

Arid Arcadia, Art of the Flinders Ranges

Art Gallery of South Australia

Education notes

The exhibition is divided into 6 different areas or zones, which correspond to a linear history of human history associated with the region.

This means that any class viewing the exhibition could work in smaller subgroups (5-6) on a rotation basis. Once students have completed an orientation of the exhibition in this way it would be possible to undertake a more thematic, research-based approach built around investigating relationships between quite diverse groups of work. To assist a number of selected contemporary period works have extended packs of information to structure viewing. In addition there are a set of Critical Questions and Considerations to challenge students into engaging with the works and researching further in the exhibition.

Content

ZONE 1 An ancient land: art of the traditional owners

Photographic records of primary rock art sites within the Flinders Ranges area (including Chambers Gorge, Red Gorge, Yourambulla Caves)

ZONE 2 Early to mid colonial artists

Rarely exhibited watercolors and drawings by surveyors, explorers and artists depicting exploration of the Flinders Ranges and territory to the north. Includes work by William Westall, E.C. Frome, S. T. Gill. Emergence of scenic landscape traditions through paintings of John White and photography by H.H. Tillbrook.

ZONE 3 Hans Heysen

Heysen's art is strongly associated with the Flinders. In this large selection of oils, watercolors and drawings is evidence of his artistic skills and also his deep sense of connection with the Flinders landscape.

ZONE 3 After Heysen: contemporaries and followers

With the opening up of the inland in the mid war period a growing group of artists (painters and photographers) traveled into the region in search of new subjects. Includes work by F.A. Joyner, Harold Cazneaux. Horace Trenerry, Max Ragless and Jessie Traill.

ZONE 4 The lure of the land: an artist's destination

The post Second World War generation of young contemporaries found a landscape, which provided a backdrop for their imaginative ideas. As later generations in the later part of last century explored the area, the scope of investigation broadened to include contemporary modes of colour field and photographic practice. Artists include; Jacqueline Hick, Jeffrey Smart, Douglas Roberts, James Cant, Barrie Goddard, David Dallwitz, Ian North

ZONES 5 & 6 Contemporary readings

The region continues to capture the imagination of contemporary artists, many choosing formats, styles and media, which allow for different forms of investigation. Artists include, Antony Hamilton, Nikolaus Lang, Sally Smart, Regina McKenzie, Sam Lester.

Themes

Once students have become familiar with layout of the exhibition and individual works it is possible to undertake more thematic based viewing which require student to move freely between different zones looking for answers to questions and making connections and comparisons between often quite diverse works. The following set of themes may be useful as a starting point for further investigation while in the exhibition or later at school.

Questions of spirit

Feeling connected to a particular landscape is often linked to a sense of spirit or of touching base with a particular environment at a level, which has nothing to do with day-to-day functioning. Try tracing this sense of connection across different periods of time to see if this sense of connection changes in any way.

Looking at the landscape

When different artists look at the same landscape they will see different things. See if you can find the same or similar sites as 'seen' by different artists and make a comparison between different approaches and methods.

Media

Do you believe that one form of media (eg drawing) or format (eg sculpture) is the best form for expressing or recording the Flinders?

Stories

There are many individual and community stories linked to many works in this exhibition. See how many you can discover

Symbols

Sometimes only symbols will best express ideas and information. Conduct an investigation to see how many different kinds of symbols you can find. Is there one, which is very effective in terms of getting the message across?

Identity

People often take their sense of identity from particular locations. In this exhibition this idea is expressed in different ways as people look at different aspects of an environment to reinforce beliefs they have about themselves and their place in the world. In trying to identify some of the different ways some artworks have expressed this sense of identity see if you can decide what kinds of things are being emphasized or left out.

Seeing the inland

Most European Australians through to the mid twentieth century rarely traveled inland and didn't

have access to colored photographs of inland landscapes. Artists such as Heysen helped people to educate their eyes to a new kind of beauty. As you move from early colonial to mid twentieth century works notice how the styles of painting begin to promote a new range of colors and forms.

Contemporary readings

The works in this zone use contemporary styles of expression and investigation.

Unlike works in earlier periods, which share a common style, these works need to be looked at on an individual basis. Once some idea of what the work may mean or be about has been reached it is possible to make connections between many different works from different periods in time.

Looking at contemporary works

This involves 'unpacking' a work to reach some idea of what it means. Sometimes this is called interpretation. But why do many contemporary artists use a style of work, which is difficult to interpret? Why can't the artist just say what he or she means?

These are important questions. Here are two possible answers.

The artist may not know the full meaning of what has been made. Artists often work intuitively and there may be elements of the work, which remain a mystery to the artist as much as the viewer.

The work may often contain 'layers of meaning' that is there may be a number of ideas contained in the work. But these meanings are rarely floating round like goldfish in a bowl. They are often ideas based on connections or relationships between things. These ideas are often 'sensed' or 'felt' and may be difficult to put into a few words.

Unpacking the artwork

Here some suggested methods

Check the title for clues

Keep track of your first impressions and instincts about the work's meaning

Discuss and share ideas with others

Look for any obvious symbolism

Note and think about the choice of materials

Let your imagination 'go'

Invent a story, which involves this work in some way

Think about the way the work is placed or positioned in the room

Think about the design or composition of the work – there may be clues here.

How does the artist want you to position yourself in relation to the work? (up close/standing over it)

Look out for some comments, which may be on a nearby label

ZONES 5 & 6 Contemporary readings (selected works plus research options)

ZONE 5

Nikolaus Lang

Varioota's daydreams after his escape near Aroona Homestead (from Imaginary Figurations, no. 13) 1986-89

Lang is a German artist who has regularly visited and worked in South Australia since 1979. In 1967 at the Museum of Mankind in London he found a booklet on Australian Aborigines, and they and their culture became an 'idea' or 'fixation' of his. He went to Florence in 1976 and collected coloured pigments from the sites that were used to gather the pigments for old paintings. While in Australia in 1979 he visited South Australia for a month. He had read about a site for coloured earths in the Flinders Ranges and saw opportunities to extend the range of his investigations made around Florence. Back in Europe he prepared for a major Australian project. He read as much as possible about Aboriginal culture and the plant life and geology of South Australia.

The artist said at the time

"Australia is one place where you can feel the stone age. There are few such places left in the world". "To experience the landscape, to familiarize myself with it, having had just a glimpse, I needed to come back."

From 1986 to mid 1989 he and his family lived in Adelaide. The territory selected for his fieldwork was a 300-kilometre stretch between Angapena Station and Melrose. This choice was determined by an episode in colonial history. In 1853 or 54 a white shepherd, James Mitchell, was killed by Aborigines in retaliation for the barbaric whipping of Indigenous women, children and infants who were drinking at a waterhole. Following a hunt for the killer, two Aboriginal men, Varioota (usually spelt Warrioota or Warranutta) and 'Puttapa Bob' were captured. Varioota escaped but the other man, although badly wounded was made to walk the 300-kilometre journey back to Melrose. He died soon after arrival. A station-hand from Angapena who came to identify the killer said that the body was that of an innocent man. To conduct his fieldwork Lang conducted a series of two to three week trips across this route, gathering ideas, objects and information as he went. His special interests were Aboriginal sites, theme themes of natural life cycles. He collected minerals and native animal carcasses and made casts of the insect-ravaged trunks of trees.

This installation consists of paper pulp casts taken from a decaying river red gum at Hookina Creek. The sheets on the wall are prints made by rolling ink onto the surface of the same tree and printing onto large sheets of paper.

Critical questions

Why did the artist choose a fallen tree as the basis for this art?

Why do two 'versions' (print and cast)?

How is this work connected with this item of colonial history?

Does this work have any symbolic elements?

Here are some clues or items of additional information, which may help

The patterns of the tree are caused by insects, which hatch under the bark of the fallen tree. As the creature grows from egg to larva to pupate stage before leaving the tree as winged beetles ready to start the process all over again – the tree is eaten in groove fashion – the size of the groove increasing as the creature grows. What you see is a series of life cycle 'maps'.

In making a cast of the tree the artist was thinking of how some early anthropologists made plaster casts of the bodies of Aboriginal people for display in museums and scientific institutions.

Considerations

Can a tree be symbolic of something? Look at paintings by Heysen and *The Spirit of Endurance* by Cazneaux to help you to decide

Is it possible that the 'journey' taken by the insects can in some way refer to the journey connected with the Varioota story?

Can life cycles in nature hold any lessons for humanity?

ZONE 5

Antony Hamilton ***Raddle Man, 1997***

While at art school Hamilton became interested in the Fluxus group, whose aim was to abolish the frontiers between the arts, and between art and life. Connected with this movement was a German artist Joseph Beuys, whose work interested Hamilton. Beuys had developed an “expanded concept of art” which understood all aspects of life to be permeated by acts of creativity. Like Marcel Duchamp before him, he utilised a wide variety of found objects in his work, and used a range of unconventional materials such as fat, felt and wax to express a philosophy of art which valued personal narrative and encompassed views on economics, politics, ecology and intellectual freedom.

On graduating from the South Australian School of Art in 1978 Hamilton began searching for an Australian subject worthy of exploration, one that had both a mythic dimension and that came from his own world of experience. He found inspiration from the woolsheds of his childhood. The title is taken from the name of the dusty red chalk which pastoralists used to mark sheep, bales and bags. As one critic has pointed out, “It’s a commonplace item but rich in references. It could be seen as whitefella ochre, a counterpart to the red ochre mined by Aboriginal people in the Flinders [Ranges] for thousands of years”. In *Raddle*, the chalk has been combined with horse grease and applied to a carefully folded jute woolpack, and to the jute thread wound around two claw-like hooks, which were once used for lifting woolpacks.

Critical questions

How can objects once used for functional purposes (wool bags and hooks) become works of art?
Why has the artist chosen items connected with the early years of the wool industry to make a contemporary work of art?

Considerations

The artist has used a number of methods or devices to ‘transform’ these industrial objects. Can you see what he has done?

Is the connection with Aboriginal use of ochre a useful idea to think about while trying to ‘unpack’ this work of art?

Is there any connection between the wool industry and Aboriginal people in the settlement history of the Flinders Ranges?

Is there any special reason why the artist has arranged the objects in this way?

ZONE 6

Nicholas Folland ***Mount Hopeless, 2001***

This work was inspired by explorers’ accounts of the extreme locations and physical conditions they endured. There is also an element of irony. Mt Hopeless was the point at which Edward John Eyre abandoned his expedition in 1840. It is little more than a stony rise (127 metres). There are two distinctive or special features to this work. Each rock is fitted with heating rods, which ‘inject’ heat into the form. The rocks can be handled. Different writers have commented that these are ways of communicating something of the actual conditions encountered by the early explorers.

Much of the artist’s recent work has been about the relationship of nature and control of nature.

Critical questions

What is the ‘art part’ of this installation?

What connections can you make between these items and the physical nature of the Flinders or its history?

Considerations

What does it mean to you to be able to touch these rocks?

What do you think continual touching will do to these rocks? Do you think continuous handling will change the meaning of these items?

Can you think of reasons why the artist has tied these rocks down and put them onto trolleys?

Are there other works in this exhibition, which have references to rocks or extreme heat? If so, is there a connection between all these works?

ZONE 5

Sally Smart

Tree House (The Unhomely Body). In memory of Kent Voight, 1974-2002, 1998 - 2002

Sally Smart was born in the Flinders Ranges and grew up on a farm outside Quorn. Her work uses cutout silhouettes, painted, stained, pinned and layered. Many of these shapes are related to her childhood and growing up on a farm with its images of animals, fences, gates and trees.

The artist has said

“ In ‘Shadow Farm’ I construct my farm, according to the idea of representing domestic spaces in the bush, particularly the spaces of the farmhouse, like verandah, yard, garden and paddock. As I build a farm by pinning cut-out parts to assemble a whole, I am conscious of the performative process at work. How with each reconstruction different meanings are created.”

The Curator of *Arid Arcadia*, Alisa Bunbury, has said that this work (*Tree House*) raises ideas about the idea of a family and the “opposition of interior and exterior, or domestic and wild forces”. On hot summer nights Smart and her sisters slept on the verandah. The artist recalls the blackness of the gum trees at night and Flinders in shades of violet, purples, magentas. In this zone between fantasy and reality the tree becomes some unifying force or structure, which binds the land, the hills, trees and even bodies with their arteries and bones into something which is ‘all together’.

Critical questions

Is it possible for so many things overlapping or tangled to ‘add up’ or make sense?

Can shadows and silhouettes have an independent life from their original sources? - (or are they just shadows of the real things?)

Considerations

Shadows often have an important part to play in art – can you find some examples in this exhibition or elsewhere?

How powerful are your childhood memories? Are they very visual?

Why has the artist joined bits together instead of just painting shapes? Does this method of construction make a difference to the meaning or appearance of the work ?

Is there anything particularly ‘country’ or Flinders Ranges about this work?

Does this work give you any strong emotions or feelings?

When you look at this do you try to ‘break it up’ into smaller details or do your eyes ‘read’ it as one image or work?

Why do you think the artist has chosen this way of working? Wouldn't it have been better for the viewer if there had been a realistic image of children sleeping on a verandah?

ZONE 5

Regina McKenzie

Wilpena Pound story, 2002

Regina McKenzie is a Luritja / lower southern Arrernte / Adnymathanha woman whose father, Malcolm McKenzie was one of the last *Wilyaru* (fully initiated men).

McKenzie was brought up learning her Adnymathanha history through stories, which were often retold with sand paintings – illustrations on the earth.

“Wilpena Pound story tells three of the McKenzie’s favorite stories. The creation story of Wilpena Pound by the two giant Akurras is frequently recounted. Bearded and with flowing manes, the Akurras came from the north-west near Copley. McKenzie here tells of two men, Vulku and Valka, who saw the Akurras approaching. Although they repeatedly warned their people... they were not heeded. The two men fled while everyone else was eaten....the snakes now sleep and their bodies form the Pound.”

A parallel story describes a meteor which fell to create the Pound, which Mackenzie depicts figuratively plunging to earth in the upper left of the painting, tearing a hole through the earthy background, revealing the stars. The Flinders Ranges at that time were lush and tropical, and high enough to touch the sky. Vulku and Valka tried to warn others of the imminent danger. The meteor’s impact caused darkness and great damage to the environment, creating ice which fell on the ranges, wearing down the mountains. This was followed by drought, bringing the climate to its current state, and causing the death of the giant animals which had roamed the area.”

A. Bunbury, *Arid Arcadia* catalogue p. 152

Critical questions

The artist objects to using the word ‘Dreaming’ and uses only the word ‘history’, stating, “This is the history of my people”. Why do you think this distinction is important for the artist and viewers of her work?

Considerations

In this exhibition different artists are ‘telling history’ in different ways. See how many different kinds of histories or historical stories you can find (in the exhibition).

If you knew this story of the formation of Wilpena Pound – do you think it would influence the way you would look at it as a traveller?

Can you find other examples in this exhibition where knowing the background story has influenced the way you look at the work?

Does your family have stories or images of the house/local area where members of your family have come from?

