

Australian Surrealism Education Pack

List of selected works with research /response activities

To assist student research, selected exhibition caption notes produced by Sarah Thomas, Curator of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia have been included. These captions incorporate some text from Bruce James', *Australian Surrealism: The Agapitos / Wilson Collection*. This text is in italics.

The Research/response activities have been developed by Education Services, Art Gallery of South Australia

Clifford BAYLISS 1912–1989

Man wearing a bowler hat 1945

black, red and green inks on paper

Magritte was the source for this painting. Bayliss invests the Belgian's humdrum Everyman with a face that is a mask of distress and eyes that have seen true horrors – indeed, the grim eye-sockets contain desolated landscapes. Despite his bowler hat and bow tie, the figure's campaign ribbons and red poppy suggest an ex-serviceman.

Research and response

In mid 20th century Australia, a man wearing a suit and a hat (a business man) was seen as an image of respectability and conservative society. For some Surrealists like Bayliss, this type of citizen was a target for satire and even ridicule.

In contemporary Australian life could certain types of people or visual aspects of social behavior be seen as representing respectability and conservatism? If so can you think of ways in which an artwork might convey this idea?

Within this exhibition can you find other examples of artists targeting social values or classes of people.

Later, find out more about the French Surrealist Rene Magritte. When you do you will discover that Magritte and Bayliss have much in common.

The caption notes comment on the idea of a 'humdrum' subject containing some distressing or horrifying elements. Can you see this idea at work in this image? Why do you think the artist has mixed the ordinary with the extraordinary or even disturbing?

Bernard BOLES 1912–2001

Memory of a desert melon c1938

oil on board

Going for a swim 1946
mixed media on paper

Boles makes the connection—common in Australian Surrealism—between the mysterious landscape wastes of the inland and those of the shoreline.

Research and response

These two images appear to suggest that the open spaces of inland deserts and beaches are places where the imagination can easily take over.

Do you believe that artist may have seen things in places like these, which may have inspired these images?

Bruce James has said that these organic forms look ‘jolly’ at first glance but later provoke ‘queasiness in the spectator’. What do you think he means by this and do you agree?

Surrealist like Boles worked hard to invent new forms such as the biomorphic objects you can see in these images.

Do you think that inventing new visual forms is an easy thing to do? Perhaps you might like to try later.

James CANT 1911–1982

The fig trees 1932
oil on board

Cant treats his subject as sentient beings, a creature with thoughts and desires – neither necessarily benign.

Research and response

‘Sentient beings’ means in this context, trees which can think, feel or desire. How has the artist (of trees being like humans) communicated this idea in this work?

Do you think this is a useful idea?

Can you find other examples in this exhibition (of non-human objects being given some human characteristics)?

James CANT 1911–1982

The lonely coast 1939
oil on canvas

*A sickly atmosphere pervades **The lonely coast**, 1939, a painting which is clearly more psychological than topographical. Whether painted in London before Cant’s return to Australia at the outbreak of war in 1939, or just after, the painting is filled with fearful presentiments. The frothing waves resolve into sinewy matter and the impossibly regimented clouds become a squadron of airborne monsters.*

Research and response

Read the caption notes above and see if you can apply these comments to different aspects of the image.

Bruce James refers to the paintwork as being ‘sickly’ and greasy’.

Do you think this is an accurate assessment?

If there are symbols of war in this image, can you identify them?

Do you believe that an image built from symbols (of war) can be more effective than images built around direct references to and illustrations of war?

James CANT 1911–1982

The metal minotaur 1948

mixed media on paper

The man-beast of Greek myth enjoyed great prestige among the European Surrealists, for whom its tribal and cultural connections ran deep. It was less the cruelty of the creature that appealed than its hybridity. For the Surrealists, the ancient minotaur was in fact modern man, a belief borne out in works by Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, André Masson, Man Ray and many others.

Research and response

There are a number of modern artists referred to in the caption notes, who have been attracted to the idea that modern man (or humanity) was a hybrid (like a minotaur) – a mix of human and beast. Later see if you can find examples in works by these artists.

The idea of living forms being hybrids or mutations of other forms was a very important idea for many Surrealists. See if you can find other examples of this idea being explored in this exhibition.

If these Surrealists were working today (in the 21st century) do you think that this idea would still be relevant?

Later, conduct your own research around the idea of humanity being a hybrid of human and non-human sources and try adapting some of the techniques used by artists in this exhibition (or invent your own) to communicate some of this research in a visual way.

Dora CHAPMAN 1911–1995

The flying triangles 1948

mixed media on paper

Untitled 1949

oil on canvas

Adelaide artist Dora Chapman was, for a time, interested in automatism, one of Surrealism’s basic tenets which encouraged expression free from rational control.

Research and response

Chapman's flying triangles are some of a number of 'flying objects' in this exhibition. See if you can find other examples in this exhibition.

'Aerialism' as it was termed (things flying or floating), features prominently in the work of Australian Surrealists. Can you think of reasons why artists were attracted to this idea?

The caption notes refer to these works as examples of 'automatism'. Given that this term describes a form of free expression, which was free of rational or conscious control, can you find other examples of this impulse at work elsewhere in the exhibition?

Look closer at Cant's works. Do you really believe that these images resulted from a complete letting go of conscious control.

Later try making an image based on automatism principles.

Russell DRYSDALE 1912–1981

Tree forms (drought sketches)

1944

ink on paper

Tree forms (drought sketches), 1944, is a sheet of studies made as part of Drysdale's commission for the Sydney Morning Herald to record the effects of a major drought in western and northern New South Wales. He produced many such drawings, but few which approach the formal variety and linear authority of the present example. It is hard not to envisage them as sculptures, although of course their function was to provide Drysdale with references for his paintings. A number of canvases of the period give Surrealistic prominence to uprooted or fallen trees, mightily twisted hulks that speak of the terror and strangeness of the rain-deprived Australian outback.

Research and response

Read the caption notes above. How is it possible for fallen trees to 'speak of the terror and strangeness of the rain-deprived Australian outback'? Do you believe that modern-day travelers within Australia would see similar symbolism in such things?

Later, look at paintings by Drysdale to see if some of the ideas in these sketches have been carried through into final paintings.

What is this response (to drought landscape) saying about a European perspectives about the land?

The theme of horror has been explored by other artists in this exhibition. See if you can find other examples.

At a personal level, do you find any of these images horrible? Yes/no? Explain or describe to someone else.

Max DUPAIN 1911–1992

The bride

1936

gelatin silver photograph on paper

Caught like a sea creature in her own net, Dupain's subject is lit simultaneously from behind and below as if to approximate the water which once surrounded her. Without any hint of obscenity she holds in her sculpturally positioned left hand one of Flora's most phallic flowers, colloquially called a 'Red Hot Poker', so that this male-gendered attribute of sexuality seems to ward off rather than invite disrespect. By the same token, and paradoxically, the vertical slit in her veil is an open incitement to penetration. The figure of the bride enjoyed significant esteem in the Dadaist and Surrealist imaginations, especially through the works of Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst.

Research and response

The figure of the bride has figured prominently in the work of Dadaist and Surrealist artists. Later see if you can find examples.

The caption notes refer to the use of certain symbolism. Can you identify this symbolism within the image?

Within this symbolism there is some contradiction. Can you see what this is?

Why do you think this motif (of a bride) has figured so prominently in the work of modern artists?

In popular culture today (e.g. cinema, magazines and TV soapies) weddings also feature prominently, sometimes as things to be satirized or celebrated. Why do you think this happens?

As a visual artist can you think of new ways to analyze and respond to the symbolism and meaning of marriage, weddings, brides and bridegrooms in contemporary society?

What is the most surreal wedding you know about or could imagine?

Max Dupain in this work is using a number of photographic and compositional techniques now in current use. Can you identify what they are?

Later see if you can find out about Marcel Duchamp's *Bride Stripped Bare* work

Look at the other works by Dupain in this exhibition. Can you see any similarities in technique or ideas?

Adrian FEINT 1894–1971

The lighthouse 1943

oil on canvas

High on one of Sydney's most recognisable northern beaches, a haul of driftwood, shells, flowers, and ribbons has come to rest. That the shells are vaginal and the driftwood phallic, is obvious enough, but Feint punctuates such sexual readings with a blazing red hibiscus and a scribble of fabric.

Research and response

The caption notes indicate some sexual symbolism within this work. Do you think this symbolism makes this image a better or more interesting work?

Using the principle that 'sex sells', contemporary advertising uses a significant amount of sexual symbolism to sell products. Later see if you can identify some examples

Surrealists often explored aspects of human sexuality in their work. See if you can find other examples in this exhibition.

Adrian FEINT 1894–1971

The mask 1928
pastel on paper

Research and response

From the late nineteenth century avant garde artists have been attracted to what they knew as ‘tribal’ or ‘primitive’ art. Such art was seen as somehow possessing mythic, spiritual or primal powers which over-refined European art had lost. Later conduct your own research on the emergence of early modernism and identify examples of this attraction and adaptation.

Do you believe that another culture can have more power or significance than another? If so why? Do you believe it is appropriate for artists to borrow from other cultures in specific ways (as in *The Mask*)

Ivor FRANCIS 1906–1993

Investigation, scientific or otherwise, of matter without form 1943
oil on canvas

This painting reveals a spatially complex scene inscribed with dynamic networks and vortices. Is this human destiny as envisaged by the classical Fates, or an Apocalyptic future as devised by modern Science? Either way, the tiny mortals at the lower centre of the canvas seek refuge from a psychic superstructure engineered by unfeeling overlords.

Research and response

In this image humanity is represented by tiny figures swallowed by the environment they are entering. This device of humanity being depicted as almost insignificant is something, which can be found in a number of works in this exhibition. See if you can find some examples?

The theme of a dominant, overwhelming force is one that Francis often explored. Look at other works by this artist and analyze the different ways he explored this theme. Perhaps other artists have explored this idea also?

Do you believe this idea reflects some truth about the human condition?

Klaus FRIEDEBERGER born 1922

Camp dream 1943
gouache on paper

Camp dream, 1943, delves deeply into the darker side of life in an internment camp. Shaping the trauma of detention into a shocking emblem, a detainee howls from his stretcher as wild beasts, one of them dingo-like in appearance, prowl the vicinity. The ribbed arch above him symbolises his own

sense of anatomical exposure, a vulnerability also expressed in his feebly folded arms and stumpy shanks.

James GLEESON born 1915

My dream 1939
mixed media on paper

This drawing relates to a group of poem-drawings executed by the artist in 1939. In these, the artist seeks to unite text and image into an inseparable whole, an ambition he fulfils magnificently. Here, the figure's head seems to be embodied by the very inscription of the subconscious narrative across her features – if indeed she is female. Her hair and veil merge into a single, writerly substance. She is at once having the dream of the title and being dreamed by it.

Research and response

This image shows a dream dreaming a dream. How can this be?

Take time out to read the text of the poem-drawing on the exhibition label.

Later, try writing using automatism as the guiding principle. See, as you write if the text you are creating can be encouraged to form itself into a design

James GLEESON born 1915

The attitude of lightning towards a Lady-Mountain 1939
oil on canvas

*Gleeson's dream life was his true teacher, notwithstanding his 1939 receipt of the Dali book **The conquest of the irrational**, or his increasing knowledge of Freudian psychoanalysis. He trained himself in the habit of recording each dream, each nightmare too, that surfaced intelligibly from his subconscious. A towering faceless figure, the Lady-Mountain of the title, does indeed seem constructed from eroded rock, indicating ancient flows of lava. In the distance, impossible aerial apertures repeat the silhouettes of the Lady-Mountain and her stony underling. If anything, an atmosphere of expectation hangs over the image, as the lightning bolt courts its beloved.*

Research and response

Read the caption notes above while standing in front of this work. See if you can make the connections between interpretation and image.

Are there aspects or parts of this text that you feel don't 'fit' with the image? If so what are they?

James GLEESON born 1915

Neo-organic figuration describing the inclination of entities 1939
oil on canvas

*This painting and **The attitude of lightning towards a Lady-Mountain**, 1939, have in common the depiction of deep space penetrated by drapery-like extrusions. Common to them both, as well, is an architectural foreground of sorts suggesting a base or platform, which ties the highly fantastical action of each to the viewer's more concrete world.*

Research and response

In this work Gleeson has used similar visual ideas and designs to those in *The attitude of lightning towards a Lady-Mountain*. Can you identify what they are?

A feature of Gleeson's art is his depiction of imaginary spaces. Select one work by this artist and comment on the way the artist has manipulated or created illusions of space.

James GLEESON born 1915

Pretext of accident 1944

oil on canvas

Research and response

In this work, a favorite scenario, association and interaction with water, is a dominant feature of the composition. Does this highly imaginative image have any logic to it? Does it have any symbolism, which can be accessed? Does it (or should it) make any sense at all?

Write a description of this work and give this description to someone else (who hasn't seen this painting).

See how closely their idea of what the original image looks like 'fits' with your memory of the original. You could ask this person to do a sketch based on your written description. If there is a difference why do you think this is so?

James GLEESON born 1915

Funeral procession in a wounded landscape 1945

oil on canvas

*Arguably the *pièce de résistance* of the Collection, it is Gleeson's portrayal of the gut-wrenching yet distracting spectacle of global violence. He pictures himself in the form of a youth setting out in a coffin-shaped contraption whose sail will drive it where the winds of war dictate. While the work images the secular subconscious posited by Freud, religious allusions proliferate within it: the temptations of St Anthony in the desert and Christ in the Wilderness, for example; **Knight, Death and the Devil**, the great Dürer engraving on the theme of the journeying Christian soul; Dante's **Inferno** and, more generally, **Hell** and **Apocalypse**. Although an atheist, Gleeson was deeply interested in sacred symbology.*

Research and response

This is a visually complex work. How has the artists retained control of all the different elements to avoid total confusion?

The caption notes make a number of references to other art and literary sources. Later see if you can find out more about these sources then consider why they might be linked to this work.

Some interpretation has suggested that this work is about a journey. Do you agree with this interpretation?

Imagine waking and finding yourself in this place. What are you feeling right now?

Joy HESTER 1920–1960

Fun fair c1946

watercolour and gouache on paper

*The disjunction between a soft female form and a seemingly male, metallic monster is nightmarish, as is the empty desolation of the coastal landscape. Given the professional and personal closeness of Hester and Nolan at this time, when the latter was engaged in his Ned Kelly series, it is feasible that the mask-like face and letterbox eyes dominating **Fun fair** allude in some fashion to Kelly. If the object held in the female figure's outstretched hand denotes a pen or a brush, the work could be read as a self portrait of the artist.*

Research and response

A key feature of this image is the extreme contrast between the figure of the woman and the demonic, machine-like face in the background.

This work uses an idea that has been around in art for a long time. It's about clowns, circuses and sideshows being connected to the darker side.

Can you think of any examples from modern cinema in which such faces and places are associated with evil, terror and violence?

Robert KLIPPEL 1920–2001

Drawing P19 1949

pen, brush, brown ink on paper

These drawings by Klippel date from his intensely fertile period in Paris, 1949 to 1950, during which he concentrated on drawing at the expense of sculpture. They embody his desire to liberate himself, at least temporarily, from the constraints of working in three dimensions. While the drawings could serve as sketches toward sculptural projects, they are amazingly free of the vicariousness which can attend the preparatory notations of a sculptor.

Dusan MAREK 1926–1993

Gravitation – The return of Christ 1949

oil on panel with inset mirror

*At one level the oceanic mass rolling across the composition of **Gravitation – The return of Christ**, 1949, references the painter's sea voyage to Australia; at another his inner psychological journey. Marek's work is about other journeys as well, especially an evolutionary one.*

Research and response

In Marek's work figures often float or fly or appear to defy gravity in some way. Explore his work in this exhibition with this idea in mind.

Read the caption notes and see if you can find in them some explanation for this.

For some Surrealist artists, the sea was a readymade symbol for the subconscious or psychic energy. Find and compare (with this work) other examples in the exhibition.

Herbert McCLINTOCK, a.k.a. Max EBERT 1906–1985

Strange oversight 1940
oil on composition board

McClintock's Surrealist paintings, among the most intriguing by an Australian artist, were the product of an enthusiasm that first gripped him as an established commercial artist and portrait painter in Perth in 1937, and came to an irrevocable conclusion when he adopted a fully Social Realist approach to art in Sydney in 1941-42. His Surrealist phase was commemorated by the use of a painterly pseudonym, 'Max Ebert'.

Research and response

Describe this artist's special style of building a sense of an environment filled with fragments of things. Is there any relationship between any of the items in these landscapes?

The artist has made extensive use of shadows to build his imagery. Consider how other artists in this exhibition have used similar techniques and approaches.

Sidney NOLAN 1917–1992
collages of steel engravings

In the 1930s and 1940s no Australian artist was more ready to experiment than Sidney Nolan. His openness to new or unusual techniques, as well as his ability to apply conventional techniques in unconventional ways, placed his achievements in a category of their own. The Collection's suite of collages, constructed from 19th century steel engravings, belongs to a large body of work in this quintessentially Surrealist medium. They relate to an ambitious project in which Nolan responded to the poetry of Rimbaud, emulating the poet's signature fracturing of mood and sense, providing a visual equivalent for the verse that is both lavish and drastically undecorated.

Sidney NOLAN 1917–1992

Still life with carcase 1953

enamel paint and oil on composition board

*Nolan was commissioned by the Brisbane **Courier Mail** to record the devastating 1952-53 drought in Queensland, the Northern Territory and elsewhere. He covered a substantial tract of inland Australia in search of motifs, mainly in the form of desiccated, semi-preserved carcasses of cattle and sheep – which he drew and photographed assiduously. When first exhibited, they were hung suspended in space, emphasising their ghostly weightlessness.*

Research and response

Nolan's images of drought emphasize the strong presence of death and deserts and deserted cities within this exhibition. Compare how different artists including Nolan have created a sense of mood and meaning when making these references.

Can you think of reasons why Nolan interpreted these dismal subjects in this way?

John PERCEVAL 1923–2000

Boys on stilts c1943

oil and tempera on board

Setting moon surprised by dawn 1944

oil on canvas on board

*These two paintings read almost as a pair of before-and-after images, charting a precise passage of time from 10.45pm to 4.55am, told by the prominent clock faces in each picture, as well as by the position of Perceval's fiery moons. The two boys in **Boys on stilts** (left), c1943, are pinkly naked as they perform against the backdrop of nocturnal Melbourne. One displays his backside, leering rudely through his thighs as he falls – the result of his mate's unsporting intervention. This fellow too, is on the point of falling, unbalanced by his own act of mischief. Their disequilibrium is Perceval's pictorial symbol for the precariousness of wartime life, and perhaps more generally for the perils of contemporary urban living. Melbourne the mad, as opposed to Melbourne the marvellous, was a recurrent theme in the painter's works of the 1940s.*

***Setting moon surprised by dawn**, 1944, has a biblical hint of denying St Peter shamed by the crowing of the cock, and seems ridden with recrimination and guilt. The parkland, or market garden setting at the edge of town does little to mitigate the aggressive emotions in play among the protagonists.*

Research and response

Read the caption notes above while looking at these two works. Are you satisfied with these descriptions? Are there things which could have been said better or need to be added?

Ernest PHILPOT 1906–1985

Untitled 1941
oil on canvas

*Untitled, 1941, could be read as a Social Realist statement or even a Political Allegory. Its surreal credentials are less clear, limited perhaps to a pervading atmosphere of Apocalyptic distress, and a sense of dreams recalled in the mind rather than realities witnessed in the flesh. There is no record that Philpot ever saw such a scene of massed aerial bombing, disturbingly imaged by the cruciform shadows of otherwise invisible aircraft as they progress inexorably towards a hilltop city. As to the male figure looming so prominently in the foreground, it's hard to tell if he reels in shock at the human carnage before him, or claims responsibility for it. Like every other Australian Modernist at this time, Philpot knew of Picasso's **Guernica**, 1937, painted in outrage at the aerial bombing of the Basque capital by fascist forces.*

Research and response

This painting is one of a number in this exhibition to deal with the subject of war. Analyse and discuss this work in terms of this focus

Douglas ROBERTS 1919–1976

Hylas re-arisen 1944
oil on canvas

The lament 1944
oil on canvas on masonite

*In distinct contrast to his friend and colleague Ivor Francis, Roberts was less concerned to articulate pure psychoanalytical theories in art than to make his images a venue for the revelation of disorderly personal emotions and intimations. For example, **Hylas-re-arisen**, 1944, and **The lament**, 1944, respectively classical and biblical in inspiration, are explorations of Roberts' innermost imaginings.*

Research and response

Roberts bases much of his imagery on the creation of special kinds of landscapes. From your observation of his work in this exhibition what kinds of landscapes are they?

Jeffrey SMART born 1921

Playground (children playing)
1951
oil on canvas

***Playground** boasts no single element of Surrealism, yet it is imbued with a suggestively Surrealist sense of suspension and immanence. Beneath a moody but bland sky, and against the unadorned*

frontages of a row of terrace houses abutting a bare factory wall, two children engage in rituals of play without obvious signs of enjoyment or exertion.

Research and response

It has been said that Smart's contribution as an artist was to capture the surreal in ordinary things and events.

How does this idea fit with this image of children in a playground?

Jeffrey SMART born 1921

Strange street 1955

oil on board

*More self-consciously Surrealist or Metaphysical in its aims, **Strange street**, 1955, transports the viewer to an Italian wasteland peopled by an assembly of classical or even Fascist statuary corralled into a secret precinct by a row of contemporary highway billboards or construction hoardings. While painted in Sydney **Strange street** indicates a nostalgia for Europe, ancient and new.*

Eric THAKE 1904–1982

Happy landing (The happy father) 1939

gouache on paper

*This is Thake's response to speculations about space travel, or at least non-conventional flight. Perhaps the picture's alternative title, **The happy father**, simply echoes the artist's home circumstances, but it also hints at the Icarus myth, in which the father-and-son team of Daedalus and Icarus escape from Knossos on wings fashioned from wax and feathers. Icarus flies too close to the sun, his wings melt and he plunges to his death in the sea. Daedalus lands safely, as does the larger of the airborne shapes in the work. The window ledge and wall in **Happy landing** appear to have been finished using the air-brush technique, as well as the elongated cloud bank in the sky and the shadow beneath the foremost of the 'propellers'. These shapes derive from the swirls of coloured glass inside children's marbles.*

Research and response

To 'get into' this work and its humour it helps to know the ancient story about Daedalus and his attempt to fly.

Albert TUCKER 1914–1999

Clown 1943

oil on plywood

In essence, the Agapitos/Wilson Collection's four paintings by Tucker are masks. Despite being produced over the course of a decade, and thus at moments of varying stylistic emphasis, they are

strikingly consistent in this regard. Each depicts a central personage who has assumed, or been assigned, a reductivist facial structure in which nostrils and mouth take grotesque precedence over eyes. Tucker's masked protagonists, so different to Sidney Nolan's rather simpleton Ned, are complex, even duplicitous creatures who might as easily wound with witchery as win over with wit.

Research and response

Analyze the way Tucker has manipulated and used faces as masks.

In one work the popular Surrealist device of the clown makes an appearance. Can you find it?

Where else in this exhibition are there references to clowns or sideshows?