

Colliding Worlds: Education Resource





Image: Patricia PICCINI, *Game Boys Advanced*, 2002, silicone, polyurethane, clothing, human hair, 140 x 36 x 75 cm (irreg, life size), image courtesy the artist, Michael Buxton Collection, Melbourne

Colliding Worlds

Education Resource: John Neylon

About this Education Resource

This Education Resource is published to accompany the exhibition

Colliding Worlds

15 May – 24 July 2009

Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art, Gallery 1

Colliding Worlds is a 2009 Come Out Festival exhibition

This Education Resource is designed to support learning outcomes and teaching programs associated with viewing the *Colliding Worlds* exhibition by:

- Providing information about the artists
- Providing information about key works
- Exploring exhibition themes
- Challenging students to engage with the works and the exhibition's themes
- Identifying ways in which the exhibition can be used as a curriculum resource
- Providing strategies for exhibition viewing, as well as pre- and post-visit research

It may be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition or as a pre-visit or post-visit resource.

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Contents

1 Background briefing	5
About this exhibition	5
The artists	5
Curatorial perspectives	5
2 Exploring the works	6
Pia Borg	6
Nicholas Folland	8
Hayden Fowler	10
Shaun Kirby	12
Patricia Piccinini	14
Anna Platten	16
3 Exploring the exhibition: Themes	18
Theme 1: Nature	18
Theme 2: Materiality	18
Theme 3: Narrative	18
Theme 4: Reality	19
Theme 5: Culture	20
Theme 6: Colliding Worlds	20
4 For Teachers	21
Planning a successful visit to <i>Colliding Worlds</i>	21
Curriculum Connections: Key Competencies	22
5 Get started	24

Year Level

This Resource is primarily designed to be used by secondary to senior secondary visual art teachers and students. Components can be adapted for use by upper primary and also tertiary students.

1 Background briefing

About this exhibition

This exhibition is a feature event of the 2009 Come Out Festival program. The overall theme, *Colliding Worlds*, is inspired by a 1932 science fiction novel by Philip Wylie (*When Worlds Collide*) which tells the story of two fictional rogue planets that enter our solar system and cause catastrophic damage and the end of civilisation. However, while the colliding worlds of culture might portend destruction, loss and conflict, they are in fact rich in fertile exchange, bringing diversity and the promise of sustainability.

Colliding Worlds brings together a diverse group of distinguished Australian contemporary artists working in very different media: sculpture, new-media, animation, painting and installation. Their imaginative creations, concepts and personal artistic trajectories are so utterly different from each other that understanding is stretched and any comfort zone challenged.

The artists

Pia Borg, Nicholas Folland, Hayden Fowler, Shaun Kirby, Patricia Piccinini and Anna Platten. All of the *Colliding Worlds* artists have worked and exhibited extensively within Australia and overseas and are represented in significant public and private collections. Four of the group (Borg, Folland, Fowler and Kirby) are Samstag Scholars. Information regarding the Anne & Gordon Samstag International Scholarships can be found at www.unisa.edu.au/samstag

Curatorial perspectives

The curator of *Colliding Worlds* is Erica Green, Director of the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art.* The following statements are taken from her catalogue introductory essay. They give insights into the curatorial process, particularly the business of interpreting the theme and selecting artists and works of art which will best, as she comments, 'express the visual and interpretive possibilities of this unusually rich idea.'

'Clearly, in our present circumstances of climatic disruption and globally threatened ecologies, the colliding worlds concept is remarkably apt, contemporary and prescient. However, it is not only our natural environments and sensitive ecologies that are stressed, reactive and changing. In fact the notion of a 'collision of worlds' can be seen as an allegory of modern times in the broadest sense, portraying also a human world where difference and the unavoidable collision of competing values — political, technological, social, religious and ethnic — threaten the established order.'

'Yet some say it has always been thus in human affairs, and that colliding worlds are natural, cyclical, and a harbinger of ultimate progress for good.'

'And where scientists typically will look to rare species of tropical rainforest frogs as true indicators of climate change, we might, in a similar vein, also benefit by reflecting on the insights that artists provide to us in their often-inspirational cultural work.'

'The work of some artists may seem inscrutable, fantastic or bizarre, and may sometimes alienate and even cause offence. But with the benefit of hindsight we come to revere artistic ideas that open new space and provide new ways of looking, or work that candidly portrays society's underbelly, with its flaws and fears.'

* Information: Samstag Museum of Art: www.unisa.edu.au/samstag

Consider

- Is the idea of art being in some way an indicator of broader trends in society reliable or useful? Can you think of examples to support this?
- When Erica Green talks of 'competing values' in modern society, what do you understand by this?
- Should we have to wait for 'the benefit of hindsight' before we understand what works of art might actually be saying? Or should artists try harder to make their intentions clear?
- Once you have reviewed the exhibition, is there any work that speaks directly to you in terms of its meaning?

2 Exploring the works

Pia Borg

Pia Borg is a film director and animator currently based in the UK.

Artist website/dealer/gallery:

www.unisa.edu.au/samstag/scholars/scholars06/borg.asp

www.rca.ac.uk

'My films collage a synthesis of stop-motion, animated found objects, photos, mirrors and puppets with live action into non-linear fairytale narratives, often drawing inspiration from arcane inventions, automatons, and the early special effects of cinema and theatre.'

Artist statement, 2009: www.rca.ac.uk

Perspectives

Pia Borg's films present a constant flow of animated action in which her 'actors' (found objects, photographs, mirrors, puppets and claymation figurines) act out fantastical narratives. The gadgetry and mechanical movement of the various visual components invoke arcane inventions and the early special effects of cinema and photography.

'Informed by German Expressionist cinema and utilising traditional animation techniques, each frame is carefully composed from a montage that encompasses old photographs, found objects, human hair, scanned textures, dust, insects and discarded 16mm footage. Shunning the slickness of digitised animation, Borg expresses a preference for a 'dirty, junky aesthetic,' citing as influential the early experimental work of French filmmaker Georges Méliès.'

Wendy Walker, 'The memorable: ephemeral', catalogue essay, The 2006 Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships, Samstag Program, University of South Australia, 2006.

Work

Palimpsest, 2008, film, 10:05 min

'This film attempts to explore the relationship of time and space by representing a fixed location over a period of three centuries. The compression of time is illustrated with a combination of time-lapse, real time, and stop-frame photography. The space itself transforms and mutates, playing with a representation of historical references from 17th century painting to early 20th century cinema. The choreography of the characters appearing, disappearing and reappearing pays homage to the photographs of the spirits of the Victorian era. As time progresses the representations of these characters fade but leave a faint trace; these traces eventually overlap, creating a new collage — like the title suggests. The sound used within the film is created using shortwave radio recordings evoking the "electronic voice phenomenon" recordings of the deceased.'

Artist statement about the work, 2009.

Framing questions and research

- The artist has stated that the 'choreography of the characters appearing, disappearing and reappearing pays homage to the photographs of the spirits of the Victorian era.' The photography of spirits (or ghosts) was an offshoot of the Spiritualism movement of the 19th century. See if you can find out more about this movement and the role played by photography within it.
- Themes of ghosts and threats posed by the paranormal have often been exploited by modern or contemporary cinema. Investigate this trend and see if you can find out more about it and why it remains a popular theme.



Pia BORG, *Palimpsest*, 2008, film still, courtesy the artist

- A significant body of early cinema (early 20th century) films consisted of horror fantasies — haunted houses, mechanised monsters, mummies, vampires and the like. Elements of *Palimpsest* appear to quote 'haunted house' conventions of ectoplasmic appearances, unexplained movements and the dramatic play of light and dark. Investigate this aspect of early cinema and re-evaluate Borg's work from this perspective.
- The central idea underlying *Palimpsest* is that of a single space being the site of an unfolding sequence of events over a long period of time. Script or create a visual storyboard for a place or site of your choosing which depicts events over time. You might like to consider creating a future projection rather than re-creating the past.

Nicholas Folland

Nicholas Folland is an installation artist based in Adelaide.

Artist website/dealer/gallery:

www.greenaway.com.au

www.unisa.edu.au/samstag/scholars/scholars99/folland.asp

'While my practice generally highlights an anxiety for potential failure in everyday activity, the primary work considers this notion through a relationship between the controlled space of domestic dwelling and the unpredictable chaos of the natural environment. By forcing everyday appliances to a point of excess, and by colliding their practical application with their inherent reference to naturally occurring forces, I attempt to highlight a fragile relationship to the world, and to shift our perceived sense of stability and security within the home.'

Artist statement, 2009.

Perspectives

Nicholas Folland prefers sculptural and installation formats to express his ideas. A feature of these works is a strong theatrical quality which suggests that his objects might be sets or props for a play or opera. The objects he creates involve the manipulation of found objects and materials, often industrial or domestic in origin. Most of these objects (individual sculptures and installations) have a pared-down quality which requires the viewer to exercise the imagination and invent stories or reasons to explain the identity and function of individual items or the relationship between several. The delicate balance in Folland's work between the natural and the artificial has often been remarked on. As the artist comments, 'Much of my work either includes or implies a transformation taking place, or something in-between states. Hopefully there's a sense that something has just happened, or that it's about to, and, like a moment of realisation, it's out of your control.' His practice is built around not one central idea but several overlapping interests which are expressions of an interest in the world views that societies create in order to make sense of — and control — their surroundings. This interest extends to the systems of hypothesising, exploring, analysing and recording used to map known, almost-known and unknown worlds.

One critic has commented, 'Nicholas Folland's works appear as experiments reflecting upon process and the construction of knowledge. They evoke studies of earth and air, wet and dry, hot and cold; they play with mobility (placed and placeless), containment, and the imaginative quest to encompass the elements of "nature" and "landscape" while pointing to the ambiguities of their own task, to incommensurability and unpredictability, the pleasure and risk of knowing and perception.'

*Ruth Fazakerley, review, Nicholas Folland exhibition, Greenaway Art Gallery, 1–26 August, 2001, *Artlink* Vol 2 no. 4.

Work

floe, 2009, found glass, nylon, 300 x 650 x 180 cm

'The work was generated from the drawings of early explorers, who would often create accurate profile drawings of new coastlines to assist in future navigation. On many occasions there was not time or an opportunity to actually go ashore and investigate the new lands, so while these documents would describe a coastline, they provide no other information as to what the landmass might contain, or its future potential. To my way of thinking, they were so close but still so far from knowing. In a way, the drawings just increase a desire for knowledge and enhance a sense of mystery.'

Artist statement about the work, 2009.



Nicholas FOLLAND, *floe* (studio work in progress), 2009, found glass, nylon, 300 x 650 x 180 cm
courtesy the artist and Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide, © Nicholas Charles Folland, 2009/Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2009

floe is one of a number of works made by Folland which pick up on the theme of exploration. These works have drawn references from the 19th and early 20th century age of exploration and the experiences of explorers subjected to the extremes of desert, ocean and polar ice-cap environments. The Antarctic — and some of its best-known pioneer explorers, RF Scott and Sir Douglas Mawson — have been drawn into Folland's creative narratives in a context of representing society's desire to break down the world's last frontier of the unknown. The map and chart referencing that strongly determines the form of the work is consistent with the artist's interest in and use of map structures within other works to signify how elusive this quest for ultimate knowledge is. To emphasise this point, Folland reminds us that the coastline once drawn to assist Mawson's explorations is, with global warming, beginning to change. In the process, the original drawings now begin to take on a nostalgic identity.

Framing questions and research

- Some interpretations of Folland's work suggest that his sculptures and installations are visual metaphors for attitudes or states of mind. Analyse *floe* from this perspective.
- Nature is often represented in Folland's work as something that can be observed and recorded, but, at the same time, is also unrepresentable or unpredictably chaotic. How is this idea explored or expressed in this installation?
- Folland's choice and use of materials is a reflection of his intentions. Analyse *floe* from this perspective.
- 'Much of my work either includes or implies a transformation taking place, or something in-between states. Hopefully there's a sense that something has just happened, or that it's about to, and, like a moment of realisation, it's out of your control.'

Do you think this comment of the artist applies to this installation?

Hayden Fowler

Hayden Fowler is currently living and working in Berlin, Germany and Australia.

Artist website/dealer/gallery:

www.gbk.com.au

www.unisa.edu.au/samstag/scholars/scholars08/fowler.asp

'The central concern of my practice is the problematic contemporary relationship between humanity and nature. I am interested in the emotional relationships of individuals to the natural world and the increasing deprivation of this connection within contemporary civilisation. My work is strongly related to the themes of freedom, loss and desire, and with the romantic hope for a return to nature.

I work to recombine and juxtapose natural and artificial elements to explore both the artifice of the modern environment and the disjointed contemporary nature/culture relationship. By relocating instinct, tradition, and human nature relationships into unfamiliar and unnatural environments, my intention is to investigate the fragmentation, sanitisation and repression of human nature and culture within the constraints of contemporary First World existence.

In constructing fictional spaces I use a framework of human history, mixing and collapsing history to generate new parallel times and places. My references range from tribalism and animism, past and imaginary civilisations, through to the futuristic projections of 20th century science fiction and utopian dystopian narrative, trying to find a new understanding of the human discourse, which begins with total immersion in the natural world and ends in total removal from it.'

Artist statement, 2008.

Perspectives

Central to Fowler's practice is the interrelationship between humanity and the animal kingdom. This the artist sees as signifying humanity's place in the world. In ancient and traditional societies this relationship is complex and is often expressed through mythologies, accounts and legends which may involve shape-changing (human to creature, and reverse), hybridity (such as Pan as man/goat) and allocation of special or totemic powers and significance to a particular creature or species. This relationship has been invariably expressed through all the arts forms. Fowler's practice invigorates and interrogates this tradition by relocating it within fictional, futuristic spaces such as a space craft (as seen in *Second Nature*) or, as in one work, (*Call of the Wild*, 2007), having a pair of extinct Huia birds tattooed onto his body while on display in a shop window. Through such strategies, the cultural authority and meaning particular creatures once had are dismantled. But, as Fowler's theatrical presentations suggest, a sense of connection between humanity and nature remains, even if we may not know what this means any more.

'Hayden Fowler's interdisciplinary practice reflects on the consequences of the increasing separation between humanity and nature at a time when it is becoming more and more difficult to define what is natural.'

Jasmin Stephens, 'Call of the Wild', exhibition catalogue essay, Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney, 2008. www.gbk.com.au

'Hayden Fowler's stills and videos also have a strong sense of theatrical narrative. Fowler's animals operate instinctively within a highly sanitised set or background, but represent aspects of human nature. There is a political dimension to Fowler's narratives. *Hunger's* lambs parallel the profligate waste of the First World with the desperate poverty of the Third. The goats in *Goat Odyssey*, the mice driven through the set in *White Australia*, and the cock in *White Cock* are following an imposed order, impotent and powerless despite the expression of instinctive behaviour.'

Louise Martin-Chew, 'Alternative Realities', catalogue essay, The 2008 Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships, Samstag Program, University of South Australia, 2008.

Work

Second Nature, 2008, digital video, 36:20 min



Hayden FOWLER, *Second Nature*, 2008, digital video, 36:20 min, courtesy the artist and Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney

'*Second Nature* articulates a number of contemporary issues: the isolation of humans from each other and from the natural world, the merging of the organic and the machine, and the potential death of Earth itself.'

'Set beyond both Earth and nature, *Second Nature* references the space colony of science fiction discourse, its inhabitants clinging to remnants of life, civilisation and nature within the sparseness and austerity of the machine which supports them. The depictions of this space slide between beauty, humour and a sense of horror, articulating the silent creeping terror of humanity's "success" in freeing itself from the limitations of nature and the earth.'

'Within these space-aged chambers, history is both condensed and extrapolated, referencing tribal costume, the prehistoric goddess figure Venus, and the gold of fallen civilisations. His handful of animal characters has survived the historic fall from animist symbols to companion animal and now accompany humanity on this journey into apparent nothingness.'

Artist statement about the work, 2009.

Framing questions and research

- Why do you think the artist associates humanity's success (freeing itself from the limitations of nature) with terror? How does he convey this idea in this work?
- The artist comments that in these works the 'boundaries between human, animal, plant and machine are blurred.' Analyse the video from this point of view and see if you can identify ways in which he does this.
- In making this video the artist intended to create a sense of mood or atmosphere. Do you think this video has or creates a particular mood? If so, how would you describe it and how has the artist created it?
- Today it is still quite common for people to have tattoos of creatures applied to their bodies. What kinds of creatures? What do you think this might be saying about these people or about society in general?

Shaun Kirby

Shaun Kirby is a Melbourne-based artist.

Artist website/dealer/gallery:

www.unisa.edu.au/samstag/scholars/scholars98/kirby.asp

Perspectives

Shaun Kirby's work defies easy analysis. Critical interpretation has often drawn attention to elements of obliqueness, layering, contradiction, open-ended narrative and cross-referencing of cultural and linguistic association in the artist's practice. At the same time there is agreement that his works have a strong visual presence. There are a number of reasons for this, among them the way the artist factors in the architectural spaces in which works are sited. The challenge in viewing Kirby's work is to accept that a work's meaning will lie somewhere in the spaces between things. The artist explains this as being like *moiré* patterns created by overlapping, animated templates. The artist has commented that within works there should be a degree of opacity and resistance, even perversity. Identifying the central ideas on which the artworks are based is equally challenging. There is no explicit social or political agenda. Despite this, there is a sense of dysfunction, unease or threat, which suggests some kind of rupture or instability in social order. This can be explained to a degree by the artist's interest in 1950s *film noir*, as well as 1930s Expressionist films which had threat as a central theme. This theme, however, while implied, is often held in check in Kirby's work by elements of humour and parody. As Kirby comments, 'there is always a sort of misanthropic humour lurking in the background of my work.'

'So dissolved are categories of practice in the present productions of Shaun Kirby, it's impossible to refer to him as a painter, a sculptor, a bricoleur or an installer, though he is each of those. Certainly he is an artist, but one for whom art is less a defining noun than an indefinite article. Flux, not fixity, is his element. His avowal is for ambiguity of meaning, or multiplicity of it, to the extent that any uni-dimensional reading of the work depraves it.'

MA Greenstein, 'Back to the Future', catalogue essay, The 1998 Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarships, Samstag Program, University of South Australia, 1998.

Work

cousin beast, 2005, mixed media

The work *cousin beast* consists of a table with a spider lurking beneath, flanked by a set of photographs sourced from 1920s glass slide positives depicting snakes — and boys holding snakes — somewhere in the Australian bush. This is a characteristic Kirby work-format: a sculptural object associated with photographs. The artist provides some clues to the work's content and possible meaning. He states that the work was made around a time in Australia when there was 'a flood of politically motivated rhetoric' about notions of Australian-ness and Australian values. This raised in his mind the way in which a term like 'home' (as in 'nation') can imply both refuge or threat. Kirby believes that 'in some ways it is a malignant concept that masks division, ambiguity and ambivalence, repressed histories and selective rememberings. The 'drifter', 'itinerant', the 'stranger'; all are negative manifestations of this fiction. It (most often figured as male) is in some sense a 'spoiler', an archetype that might be seen to threaten the unraveling of social, ethical and moral attachments. It is a lurking presence at the edge of our physical and psychic worlds, a phantom that threatens to manifest and wreak some form of terrible damage or rupture.'

This 'lurking presence' is expressed in *cousin beast* by the spider ('rather loosely based on the white-tailed spider that urban myth has made the carrier of a flesh-eating necrotic bacteria') and the photographs that for the artist form a kind of negative 'Dad and Dave' image of Australian-ness, perhaps darker and more real than the romantic myths of mateship, the 'fair go'.

Linked to this, the artist sees the images in *cousin beast* as resonating 'strongly in terms of Australian attitudes to the landscape, the flora and fauna, and the country's Indigenous people.'



Shaun KIRBY, *cousin beast*, 2005, mixed media, dimensions variable (table: 2.5 x 2.5 x 0.9 m), courtesy the artist

Framing questions and research

- One possible interpretation of Kirby's work is that beneath the surface of social order is an underbelly of violence and threat. Discuss or analyse *cousin beast* from this perspective.
- The artist has suggested that 'these images represent a sort of 'anti Dad and Dave', a kind of dark twin of the cosy nostalgic fictions of nationalism'. Who were Dad and Dave? And how can these figures be linked to nationalism?
- The proportions of the table are derived from the architecture of Walter Burley Griffin. Who was Walter Burley Griffin? Why do you think the artist is associating this particular architect with 'underlying darkness and violence'?
- Do you think that this work is saying something about 'Australian attitudes to the landscape, the flora and fauna, and the country's Indigenous people'?

Patricia Piccinini

Patricia Piccinini is a Melbourne-based artist.

Artist website/dealer/gallery:
www.patriciapiccinini.net

'One of the points of my work is that we now know that we all came from the same genetic material; that all life on Earth came from the same common genetic ancestor. So one of the points of the exhibition is that there is a family inside the show, and there is also a family that includes us as well as these creatures that I present. So if we are family, then how does that change our attitude, how does it determine our responsibility to the creatures we create? In my work, perhaps I am saying that whether you like them or you don't like them, we actually have a duty to care. We created them, so we've got to look after them.'

From lecture by Patricia Piccinini, 8 December, 2003, Faculty of Fine Arts, Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. www.patriciapiccinini.net

Perspectives

After leaving art school in the early 1990s Piccinini spent a lot of time drawing at anatomy museums. Around this time she began a project called *The Mutant Genome Project* (1994–95). The inspiration was an international science research project, started in 1990, called the Human Genome Project (HGP) which aimed to identify the genetic makeup of the human species. The artist became interested in the idea of 'designed humanity'. Central to the artist's practice from this point on is the idea of creating or giving birth to new lifeforms which carry some imprint of the human species, partly in biological form and partly in behaviour. Initially she explored the idea of 'designer babies', expressed as LUMPS (Life Form with Unevolved Mutant Properties). By the later 1990s her projections of possible future life had encompassed tissue engineering (as seen in *Protein Lattice*, 1997, essentially realised as a mouse with a human ear growing on its back) and machine/human hybrids centred on car and truck bodies (*Truck Babies* and *Car Nuggets*). In 2000, scientists successfully synthesised DNA to make the world's first synthetic organism (SO1), essentially a lifeform created with chemicals. Piccinini's response was a second synthetic organism, SO2, expressed as an almost bald, mole-like creature ('siren mole'). In an extended series of photographs and installations, the artist cast this creature as a technological animal, dependent on humans for its survival. A major exhibition — *We Are Family*, presented at the 2003 Venice Biennale — was a showcase for the artist's lines of investigation to date and the high level of production skills required to communicate them. This exhibition included the works *Still Life With Stem Cells*, 2002, *Game Boys Advanced*, 2002, and *The Young Family*, 2002.

'Patricia Piccinini is an artist who explores the frontiers of science and technology through her sculptures, photographs and video environments. Since the early 1990s, Piccinini has pursued an interest in the human form and its potential for manipulation and enhancement through bio-technological intervention. From the mapping of the human genome to the growth of human tissue and organs for stem cells, Piccinini's art charts a terrain in which scientific progress and ethical questions are intertwined.'

Rachel Kent, 'Fast forward: accelerated evolution', catalogue essay for exhibition *call of the wild*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2002.

Work

Game Boys Advanced, 2002, silicone, polyurethane, clothing, human hair

The two boys are cloned twins. On close inspection alarming signs of premature aging can be seen. The source for this idea was Dolly the sheep. Dolly was a ewe (5 July, 1996 – 14 February, 2003) famous for being the first mammal to be cloned from a cell. Dolly's death at the premature age of six years prompted debate about the biological and ethical consequences of cloning.

Work

Still Life With Stem Cells, 2002, silicone, acrylic, human hair, mixed media

This work extends ideas explored earlier in the LUMP series of undifferentiated tissue forms. The lumps of apparently living tissue, with their human-like skin, vascular traces, creases, veins and fine hair, might potentially be lung or heart tissue. The action of the girl in caring for these 'living things' invites thinking and questions about adjusting to future worlds in which such entities may become commonplace.



Patricia PICCININI, *Game Boys Advanced*, 2002, silicone, polyurethane, clothing, human hair
140 x 36 x 75 cm (irreg, life size), image courtesy the artist, Michael Buxton Collection, Melbourne

Work

The Young Family, 2002–03, silicone, polyurethane, leather, human hair

The mother creature suckling its young is a cocktail mix of buffalo, pig, ape and perhaps other creatures. The expression on its face demands an emotional response. The question is: 'why'?

Framing questions and research

- It has been said that Piccinini has an ambivalent attitude towards technology. In the context of the artist's works in *Colliding Worlds*, what might this mean?
- Art critic John McDonald has commented that Piccinini's works are 'science fiction vignettes plucked from some imaginary movie set'.* How do you see them?
**Sydney Morning Herald*, 17–18 September, 2005
- A curator has commented about Piccinini's work, 'the question of what constitutes the "natural" has been central to her research and work. The conceptual strands that link her disparate projects are examinations of the distinction between nature and artifice, the virtual and the real, and the increasingly complex and problematic ways in which our experience of the world is mediated through contemporary scientific information and digital technologies.'*
*Jason Smith, 'Sandman', catalogue essay for *Sandman* exhibition installation, National Gallery of Victoria, 2002 – 2003.
What do you think these statements mean? How do they apply to the artist's works in the exhibition?
- If you could ask the *Game Boys* some questions, what would they be? What kind of answers might you get?

Anna Platten

Anna Platten is an Adelaide-based artist.

Artist website/dealer/gallery:

www.evabreuerartdealer.com.au/platten.html

www.acsa.sa.edu.au/studios/platten/platten.html

'I feel my motivation for painting hasn't changed much from that which I had as a child. As I imagine for most children, drawing was for me a means of tangibly exploring, possessing and controlling the world around me... I'm still trying to do the same thing but now the emphasis has changed from a capturing of outward reality to using that reality to embody that which is sensed, albeit inner and uncertain. Behind the mundaneness of everyday life we are all part of an emotional reality which is anything but mundane.'

Artist statement.

Perspectives

Anna Platten's meticulously crafted painting and drawings use tonal realist styles of depiction to create scenarios which blend fantasy and commonplace elements. Her subjects are largely drawn from her immediate world and encompass themes of life as a journey and the transition from child to adulthood, single to married state and parenthood. The resolution of such processes is rarely complete or reassuring, but more ambiguous, leaving the viewer in some doubt about purposes and outcomes. Her work has sometimes been described as 'surreal' but lacks the darkness of the most intense of surrealist expression. It invites instead an opportunity to see life as a theatre of the absurd. The association with theatre is often strengthened by the stage, marionette-theatre-like and pantomime settings in which her characters appear. Symbolism such as ladders, exotic costuming and toys offer coded entry points into what appear to be autobiographical statements. Platten's adoption of realist modes was initially inspired by Flemish early Renaissance artists. Other artistic models followed, notably Velázquez, Rembrandt and Watteau. She doesn't draw from the imagination but works from props and costumes as worn by models.

'Platten is concerned with the symbols and objects that we see or are influenced by in our daily life. Her work contains representations of symbolic objects of all kinds. She poses her subjects in a way that reveals the most intimate aspects of their personalities, with great attention to facial expression, posture, the positioning of the hands, and the direction of the gaze. All these elements convey archetypal aspects of the human personality.'

Chris Reid, 'Gazing in the theatre', catalogue essay for the exhibition *Anna Platten: Paintings and drawings 1994 – 2004*, Adelaide Central Gallery, 2004.

The works

The Journey, 2008, oil on linen

The Journey – gate, 2008, oil on linen

The Journey – crossing, 2009, oil on linen

The Journey – landmark, 2009, oil on linen

The figure of the woman in period costume was originally inspired by a 16th century biblical illustration which depicted the human soul as a wandering fool or jester. The objects associated with the figure – the fool's hat, hobbyhorse, basket and hurdy gurdy in her left hand – were derived from that illustration. The artist comments:

'The relevant reference was Psalm 69, verse 5, loosely translated as 'Only you Lord know my folly, I cannot hide my guilt from you.' **The woman's dress is an original Victorian which my sister Bronwyn and I found in a London opp-shop over thirty years ago. It seemed perfect, due to its tonality and obvious age, to enhance the idea of a riding habit in which the journey-er had been for a long, long time.'**

'To me the figure, although female and young, stands in for anyone reflecting on the experience of passing through life, reflecting on one's interaction with the world within and the world without.'



Image: Anna PLATTEN, *The Journey – gate*, 2008, oil on linen, 186 x 130 cm, private collection, image courtesy the artist

'Rather than trying, as I have in the past, to have an entire narrative in each painting, I envision this *Journey* series to be exhibited as part of a larger body of work nominatively titled as "the Waking Dream" in which the narrative is made as an interaction between the works – the journeying figure and the "mythical" figures I hope that she might encounter.'

Artist statement about the work, 2009.

Framing questions and research

- In *The Journey* series, the artist has travelled back in time and used imagery from a previous era to represent a significant transition from youth to womanhood. Imagine that, as an artist from some future time, you decide to travel back to 2009 and select some images to do the same. What images would you choose and how would you use them?
- Consider inventing or choosing visual symbols that represent who you are: not just how you look but your personality, feelings, things that matter to you, personal stories and so on. Compose these symbols within a work in such a way that people will want to spend time getting to know you.
- It has been said that much of the interest in Anna Platten's art can be found in the way in which she mixes symbolism and realism or naturalism. Analyse any work from this perspective.

3 Exploring the exhibition: Themes

Exploring the exhibition extends beyond looking at an individual artist's work to identifying and considering relationships between any works in the exhibition. An effective way to do this is to view *Colliding Worlds* as an exhibition made up of groups of works with similar thematic links. Deciding on which themes are relevant to any exhibition is a personal process. Below are a number of suggested themes. As you explore the exhibition you may identify additional or alternative themes.

Theme 1: Nature

The idea of nature is central to human life and identity. Many traditional world views hold nature to be something other than human life, or that humanity is somehow 'above' nature. Art of the modern era has been increasingly drawn into the debate about what nature actually is and how humanity fits into it. Most recently, in a context of scientific analysis of the global biosphere (and beyond) in which humanity as a species lives and co-exists with other species, many artists have been exploring the nature of human identity and the implications of bio-technological enhancements of humanity's 'natural' form.

Consider:

- Piccinini's mutant humans and creatures, envisaging the possibilities of bio-medical science creating new lifeforms.
- Fowler's interrogation of the interrelationship between humanity and the animal kingdom, set in the future.
- Folland's representation of nature as a contradiction — something 'fixed' that can be recorded, but, at the same time, is unpredictably chaotic.

Theme 2: Materiality

The term 'materiality' refers to the role that the materials used to compose the work play in delivering some sense of meaning or significance. In traditional studio arts such as oil painting or bronze sculpture this aspect was taken as given, and critical commentary restricted to subtleties and individual styles of handling the medium. The modern era has foregrounded this aspect of art-making to the point where the choice of materials and their tactile and symbolic properties has become part of the package in terms of setting up and delivering meanings or simply making emphatic statements. The increasing use of found objects and materials — such as industrial or mass consumer domestic materials and ware — accelerated this process. Today, artists draw on a rich contemporary tradition in which the use of such materials or items such as fat, rubber, furniture, industrial fasteners, clothing, off-cuts, toys, clay, timber, fur or water is often read as being significant and perhaps central to the work's intent.

Consider:

- Piccinini's finely-crafted simulation of human or animal skin.
- The sense of arcane dustiness created in Borg's video.
- The high degree of naturalism or realist detail in Fowler's video which contrasts with the unreality of the scenarios.

Theme 3: Narrative

The narrative (story-telling) traditions of Western art were interrupted by the revolutionary modern era which regarded such traditions as obsolete or better served by cinema. The later part of the 20th century saw a revival of narrative as a key art practice strategy. This was due in part to the emergence of film, video and photographic-based practices as preferred modes of expression. Parallel to this, post-modernist perspectives encouraged a revitalisation of narrative structures in order to critique cultural systems or insert previously marginalised accounts (e.g. minority groups) into mainstream histories. Narrative in contemporary art takes various forms, with many favouring fictive constructions (as in literary or cinematic fiction), broken/interrupted/overlapping narratives, multiple endings and strategies designed to encourage the viewer to identify with the central narrative, create alternatives, or 'join the dots' in order to uncover the story. Through such means the past, present and future can be considered from many different perspectives.

Consider:

The idea of the journey as a special kind of narrative

- Piccinini's sculptural installations act as freeze-frame scenarios which usually motivate viewers to construct stories or some dialogue in order to bring these creature to life.
- Fowler adds an extra dimension to the interrelationship of humans and animals by setting his characters in some future time, on a spaceship travelling further from the past and the values and world views the past represents.
- Platten's young woman is on a life journey.
- Borg's animation tells the life story of an architectural space.

Theme 4: Reality

'Reality' continues to be a go-to term to represent the central concerns of many contemporary artists. In European art, the modern idea of reality having many 'realities' or existing in many forms can be traced from Surrealism (or 'super-realism') early in the 20th century, which held that the inner reality of dreams, the subconscious and the imaginative mind represented a more central reality than that of the world of appearances. By the later 20th century, 'reality' took centre stage as postmodernist ideas and debate addressed the systems and basis on which society functioned, such as beliefs, political and commercial systems, values, and national and individual identities. In the visual arts the focus fixed on the way the art world and the worlds of popular culture and consumerism intersected. Taking a position that it was not possible to separate art from the wider visual environment (or visual culture), many artists based their practice on a critique or exploration of the way mass media had created a 'hyperreality' based on an endless circulation of signs. The virtual reality enabled by state-of-the-art computer games and reality TV shows are indicators of the significance of reality as a form of cultural and consumer branding.

Consider:

'Magic realism'

This term has come to be applied to a wide range of art practices which embrace both old and new media. As the term implies, it employs realism such as close simulations of physical reality (life-like figures, for example) or powerful illusions of visual reality. This realism is mixed with slight or extreme fictional elements which cause the viewer to hover between wanting to believe and wanting to enjoy the story or spectacle for its own sake. Elements of this kind of art can be seen in:

- Platten's fictional recreation of a young woman on a life journey.
- Fowler's actual use of real actors (individual figures and animals, complete with reality touches such as droppings) set in a fantasy space craft or futuristic enclosure.
- Kirby's ominous spider.
- Piccinini's disturbingly real *Game Boys*.

Constructions of reality

Central to some artists' practice is a probing into the nature of seeing and understanding the world. Folland, for example, takes a position that the reality that we believe to be constant (particularly nature and literally rock-solid things like coastlines) is fundamentally unstable. Collapsing or juxtaposing time is another way to challenge the idea of reality as fixed and final.

- Borg's unfolding series of historical 'facts'. Which period is the real one?
- Platten's model for her time-traveller is part early book illustration and part fellow artist Fleur Noble.
- Fowler, in sending his characters on some futuristic voyage, intensifies the focus on the 'here and now'.

3 Exploring the exhibition: Themes

Theme 5: Culture

The idea and nature of culture is a fixture in contemporary discourse (thinking, discussion and debate). The 20th century witnessed what can be described as 'Culture Wars', which had their roots in 18th century and 19th century revolutions involving many things, including the emergence of middle-class society and individualism. The Wars were broadly about the distinctions traditionally made between so-called 'high' and 'low' culture. Accompanying this were other debates about systems and sources of cultural authority (e.g. 'official' histories of art, art museums and academies). Many strategies used in the revolutionary periods of the late 19th to early 20th century art (such as the use of found objects) can be traced to this determination to replace old definitions of culture with ones that made sense in a contemporary trans-cultural world.

Consider:

- The subtle absurdity in Platten's image of a 'modern face' set on a period-costumed body.
- The faux classicism in Fowler's images, referencing the 'high culture' credentials of such creatures as goats and horses.
- Popular culture as represented in Piccinini's computer games (*Game Boys*) drawn into serious debate about the future of humanity.

Theme 6: Colliding Worlds

Implicit in all of the above themes is the idea that alternative, parallel or complementary world views exist. When the gap or alignment between one set of world views and another is extreme, collisions can occur. Part of exploring the exhibition *Colliding Worlds* is to identify any world views individual artists hold, and decide if exploring or expressing contradictory world views have a significant role to play within the work.

Consider:

- Folland's belief that nature (and thus reality) is both unstable and ultimately always out of reach contradicts a generally held belief that technology, science and natural laws will ultimately keep everything under control.
- Fowler's reading of human history which involves recognising that humanity as a species has evolved a complex set of relationships with the animal kingdom. It implies a sympathetic position to reasons why such relationships evolved and the artist's concern with views which hold that in a future world animals will have to 'sing for their supper'.
- Piccinini's sculptures address a prevailing view that bio-technological advances which enhance human life are welcome, in such a way as to raise doubts about ethical, social and even biological implications.
- Kirby's tag-team of lurking spider and little snake-killing Aussies needs to be read, as the artist suggests, against a backdrop in current Australian society of historical attitudes to such things as dispossession or nature, of which the artist reveals 'disturbingly retrograde attitudes, views and values.'

4 For Teachers

Planning a successful group visit to *Colliding Worlds*: Pre-exhibition

Background briefing: Inform the students about the origins and content of the exhibition.

The Curatorial perspectives section at the beginning of this Resource will be a useful resource here.

The primary focus in briefing students should be the fact that most modern forms of art are experimental, are not concerned with representation for its own sake, and often require the viewer to bring their own thoughts and feelings to the process of making meaning. Things that can be identified in the works are often symbolic rather than literal.

Suggested activities:

- Look at examples of contemporary art (reproductions/videos) which explore themes similar to those identified in this Resource (see Exploring the exhibition: Themes).
- Art Gallery of South Australia on-line student research downloads:
Check out the Art Gallery of South Australia on-line education resources site — www.artgallery.sa.gov.au — and download the following:

SEE KNOW and FEEL enquiry map

Access: Go to EDUCATION/unpacking art/TEACHERS/Enquiry Map download.

Use this as a basis for exploring and analysing *Colliding Worlds* artworks. Gathering information using the enquiry-based SEE KNOW and FEEL approach also introduces the idea that looking at artworks involves looking for clues to develop ideas about what a particular work might mean or be about.

Art Games: games-based looking and discussion is an excellent way to introduce the idea that looking is an active and engaging activity which stretches the imagination.

Access: Go to EDUCATION/unpacking art/TEACHERS/Art Games download.

Planning a successful group visit to *Colliding Worlds*: At the exhibition

Option 1

If you decide that the viewing session will be broadly immersive and involve little formal work such as small group analysis of works, scribing, student reporting and teacher debriefing then consider the following package:

On arrival, briefly assemble students and focus on the broad theme of *Colliding Worlds*. Give reminders about gallery behaviour protocols. Distribute the *Collision Course* research sheet or other material prepared by the teacher.

Tasks

- | | |
|------------|---|
| 15 minutes | Small groups (4–5 students) take time to view some works.
During this time it is better if students all have some specific tasks.
Suggest selections from the <i>Collision Course</i> menu. |
| 10 minutes | Regroup and sample some group responses/findings. |
| 15 minutes | Reverse groups' level allocations. |
| 10 minutes | Finally, individual time out with students given or selecting activity from the <i>Collision Course</i> sheet. |

A useful 5-minute close-out exercise: before leaving, give students time out for a last look with some specific tasks in mind. For example: Choose one work which interests you most and think about one thing within it or an aspect that you could talk about later or perhaps use in individual artwork.

Note: Time allowances for each unit can be trimmed according to individual schedules.

4 For Teachers

Option 2

This session will involve students being involved in more formal and individual analysis, and response and scribing.

A suggestion is that students in this session try two things:

- Engage with the work of an individual artist.
- Engage with the exhibition's themes.

For this to happen it would be useful if the students had access to the *Colliding Worlds* Education Resource prior to visiting the exhibition. This could allow students to make focus selections before arrival.

This viewing package might look like:

On arrival briefly, assemble students and focus on the broad theme of *Colliding Worlds*. Give reminders about gallery behaviour protocols. Distribute *Collision Course* research sheet or other material prepared by the teacher.

Orientation time

10 minutes	Regroup and sample some group responses/findings. Focus students on tasks to follow.
20 minutes	Release group as individuals to engage in research tasks, such as selecting from <i>Collision Course</i> menu.
10 minutes	Regroup and view selected works using students' research and responses as the primary focus.

A useful 5-minute close-out exercise: before leaving; give students time out for a last look with some specific tasks in mind. For example: Choose one work which interests you most and think about one thing within it or an aspect that you could talk about later or perhaps use in individual artwork.

Note: Time allowances for each unit can be trimmed according to individual schedules.

Note: In on-site and follow-up discussion, direct students' attention to key questions including: Why do different artists see things in different ways? How important is the choice and use of art medium in expressing ideas? Are some works more effective or interesting than others in dealing with the theme/subject? Related discussion should focus on the process of interpretation. What does 'to interpret an idea or subject' mean? What kinds of devices or systems of communication do artists use to interpret a theme or subject e.g. use of symbolism, distortion, illusionism?

Planning a successful group visit to *Colliding Worlds*: Post-visit

Post-exhibition options primarily consist of sharing and analysing the information gathered during the exhibition visit. This process could include:

- Checking data generated using proformas.
- Sharing individual opinions.
- Different task or theme groups reporting findings.

There are a number of artist websites listed in this Education Resource which will provide follow-up research resources. Search options (e.g. Google) will provide further information on individual artists.

Curriculum Connections: Key Competencies

Actively engaging with artworks within this exhibition will support Key Competencies development as follows:

- KC1 Collecting, analysing and organising information: *Collision Course* tasks require students to use a number of strategies to collect and organise data on individual works and groups of work.
- KC2 Communicating ideas and information: *Collision Course* tasks require students to scribe, debate and report findings.
- KC4 working with others in teams: *Collision Course* tasks involve students working in teams.

Curriculum Connections: Essential Learnings

Futures: A number of works in this exhibition offer a glimpse of the future as mediated by technologies. They ask questions about humanity's place in a world where communication media systems and new technologies constantly create new realities.

Thinking: The power of many of the images will cause students to stop and think about many things such as the issues faced by human society in a rapidly changing world. As a group, the *Colliding Worlds* artists demonstrate a high level of ability to critically evaluate, plan and generate ideas and solutions.

Communication: Analysing works or reporting and debating findings related to viewing works will require students to make effective use of language and writing skills. Analysing and responding will also allow students to learn more about art as a powerful form of communication. Many works in the exhibition are concerned with ways in which world views are created and ask viewers to debate the consequences.

Curriculum Connections: Visual Art specific outcomes

Colliding Worlds offers a unique opportunity for art teachers and students to:

- **Expand knowledge** of the diversity and content of contemporary art practice.
- **Learn about:**
 - Different kinds of art practice.
 - Different kinds of art-based methods and materials.
 - Where artists get ideas from.
 - Ideas important to contemporary artists.
 - The impact of new and emerging technologies.
 - The links contemporary art practice has with art of the past.
- **Develop skills in:**
 - Engaging with, analysing, and responding to artworks, and communicating about them.
 - Visual thinking, problem solving, and using imagination.

Year Level application: Years 8 – Senior Secondary

Senior Visual Arts Students

This exhibition provides insights into the practice of contemporary Australian artists. These insights can be explored within a context of contemporary art and culture.

SACE Visual Art Stage 1

- Practical work – ideas for creating works and expressing ideas.
- Contemporary Practice – offering insights into strategies and methodologies.
- Investigative Study – A *Collision Course* artist could present as a likely candidate for a student's investigation of an artist.

SACE Visual Art Stage 2

- Creating – offering models and strategies for inventive thinking and action.
- Perceiving – offering structured engagement with original and unique artworks to support the development of skills in analysing and expressing opinions about artworks, understanding art within a wider cultural context, and writing about and researching art using original works as a primary source.

Visual Arts Years 8 – 10

Colliding Worlds has special value in exposing students to the diversity of art practice within contemporary society as well as offering ideas for arts practice, arts analysis and response, and an understanding of art in social context.

5 Get started

Collision Course: student start-up

The following tasks are designed to support and initiate structured viewing and engagement for students viewing the exhibition. They can be undertaken in any order and are suitable for both individual and small group work. Implicit in some tasks is the idea that students or groups will report findings and discuss works with others.

Scribing is not necessary to undertake these activities but some of these tasks could involve scribing to support ongoing post-visit work.

First and last impressions

- What did you think about when you first came into the exhibition and looked around?
- Was there any work in particular you wanted to look at, or return to and look at again? Why do you think this happened?
- Is there a work in this exhibition that you think you will never forget or find hard to forget?
- Before leaving, check out the exhibition one more time to see if there's an idea or technique in a work that you could try when you get back to school.

Think abouts

- When you find yourself wanting to look at some works in particular, do you think it is because the image or subject is interesting, or is it because of the artist's technique or way of interpreting the subject?
- If the building was burning and you could save one work from this exhibition, which one would you save and why?
- Is there a particular work in this exhibition that contains or is saying things that you agree or disagree with strongly? Talk to someone else in your group and share your opinions.

Easy?

- Which work was the easiest and which work was the hardest to make – and why?

Symbols

- Can you find an artwork that uses symbols to help tell a story or communicate an idea?
- Talk to someone else about this artwork and its use of symbolism.

Analysis and response (individual work/s)

Choose any work that attracts your attention and apply any or all of the following questions:

- Are the visual qualities of this work appealing in any way?
- Would this idea have been better expressed in a different way?
- Can you see any kind of connection between this kind of art and others you know about?
- What do you think this work is about or might be saying?
- Write a caption (extended wall label) for a selected work based on your own personal response, feelings or interpretation.
- Has this given you an idea for something you could make as part of your art studies?
- Why can't artists just say what they mean without using symbols or asking people to guess what the work of art might be about?
- Select one work that appeals in some way and tell someone else your reasons for your selection.

Analysis and response (the exhibition)

- Write a review of the exhibition which explores the links or relationships between the works.
- Choose one of the themes suggested in this Education Resource and review the exhibition from this perspective.
- Are there other themes not identified in this Resource which could apply to this selection of work?
- Write a press release for this exhibition.
- Compare two or more works which appear to be exploring similar ideas in different ways.
- The exhibition's curator, Erica Green, has stated that, 'the notion of a "collision of worlds" can be seen as an allegory of modern times in the broadest sense, portraying also a human world where difference and the unavoidable collision of competing values — political, technological, social, religious and ethnic — threaten the established order.'

Do you believe this exhibition portrays the world in this way?