“Any ‘dodge, trick, and conjuration’ of any kind is open to the photographer’s use so that it belongs to his art, and is not false to nature.... It is his imperative duty to avoid the mean, the bare and the ugly, and to aim to elevate his subject, to avoid awkward forms, and to correct [the] unpicturesque.”

- Henry Peach Robinson, 1869

**Introduction**

Since the inception of the photographic image, the notion of ‘the truth of photography’ has been associated with the medium’s ability to capture ‘real life’. Of course, the photograph is always mediated: individual elements are selectively included or excluded, poses controlled, scenarios staged. Further editing can occur in the darkroom. With digital advances in photography, entire images can be created beyond the realm of the everyday.

All of the artists in *Artifice* draw on pictographic histories, be they based within the fields of photography, painting, advertising, popular culture or indeed a combination of the aforementioned. The intellectual impetus of the artworks lifts the images above the realm of the snapshot or photograph-as-window-on-the-world, for ‘... contemporary art photography, while acknowledging its own history, draws on a range of traditions, both artistic and vernacular, and reconfigures them rather than simply emulating them.’

**Areas of Interest for Students:**

- Constructing reality through manipulation and composition
- Digital and analogue processes
- Identity
- Photography as a contemporary art medium
- Staging
Camilla Birkeland

Key points:
- Constructed space/photographic set
- Scale
- The relationship between humanity and the natural world

Camilla Birkeland’s *Standing witness* series explores **constructed space and scale**. Her photographs have associations with 19th Century Romantic landscape painting and the ruins of grand architecture. Birkeland states “photography, painting, sculpture, installation art and science fiction converge in this work”. Birkeland plays with scale to produce images of apparently cavernous ruins that are in reality small, domestic spaces. The natural landscape itself does not appear in Birkeland’s photographs, yet her works suggest the sublime magnificence of natural terrain such as the fjords of her native Norway. The tiny ‘everyman’ that is dwarfed by his surroundings is a powerful metaphor for humanity and the insignificance of the individual.

Birkeland’s almost monochromatic images in the *Standing witness* series are dominated by the geometric surroundings that simultaneously possess an organic feel. Set in a disused backyard incinerator (itself a now-defunct structure, with its primary function outlawed through current pollution laws), the photographs hark back to a bygone era. The play on physical space and scale transforms the ‘everyman’ into a figure caught in a performative moment, suggesting a narrative in the manner of a film-still but without the clues of what will next occur or what has previously passed. Like a film set, it is unclear whether the surroundings are real or artificial – the surrounding ‘oversized’ blocks could easily be made of polystyrene.

In her latest body of work, *Staged*, Birkeland removed the everyman figure and switched to constructed interiors for backdrops. Birkeland ‘explores the representation of three-dimensional space in photographic media’

Ordinary objects assume a strange, otherworldly aura. The viewer cannot be certain what Birkeland’s objects are, and their scale remains indeterminate. She contemplates one’s insignificance within the infinite mystery of the cosmos and brings into question the futility of human endeavours in attempting to control and dominate the planet on which we exist.
Mari Hirata

Key points:
- repetition
- identity
- symbolism
- cultural heritage/cultural traditions

Gold Coast artist Mari Hirata was born in Japan to parents of mixed heritage and lived there until her family migrated to Australia in 1991. Her own life experiences are reflected in the cross-cultural references in her work. Hirata’s most recent series of work, Sacred ties, is a personal narrative that pays homage to her late mother and considers the enduring mother-daughter relationship over generations. The series marks various stages in a woman’s life. To reach, to hold features numerous white shoes (an icon from Hirata’s earlier work) which symbolise entrenched expectations and ideals of women. Amid this wave of white shoes is a solitary red shoe of individualism, gently held in two hands. The gentleness conveyed by the unidentified woman’s gesture suggests both a cradling/nurturing of the shoe and an offering.

A Japanese sensibility pervades the series through Hirata’s strategic arrangements and her iconic use of red, white and black. Her works also possess many of the formal qualities of Australian photographers such as Wolfgang Sievers (born 1913) and Olive Cotton (1911-2003). The strong geometric elements of Hirata’s To reach, to hold echo the modernist style of Cotton’s famous photograph Tea cup ballet (c.1935).
Joachim Froese

Key points:
- exploration
- colonisation
- migration
- landscape
- the ‘photographic essay’
- display

When producing Contactproofs Joachim Froese was interested in the history of Australia’s colonisation from the beginning of European contact with Tasmania. For Froese, this body of work looks critically at his own migration process from Germany. Froese’s use of photography to create objective accounts of his adopted home, Tasmania at the time, revealed to the artist the viewpoint of a displaced European.

Tasmania was discovered by the Dutch navigator Abel Tasman on 24 November 1642 and Froese became particularly interested in the means of navigation that Tasman used. Due to the navigational equipment available at the time, Tasman consistently recorded his position inaccurately as he could only measure latitude and had to use guesswork to estimate longitude. The series focuses on the inherent inaccuracies of European global exploration, citing Tasman’s attempts to geographically pinpoint coastal sites around Tasmania without the ability to accurately measure longitude. Froese photographed the actual locations matching Tasman’s recorded (but incorrect) geographic markers, with each site’s latitude and longitude appearing as text beneath the images.

Froese documents the physical geographical locations that match Tasman’s recorded positions. The haphazard nature of the early explorer’s documentation of his ‘first contact’ with the island is echoed in the jarred, uneven presentation which includes irregular framing of the negative and the inclusion of film arrows and the spaces in between individual negatives. The series aligns with segments of an oversized photographic contact proof, in turn playing on the concept of a physical evidence of contact. The gold framing also suggests an historical document rather than contemporary artistic practice.

That Tasman’s suggested locations existed either well inland or out to sea indicates that history is often a point-of-view. Froese dissects and reassembles, implying history can be (and ought to be) scrutinised and questioned.
Pete Johnson

Key points:
- social documentary photography
- urban environment
- hard-edge abstraction and colour field painting
- art historical references (such as Barnett Newman and Jeffrey Smart)
- composition

The traditions of social documentary photography are the entry point into the work of **Pete Johnson**, who ponders the nature of the constructed environment in contemporary urban areas. While his style is not new, Johnson proposes that familiar, everyday spaces are as valid as ‘the Other’ as subjects for contemporary photographic investigation. In doing so he ‘reflect(s) our own culture back to us and avoid(s) any fascination with the exotic.’

Johnson’s work also mirrors his personal concerns with environmental degradation, and overzealous building programs which promote development at the cost of nature. Johnson’s compositions highlight a dominance of the geometric shape of contemporary industrial architecture and design over organic form. This is further reinforced through his choice of locations, which often encompass blocks of monotone colour. Such formal qualities make reference to geometric and hard-edge abstraction painting. Photographs such as *Village - Kippa-Ring 2006* also allude to the op-art movement, where the variations in our automatic responses to colour produce illusions of shifting depths within the colour field. Such references are clear and deliberate. Johnson openly acknowledges his subjectivity in interpreting these landscapes in such a manner, underscoring the influence that art and visual culture has on his work.

Johnson’s work *Helmet – Clontarf 2004* (left) captures an industrial building feature that has a strong connection to the infamous Australian bush ranger Ned Kelly. A similar motif was used by Sydney Nolan in his Ned Kelly series.

The distinct shadows and stark light in Johnson’s works suggest the paintings of Jeffrey Smart. Where Smart constructs urban environments on the canvas, Johnson captures these moments from real life around suburban South-East Queensland.
Johnson’s concern for geometric forms and solid blocks of colour references the work of many iconic abstract painters from the 20th Century such as Kenneth Noland and Barnett Newman.
Maurice Ortega

Key points:
- identity and social stereotypes
- narrative
- constructed scenes/staging
- art historical references

In his *Billboards* series **Maurice Ortega** investigates concepts of masculinity and, to a lesser extent, race. His constructed images, informed by the language of advertising, see himself cast as the central protagonist in various scenes from country doctor to Christ. He plays the archetypal/stereotypical hero in a variety of roles which each, in their own manner, brings into question the concept of masculinity. David Broker summarised Ortega’s work as follows:

Maurice Ortega mocks the idea of ‘social acceptability’ by acting out and exaggerating conventional male role models that would have us see him as a doctor, a lover or a man in suit. In referencing photographers such as Helmut Newton and Frank Hurley, his works subvert traditional models by revealing role plays that expose the callous, the colonial, the carnal.\(^{vi}\)

A key work in the series is based on *The incredulity of Saint Thomas* (c.1600, oil on canvas) by Caravaggio (Italian, 1571-1610). Ortega’s *mise en scene* is ‘the Gabba’, home of the Brisbane Lions AFL team. It was photographed in 2004 when the Lions’ popularity was soaring following three back-to-back premierships in 2001, 2002 and 2003. The ‘Lions Den’ is a formidable arena, thus an ideal setting for the visual reinterpretation of a religious tale. Ortega replicates Caravaggio’s composition of characters. In place of robes he uses hotel towels, yet stills follows traditional colour schemata with himself (Christ) in white.
Marian Drew

Key points:
- photography influenced by painting
- symbolism
- studio set-up
- environmental concerns

**Marian Drew** reflects upon the traditions of European still-lifes to ponder the fate of Australian native animals that have met their demise as roadkill, or a similar end. Her sumptuous studio images reconsider and recontextualise *vanitas* imagery, while maintaining the grandiose overtones of their source material. As Russell Storer recently wrote:

[European] still life painting not only depicted the fruits of wealth and the breadth of ownership, but was also a desirable commodity in itself. Often gathering together the products of the owner’s estates with the exotic spoils of colonialism, ripe for the taking, the still life represented human control over the natural world, breaking the bonds of space and time. The four corners of the earth come together in this singular, domestic space: numerous species of flowers bloom simultaneously, every fruit is in season, diverse objects gain a pictorial equivalence and everything has its price.¹⁸³

Objects in Drew’s work are visual acknowledgments of the art history to which they refer, but the metonymic *memento mori* icons are replaced with the reality of death in the form of carcasses of native wildlife that have been killed as a result of human activities. The animals are presented as peaceful, serene, posed models (and no they are not just sleeping, as some younger viewers have asked). In the *Australiana* series, Drew also considers the history of wildlife photography. She explains, ‘The work] presents wildlife that becomes dislocated from the idealised view of animals in their natural habitat. The long lens of the ‘wildlife photographer’ is replaced by the close up lens, painted light and the table top.’¹⁹
Artifice:
Recent Queensland Photography

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Image captions

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Mari Hirata, details of To reach, to hold (from the series Sacred ties), 2006. Type C photograph, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy of the artist and Schubert Contemporary, Gold Coast

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Top: Camilla Birkeland, Circle (From the series Staged), 2006. Pigment ink on cotton rag, 105 x 90.5cm. Courtesy of the artist.

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Left: Mari Hirata, To reach, to hold (from the series Sacred ties), 2006. Type C photograph, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy of the artist and Schubert Contemporary, Gold Coast
Right: Mari Hirata, The Pregnant Bride (from the series Sacred ties), 2006. Type C photograph, 100 x 100cm. Courtesy of the artist and Schubert Contemporary, Gold Coast.

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Top: Joachim Froese, Contactproofs no.2, 1995. Silver gelatin photograph, 40 x 50cm. Courtesy of the artist and Jan Manton Art, Brisbane.
Bottom: Joachim Froese, Contactproofs, 1995. Thirteen silver gelatin photographs, each 40 x 50cm. Courtesy of the artist and Jan Manton Art, Brisbane.

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Maurice Ortega, From the Billboard series, 2000. Lambda print, 125 x 188cm. Courtesy of the artist. (‘The rockstar’)

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Top: Caravaggio, The incredulity of Saint Thomas, c.1600. Oil on canvas.
Bottom: Maurice Ortega, From the Billboards series, 2004. Lambda print, 125 x 188cm. Courtesy of the artist. (‘Doubting Thomas’)

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Bottom: Marian Drew, Tasmanian swamp hen with apples, 2005. Giclée print, 90 x 113cm. Purchased 2006 through the Betty Quelhurst Fund. QUT Art Collection.

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Top: Willem Claesz Heda, Breakfast with a Lobster, 1648. Oil on canvas. Hermitage Museum, Russia.
Bottom: Willem Claesz Heda, Still Life with Pie, and Silver Jug, 1658. Oil on canvas.

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