unAustralian: reimagining national identity

education resource
years 10 - 12
A guide to this resource

This resource provides valuable support for educators wishing to include UnAustralian: Reimaging National Identity in their Visual Arts program. It includes easy to read notes that can be used directly in the classroom and sample activities for use before, during, and after a visit to the exhibition.

The Queensland Studies Authority outlines a series of Global Aims for a course of study developed for use in the Visual Arts. This resource draws from these aims, and supports the Inquiry Learning Model. It specifically encourages students to:

> Appraise artworks, with confidence and individuality
> Recognise and respect the personal aesthetic of others
> Affirm and value the contributions of visual artists, engaging with Australian art
> Examine perspectives relating to social, spiritual, environmental and vocational contexts
> Be appreciative of multiple perspectives and philosophies on the meanings of artworks
> Embrace contemporary visual arts practices
> Create informed, active and sustained engagement with the visual arts.

Although these resources are developed with Visual Arts students in mind, there are many aspects relevant to other Key Learning Areas such as English and Studies of Society and Environment.

The content of this Resource was developed from the Queensland Studies Authority syllabus for Senior Visual Art (ISBN: 978-1-920749-44-6) and the Queensland Studies Authority’s Year 10 guidelines for The Arts. This Resource was produced by QUT Art Museum, QUT Precincts.
Introduction

The exhibition

“There is no ‘real’ Australia waiting to be uncovered. A national identity is an invention.”
Richard White, 1981

Since the late 1990s the term un-Australian has been used freely, appearing everywhere from front bench politics to the sporting arena. But what does it mean to be unAustralian? The term implies that there are fundamental characteristics shared across our society that bind us as Australians regardless of our diversity, and to be un-Australian is to challenge this. However, cultural stereotypes aside, is there a national identity that reflects the reality of our everyday lives or is it simply a myth?

Utilising works drawn from the QUT Art Collection, UnAustralian: Reimagining National Identity reflects on the role that art plays in confirming and challenging ideas of national identity and how we revisit, retell and repurpose enduring national stories.

What is national identity?

National identity is a concept that attempts to connect the population of a country by promoting national stories and ideas that make everyone feel as if they have a shared sense of history and destiny. National identity encourages them to act in ways that benefit the community, not just themselves.

When trying to define what it means to be Australian we discover more questions than answers. This is because each one of us could describe ourselves as having various different identities that depend on things such as ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, sexuality or class. We could even say that our identity changes many times throughout our life as we experience new things.

Art shares a very close relationship with nationalism. It can confirm and challenge our national stories. Some artworks visually present important events in our history to commemorate and record them. Other artworks present new stories that aren’t well known, or a different version of an existing story.
UnAustralian

Without really thinking about it we all really know what it means to be Australian. Positive stories about being Australian are all around us. If we know what it means to be a ‘good’ Australian then what is the opposite of this?

The term that is used to describe this is unAustralian. It was first used during the 1850s however it became very common from the mid 1990s. The term has changed in meaning over this time. Firstly, it was used in the areas of art and literature for defining something that wasn’t Australian in character. Throughout the 1990s the term became more negative, suggesting behaviour, belief or policy that was against the Australian way of life. As the term has become more common over the years, it has become less offensive and more sarcastic.

Bashir BARAKI 1943-98
Footballers in scrum with the horses (from the Australian football series) 1996-98
Six colour laser prints
Purchased 1997-1998
Ned Kelly

Edward ‘Ned’ Kelly was a notorious Australian bushranger; he was arrested several times in his youth for assault, and was later caught after playing part in a cattle-rustling operation. Eventually Kelly and his gang attempted bolder crimes: robbing banks and taking hostages. After an acquaintance of the gang was found to be a police informant and killed, the Kelly gang took around seventy hostages at the Glenrowan Inn, knowing that a train loaded with police was approaching. The gang donned their famous armour in preparation for the attack, but were overwhelmed by the police after a plan to derail the train failed. All of the members of the Kelly gang were killed in the incident except for Ned Kelly himself. He was tried and hanged on November 11, 1880.

The myths and stories associated with outlaws or ‘social bandits’ are important to building national identity. Long after his death, Kelly has appeared in various cultural situations including visual art, literature and film. He also made a public appearance at the opening ceremony of the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. He is portrayed as a positive symbol of Australian identity, standing up for the ‘underdog’ regardless of the fact that he was a criminal.

Wandjina

Traditionally found in the Kimberley region in northern Western Australia, the Wandjina figure, which are believed to be spirit ancestors, are primarily characterized by their imposing size, large eyes and nose, but no mouth. Traditional rock paintings featuring Wandjina are believed to be marks placed by the spirit ancestors themselves and it is the Indigenous custodians’ responsibility to repaint these images again and again to keep them fresh.

In Perth during 2006 Wandjina figures began appearing in the form of graffiti. These images engaged the local community, with Perth people taking up ‘Wandjina Watching’, documenting the phenomena by photographing the graffiti and uploading it onto a community website.

The use of this sacred Indigenous image in contemporary street art angered elders from the Kimberley and raised questions about what is considered vandalism and what is considered culture. Today, some contemporary artists who are descendants from the Kimberley region are allowed to produce Wandjina images as art, however unauthorised use of these images is not looked upon kindly by the Kimberley elders and other members of the community. In the end, the individual graffiti artist who was painting the Wandjina revealed his/her identity to the Kimberley elders, who requested the artist stop painting the figures.
Our relationship with land and space is very important to our understanding of national identity. Our natural environment is what tells us apart from other nations and therefore is regularly used as a metaphor for uniqueness. In the case of Australia, the outback and the beach are popularly seen as our most defining features.

**The country**

Outback: Australian: the remote and usually uninhabited inland districts.

In many ways the outback is presented as the ‘real’ Australia regardless of the fact that most Australian’s live and work in cities, suburbs and regional centres. It is mythologised in many non Indigenous stories in two ways. Firstly, as a pure and authentic place, untainted by Western influence and secondly, as a site of fear, terror and hardship.

**Terra nullius**

Terra nullius is Latin for “land belonging to no one”. It refers to the legal concept that when the first Europeans arrived in Australia the land was owned by no one and therefore open to settlement.

Indigenous imagery is all around us today, yet it took until 1967 before Aboriginal people were accorded basic citizenship rights and were counted in the National Census of the Australian people. Prior to this, Aboriginal people were not even counted as citizens. It was not until the High Court’s Mabo v Queensland decision in 1992, that ‘terra nullius’ was not recognised by the common law.
The beach

Most of Australia’s population lives close to the coastline and the beach has long occupied a special place in the Australian identity. All Australian beaches are public places and for many it is a desired recreational destination for sun and fun. However throughout recorded history and even in the recent past the beach has also seen disaster, tragedy and conflict.

The suburbs

Earlier representations of Australian national identity centred on the rural, country and bush environments. Given that some 85% of Australians live in urban areas, it is not surprising that over time representations of people and place have changed to focus on suburban Australian life. Suburbia is one of the ways that Australia is internationally known given that a lot television programs that are exported overseas focus on life in the suburbs [Kath and Kim and Neighbours].

The suburbs are seen in different ways by different people. They are places of great aspiration; to own a land and house brings a feeling of security and belonging to the owner/s. They are also criticised as being repetitive, ordinary and boring; not reflective of the diversity of the people that live there.
Focus works

John Coburn: Kakadu

‘My aim is to create formal harmonies of shapes and colours that exist in their own right and at the same time distil the essence of a place … Vital art must be a natural outpouring of one’s experience disciplined by form’

John Coburn

A dedicated abstractionist, Coburn’s art emanated from a contemplative place - his wish to express a quiet spiritualism through painting. His highly emblematic forms are imbued with a sense of peace and organic vitality. Their condensed nature alludes to the transcendental mysteries of nature as a means of defining human existence.

During 1987 Coburn visited the Northern Territory – Kakadu, Alice Springs and the Gulf Country. He said at the time: ‘We come from a European culture – we have been here 200 years. It’s time for us to relate to the land as the Aborigines do and have the same feeling for it.’

The painting you see here, Kakadu 1990 was inspired by this journey.


Gordon Bennett: Big Baroque Painting (The inland sea)

Throughout his career, Gordon Bennett has consistently dealt with the issue of identity, in particular focussing on the tensions of identity within contemporary Australia. His practice is strongly influenced by deconstruction theory and realised through forms of post-modern appropriation which challenges conventional ways of viewing the subject matter he explores.

In many ways this work is both landscape and seascape. The dominant colours of yellow, ochres and red hark to that of the desert however there are also motifs of the sea; rolling waves and an upturned boat. By way of appropriation, Bennett often references Australian and international artists in his work. In the case of Big Baroque Painting (The inland sea) we can see explicit references to the American abstractionist Jackson Pollock, through characteristic splatters in the left and Roy Lichtenstein through the yellow and red graphic brush strokes that sweep across the painting. In contrast to this black handprints found at the top right of the painting signify the presence of Indigenous people and culture.

Another reoccurring motif in Bennett’s work is the perspective grid. This system has long been used for organising visual information and to assist in depicting three dimensional space on a two dimensional plane. In Big Baroque Painting (The inland sea) we find a solitary Indigenous man in the lower left corner seated on a grid. The grid highlights the controlled order and structure of knowledge systems in Western culture, and how these influence ones understanding of self. In particular Bennett is interested in how these systems have impacted on Indigenous Australians.

Gordon BENNETT  
born 1955

Big baroque painting (The inland sea) 1995
Synthetic polymer paint and oil on canvas
Purchased 1995 with the assistance of the Vice-Chancellor’s Special Initiatives Fund in celebration of the Collection’s fiftieth anniversary
List of works

Tony ALBERT born 1981
Girramay/Kuku Yalanji language groups
Welcome to Australia 2009
Archival digital print on 300gsm splendorgel digital paper stock with hand coloured title page and 10 piece texta set
Purchased 2009

David ALLEN born 1951
Anna head, still life and Bookah painting no. 2 1980
Oil on canvas
Purchased 1981

Bashir BARAKI 1943-98
Australian football series 1996-98
Six colour laser prints
Purchased 1997-1998

Gordon BENNETT born 1955
Big baroque painting (The inland sea) 1995
Synthetic paint and oil on canvas
Purchased 1995 with the assistance of the Vice-Chancellor’s Special Initiatives Fund in celebration of the Collection’s fiftieth anniversary

John COBURN 1925-2006
Kakadu 1990
Oil on canvas
Gift of John and Doreen Cobern under the Cultural Gifts Program, 1998
QUT Art Collection

Juan DAVILA born 1952
Ronald and Barbera 1972
Earthenware ceramic sculpture, hand built
Purchased 1994

Margaret DODD born 1941
On top of old faithful 1972
Earthenware ceramic sculpture, hand built with onglaze enamels and silver lustre
Purchased 1972

Marian DREW born 1960
Pelican with turnips 2005
"De Noo" with Puw Puw 2005
Giclée print
Purchased 2006 through the Betty Quelhurst Fund

Lesley DUXBURY born 1950
... Of skies tolerably large 1993
Photo-transfer and embossing
Printed by the artist, Melbourne
Print Council of Australia Inc. Member Print, 2003
QUT Art Collection
Another day 2003
Inkjet print, diptych
Printed by the artist, Melbourne
Print Council of Australia Inc. Member Print, 2003

Irene Mpetyane ENTATA born 1946
The drivers 2002
Terracotta pot, coiled and hand built with underglazes, applied decoration and leather
Purchased 2002

Rosalie GASCOIGNE 1917-99
Close-up (From the ‘Readymade Boomering’ portfolio)
Colour photo-screenprint
Purchased 1991

Graffet 1999
Assemblage of sawn wooden soft drink crates on plywood
Purchased 1999

Fiona HALL born 1953
Cross purpose (From ‘Common Ground’, the second portfolio of Republic Unlimited) 2003
Colour photo-lithograph
Printed by Martin King, Australian Print Workshop, Melbourne
Purchased 2006

Louis KARADADA c1940
Wanambul language group
Wanjina 1998
Etching
Printed by Martin King and Sam Cooper, Australian Print Workshop, Melbourne
Purchased 1998 with the assistance of the Visual Arts/Craft Fund of the Australia Council

Leah KING-SMITH born 1957
Buttons 2 (From the series ‘Beyond Capture’) 2004
Archival inkjet on cotton rag
Printed by the artist, Brisbane
Purchased 2005

Ron MCURNIE born 1957
All night long he struggled with his hose 1992
Etching and aquatint
Printed by the artist, Townsville
Print Council of Australia Inc. Member Print, 1992
QUT Art Collection
Dead drive-in 1989
Etching and aquatint
Printed by the artist, Townsville
Gift of Ralph Martin under the Cultural Gifts Program, 2005

Noel McKENNA born 1956
Domestic scene II 1989
Watercolour and coloured inks over pencil
Purchased 2005

Bondi Junction 1990
Watercolour and coloured inks over pencil
Purchased 2005

Milan MILOJEVIC born 1954
Absorption/assimilation series no.2 1990
"De Noo”, absorption/assimilation series no.4 1987
Colour lithographs
Printed by the artist, Hobart
Purchased 1991

Elaine Kingwarria NAMATJIRA born 1962
Arrente language group
Black cockatoo 2000
Terracotta pot, coiled with underglazes and applied decoration
Purchased 2000

Jillian NAMATJIRA born c1945-91
Arrente language group
Petermann Ranges, Central Australia 1985
Watercolour
Purchased 2001

Margaret OLLEY born 1923
Marine and allamandas 1964
Oil on composition board
George Daughtrey Bequest Fund, 1964

Glen O’MALLEY born 1948
Sealable felt 1995
Silver gelatin photograph
Purchased 1996

Claude PANNA born 1928-72
Luritja language group
Central Australian landscape c1963
Watercolour
Purchased 2006

Central Australian landscape 1964
Watercolour
Purchased 2006

QUT Art Collection

Ben QUILTY born 1973
Torana 2004
Colour collograph
Gift of the artist, 2004

Tom RISLEY born 1947
Coral trout 1983
Thong fragments on weathered plywood
Purchased 1983

Luke ROBERTS born 1952
I+I=8 2001
Twelve giclée prints from a photographic performance series, 1988-93
Purchased 2002

William ROBINSON born 1936
Professor John and brother William 2004
Colour lithograph
Printed by Franck Bordas, Atelier Bordas, Paris
Gift of the artist under the Cultural Gifts Program, 2008

Scott REDFORD born 1962
Painted laser-cut plastic and metal
Purchased 2008

Bruce REYNOLDS born 1955
Peninsula 1994
Linoleum and enamel on plywood
Purchased 1994

Carol Panangka RONTJI born 1968
Arrente language group
Aladaki (Galahs) 1995
Terracotta pot, coiled with underglazes and applied decoration
Purchased 1996

Jeffrey SMART born 1921
The argument (From the ‘Red Millennium’ portfolio) 1999
Colour screenprint
Printed by Michelle Perry and Nick Beaseal, Mamling Press, Sydney
Gift of Pat Corrigan AM under the Cultural Gifts Program, 2001

Richard STRINGER born 1936
Bathtubs, Rhonda Collier, 1990 1993
Silver gelatin photograph
Purchased 1993

Carl WARNER born 1965
Disturbance 11 2007
Type C photograph
Purchased 2007

Brett WHITELEY 1939-1992
Kokaburra 1983
Colour screenprint and offset lithograph
Gift of William George (Monty) Howard, 2007

William YANG born 1943
Self portrait no. 5 (From the series ‘Life lines’) 2008
Colour inkjet print
Purchased 2009

Jeffrey SMART born 1921
The argument (From the ‘Red Millennium’ portfolio) 1999
Colour screenprint
Printed by Michelle Perry and Nick Beaseal, Mamling Press, Sydney
Gift of Pat Corrigan AM under the Cultural Gifts Program, 2001

Richard STRINGER born 1936
Bathtubs, Rhonda Collier, 1990 1993
Silver gelatin photograph
Purchased 1993

Carl WARNER born 1965
Disturbance 11 2007
Type C photograph
Purchased 2007

Brett WHITELEY 1939-1992
Kokaburra 1983
Colour screenprint and offset lithograph
Gift of William George (Monty) Howard, 2007

William YANG born 1943
Self portrait no. 5 (From the series ‘Life lines’) 2008
Colour inkjet print
Purchased 2009

Jeffrey SMART born 1921
The argument (From the ‘Red Millennium’ portfolio) 1999
Colour screenprint
Printed by Michelle Perry and Nick Beaseal, Mamling Press, Sydney
Gift of Pat Corrigan AM under the Cultural Gifts Program, 2001

Richard STRINGER born 1936
Bathtubs, Rhonda Collier, 1990 1993
Silver gelatin photograph
Purchased 1993

Carl WARNER born 1965
Disturbance 11 2007
Type C photograph
Purchased 2007

Brett WHITELEY 1939-1992
Kokaburra 1983
Colour screenprint and offset lithograph
Gift of William George (Monty) Howard, 2007

William YANG born 1943
Self portrait no. 5 (From the series ‘Life lines’) 2008
Colour inkjet print
Purchased 2009
Activities in the classroom

- Research Australian identity and determine a theme/place/person that embodies your idea of what it means to be Australian. Discuss.
- Look around your environment - home, school, suburb and city. Look at advertisements, television, newspapers and the internet. Throughout one day, write down all the images/icons that you see and that you associate with being Australian?
- Do you think there is just one ‘Australian identity’, or do you think it is a pluralistic term? Discuss.
- Read the section about Ned Kelly and complete further research. Discuss whether you think Kelly should be celebrated or criticised.
- Read the section about Wandjina spirit figures and access the following article online: Wandjina, graffiti and heritage: The power and politics of enduring imagery Ursula Frederick and Sue O’Connor http://epress.anu.edu.au/hrj/2009_02/mobile_devices/ch10.html#d0e5073
  Discuss the implications of reproducing Indigenous imagery without consent. Do you think what the graffiti artist did was wrong?
- Describe where you live. Is it urban, suburban, coastal or country? What are some of the outstanding features of the place you live. Do you think your environment impacts on the art you make, if so, how?

Australian Self-Portrait
- Write down what being Australian means to you.
- Find images and/or text from magazines and newspapers that represent what you have written down.
- Create an artwork using these images and text.

NOTE: This exercise could be completed again after a visit to the exhibition. Students then compare and contrast the two works that they have created.
Activities. during and after your visit

- Find *Big baroque painting (The inland sea)*, 1995 by Gordon Bennett. Bennett often appropriates styles, techniques and images from other artists and artworks. Write down all the characteristics of this painting that you think are appropriated and were do you think they have been sourced from.

- Still looking at *Big baroque painting (The inland sea)*, what does this work say about Australian identity and how does this compare to your own idea of Australian identity?

- Find *Systematically altered photographs: Suburban Sunday; Canberra Shopping Centre, Popular Torrens Lake, Adelaide; Text ‘It seems, in my seeing…’, 1968* by Ian Burn and read the following statement:

  ‘In Systematically Altered Photographs, the image was photocopied, then the copy copied and so on, for about a dozen times. The altered image was then juxtaposed with the original, with the readings drawing attention arbitrarily to certain features and details. The original image was cut from a magazine. There was no sense of creating the image, only of recreating it within a new system. The source was a promotional publication put out for overseas consumption by the Australian government...The clichéd character of the images was important.’

  What do you think Burn is trying to say about suburban Australia in this artwork?

- Find the artwork in the exhibition that **most** captures your idea of what it means to be Australian. Describe the artwork.

- Find one artwork in the exhibition that **least** captures your idea of what it means to be Australian. Describe the artwork.

- Compare and contrast these two artworks focussing on what you consider to be Australian and unAustralian.

- What were some of the **subjects/themes** in the exhibition that were most important to you?

- Was there anything you expected to see but did not?

- Has viewing other people’s versions of identity changed the way you think of your own identity as an Australian? Explain.
Resources and further information

**Being Australian: Narratives of National Identity**  
Catriona Elder, 2007 [Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest]  
Being Australian explores the origins, meanings and effects of the many stories we tell about ourselves, and how they have changed over time.

**White Aborigines: Identity Politics in Australian Art**  
White Aborigines is an investigation of how identities have been constructed in Australian art from 1788 to the present.

**Homesickness: Nationalism in Australian Visual Culture**  
Traudi Allen, 2008 [Macmillan Art Publishing, South Yarra]  
Homesickness explores the relationship between visual culture and national myths in Australia since 1940.

**Artlink: Art history: go figure**  
Joanna Mendelssohn (ed) [Volume no.26 No 1 2006]  
Topics covered: revisiting Australian myths, post-media world views and indigenising culture.

**Australia's Citizenship Test**  
The test covers topics such as Australia's democratic beliefs, laws and government, as well as the responsibilities and privileges of citizenship.  

**A Short Introduction to UnAustralian Art**  
Rex Butler, 2003 [Broadsheet, 32 4: 17]  

**Australian Screen** [Australia’s audiovisual heritage online]  
Selected clips from Australian films and other screen based media that deal with the topic of identity and culture including national identity.  

**We are all boat people**  
A group commenting on the treatment of refugees in Australia through public interventions and displays.  
http://www.boat-people.org/

**Celebrating Australia: identity by design**  
An exhibition developed by the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney that looked at how concepts and symbols of national identity have been used and developed by Australian graphic designers throughout the 20th century.  
http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/previous/celebrating_australia.asp

**Australia's un-doing**  
Judith Ireland [Sydney Morning Herald, 15 March 2005]  
The term ‘un-Australian’ has become so widely used that the Macquarie Dictionary is revising its definition.  

**UnAustralian Lamb Ad**  
‘We Love Our Lamb’  

**Popular understandings of ‘UnAustralian’: an investigation of the un-national**  
In social science the ‘national’ has been studied extensively, but comparatively little attention has been given to the ‘un-national’. The article takes up this challenge in an Australian context.  

**Ned Kelly: Australian Icon**  
Bruce Tranter and Jed Donoghue, 2008  
Ned Kelly has symbolic importance for a majority of Australians, although attitudes regarding his status as hero or villain vary considerably.  

**Ned Kelly by any other name**  
AnneMarsh, 2002 [Journal of Visual Culture; 1; 57]  
http://vcu.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/1/1/57

**Marian Drew**  
A film by Alix Chomiz on the making of Marian Drew’s Australiana series.  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VKZNJKYEEI

**Wandjina, graffiti and heritage: The power and politics of enduring imagery**  
Ursula Frederick and Sue O’Connor  
This article explores the re-purposing of rock art imagery in contemporary graffiti by examining a particular case study from Perth, Western Australia.  

---

**UnAustralian: Reimagining national identity**  
[9 February - 4 July 2010] is part of QUT Precincts Identity10 programming.  
For more information visit www.qut.edu.au/identity10

Curated by Megan Williams  
Presented by QUT Art Museum