519 Assessment Task 1: A journal of inquiry, critical analysis and interpretation – teaching and learning strategies

Indigenous Perspectives

This teaching and learning resource is centered on the concept of ‘Indigenous Perspectives’. The term Indigenous refers to ‘originating or occurring naturally in a particular place; native’. It will center on the historical, cultural, contemporary and personal perspectives of Indigenous Australians and Indigenous Native Americans, as well as contributing cultures and how they express these views through their art.

It is a journal of inquiry, critical analysis and interpretation through structured questions, where students will have to form extended responses. It has been developed in relation to the VCE Studio Art Unit 3, Area of study 3 and Outcome 3 key knowledge and skills. Through critical inquiry, structural and post-structural perspectives, students will learn how to respond, analyze and interpret artworks from different times and cultures. Through this resource students will further develop their visual literacy skills (art language and terminology) and skills in researching (using a variety or references to inform their ideas about art and art making).

The ‘Indigenous Perspectives’ resource includes:

- **Section 1**: 5 Artworks related to the theme of ‘Indigenous Perspectives’. Each artwork will come with contextual information about the artist/artwork, and further reference material.
- **Section 2**: 5 questions and 5 exemplary responses to those questions.
- **Section 3**: An evaluation of how this resource will meet the VCE Studio Art Curriculum (teaching and learning strategies).
- **Section 4**: Further information regarding how this resource will assist students in developing a larger body of work (making and responding tasks included).
ARTWORK 1

**Figures in possum skin cloaks, 1898. William Barak (Wurundjeri)**
Medium: Pencil, wash, charcoal solution, gouache and earth pigments on paper
Measurements: 57.0 × 88.8 cm (image and sheet)
Credit Line: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased, 1962 © Public domain

**Contextual information:**
- *Figures in possum skin cloaks* by William Barak (1898) has a direct link to the theme of ‘Indigenous Perspectives’ as his work explores the themes of the colonization and importance of culture. Barak’s art explores Mimetic art theory, as he re-represented traditional and cultural scenes. In a time where the Europeans were trying to wipe out the indigenous race, Barak responded to this by creating art that reminded his people of the importance of their culture. The aesthetics, art theory, materials and techniques reflect the modernist time it was created.
- Artist bio: William Barak was a Warundjeri Indigenous Australian Artist. Above all else Barak was an influential spokesman for Aboriginal social justice, during the European invasion of the Wurundjeri peoples land (Ryan, 1999). Barak only created Art towards the end of his life, from 1880 until his death in 1903. The purpose of his art was not only to carry on the culture for his own people but to also show Europeans the complexity and
importance of his peoples' cultural and spiritual life. Barak's Aboriginal scenes depicted sacred ceremonies and spiritual stories unique to his people. Barak is one of many Aboriginal artists who used his artwork to help non-Indigenous people better understand and respect Aborigines and their way of life.

- Modernism: Mimetic Art Theory (re-representation as documentation). Structural perspective: sign and symbol systems (cultural and personal memory).
- Aesthetic qualities of the artwork: Line is the most prominent art element producing this artwork as all the components in the composition are outlined in thick black charcoal lines. The composition is completely covered leaving very little blank space. The artwork is landscape and divided equally by a path across the middle of the artwork, each side of the path consisting of a row of 10 men which creates a very balanced feel. All of the men are painted with identical positioning of the hands, representing that the men are undertaking some kind of traditional dance. Between the heads of the top row of 10 men, are smaller trees painted into the background creating a scene/environment. The artwork has this floating aura to it as there is no ground drawn, and the figures and trees seem to be floating. The artwork is not realistic, but like stated before a two dimensional representation of life. The artwork is rich in indigenous culture with symbolic line patterns and earthly pigments. What is interesting about this artwork is that there is a clear European influence, that being the unusual use of materials to create this artwork. Barak has mixed traditional indigenous materials such as ochre and charcoal; in conjunction with European manufactured gauche. This is symbolic of the invasion that occurred during this time in Barak's life.

Further reference material:
- First Australians series on SBS (Video Clip).
  'First Australians chronicles the birth of contemporary Australia as never told before, from the perspective of its first people. First Australians explores what unfolds when the oldest living culture in the world is overrun by the world's greatest empire. Over seven episodes, First Australians depicts the true stories of individuals - both black and white - caught in an epic drama of friendship, revenge, loss and victory in Australia's most transformative period of history.'
  - Episode 3 ‘Freedom for our Lifetime’ focuses on the story of William Barak, including his art.
  This reference material provides a thorough understanding of William Barak and what he dealt with as an artist, in regards to historical and cultural perspectives. The website also includes interactive online games to discover more information to inform the student's responses and to assist them in developing a justified critical position/interpretation.
- Culture Victoria (Video) ‘Remember Barak’
• The Barak Project: When the wattles bloom again (NGV Essay)

• Artist Biographies including quotes from the artist (Website).
  Links:

• National Gallery of Australia (Exhibition Essay)

ARTWORK 2

Sexy and Dangerous 1996; printed 2005.
Brook Andrew.
Medium: computer-generated colour transparency on transparent synthetic polymer resin
Measurements: 145.9 × 96.0 cm (image and sheet)
Edition: artist's proof ½
Accession Number: 2005.166
Department: Australian Photography
Credit Line: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
Purchased with funds from the Victorian Foundation for Living Australian Artists, 2005
© Brook Andrew, courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne
Contextual information:

- Sexy and Dangerous (2005) by Brook Andrew has direct links to ‘Indigenous Perspectives’. Andrew’s work touches on his Indigenous heritage, heavily influenced by the history of the first Australians. Brook Andrew's people are the Wiradjuri of New South Wales. Sexy and dangerous questions past and present modes of cultural representation, particular in stereotypical views of Aboriginality. Andrew re-contextualizes Indigenous perspectives in contemporary ways. The art form of a photograph and techniques (computer-generated colour transparency on transparent synthetic polymer resin) alludes to the post-modern nature of his work. Andrew also has created this artwork using the post-structural perspective of appropriation of an old postcard.

- Post-Structural perspectives:
  - Appropriation
  - Re-contextualization/De-contextualization
  - CRITICAL THEORISM: Internal criticism: Every society ought to be seen to be making an implicit claim to allow its members to live a good life. (Critical race theory and post-colonial theory).
  - Edited photography as an art form
  - embraces cultural diversity (Cohen, 2015).
  - ‘Post-structuralism not only questions, but also continues, the central project of structuralism – the inquiry into the organizing principles of a language system’ (Radford, G., Radford, M., 2004).

- Artist bio:
  - Brook Andrew was born in Sydney and is of the Wiradjuri people of New South Wales. He has a kinship connection to his mother’s country in Cowra.
  - Andrew completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts at the University of Western Sydney in 1999 and a Master of Fine Arts by research at the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University in 1997.

Further reference material:

- Gallery visit to the National Gallery of Victoria: Ian Potter Gallery.
  On view: Gallery 13, Level 3.

- Artist's (Website) including archives and essay's.
  Link: http://www.brookandrew.com/

- ABC Television series: Message Stick.
  Includes: Videos (Transcript of Videos and Quotes about Andrew's art) and gallery of images.
  Link: http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s1242475.htm
ARTWORK 3

A native American Woman and child of Promeinoc, c1585-1593.
John White.
Medium: Watercolour
Measurements: Unidentified
Credit line: British Museum

Contextual information:
- John White was largely responsible for shaping England’s first view of America, though few are familiar with his name. In the 1580s, White sailed with the earliest expeditions to Virginia and produced a series of amazing watercolours that documented the complex and sophisticated culture of the North Carolina Algonquian Indians and the local flora and fauna. These drawings are the only surviving original visual record of this early period of America’s history. This is why they’re so significant in history.
The clear influence of the Elizabethan invasion on the Native American’s land is clear in this artwork (E.g. the child holding a doll wearing an Elizabethan dress).

Modernism: Mimetic Art (re-representation as documentation). Signs and symbol systems. (Cohen, 2015).

**Further reference material:**


- British Museum (Press Release for the exhibition ‘A New World’)  

- Essay PDF. Kim Sloan et al, A New World: England’s first view of America  
  (University of North Carolina Press, 2007)  
  Link: [http://www.sts.vt.edu/faculty/goodrum/sloan-review.pdf](http://www.sts.vt.edu/faculty/goodrum/sloan-review.pdf)
Hollywood Africans (1983) by Jean-Michel Basquiat artwork doesn’t have a direct link to ‘Ingenious perspectives’ but deals with the repercussions of what happened in history before him. During the European colonization of America, Indigenous Native Americans were used as slaves. America also brought Africans to the U.S as slaves (which is where the history of African Americans started). Basquiat’s art comments on the misconception and racism he experienced as an African American.

Modernism: Neo expressionist. Expressive Theories.

Structuralism perspectives: ‘Cultural phenomena as sign systems that are based on deep and hidden structure’ (Cohen, 2015). Critical Theorems: Critical race theory.

Artist bio: Jean-Michel Basquiat was born in New York City in 1960, where he died in 1988. Born to a Haitian father and a Puerto-Rican mother, Basquiat left his family home in Brooklyn, New York at the age of fifteen and took to the streets. A voracious autodidact, he quickly became a denizen of the explosive and decadent New York underground scene—a noise musician who loved jazz, and a street poet who scrawled his sophisticated aphorisms in Magic Marker across the walls of downtown Manhattan, copyrighting them under the name SAMO. In 1981, he killed off this alter ego and began painting and drawing, first on salvaged materials then later on canvas and paper, and making bricolage with materials scavenged from the urban environment. From the outset he worked compulsively; his passion for words and music, his intense yet fluid energy, and the heterogeneous materials that he employed so freely imbued his work with urgency and excitement. He sold his first painting in 1981, and by 1982, spurred by the Neo-Expressionist art boom, his work was in great demand. In 1985, he was featured on the cover of The New York Times Magazine in connection with an article on the newly exuberant international art market. In that photograph, Basquiat is a vision of cool, sprawled in a chair in an elegant threepiece suit and tie, with bunched dreadlocks and bare feet, in front of a large, bold painting—a supernova in the making.

Hollywood Africans is one of a series of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s paintings that feature images and texts relating to stereotypes of African Americans in the entertainment industry. It was painted while Basquiat was on an extended visit to Los Angeles, California, in 1983. Several of the work’s notations are autobiographical: the trio of figures on the right depicts the artist with the rap musician Rammellzee and the painter Toxic, who had traveled with him from New York, and he includes the digits of his birth date: 12, 22, and 60. Other notations are historical: phrases such as “Sugar Cane,” “Tobacco,” “Gangsterism,” and “What is Bwana?” allude to the limited roles available to black actors in old Hollywood movies. The notion of exclusion or excision is reiterated in the way that Basquiat often crossed out words or phrases in his works. The technique, he explained, was actually meant to direct attention to them: “I cross out words so you will see them more; the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them.”

Further reference material:

- Whitney Museum of American Art (Object label of the artwork) including artist quotes.
  Link: http://collection.whitney.org/object/453
ARTWORK 5

**Notes to Basquiat: Poet and Muse, 2000.**

**Gordon Bennett.**

Medium: synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
Measurements: 152.5 × 182.8 cm  
Place/s of Execution: Brisbane, Queensland  
Department: Australian Painting  
Credit Line: National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Purchased through the NGV Foundation with the assistance of Mr. Henry Gillespie, Governor, 2001  
© Gordon Bennett

**Contextual information:**

- Gordon Bennett is an Australian artist and was born in 1955, who has strong themes of his heritage influence in his work (Indigenous).
- Bennett is interested in the way language and images construct identity and history, and the way this language controls and creates meaning in his artworks. An example of this can be seen in the "Notes to Basquiat" series when he writes racist slang names of Australian colonialism and African American history next to images of various parts of the human body.
- Expressive Theories of Art (art viewed as representation or manifestation of the inner state of the artist).
• Poststructuralist perspectives:
  - using appropriation and re-contextualization ( Appropriation for Bennett is a tool that enables him to open up and re-define stereotypes and bias. Fundamentally, he deconstructs history to question the ‘truth’ of the past).
  - embraces cultural diversity (Cohen, 2015).
• Informed by theories about appropriation - the borrowing of images from other artists and visual sources - and by post-colonial theories about identity and history.

**Further reference material:**

- Gallery visit at the NGV


- Art Gallery New South Whales. Gordon Bennett (Collection and Works)


- Visual Arts Queensland: Gordon Bennett bio.

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**Section 2:** 5 structured extended response questions and 5 exemplary responses to those questions.

**Question 1.**

*Figures in possum skin cloaks, 1898. William Barak (Wurundjeri)*

Research the artist’s personal interests and experience; analyze, interpret and respond to the artwork through the application of the Formal, Personal and Cultural framework.

William Barak was a Warundjeri Indigenous Australian Artist. Above all else Barak was an influential spokesman for Aboriginal social justice, during the European invasion of the Wurundjeri peoples land (Ryan, 1999). Barak only created Art towards the end of his life, from 1880 until
his death in 1903. The purpose of his art was not only to carry on the culture for his own people but to also show Europeans the complexity and importance of his peoples’ cultural and spiritual life. Barak’s Aboriginal scenes depicted sacred ceremonies and spiritual stories unique to his people. Barak is one of many Aboriginal artists who used his artwork to help non-Indigenous people better understand and respect Aborigines and their way of life (Ergo, 2015).

The artwork this writing will focus on is ‘Figures in possum skin cloaks’, created in 1898 by William Barak. The artwork depicts a group of 20 men engaged in a ceremonial procession, all adorned in possum cloaks like the title alludes. Barak focused on two aspects of traditional life in this artwork: corroborees, and groups of Indigenous people wearing possum-skin cloaks which identified them as Wurundjeri. Barak has created a composition that reflects his cultural background and experience of life. In a time where the Europeans were trying to wipe out the indigenous race, Barak responded to this by creating art that reminded his people of the importance of their culture back then, and even today long after his passing. Barak’s art takes on a mimetic theory as he imitates and creates a representation of his life at the time. All of the figures are painted two dimensionally, very similar the pre-historic Egyptian wall art figures.

Line is the most prominent art element producing this artwork as all the components in the composition are outlined in thick black charcoal lines. The composition is completely covered leaving very little blank space. The artwork is landscape and divided equally by a path across the middle of the artwork, each side of the path consisting of a row of 10 men which creates a very balanced feel. All of the men are painted with identical positioning of the hands, representing that the men are undertaking some kind of traditional dance. Between the heads of the top row of 10 men, are smaller trees painted into the background creating a scene/enviourment. The artwork has this floating aura to it as there is no ground drawn, and the figures and trees seem to be floating. The artwork is not realistic, but like stated before a two dimensional representation of life. The artwork is rich in indigenous culture with symbolic line patterns and earthly pigments. What is interesting about this artwork is that there is a clear European influence, that being the unusual use of materials to create this artwork. Barak has mixed traditional indigenous materials such as ochre and charcoal; in conjunction with European manufactured gauche. This is symbolic of the invasion that occurred during this time in Barak’s life.

References:


Question 2.

**Sexy and Dangerous, (1996; printed 2005) Brook Andrew.**

Using the Formal, Personal and Contemporary Framework discuss contemporary artist Brook Andrew’s work and how he has been influenced by significant events in Indigenous Australian history.

“You know, it's really interesting, when I first started making art, people would label me as "the gay black artist". And I'd think, "Uh-uh. This is a load of crap. I can't cope with all of these identities. I'm an artist." Sure, you know, my Aboriginality has a lot to do with that, and also my sexuality has a lot to do with it, because I have a perception which is different to other people's lived experiences. But, at the end of the day, I'm part of a broader art spectrum, and I'm really interested in international art. And I'm really interested in different mediums. And I like being liked because I'm an artist, not because I...have those other identities" (Barak, 2005).

Brook Andrew’s ‘Sexy and Dangerous’ explores themes of personal identity, and his heritage (Wiradjuri) in a contemporary way. Brook Andrew’s personal identity as a cultural activist informs his artistic practice. For him, art, politics and everyday life are inseparable. Identity and representation are core themes of his work, but by engaging in hybridity and fluidity in the face of conventional power relationships, the artist prevents prescriptive readings of his work (QAGOMA, 2015).

Andrew re-contextualizes the perspectives of his Indigenous ancestors on the invasion of European settlers, as he deals with contemporary perspectives of Indigenous Australians today. Andrew’s work comments on how Indigenous Australians are perceived in society today. Sexy and Dangerous, and in other works from Andrew make reference to Indigenous peoples as not ‘savages’ or ‘primitives’ (as depicted in history from English perspectives), but people who lived extraordinary lives with dignity, rank and honour for their achievements. His art is a celebration of his culture.

Sexy and Dangerous 2005 is a photograph (computer-generated colour transparency on transparent synthetic polymer resin print). This medium reads as a post-modern method of art, which challenges his cultural traditions. The photograph depicts a centered, half body portrait of a bare chested Indigenous man. We know he is Indigenous because of the slashes of paint across his body (traditional body scarification) and the septum decoration representative of his heritage (Langton, 2005). The body scarification and septum decorations were badges of rank that denoted stages of knowledge and status in Indigenous social worlds. In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when phrenology and racial classification were powerful ideas that attracted the most famous scientists in the world to their rank, photographs such as this one served to denote none of these social and human conditions, but served only mad racial fantasies about racial ‘types’ and the theories concerning the hierarchy of races (Langton, 2015). The sitter of the portraits gaze and stance is fierce and aggressive, which emphasizes the ‘sexy and dangerousness’ of the man as suggested in the title. This image is an appropriation of an old postcard, which Andrew has altered. The sitter of the portrait has white horizontal lines that have been used to erase parts of his chest, which Andrew may be communicating the impact of colonialism on Indigenous Australians, and the English desire to erase Aboriginals from their land. The centralized figure also has ‘sexy and dangerous’ and Chinese symbols stamped over his chest (that looks like it has been edited in using a
photo editing program prior to printing) that may symbolize the man’s influence of many cultures. The sitter of the portrait has been captured in minimal light, his face has a subtle shadow cast on the left side of his face creating a sultry vibe. The earthly pigments represented in the photograph resonate with traditional Indigenous Art from the past, as he re-contextualizes these views through contemporary art forms.

Brook Andrew speaking at the Queensland Art Gallery states “for me, Sexy and Dangerous is about the way in which Australians and non-Indigenous Australians, I suppose, communicate across the void of colonialism and the whole mixing and complexity of that. And, that is, this guy is seen as sexy, but he’s also really dangerous for lots of different reasons. And I suppose it’s also to do with contemporary Indigenous issues as well. It’s a sexy thing, but it’s also quite dangerous as well” (2005).

References:


Question 3.
- Notes to Basquiat: Poet and Muse, 2000 by Gordon Bennett.

Research the two artists above: find out their personal, cultural history and aesthetics of their work. Then using the Formal, Personal and Cultural Framework construct a response analyzing and comparing their two artworks from their different times of production.

With the first glance of Hollywood Africans, 1983 by Jean-Michel Basquiat and Notes to Basquiat: Poet and Muse, 2000 by Gordon Bennett you can already observe some striking similarities visually within the art form of painting and style. Figures and text fragmented all over the canvas, and Bennett’s direct mentioning of ‘Notes to Basquiat’ in the title of his artwork confirming his influence.

Jean-Michel Basquiat was born in New York City in 1960, where he died in 1988. Born to a Haitian father and a Puerto-Rican mother, Basquiat left his family home in Brooklyn, New York at the age of fifteen and took to the streets. This artwork Hollywood Africans 1983 was part of the Neo-Expressionist art boom, which reflects a continuous theme present in all his artwork throughout his career – misconception, racism and stereotypes as being an African American. Hollywood Africans 1983 is one of a series of Basquiat’s paintings that feature images and texts
relating to stereotypes of African Americans in the entertainment industry (WMAA, 2015). It was painted while Basquiat was on an extended visit to Los Angeles, California, in 1983. Several of the work’s notations are autobiographical: the trio of figures on the right depicts the artist with the rap musician Rammellzee and the painter Toxic, who had traveled with him from New York, and he includes the digits of his birth date: 12, 22, and 60. Other notations are historical: phrases such as “Sugar Cane,” “Tobacco,” “Gangsterism,” and “What is Bwana?” allude to the limited roles available to black actors in old Hollywood movies (WMAA, 2015). The notion of exclusion is reiterated in the way that Basquiat often crossed out words or phrases in his works. The technique, he explained, was actually meant to direct attention to them: “I cross out words so you will see them more; the fact that they are obscured makes you want to read them” (WMAA, 2015).

Gordon Bennett is an Australian artist and was born in 1955, who has strong themes of his heritage influence in his work (Indigenous). Bennett’s art is informed by theories about appropriation - the borrowing of images from other artists and visual sources - and by post-colonial theories about identity and history(Art Gallery NSW, 2015). Bennett is interested in the way language and images construct identity and history, and the way this language controls and creates meaning in his artworks. In Notes to Basquiat: Poet and Muse 2000 Bennett writes racist slang names of Australian colonialism and African American history next to images of various parts of the human body. The choice of earthly, traditional colours in his artwork shows influence of his Indigenous heritage, as he uses these images and text to express his perspective on post-colonial identity and history.

Notes to Basquiat: Poet and Muse 2000 is part of a series ‘notes to Basquait’ where Bennett has an open dialogue with the late artist. This conversation is manifest quite literally when Bennett drafts a letter to the - then already deceased - Basquiat, outlining his reasons for emulating his style. Underlying this dialogue with Basquiat Bennett's need to re-contextualize the issues that he has explored throughout his artistic career, confronting them within a global context (Art Gallery NSW, 2015). Appropriation allowed Bennett to refer to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art, and situate his painting in a fluid area between these two overlapping forms of contemporary art. Bennett takes appropriation to a new level within his practice. Bennett not only borrows images from the work of American artist Jean-Michel Basquiat, but also begins to mimic Basquiat’s spontaneous and gestural urban style of painting, reflecting his involvement in the graffiti culture of the United States (Art Gallery NSW, 2015). Both Bennett and Basquiat use images and text as a way to construct meaning in their artwork. Basquiat does so in a neo-expressive style, while Bennett’s artwork is in a more constructed, neat, clear and in a reserved way (almost looking like a comic book illustration). There is also a visual aesthetic difference in the choice of colour; as Basquiat uses bright, bold and expressive colour, as Bennett uses traditional earth pigments as if paying homage to his ancestors. There is an obvious difference in the production times of the artworks as one was made in 1983 and made from acrylic and oil stick on canvas, and the other in 2000 made from synthetic polymer paint on canvas.

References
Question 4.
- Figures in possum skin cloaks, 1898. William Barak (Wurundjeri).

Discuss how these artists from difference times and cultures have interpreted sources of inspiration and used materials and techniques in the production of their artworks.

Referring to the Formal, Personal and Cultural Framework form a response that analyses the similarities and differences.

Your response should include: Aesthetic Qualities, Materials and Techniques, Subject matter, Sources of Inspiration and Influences, Themes, Art forms, Style and Historical context.

“John White, a gentleman and artist, was largely responsible for shaping England’s first view of America. In the 1580s, White sailed with the earliest expeditions to Virginia and produced a series of amazing watercolours that documented the complex and sophisticated culture of the North Carolina Algonquian Indians and the local flora and fauna. These drawings are the only surviving original visual record of this early period of America’s history” (Ward, B., 2007). ‘A native American Woman and child of Promeinoc’ (c1585-1593) by John White depicts a woman entrenched with Native American signs and symbols, holding a container that looks like its purpose is to carry water. The fine lines White used to re-create the cultural tribal body markings, naked bodies with only a small sarong wrap around her waist and traditional jewelry; are all symbols of her Native American culture. The watercolour artwork seems to be depicting this woman doing an everyday task (collecting water) with her child. Her child, also adorned in Native America attire shows themes of the European invasion and influence as the doll she carries wears an Elizabethan dress. This is symbolic of this historic period in history, and shows the crossing of cultures. White uses a very natural, earthy palette as he used and created the pigments from the Native American land mixed with water. The proportions and tones used creates a realistic and mimetic representation of the figures.

William Barak was a Warundjeri Indigenous Australian Artist. Above all else Barak was an influential spokesman for Aboriginal social justice, during the European invasion of the Wurundjeri peoples land (Ryan, 1999). Barak only created Art towards the end of his life, from 1880 until his death in 1903. The purpose of his art was not only to carry on the culture for his own people but to also show Europeans the complexity and importance of his peoples’ cultural and spiritual life. Barak’s Aboriginal scenes depicted sacred ceremonies and spiritual stories unique to his people. Barak is one of many Aboriginal artists who used his artwork to help non-Indigenous people better understand and respect Aborigines and their way of life (Ergo, 2015). ‘Figures in possum skin cloaks’ (1898) by William Barak (Wurundjeri) depicts a group of 20 men engaged in a ceremonial procession, all adorned in possum cloaks like the title alludes. Barak focused on two aspects of traditional life in this artwork: corroborees, and groups of Indigenous people wearing possum-skin cloaks which identified them as Wurundjeri. Barak has created a composition that reflects his cultural background and experience of life. In a time where the Europeans were trying to wipe out the indigenous race, Barak responded to this by creating art that reminded his people of the importance of their culture back then, and even
Barak’s art takes on a mimetic theory as he imitates and creates a representation of his life at the time. Line is the most prominent art element producing this artwork as all the components in the composition are outlined in thick black charcoal lines. The composition is completely covered leaving very little blank space. The artwork is landscape and divided equally by a path across the middle of the artwork, each side of the path consisting of a row of 10 men which creates a very balanced feel. All of the men are painted with identical positioning of the hands, representing that the men are undertaking some kind of traditional dance. Between the heads of the top row of 10 men, are smaller trees painted into the background creating a scene/environment. The artwork has this floating aura to it as there is no ground drawn, and the figures and trees seem to be floating. The artwork is not realistic, but a two dimensional representation of life. The artwork is rich in indigenous culture with symbolic line patterns and earthly pigments. What is interesting about this artwork is that there is a clear European influence, that being the unusual use of materials to create this artwork. Barak has mixed traditional indigenous materials such as ochre and charcoal; in conjunction with European manufactured gauche. This is symbolic of the invasion that occurred during this time in Barak’s life.

There are so many similarities that can be drawn from these two artworks, remarkable given their subject matter is from different times and cultures. The first similarity being that they both have themes of European colonization, one in Australia and one in America. The influences of European cultures can be seen in both artworks. Barak’s artwork was created using not only traditional Indigenous materials, but European manufactured gauche. White on the other hand depicts the influence his own European culture has had on the Native American’s with the inclusion of the child holding a doll wearing an Elizabethan dress. Although different times and cultures, we can see the common themes throughout these two artworks from different perspectives, that of the Indigenous Australians and European settlers during their expeditions to America. Both artworks share the purpose of using mimetic art theories, but for different purposes. Barak used mimetic art theories in his art practice to conserve the traditions and cultures of his people, which seem to be on the verge of being whipped out by the European invasion in Australia. White used mimetic art theories in his art practice purely to document what he saw to bring it back home to share his knowledge. Both artworks have been created using pigments from the land of their production.

References:


Question 5.
- Figures in possum skin cloaks, 1898. William Barak (Wurundjeri)

Compare and contrast the art forms and styles of Brook Andrew and William Barak’s artworks in relation to pre and post 1990 Indigenous perspectives. Create an extended response using the Formal, Personal and Cultural Framework.

Brook Andrew’s ‘Sexy and Dangerous’ (1996; printed 2005) and William Barak’s ‘Figures in possum skin cloak’ (1898) both share themes of identity, culture and colonialism, but through different perspectives of time. For both artists art, politics and everyday life are inseparable, and is evident in their work. The production time of their art is reflected in their choice of art form. Andrew expresses his messages through the art form of photography; using computer-generated colour transparency on transparent synthetic polymer resin print. Whereas Barak does so through the art form of drawing; using pencil, wash, charcoal solution, gouache and earth pigments on paper.

Brook Andrew speaking at the Queensland Art Gallery states “for me, Sexy and Dangerous is about the way in which Australians and non-Indigenous Australians, I suppose, communicate across the void of colonialism and the whole mixing and complexity of that. And, that is, this guy is seen as sexy, but he's also really dangerous for lots of different reasons. And I suppose it's also to do with contemporary Indigenous issues as well. It's a sexy thing, but it's also quite dangerous as well” (2005). Sexy and Dangerous 2005 is a photograph. This form reads as a post-modern method of art, which challenges his cultural traditions. The photograph depicts a centered, half body portrait of a bare chested Indigenous man. We know he is Indigenous because of the slashes of paint across his body (traditional body scarification) and the septum decoration representative of his heritage (Langton, 2005). The body scarification and septum decorations were badges of rank that denoted stages of knowledge and status in Indigenous social worlds. In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when phrenology and racial classification were powerful ideas that attracted the most famous scientists in the world to their rank, photographs such as this one served to denote none of these social and human conditions, but served only mad racial fantasies about racial ‘types’ and the theories concerning the hierarchy of races (Langton, 2015). The sitter of the portraits gaze and stance is fierce and aggressive, which emphasizes the ‘sexy and dangerousness’ of the man as suggested in the title. This image is an appropriation of an old postcard, which Andrew has altered. The sitter of the portrait has white horizontal lines that have been used to erase parts of his chest, which Andrew may be communicating the impact of colonialism on Indigenous Australians, and the English desire to erase Aboriginals from their land. The centralized figure also has ‘sexy and dangerous’ and Chinese symbols stamped over his chest (that looks like it has been edited in using a photo editing program prior to printing) that may symbolize the man’s influence of many cultures. The sitter of the portrait has been captured in minimal light, his face has a subtle shadow cast on the left side of his face creating a sultry vibe. The earthly pigments represented in the photograph resonate with traditional Indigenous Art from the past, as he re-contextualizes these views through contemporary art forms.

William Barak was a Warundjeri Indigenous Australian Artist. Above all else Barak was an influential spokesman for Aboriginal social justice, during the European invasion of the Wurundjeri peoples land (Ryan, 1999). Barak only created Art towards the end of his life, from 1880 until
his death in 1903. The purpose of his art was not only to carry on the culture for his own people but to also show Europeans the complexity and importance of his peoples’ cultural and spiritual life. Barak’s Aboriginal scenes depicted sacred ceremonies and spiritual stories unique to his people. Barak is one of many Aboriginal artists who used his artwork to help non-Indigenous people better understand and respect Aborigines and their way of life (Ergo, 2015). ‘Figures in possum skin cloaks’ (1898) by William Barak (Wurundjeri) depicts a group of 20 men engaged in a ceremonial procession, all adorned in possum cloaks like the title alludes. Barak focused on two aspects of traditional life in this artwork: corroborees, and groups of Indigenous people wearing possum-skin cloaks which identified them as Wurundjeri. Barak has created a composition that reflects his cultural background and experience of life. In a time where the Europeans were trying to wipe out the Indigenous race, Barak responded to this by creating art that reminded his people of the importance of their culture back then, and even today long after his passing. Barak’s art takes on a mimetic theory as he imitates and creates a representation of his life at the time. Line is the most prominent art element producing this artwork as all the components in the composition are outlined in thick black charcoal lines. The composition is completely covered leaving very little blank space. The artwork is landscape and divided equally by a path across the middle of the artwork, each side of the path consisting of a row of 10 men which creates a very balanced feel. All of the men are painted with identical positioning of the hands, representing that the men are undertaking some kind of traditional dance. Between the heads of the top row of 10 men, are smaller trees painted into the background creating a scene/enviourment. The artwork has this floating aura to it as there is no ground drawn, and the figures and trees seem to be floating. The artwork is not realistic, but a two dimensional representation of life. The artwork is rich in indigenous culture with symbolic line patterns and earthly pigments. What is interesting about this artwork is that there is a clear European influence, that being the unusual use of materials to create this artwork. Barak has mixed traditional indigenous materials such as ochre and charcoal; in conjunction with European manufactured gauche. This is symbolic of the invasion that occurred during this time in Barak’s life.

Although Barak and Andrew have created art during different times, their artworks share similar content such as identity as an Indigenous Australian, and traditional and cultural symbols. Barak and Andrew aren’t from the same tribe, Barak from the land of Wurundjeri, and Andrew from the land of Wiradjuri. Barak depicts a traditional corroboree of his people wearing a possum skin cloak representative of his people. Andrew depicts another traditional theme of body scarification within his culture. Both artworks deal with contexts of personal themes of the colonization in Australia. Barak has communicated his ideas and meanings through a traditional method of art form-drawing. Andrew has communicated his ideas and meanings through a contemporary (post-modern) method of art form – photography. The choice of art form changes the aesthetics, materials and techniques in the construction of meaning in their artworks. Barak’s art is a mimetic representation of what was happening during this time of colonization, whereas Andrew uses the re-contextualization of these traditional ideas in a new way. Andrew creates a conceptual response to his Indigenous perspectives, as well as many other ideas through one artwork. Barak is much more personal in the way that the purpose of his art is to deal with how he is always identified and labeled as a ‘Gay Indigenous Artist’ (he brings contemporary issues of identity).

References:


Section 3: An evaluation of how this resource will meet the VCE Studio Art Curriculum (teaching and learning strategies).

How this resource meets the VCE Studio Art Curriculum (Teaching and Learning Strategies):

‘Indigenous Perspectives’ is a teaching and learning resource that addresses the following key knowledge and skills of Unit 3 Studio Art, Area of study 3 and Outcome 3:

**Key knowledge**
This knowledge includes
• art practices related to particular artworks or art form/s in more than one historical and/or cultural context/s;
• analysis of how artworks reflect the artists’ interpretations of subject matter, influences, cultural contexts and communication of ideas and meaning;
• examples of artworks from different historical and/or cultural contexts; • materials, techniques and processes used in the production of artworks;
• aesthetic qualities and styles of artworks.
(VCE Studio Art Study design, 2014).

**Key skills**
These skills include the ability to
• discuss ways in which artworks reflect artists’ interpretations of subject matter, influences, cultural contexts and communication of ideas and meanings;
• analyse and discuss ways in which artists employ materials, techniques and processes;
• analyse the ways in which aesthetic qualities and styles are developed;
• discuss artistic practices and ways in which artists develop aesthetic qualities and styles in their artwork with reference to art elements such as line, colour, texture, tone, form, shape, movement, sound and light;
• research and discuss art practices in relation to particular artworks or art form/s, and the ways in which artists develop styles in their artwork.
(VCE Studio Art Study design, 2014).

This resource is a set of tasks that require responses to structured questions, that support the development of knowledge and skills that are assessable in the external exam. This resource focuses on professional art practices in relation to particular art form/s and the development of styles in artworks. Students investigate the ways in which artists have interpreted subject matter, influences, cultural contexts, and communicated ideas and meaning in making artworks. The use of materials, techniques, processes and working methods of artists to make
artworks, and the ways in which artists have developed aesthetic qualities and styles in artworks are also considered (VCE Studio Art Study design, 2014).

Section 4: Further information regarding how this resource will assist students in developing a larger body of work (making and responding tasks included).

This section of the resource provides information for how this resource could be used in developing a larger body of work, including making and responding task ideas:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Making Tasks:</th>
<th>Responding Tasks:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Appropriate an artwork from this resource.</td>
<td>• Using this resource an outcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Create an artwork on your perspective of Indigenous Australians.</td>
<td>• Ongoing assessment, week by week all adding up to their final grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Create an exhibition based on the ‘Indigenous Perspectives’ resource.</td>
<td>• Extend the responses as essays. Focusing on two artists from this resource.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Brainstorm and develop your own distinctive style Task: Creating personal signs and symbols to communicate meaning in your art making.</td>
<td>• Visit the galleries where these artworks are currently. Create a response while viewing them.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Comparing and contrasting Task: using tables or Venn diagrams. Individual or jigsaw group research.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Get students to research their cultural background to inform their own art practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Further extend the questions to appropriation, in regards to Gordon Bennett and Jean-Michel Basquiat.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
References for the whole resource:


