

Under the influence

[ART & MUSIC]

EDUCATION RESOURCE - ARTISTS

INTRODUCTION

Music has a ubiquitous presence in our daily lives. From cinema to supermarket soundtracks, just the hint of a few familiar notes can be a conduit to another time and place, stirring emotions and memories. Throughout history, artists have shown an engagement with interpreting and transmitting the ephemeral nature of sound into the visual. Interactive and engaging, Under the Influence presents the work of a group of contemporary Australian artists for whom engagement with music and sound is integral to their practice.

ARTISTS INCLUDE:

- Tony Albert
- **Eugene Carchesio**
- The Histrionics
- Danius Kesminas
- **The Kingpins**
- Isobel Knowles
- Slave Pianos
- Susan Pickering
- **David Sequeira**
- **Martin Smith**
- **Madonna Staunton**
- Soda_Jerk
- **Ken Thaiday**

Soda_jerk

Together, sisters Danielle and Dominique Angeloro are Soda_Jerk. They are remix artists, whose practice is a combination of collage, scratch video and popular culture sampling, where material from various sources is mixed together to create new narratives and meanings.

Like most remix artists Soda_Jerk are opposed to the concept of ownership when it comes to popular culture, a stance reflected in larger cultural movements, such as Creative Commons and Copyleft. With ever-increasing image saturation and the media's continual manipulation of fact and fiction, it's no surprise that the art of remix is currently booming. While the majority of remix artists are interested in simply juxtaposing images to make a socio-political statement, Soda_Jerk differ in two ways: first, through their intelligent use of the medium to create narratives, and second, through the medium self-referentiality they build into their practice.

Soda_Jerk are not interested in seamless creation; the hand of the artist is visible in all their works, albeit in digital form. Similarly, they are not interested in using anonymous sources; they embrace popular culture and realise the potency of messing with loaded imagery. Soda_Jerk's process is one of détournement, a subversive practice of reusing parts of well-known media to create new work with a different message, often directly opposed to the original, but certainly not ironic, because as the artist's state, we all know Alanis Morissette ruined that concept for everyone.



Astro Black: A History of Hip Hop (Episode 1) 2007

Digital video, 6m 35s

Courtesy of the artists

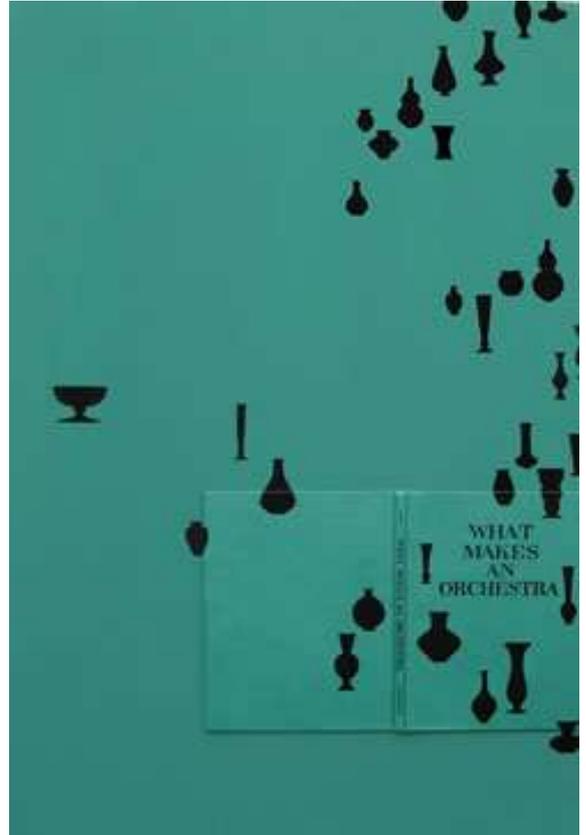
- Soda_Jerk's works appropriate popular icons from the past and present to create powerful narratives. Use magazines and other found materials, and join them together to create your own narrative.

David Sequeira

Colour is everywhere and it plays a starring role in our lives. Colour has the ability to affect our moods, to convey our identity, and even to make us imagine sounds or music. This ability to ‘hear a colour’ or ‘see a sound’ is commonly known as Synaesthesia and is one of David Sequeira’s abiding interests.

In his new series of work featured in *Under the Influence: Art and Music*, Sequeira has brought together three key instruments of his practice: vases, books and colour. Sequeira’s use of vase symbols relates to his interest in finding music in everyday objects, and also references previous works creating colour chords and harmonies with found vases, as well as sound pieces created by using these vases as instruments. Conceptually the vase can be seen as a vessel of both sound and silence, but it also embodies the artist’s humour – imagine how silly you would feel playing vases.

The same wit comes through in the artist’s use of found music books, for paraphrasing Sequeira, there is an inherent absurdity in reading a book about listening to music. One might imagine there is a similar illogicality in the idea that colour and sound can inform one another. However, in these works vases dance and pause, rise to a crescendo and soften, like notes they traverse fields of colour directly informed by music, albeit in the form of books.



- Do you agree with Sequeira that music can be found in the everyday? Discuss your answer with your classmates.
- Visual music theories hold that colour can be used to evoke the same emotional responses as music. Create your own abstract work in response to a particular piece of music.

Image:

What Makes an Orchestra, 2008

Enamel and book cover on board

Courtesy of the artist

Ken Thaiday

Ken Thaiday is a senior Torres Strait Islander artist known for his elaborate dance machines, in particular his hammerhead shark headdresses. Thaiday is from Erub (Darnley) Island, where he grew up watching his father perform complex dances at traditional ceremonies. Sculptural headdresses, instruments and body adornments played an important role in these rituals which served to connect the spiritual and physical worlds. Thaiday's headdresses are contemporary interpretations of traditional items, designed to keep his cultural history alive.

One of the most remarkable aspects of Thaiday's works is their movable parts activated by pulling various strings. This allows the wearer to create the illusion of sharks and fish swimming through the ocean, for example, in order to complement the meaning of the dance and its movements. Moving parts are a traditional characteristic of masks from Darnley Island, and Thaiday fully explores their potential, with some of his works requiring electronic motors due to the complexity of their construction.

Traditionally headdresses and other dance equipment was created for specific ceremonial purposes and designed for a single use. Today, Thaiday often experiments with unwearable headdresses up to 3 metres in height and length, and galleries and museums collect his dance machines as works of art removed from their original function.

- Does your family have traditions for special occasions? Think about any particular items involved with these celebrations. What do they mean to you and why are they important?
- Thaiday's work functions to keep his cultural traditions and ancestor stories alive. Speak to your parents and grandparents about important events in their lives and their beliefs. How could you represent these visually to pass them on to future generations?

Madonna Staunton

Madonna Staunton is a collector. Like a bowerbird she seeks out used materials that attract her eye and stores these in her studio to later transform into works of art. Staunton works across painting, collage and assemblage, continually combining new and found materials in carefully arranged compositions that resonate with the prior lives of discarded objects. The way Staunton makes her work is strongly instinctive and draws upon both Eastern and Western philosophy, in particular Zen Buddhism. Her works reflect the Zen ideal that Enlightenment is to be found in the commonplace, in emptiness or non-attachment.

Staunton often creates works that use musical materials such as piano keys. The keys are full of potential: they suggest musical compositions once played across their surfaces yet are rendered silent, separated from the note they created when part of a whole piano. This kind of poetic ambiguity pervades the artist's work and is also played out through her juxtaposition of diverse source materials in collages such as *Postcard*. In this work ticket stubs about handwritten greetings, a newspaper article peeks from behind a wood off cut and a piano key becomes the 'T' in postcard. Just as music allows listeners to attach their own meaning to a composition, Staunton's works leave the viewer to ponder and create the story behind her collection of objects.

- Choose one of Staunton's works and explain the role and meaning of the found objects within the overall work.

The Kingpins

If video killed the radio star then The Kingpins have certainly had a hand in killing the allure of the male rock star. The female foursome utilise the aesthetics of drag and elements of the remix in their borrowing from media and pop culture. Taking the form of live performance and interventions, installations and video, nothing escapes their firing range, particularly the semiotics of male culture. One area that seems of particular interest is the aesthetics of heavy metal.



In a genre dominated by men, the irony that long flowing hair and tight pants is de rigueur is inescapable. Megadeath (2007), a totemic, towering mass of long lustrous wigs can be read as a tongue-in-cheek homage to the excess of the metal aesthetic. Similarly, in live footage of The Great Undead (2007) deceased heroes of rock 'n' roll such as Freddy Mercury and Jim Morrison are resurrected through drag to flick their hair and strut their stuff once more. The act of presenting through drag serves to highlight a camp undercurrent, in turn revealing the hilarity and irony of what is idolised as masculine.

- What do you think The Kingpins are trying to say by appropriating the work of other artists and musicians?
- Referencing the work of others can result in powerful statements because of the layers of meaning that are involved. Choose a particular artist's work or style, or a popular culture image, and using appropriation and remix techniques create your own artwork and explain its meaning.

Image:
Sydney Infinity, 2005
Digital video, 32 min 7 sec
Courtesy of the artists and Kaliman Gallery

Eugene Carchesio

For Eugene Carchesio there is no divide between his visual art and music practices. His records are both collected by galleries and promoted by music labels. Regardless of the context in which they are shown, Carchesio's intimate watercolours, paper and cardboard constructions, sound pieces, and live performances form a single practice that explores lofty concerns such as spirituality, energy, transience, continuity and the eternal, through the humble medium of the minute and everyday.

Carchesio's works promote an awareness of the everyday through their intimate scale and their use of found or commonplace objects, such as the musical instrument felt in *Untitled (felt circles)* 2005. The felt takes on a number of meanings. It references the production of sound, because many instruments, such as piano, rely on felt to produce a clean, accurate sound. However, it also suggests the absence or removal of sound because felt is also used as a dampener, to absorb and eliminate noise.

The grids and abstract patterns that Carchesio creates are systematic and regular. As such they are like snapshots of a larger whole that continues endlessly in all directions. Hence, through pattern repetition these works talk about eternity and the cyclical nature of life, and their execution in watercolour, a fluid, transparent medium, embodies Carchesio's interest in transience.

- Research the work of Joseph Beuys. How does his use of felt differ from Carchesio's in terms of meaning?
- Consider the themes of transience, continuity and the eternal. How might you represent and express these in your own work?

Martin Smith

Martin Smith's work explores the power of music and photographs to evoke memories of times gone by. In a sense his works are self-portraits relaying his deeply personal experiences, in turn creating a picture of the artist's life in the viewer's mind. On the other hand his use of popular song lyrics and family snapshot style photographs means his work can relate to the lives of many viewers. Through familiarity, Smith speaks of shared experiences (where were you when you first heard Nirvana's *Smells Like Teen Spirit* or David Bowie's *Heroes*?).

Smith's works in *Under the Influence: Art & Music* form part of an autobiographical series that explores the artist's life as a young boy and awkward adolescent. Interspersed amongst the artist's candid stories are works with song lyrics that connect to particular times in Smith's life. While Smith often lays bare his most intimate memories, he realises that through the act of selection (choice of story, words, tone and style) he has inadvertently created a new character, a re-presentation of himself.

The photographs Smith employs have been taken over a twenty-year period, and are not constructed, technical shots. Like a snapshot, they are taken as the artist goes about his daily routine. Further, the photos are not created specifically for the text that obscures and disfigures their surface and vice versa. Cutting and sanding the surface of a photograph could be read as a violent act through its destruction of the 'sacred' image. However, in Smith's work, the treatment of the photograph as an object speaks about absence and presence and the faulty nature of memory.



- Do you have songs that relate to particular moments in your life? Why do you think music can be such a powerful trigger of memory?
- Make a work using one or more photographs as objects. How does the meaning of the work change compared with a single photograph as the artwork?

Whatever nevermind 2005
Lyrics by Kurt Cobain, Type C print
Private collection, Brisbane.

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Tues-Fri 10am – 5pm, Wed until 8pm, Sat-Sun 12-4pm | www.artmuseum.qut.edu.au

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