

HOW TO LOOK

OR, A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO VISUAL LITERACY

When there is a new *'art lover's guide to galleries'* in 2021 and beyond you may imagine that it will largely focus on the online experience.

Not so. Some of the most rewarding innovations to come out of these times entail up close and personal experiences with not an electronic device in sight. The 1:1 CONCERTS and Mounted's THE VIEWER IS PRESENT are just two.

Julie Parkin and Mark Denny wanted to share the magic when they designed their COVID-19 safe exhibition program THE VIEWER IS PRESENT around the concept of visual literacy.

Julie's interest began when learning to paint with wellknown artist Kerry Johns. 'Kerry taught me how to look at a painting... I was so excited by the experience of what happened when I really looked at and engaged with a painting that it became a kind of fascination. I realised that if I engaged with a work in this way that somehow I could magically decode it and have my imagination sparked at the same time. It was like finding a new form of communication where the painting talked back – that I had uncovered one of the mysteries of life!'

My own experience with Kerry was meeting her at the National Gallery in London when she said she had just spent an hour seated in front of Michelangelo's Cartoon. At the time I thought that showed particular dedication.

The artist run initiative and exhibition space MOUNTED in the Lower Blue Mountains (www.mountedari.com) had been set up by a group of experienced teachers and professionals from across the arts and had just commenced a program of exhibitions when COVID-19 struck. Forced to adapt, Julie devised the concept of THE VIEWER IS PRESENT, creating a series of events which participants (viewers) attended by appointment. Each event consisted of an artwork, a piece of writing and another item, perhaps

a sculpture or small installation. Viewers could attend singly or with a friend to assist with the discussion of ideas and they were encouraged to write down their comments.

In a relaxed and non-confrontational environment viewers were introduced to the concept of visual literacy. These skills are certainly not new, but they are only now being more commonly taught and practised in schools and colleges. In fact, they relate to all forms of artistic activity and professional artistic development, including film making and the performing arts (see, for example, an interview with film maker Martin Scorsese on the website www.visualliteracytoday.org).

The basics of visual literacy in reference to artworks are described simply: look, observe, see and describe, analyse and interpret. Kate Blake describes this process in Learning to Look Across Disciplines: Visual Literacy for Museum Audiences – specifically at the Toledo Museum of Art where this is one of their strategic objectives <https://visualliteracytoday.org/learning-to-look-across-disciplines-visual-literacy-for-museum-audiences-by-kate-blake/>

The importance of visual literacy is also the focus of Justin Paton, Head Curator of International Art at the AGNSW in his book 'How to Look at a Painting' (AWA, 2005, reprinted 2012). Paton is the curator of Unguided Tours at the AGNSW. Along the way he discusses spiritual quests, roads to nowhere, the relationship between art and nature and the



importance of walking in a sped-up world. He writes: 'No paintings are harder to see for what they are than 'great works' that have been shrunk on to postcards, tea towels, shower curtains, jumbo pencils, and all the rest of the souvenir paraphernalia. Museums – once we're through their gift shops – are places where we get to pull paintings back from the flatland of reproduction. They're places to encounter anew all the rich and sticky facts that photographs leave out.' (And not only photographs leave out, but the flat screens of your various electronic devices.)

A brief guide to the process

Look, Observe and See: Looking permits a quick appraisal, followed by observing which is done with more care and attention. Then seeing brings together all of the image's visual elements.

Describe, Analyse and Interpret: With these three steps the content of the visual elements is identified and analysed. These consist of form, symbols and ideas which are then merged to become the viewer's interpretation. Form covers the elements of art and principles of design and composition. Ideas encompass cultural and historical influences and how our society's values and beliefs shape our understanding. Symbols are powerful associations we use to stand for something else, often gained through personal experience. In this way 'learning to look' is cyclical and the viewer then returns

to viewing the work and seeing how the experience has challenged first observations.

Teaching the skill of visual literacy becomes more important as we find ourselves in an increasingly image saturated world. The process described in the series *THE VIEWER IS PRESENT* is one which could well be adopted and offered to visitors at larger art galleries, to enhance the gallery experience (as well as to challenge curators).

Carolynne Skinner

***Lottie* by Paul Mallam (below), *Afternoon Tea with Mrs. Ward* by Jacqueline Spedding, and *The person across the table* written by Mel Jacob provided the three elements of *THE VIEWER IS PRESENT* in week 6 of the program.**

Paul Mallam's work for MOUNTED was his Archibald Prize entry, a portrait of performance artist and painter Lottie Consalvo. Lottie was one of a group of Australian performance artists invited in 2015 to undertake a week-long workshop with Marina Abramovic, the global superstar of performance art.

Each artist was allocated a small plywood cubicle with a bed, exposed to the public. Seated in her cubicle, Lottie began a series of gestures using her clothes. One gesture was to pull her jumper over her head, hiding her face and at once suggesting the burqa, the covered faces of both terrorists and security forces, or mortality – the covered face of the deceased. This single gesture removed Lottie's face from the viewer's gaze and made her slightly threatening.

Jacqueline Spedding – *Tea with Mrs. Ward*

This work celebrates the Wunderkammer, the cabinet of curiosities, a favoured method of display of natural specimens, artefacts and other objects in Victorian times, and was first exhibited in 'Birdland' at the Mount Victoria Museum last year. The collection of stuffed birds and other exotic paraphernalia accumulated by naturalist Mel Ward in the first half of last century, is partly housed in the Mount Victoria Railway Museum and this work references Mrs. Ward and the tradition of afternoon tea.

Spedding has recreated china and cutlery using bird motifs, most poignantly the claw of a satin bowerbird as the stem of a teaspoon. The installation represents beauty in detail but tragedy in subject as well as our changing regard and respect for the natural world we share.



THE PERSON ACROSS THE TABLE

On the eve of her daughter's wedding ceremony, Cat's mother gave her the following unsolicited advice.

'My tykva, I wish you every happiness.' Cat was 27 and irritated that her mother still called her a pumpkin. 'Tykva, people change and the Alex that you are marrying tomorrow will not be same Alex that sit across from you in twenty years.'

Cat had not given a second thought to her mother's words until some seven years later, when without warning, her husband announced his desire to help the poor.

Alex's first step was taking the reigns of a mobile soup kitchen. And their once hedonistic weekend plans now involved collecting one large bag of unsold pastries, making ten loaves of sandwiches, two pots of soup, filling eight thermoses with hot water before loading everything except a partridge in a pear tree into their car, for distribution at the local train station. Alex arrived home elated that night. 'It was one of the best moments of my life,' he said. 'Seeing their faces, hearing their stories. So grateful for a cheese sandwich. Not even expensive cheese – plastic cheese.' Cat shuddered as Alex pulled her in for a kiss.

'Ugh you reek,' she said.

'That's why you need to come,' Alex said. 'Then we'll both stink.' They'd been through this. She'd help prepare the sandwiches (a selfless act on her part, considering she didn't eat carbs) but that was it.

'Don't you want to be happy?' Alex asked. No-one had ever described Cat as a happy person. Focused, enterprising, ambitious. That's what he had

signed up for. But what had happened to him? To the materialistic man she had married? The man who, only six months ago, sat front row at Cat's side during the Show Me The Money conference chanting, 'I am worthy, I am rich.'

There is no doubt philanthropy has its health benefits. Fuelled by a purpose greater than himself, Alex started a strict health regime, took cold showers, did hot yoga. And the sex was mind blowing: spontaneous, honeymoon worthy. On the bench top, in the shower, on the floor, and once in a spirit of daring, atop the washing machine in the communal laundry; their delicates tumbling slowly beneath them.

Other people began to notice that Alex had 'changed'. He was such a 'nice guy', everyone kept telling Cat as blankets and jackets were smuggled out of their apartment. 'Have you seen my Michael Kors coat?' Cat had asked on the way out to dinner. Although Alex vehemently denied it, he looked up to the right – a tell-tale sign he was lying. Cat rationalised that she could live with a few missing items of clothing (she could replace them), but what crime had she committed in a past or present life, to now find herself married to a teetotaller? Genocide? Regicide? Using the disabled car space? It was *one time!*

Who was this stranger that now sat across from her? She did not recognise him at all.

Mel Jacob

Mel Jacob is author of 'In Sickness, In Health... And in Jail' (2016, Allen and Unwin).



In week 3 of Mounted's series of **THE VIEWER IS PRESENT** the three participants were Jane Lennon's paper sculpture of *Porceline*, Joanna Cole's landscapes (below) and Kathryn Knight's poem, *The Road to Cowra* which was especially written to accompany the painting of a landscape.

JOANNA COLE is a landscape painter who works from the Nest Creative Studios in Sydney. She says she literally follows the path of plein air artists Fred Williams and Luke Sciberras (to the Dandenongs and Hill End), combining a process and a tradition with studio painting that stimulates connections through memory. This year her practice has turned to painting plein air in the urban locations of home and work, charting the details that contribute to mental health, maintaining a sense of wonder in the landscape on the doorstep in times when travel is limited. Her work is based on a foundation of continuous line drawing learned with Margie Hooper at the University of South Australia, layered with a repetition of motifs derived from the sketches and paintings from field trips.

Using a limited localised palette, unexpected placements of colour elicit recognition of seasonal and human contributions and a sense of wonder in the landscapes we witness, and pleasure and joy. Cole is interested in how contemporary art can start optimistic dialogues about how we see the world and ourselves in constant change.

Below left: *Pental Island Flotsam & Jetsom* 2020, 40x40cm oil on oil paper

'In the heat of that summer day, the sky a haze, I notice the leaf matter, the sticks and rocks, the flotsam and jetsom of life. Nature strewn across into the distant trees. Beyond, the river moves, the snake of dreamtime carving deep through the land, nurturing pockets, devouring others. To be devoured in this land, this colourful vibrant land.'

Below right: *Bushfire* 2020, 100x100cm, oil on ply

'This is an image without adequate words of explanation. For months many people had intense feelings. For months more, some people continued to experience strong feelings. It will be years and people will be having these intermittent strong feelings about the Bushfires of 2020. Some rely on physical action, some on social interaction; acts of compassion and service and sharing; therapy. Some create with words, music, the land, some with painting and other forms of visual media. Colour in this time is intense. I feel a saturation of life ... and strong colour was soothing.'



The Road to Cowra
Kathryn Knight

Fleet-footed fast I rush,
I fly across the floating fields
wade into dank swamps
scale mountain arpeggios
thick with colour - teal
green oxide and ultramarine,
pink, mauve and orange-gold - palette of promised riches;
then I'm arrested, by rust red:
by traces that expose the substrate, dark tones that stain the bright present on this
road to Cowra.

Snail-paced slow she saunters,
she tastes the air and smells its sounds; she sees, as artists do,
the shifting shapes, the histories
piled up inside this panorama.
Then, canvas primed, and pigments lined up like lolly jars
she drops sweet gobs of colour
onto her wide white plain;
she makes layers, as time does,
then scrapes back, erases,
and remakes this, the road to Cowra.

'Colour cutting through colour,' she says, but my white eyes cannot yet see the
ghosts
in centuries of Cowra dust: outsiders, penned in by war,
hurl themselves against fences, death more comforting than exile; and before
them, Wiradjuri

slain, banished or corralled,
their hearts wrenched from country their rivers thick with blood,
layer upon layer, on the road to Cowra.

Kathryn Knight is a professional and creative writer. She taught writing at WSU for a decade and she has a PhD in Writing and Cultural Studies.

Porceline dreams of a future when speciesism is as abhorrent as slavery, cannibalism and racism... a time when all life forms are considered an important and interdependent part of a cycle, rather than assuming we humans are at the top of a hierarchy.

This work reflects one of my recurrent themes—combinations of abstracted animal and human forms. My work is made from discarded office paper, particularly legal documents. The process of pulping washes away the secrets and sorrows contained within the printing.



JANE LENNON has transformed thousands of reams of discarded office paper into abstract and functional objects for the past two decades.