



Nahrain

8 February – 30 March 2014

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Nahrain.

Nahrain

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

Nahrain, meaning “land between the rivers” or “land of rivers”, is the name given to the area of the Tigris and Euphrates river systems, two of the major waterways in the Middle East. Historically known in Europe as Mesopotamia, the region largely corresponds to modern-day Iraq as well as some parts of Syria, Turkey, Iran and Kuwait.

From Ancient times, *Nahrain* was referred to as the “Fertile Crescent” because, unlike the arid desert that surrounds it, the rivers provided the region with water and rich soil, which allowed people to settle and develop agriculture. The Tigris-Euphrates Basin is known to be the birthplace of writing, literature and banking, and the early development of the wheel and sophisticated irrigation systems has made the region synonymous with the cradle of civilisation¹.

The natural resources of the basin have affected the way people live and have had a profound impact on the political development of the region. For many nations in the area, access to the river systems is crucial to survival and to their way of life. Over time the use, supply and control over the water source has become a major issue and has led to conflict and unrest. In more recent times diminishing resources due to the effects of population growth, war and pollution have **exacerbated** a number of socio-political issues and created severe tensions between nations in the area². These ongoing disputes highlight our inseparable relationship with water systems and illustrate how rivers can influence societal outcomes.

The *Nahrain* exhibition draws focus to how vital the river systems are in shaping the geography, history and culture of the region. By sourcing significant artworks from Australian artists and those with Mesopotamian heritage, the exhibition stitches together a narrative about the region’s identity, prompting investigation into how society, politics, history and separation affirms or disrupts people’s connection to the region and its culture.

The artists and artworks relate to the theme of the exhibition in both direct and ambiguous ways, opening up dialogue about a broad range of issues and ideas, such as: questioning what structures inform cultural identity and perceptions of cultural groups, exploring common links and disparities between Mesopotamian cultures and the West, questioning the construction of history, documenting the lives of people in the region during times of historical significance and political upheaval, and critiquing how war and industry affect relationships to waterways.

Furthermore, the *Nahrain* exhibition inspires reflection on how local river systems like the Parramatta, Georges and Nepean Rivers have been significant in Australian history, and how they have affected culture, human ecology and the shaping of natural and built environments.

(1) Jim Down, ‘Mesopotamia-The Cradle of Civilization (part II)’ in Civilization, 28 March 2003, http://www.newsfinder.org/site/more/mesopotamia_the_cradle_of_civilization_part_ii/ Accessed 24 Oct 2013

(2) Ilan Berman & Paul Michael Wihbey, ‘Approaching Crisis: Water Resources in the Middle East’ in *Strategic Review*, Summer 1999, <http://www.iasps.org/strategic/water.htm> Accessed 23.10.2013

EXHIBITION DEVELOPMENT

The theme of the *Nahrain* exhibition grew directly from the local community, through several community consultations held in Liverpool in 2009. They involved artists and cultural practitioners from diverse backgrounds including, Iraqi, Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian, Jordanian, Egyptian, Assyrian, Kurdish, Iranian, Turkish, Afghan and North-East African. These consultations examined how the interests and ideas of contemporary artists intersect with those of the local community, and focused on projects that would be accessible, engaging and relevant to the culturally diverse local region.

ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

The *Nahrain* Education Kit has been developed for Secondary students from Stages 4 to 6. It contains brief biographies on artists, information on their practice and the artworks in the exhibition. It also contains a series of curriculum-based exercises that explore Artist Practice, The Conceptual Framework and The Frames. A glossary of the words that appear in **bold** throughout the publication is included at the end of the kit.



SAIF ALMURAYATI

Saif Almurayati was born in Baghdad, Iraq in 1976. After the Gulf War in 1991, he and his family were forced to flee their country due to **political persecution**. They moved between **refugee** camps in Iran, Turkey and Syria before settling in Damascus and finally being processed as political refugees and migrating to Australia in 1998.

People who have been **displaced** due to political persecution go through tragic and stressful experiences when escaping circumstances like discriminatory policies, war, police brutality, imprisonment, torture and other acts of terror. They also face the challenge of having to adapt to different living conditions and cultures, and deal with mixed responses from the society they settle in, at times experiencing misrepresentation in the media, discrimination and hostility³.

In his work, Almurayati blurs the boundaries between painting, drawing and writing, creating large-scale abstract paintings using Islamic calligraphy. His more sculptural works such as *Praxis* (2013), where he has painted on natural materials like stone and wood, have been interpreted as reminiscent of Ancient artefacts, or sites in the Australian bushland, where rocks and trees have been inscribed by walkers who record their names to mark their presence at the site.

Almurayati's practice investigates how identity changes and evolves in relation to the environment and culture of the society in which you live. The artist's use of Islamic text demonstrates a refusal to **subvert** his cultural heritage and his personal history as he explores and adapts to the attitudes, ideas, practices and culture of his new home.

Artist Statement

I have endeavoured in my works to delve beneath the surface of the complex themes involved in the experience of being between multiple cultures. Text is a significant aspect of my artworks. The crescendo of calligraphy provides the viewer with a sense of harmony and optimism. My works act as a map of my movement through my cultural experiences.

Questions

Stage 5

Examine Almurayati's artistic practice through the Conceptual Framework. In particular, consider the influence that memory and experience has had on the form and concepts in his work.

Stage 6

Consider some of the assumptions about refugees and displaced persons that have been generated by the forces around you – friends, family, the media, etc. Discuss how Almurayati challenges these preconceived notions of his own identity in his practice.

[3] Andrew Frost, 'Top Draw: Artists pushing the boundaries of Drawing' in *The Guardian*, 2 July 2013.

Saif Almurayati, *Flux*, 2013, mixed media on canvas, 200 x 155cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



BROOK ANDREW

Brook Andrew is a Melbourne-based artist who has worked across mixed media, photography, and printing, creating installations, interactive artworks and public art. Throughout his artistic career, Andrew has continually explored concepts about memory and perception, particularly with regards to race issues and the construction of history. Andrew's practice challenges the authority of print media, archival documents and historical records by interrogating the underlying **power structures** inherent in their construction, exposing threads of **historical amnesia, stereotyping** and **complicity**⁴. The role of **archives** as source material is a significant component of Andrew's work. He accesses community and museum collections, gaining insight into the values and ideas that circulate in the community and that are ingrained in the history of the local area.

In the *Danger of Authority* series (2009), Andrew uses a selection of found images of lavish American and English interiors from the 11th Century until the 1970s, and **juxtaposes** them with headlines published in the *New York Times* in 2009. The images and texts act as ready-made art⁵ which Andrew **appropriates** to form new narratives about the history they reference. The hand printing of the images through lithography, silk screening and wood block printing, highlights processes of human intervention and artistry in the construction of the image. Although the headlines are familiar, the traditional modes of printmaking are removed from the kinds of mechanically printed materials we engage with on a daily basis. This raises the visual and conceptual power of the image and text, provoking deeper inspection into the **didacticism** of the source material.

Artist Statement

History is not just inherited, it changes all the time, except some people think it doesn't, or others try to forget.

Questions

Stage 4

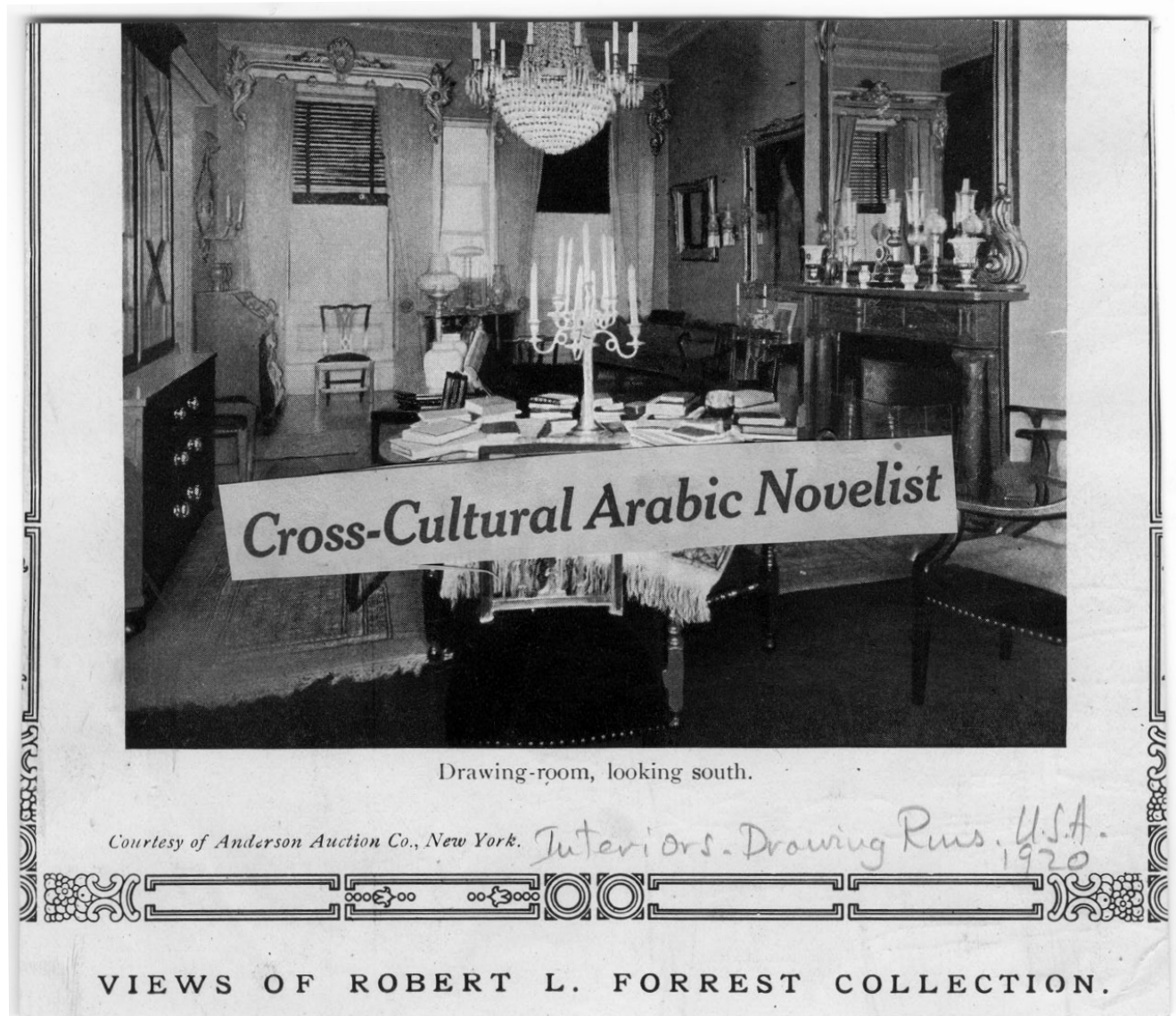
Why do you think Andrew uses text taken directly from the media in his artworks? How do you think the media influences your own understandings and opinions towards other parts of the world?

Stage 5

Andrew's practice is characteristically Postmodern. How does his appropriation of archive material challenge the dominant views about war in the Middle East?

Stage 6

Using the Postmodern Frame to guide your response, discuss the function of image and text in Andrew's work.



Brook Andrew, *Cross Cultural Arabic Novelist*, 2009, lithograph, 45 x 55cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

[4] Laura Murray Cree, 2010, 'Brook Andrew' in *Artist Profile*, Issue 11, 2010, pp. 50-59

| MARY JANE CASWELL

Mary Jane Caswell is an Australian artist working with video, installation, photography and performance. *Dystopic Landscapes* (2012) is an abstract video work that depicts two contrasting landscapes; one a closed-in urban setting, the other a vast, blaring, desert horizon. The ambiguous white form of a figure stands between the two landscapes, flickering violently then disappearing as a passing desert landscape intersects with the busy urban scene, creating a sense of movement, impermanency and escape.

A dystopia is an imagined world where people live with the illusion that they are part of a perfect society. The society, however, is oppressively controlled by corporate, bureaucratic, technological, **ideological** or **totalitarian** structures. It is essentially a depiction of the worst-case scenario of where society is heading and can be used to critique current trends, political systems and social structures⁶.

In this exhibition there is a connection made between Caswell's visualisation of dystopic landscapes and the idea of *Nahrain* as a site of dystopia. Her work functions to reinforce what the audience knows about political, religious and racial oppressions in the Middle East. The abstract figure in the work is able to communicate sentiments shared by a society; from it we get a disconcerting sense of isolation and futility.

Artist Statement

My work is often concerned with disharmonious forms – urban spaces which speak of histories and beliefs not articulated by conventional methods. Distant horizons met by imposed directive urban-ism. This work is concerned with merging forms within an urban and non-urban space.

Question

Stage 4

Describe your emotional reaction to Caswell's video work. Explain what characteristics and techniques contribute to your subjective response to the work.



Mary Jane Caswell, *Dystopic Landscapes* (still), 2012, one-channel video. Image courtesy of the artist.

(6) 'Dystopias: Definition and Characteristics', *ReadWriteThink*, 2006 http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/lesson_images/lesson926/DefinitionCharacteristics.pdf Accessed 28.10.2013

ELLA CONDON

Ella Condon is a Sydney-based artist who works with photography, video and installation. Condon's practice explores how history can be embedded in a site, how a "space holds memories and stories from the past in their physical structure, and how this lingering presence shifts over time". When presented within the context of the *Nahrain* exhibition, Condon's work becomes imbued with ideas about how people's relationships with water impact history and highlights how significant water becomes to people when their access to it becomes tenuous.

The presence of the figure in *The Invisible Force* (2013) installation is **ambiguous**, floating on the surface then receding into darkness, creating an unnerving feeling as it morphs and distorts with the current of the water. As the figure vanishes, the audience can make different connections with ideas related to the exhibition, for instance, tensions over water resources in the Middle East.

As a result of population growth, pollution, and industrial and agricultural initiatives, water in the Middle East has become increasingly scarce and has thus exacerbated serious issues about the supply, control and allocation of water to different nations. As a result, crisis zones have begun to emerge along major rivers of the region, spurring conflict and acting as a catalyst for war. The ongoing conflict between Turkey and Syria over the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers is one example of how water has become a strategic and political force⁸. The future of the people who rely on the river systems to survive is uncertain and this notion of uncertainty and the immense loss thus far, bears on the imagery and feeling of Condon's installation.

Artist Statement

In the light installation *The Invisible Force*, the viewer encounters a somewhat abstracted reflection upon the ground. When further considering the imagery, they come to see what resembles elements of a figure, morphing in and out of focus from the darkness, appearing somewhat sculptural and creating an illusion that exists beneath the surface of the floor. Surrounded by a watery substance, drifting almost formlessly through the water, the image appears to transcend its formal qualities coming to life, whilst disappearing further from reach.

Question

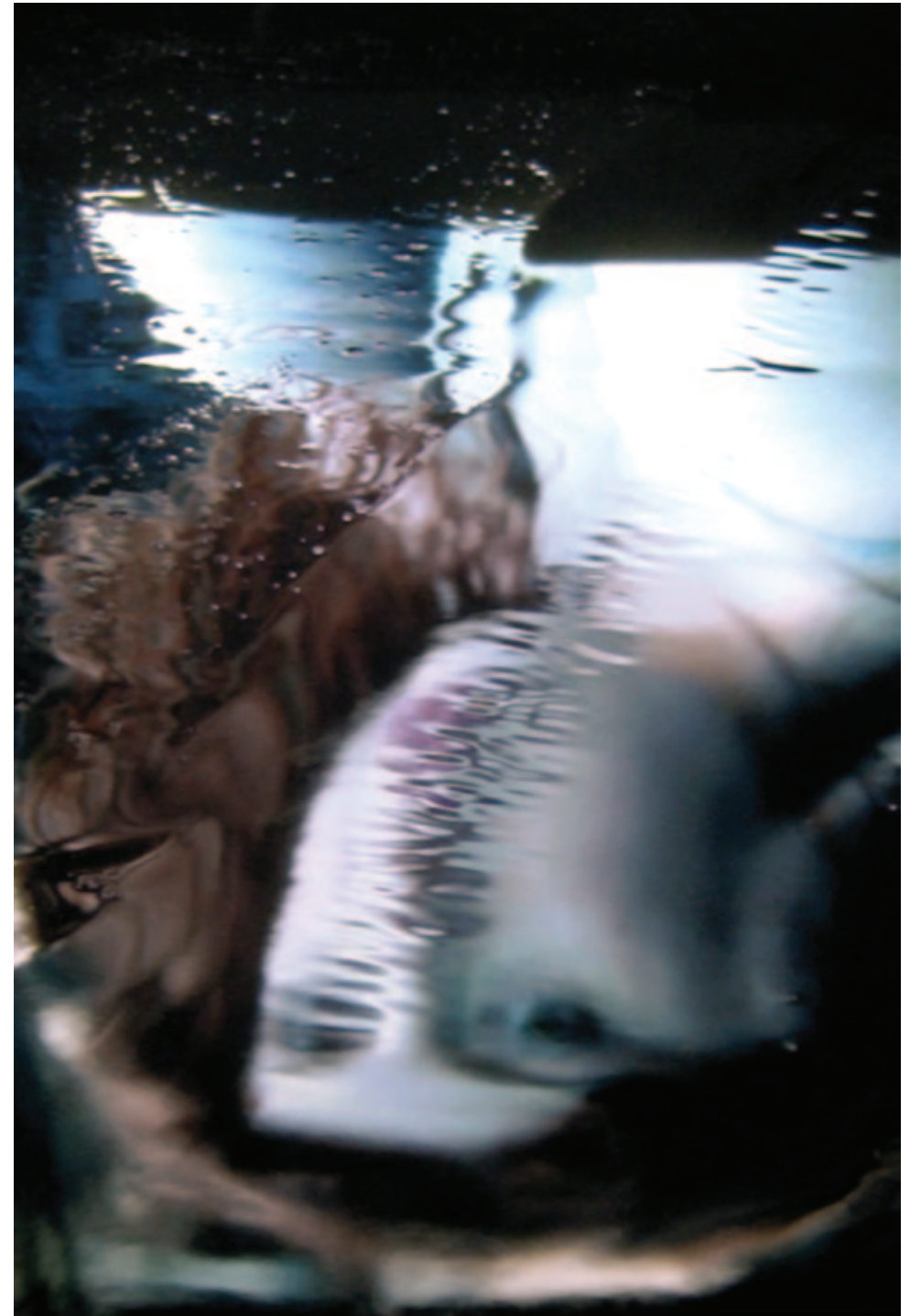
Stage 6

One interpretation of Condon's *The Invisible Force* is to view it as a metaphor between people and water resources in the Middle East. Use The Frames to explore other possible interpretations of this work.

[7] Interview by Kim Hirst, 'Ella Condon: NAVA Featured Artist of the Month', 30 April 2012, <http://ellacondon.com/p/text/nava-interview> Accessed 24.10.2013.

[8] Ilan Berman & Paul Michael Wihby, 'The New Water Politics of the Middle East' in *Strategic Review*, Summer 1999.

Ella Condon, *The Invisible Force* (still), 2013, video installation. Image courtesy of the artist.



RAAFAT ISHAK

Raafat Ishak moved to Melbourne from Cairo, Egypt when he was a teenager. Although he moved by choice, **assimilating** to Australia was not easy. This might explain why he does not identify himself as either Egyptian or Australian and believes that his identity is not tied to any one particular place⁹.

The materiality, formal qualities and conceptual content of Ishak's paintings, drawings and installations are heavily influenced by his studies in architecture as well as his Arabic heritage. In his *Mount* (2006) and *Valley* (2007) works, Ishak paints directly on un-primed MDF board – a manufactured wood panel commonly used as a building material. Using photographs of urban environments in Cairo, Melbourne and Castlemaine as source material, he creates a series of invented built environments that are a **pastiche** of public and institutional buildings, city spaces and modes of transport¹⁰.

In addition, Ishak's work makes reference to Modern Western art history. The recurring staircases and the distinctly geometric forms in his paintings are reminiscent of Cubist works, in particular Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending Staircase* (1912). Further, the repetition of the black square alludes to Kazimir Malevich's minimalist painting *Black Square* (1915). This symbol is particularly significant as it also references the black stone cube of the Kaaba in Mecca, a sacred site of Islamic pilgrimage¹¹. The **oscillation** between the cultural readings of symbols stimulates ideas about the construction of cultural identity over time and place, and creates a dialogue between two cultures about transitory personal, social and political relationships.

Questions

Stage 4

List the symbols you identify in Ishak's works. How can these symbols be interpreted differently by people from different backgrounds?

Stage 5

With reference to the Structural Frame, explain how Ishak uses symbols to communicate meaning in his work.

[9] Elizabeth McDowell, 'Raafat Ishak: Ascents and Descents' in *Contemporary Practices; Visual Arts from the Middle East*, Vol. IX, pp.166-171.

[10] *ibid.*

[11] *ibid.*

Raafat Ishak, *Rejection Valley*, 2007, acrylic on MDF, 50 x 65cm. Image courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne.



ABBAS MAKRAB

Abbas Makrab is an abstract painter and mosaic artist who was born in 1967 in Baghdad, Iraq. His vibrant paintings, collage and print works draw on Ancient Arabic stories and investigate the role of myth in constructing culture and identity. His works are emotionally charged and visually expressive, with **metaphoric** and imaginative explorations of stories, past memories and interpretations of events.

Makrab has lived, worked and taught in Iraq and Jordan, and most recently in Australia. Alongside his work with painting, Makrab's artistic practice also involves connecting and working with migrant communities around Western Sydney to produce major public art works.

In this exhibition, Makrab uses painting to create a story about a river. Using his memories and experiences from his time as a student at the College of Fine Arts in Baghdad, Makrab explores how a river bank acted as a space for creating romantic stories and inspiring dreams for the future. He delves into the impact of endless war on people's hopes and on how people retain a sense of connection when they have been torn apart.

Artist Statement

When I was a student in the College of Fine Arts, the river bank was a place for our romantic stories, we were writing our stories and dreams to the river, but our dreams were besieged by war...our hope had been flying over the years and the war had no end. Our love letters were gone, missiles were there flying over the river instead, we believed that all the rivers spring from one place, but they could be in **exile**. One day, I told her that I would have to leave with the river...and perhaps I would see you on the other bank of the river. We met years later...her face was pale, but with glowing eyes. She asked me: did you receive my letters? I told that I was on the other side of the world, and there was a river I see her face on it every day..."

Question

Stage 4

Identify how Makrab represents his feelings and personal experiences through his paintings? What emotional and imaginative responses do his works invoke in you?



Abbas Makrab, *Childhood*, 2013, mixed media on paper, 36 x 53cm.
Image courtesy of the Abbas Makrab Collection.

KATE MITCHELL

Kate Mitchell is a Sydney-based artist whose practice involves performance, video work, drawing and sculptural installation. Her works often use **satire**, creating light humour as they encourage the viewer to explore the absurdity of everyday life. By placing herself in mundane situations and putting her body through repetitive cycles of action, she challenges the viewer to reconsider their role in society and reflect on the often taken for granted behaviours that they continually perform¹².

In the rug piece of *Magic Undone* (2012), Mitchell presents the viewer with an unravelled kilim rug, seemingly floating mid-air. Kilim rugs have special significance in some Middle Eastern cultures. Authentic kilim rugs are produced in areas extending from the Balkans to Pakistan, and have both decorative and **utilitarian** functions. They are also used as prayer mats. Some traditional kilim designs have rich and complex symbolic meaning that is closely linked to the imagination, feelings, intuition and aesthetic of the craftsman¹³. They have also been collected by museums, galleries and private collectors around the world as artefacts of significant cultural history. As globalisation affects art and consumerism, kilim rugs have become increasingly popular in Western countries, and what was once an object created specifically for private, indigenous use, has become a mass-produced export commodity. This has implications on notions of authenticity and objects being stripped of cultural significance in the processes of global consumerism.

In the *Nahrain* exhibition, possible interpretations of the rug piece are influenced by its place within a collection of works that are exploring themes of war, **displacement**, cultural identity and history of Mesopotamia. In this context, the unravelling of the rug takes on a more solemn tone, representing the 'guts' being metaphorically ripped from a nation by a series of devastating events which are leading to the unravelling of social values.

Questions

Stage 5

The kilim has taken on functions and meanings beyond its originally-intended cultural purpose. In Mitchell's work, it is repurposed again as an artwork. How does the kilim's positioning in an art gallery once again change its meaning? What does it mean to you?

Stage 6

With reference to the *Nahrain* exhibition, explain the role of the **curator** as an agent in the construction of meaning in artworks.

[12] 'Kate Mitchell', *Chalk Horse*, www.chalkhorse.com.au/artists.php?a=MITCHELL&s=1 Accessed 28.10.2013.

[13] 'Language of Kilims', *Kilim.com: Timeless Weavings*, www.kilim.com/about-kilims/lang-of-kilims.asp Accessed 28.10.2013.

Kate Mitchell, *Magic Undone*, 2012, installation. Image courtesy of the artist and Chalk Horse Gallery.



TOM NICHOLSON

Tom Nicholson is a Melbourne-based multi-media artist, writer and academic. His practice is focused on significant moments in Australian history and how contextual differences affect our relation to, and our understanding of, events from the past.

In *Comparative Monument (Palestine)* (2012), Nicholson has documented nine monuments around suburban Melbourne that commemorate Australian presence in Palestine during World War I. Unlike memorials that are quiet spaces for reflection, removed from everyday life in honour of the dead, monuments are often oversized, imposing structures that are erected in community spaces to celebrate heroes and triumphs in history, and are designed to be perpetually present and be ingrained in everyday life¹⁴.

According to Nicholson, when monuments are created they are constructed to reference a particular set of meanings¹⁵. When erected in the 1920s, the Palestine monuments around Melbourne celebrated the Australian Military's part in the British capture of Bir Sab'a (1917) and their involvement in the British mandate, which resulted in the fall of Ottoman presence in Palestine. Over time, these monuments have taken on new meanings, for instance, they now create links to the Nakba, the violent Israeli colonisation of Palestine in 1948.

Nicholson plays with the idea of changing meaning further as he takes images of these monuments and **decontextualises** them by isolating them on white backgrounds, eliminating any links to the structures' cultural and physical landscapes. In the exhibition, ten documentary photographs depict street scenes in present-day Palestine where Nicholson has pasted up his images alongside advertising, political **propaganda** and community information boards. By inserting Australian war monuments into contemporary Palestine, a dialogue about our shared history is brought to the fore with new meanings implicated by time and place, **memorialisation**, translation and cultural difference.

Artist Statement

What I am interested in as an artist is trying to mobilize this sense of one place being embedded in another, but towards a kind of internationalism or solidarity. That word "Palestine" on these monuments stands for something that we would both reject, that both Palestine and Australia existed within the British Empire. I am trying to use this imperial link for a different kind of connection, which might be one of shared history, but also one of shared responsibility for that history.¹⁶

Questions

Stage 5

What ideas are Nicholson exploring when he injects images of Australian-Palestine monuments into Palestinian streets?

Stage 6

Discuss Nicholson's work in relation to the Cultural Frame. Focus your discussion on the significance of culture in shaping the relationship between Artist and Audience.



I find nine monuments bearing the name 'Palestine' in and around Melbourne: Aroca, Cudfield, Coburg, Donald, Kew, Longwarry, Mooroopna, North Melbourne, and Terang. These monuments commemorate the presence of Australian soldiers in Palestine during WWI and their role in the 1917 British capture of Bir Sab'a, or BeerSheba (or Bêr Sheva, as it is known when it is captured and cleared by Israeli soldiers in 1948, its Palestinian population killed or gathered together and forcibly transported by truck to Gaza, Bir Sab'a becoming part of the new state of Israel).

I walk right around the edge of that vast open space, surrounded by a fence without a gate. It is wedged between the historical Ottoman city of Bir Sab'a and the Israeli new city, a glassy office block, a mall, an eight-lane road with traffic whizzing along in both directions. This is where the Israeli soldiers enter Bir Sab'a in 1948. It is the site of the city's Islamic cemetery. The low sun picks out the confusion of rocks and rubble and worn headstones scattered through the expanses of bare earth and long grass.

The sites of the nine monuments bearing the word 'Palestine' are cleared. The nine monuments are gathered together. They are shipped from Melbourne to Tel Aviv, and transported by truck to Bir Sab'a. They are installed as a single line, each monument abutting the next, side by side, to create a sixty metre-long monumental form that diagonally cuts across the busy road alongside the old cemetery, David Hacham Boulevard. This new monument blocks all eight lines of traffic. All that stone, the bulk and weight of obelisks and rotunda and carved marble, become a kind of arrow, an over-scaled historical marker, pointing to that vast open space surrounded by a fence. It is a line for soldiers who would enter the city here. The nine inscriptions face the same way: Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine. Palestine.

تعليق موقع النصب التذكارية المسماة 'فلسطين' فلسطين 'تجميع النصب مع بعضها البعض البعض النصب من مليون إلى ثلث ألف وتنتقل إلى نهر السبع باستخدام الشاحنات. أُنشئت تركيبها على شكل خط مستقيم بحيث تكون النصب صامتة لبعضها البعض وبنياً إلى جانب لإنشاء نصب تذكاري بطول ستين متراً يقطع عرضياً عبر الشارع الأوسع بجانب القديسة القديسة في مائة رافيد هاشام. يعيق النصب العديد للمسارات الممائية جميعها وتصبح كل هذه الحجارة كتلة بون من الزجاج والسمات والمحفوات سيجها وعلامة تاريخية تشير إلى المساحة القديمة والأرضية والأفانط يتصاح وتصبح هذا خط مستقيم للحدود التي سيدخلون المدينة من هذا المكان النضوب التسعة على المنحدرات تلي في نفس الاتجاه غلستين فلسطين فلسطين فلسطين فلسطين فلسطين فلسطين فلسطين فلسطين فلسطين.

أُثير على تسعة نصب تذكارية قبل اسم 'فلسطين' 'في وجيل مدينة مليون. الاسرائيلية: الوكا وكولفولد، وكوبورج وونفيلد، وكو وادفوار، وموروپنا وشمال مليون. وراق الهدف وراء هذه النصب التذكارية هو إحياء ذكرى تواجد الجنود الاسرائيليين في فلسطين خلال الحرب العالمية الأولى وديروهم في الاستيلاء البريطاني عام 1917 على نهر السبع. أو يربط بين كندا أصبحت معروفة عندما م الاستيلاء عليها من قبل جنود اسرائيليين عام 1948 وقتل أو مأسسة التهجير القسري على السكان الفلسطينيين الاسرائيليين عندما تم نقلهم إلى قطاع غزة بحيث أصبحت نهر السبع جزء من دولة إسرائيل.

أول حول طرق المساحة القديمة الواقعة تسليح لا بداية والتي تقع بين مدينة نهر السبع التاريخية من زيم الاسرائيلية الفلسطينية الحديثة والبنية الاسرائيلية الجديدة التي تسمى مملوكة من الكابك الزنجاوية. يركز لتسويق وشراع مكون من ثمانية مسمارت تدير فيه المركبات تكلل الاضواء. ولقد كان هذا المكان نقطة دخول الاسرائيليين إلى نهر السبع عام 1948 وهذا تقع القسرة المسماة تكتشف مبروتة الدعاء القديس المتجسدة من افراخ والقيوتة بين الاحجار والالافس وشواهد القبور الحالية المنتشرة في مساحات الأرض العارية ومن الاشجار الطويلة.

[14] Arthur Danto, 'The Vietnam Veterans Memorial' in Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.), *Aesthetics: The Big Questions*, 1998, p.128
[15] Tom Nicholson, 'Rethinking the possibilities of the Monument in the face of histories of dispossession' in *Broadsheet*, issue 42, vol. 1, 2013, pp.66-68
[16] ibid.

| JOSH WODAK

Josh Wodak is an Australian-based **interdisciplinary** artist practicing in photography, video and sound art, sculpture and interactive **installations**. Drawing on his formal training in Visual **Anthropology** and Interdisciplinary Cross-Cultural Research, Wodak travels around the globe conducting and documenting environmental studies and investigating **human ecology** and political issues.

In *Semblance of Stability* (2013), Wodak presents a series of unstaged documentary photographs taken in Syria during April and March, 2011. This was during the Arab Spring, a wave of revolutionary demonstrations, riots and civil uprisings throughout the Arab world protesting against the rule of local governments and in some cases leading to rulers being forced from power. Wodak's research in the region at the time revealed how many locals were optimistic that Syria would be responsive to change and that their president, Bashar al-Assad, might grant partial reforms to his people¹⁷. Contrary to their hopes, the Government responded to the uprising with violent repression, which resulted in the loss of thousands of civilian lives.

In Wodak's photographic series we are presented with vignettes of the daily lives of Syrian people during the three weeks before the first violent Government action was taken against civilians. During this time any dissatisfaction with the Government or desires for political change were effectively restricted to the private domain¹⁸. These photographs encapsulate the **semblance** of stability and the apparently normal day-to-day work and family life that was enacted in the area before conflict broke out. However, the **juxtaposition** of intimate family moments with subtle indicators of melancholy, and subtle indicators of melancholy, anxiety and weariness continually convey a sense of tension and unease.

Artist Statement

This "land between the rivers" of the Tigris and Euphrates is in the midst of ongoing social and political upheaval from the Arab Spring and the diverse trajectories it has developed into across the region. One of the less acknowledged sources of the Arab Spring is climate change – as the spiral between drought, crop failures, food security and commodity prices were a major catalyst for the desires voiced for social and political change.

Questions

Stage 4

What do Wodak's photographs tell us about society and culture in Syria?

Stage 5

Consider the functions and relationships between the Artist-World-Artwork-Audience from the Conceptual Framework. What techniques has Wodak used to construct ideas about social and cultural issues in his photographs? Explain how effective Wodak's work is in communicating a message.



Josh Wodak, *Khirbet Khateb @t-minus 07 days before the storm broke*, 2013, photograph, 112 x 78cm. Image courtesy of the artist.

(17) 'Semblance of Stability' in *PhotoAccess Gallery*, <http://www.arch-angle.net/photography.html> Accessed 25.10.2013

(18) *ibid*.

JAMIL YAMANI

Jamil Yamani is a Sydney-based artist who works with video projection and installation. His works explore themes of migration, borders, cultural identity and the construction of the Other. The Other can be understood as any group of people who diverge from the accepted norm (this was historically thought of as a middle-class, white, male) and are considered backwards or inferior.

Yamani's art making involves fusing traditional Islamic icons and practices with a contemporary Western art aesthetic, drawing on pop culture and technology for inspiration.

Artist Statement

I have presented three new works in 2014 that aim to confuse and conflate cultural Islam with Western icons. I focus on Islamic and Western culture since that is my background, although my art applies to any **diaspora**. 'Multicultural' can imply a shared celebration of different cultures that exist harmoniously. This is an ideal but it can also imply a patronising civility even with a subtext of 'fit the stereotype or go elsewhere', or subtle if explicit exclusion.

Multiculturalism should ask difficult things of us if it is to be reciprocal in its intent. My art moves beyond superficial cultural defences to seek the deeper social cohesion (not assimilation) that unifies us. My artworks fondly tease both cultures through new permutations, for example devotion and sport, to represent ourselves in new modes, yet they criticise our wary protection of supposedly fixed identities.

My imagination was sparked during my International Studio & Curatorial Program Residency (funded by the Australia Council): e.g. *Made in America* (2011), a mosque combined with a classic American Chevrolet, exhibited in New York City, 2011. I promote a less usual debate about the common historical experiences of generations of migrants. These projects challenge us to find new ways to welcome each other and to merge, creatively and mutually, our cultural horizons.

Question Stage 5

Considering the Postmodern Frame, how does Yamani challenge traditional art conventions to critique ideas about contemporary multiculturalism?



Jamil Yamani, *Mussie Mussie Mussie Oi Oi Oi!* (video still) 2013-14, multi-channel video, 5:00mins. Image courtesy of the artist. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its art funding and advisory body.

GLOSSARY

Anthropology: the study of human societies and cultures and their development.

Archives: a collection of historical documents or records providing information about a place, institution, or group of people.

Ambiguous: open to more than one interpretation; not having one obvious meaning.

Appropriate: to use pre-existing images or objects with little or no transformation applied to them. i.e. the use of borrowed elements in the creation of a new work.

Assimilation/Assimilating: to take in and fully understand, or, to integrate people into a wider society or culture.

Complicity: the state of being an accomplice; partnership or involvement in wrongdoing.

Curator: a Curator sources and manages the artworks of an exhibition.

Decontextualize: to consider something in isolation from its context.

Diaspora: a dispersion of a people from their original homeland; the community formed by such a people.

Didacticism: intended to teach or instil a specific message as an ulterior motive.

Displacement: movement from place to place, particularly the forced departure of people from their homes, because of circumstances like war, persecution, or natural disaster.

Exacerbated: made worse.

Exile: to expel or banish a person from his or her country; to separate from country, home, usually for political reasons.

Historical amnesia: events and actions in history, particularly those that are undesirable, that are repressed or forgotten.

Human Ecology: the study of human relationships with natural, social and built environments.

Ideology: a system of ideas and beliefs, especially ones which form the basis of economic or political theory and policy.

Installation: installation art uses sculptural materials and other media to modify the way we experience a particular space.

Interdisciplinary: of, relating to, or involving two or more disciplines/fields of study that are usually considered distinct.

Juxtapose: placing two items or ideas side-by-side in order to compare and contrast them.

Memorialise: preserve the memory of, commemorate.

Metaphoric: a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else.

Oscillation: the act of going back and forth.

Pastiche: an artistic work consisting of a medley of pieces imitating various sources

Political persecution: the domination and control over of a group of people with the intention to repress them politically. Groups who defy those that are in control may have their human rights taken away, be imprisoned, abused or murdered.

Propaganda: information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view.

Power structures: An elite group constituted by people holding influential positions within a government, society, or organization.

Refugee: a person who is seeking refuge due to being forced to escape some danger or problem.

Satire: the use of humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize people's actions or vices.

Semblance: the outward appearance or apparent form of something, especially when the reality is different.

Subvert: to undermine or destroy completely.

Stereotype: a generalisation of a particular group of people, often leading to prejudice.

Totalitarian: a system of government that is centralized like a dictatorship.

Utilitarian: regarding something that is useful or practical, instead of decorative or ornamental.



Tom Nicholson, *Comparative Monument (Palestine)*, 2012. Exhibited at the Qalandiya International Biennial 2012. Image courtesy of the artist and Milani Gallery.

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Cover image: Saif Almurayati, *Attaining Safe Haven*, 2013,
acrylic and clay on canvas, 160 x 200cm. Image courtesy of the artist.



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