an open book where her head should be. Candidia, a Roman ‘witch’ who wove vipers through her hair, has been given a head of rusting razor wire. Hypatia, an Alexandrian poet who was brutally murdered, wears a glass cube in place of her head.

Palmsonntag (page 212) was part of an exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW in 2007. Like many of the works displayed in the exhibition, this work references Palm Sunday and Advent from the Catholic liturgy. The title of the exhibition was *Aperiatum Terra*, a reference to the Book of Isaiah and a passage that translates as ‘Let the earth be opened ... and bud forth a saviour and let justice spring at the same time’. Text from Isaiah is included in several of the pieces. The **symbolism** of the dying palm tree and the accompanying paintings of natural growth relates to this text and to Kiefer’s theme in many of his works — the contrasting forces of destruction or violent upheaval and re-creation (spiritual renewal). This installation is monumental in scale to match the symbolism of the epic journey of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem, which was followed by the ascent to Calvary, death and resurrection.



Palmsonntag 2006
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
© the artist
Photo: Stephen White
Courtesy of White Cube
Gallery, London

Artist's practice

Influences and approach/subject/intention

Kiefer's works show links with Modernism, particularly the German Expressionists, and, in paint application, the Abstract Expressionists (de Kooning and Rothko). They have even been compared to the large paintings of French Romantics such as Delacroix. But his style and working methods are unique, the imagery complex, loaded with symbolism, mythology and religious references. He appears to be equally concerned with the aesthetics of the painted surface and the conceptual strength of his meanings.

Kiefer's art exemplifies many Postmodern approaches (particularly to history) and stretches the boundaries of traditional methods of creating an artwork. His works challenge the German national conscience and reveal the confusion felt by many postwar Germans. Kiefer often begins with basic German themes, such as a forest, a field or a hall, on which he overlays his narrative and symbolism. His paintings are disturbing and full of angst. Some see them as pessimistic

and questioning, while others see them as pointing towards renewed hope, but all see them as powerful.

There is no doubt that Kiefer's artworks can be appreciated purely as art objects and have their own place within Postmodernism. However, their significance or meaning may differ, and be infinitely enriched, according to the experiences, nationality, beliefs and historical knowledge of the audience.

Working methods

Kiefer's unique, exciting, heavily encrusted surfaces are one of his expressive elements. They are the result of applications of substances such as tar, straw, sand, epoxy, gold leaf, copper wire, paper, canvas, pieces of ceramic and molten lead. Unfortunately for curators and conservation experts, Kiefer's unconventional methods and choice of media have often resulted in a somewhat impermanent surface. This richness of surface is enhanced by the way the materials have been manipulated, wrinkled, crumbled, stained and rubbed back to create a feeling of the devastation of time and events on surfaces, both human and natural. This layering and peeling back of the surface suggests the effects of violence, war and the neglect of land — not just in relation to Germany in World War II, but more universally. Symbolic threads flow through his work, including toy aeroplanes, wings, pathways, bridges and his studio.

Kiefer often works in series with a unifying theme or a generic title. He is highly experimental in his use and combination of media, and generally works on a monumental scale. For example, the two towers titled *Jericho*, designed for his 2007 exhibition in London, were five and six storeys high and were cast from the inside of shipping containers, each layer sitting on huge lead books and topped by lead sculptures of warships. His studio complex in Barjac, in the south of France, where he has worked since 1991, has had to be adapted so that he can paint canvases 15 metres high, as for his May 2007 exhibition at the Guggenheim Bilbao Museum.

Critical practice

'This is as good, I think, as art ever gets: mystery and matter delivered in a rush of poetic illumination.'

'Kiefer is well known for generating overlapping readings by using images from mythology and mystical texts. Sometimes he associates creation mythologies with the creative process of the artist. He has often spoken of art as a journey into uncharted territory. It is his hope that we the viewers will gladly embark on equally uncertain journeys in our appreciation of the work, bringing our own affective and intellectual baggage to interact with the multilayering he provides in text, image and the extraordinary material qualities of the objects he creates.'

Simon Schama, historian, quoted in 'Anselm Kiefer: Let the Earth Open', *Look* magazine, May 2007, p. 37.

Anthony Bond, Head Curator of Western Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales, in *Look* magazine, May 2007, p. 37.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Look at Kiefer's painting *Departure from Egypt* (page 209) and a landscape by one artist of your choice. Explain how artists can interpret their world from a cultural perspective.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Conceptual Framework — historical practice



Evaluate the significance of the readymade in the history of art, from Duchamp to Kiefer and Jonathan Jones.

2. Postmodern Frame — artist's practice



Analyse the Postmodern artmaking practices, in terms of the use of unconventional media, with reference to at least two artists.

3. Structural Frame — artist's practice



Explain how artists' beliefs and interests are reflected in the choice of materials and use of symbolism in the work of Kiefer and one other artist.

SAMPLE EXTENDED RESPONSE

Analyse the significance of the readymade and the use of found materials in two artists' works (Conceptual Framework).

(Written in 20 minutes under examination conditions)

Briefly explains the significance of the readymade to two artists

Suggests how readymades can add meaning

First artwork example

Explains significance of readymades in terms of symbolism and connotations

Artist's quote supports argument

For Ken Unsworth and Anselm Kiefer, the use of the 'readymade' and found objects gives a strongly contextual, emotional and evocative quality to their artmaking, not only for themselves but also for their audiences. For both artists, the personal connotations that the materials carry are the most powerful concept behind their art. They give it significance and provide strong universal and personal symbols and connections to the world.

Ken Unsworth provokes a reaction from his viewers in many ways. His use of various readymades, like pianos, chairs, and even the human body, gives his installations significance and a resonating message for the audience. These materials, as in Kiefer's art, also create a sense of nostalgia and stimulate the audience to interpret the work from their own personal experiences. Unsworth's artworks do not, by any means, offer rational answers; instead they ask questions.

In *Rapture 1994*, Unsworth's use of the readymade as a way of communicating through symbolism is obvious. Unsworth does not make a realistic version of either the set of stairs ascending or the piano. The meaning or worth is not found in the skill of the artmaking or in the value of the materials or their aesthetic quality; it is found in the connotations and symbolism that the materials themselves hold. The piano, suggestive of the spiritual side of life, as well as a tribute to his wife, is simultaneously a universal symbol of form and of expression. The piano is not sculpted or created by Unsworth, it is a readymade item that has been assembled and given meaning and life in context. Unsworth has said that he placed materials in a 'context in which they can resonate in our own psyche'.

Unsworth's dark sense of humour is also evident in the choice of materials and the way they are constructed. In his artwork *Chair on Fire*, a chair looks at a video of itself being burned. The personification that is often given to Unsworth's objects suggests a sense of humour and a need to ask questions. Unsworth said it is as if 'the chair is facing its own mortality', which shows the spiritual connotations of the materials, but also the quirky use of them in these contexts. The dark undercurrent and reference to death highlight his ironic humour, which adds to the appeal and resonance of Unsworth's artmaking.

The influence of Duchamp is clear in Unsworth's works, with the inclusion of the readymade being significant. He also makes references to *art povora* in his style, using materials that have no innate economic value. Unsworth said, 'Duchamp opens the door to the beginning of the 20th century, Joseph Beuys, the second half', thus stating his connection to the tradition of using found materials with the power that they can harbour. Moreover, Unsworth uses as the first readymade an object that has been used since humans existed — the body. In works like *Five Secular Settings for Sculpture as Ritual and Burial Piece* 1975, the body as readymade is the powerful image, which, because of its connotations and context, gives a sense of minimalistic art with ritualistic implications.

Anselm Kiefer similarly uses the readymade and found materials to add meaning to his art. Much like some of Unsworth's work, the materials convey a nostalgia for the past. The symbolic nature of the materials is important in Kiefer's highly evocative paintings. Growing up in the aftermath of World War II and the destruction of German fascism, Kiefer often starts with basic German themes like the Black Forest or halls, and builds up the layers with materials like ash, charcoal, hair, concrete or straw. Each material is imbued with history, science and personal memories, which give his work power and intensity. For example, *Your Golden Hair — Margarete* 1981 (ash, straw, women's hair, shellac) is a heavily collaged, grandiose and confronting canvas. The materials Kiefer uses are strongly connected to his message, and the style in which he paints almost gives a sense of his presence. The ash and straw connote the fate of the Jewish prisoners in the camps. The found materials in this work are at the crux of Kiefer's meaning and message, and it is their evocative nature that makes the art so powerful and significant.

Interior 1981 depicts the clean-cut style of architecture in Germany at the time of Nazi power. The room is bleak and dark. The composition makes the room appear powerful, with strength and formality in its grand appearance. The building reinforces the nostalgic nature of Kiefer's art: it is a symbol of the past, created from evocative materials that enhance its overwhelming physical and emotional impact on the viewer. Found materials are also used in *Faith, Hope, Charity/Love*, 1984–86. The propeller has symbolic power. It relates to the war and the corruption of human ethics and morals in that society. This readymade has highly evocative associations that give it meaning.

Both Anselm Kiefer and Ken Unsworth understand the emotional, spiritual, historical and symbolic nature of found materials and the readymade, which gives their art significance and power.

Sophie Dunkerton, Year 11

Second example — expanding on interpretation of question

Explores influence of Duchamp on Unsworth

Third example

Introduces second artist and expands on how readymades can add meaning and emotion

Second artist — first example

Second example used to strengthen argument

Third example analysed in relation to question

Conclusion

Jean-Michel Basquiat

(b. 1960 Brooklyn, died 1988, American)

Issues/interests: racial inequalities, links to street art, graffiti, fast-paced inner-city life

Form: painting

Frames: *Cultural* in its comments on social and racial issues; *Postmodern* in its naïve technique, challenging of art traditions, codes and conventions, and links to popular culture

Conceptual Framework: a personal, rebellious response to his experiences of New York street life

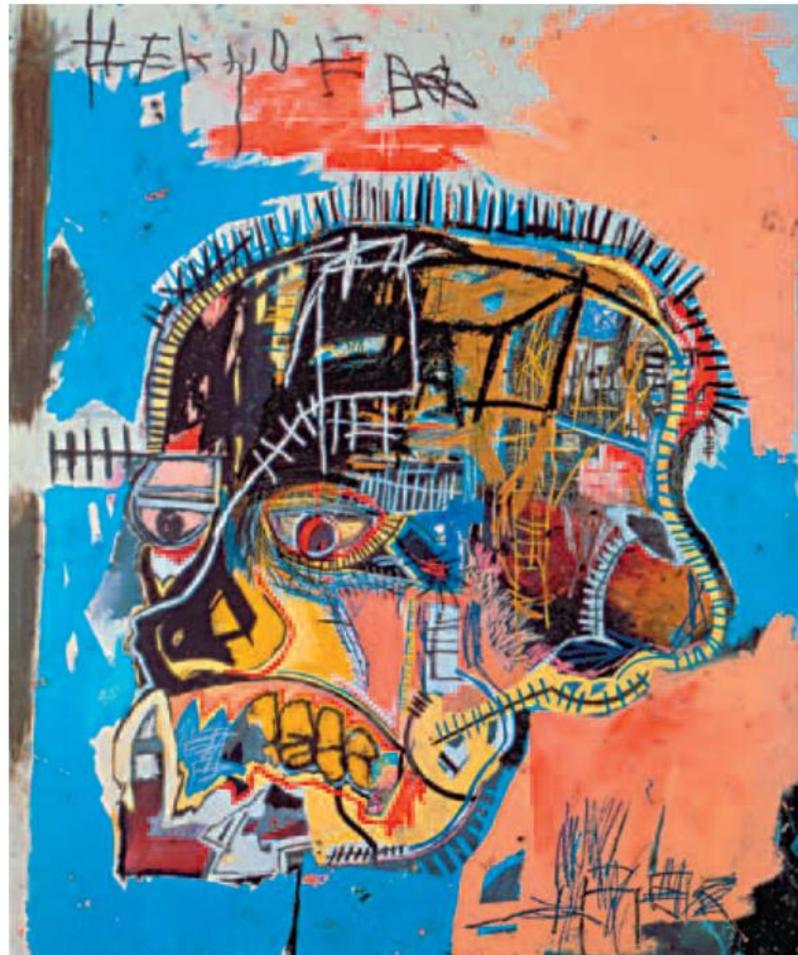
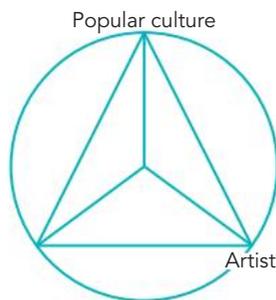
Artworks in this unit

Untitled (Skull) 1981

Notary 1983

 **Street to studio**

Use the **Street to studio** weblink in your eBookPLUS to examine Basquiat's art and learn about the images he used.



Untitled (Skull) 1981

acrylic and oil on canvas

207 × 175.9 cm

Los Angeles, The Eli and Edyth

L. Broad Collection

Courtesy of Tony Shafrazi

Gallery, New York

© Jean-Michel Basquiat/ADAGP

Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Basquiat's poignant portrait *Untitled (Skull)* (opposite) evokes the angst, self-doubt and torment of Van Gogh's self-portrait, but the methods used connect it to contemporary street life in America. Here is someone in obvious confusion. We can almost race around his head, tracking the thoughts and emotions as they collide, overrun and wipe out one another. On a superficial level we can appreciate the decorative qualities and bright, pleasing combinations of blue, yellow and orange, but not for long — the heavy black areas, the hastily scribbled words and frenetic crayon markings suggest a lurking terror and anger. It has strength and emotional intensity.



The painting *Notary* (above) is full of symbolic, text and figurative elements that create a sense of rhythm and frenetic patterning, working on various levels of meaning. Flouting conventions, popular American symbolism and street jargon are blended with references to history. There is an evident confidence in the seemingly random overlays and the expressive, spontaneous yet naïve quality of the line work. He seems to be trying to engage us in word games. The word 'salt' (a necessity of life) on the left is counterbalanced by the word 'dehydrated' on the right. A snarling white face appears on the left while a decorated black torso is depicted on the right. Words such as 'parasite', 'debt' and 'fleas' point to Basquiat's interpretation, and probably his personal experience, of big-city life. The copyright symbol links back to his graffiti days.

There is a feeling of rebellion, also a hint of aggression or anger, an ugly edge to the artwork not just in the words and symbols but also in the heavy brushstrokes, discordant colours and scratching out. Although it appears to have been painted in a spontaneous fury, careful compositional decisions have been made and the layering has been created over time.

Notary 1983

acrylic, oilstick and collaged paper on canvas, wooden mount
180.5 × 401.5 cm
BI, ADAGP, Paris/Scala, Florence
© 2009
© Jean-Michel Basquiat/ADAGP
Licensed by Viscopy, 2010

Historical background

The artworld of the 1970s and 1980s



The 1970s had been dominated by pop art, minimalism and conceptual art. The 1980s saw a shift from the 'cold' intellectualism of this art to new, emotionally charged works. In Europe it was Baselitz and Clemente; in London gallery owners such as Charles Saatchi began to openly promote emerging artists. The art market boomed, with art rivalling the sharemarket as an investment option. Buying art was considered chic among wealthy socialites. Likewise in the United States, new galleries like that of Mary Boone used the media to help elevate prices for the artists they represented. Posters and photos of the artists were used as promotional tools. Mary Boone represented Basquiat for two years. Zurich-based collector and dealer Bruno Bischofberger helped push the prices up by buying new works and reselling them on a large scale.

Influences

Jean-Michel Basquiat was the son of a middle-class Haitian father and a Puerto Rican mother. He was brought up speaking French and Spanish but reading English-language comics, watching American TV and occasionally being taken to art museums by his mother. When he was 14, the family moved to Puerto Rico. Jean ran away, living with a disc jockey who worked for a local radio station. Two years later the family moved back to Brooklyn but Basquiat left home for good, joining the New York underground, sleeping on park benches or on friends' couches and working part time as a pub-club musician. He took some art courses but more or less taught himself to paint. He was a rebel and high-school dropout who was strongly influenced by the violence of street life, multiculturalism and the emerging hip-hop culture. He initially planned to be a cartoonist, his favourite imagery being cars, weapons of war, political figures such as Nixon, and J. Edgar Hoover, and Hitchcock.

While still a teenager Basquiat became known as a graffiti artist in SoHo and the Bowery, signing himself 'SAMO'. On the streets of New York, he became the 'king' of graffiti art, his crowns, cryptograms and copyright signs instantly recognisable. Leaving the graffiti scene in 1979, he was soon drawn into the artworld. In 1980 he participated in his first large group show, *The Times Square Show*, which exhibited a mix of feminist political artists, emerging new artists and the graffiti artist Keith Haring. In 1981 Basquiat received a very favourable review in *Artforum* in which his work was linked to Cy Twombly and Jean Dubuffet.

Basquiat began mixing with artists such as Warhol and Clemente. He quickly found international recognition, fuelled by the art boom of the 1980s when artists gained the status of celebrities and were promoted by individual commercial galleries such as Patti Astor's Fun Gallery in Manhattan's Lower East Side, where exhibitions were accompanied by rap music and break-dancing. Basquiat, however, was unique. Unlike Keith Haring, he had had no traditional artistic

training and yet his work was quickly accepted and exhibited in prestigious galleries in Europe. As evidence of his rapid rise to fame (or notoriety) as an artist, he was the subject of a special feature in the *New York Times*.

Basquiat had a deep desire for acceptance, recognition, fame and the money that came with it, yet he was shy and plagued with self-doubt, turning to drugs to support his ego and finally succumbing to an overdose at the age of just 27.

Artist's practice — intention/technique

Basquiat's paintings reflect his links with graffiti art, the underground, multi-ethnic world of hip-hop culture and fast-paced New York street life. His multi-layered imagery includes crudely drawn figures, diagrams, vagrant (hobo) symbols and scientific formulae and text, often with a fierce, personal social message. There is an originality and compositional strength that add to the emotional depth of his artworks.

Colour is applied boldly and spontaneously, the brushstrokes creating a feeling of emotional energy. Colour washes partly obscuring imagery at times and elsewhere the paint applied more thickly, emphasising and connecting the somewhat jumbled imagery. The emotive power of the paint and the artist's gestural quality and smearing technique have similarities to the Abstract Expressionist work of de Kooning and Franz Kline.

Basquiat's motifs are drawn not only from the hectic metropolis, children's drawings, comic book figures, graffiti-like scrawlings and advertising slogans but from African traditions. His paintings may combine such disjointed imagery as African masks, trucks, crocodiles, cats, elephants and totemic sculptures intermixed with slogans, symbols and text, often in white on large areas of black. His artworks have personal meaning apart from the multi-layered comments on racial issues and contemporary city life. His interest in using skeletons and anatomy as imagery can be traced back to his early childhood, when he was given a copy of the classic nineteenth-century medical text *Gray's Anatomy* as he lay in hospital after being hit by a car at age seven (colliding cars in his works could also be a reference back to this accident). We appreciate their rich surface of colour and pattern, created by the symbols and text, yet strive to find a narrative or relevance beneath the mark making applied with such intensity and emotion. Often he applied brighter colours of blue and yellow in the background before overpainting a large proportion of the canvas in black, sometimes then scratching through the layers (a technique he learned from Twombly) or even painting yet another layer, often white, in areas on top.

Basquiat's early work has a naïve quality, with aeroplanes and cars (both symbols of urban life) similar to children's drawings, but there is a growing confidence in the way he structures the works, dividing

them into fields of different sizes and adding tension and meaning with text. He loved toys and comic books, which were a great inspiration to him. He began to add sports heroes (mainly baseball stars and boxers), such as the African-American Hank Aaron, to his bank of imagery and text, while the 'crown' he was bestowed as the king of graffiti art also appears. In 1982 and 1984 he dedicated paintings to Picasso. In his work during 1983, Basquiat also honoured black musicians such as Miles Davis and Charlie Parker.

The people Basquiat most admired were generally tragic figures, victims of prejudice and social oppression or of their own self-destructive lifestyles or feelings of inadequacy. These heroes included Jimi Hendrix, James Dean, Charlie Parker, Joe Louis, Billie Holiday and Janis Joplin — all iconically famous, most meeting an early death. His underlying themes of martyrdom (the crown of thorns, halos) and heroism are mixed in with representations of the artist (Basquiat is identifiable by his dreadlocks) and white oppression. Basquiat himself referred to his themes as 'kings, heroes and the street'.

In 1983 and 1984 he collaborated with first Warhol and Clemente and then just Warhol, who was inspired by the younger Basquiat to paint again, but the friendship didn't last.

As Basquiat's career skyrocketed he became less able to cope with or control his life. Symbols of death (skeletons, the use of black) occur throughout his work but feature more frequently in later work, with titles such as *To Repel Ghosts* and *Riding with Death* suggesting a premonition of death.

Despite his early death, Jean-Michel Basquiat left behind more than 100 paintings and some 2000 drawings. He has been credited with being one of the finest American Neo-expressionists of his era. He was the first black to be seen as a legitimate artist in the white artworld.

Historical practice

Jennifer Clement, extracts from *Widow Basquiat: A Love Story*, Payback Press (Canongate), Edinburgh, 2000.

'Everything he did was an attack on racism ...' (p. 36)

'I realised that he must have been to the MoMA millions of times. I had no idea. I never knew when he went. He never mentioned it to me. I know that his mother had taken him to museums. Jean knew every inch of that museum, every painting, every room. I was astonished at his knowledge and intelligence and at how twisted and unexpected his observations could be ...' (p. 39)

At MoMA

'"There are no black men in museums ... Try counting ... This is another white man's cotton plantation," he explains.' (p. 38)

'Jean-Michel sells his first painting to Deborah Harry from Blondie for 200 dollars and spends the money on one expensive dinner with Suzanne. He leaves a fifty dollar tip.' (p. 44)

'Jean-Michel says his paintings are jazz on canvas.' (p. 53)

'Jean-Michel never reads. He picks up books on mythology, history and anatomy, comic books or newspapers. He looks for the words that attack him and puts them on the canvas. He listens for things Suzanne says and writes them on his drawings. He listens to the television.' (p. 56)

“I scratch out and erase but never so much that they don't know what was there ...” (p. 62)

'Jean-Michel's favourite soap is Black Tar soap. He uses it every day. It makes a gray lather. No one else can use it. It is his joke. Jean-Michel draws it on his paintings.

'Everything was symbolic to him. How he dressed, how he spoke, how he thought, who he associated with. Everything had to be prolific or why do it and his attitude was always tongue-in-cheek. Jean was always watching himself from outside of himself and laughing ...

'He tried to make people notice him, wake them up, by using a symbol out of context. This occurred in his paintings and in his actions. He never took anything as it was. Any idea, any belief, any norm was very quickly examined and used in his art.' (p. 75)

“This is why I paint,' he says. 'To get black men into museums.” (p. 97)

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Analyse Jean-Michel Basquiat's artmaking practice with reference to one of his artworks and the following information.

Basquiat's first artworks took the form of paintings on walls and T-shirts. He turned to oilsticks and paint on canvas as he became accepted in the artworld and exhibited in galleries. Basquiat retained elements of his earlier graffiti art using text and naïve, almost crudely drawn figures and symbols, developing his unique visual language to convey his anger and intense reactions to his experiences. Other methods employed by Basquiat include collage, silkscreen printing and painting on found objects such as doors and fridges.

2. Not all critics have been favourable towards Basquiat. Look at the writing by Robert Hughes in *American Visions*. How does an art critic influence an artist's success and reputation?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Postmodern Frame



Postmodern artists have included text in their work, not only as a reflection of advertising and popular culture but also as a personal note, like a diary entry, to add meaning. Discuss with reference to a range of Postmodern artists including Basquiat.

2. Structural Frame



Artists often delve into their own experiences and develop visual codes or symbols as a means of communicating deep emotions or their response to their surroundings. Explore the work of two artists who use symbols in a direct way.

(Written in 10 minutes under examination conditions)

Marker's comments

Other points that could have been included:

- Negative connotations of some of the words Basquiat included (e.g. 'parasites', 'fleas')
- Symbolism of colour — white, black
- Scratched-out text suggests social anger, frustration
- Cultural disparity — stereotypes
- Childlike drawings/handwriting suggest poor education
- Clever incorporation of codes and symbols — links to graffiti writing (subculture)
- Overlapping images create a sense of constraint
- Expressive line work, bold naïve imagery.

SAMPLE STUDENT SHORT RESPONSE

'Artworks are often comments by the artist on social issues of personal concern to them.' Discuss with reference to Basquiat's painting *Notary 1983* and the following quote. 'Working with a blend of popular American symbolism and street jargon, Basquiat was the first black person to be seen as a legitimate artist in the white artworld.'

Artists often use their artworks as a means of portraying and/or challenging issues, values and attitudes within their own or others' society.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, a black American artist, experienced homelessness and other hardships. His lifestyle exposed him to a darker side of American society, such as cheap illegal labour, exploitation by mass media, discrimination and the frightening aspects of globalisation. His experience as a graffiti artist influenced his style and subject matter. His art is Postmodern in the way it challenges painting traditions and values.

Notary 1983 presents us with beings surrounded with text, a bombardment of consumerism and advertising (Pluto). Through this disturbing artwork, Basquiat comments on issues he experienced and the lifestyle choices he made. The rush of urban America and the dehumanisation of people within a community are replicated by the frenetic and busy canvas with its overlapping and scratching-back technique. The skeletal, tortured face surrounded by darkness, overlaid by text, is a comment on discrimination against black Americans. All these issues were personal to Basquiat, a cultural artist who uses his emotive art to comment on American society.

Beatrice McBride, Year 12

Gordon Bennett

(b. 1955, Australian)

Issues/interests: rewriting Australian history, relationships within society

Forms: painting, installations

Frames: *Cultural* in the choice of racial concerns and connectedness to place and nationhood as subjects and the intention of his work as a comment on social history; *Postmodern* in his methods, appropriation, challenging audiences' perceptions and the notion of truth in history

Conceptual Framework: Many of his artworks are very personal statements, sometimes involving his own body in a direct way. He presents a viewpoint on the world both past and present.

Artworks in this unit

Home Décor (Preston + de Stijl = citizen) Panorama 1997

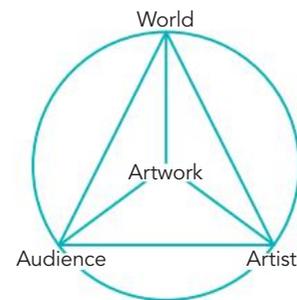
Notes to Basquiat (Samo) Twenty-first Century 2000

Interior (Tribal Rug) 2007

Audio: Artworks — Gordon Bennett

Curator Kelly Gellatly offers insights into Gordon Bennett's artworks.

SEARCHLIGHT ID: AUD-0005



VOCABULARY

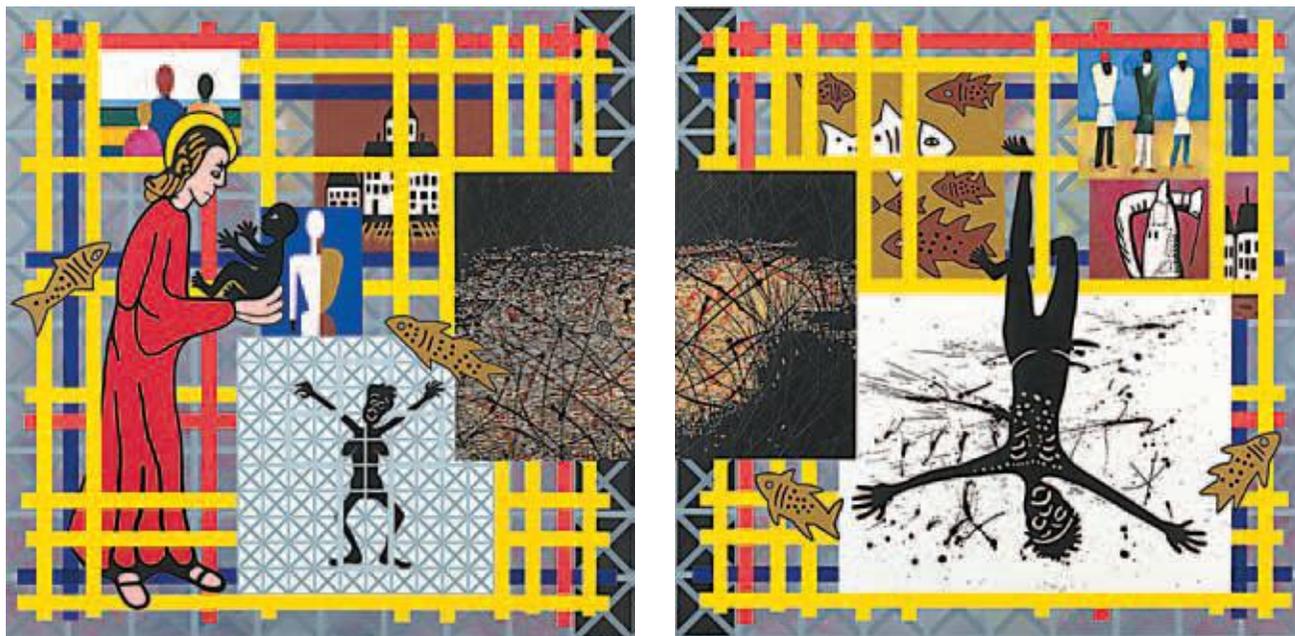
appropriation the art practice of borrowing images, for example from art, advertising or popular culture, and using them in new and significant ways

De Stijl early-twentieth-century Dutch art movement, also known as Neoplasticism

Gordon Bennett's *Home Décor* series was begun in 1995 and developed over three years into a large body of work. As suggested by the title of several in the series including *Home Décor (Preston + De Stijl = Citizen) Panorama* 1997 (page 224), the work began with the notion of how Margaret Preston copied Aboriginal motifs into interior decoration as well as into her paintings in an effort to create a national Australian art. Bennett has included the abstracted stereotypical representations of Aboriginal figures evident in her later work.

The *Home Décor* series also demonstrates Bennett's increasing use of the computer as an art tool that allows him to experiment with

complex **appropriations** of images, both from other artists and from his own past works.



Home Décor (Preston + de Stijl = Citizen) Panorama 1997

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

182.7 × 365.3 cm

Brisbane, Queensland

Presented by the National Gallery Society of Victoria as the winner of The John McCaughey Memorial Prize, 1998

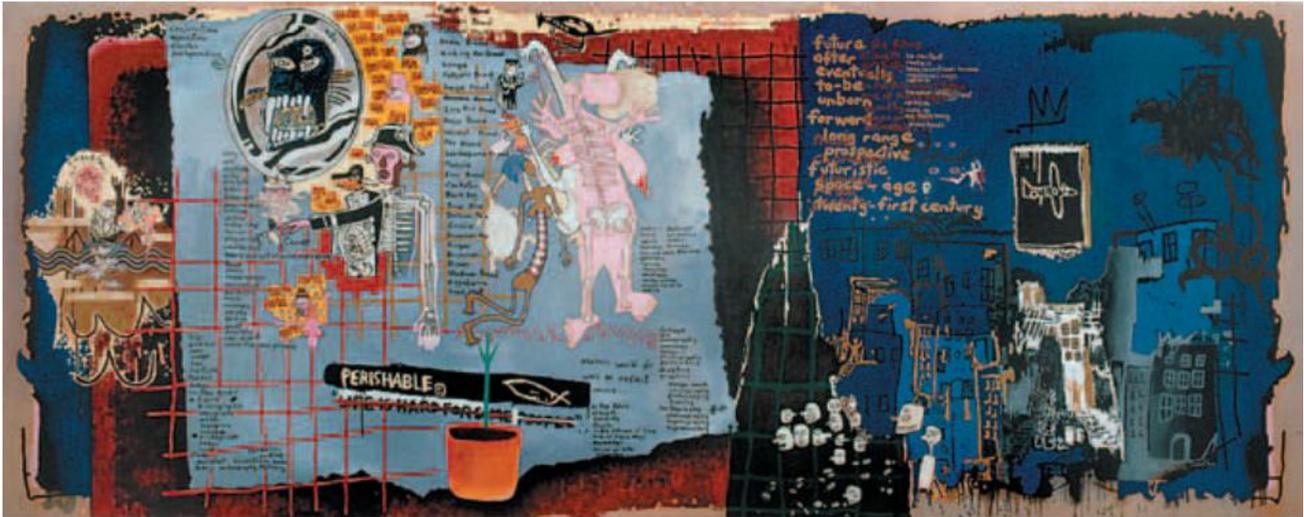
© Gordon Bennett

In the centre panel we see appropriation of the drip technique of American Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock (page 63). Bennett has used it to raise questions about the white male 'hero' or art 'master'. But there are also links between Pollock's method of working on the canvas on the floor, as inspired by the ceremonial practice of and painting by indigenous Americans, and the ground painting of Indigenous Australian artists.

There is complexity not only in the imagery, combining obvious Christian images and symbols (Christ, halo, cross, fish) with the hooded Ku Klux Klan image, but also in the layering of images, some floating on top, others partly hidden and others such as the upside-down figure entwined across spaces. Bennett has used the **De Stijl** artist Piet Mondrian's primary coloured grid both as a unifying feature and to add to the layering of meaning. Apart from this obvious reference, he has used the earlier grey diagonal grid of Mondrian to add depth and to suggest the fencing in or imprisonment of the black woman screaming on the right. By using the Postmodern method of pastiche (appropriating from a variety of cultures and time periods), Bennett seems to be offering different ways of seeing and representing, questioning how we perceive the world and how our perception of the history of race and nation has been constructed.

Bennett's series on Jean-Michel Basquiat (see opposite) reference his artmaking, but Bennett also acknowledges a connection to Basquiat's life story (page 218). Rather than appropriating imagery directly from Basquiat (as he did with Mondrian), Bennett has developed his own version of Basquiat's 'street-graffiti' inspired style, including word lists

and layering of background colour, although he does at times include some of Basquiat's more obvious symbols, such as the crown and the childlike drawing of toys. (The plane in this work more obviously references the 9/11 attack on New York's Twin Towers in *Notes to Basquiat (the Coming of Light)* 2001.) These symbols are mixed with Australian motifs, such as Captain Cook's hat and the words 'drover' and 'true blue', as he examines the foundations of identity and different accounts of experience, culture, race and history.



The skeletal figures that appear in Basquiat's paintings and are reinterpreted in Bennett's work suggest a sharing or universality of racial experiences that is reinforced by the inclusion of the words 'mimic', 'emulate', 'duplicate', 'copy' (the implication being that their life experiences are similar but different).

The crowded and intense imagery and use of text evident in the two previous works become more structured and simplified in the later work (page 226) by John Citizen (aka Gordon Bennett). The alter ego of Citizen allows Bennett to pursue other streams of thought. The *Interior* and *Coloured People* series since 2004 are objective and access images from the social pages of weekend newspapers and lifestyle magazines. The *Interior* series, characterised by graphic form and bright and often distasteful palettes, depict partial views into well-furnished rooms, endowed with designer items and artworks that are tasteful and desirable yet devoid of lived-in homeliness. All surface and little depth, they showcase a lifestyle that focuses on material satisfaction and comfort to the detriment of values associated with traditional work and life.

The common content in this Citizen *Interior*, the disconcerting *Coloured People* with their lurid faces and empty white eyes and the Bennett painterly abstract *Stripes* of 2003–08, is invisibility, and the anxiety associated with ambiguity. Perhaps Citizen is portraying a disguised critique of contemporary society.

**Notes to Basquiat (Samo)
Twenty-first Century** 2000

synthetic polymer paint on canvas

171.0 × 436.0 cm

The Paul Eliadis Collection of Contemporary Australian Art, Brisbane

© Gordon Bennett

Photo: John O'Brien

John Citizen
born Australia 1955
Interior (Tribal Rug) 2007
synthetic polymer paint on
canvas
152 x 152 cm
Private collection, Brisbane
© Gordon Bennett



Artist's practice

Intention/meaning

Gordon Bennett's wide practice, involving painting, photography, installations, performance and video, engages with historical and contemporary issues of cultural and personal identity. His work asks questions about perception and knowledge. He investigates in his paintings the way history is constructed after an event. Bennett's artworks are often challenging, as he seeks to persuade viewers to rethink their notions on race and citizenship, highlighting the tensions in black–white relationships from the colonial era to the present. Bennett comments on how he is perceived as a 'cultural outsider', being of Indigenous Australian and Anglo-Celtic descent in an artworld dominated by white European and American 'masters'. In his exciting and challenging paintings he offers another viewpoint, another perception of history. His art has both intellectual and aesthetic appeal.

Technique

Bennett is an artist whose work has shifted and developed, both in media and techniques used to convey meaning. His early work was expressionistic, then graphic elements and text and complete abstraction appeared.

Bennett's imagery not only references a rich Indigenous tradition but also appropriates or references Western art traditions (such as systems of perspective and text) to indicate how a European vision of Indigenous Australian culture has evolved. He includes perspective and vanishing point lines from the Eurocentric artworld as well as the aerial viewpoint of Indigenous art. He includes heroes as well as anti-heroes and employs obvious codes when referencing race and religion. Although some of these symbols are easily interpreted, such as the cross (Black angels have become a personal symbol for Bennett), it is in the way he combines imagery, overlaying and juxtaposing elements from different cultures, that the subtleties of meaning are developed.

Using Postmodern methods, Bennett has deconstructed works of Modernist artists such as Piet Mondrian, Jackson Pollock, Roy Lichtenstein, Kazimir Malevich, Colin McCahon and Jean-Michel Basquiat. He has also investigated language systems and their effect on identity — how meanings and values become associated with words and thus enter into history. The letters 'A', 'B', 'C' and 'D' appear repeatedly in his work as a reference not only to the building blocks of language, the first letters in the English alphabet, but also to the derogatory, offensive words 'abo', 'boong', 'coon' and 'darkie'.

Artist's statements

'If I could choose a single word to describe my practice it would be the word question ... questioning involves our "ethos", our ways of being, or becoming who we are. To be free we must be able to question the ways our history defines us.'

'The manifest toe', in Ian McClean and Gordon Bennett, *The Art of Gordon Bennett*, Roseville East, 1996, pp. 10–11, quoted in *Gordon Bennett*, National Gallery of Victoria, 2007, p. 9.

'I am an Indigenous Australian. My mother is an Indigenous Australian and her mother before that and so on for countless generations. My father was English. My work comes out of small-town and suburbia Australia. I was socialised into an essentially Anglo-Saxon Eurocentric society ... My identity was shaped by the historical narratives of colonialism with all its romantic illusions and factual deletions. My Aboriginal identity was delineated by racist language such as Abo, Boong, Coon, Darkie and the always popular Nigger. I realised early in life that Language directs the perceptions of its users, giving them ways to categorise, analyse and reify experience ...'

Gordon Bennett, Statement, 29 January 1992, Art Gallery of New South Wales.

'I use strategies of quotation and appropriation to produce what I call "history" paintings. I draw on the iconographical paradigm [example or pattern] of Australian, and by extension European, art in a way that constitutes a kind of ethnographic [study of human societies] investigation of a Euro-Australian system of representation of Aboriginal people in particular ... I wish to reinstate a sense of Aboriginal people within a culturally dominant system of representation ... rather than a visual sign that signifies the "primitive" or "noble savage" or some other European construct associated with black skin.'

Quoted in Margo Neale, *Yiribana*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1994, p. 122.

Critical practice

Sebastian Smee,
'Dear Gordon Bennett ...',
Sydney Morning Herald,
9 November 1999, p. 17.

'There are two striking aspects to this weirdly anachronistic exhibition [*Notes to Basquiat*]. One is Bennett's genuine talent for making bold, vibrant paintings, dense with miscellaneous information. He strews [scatters] the works with recent art historical references — to Basquiat in particular, but also to various Australian artists — as well as lists of words, diagrams, cartoons, and all sorts of bitter jokes about genius, authenticity and race relations. How Bennett manages to make each painting cohere [come together as a unit] is anyone's guess — but he does. The second striking thing, however, is Bennett's ability to remain sincere about this sort of art. The experience of trying to read his work — and "read" really is the apt word — is like being hectored and bullied by an undergraduate smart alec, prodded into "getting" something one can only imperfectly grasp because the medium of communication is so obliquely [indirectly] coded ...'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. With reference to the artworks by Jean-Michel Basquiat (pages 216, 217) and the first two works by Bennett, evaluate how these two artists comment on their life experiences — their 'world'.
2. Refer to the artist's statements and one of his artworks to explain some of the levels of meaning within Gordon Bennett's art practice.
3. Analyse art critic Sebastian Smee's review from the *Sydney Morning Herald* — and particularly how he shows his judgement and persuades the reader.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. **Postmodern Frame — Structural Frame** 
'Text is a significant code system that affects the form and meaning of works by a range of contemporary artists.' Analyse this statement with reference to artists from different cultural backgrounds. Suggestions: Gordon Bennett, Xu Bing, Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer, Colin McCahon, Ruark Lewis, Shirin Neshat.
2. **Postmodern Frame — artist's practice** 
Evaluate the importance of the Postmodern methods of appropriation, pastiche and irony in two artists of your choice.
3. **Cultural Frame** 
How have three artists commented on Aboriginal identity? You might consider: Gordon Bennett, Jonathan Jones, Tracey Moffatt, Fiona Foley, Adam Hill.
4. Traditions and conventions can influence artmaking practice. Discuss this statement with reference to artists who either follow and/or challenge them.

Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy

(b. 1974 and 1971, respectively; Australian collaborative artists)

Interests/issues: exploring the shifting ideas of mobility, home, consumerism and waste in our contemporary society through deconstructing, compacting or laying out

Form: installations of found objects — often their own possessions

Frames: *Cultural* in commenting on society's obsession with possessions; *Postmodern* in their wry sense of humour, challenging our values, deconstructing history and objects

Conceptual Framework: The artworks are a direct response to the artists' world. The viewer relates to the reality of the reconfigured found objects.

Artworks in this unit

The Cordial Home Project 2003

Hamper (9 Months and an Hangover) 2006

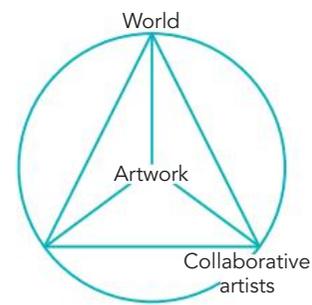
Primary Producers 2007

eBookplus

eLesson: Interview with Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy

Sean and Claire give an insight into their work and inspirations. Your eBookPLUS also contains links to other interviews and works by the artists.

SEARCHLIGHT ID: ELES-0645



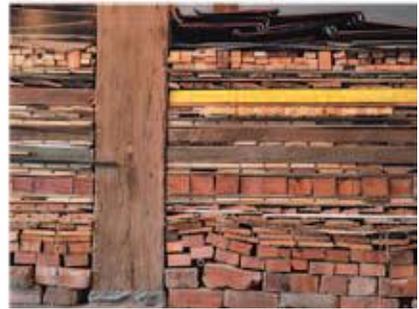
VOCABULARY

collaborative working cooperatively with others on the same project

consumerism a social trend towards buying, owning and consuming more products

When they learned that a house was destined for demolition, Healy & Cordeiro were able to obtain it in exchange for the labour and costs of taking it away. With the help of about 40 friends, the artists painstakingly 'reconstructed' the house over a period of about a month, in a solid oblong block (7 metres by 6 metres — the size of a large room and roughly human height) arranged in precisely stratified stacks from foundation blocks to roof tiles. The materials thus lost their original function, instead taking on their own identity as objects. *The Cordial Home Project* (page 230) showed a direct influence from

Duchamp but on a bigger scale and with a deeper conceptual meaning. The artwork was an investigation of the material function that makes up a home and involved the removal of space, thus leaving no space in which to live. It makes reference to the 'first homeowner's grant' and raises the question 'What is a home?'



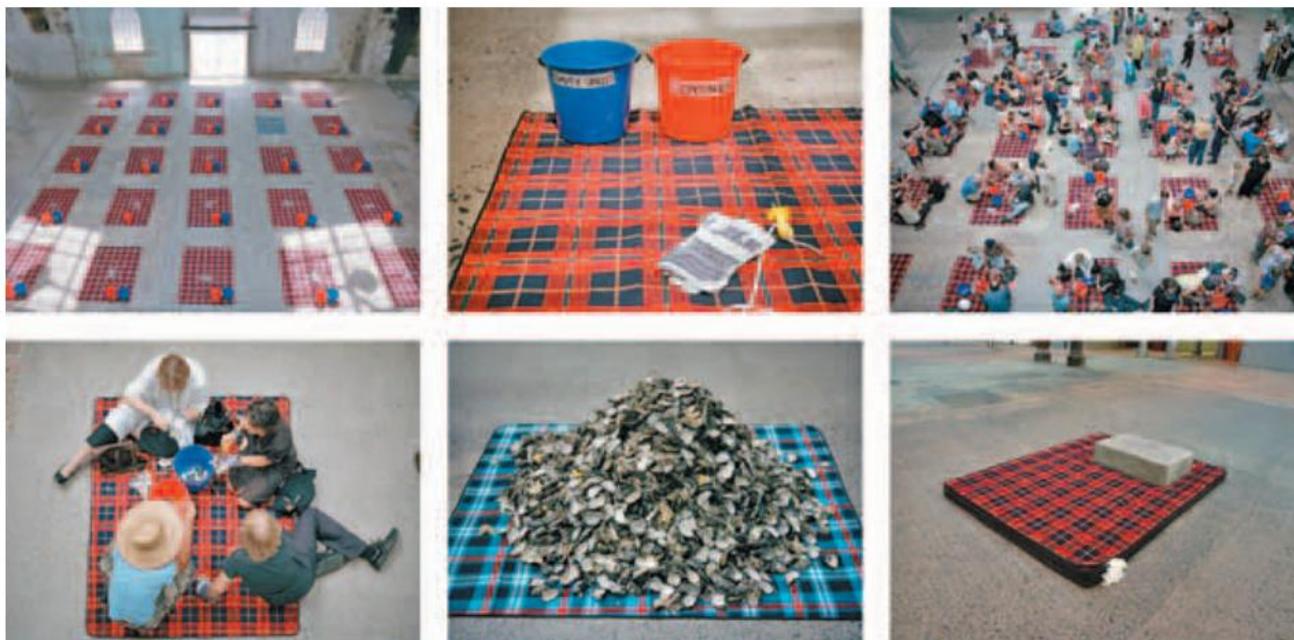
The Cordial Home Project 2003
 6 C-type LED prints
 50.8 × 76.2 cm each
 Edition of 10
 Installation of entire house,
 Artspace, Sydney
 Photo: Liz Ham
 Courtesy of the artists and
 Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney

For *Hamper* (below), the artists collected and flattened all the packaging and waste paper that entered their studio and placed it neatly under a plastic picnic table along with empty beer bottles, symbolising their basic, somewhat impoverished existence when they first lived in Berlin, trying to survive on one scholarship.

Hamper (9 Months and an Hangover) 2006
 9 months of printed matter
 waste, picnic table and
 beer bottles
 68 × 85 × 140 cm
 Museum of Contemporary Art,
 Sydney
 Courtesy of the artists and
 Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney



With *Primary Producers* (below) Healy & Cordeiro moved from the politics and economics of housing to the history of building in Australia. Found objects were selected for their historical significance to place. It was a type of re-enactment of the way Aboriginal middens (including oyster shells) were ground into a powder to make mortar for colonial architecture. The work involved feeding oysters (washed down with beer) to participants then grinding the oyster shells into a powder, which was then cast into a sculpture, a lime block resembling a big lump of concrete. It thus made reference to colonialism and the Australian wool industry (the blankets).



Historical background

The artists met at College of Fine Arts, Sydney, and became life and creative partners. In 2003 they were awarded the Helen Lempriere Travelling Arts Scholarship, which provided them with the opportunity to travel through 14 countries over a year. In 2005 they received a NAVA (National Association for the Visual Arts) marketing grant, and Australia Council Tokyo and Berlin residencies, and in 2006 they were awarded the Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship, which allowed them to study in Berlin. They have exhibited extensively in Australia as well as in Britain, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Nepal, Switzerland and Taiwan. This nomadic life has provided both subject and substance for their artmaking.

Artist's practice

Intention/meaning

These artists have been working in a **collaborative** practice for some nine years (since 2001), interrogating the concept of habitat/home,

Primary Producers 2007

Lambda print

50 × 98 cm

Edition of 20

Installation of 30 picnic blankets,
58 oyster shuckers, 58 buckets,
3600 oysters, 2 kegs of beer and
lemons

Performance Space, Sydney

Photo: Liz Ham

Courtesy of the artists and
Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney

reconfiguring found objects into sculptures or installations. They deal with complex notions of the home in its cultural and material sense, and in particular with the idea of impermanency.

The duo investigate through their artworks the processes and life cycles of buildings and houses (construction, decay and demolition). They are interested in the by-products of urban living including marketing, buying and selling, their histories and daily associated activities such as garbage removal. They deconstruct matter, reassembling it to give it new meaning.

The suggestion is that as the Australian dream of owning a house is disappearing for many, and these 'remnants' of buildings may be all they will be able to possess.

Their mischievous sense of humour is evident in the titles of their works as well as in their own apparent disregard for property and possessions.

Materials/techniques

The materials and contents of buildings often form their artmaking materials. As is the case with many contemporary works that are transient, site-specific or in some way not easily collectable or saleable items, Healy & Cordeiro document their practice and offer limited edition photographs. These are generally large-scale Lambda prints; for example, they did one image in an edition of 10 prints for *Deceased Estate* and six images in an edition of 10 sets for *The Cordial Home Project*.

Artist's statements

'We are the wasp,' says Healy, 'that implants its eggs in a host insect.' And Cordeiro adds, 'Our art is about spaces of transit, where you cross between territories, or between life and death.'

'When you pull something apart it's like a complete analysis of the material. And stacking feels like a safe way to present it to an audience, because it is almost like silencing it. The object almost becomes a closed book again. When you compress something, how much of the original is left over? It's like having the matter minus the space. It's a sculptural way of dealing with something emotional...

'The act of stacking is somewhat an act of silencing. Not all components of the mass can be analysed. Pieces lie beneath the façade. The act of displaying every part of the fabric is more of an act of analysis or investigation. In the past we have been interested in the entirety of the mass minus the space. Since we have been living abroad for the past three years, our understanding of accumulation has changed considerably. Things that are in a state of stasis remain compact for matters of convenience and economy. However, the act of unloading is similar to the act of moving house, unpacking to recreate a new living space, through the articulation of placing possessions or furniture. This unloading, staking out a new territory, is different.

Quoted in *Australian Art Collector*, issue 38, October–December 2006, p. 114.

'New 07 Interviewed', in *Contemporary Visual Arts+Culture Broadsheet*, vol. 36, no. 1, p. 16.

On why their two methods of display involve either compressing and stacking objects or laying them out in pieces

Re-piecing fragments together again as if a puzzle or clues to the past, is in a sense an act of reliving something, or being nostalgic for the past, unravelling to discover the course of events that must have happened.'

'Our subject matter has led to us creating installations of monumental size. I suppose scale is one of those things that's a bit addictive. It comes naturally within our work, though of late our work has scaled down a lot since moving to Europe.'

Quoted in Barbara Messer,
'A collaboration to die for',
'Fine Arts – Section 1',
COFA magazine, issue 19, 2007, p. 7.

Other artworks

The Paper Trail, August–October 2007, Art Gallery of NSW

For this installation the artists continued their exploration of issues of 'home' and 'permanency' through the use of a Mongolian tent (*ger*) as a symbol of that society's traditional nomadic [roaming] culture. The Mongol empire grew out of a nomadic history to become a powerful global economy, which the artists have symbolised by filling the tent with archive boxes and a trailer stacked with mirrored Perspex and wooden sculptures. This artwork questions the difference between nomadism and contemporary globalisation. An underlying meaning is the way that through paper (the paper trail, be it manuscripts, religious texts or trade documents, for example) we can trace the passing down of knowledge over time within and between cultures.

The AGNSW press release quotes the artists:

In essence the Mongolians were the first truly global people. After their initial destruction and conquest of cities, the Mongols instituted systems that served to create networks of commerce and communications that spanned continents. They created a global order that was based upon free trade, a reliable postal system, religious freedom, a single international law, a universal alphabet and a paper currency that was to be used everywhere.

Self Storage 2006

The artists' personal possessions were crammed into the wooden frame of a glasshouse. The work questions our attachment to place and property.

The Plastic Menagerie 2006, Newcastle Regional Gallery

This piece consisted of piled pine vitrines (display cases) housing inflatable animal toys you might expect to find poolside, such as a whale and a crocodile. The vitrines were stacked together to resemble a greenhouse rather than an ordered museum display. Among other things, it suggests an easy, cheap solution to zoo overcrowding.

Flatpack 2006

This began with a found object — a discarded 1960s vintage caravan/camper — in Berlin (in the old border zone between the East and West sectors), in a small alternative community of caravans where people have set up permanent homes, in what are designed as temporary

mobile structures. The artists bought the run-down old caravan, cut it up with backsaws and metal saws, brought it back to Berlin and exhibited it stacked in four identical rectangular piles, trimmed to fit on Euro-pallettes (shipping pallettes).

When the Bulls Fight the Calves Get Crushed 2005

Installed in the Siddhartha Gallery, Kathmandu, Nepal, in 2005, this work consisted of a strangely formal arrangement of boxes created to evoke the vulnerability of existence in a politically unstable society.

Tollgate

Installed in the Kunst Kiosk Kleinhungingen, Basel, Switzerland, it consisted of an everyday tollgate, which the artists had transformed through an eerie, glowing red light.

Deceased Estate 2004

Installed in the Glashaus Gallery, Weil am Rhein, southern Germany, in 2004, this piece involved a site-specific installation that compacted and piled up an entire abandoned squat/artist's studio warehouse (bookcases, electrical goods, guitar amps, paperbacks, bicycles, tables and stools stick out of this enormous rough ball shape held together by orange twine). There appears no order to the stacking, the different objects in tension with each other in this confined space. The work was exhibited in a 'gallery' inside the abandoned building. There is an element of humour, but also the suggestion of a more serious statement about **consumerism**.

Their exhibit for Sculpture by the Sea, Bondi 2003, titled *Package Tour*, involved an army tank (with an ocean view) made 'homely' by being adorned with such suburban items as a veranda, barbecue, potted plants, milk crates, boogie board and deck chair. It questioned our notions of 'war' versus 'home'.

Another work that revealed a sense of humour was the installation *Raiders of the Lost Ark 2003*, involving a fake ski hut in the middle of Martin Place, Sydney, in which a couple of mannequins embrace on a bed, being watched by stuffed animals.

Critical practice

Andrew Frost, *Australian Art Collector*, issue 37, July–September 2006.

'Healy & Cordeiro have always managed to create images with a real visual punch. With a deft understanding of materials and the understated metaphor, even their earlier work was richly evocative. *Wasted Consumer Ritual 2004* was a shop that sold nothing but bottled water. In the middle of the shop was a sad looking stuffed seal — a commentary on nature and our relationship to it.'

Alison Renwick, *Australian Art Collector*, 50 most collectable artists, issue 39, January–March 2007, pp. 121–4.

'These are two artists definitely worth watching. Their work is holding up a mirror to society with supreme effect. Are they Art's answer to Greenpeace? Let's hope so.'

'Young Berlin-based duo Cordeiro & Healy marry high concepts with low materials and a sense of place to produce art that is engaging, rigorous . . . and fun! With an eye for drama, a feel for the experiential and a sense of humour, they cannibalise (often literally) the everyday to produce work that is anything but. With an eye to an international practice they are continually pushing themselves to make work that resonates locally and internationally.'

Amanda Love, *Australian Art Collector*, 50 most collectable artists, issue 43, January–March 2008, p. 124.

'Their recent sculptures of cut down reference books contained within bland yet colourful Ikea shelving are brilliant . . . They are instantly gratifying, and yet leaving you wanting more — perfectly teasing in their ability to reveal just enough to hook you in but not enough to sate your desire for knowledge. Who wouldn't love them? They are going to continue being artists to keep watching and enjoying.'

Alison Renwick, *Australian Art Collector*, 50 most collectable artists, issue 43, January–March 2008, p. 124.

CRITICAL PRACTICE QUESTIONS

1. Look carefully at the above critical reviews by different art critics but written for the same magazine over the space of three years. Analyse the writing to discover how they offer an opinion or judgement, what persuasive language they use and how informative they are concerning the artists' practice.
2. Compare these critical writings with that of art critic Clement Greenberg on Jackson Pollock (pages 65–6). Has the role of the art critic changed since Modernism?
3. Read the following extract from *Harper's Bazaar* magazine (March 2008, p. 201). In what ways is this written more in the style of historical writing than the critical writing in the above reviews in *Australian Art Collector* magazine?

They're interested in movement within global systems and how this impacts on the individual. 'Our early works were looking at real estate in Sydney', she says. In *The Cordial Home Project* they pulled apart a house in Sydney's western suburbs and reconfigured it in a gallery. For Cordeiro and Healy there is a violent subtext to these ideas of movement and reconstitution. While piles of wrapped belongings and blocks of lime might put a smile on viewers' faces, the pair are raising serious issues. 'In Australia, everything you pick up in your shopping cart is from another part of the world,' Healy observes. 'We live in this readymade society where things are so immediate and consumable and there's a rush to have possessions that have to travel so far to get here.'

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Conceptual Framework



Evaluate some of the differences in what constitutes an 'artwork' and the role of the artist between Modernist and contemporary art.

Artist's practice

2. Discuss the art practice of at least three artists who create sculptural installations or site-specific works.
3. Explore how the practice of a range of artists/designers or architects reflects their society.

FURTHER RESEARCH

eBook plus

Use the **GBK** weblink in your eBookPLUS to look at Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy's February–March 2008 work *Disruptive Colouration*.

STUDENT SAMPLE SHORT RESPONSE

Conceptual Framework — artist–world; Cultural Frame

'Artworks often explore social issues or a personal concern of the artists.' Discuss in relation to the artwork *Deceased Estate* 2004. Refer to the following quote:

Their vagabond, suitcase way of life is all the more remarkable given the monumental ambition of their projects and their artwork. (*Deceased Estate* by Australian artists Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy, an installation of found objects, exhibited in Glashaus Gallery, Germany, in 2004)

eBook plus

Use the **GBK** weblink in your eBookPLUS to look this up on the gallery site.

(Written in 10 minutes under examination conditions)

Deceased Estate is a metaphor for how we live our lives. It depicts social issues by indicating all the objects we gather over our lifetime and how worthless these objects become once their function and relationship with their owners is past.

Collaborative artists Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy have explored a social issue that is personal to them — how people are so caught up in their lifestyle that they collect many unnecessary objects. This artwork shows a confusion of objects piled together, giving a sense of the owners' unwillingness to change along with changing technology. On closer investigation we see that many of the objects are outdated and useless in today's society, having been superseded by new technological inventions. The rope, signifying boundaries, suggests how people try to organise and reduce the confusion of their lives.

This cultural statement represents ideas and projects unfinished and stories untold from one's life, which is a personal concern for Sean Cordeiro and Claire Healy.

Paris Scoufis, Year 12

Marker's comments

Strengthen the response by including the following:

- Globalisation — the trend to working overseas
- Lack of stability in contemporary life
- Superficial, consumer-driven society
- Relate to other artists — found object installations of personal belongings (e.g. Tracey Emin); use of rope to wrap objects to change the audience's perceptions (e.g. Christo and Jeanne-Claude).

Xu Bing

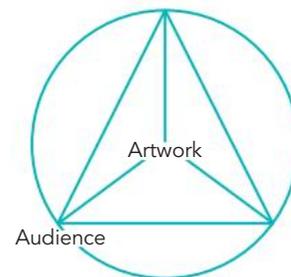
(b. 1955 in China, worked in America since 1990)

Issues/interests: understanding of art as global; questioning the barriers of language and culture; calligraphic works blur the divides between language and meaning, past and present

Forms: interactive installations, a wide range of media

Frames: *Cultural* in references to both Chinese and Western cultures; *Structural* in use of codes and sign systems; *Postmodern* in challenging traditions of art practice and the artwork

Conceptual Framework: By directly involving the audience in his works, Xu Bing challenges the audience's perceptions so as to reshape their conceptual boundaries and patterns of thought. He wants to give his audience a 'special experience'. In an artworld where contemporary art is often hard to understand, or is objectionable, Xu Bing wants his work to be 'friendly and close to the audience'. He communicates his personal, cultural and political life experiences through deconstructing language. He sees himself as being outside any particular culture or language. His calligraphy refers to ancient and modern Chinese characters, Japanese and English words, poems and nursery rhymes. Through his work Xu Bing comments on 'how human beings use cultural marks to explain nature' (artist's quotes from Biennale of Sydney, 2000 Symposium, 'Truth and Lies').



Artworks in this unit

Book from the Ground (Work in Progress) 2003

Magic Carpet 2006

eBookplus Xu Bing

Use the **Xu Bing** weblink in your eBookPLUS to visit this artist's official website.

VOCABULARY

calligraphy the art of fine, beautiful handwriting

Cultural Revolution a movement in China, 1966–68, intended to preserve ideological and revolutionary enthusiasm, especially among the young, for Mao Zedong. Mao aimed to strengthen Chinese culture by isolating it from Western thought. Western literature was banned and books were burnt. Mao's 'Little Red Book' became the main guide to right behaviour.

deconstructs breaks down, pulls apart in order to analyse — a Postmodern method

stereotyping characterising by oversimplifying, reducing to an unfair generalisation



Book from the Ground (Work in Progress) 2003
 software, acrylic panel with printed mylar
 Exhibition: *Automatic Update*
 27 June 27–3 September 2007
 The Museum of Modern Art, New York
 Courtesy of Xu Bing Studio

Book from the Ground (Work in Progress) (above) is an interactive installation using a chat computer program and involving ‘wall text’, on clear mylar (allowing access from both sides), of pictograms, signs and codes, which can be ‘read’ as a narrative. Participants may interact with the pictograms on the screen to construct ‘sentences’. These pictograms have become public signage in an age of globalisation and easy long-distance travel. Xu Bing is reminding us that these signs have become ‘icons’ that represent our only universal language. Traditionally referring to religious symbols, icons now more commonly represent cultural symbols (such as the Vegemite jar in Australia) or company logos. Through this ongoing work, Xu Bing fosters global communication using our ‘contemporary’ form of language, his personal quest being to develop a single script that can be ‘read’ by all.



Magic Carpet 2006

魔毯

Belief, Singapore Biennale 2006

Preproduction digital rendering

with 676 Square Word

Calligraphy characters

Courtesy of Xu Bing Studio

Designed for the Singapore Biennale, *Magic Carpet* (above) is a handwoven prayer mat for the Buddhist Kwam-Im Temple in Singapore. It is based on a Qin dynasty (221–206 BCE) **calligraphic** text. The original can be read in different directions and contains some 4000 separate poems. Xu Bing selected passages from four different religious texts, all in English translation, transcribing them into a square grid that can be read in different combinations and directions. The curatorial note attached to the exhibition stated: ‘Reality can be read in many ways, through diverse layers of meanings and beliefs, and suggest further insights into truth’. Xu Bing says, ‘Humans really need to re-evaluate and re-think their beliefs, because, today, there are so many problems plaguing the world. We have come to a stage where people are disoriented about what standards they should adopt’ (*Sunday Morning Post*, Singapore, 12 November 2006, ‘The Review’, p. 8).

Historical background — biography

Biographical information on Xu Bing helps us to understand how his art practice can be interpreted from the *Cultural Frame* and his desire to challenge the audience (*Postmodern Frame*) into rethinking our means of communication and promoting artistic freedom. His own social and political experiences of China include the period of Russian influence in China, the years of Mao’s **Cultural Revolution** and the Open Door Policy.

As a teenager, Xu Bing experienced emotional and social upheavals as a result of the Cultural Revolution in China. In 1974 he was removed from his 'reactionary' parents in Beijing and sent to the provinces to work in a small farming commune, as part of the 'rustication program' established by Mao Zedong (1893–1976). Mao hoped to create a new culture that dispensed with the old but at the same time was not Western. Xu Bing survived this experience by being useful to his village as a scribe. This experience led Xu to question and re-examine the meaning of Chinese characters and language in general and the value of art and culture. It also gave him close-hand experience in raising pigs, which he came to realise were very primitive animals yet intelligent enough to cooperate with humans. Xu Bing has used pigs in many installations and performance works, including *A Case Study for Transference* 1994. Two mating pigs covered with unintelligible writing were placed within a fenced-off area strewn with books. This work highlighted the difference between animals and humans and the way text (language) is a point of difference.

Xu first challenged written culture, and Chinese text specifically, in his *Book from the Sky* 1987–91, part of the China Avant-garde Exhibition in Beijing. Writing is both a way of recording language and an art form; books as conveyors of meaning have always occupied an important place in Chinese culture. In this work the artist destroyed the woodblock-carved characters, making them into meaningless text. He employed wall texts, long printed banners hung from the ceilings reminiscent of sutra scrolls (a traditional element of China's Buddhist teachings) and volumes of hand-printed texts. In a move that now seems to symbolise the end of cultural freedom in China, the authorities closed the exhibition. The political climate in China at the time constrained an artist's practice and freedom to express ideas. Social and political repression, and the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, prompted several Chinese artists to move to the West. Xu Bing now lives in the United States but travels frequently to China, where many of his works are still constructed.

Artist's practice

Intention/meaning

Xu Bing questions the concept of communicating through language, demonstrating in his installations how meanings and words themselves can be manipulated to become meaningless or misleading.

Techniques

Xu Bing studied as a traditional, conventional artist at the Central Art Academy, specialising in woodcut prints. *Book from the Sky* involved 4000 hand-carved individual printing blocks. He carves each character individually from wood, as in the Ming Dynasty, but combines the components in non-conventional ways, creating 'new' characters that do not have an established meaning. Xu's new form of 'writing' is often

referred to as Square Word Calligraphy, as used in his 2000 work for the Sydney Biennale and also his *Art for the People* 1999, which consisted of a traditional red banner with yellow script that looks like Chinese calligraphy but in fact contains the English words ‘Art’, ‘For’, ‘The’ and ‘People’. In 1998 he collaborated with a Japanese company to devise a computer program that allows the user to type in English words and have them translated into ‘Xu Bing’ language (which he calls *Chinlish*).

Xu Bing’s work follows, yet **deconstructs**, the tradition of Chinese writing. He uses language as a didactic (teaching) tool to document and attribute meaning to an event rather than using the text itself to convey meaning. He comments on the power of language not only to convey meaning, but also as an important component in **stereotyping** cultural identity.

Artist’s statements

‘“Calligraphy” is by nature different from “writing”. It is not merely a tool of communication, but also an activity that combines both artistic expression and spiritual energy. From the first stroke of a word to its completion, our entire bodies are involved. It is a process of communing with nature, of experiencing consummate [perfect] beauty, and of discovering our inner selves. Through this practice, our minds, bodies, and thoughts will enter a new realm.’

Quoted in ‘An introduction to Square Word Calligraphy’, in Britta Erickson, *Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words, The Art of Xu Bing*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 2001, p. 69.

‘I feel I am finding a way to take what is valuable in Chinese culture and bring those things into contemporary society ... Of course when I am working I consider ... whether or not it will be meaningful or beneficial to people. I hope my work will reach the broadest spectrum of people possible, everybody from the art expert to the average person.’

Britta Erickson, *Words Without Meaning, Meaning Without Words: The Art of Xu Bing*, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, 2001, pp. 67–8.

Other works

Introduction to Square Word Calligraphy

First shown in Finland in 1996, and recreated for the Biennale of Sydney in 2000, in this installation in the form of a classroom, the audience were invited to participate by learning the basics of Chinese calligraphy. But what they were learning to write with traditional Chinese ink brushes was meaningless. Although it looked like Chinese characters it could be ‘read’ as English nursery rhymes. Xu is not only challenging the notion of the cultural significance of language but also urging a reassessment of the controlled discipline of Chinese writing and art.

The Glassy Surface of a Lake 2004–05

This site-specific installation consisted of cast aluminium letters forming a passage from Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* stretching across the museum’s atrium and pouring down into an illegible pile of letters on the floor below (Chazen Museum of Art, USA).

Where Does the Dust Collect Itself?

Exhibited in 2004 at the Chinese Arts Centre in Manchester, the artist used dust he collected in New York City on the day after the destruction of the World Trade Center. He actually saw the attack from his studio across the river. Memories of Tiananmen Square in 1989 (where he collected a bicycle flattened by a tank) came back to him.

The Well of Truth 2004

Xu transformed the gallery space in La Galeria de Valencia, Spain, by infilling the 12 arches that support the upper floors with 'bricks' of newspapers.

The Tobacco Factory 2004

This installation at the Shanghai Art Gallery, China, explored the relationship between the city of Shanghai and the tobacco industry.

Xu Bing's more recent works are less confronting, yet the deeper messages are still there. In March 2008 he was appointed Vice President of the China Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Structural Frame — Conceptual Framework



How has Xu Bing developed his own personal system of signs or language to convey meaning and engage his audience?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Cultural Frame



Evaluate Xu Bing's contribution through art to breaking down cultural boundaries. You may also refer to one other artist who explores this issue.

Postmodern Frame



2. Explore the role of text in Postmodern art: text as sign, text as layering of meaning; and text as reference to mass media. Refer to three artists in your response.
3. Postmodern art presents a closer relationship between the artwork and the audience in various ways. Discuss with reference to Xu Bing and one other artist of your choice.

Ai Weiwei

(b. 1956, Beijing, China)

Issues/interests: cultural anxiety associated with the unprecedented growth and change in Beijing; questioning what has and has not changed in China, and what the future holds

Forms: sculptural installations, sculptural objects, architecture, video

Frames: *Postmodern* in the way he re-contextualises objects and challenges traditions as well as current issues; *Cultural* in the way his works play in layered ways with Chinese history and culture

Conceptual Framework: Ai Weiwei responds to the changes occurring in China, challenging the audience to reconsider historical culture.

Artworks in this unit

Through 2007–08

Forever 2003

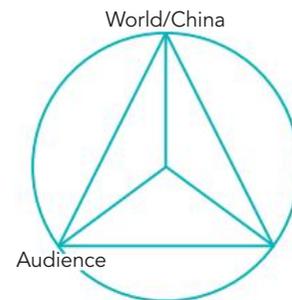
eBookplus

Ai Weiwei

Use the **Ai Weiwei** weblink in your eBookPLUS to visit this artist's official website. Your eBookPLUS also contains links to interviews and works by this artist.

The dynamic installation *Through* 2007–08 (page 244) is on a monumental scale, filling the whole gallery space. There is no space for the viewer to 'look at' the structure — as soon as you enter the gallery space you are immersed within it. It feels as though you have entered a construction site. It draws you in to explore further and appreciate the amazing beauty of the craftsmanship. This work required the assistance of 15 skilled artisans working full-time for almost a year, first constructing it in Ai Weiwei's studio, then dismantling and rebuilding it in Sydney.

The wooden beams appear to impale the tables. The two elements are balanced at gravity-defying angles, creating a feeling of unease. Using materials from ancient demolished buildings, Weiwei is questioning the need for such destruction to accommodate economic growth and social change. He challenges us to consider how identity can be lost when the culture of a country is repositioned. In redefining a nation one must also remember its history and cultural achievements — a process of recording is necessary. In his art, Weiwei represents cultural history. This work can thus be 'read' on various levels: as symbolising the collision between China's traditions and globalisation, and between government and individual, but also as suggesting how an ancient culture can demonstrate adaptability and strength even during periods of renewal and change (see Adam Jasper's quote on page 247).





Through 2007–08

Installation view

iron wood (Tieli wood), of Qing Dynasty (1644–1911), tables,
parts of beams and pillars from dismantled temples of the Qing Dynasty
400 × 800 × 1340 cm

Commissioned by Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2008

Photo: Paul Green

© Ai Weiwei

Forever (opposite) is a circular construction in which a utilitarian object, the bicycle, has been used as a building material, a large number of them being joined together in a visually interesting way. Our first response is that this is a playful installation that references artworks by Duchamp and Picasso. But once we realise who the artist is and his cultural background, deeper levels of meaning become apparent. So we need to look deeper at the conceptual basis of this work and how it relates to Ai Weiwei's world:

By transforming an 'iconic object of Chinese life into a cog in a giant geometric structure, pointedly abstracting it of any content', it can also be read as a comment on how people's lives become an impersonal object of manipulation. Playing off the name of the bicycle company, 'Forever', the bicycle as symbol of a peasant revolution and socialist utopia turns out to be going nowhere. It may be forever but, if it is to be called revolution, it is only insofar as

the wheel revolves in the perpetual circularity of a fixed movement.
(*Ai Weiwei, Under Construction*. Charles Mereweather, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, p. 115)



Forever 2003
Bicycles
275 × 450 cm diameter
Installation view
Courtesy of Haines Gallery
© Ai Weiwei

Historical background — biography

Ai Weiwei's father was a modernist writer, a free verse poet of considerable reputation who studied in Paris in the early 1930s. His wife, Ge Ying, whom he married on his return to China, was also a poet. Ai Qing was imprisoned for participating in a Marxist Study Group. Later, in the 1950s, he and his family were sent to a labour camp in the country for 're-education', where Weiwei also spent five years. Ai Qing's poetry was banned from schools and universities, and he was prohibited from publishing his writing. For the next 20 years his 'career' involved cleaning toilets. It was not until 1975 that the family returned to Beijing, but although he was now a member of the National People's Congress and was allowed to write again, the family still had limited freedom and could not return to their family home. Personal experience of the Cultural Revolution (a time of severe repression of artists and intellectuals, accompanied by the banning and destruction of books) thus had a profound effect on Ai Weiwei's artistic practice, underlying his political views and the issues he explores in his conceptually powerful artworks.

In 1978 he enrolled in the Beijing Film Academy and the following year he founded an artist collective called 'Stars', which aimed to express and encourage individual artistic freedom. In 1983 Ai Weiwei left for the United States, studying at the University of California, Berkeley, before moving to New York, where he produced conceptual

art by altering readymade objects. In 1993 he returned to China when his father became ill. He helped establish the Beijing East Village, an experimental artist's quarter in the outskirts of the city, and published a series of three books about contemporary Chinese artists. At that time China had no art galleries and no magazines focusing on contemporary art, which was still officially viewed as a spiritual corruption from the West and therefore mostly remained underground. Weiwei was therefore influential in encouraging a whole generation of artists to embrace experimental art.

Ai Weiwei is one of China's leading artists, independent curators and architectural designers.

Artist's practice

Intention/meaning

Ai Weiwei has been called a dissident conceptual artist. He certainly has oppositional political views and refuses to kowtow to Chinese government pressures. For example, because of his concerns about the social and cultural impacts of the Olympics industry on his city, he chose to ignore the government's acknowledgement of his creative part in the co-designing (with Swiss architectural firm Herzog and de Meuron, page 272) of the signature Beijing Olympic Stadium, refusing to be drawn into their propaganda efforts. He is against government and corporate structures that undermine the freedom and integrity of cultural life. His political views reflect his childhood experience of being forced to share the disgrace of exile with his father.

Although his art resonates with this personal experience and his concerns for his country of birth, it is also informed by his experiences of change in the Western world. It is remarkable that at the time of the exhibition of *Through* in Paddington, Sydney (the centre of the eastern suburbs), a major survey of Ai Weiwei's work was also being staged at Campbelltown Arts Centre, which services a rapidly growing and changing community of mixed migrant histories, displaced political refugees and complex social structures.

Ai Weiwei's art focuses on the contradictions of modernity and the effects of a centralised political system on China's cultural history. He is concerned with how China's economic reforms (it has the world's fastest growing economy and rapidly expanding cities) have transformed the country's cities and lifestyles (see the BBC News extract on page 247). His work is thought-provoking and at times controversial.

Technique/materials

Ai Weiwei's art practice, although diverse, has long been based on using readymades including everyday materials, such as coat hangers (*Hanging Man* 1985), violins and shovels (*Violin* 1985) and shoes (*One-man Shoe* 1987). While working in New York he was heavily

influenced by Duchamp, even parodying his work *The Large Glass*, renaming it *To Be Looked at (from the Other Side of the Glass)*. But his art goes far beyond a Dadaist approach: yes, there is a quirkiness, but his choice of materials is very selective. He is not interested in the detritus of everyday life unless it resonates with meaning or has historical cultural significance. His works show elaborate intervention and mediation, the objects in their metamorphosis often ending up not what they seem to be. His work also belongs to a long tradition of Chinese craftsmanship and truth to materials, thus his focus on using wood and porcelain.

In his signature minimalist assemblages of objects, Weiwei is able to encapsulate big philosophical ideas.

Ai Weiwei's architectural firm is called Fake Design, its design philosophy to 'make it simple'. His approach is generally economical in style, with unadorned forms and a balance of inside and out taking into consideration the location. He has designed more than forty public and private projects in China, including his own residence, his restaurant, bars and art galleries in Beijing.

Artist's statements

Ai explains: 'The timber is from demolished temples from the south. The structure is chaotic, with no order that conditions it, but the [method of] construction is a traditional one. There's a clear, strong logic in its construction. It's not made with metal; there are no nails holding it together. It's an all-wood method of building that has been used for thousands of years.' It's a paucity of history, a shortage of context, Ai argues, that leaves us disoriented in both time and space. His work is therefore continually attempting to reveal the substructure of things and the ongoing disaster that we like to call progress. As he patiently explains ...: 'History is always lost in interpretation. The moment is always lost. Trying to preserve history is like trying to catch water on your finger.'

Quoted in Adam Jasper,
'Ai Weiwei: Critical Mass',
Art Review, issue 22, May 2008, p. 63.

'I think China as a society has been closed up for half a century. In the past twenty years it's started to open up.

'The economic change and political change has really created a very strong interest in what's going on in this very big society, whose population is one-fifth of the whole world.

'Everything is changing and happening in such a dramatic way, and it's all reflected in Chinese art.

'On the one hand, there's much freedom. Almost anything can go, almost anything is possible. On the other hand, there's still a system there.

'Certain areas, certain taboos can't be touched. There's still censorship there. You really have to be very alert about where is the fine line, the border. You don't know exactly where it is, you have to be intelligent.'

Extract from transcript, BBC News
Asia-Pacific, 'China's New Faces:
Ai Weiwei', 3 March 2005.

Quoted in Karen Smith,
'21st Century Beijing Man',
Artist Profile, issue 3, 2008, p. 59.

'I always have the materials first. Sometimes they sit in the studio for years before I decide how to use them. I have always been fascinated by materials. I collect things without having a clue what I will do with them, and then suddenly there's enlightenment. It's about learning to be at ease with them. At first, they sit uncomfortably in the studio, out of context, unfamiliar. But one day I suddenly see them differently. That's when I make a drawing and we start working on a model ...

'Whenever I develop a new work, it always relates to the work that has gone before it; to the lessons learned.'

Quoted in Peter Hill,
'Ai Weiwei', *Art World*,
June/July 2008, pp. 66–8.

'I think that contemporary art and practice offers a different interpretation of life today. It also offers possibilities and a new awareness of the new condition we are in. The new condition is represented by a broken aesthetic and a broken morality. There is no single way to interpret the world and no unified rules. As artists we must use our sensitivities to reflect these new conditions ...

'I grew up in a society with so much injustice that it is very difficult for artists like me not to be concerned with basic human conditions. With me it's not about a gesture or a strategy, but how you personally value culture and life. It is not about the necessity of expression but the necessity of surviving ...

'Art allows you to escape from the public domain.'

Other works

Although his practice is diverse it can be roughly classified in the following categories of ideas or media, taking into consideration that at times he works across these areas:

- (a) readymade objects
- (b) China's cultural heritage
- (c) architectural
- (d) video-recording changes brought about by urbanisation.

Below is a list, organised chronologically, of some of his key works.

Hanging Man 1985

A distorted coat hanger transformed into a profile of a man. There is humour here as well as a pun (and perhaps a reference to Dada's readymades, Warhol's and Jasper Johns' use of everyday objects, and Surrealist art such as Magritte's *This Is Not a Pipe*).

Untitled 1986

Half a shoe is attached to a book. There is a hint of humour but also deeper meanings associated with the Chinese Cultural Revolution.

Han Dynasty Urn with Coca-Cola Logo 1994

Ai has transformed a Han dynasty (206 BCE–24 CE) vase by painting it with the Coca-Cola logo to comment on Western influence in China.

Tang Dynasty Courtesan in Bottle 1994

Ai placed a small traditional clay figurine in an Absolut vodka bottle. On his return to China in 1993 Ai started visiting markets, collecting antiques and noting the skill of fakes. He combined these creations of China's imperial history with symbolic objects of Western consumerism.

Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn 1995

A series of three photographs showing Weiwei in the act of dropping a precious, ancient ceramic piece, symbolising the loss and destruction he feels regarding Chinese culture.

Breaking of Two Blue-and-white Dragon Bowls 1996

This performance piece extends the idea of the previous piece, commenting on our attachment to objects as well as the vandalism of the Red Guards during the Cultural Revolution.

Beijing 2003

Video and video stills were shot by mounting a video camera in the front seat of a van that for 16 days was driven along every road of the Fourth Ring Road of Beijing. This work led to a series of photographs, *Provisional Landscape* 2002–2005, documenting barren locations where demolitions had taken place.

Table with Two Legs 2004 and *Table with Two Legs on the Wall* 2005

For both works Ai Weiwei refashioned furniture in a subversion of tradition, beautiful Ming and Qing pieces transformed into functionless yet refined objects despite their awkward positions.

Map of China 2004

Made from dismantled wood from temples of the Qing Dynasty, the 'map' is visible only from above.

Chang' an Boulevard 2004

A video taken over the time frame of a whole winter, with a single frame of one-minute duration at measured increments of 50 metres along a major arterial road. It stands as a document of the life of the boulevard from rural village to business district and political centre.

Boomerang 2006

A grandiose crystal chandelier is installed over water.

Painted Vases 2006

These ancient vases were in fact painted over and thus defiled (but preserved) Han Dynasty vases, their traditional decorative beauty obliterated. The message is to alert the viewer to the danger of forgetting of ancient cultural traditions in the context of globalisation and universal commercialism, and to hint at Western blindness to Eastern aesthetics.

Oil Spills 2006

The appearance is of pools of black, glossy liquid scattered over the gallery floor in vaguely circular shapes. Resembling oil spills floating on water, they are in fact solid objects made from porcelain.

Mei Le 2007

Black rocks reminiscent of lumps of coal (but actually made of fibreglass, carefully coated with Chinese black lacquer) are arranged in a circle to suggest a primitive ritual.

The Chinese Coffin 2007

This artwork represents a traditional coffin, but bent or twisted out of shape. Here the artist comments subtly on official corruption, as the Chinese word for coffin (*guancai*) combines two words — *guan* can mean 'high official', while *cai* means money or prosperity.

Documenta XII 2007 (a contemporary art exhibition held every five years)

In his work *Fairytale* he conspired to bring 1001 Chinese visitors, many of whom had never before left their villages, to Kassel, Germany, for the exhibition. They travelled at no cost to themselves, the process of getting passports etc. being documented via video. The piece *Template* was a massive installation of 1001 Ming and Qing dynasty doors and windows from buildings demolished for the sake of progress. These Weiwei assembled to form a huge structure to represent the interior space of a traditional Chinese temple, which later collapsed during a storm.

Bench Map of China 2007

Resembling a hollowed-out tree trunk laid on its side, it is made from wooden beams salvaged from an old temple. Ai has carved one end of the piece into a map of China, in doing so making it useless as a bench.

In 2007 he worked on a series of pieces in traditional porcelain but using what at first appear as everyday contemporary images, such as flowers on girls' dresses or a wave (but this is in fact his version of the famous wave by Hokusai). By changing the media he also changes an object's meaning, setting up a questioning response that he hopes will encourage the Chinese people to change their own cultural direction.

Critical practice

'He has become, and will remain, a key cultural figure of our time. Throughout the European summer of 2007, both his absurdly ambitious and deeply poignant *Fairytale Project* and the sculpture *Template* (constructed from carved doors and windows salvaged from old Chinese houses and subsequently destroyed on site by a powerful storm), dominated the major quinquennial exhibition, *Documenta XII*. He manifestly occupies a core position in the early twenty-first century creative spectrum.'

Gene Sherman, *Ai Weiwei: Under Construction*, UNSW Press, Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, 2008, p. 14.

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Analyse one of Ai Weiwei's artworks from one of the four frames.
2. Investigate the 'Bird's Nest' Olympic Stadium of Beijing and compare it with one other Olympic stadium.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Cultural Frame



Artists may use their art to make powerful, provocative or subtle political comments. Evaluate the work of a range of 'political artists'. You might consider artists from the following list: Goya, George Gittoes, Doris Salcedo, Sherin Neshat, Jorg Immendorff, Mona Hartoum.

2. Cultural Frame — Conceptual Framework (artist–world)



Discuss the work of at least two artists or collaborative teams who use objects to challenge the cultural ideas or values placed on these objects. Suggestions of artists to consider: Duchamp, Cordeiro & Healy, Ai Weiwei, Warhol, Damien Hirst, Tracey Emin, Andreas Serrano.

3. Conceptual Framework



Discuss the work of at least two photographers or video artists who document their world as a historical record of change or as a political/social statement.

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAY

Discuss the work of two artists from the Cultural Frame.

Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing are two contemporary Chinese artists who explore their cultural heritage and respond to changes in both Chinese and Western cultures in their artmaking. Weiwei's works are scattered with elements referencing Chinese history and culture while also commenting on the destructive impact that globalisation has had on China's traditions and values. Xu Bing's works similarly reference Chinese and Western cultures, exploring the notion of the cultural significance of language and how the age of globalisation has allowed the development of a 'contemporary' form of language. Both artists are strongly influenced by their Chinese heritage and personal experiences during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s, and by the changes to traditional Chinese culture as a result of embracing globalisation. It is clear that both Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing are heavily influenced by their cultures and societies, and draw upon these cultural roots as prominent features in their artworks.

Ai Weiwei explores changing Chinese culture and the anxiety associated with the unprecedented growth and change in Beijing as a result of globalisation. His sculptural installations, objects, architecture and videos are strongly linked by this cultural influence, often symbolising the collision of China's past traditions with globalisation.

(Written in 45 minutes under examination conditions)

The writer has chosen to discuss two artists with a similar cultural background.

States the artist's intentions and choice of medium

Quote from curator

First artwork example explained in cultural terms

Describes artist's political concerns in the context of his cultural background

Introduces second example to show how the artist works from a Cultural Frame

Quote establishes artist's importance

Reference to another work by the artist demonstrates his cultural standpoint.

Two more examples interpreted

His works therefore present a resonating cultural theme and influence, supporting Gene Sherman's view that Weiwei 'has become, and will remain, a key cultural figure of our time'.

Ai Weiwei's *Through 2007–08* is a dynamic installation assembled from deconstructed Qing Dynasty tables and ancient temple beams refashioned into complex relationships. His work is seen within the context of a country where future possibilities are shaped by the opposing forces of ruin and production. The use of objects from ancient destroyed buildings highlights this destructive element, and comments on the sacrifice of traditional factors to allow for economic growth and societal change. Weiwei is attempting to raise a key issue about the connection between identity and cultural heritage, suggesting that identity may be lost with the cultural repositioning of a country, and stressing the importance of preserving and remembering a nation's history and cultural achievements. Weiwei maintains a strong belief in the need to document and retain historical memory, hence his artworks present cultural histories in an attempt to preserve them for future generations. The artist comments that 'history is always lost in interpretation. The moment is always lost. Trying to preserve history is like trying to catch water on your finger'.

Weiwei's *Forever 2003* features the use of the readymade bicycle, referencing the work of Duchamp and Picasso, while also being culturally significant on a deeper level by representing the artist's own cultural background. Charles Merewether suggests Weiwei has transformed 'an iconic object of Chinese life into a cog in a giant geometric structure, pointedly abstracting it of any content'. The use of 42 bicycles is symbolic of a peasant revolution and socialist utopia, although also indicating that revolution is constrained to circular movements as metaphorically represented by the circular revolving of the bicycle wheels. Dr Merewether summarises, 'Ai Weiwei's artistic output, based on the formulation of ideas, is interwoven with his political thinking and illuminated for the audience the internal struggles China currently faces, as well as deep human concerns'.

Ai Weiwei is described as not only an artist, but an arts entrepreneur, photographer, curator and successful architect. Weiwei co-designed the Olympic Stadium (the 'Bird's Nest') for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games, though he refuses to be acknowledged by the Chinese government for his role in its creation, staunchly resisting becoming part of their propaganda since he is opposed to the social and cultural impacts the Olympic industry had on his city. The artist remains concerned with how China's economic reforms and ambitions have transformed the country's cities and lifestyles. He also references the effects of a centralised political system on China's cultural history, suggesting it undermines the freedom and integrity of cultural life.

Weiwei's concern about China's rapid economic growth and development is further explored in *Oil Spills 2006* and *Mei Le 2007*. *Oil Spills* is a collection of porcelain sculptures made to resemble puddles of oil through their black, glossy, 'liquid-like' appearance. Similarly, *Mei Le* is a collection of works constructed of fibreglass coated with black lacquer to resemble lumps of coal. The use of

these raw materials as subject matter directly correlates to China's growing demand for these commodities to fuel its expansion and accommodate its economic growth. The artist is therefore representing China's changing culture and society, commenting on the destruction and pollution which result from the extensive use of coal and oil. Consequently, Ai Weiwei has become an international contemporary icon and cultural commentator praised for his work in encouraging his society to reconsider the importance of their cultural heritage and preserve their cultural history.

Fellow contemporary Chinese artist Xu Bing also explores cultural significance in his artmaking, particularly the relationship between and barriers of language and the increasing interaction between Chinese and Western cultures. His interactive, multimedia installations explore the idea of communicating through language, demonstrating how meanings and words themselves can be manipulated to become meaningless or misleading. By exploring this concept and focusing on Chinese calligraphy and characters, Bing is responding to his own Chinese background and commenting on how human beings use cultural marks to explain nature.

Bing's *Book from the Ground (Earth)*, 2003 onwards, is an interactive installation combining a computer chat program and 'wall text' on clear mylar (allowing access from both sides) of pictograms, signs and codes which can be read as a narrative. Viewers can interact with the icons on the computer screen, using Xu's sequences of simple images to construct 'sentences' — from a universal, visual language to hieroglyphs. The word 'icon' was traditionally used to denote objects of worship, yet now refers more commonly to company logos and thumbnail images on computer screens. Bing is therefore fostering communication through a common language of icons, referencing the new ways of communicating made possible by globalisation and cultural change. Bing states, 'In certain respects, this language transcends our structures of knowledge and the limitations of geographic and cultural specificity . . . Regardless of your cultural background or mother tongue, you will be able to read this book as long as you have experience of contemporary life'.

Bing first challenged written culture and Chinese text in his *Book from the Sky* 1987–1991, named because it contained a text legible to no-one on this earth. The artist created the work to prove that regardless of your mother tongue or level of education, the language of 'icons' treats you equally. *Book from the Sky* is an expression of Bing's doubts regarding writing as a record of language and an art form. By destroying a traditional Chinese woodblock, carving characters to form a meaningless text, Bing is making a statement on how language, which is considered fundamental to any culture, can be manipulated to become meaningless or misleading. Furthermore, the use of books as conveyors of meaning have always had a significant place in Chinese culture — long printed scrolls as well as volumes of handwritten texts held a traditional role in Buddhist teachings.

Notably, the Chinese authorities closed *Book from the Sky* not long after the opening, indicating the suppression of cultural

Second artist introduced, with reference to his methods and the issues addressed in his artworks

Second artist — first example notes the importance of text in his artmaking

Second artist — second example

Reference to cultural significance of artwork

Alludes to a third Chinese artist who makes cultural statements in his artworks

Second artist — third example

Conclusion — returning to the question in relation to the work of these artists

freedom in China and proving that the political environment at the time constrained the artist's practice and liberty. This suppression prompted not only Bing, but other Chinese artists, to move to the West so that they could practise their artmaking in a free and open culture. Another such artist is Guan Wei, who was forced to move to Australia in 1993 to escape the limits to artistic freedom experienced in China during this period. Wei's *Treasure Hunt Nos. 3, 15, 9, 19* 1995 is the artist's response to the exposure of Chinese culture to Western philosophy, literature and art. The *Treasure Hunt* series depicts an enlarged drug capsule placed in an identifiably Australian landscape and scattered with Australian native animals juxtaposed with Chinese hunters armed with bombs, electronic games and mobile phones. Here Wei is suggesting the destructive impact globalisation has had on traditional Chinese culture.

Xu Bing also explores cultural issues on a global scale, believing 'humans really need to re-evaluate and re-think their beliefs, because today there are so many problems plaguing the world'. Bing's concern for the world's problems is shown in his *Forest Project* 2008, where Bing has utilised art, education, culture and the internet to create a system to facilitate the automatic and uninterrupted flow of funds from developed nations to Kenya for the planting of new trees. *Forest Project* seeks to establish a self-sustaining system linking these two worlds symbiotically through auctions of artworks created by students from primary schools in the Mount Kenya National Park area. Bing has created an instruction book and hosts workshops to connect the written word, calligraphy and art into one process while encouraging local children to create pictures of trees using forms of writing from a variety of cultures and historical periods. Bing is therefore utilising his artworks not only to comment on cultural issues, but in an innovative way to generate income and produce in Kenya, helping to solve the problems as well as increasing awareness of them.

Contemporary artists Ai Weiwei and Xu Bing are strongly influenced by cultural elements of both Eastern and Western cultures, as depicted in their artworks. Weiwei closely explores the concept of cultural history and the importance of retaining Chinese heritage and traditions. Furthermore, Weiwei explores the destructive impact that globalisation and an aggressive approach to economic growth can have on the cultural and social components of society. Xu Bing is similarly influenced by Chinese culture, specifically traditional calligraphy. Bing questions the meaning of Chinese characters and language in general and the value of art and culture. Both artists create works that respond to, and comment on, China's changing culture and society.

Sophie Stanton, Year 12

Chapter 7 Architecture



Deutsche Bank Place 2002–05
126 Phillips Street, Sydney
Photo: Richard Glover/Photolibrary
© Foster + Partners

SYLLABUS FOCUS:

Postmodern Frame

Bold structures and innovative designs are the hallmarks of the contemporary architect. Modernists believed nothing was too daring: their heroic glass towers, they believed, could change society; their designed cities promised Utopia. These dreams did not always come true, but today's 'star' architects still believe buildings can have a profound effect on people. Architect Frank Gehry, after all, saved the failing economy of Bilbao, giving the Spanish city a new impetus as a cultural industry centre with his radical design for the Guggenheim Museum there. Abu Dhabi plans to establish itself in a similar way with museums by Gehry as well as by Zaha Hadid, Tadeo Ando, Sir Norman Foster and Jean Nouvel.

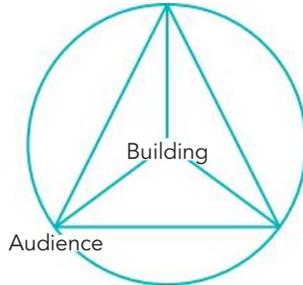
Advances in technology, particularly computerisation, have enhanced the creative possibilities of architectural design, although architects must still consider the basics of function and relationship to site. Other challenges for the twenty-first-century architect are energy saving, building time and economic considerations. Architects work within the global economy. Very successful ones establish their own firms, have offices in various cities around the world and employ large staffs. The best architects balance creativity, innovation and functionality with social considerations to create distinctive and spectacular signature buildings. Because globalisation tends to create a 'sameness', there is also an increased need for conspicuous originality.

Zaha M. Hadid

(British, b. 1950 in Iraq)

Form: architecture

Frame: *Postmodern architecture* — Hadid's approach to architectural design is highly creative and original. Her structures challenge past concepts of what a building should be. The fluid energy of her buildings is sculptural in approach. *Conceptual Framework* — innovative in approach to a building's function and the flow of people towards and within it.



eBookplus

Zaha Hadid Architects

Use the **Zaha Hadid** weblink in your eBookPLUS to visit this architect's official website.



**Lois + Richard Rosenthal
Contemporary Arts Centre
2003**

View of east elevation with urban
carpet
44 East Sixth Street, Cincinnati,
Ohio, US
Photo: Nick Guttridge/
Photolibary
© Zaha Hadid Architects

The Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art (opposite) was Hadid's first real chance to explore her new approach on a large scale. It was also a chance for her to express her personal ideas on museum practice and new concepts of curating, allowing curators to individually change or customise spaces for each exhibition.

The horizontal oblong tubes function as the main galleries, linked with ribbon-like ramps that zigzag upwards. The entrance is at the busiest intersection in Cincinnati and is designed to draw in the crowds. From the entrance, light bands entice you to the walkways and from one artwork to the next. Viewers are led from the most intimate spaces to the more dramatic and invited to pause and look out through carefully positioned windows. This building established Hadid's reputation: the *New York Times* referred to it as the most important new building since the Cold War.



London Aquatic Centre

(expected completion 2012)

London, UK

Photo by London 2012 via Getty Images

© Zaha Hadid Architects

The futuristic, dynamic design for the London Aquatic Centre (above) has an organic, living quality. Its shape evokes a stingray or a crashing wave, suitable symbols for the intended function of the building. The curvilinear shapes slide gently along the foreshore as if about to slip back into the water. The overhanging curve seems to gather onlookers together protectively below it, drawing them towards the building, stimulating their involvement.

The ladder-like structures inside the glass façade inspire spectators to visually climb to the peak of the building. For those who cast their eyes downwards to the pavement, the repetitive horizontal rungs draw the eye upward, intimating a rise in expectations and ideals. Each curving rib of the roof sets up a forward surging motion in a rising crescendo, symbolising an ongoing energy within the building. The building is streamlined, flowing and highly individualistic, a fitting design for a prestigious event and for highlighting Britain's creative energy. It also highlights the exciting possibilities for architecture offered by computer-aided design. There is a strength and distinction to the design that reflects Zaha Hadid's own personality.



Opus (expected completion 2011)
Dubai
Omniyat Properties
Photo courtesy of Zaha Hadid Architects
© Zaha Hadid Architects

This stunning, individual building should be a stand-out in Business Bay, Dubai, a country already known for its exciting, innovative architectural structures. It is to be a mixed-usage property with shopping outlets on the first three floors, and the top floor offering a ‘tranquillity zone’ complete with pool and a beach.

Despite its rectilinear form it has a strong sculptural feel. We are reminded of the glass walls of ribbon windows of the Modernist International School, and the way it hovers is similar to Le Corbusier’s concept of raising a building on pilotis, but the monumental split in one side of the building and the ‘carved out’ shape in another are definitely contemporary statements.

Unlike modernist architects who tried to develop a distinctive ‘style’ or approach, adopting guiding principles such as ‘less is more’, ‘form follows function’, ‘a house should be of a hill not on a hill’, contemporary architects such as Zaha Hadid, Norman Foster and Amanda Levete seem to revel in creating unique architectural statements with each project. To some extent it is new technology that is making possible such wildly imaginative designs.

Chanel’s travelling art museum (opposite) exemplifies the contemporary trend towards bridging a range of art disciplines as

well as integrating design, fashion and everyday life. This piece of architectural design by Hadid could be thought of as an extension of the rebellion that occurred in art during the 1970s and 1980s, when artists such as Walter De Maria and Christo no longer exhibited solely inside the institutions of art museums.



This mobile piece of architecture, along with the work of 20 avant-garde artists to be housed inside it, was commissioned by Chanel under the leadership of Karl Lagerfeld (see Katrina Israel's review on page 262).

Architectural practice

Zaha Hadid grew up in Iraq as the daughter of a bourgeois intellectual family that played a leading role in the then liberal, secular, western-focused state with a growing economy. Yet even under these circumstances it took a strong-willed, ambitious woman to take up the male-dominated profession of architecture.

Zaha Hadid attended convent schools in Baghdad and Switzerland and achieved a degree in mathematics at the American University in Beirut. She was awarded the Diploma Prize in Architecture in 1972 from the Architectural Association, London, graduating in 1977. In 1980 she established Zaha Hadid Architects.

Hadid is notable as the first woman architect to be awarded the distinguished Pritzker Architectural Prize, which she received in 2004

Chanel Contemporary Art Container 2008

Rumsey Playfield, Central Park, New York

Photo: Andrew H. Walker/Getty Images for CHANEL

© Zaha Hadid Architects

when she had only just completed her first substantial project, the Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art in Cincinnati, and was named Ego Design's 2006 Personality of the Year.

The Iraqi-born, London-based architect is known internationally for unique, complex and striking designs that often seem to defy gravity. She is respected as an innovator who consistently tests the boundaries of architecture. At first her original drawings, such as those for The Peak, a spa designed for Hong Kong, were considered unbuildable. It was almost as though she had to wait for the technology and the public to catch up with her vision. Her most controversial project, and perhaps a lesson for her in the politics of how to gain acceptance for her radical approach, was her 1994 competition-winning design for the Cardiff Bay Opera House, which was abandoned after conservative politicians rebelled against an innovative British statement in their Welsh city. Now Hadid has major projects in Europe, North America and Asia, all of which are striking for their futuristic appeal and ability to excite.

Zaha Hadid's radical style involves a new approach to architecture, with multiple perspective points, smooth surfaces where walls seem to melt, ceilings appear to compress, bend and expand, and floors curve upwards. Her designs seem to deny the concept of solidity traditionally associated with architecture. Her forms appear to be in a constant state of change, morphing and gliding as if in a science fiction movie, drawing the onlooker into her personal fantasy. Her structures reflect a unique appreciation of architectural form, the emphasis on shadow and ambiguity a reference to her cultural roots, while the fluidity is a reaction against the constrictions, as she perceives them, of modern urban landscapes.

Although architecture requires individual inspiration, it also involves a lot of people. Hadid herself does not like using computers, preferring to draw her ideas, working out abstract spatial relationships on paper. She is particularly interested in how the relationship of floor to wall and ceiling can be redefined. She employs a staff of around 150 people to implement her ideas.

Hadid's architecture is complex. Earlier work has a Suprematist (a Russian art movement using simple forms such as the circle or square), geometric basis, with layering and overlaps of crosses and uppercuts giving way to more molten forms suggesting buckled rock formations, cooling lava or musculature, but still with an abstruse geometric basis and sense of drama. She has said that she comes from a tradition in which intuition and logic are closely connected.

Hadid is an influential architect with a groundbreaking approach to design. Many of her buildings are raised so as to leave the space beneath free for urban living, allowing her structures to remain fluid and busy, stimulating movement and dissolving classic boundaries. Hadid's buildings do not follow a set formula; her objectives are to create buildings that are right for the place and the user, and to promote a sense of optimism.

Architect's statement

'I am always trying to create a holistic language in my designs, looking at the connections of ground, form and people to create buildings that become a part of the earth ...

'I don't see why buildings, particularly civic spaces, can't be mesmerising ... It's important to have stimulating, exciting and thoughtful design available on people's doorstep.'

Quoted in *Vogue Living*,
November/December 2007, p. 7.

Other works and awards

- The Peak Project, Kowloon, Hong Kong, 1983. Hadid's winning design for this private club is indicative of why her work has been called 'Deconstructivist', after the theories related to the Deconstructivist literary movement and the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Her proposal involved transforming the site by excavating the hills and using the excavated rock to build artificial cliffs. She interspersed these with cantilevered beams and other elements to break it up into many parts, as if the whole cliff had been subjected to a destabilising force. The whole complex is an anti-gravity statement.
- The Mind Zone at the Millennium Dome, London, 1999; Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, London, 2000; a tram station and car park, Strasburg, 2001.
- Bergisel Ski Jump, Innsbruck, Austria, 2001–02. This elite sport facility needed to include a café and be built within the year between events. Hadid's solution was a hybrid between a bridge and a tower that was functional yet also acted as a type of monument. The dynamic and elegant characteristics of this sport — its speed and sense of free flight — have been captured in this building. The ski jump itself seems to wind out of the tower, its curved back reinforcing the feeling of imminent release into motion.
- The BMW Central Plant Building, Leipzig, 2005; Phaeno Science Centre, Wolsburg, Germany, 2005.
- Hadid received the American Institute of Architects Award (UK) in 2007. She won an international competition to design the Nuragic and Contemporary Art Museum currently in development in Cagliari, Italy. Hadid was the winner of the design competition for the London Olympic Aquatic Centre (for 2012). She has also designed the Abu Dhabi Performing Arts Centre in the United Arab Emirates, due to be completed in 2018.
- Transport Museum, Glasgow, Scotland, 2008. The building flows from the city to the Clyde River, its spiky angular roof reminiscent of a wave, graph or pleat. Its design is fluid and exciting.
- She also has plans for high-rise architecture, including a 'green scheme' of buildings and civic spaces in the Docklands area of Melbourne.

Critical practice

Katrina Israel, '2008: A space odyssey', *Harper's Bazaar*, May 2008, p. 112.

On Chanel's Mobile Art Pavilion (see page 259)

"I think design and architecture are the real art of today," said Karl Lagerfeld when introducing the project at the 2007 Venice Art Biennale. "No one has done this before. Nobody else has made a museum that can travel. Normally people travel to see a museum, here the museum is travelling — it is a very new concept."

'The free exhibition began its two-year, seven-city world tour in Hong Kong in February and will travel (packed into 65 shipping containers) to Tokyo, New York, Los Angeles, London and Moscow, before retiring in Paris in 2010, having spent five weeks open to the public in each cultural hub. "It's the ultimate luxury to do this," continues Lagerfeld, "to initiate an approach that would otherwise be impossible, that benefits everyone" ...

'This revolutionary collaboration, which integrates the disciplines of architecture, design and fashion, began with the actual container itself. "It is an architectural language of fluidity and nature, driven by new digital design and manufacturing processes, which have enabled us to create the pavilion's organic forms," says Hadid, with whom Mr Lagerfeld had been looking to work for some time. The result is a futuristic, curvilinear labyrinth with a quilted exterior referencing the 2.55 [Chanel's iconic quilted handbag] made of fibreglass components that will be reassembled at each new destination.'

Carter B. Horsley, publicity statement for the 2006 exhibition 'Zaha Hadid — Queen of energetic, explosive works of varied perspectives', at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, June–October 2006

'The retrospective exhibition on Zaha Hadid at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2006 makes it abundantly clear that Ms Hadid is the foremost creator of intriguing architectural compositions in the world, surpassing even Frank O. Gehry in this regard.

'Gehry, of course, is the pre-eminent architect in the world as measured by his completed projects. In comparison, Ms Hadid has only a handful of projects that have been brought to fruition as real buildings, although this exhibition suggests that her built portfolio is likely to grow substantially over the next few years.'

Dominic Lutyens, 'Tomorrow's World', *Elle Decoration*, September 2007, p. 61.

'The first woman to win the prestigious Pritzker Prize for Architecture has turned her attentions to furniture, embracing the sinuous, the sexy, the shocking ...

'Zaha launched her crescent-shaped "Moon system" sofa for B&B Italia, slinky, silver acrylic bowls for Italian brand Sawaya & Moroni and the jigsaw-esque "Nekton" stools for Brit label Established & Sons. So what makes her the designer *du jour*?

'Like her buildings, Zaha's furniture is the epitome of a new form of Futurism, merging right-angled planes into kinetic, shard-like and sinuous shapes (her early influences include Russian Suprematist art's abstract, geometric motifs). She describes her work as "driven by the latest cutting-edge technologies" and as "the reinvention of space using a design language that emphasises complex curvilinearity and seamlessness".'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTIONS

1. Architect's practice

It has been said that while at university Hadid was influenced by the Suprematist Kasimir Malevitch, who wrote in 1928: 'We can only perceive space when we break free from the earth, when the point of support disappears'. What evidence of the influence of this statement do you find in the designs of Hadid?

2. Discuss the similarities in approach between Hadid's architecture and her designed objects. Examples include the Mesa table designed for Vitra, the Louis Vuitton bag, her Z.Island kitchen for DuPont™ Corian®, and Nekton stools for Established & Sons.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. 'Hadid has been called a Baroque modernist, combining the modernist's desire to break free of traditions with the Baroque ideals of creating dramatic buildings of curves and dizzying spaces to lift your eyes and heart to God.' Discuss this statement with reference to Hadid's architecture as well as a Modernist and the Baroque architect Borromini.

Postmodern Frame



2. 'Contemporary architects are able to let their imagination run free, creating exciting fluid shapes with the help of technology.' Evaluate this statement with reference to Hadid and two of the following architects: Frank Gehry, Amanda Levete, Santiago Calatrava, Jean Nouvel.
3. When the Sydney Opera House was first conceived in drawing form it excited people, but controversy soon set in when it, like Hadid's earlier work, was declared to be unbuildable. The architect, Joern Utzon, was forced to adapt his design to available technology. For Hadid, technology has helped her resolve her imaginative designs. Evaluate the similarities in approach to architectural design of Utzon and Hadid and related issues they experienced. (Research the scheme by Hadid for the Department of Islamic Art at the Louvre in Paris which didn't make it beyond a plan. Use the **Zaha Hadid** weblink in your eBookPLUS to discover further details.

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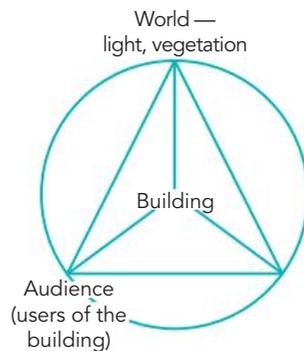
Sir Norman Foster

(b. 1935, British)

Issues/interests: a swing away from modernist rectilinear forms to elegant, curvaceous, sculptural designs using large areas of glass. His projects are characterised by innovative affordable design, a concern for ecology and for bringing the outside environment inside to be appreciated by the users of the building, and superb engineering.

Form: architecture

Frame: *Postmodern architecture* — Foster challenges traditional building design processes and concerns through his innovative approach and use of high technology. *Conceptual Framework* — He tries to bring the outside world inside his buildings. He is especially concerned with the social aspects of his buildings.



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Deutsche Bank Place 2002–05
126 Phillips Street, Sydney
Photo: Richard Glover/
Photolibrary
© Foster + Partners

The Deutsche Bank's distinctive design is a response to the narrow inner-city Sydney site. The structure is obvious on the outside, the outer grid articulating the facade, its uniqueness among the other city buildings being its emphasis on the vertical rather than the horizontal. The sloping profile of the roofline with its two spires facing north adds to the verticality. It is elegant, streamlined, dynamic in feel and far from boring. The slim rectangles attached at the side are separated from the main structure by a glass membrane. In typical Norman style, the building boasts a column-free light-filled atrium (four storeys high) at ground level. This acts to bring the outside into the city building, forming a type of interior, wind-protected public square.

Foster's other Sydney project is Regent Place, a high-rise apartment block in George Street. The key concept is the provision of light as well as privacy.



Commerzbank Ag 2000
Frankfurt, Germany
Photo: Frank Seifert/The Image Bank
© Foster + Partners

Commerzbank's (page 265) triangular plan encircles a central atrium providing natural ventilation similar to a huge chimney. It is an ecologically conceived high-rise. Every office worker has a 'garden' view across the atrium since nine gardens have been lifted up into the building on various levels.



The Sage 2004
Gateshead, England, UK
Photo: Richard Klune/Corbis
© Foster + Partners

The Sage (above) is a centre for musical education, performance and conferences. A spectacular sculptural building reminiscent of a cocoon or large seed-pod, its panelled reflective surfaces make it distinctive yet also a part of the environment. The supporting structures for the glass and entrance arch are a feature of the design. The tall glassed entrance wall allows light to stream into the entranceway.

At 40 storeys high, the Swiss Re Building is the first scraper tower built in London since 1979. Its outer shape with the crisscross, diamond-shape pattern has been likened to a gherkin, an Argyle sock or even a fat banker in fishnets, but it has nonetheless become a very recognisable and well-liked landmark. Because it occupies less than half of the site at ground level, yet optimises the floor space by the gentle swelling as it progresses upward, Foster + Partners were able to optimise the use of public space. The outer cladding has been designed mathematically, its geometry changing at every level. Thirty-six steel columns spiral around the building, forming an independent, self-bracing structure. The curved form is designed to minimise wind loads, provide spacious pedestrian access and assist internal ventilation.



Swiss Re Building
(‘The Gherkin’) 2001–04
30 St Mary’s Axe, London
Photo: Joey Nigh/Corbis
© Foster + Partners

Architectural practice

Norman Foster heads a large international architecture firm based in London. His work is innovative, generally large scale and involving high technology. Foster has a passion for inventive roofing, often employs the curve, uses innovative ways of introducing light into buildings, brings the outside inside in the form of trees and water features, and incorporates vast interior spaces and, where possible, panoramic views. His buildings have been termed 'sexy and surreal'.

He has been responsible for 11 architectural projects in central London alone; no wonder he has been referred to as the twenty-first-century face of London, but his work also extends to 40 other cities. He employs nearly 1000 staff in more than 20 offices around the world.

Foster's rise to eminence was an unusual one, indicative of his drive, social conscience and love of architecture. Leaving school at 16, he worked in Manchester Town Hall for two years, then spent two years in the Royal Air Force, one in an architect's office and five at Manchester School of Architecture and Town Planning.

His projects are high tech and economical and prioritise energy-saving features. He was awarded the Pritzker Prize for Architecture in 1999.

Foster + Partners state their philosophy:

Foster + Partners' architecture is driven by the pursuit of quality — a belief that our surroundings directly influence the quality of our lives, whether in the work place, at home or the public spaces in between. It is not just buildings but urban design that affects our well-being. We are concerned with the physical context of a project, sensitive to the culture and climate of their place. We have applied the same priorities to public infrastructure world-wide — in our airports, railway stations, metros, bridges, communication towers, regional plans and city centres. The quest for quality embraces the physical performance of buildings ...

We design by challenge — by asking the right questions ... We believe the quality of our surroundings can lift the quality of our lives ... Our work ranges from new buildings to interventions within old structures ... We work from the scale of the airport down to the detail of a door handle ... We are guided by a sensitivity to the culture and climate of a place ... (www.fosterandpartners.com/Practice/1/Architecture and www.fosterandpartners.com/Practice/Default.aspx)

Architect's statement

'What I like mainly is architecture that is clear, open and bright ...

'I like distance, transparency, I like to let the sun in ...

'I get uneasy when people start acting as if architecture was mainly a question of aesthetics. Aesthetics are important, of course, but they're not an end in themselves, not a value as such. The social dimension has always mattered to me as well. It's a matter of human architecture ...

Quoted in Hanno Rauterberg, *Talking Architecture: Interviews with Architects*, Prestel Press, Munich, Berlin, London, New York, 2008, pp. 45–56.

‘Just look at our Russia Tower in Moscow, for example ... The tower is actually a small city district containing everything it needs, apartments, hotels, offices, a cinema and shops and gardens. It just happens to be a vertical district. You can’t build a tower like that everywhere, that’s true. But in many parts of the world, high-rise buildings are the only way ...

‘Many of our buildings save energy, and they provide a much more pleasant working and living climate. There, too, our architecture has a technical dimension and a social dimension ...

‘Perhaps you could say my buildings also allow a distant view, that they invite you to look around ...

‘And I hope my architecture is also architecture of optimism. That it radiates something light and uplifting.’

Other projects

- Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank, 1981–85. This advanced technology building is 47 storeys high and is designed with separate sections rising to different heights. Elevators are positioned at the corner of the building to service the double-height floors, while escalators are used to service the rest of the building. The unique design utilises stacks of steel in a dramatic exoskeleton, with concrete floors supported by steel masts. Its distinctive feature is the giant atrium whose glazed floor catches the light.
- International Terminal, Stansted Airport, London, 1987–1991. ‘The design of the new terminal at Stansted Airport has been influenced by two important factors. The first is the opportunity, in the context of a new site, to reconsider the configuration of an airport building from its first principles. The second is the relationship of the building to its surroundings.’ (Foster + Partners statement, www.GreatBuildings.com/buildings/Stansted_Airport.html)
- International commuter station, Kowloon, Hong Kong
- Rebuilding of Reichstag/German Bundestag, Berlin, 1992–99
- Al Faisaliyah Centre, Saudi Arabia, 2000. Known as the ‘Star Dome’, this is the first skyscraper to be built in Saudi Arabia. Four columns taper from each corner of the square floor, joining at the top.
- Masadar Development, Abu Dhabi (begun 2007). The first carbon-neutral town in the world, it is designed for a future without oil. Planned for 90 000 inhabitants, it is meant to be ready for 2018. The goal is to create a city that produces its own power and water, and can function without fossil fuels.
- Seattle Civic Square, USA, 2007
- Spaceport, New Mexico, US, 2007
- Camp Nou Stadium, FC Barcelona, Spain, 2007
- Yale School of Management, New Haven, USA, 2007
- The airport Beijing opened for the Olympics is the largest architectural project in the world to date.

Critical practice

Rob Gregory, 'Windsock: the integration of structure, form and fabric creates London's first environmentally progressive skyscraper', *Architectural Review*, November 2003, pp. 69–73.

'With St Mary Axe, structure, form and fabric have been integrated, and Foster and Partners have produced one of the City's first large-scale office buildings which genuinely has the capacity to be passively ventilated.

'The building's distinctive pattern is a direct reflection of its internal organization and its environmental strategy, where six orthogonal fingers of flexible office space are punctuated by radial atria: a series of two- and six-storey voids that spiral around the building, increasing perimeter desk space, and bringing light and air deep within the heart of the building's circular envelope.'

Godfrey Barker, 'Norman's Conquest', in *The Weekend Australian Magazine*, 15–16 March 2008, p. 32.

'Foster and his public buildings define our time and the feelings between us as human beings. This poor, working-class lad from Manchester, whose fire was lit by a Dickensian disgust at the city's factories, has done more for social democracy than any British politician. He has knocked down walls in offices, demolished beyond recognition the "them and us" culture of management and workers, imported sun and light through glass walls and transparent roofs into the prisons of mediocrity in which office workers toiled after the war.'

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION

Postmodern Frame



'Foster and his public buildings define our time and the feelings between us as human beings.' How does Foster challenge traditions in architecture and reflect contemporary culture as expressed in this quote?

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Evaluate the architectural practice of two contemporary architects with reference to high-tech sculptural forms. You might consider Norman Foster and Frank Gehry.
2. With reference to a range of architects, discuss the development of the high-rise office block from early modernism to the Deutsche Bank in Sydney by Foster.

Herzog & de Meuron

(Swiss architectural firm of Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron, both born 1950, Basel, Switzerland)

Issues/interests: Each building is unique and exciting in its originality, with a concern for precision combined with complete artistic freedom. They are innovative in their use of materials and explore new techniques while being sensitive to the building's purpose.

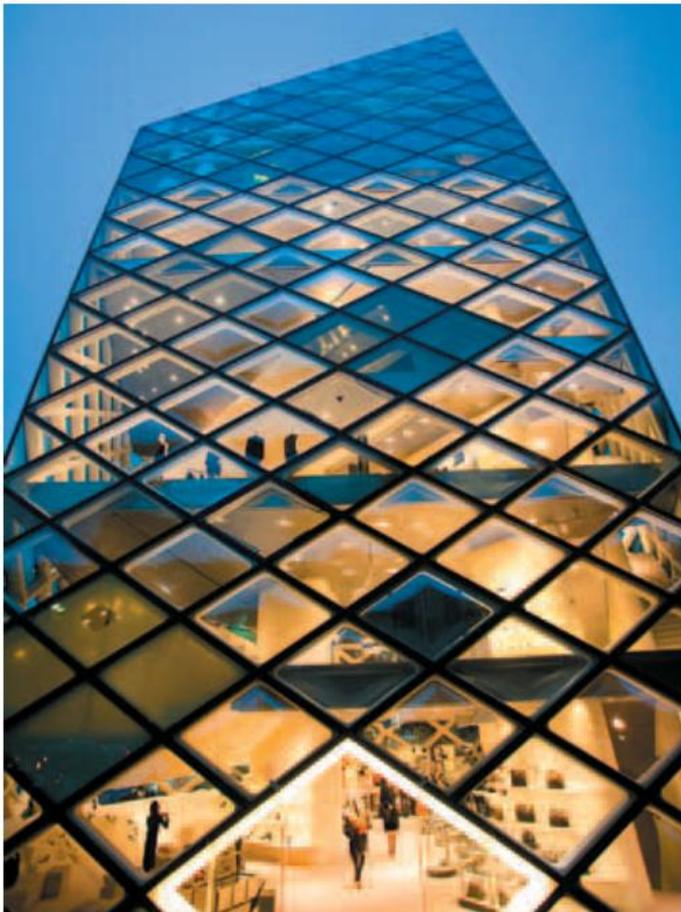
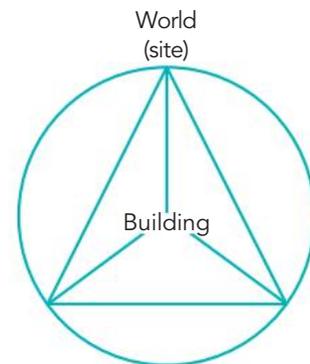
Form: architecture

Frame: *Postmodern architecture* — Herzog & de Meuron always use materials and technology in innovative and creative ways, challenging traditional architectural approaches to design.

Conceptual framework — Each building is a unique response to the site. Each architectural design is original and daring, pushing the creative possibilities.

eBookplus **Architectural gallery**

Use the **Architectural gallery** weblink in your eBookPLUS to explore a gallery of Herzog & de Meuron buildings from around the world.



Prada store, Aoyama district
2003
Tokyo, Japan
Photo: Stefano Amantini/
Atlantide Phototravel/Corbis
© Herzog & de Meuron

The \$80 million, six-storey Prada Store in Tokyo is a temple to Postmodernism. With a striking five-sided facade of clear, bubble-like glass in a twisted harlequin pattern, the glass panels both enliven the outside and articulate the inside. More than just a glass box, the building challenges many accepted ideas about floor usage and retailing with its unique design in which the structure, space and façade are unified, being based on the same basic shape.

Contrasting with the low-rise buildings in the neighbourhood, its 32-metre height seems to erupt from its outdoor plaza. The architects also controlled the way the products are displayed within the seemingly continuous flowing inside space, using contrasting hyper-artificial substances such as silicon and resin or natural materials such as leather to make a Postmodern statement about combining the traditional with the contemporary. This building is unique and has a strong impact on the site and the shopper.



Beijing National Stadium
(‘The Bird’s Nest’) 2008
Beijing, China
Photo: Marcel Lam/Arcaid/Corbis
© Herzog & de Meuron

Beijing’s National Stadium, nicknamed the ‘Bird’s Nest’ for its outer skin of twig-like patterns, when nearing completion it was named by *Time* magazine as one of the ten architectural masterpieces of 2007. It is the world’s largest steel structure. Herzog and de Meuron’s design was chosen from 13 final submissions. The design brief had included requirements for post-Olympic uses, a retractable roof (later omitted) and low maintenance costs. Ai Weiwei (page 246), as artistic consultant, insisted that the design embody unique Chinese characteristics, the chosen influence being Chinese ceramics. The stadium consists of two independent structures — a red concrete seating bowl and an outer steel frame.

Architectural practice

The headquarters of this architectural firm is in Basel, Switzerland, but they also have offices in various cities and employ some 250 staff. There are seven other partners who work with this creative duo. Herzog and de Meuron were born in the same year in the same town, went to architectural school together and have worked together as friends since.

Rather than conforming to a recognisable Herzog & de Meuron 'style', their buildings amaze in their individuality. The function of each building may not be obvious from the outer form. Aside from functionality, thought is also given to the topography and other restrictions of the site, so the resulting design is a unique response to its location. Their buildings are also distinctive for their innovative use of materials. For the library at the Technical University in Eberswalde, Germany, they created bands of silk-screened images on glass and concrete. They covered the façade of an apartment block in Basel with a movable curtain of perforated latticework. Their apartment block on Rue des Suisse, Paris, features a rippling cladding of perforated corrugated shutters. The 1994 Signal Box, a railway utility building in Basel, utilised an exterior cladding of copper strips, twisted at intervals to emit daylight. Copper is also used in the façade of the de Young Museum in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, completed in 2005, in the form of 7200 individually shaped and punctured copper panels, the design originating from pixelated photographs of the park's tree canopy.

Their international reputation was established when they were chosen in 1995 to design the new Tate Gallery extension for contemporary art, the Tate Modern, situated in the Bankside Power Station on the Thames, in London, which opened in May 2000, with further developments in 2005. They retained much of the essential character of the power station, including the chimney, converting the turbine hall into a dramatic entrance area with the boiler-room becoming the galleries. Above the original roofline they added a two-storey glass structure known as the Lightbeam to house a café-restaurant and members rooms. Their highly creative vision for this gigantic industrial building led to their receiving the Pritzker Prize in 2001. They also received the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2003 and the Royal Institute of British Architects Gold Medal in 2007.

Their innovative articulation of interior space through free-flowing curves is evident in the CaixaForum Madrid, Spain, 2008, and the Philharmonic Hall, Hamburg, Germany, 2003–09. The latter's rooftop features a dynamic scalloped effect at skyline level, creating the impression that it is undulating to the music within. Their imaginative approach to exterior design and innovative use of exterior materials and treatments is also evident in the National Stadium, Beijing.

The team are presently having an impact on residential living in New York. In 2007 they completed their first New York building, an 11-storey structure at 40 Bond Street where they transformed graffiti into 3D ornament to form a gate, the façade itself evoking the feel of the city's industrial buildings. The ambitious 56 Leonard Street, due for occupancy in 2010, is no boring glass box skyscraper. Designed using rotating slabs and cantilevers, protruding balconies and slab corners, the irregular arrangement provides a different floor plan for each of the 145 condo units. (From the outside one is reminded of some of the precarious structures children build with Jenga blocks.) The double-height lobby will be articulated with a giant mirror sculpture by Anish Kapoor. Attempts have been made to relate the outside glass and exposed concrete with Travertine-paved balconies, Travertine and Thassos marble being used as a feature in the interiors.

Among other skyscraper projects, 'Le Project Triangle', which is due for completion in 2014, is a pyramid so slim that it will cast virtually no shadow but by its orientation will take advantage of both solar and wind power. It will rise 200 metres from the Port de Versailles in Paris, providing shops and restaurants at ground level, offices, a conference centre and a 400-room hotel. A 31-year ban on high-rise buildings has recently been lifted, so as one of the new projects it is especially important that this building 'fits' into the Parisian landscape and gains acceptance by the Parisians.

Herzog and de Meuron have explained their design intentions:

The Triangle is conceived as a piece of the city that could be pivoted and positioned vertically. It is carved by a network of vertical and horizontal traffic flows of variable capacities and speeds. Like the boulevards, streets and more intimate passages of a city, these traffic flows carve the construction into islets of varying shapes and sizes. This evocation of the urban fabric of Paris, at once classic and coherent in its entirety and varied and intriguing in its detail, is encountered in the façade of the *Triangle*. Like that of a classical building, this one features two levels of interpretation: an easily recognizable overall form and a fine, crystalline silhouette of its façade which allows it to be perceived variously. (www.inhabit.com/2008/10/06/project-triangl-by-herzog-and-de-meuron)

Architect's statement

'Our means to that end have always been much more of a conceptual and intellectual nature than craftwork ... [if they] have something random about them, it's programmed randomness ...

'What's important are the unconscious impressions — everything that's communicated to you via the materials, smells and acoustics of a building. The aim with our buildings is to tone down the visual side a bit and appeal to all the human senses ...

'Architecture, art, fashion, film and music have all moved much closer than they used to be. We can work well with artists, but also

Herzog quoted in Hanno Rauterberg, *Talking Architecture. Interviews with Architects*, Prestel Press, Munich, 2008, pp. 83–7.

with fashion leaders such as Miuccia Prada, because our ways of working and thinking have come closer together. As I explained a while back, all firm landmarks and traditions have vanished, leaving a vacuum that architects have to fill with their own strategies and concepts, as long as they're capable of it. In that respect, architects and artists are related these days. But the product that emerges from it is quite different. Architecture is architecture, art is art. Architecture as art is intolerable!

Critical practice

'There is a sensitivity to scale defining the new de Young as the off-axis building snugly fits into the park hitting the same height as the tree tops, all except the tower whose graceful form buoyantly pops its head up out of the trees and looks out and across to the bay ...

'What one enjoys are a variety of topographical nodes filled with different modulating surfaces, open and intimate spaces that are conducive to both individual and social encounters, luminous areas that invite the outdoors into the building and where one is encouraged to engage with the world as one views art. As Jacques Herzog describes it: "We want to make a sensuous architecture ... an architecture that can't be experienced by the intellect alone". In this way, the design pushes the limits of how we define and experience a museum and civic building, responding to and working with key features of the region, picking up on both the natural and man-made characteristics that define San Francisco and how these are arranged and distributed.'

'They refine the traditions of modernism to elemental simplicity, while transforming materials and surfaces through the exploration of new treatments and techniques.' (Ada Louise Huxtable)

'One of the most compelling aspects of work by Herzog and de Meuron is their capacity to astonish.' (Carlos Jimenez)

'... all of their work maintains throughout, the stable qualities that have always been associated with the best Swiss architecture: conceptual precision, formal clarity, economy of means and pristine detailing and craftsmanship.' (Jorge Silvetti)

'Despite the vast range of scale, type, budget and visual expression, there is a consistency to Herzog and de Meuron's work. Ideas of surface and individual experience can be tracked through a succession of projects. Such an approach, which is not linked to programme or structure, is as applicable to projects involving sensitive urban repair as it is to high-profile object buildings.' (Sarah Jackson, 'Elevating the everyday', in *The Architectural Review*, July 2002, p. 42)

Adrian Parr, *Monument Architecture and Design* magazine, April/May 2006, p. 76.

On the de Young Museum, San Francisco

Various architectural critics and members of the jury of the Pritzker Prize

SHORT RESPONSE QUESTION



Conceptual Framework

'The strength of our buildings is the immediate, visceral impact they have on the visitor.' (Jacques Herzog) Discuss this comment in relation to two of their buildings.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the growing trend of architects working with artists and fashion designers.
2. 'Contemporary architects are admired for their imagination, virtuosity and creative use of materials.' Evaluate this statement with reference to at least two architects or architectural firms and examples of their work.
3. 'Both artists and architects respond to a site.' Discuss.

Glossary

action painting a gestural style of painting in which paint is dripped, splashed or smeared onto the canvas 63

aesthetic concerning beauty 177

alchemy a medieval forerunner to chemistry whose main objective was to transform metals of little value into gold 36

alienation feeling of hostility, estrangement, foreignness, a common theme in Postmodern art 23

allegory symbolic story or fable 131

appropriation the art practice of borrowing images, for example from art, advertising or popular culture, and using them in new and significant ways 224

automatism involuntary action, unthinking routine 55

avant-garde experimental, striving to be new or different 64

biomorphic suggestive of changing living forms; combination or variant of biological forms 55

bohemian unconventional (as of lifestyle of artist, writer or musician) 131

calligraphy the art of fine, beautiful handwriting 239

cathartic purifying or purging 110

collaboration working together cooperatively on the same project 163

collaborative working cooperatively with others on the same project 231

colonialism control and exploitation of a weaker country, especially its land and resources, by a stronger one 12

consumerism a social trend towards buying, owning and consuming more products 234

contemporary of our time, generally taken as referring to the past 10 years 200

Cultural Revolution a movement in China, 1966–68, intended to preserve ideological and revolutionary enthusiasm, especially among the

young, for Mao Zedong. Mao aimed to strengthen Chinese culture by isolating it from Western thought. Western literature was banned and books were burnt. Mao's 'Little Red Book' became the main guide to right behaviour. 239

De Stijl early-twentieth-century Dutch art movement, also known as Neoplasticism 224

deconstructs breaks down, pulls apart in order to analyse — a Postmodern method 241

displacement removal from one's place or home, particularly through war or revolution 12

documentation record of art performances or transitory works in the form of photography or video; often a part of Postmodern practice, with the documentation replacing the art object's role as 'the saleable item' 159

emotive exciting or expressing emotion 197

ephemeral existing for only a short time 35

Expressionist an art style in which the work emphasises emotion and the projection of inner feelings 113

found object natural or manufactured object not originally intended as art but used by an artist for its aesthetic value 204

gestural of marks made by the action, including free hand and body movement, of the artist as he or she paints 139

gesture marks created as extensions of arm or body movements 64

idiom form of expression, style 65

Jungian a philosophy that asserts that certain core myths and beliefs are common to different societies at various times 54

juxtaposing placing together, side by side 135

monochromatic having, or appearing to have, tones of only one colour 139

monochromaticism emphasis on tones of one colour 7

motif distinctive feature, dominant element or image 55

mythology body of stories, myths and legends associated with a particular culture 211

parochialism tendency to a narrowly restricted or local outlook 5

philosophical concerned with the principles of knowledge, beliefs, values and ideas about existence 26

plein-air in the open air; of painting done outdoors 134

Postmodern a widely used term for progressive, unconventional art starting around the 1980s. It generally challenges the traditions of art, particularly the concept of originality and acceptable media. It is often characterised by the use of technology and may draw on other art traditions. 178

proprietary relating to a sense of ownership 6

rejuvenative having the ability to make young or come alive again (e.g. plants after a fire) 31

stereotyping characterising by oversimplifying, reducing to an unfair generalisation 241

sublime awe-inspiring 3

symbolism use of signs or visual images to represent ideas 211

turbulent wild, suggesting a storm 111

vernacular characteristic language of a particular group or community 142

vitrine glass display cabinet 10

voyeuristic relating to the gratification experienced by looking at sexual objects or situations. The voyeur in art can be the artist painting a model but is more particularly the viewer of the artwork. 156

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