

michelle nikou
a e i o u



Educational Resource
by Marcin Kobylecki

**NETS
VICTORIA.**
National Exhibitions
Touring Support Victoria

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ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

Target Audience

Senior and VCE secondary school level students

A NETS Victoria touring exhibition developed in partnership with Heide Museum of Modern Art

Artist

Michelle Nikou

Curators

Melissa Keys & Kendrah Morgan

Presentation partner venues (2016–2018)

Heide Museum of Modern Art
Benalla Art Gallery
Cairns Regional Art Gallery
Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art
Caloundra Regional Gallery
National Art School Gallery
Western Plains Cultural Centre

This document is designed for educational purposes to aid educational staff, teachers, tutors and project managers to support student learning in visual art subjects. It is intended to be used as a basis for the design of projects related to subject strands and curriculum outcomes. It is primarily aimed at students attending senior secondary schools to enable a range of pedagogical outcomes. While the focus of the resource is Michelle Nikou's *oeuvre*, it can potentially be used to explore modes of artistic practice more broadly, and to foster further research opportunities. The lesson outlines below are designed for utilisation as complete activities or as components of larger projects.

This resource is related to areas within the Australian Arts Curriculum as well as the Victorian Curriculum Art bands. It's scope, however, may be modified to suit any cross-curricular activities in a number of subject strands and to match various student outcomes.

This educational document is intended to provide a starting point to generate discussion and activities before and after a visit to *Michelle Nikou a e i o u*. It is designed to be used in conjunction with the exhibition catalogue, didactic labels and art works. And may also prove valuable during the regular school calendar and in planning of future modules and activities in both practice led and theory based areas.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This resource is intended to provide a number of educational objectives to be utilised in planning activities to meet outcomes in Units 1, 2, 3 and 4 of the VCE ART (Study Design document) and their respective Areas of Study.

This resource is also related to outcomes for secondary school levels as outlined by the 8–10 and senior school Australian Curriculum documents – achievement standards and band descriptions.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Michelle Nikou draws on surrealism in a reflective and productive way to transform mundane domestic objects and materials into sculptures of humour, poignancy and marvel. In this exhibition of new and recent work she utilizes surrealist strategies such as chance, psychological metaphor, deadpan wit and juxtaposition, and inventively mingles high and low art sources and cultural references. Her work intentionally blurs and extends the boundaries between fine art and craft and often invests unremarkable or overlooked facets of daily existence with new and unexpected significance.

Many of Michelle Nikou's artworks take the form of household objects, the sort of minutiae that are taken for granted and easily overlooked in the domestic environment. Objects such as curtain rings, spoons, bath plugs, tissue boxes, toilet rolls and draft-stoppers all make an appearance, shaped or cast in various materials, from textiles – including tapestry and a grey felt made from lint collected from clothes dryers – to ceramics, aluminum, concrete, lead, stainless steel and bronze. A range of common foodstuffs including potatoes and biscuits receive a similar treatment. More direct evidence of the presence of the human body in the domestic environment is less common in Nikou's work; it's currently limited to chewed gobs of various substances and, in recent bronze and ceramic works, hair – both cast-off materials with an air of the abject.

Nikou's practice is also characterised by a deep engagement with language and she forges connections between art and literature that invoke suburban life, family interactions and food. Seemingly disparate concepts and materials are regularly combined to produce unsettling and sometimes absurd effects, such as the fried eggs made in bronze that lend the exhibition its title, the flattened egg forms suggesting the vowels of the alphabet. As a result of imaginative exploration Nikou has evolved a distinctive visual vocabulary and sophisticated practice with a strong conceptual basis in its play of poetics, aesthetics and forms. – *Melissa Keys and Kendrah Morgan*

Michelle Nikou was born in Adelaide in 1967. She graduated from the South Australian School of Art with a Bachelor of Design in 1989, a Master of Visual Arts in 2005, and is currently completing doctoral studies. She has presented regular solo and group exhibitions since 1993 and was the recipient of the South Australia Living Artist Festival publication prize in 2005, resulting in a monograph published by Wakefield Press. Nikou was subsequently awarded an Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship and moved to Berlin for two years, where she studied under Professor Thomas Rentmeister at the Braunschweig University of Art in 2010–11.

Michelle Nikou's work is held in private and public collections in Australia and abroad, including the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. She lives and works in Adelaide and is represented by Darren Knight Gallery in Sydney.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- What are the key themes and ideas of the exhibition?
- How does the artist explore material qualities, characteristics and constraints within her sculptural practice?
- What are the ways the artist refines and presents her personal aesthetic?
- Discuss some of the ways the artist's work reflects her life and life experiences.
- What are some of the ways her practice reveals emotions and states of mind – what methods does she utilize to express the above?
- Describe the materials, processes and techniques the artist employs.
- What symbols or metaphors from contemporary culture are evident in the artwork?
- What possible meanings and messages do they convey?
- In what way do artists such as **Louise Bourgeois**, **Kiki Smith** and **Ed Ruscha** employ similar tendencies, processes and concepts?
- Discuss how the artist uses metaphor and symbolism in her work?

- What role does personal circumstance play in the artist's studio practice and methods? Identify artworks in the exhibition shaped directly by the artist's surroundings.
- How is the interpretation of the artwork formed by artist's choice of materials techniques and processes?
- How do the *aesthetic* aspects of the artwork convey symbolic meaning?
- Examine the role of scale in Michelle Nikou's work.
- Discuss the placement and the overall installation of the exhibition.
- Discuss the role of traditional sculptural methods – i.e. bronze casting, and how the artist experiments with innovative and established studio processes.
- Discuss the use of craft methods - ceramic design, tapestry - in the context of contemporary sculptural practice.
- Describe the linkages between traditional art making practices and non-art specific processes.



Acolyte 2013

Translating into being – sculpture and the written word



Sage, Rosemary and Thyme 2012–2016

Focus artworks

Sage, Rosemary and Thyme 2012–2016

Grow (A Series of Typos) 2016

a e i o u 2015

No Vacancy 2010

Vacancy 2014

Oh 2012

Michelle Nikou's work examines the often-silent relationship between objects and the words we use to give those objects this 'other life'. Nikou's practice examines the strange and strained relationship sculpture has to the language of objects and the words we use to describe them. If one object sits on another, what language do they speak to each other? It's not one we can hear but it is one that we can perhaps try and translate. What is it that objects say to one other?

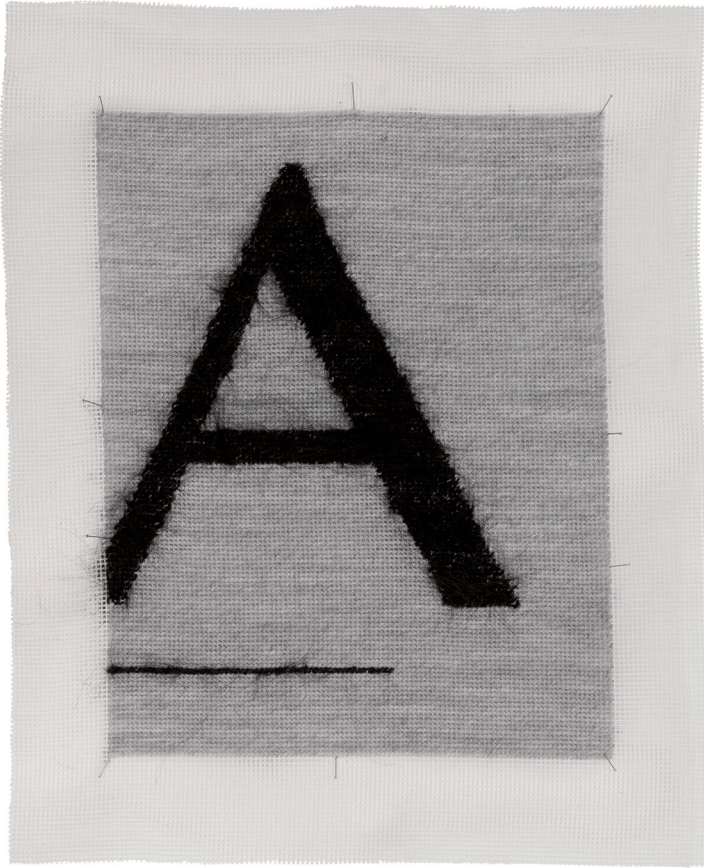
Words are objects too of course, and we shouldn't underestimate just how much like objects they are. When we use words we should be aware that it is not the thing we are describing, but our understanding of the thing.

A-E-I-O-U are not just letters that make up words; they are objects that have a presence in the world. We can often see letters in objects and it reminds us of what it is that words do. Is that egg saying something to me? What is it telling me? Is that an O or U? – *Dr. Toby Juliff*

Text is a recurring presence in Nikou's practice. *The curtain rings*, from 1998, are imprinted with unedited dialogue from a daytime soap opera. Her most recent work includes phrases or words that sound like demands, statements, or pleas, and often they are left to stand almost as sculptural forms in themselves. In her art Nikou frequently engages with language and she will sometimes construct a work from a single word or phrase. *No Vacancy* and the related installation *Vacancy* explore similar states of mind from different angles and operate on a number of levels. *No Vacancy*, for example, deploys the familiar roadside motel signage to convey the sense of anxiety and heightened vigilance induced by encountering the flashing text. At the same time the words point to a mental state of extreme fullness, and the inability to take in any more information. – *Exhibition wall text – Melissa Keys and Kendrah Morgan*



No Vacancy 2010



Grow (A Series of Typos) 2016

ACTIVITY

- Consider a line from a favourite poem, song, play or film. As a preliminary activity, create a large drawing of a three-dimensional form comprised of letters or words contained in the text.
- The drawing should express *three dimensionality* – mass, volume and space. Materials may include – soft and compressed charcoal, pencil, or ink. This activity allows students the opportunity to design and plan elements of the sculpture. The drawing will explore, develop, focus ideas and personal concepts.
- Create a three dimensional sculptural form by using text – words, letters or a phrase. Possible materials may include clay, fimo, wire, plaster bandage, found materials, papier-mache, cardboard.
- Consider the dynamic nature of the form, its ability to express three-dimensionality as well as achieving balance.
- A sense of creative “play” is vital to this activity as the words, letters and phrases need to be seen to convey a sense of surprise.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- How has the meaning or significance of the text changed? How was the emotional impact of the words transformed by the materials used?
- How can the practice of making words three dimensional, provide us with alternative meanings?
- Look at the work of **Ed Ruscha**, **Barbara Kruger**, **Jenny Holzer** and **Roy Ananda**. Compare the aesthetic qualities of text as part of their visual language.
- What part does *juxtaposition* play in their work? How do aesthetic characteristics of materials they employ create contrasts, *dichotomies* of meaning?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

- Research the work of **Annette Messenger**, **Anselm Kiefer** and **Mikala Dwyer**. Discuss the kinds of materials used and their aesthetic effect. To what extent do these materials influence an emotional reading of the work? How do expressive and qualities of the materials used influence the form and the content of the work?
- Explore the term “*material constraints*”. As part of journal work, examine a variety of sculptural materials – metal, bronze, clay, fabric, plastic, wool and wood. Write a short paragraph or discuss with class peers, the emotional implications of each material characteristic. Record a personal response to the kinds of emotions each material evokes or suggests – i.e. memories, dreams, sadness, joy etc.

Expressing the in-explicable: emotion, poetry, the subconscious and the surrealist impulse



Sylvia's Jumper 2013–2016

Focus artworks

Sylvia's Jumper 2013–2016

Ted Hughes's Scarf 2012

Yoked 2016

Basket 2012

Free Money 2012

Image 2016

Blend 2016

Acolyte 2013

Lead Landscape 2007

Gertrude Stein is a writer whom Nikou has long admired. In Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914), a book of short prose poems, she challenges the established authenticity of familiar objects by linking them with surprising adjectives that seem to bear no connection. This compels the reader to re-think their preconceptions and look a-new from an unguarded perspective. This approach informs Nikou's



Yoked 2016

etching *Image* (2016), a portrayal of an oversized ear protruding from a mane of loosely sketched hair enclosing a void where a face should appear. While the work visually suggests the activity of listening, its title refers to looking, or to capturing a likeness when there is none. The confusion of sight, sound, object, gesture and word encourages us to reflect on how these elements are interrelated and how we usually interpret them. — *Melissa Keys and Kendrah Morgan*

In her art Nikou frequently engages with language and she will sometimes construct artwork from a single word or phrase. *No Vacancy* and the related installation *Vacancy* explore similar states of mind from different angles and operate on a number of levels. *No Vacancy*, for example, deploys the familiar roadside motel signage to convey the sense of anxiety and heightened vigilance induced by encountering the flashing text. At the same time the words point to a mental state of extreme fullness, and the inability to take in any more information.

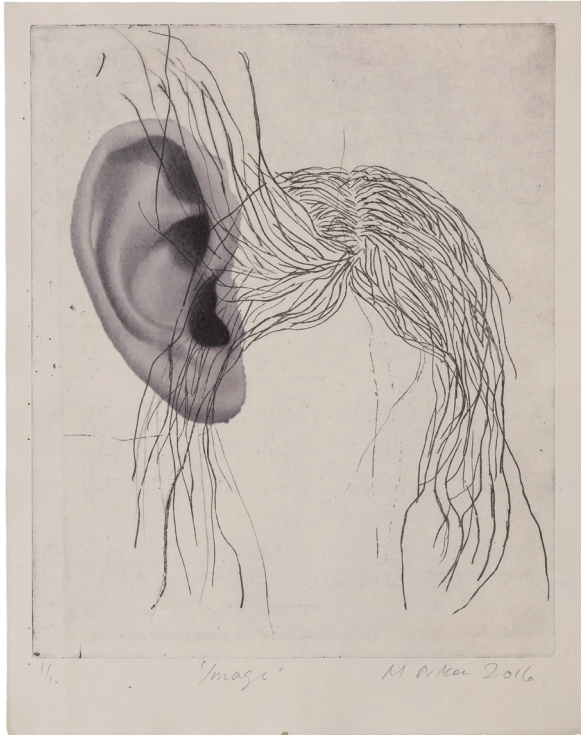


Image 2016

This playful surrealist work may be interpreted in any number of ways. It appears lightly erotic, taking an unconventional look at how things, people and forces join together and become entwined. Such a reading of the elements triggers various psychological connotations, both positive and negative, associated with close relationships. *Yoked* is the result of trial and experimentation with different materials and patinas. The forms are rendered with a high degree of naturalism, which is disquieting given that it would be impossible to arrange them like this in reality.
– Melissa Keys and Kenrdah Morgan

ACTIVITY

- Let's start with a collage. From magazines, books or printed web pages, select various images and isolate objects, figures or landscape features.
- Cut them out.
- Without deliberation, combine the chosen objects in order create unexpected and unpredictable collage images.
- Utilizing chance, serendipity and chaos – endeavor to access the subconscious and unpremeditated side of creative practice.
- This activity is designed to be a rapid - brainstorming, ideation process, however the aesthetic qualities of the collage need to also be considered - tone, texture, scale and shape – and the overall composition.
- Identify any unexpected, ambiguous, surprising and poetic results.
- The major component of the activity is to create a sculpture, based on an idea of expressing the unconscious, the poetic and the metaphoric. This activity could also suit printing, painting, drawing or a ceramics practice.

- If possible include materials not usually associated with your chosen medium. Are there any possible everyday items, which can be utilized?
- Are there any possibilities to undertake casting?
- This activity may take form of an *assemblage*, which can comprise of a collection of objects contained in a box, fixed to a pin board or any suitable display. These items will need to be connected visually, through a process of modification or *intervention* in the studio.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Examine the work of Meret *Oppenheim*, Louise *Bourgeois* and Kiki *Smith*. Consider the various motifs, objects and materials the artists utilize in order to express a sense the *uncanny* or the *inexplicable*. How do they investigate the *subconscious*?
- What means do the artists employ to achieve a sense of the *poetic*?
- What processes and materials are prevalent in the artist's work?
- How do the artist visually express *poetic* notions and how do they employ *metaphor* within their work? What various interpretations and conclusions can be made from examining their work?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

- List the various techniques used by the early 20th century surrealists.
- Research and identify main terms associated with the movement.
- Conduct wider historical research, identify other (social, political) factors, which may have influenced and shaped the work of the surrealists.
- How did the work of **Gertrude Stein**, **Jean Cocteau**, **Sigmund Freud** or **Wilhelm Conrad Roentgen** influence European surrealist artist?
- What would surrealism look like if it came about today?

Transforming the mundane – expressionism and everyday objects



Spoons 2000

Focus artworks

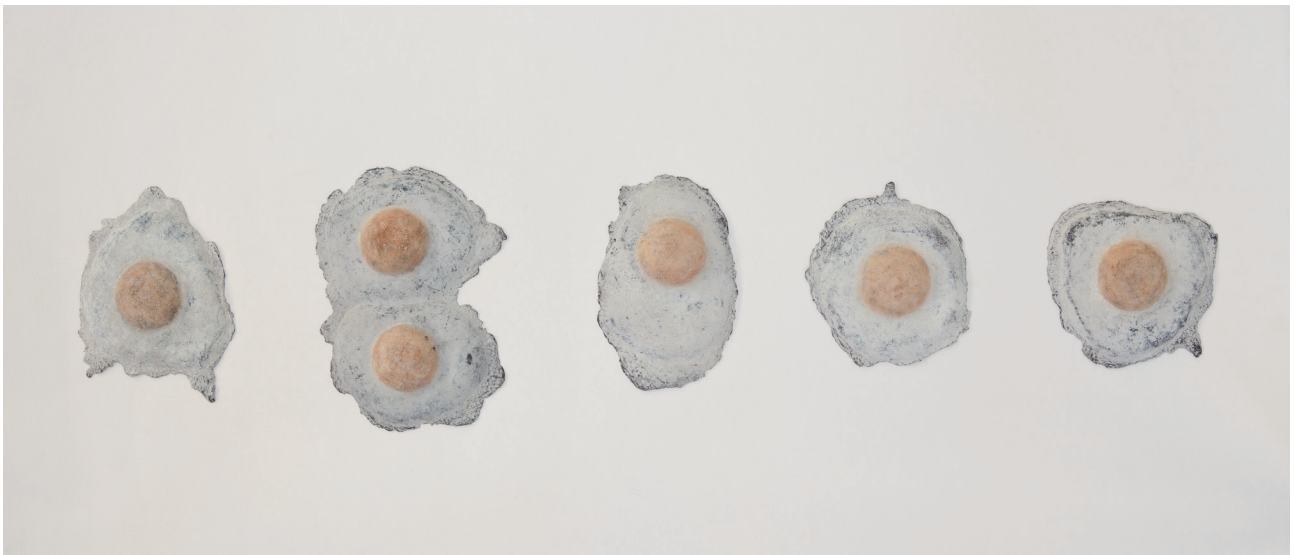
Tray 2010
Untitled 2001
a e i o u 2012
Concrete Plugs 2009
Recollect 2014
Free Money 2012
Potatoes 1999
Never Making Now 2002
Untitled 2000
Hankies 1997–2016

Many of Michelle Nikou's artworks take the form of household objects, the sort of minutiae that are taken for granted and easily overlooked in the domestic environment. Objects such as curtain rings, spoons, bath plugs, tissue boxes, toilet rolls and draft-stoppers all make an appearance, shaped or cast in various materials, from textiles – including tapestry and a grey felt made from lint collected from clothes dryers – to ceramics, aluminum, concrete, lead, stainless steel and bronze. A range of common foodstuffs including potatoes and biscuits receive a similar treatment. In a range of works Nikou also transforms these objects in surprising ways. For example, she has made necklaces, decorating them with concrete casts of potatoes or bronze casts of halved *Yo-Yo biscuits*, *life-savers* lollies and chewed

substances; she has titled a bronze cast of a draught-stopper *Snake* (2002); and in *Hair* (2003) she has made worm-like threads of 'hair' modeled from wax and cast in bronze so they stand, self-referentially taking the form of the letters: h-a-i-r.

All these transformations involve invigorating mundane, sometimes even repulsive objects, giving them an unsuspected sense of value and life: a sense of preciousness in the case of the necklaces, an improbable sense of life in the case of *Snake*, and an uncanny animation and intelligence in the case of *Hair*.

— *Michael Newell*



a e i o u 2012

a e i o u 2012 pictured above is the artwork for which Michelle Nikou's exhibition is titled. Here Nikou reduces the spoken and written word to its essential forms: the five vowels, which are represented by five fried eggs cast in bronze and painted naturalistically. The embryonic shapes of the eggs echo the forms of the vowels. Nikou reminds us that language is often inadequate to express what we really feel. Vowels are in themselves incomplete, they exist as only fragments and require other letters to generate meaning. Nikou demonstrates that, with simple building blocks, there are many alternative forms of expression and exchange available, so long as you remain open to the possibilities.

— *Exhibition wall text* — *Melissa Keys and Kendrah Morgan*

ACTIVITY

- Consider everyday objects, which are not usually given significance beyond their intended function. This may include domestic objects, utilitarian items or everyday belongings.
- Note their *formal*, *aesthetic* or *design* characteristics.
- As part of journal activity, investigate sculptural materials, which in some way may be in opposition to the function of the chosen item. Consider juxtaposing material qualities such as: hard/soft, light/heavy, monochromatic/colourful, rough/smooth, large/small. Natural versus synthetic.
- Utilising a variety of sculptural materials and processes to create a freestanding sculptural representation of the chosen item. Consultation with teaching and technical staff at the school's visual art department is required.
- As the materials and resources may vary, this activity will be dependent on a number of logistical factors. However clay, wire, plaster-bandage, paper pulp, papier-mâché, fabric, cardboard, paint and hot glue guns could be utilised.
- Consider the scale and the resemblance of the sculpture in relation to the chosen object.
- The final sculpture is to reflect the material properties of selected media as well as reflect and resemble the form of the source object.
- Consider the tools and processes utilised. Marks, textural elements and evidence of process add an expressive quality to the sculptural form.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

- Research the work of **Rosemary Trockel**, **Fiona Hall** and **Thomas Rentmeister**. Note the particular ways in which each artist re-imagines and represents the notion of the *everyday*.
- Consider their personal relationship to objects and how this informs the modes of production (materials, methods).
- Are there wider social implications in any of the above art works? Identify any cultural values and beliefs the artist might represent.

- Are there any aspects of their work, which provide commentary on human emotional states such as depression, grief, anxiety, consumption, joy, spirituality, complacency, alienation, etc.?
- Describe methods the artists chose to express their views on contemporary issues – social, political and environmental.
- How have these methods, studio experimentation and exploration of materials facilitated a visual communication of their personal views in society?
- Are there metaphors or symbols from contemporary life, which were employed by the artists in order to critique contemporary society?
- What are the various structural elements of the artist's work? Conduct a comparative examination of key artworks and analyze visual elements such as shape, volume, tone, form, rhythm, repetition, movement, balance, scale, proportion and balance. How do these elements combine to express and communicate emotional information?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY

- Explore the terms *symbolism* and *expressionism*. What is their historical use in art throughout the ages?
- Research the various methods in which symbolism and expressionism are used in art from the 20th century. Identify the key figures and key art works in the European, American and Australian art since WW2?
- What role does the audience (the viewer) play in the experience of artwork, which employs symbolist and expressive qualities?
- What role does experimentation with materials and techniques play in instilling expressive qualities in an artwork.
- Identify 3 artists from the last decade (locally and abroad) who use symbolism to create highly expressive art works.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Symbol – A form, sign, or emblem that represents something else, often something immaterial, such as an idea or emotion.

Metaphysical – Transcending physical matter or the laws of nature. Metaphysics refers to the branch of philosophy that studies the fundamental nature of being and knowing.

Surrealism – A literary, intellectual, and artistic movement that began in Paris in 1924 and was active through World War II. Influenced by Sigmund Freud's writings on psychology, Surrealists, led by André Breton, were interested in how the irrational, unconscious mind could move beyond the constraints of the rational world. Surrealism grew out of dissatisfaction with traditional social values and artistic practices after World War I.

Expressionism – An international artistic movement in art, architecture, literature, and performance that flourished between 1905 and 1920, especially in Germany and Austria, that favored the expression of subjective emotions and experience over depictions of objective reality. Conventions of Expressionist style include distortion, exaggeration, fantasy, and vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic application of color.

Juxtaposition – An act of placing things close together or side by side for comparison or contrast.

Irony – An expression or statement in language or imagery that signifies its own opposite, typically for humorous or emphatic effect.

Concrete Poetry – a poem whose meaning is conveyed through its graphic shape or pattern on the printed page; also called shaped verse.

Assemblage – A three-dimensional composition made from a variety of traditionally non-artistic materials and objects.

Dichotomy – division into two mutually exclusive, opposed, or contradictory groups.

Aesthetic – concerned with beauty or the appreciation of beauty.

SELECTED LINKS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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All images courtesy of the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

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