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Multidimensional Citizenship Education

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Abstract

**Visualizing Citizenship: the Socio-Cultural Performative Narrative in Visual Art Education**

While economic futures and work readiness preoccupies curriculum imperatives increasingly there is discussion around the wider social issues of cultural sustainability and citizenship imperatives (Hawkes, 2002; McCarthy et al., 2004).

Visual Art education, in an increasingly globalised visual world, is gaining significance, for its contribution to a wider understanding of how its multi-disciplinary inquiry strategies contribute to the wider understanding of the field of cultural production (Dewey, 1934; Bourdieu, 1977; Bracy, 2001; Emery, 2002; Freedman, 2000) Visual art education is presented as a performative site for the development of subjectivities and ethico-aesthetic understanding (Guattari, 1995) as they inform cultural meaning, society and citizenship dispositions.

The paper presents the general findings of a longitudinal and case study research project into the learning outcomes of post-compulsory NSW Visual Art syllabus. These findings will be elaborated through a student who selected to inquire into her Australian identity through visual artmaking. It reveals the wide range of multi-dimensional inquiry questions and demonstrates that seeing the world through the particular or private has public benefits for the maintenance of the culturally and socially sensitive citizen.

Key words: Visual Education, Visual and Communicative proficiency, Subjectivities, socio-cultural performative narrative, Visual Art education, performative pedagogy

## **Introduction**

Globalisation, economic futures and work readiness preoccupy curriculum imperatives. Increasingly there is discussion around the wider social issues of the role of education in nurturing cultural sustainability (Hawkes, 2002) and citizenship dispositions (Australian Civics and Citizenship Education, 2007; Scottish CCC, 2001). The robust society that provides citizenship capabilities for its students will need an education that nurtures creativity and the imagination through its curriculum as a creative mind is able to make connections between ideas and thoughts which have previously been unconnected (Robinson, 2002). Connectivity across knowledge constructs is an important function in the rapid siloing and expansion of knowledge in education. Students will need to connect their understandings of the multi-dimensional nature of school curriculum as it informs knowledge and understandings, values and dispositions, skills, competencies and enterprise. Visual Art education, in an increasingly globalised visual world, is gaining significance, for its contribution to the development of socio-cultural inquiry and the skill of visuality (Stafford, 1996). Visuality, the ability to critically interpret and construct meaning through imaging in Visual Art education contributes to the wider understanding of society and the field of cultural production (Dewey, 1934; Bourdieu, 1977; Bracy, 2001; Emery, 2002; Freedman, 2000). Values education and teachers work will require that teachers provide learning opportunities that engaged students in more sophisticated levels of communicative capacity and self-reflection (Lovat, 2005).

Visual Art education and its inter-disciplinary and multi-dimensional artmaking practices are presented in this paper as a performative site for the development of subjectivities and ethico-aesthetic understandings (Guattari, 1995). The paper is informed by an in-depth case study of a post-compulsory visual art student who researched her identity through her artmaking. Her socio-cultural artmaking inquiry linked her knowledge of Australian culture to her written and visual communicative competencies. The visual and performative inquiry helped her to resolve issues of Australian citizenship through the phenomenon of her Melbourne Cup experience and the people who celebrated the event in her community. The case study research is informed by a broader longitudinal study of the New South Wales ARTEXPRESS exhibition student learning outcomes. Both demonstrates that seeing the world

through the particular or private experience of the visual arts has public benefits for the maintenance of the culturally and socially sensitive citizen.

### **Citizenship, Globalization, Visuality and Education**

Education is now identified for its role in social production (Bourdieu, 1977) and values education identified as an aspect of social agency (Lovat, 2005). Mellor (2004) reporting on civics and citizenship education in Australia states that students should:

Have the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and the capacity to make sense of their world, to think about how things got to be the way they are, to make rational and informed decisions about their lives and to accept responsibility for their own actions (p. 1).

As imaging increasingly becomes central to the cognitive experience and communication a skill for all citizens, so too the skill of visuality will play an increasingly important role in the history of citizenship (Szersznski and Urry, 2006) and in identity formation. As citizens we share mutual visibility, seeing other and self (Habermas, 1976), we see, in modern terms as watchers, or observers of others (Foucault, 1977, 1986) and thirdly as visual symbols, signifying (Barthes, 2000). Symbols may carry collective, historical, scientific and personal mythologies of self or present as corporate branding or totemic symbols. The implications of our increasingly visual and mobile world are that images are extending their influence over how we experience the world (Bonsiepe, 1997, Stafford, 1996) and that the skill of visual communicative proficiency (Grushka, 2005b) will be an essential aspect of education as it informs our ocular-centric twenty-first century.

For educationalists this implies shifting from the logo-centrism that accompanies the cultural supremacy of text along with its associated devaluing of more, intuitive, spatial, affective, imaginary and sensory understandings that accompany visual cognition. Visual education as multiliteracies is increasingly emerging as a focus of discussion in education (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Kalantzis & Cope, 2001) and the skill of visuality presents as an authentic means of cultural communication (Stafford, 1996) and inquiry. Visual Art education within the broader arts education arena offers rich and complex learning opportunities and powerful developmental experiences for the

adolescent. It is seen as “fostering cognitive, social and personal insights for lifelong learning and fulfilment” (NRVE, 2006, web).

Visual culture education research, within the field of visual art education continues to reveal how imaging is an important means by which students’ learn. It also is identifying how visual artmaking, within arts education, can contribute to the active construction of an individual’s values, beliefs, identities, issues of social justice and ethical understandings (Cary, 1998; Crouch et al., 2001; Feldman, 1996; Freedman, 2000; Guattari, 1995; McCarthy et al, 2004; Markello, 2005; Stevenson & Deasy, 2005, Cunliffe, 2005). Visual Art education is presented as discursive, expressive and a performative praxis where artmaking enacts cultural agency and promotes a studio-based pedagogy that moves toward critical citizenship (Tavin & Hausman, 2004; Tavin 2003) and cultural agency (Hawkes, 2002).

### **Cultural Agency, Ethics and Creativity in Visual Art Education**

Visual Artmaking, as cultural production is presented as the act of connecting and relating all aesthetic activity (Bourriaud, 2002) in life as it is shaped within society rather than the modernist notion of emergent from an independent or private space or teleological position. Visual Art education has been identified for the contribution it brings to the individual’s wider understanding of the field of cultural production (Dewey, 1934; Bourdieu, 1977; Bracy, 2001; Emery, 2002; Freedman, 2001), identity (Deleuze, 1990) and ethico-aesthetic understandings (Guattari, 1995). Creativity within visual inquiry connects to the broader debate around creativity and its centrality in the development of citizenship capabilities.

Collins (1990), Robinson (2001) and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) affirm that the development of a creative trait is linked to the maintenance of creative cultures which all argue is directly linked to human evolution. In a visual society this means that the individual will increasingly need to find ways to reconstruct themselves as a response to more complex images of themselves and an increasingly shifting and unstable world. In particular Visual Art education is giving attention to how to develop students’ capacities to engage creatively with visual learning that provides opportunities for thoughtful

participatory understanding about self and other as a citizen of the world, or as a member of ones national or local community.

Current thinking on Visual Art education draws together the theory of communicative action (Habermas, 1976, 1990), a focus on identity drawn from subjectivity theory (Mansfeild, 2000) and the fields of cultural studies, history and the discursive inquiry of contemporary arts practices. Visual Art education employs pedagogical practices which address issues of knowledge, power, equity, inclusivity, sensuality and expressive understandings. It is further informed by the visual culture debate (Duncum, 2002; Freedman, 2000; Mizoelff, 1998; Parks, 2004, Tavin, 2005). and gives attention to reflective action as praxis (Emery, 1996, Schon, 1983, Van Manen, 1991; Grushka, 2005a; Sullivan,2005 ). This praxis centers the students own 'seeing', informing deep personal meaning within a legitimate personal context.

Visual Art classrooms and their related curriculum are providing opportunities that allow young people to reflect and monitor their life through the mediation of the visual's social and cultural influences on society (Markello, 2005) and to celebrate cultural difference in creative and productive ways (Centre for Arts & Culture, 2004).

As all members of society confront issues of identity and seek ways to make sense of their world. Artists, by definition of their function in society as socio-cultural researchers (Sullivan, 2005) possibly engage with issues of identity and ethico-aesthetic understandings (Guattari, 1995) in more intense and personal ways than many other fields of inquiry. The knowledge, as meaning, emerges from the conscious intent of the artist to explore the self through representations of their world. This process involves reflective and embodied material practices (Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991). Visual art inquiry provides a means through which to mark one's identity against our collective cultural history, values and beliefs and employ the praxis of reciprocity to articulate, through performative means life concerns.

### **Performative Visual Pedagogy, Ethics and Citizenship**

The theory of performative pedagogy is not about a pedagogical style, but the way classrooms can provide students with spaces or sites for an engagement with possibilities (Pineau, 1994). This has been extended by other writers who have linked performative pedagogy with critical understandings of power and the politics of identity and the lived experience (Alexander, Anderson, Gallegos, 2004). Work in the visual arts is described as a way to not only create performances and products, but as a creative means of producing new understandings or re-representations ( Bolt, 2004; Greirson, 2006) that shape dispositions through understanding one's shared culture.

Subjectivity or identity production as image(s) provides a voice or agency (Jones, 2007) for the student that supports the autonomy of the individual. In terms of one's whole life education, understanding how cultural values and ethics behaviours can be explored through visual inquiry and aesthetic sensibilities would seem to be a fundamental knowing in a visual society. As Slattery (1995) argues, the self-portrait (in all its forms) as visual inquiry can be used to explore subjectivity and test cultural assumptions, thus allowing the individual to experience a deep ecology of learning. Recent work by Slattery & Rapp (2003) connects ethics, postmodern curriculum, sustainability and human rights.

Habermas (1990) affirms the importance of performative attitudes and emphasises the role of feelings and expressive forms of communication over more discursive approaches to ethics. He affirms the importance of practical ethical decisions being made about the good life by an individual within the context of their life-world and shared cultural values. Furthermore, he emphasises the primacy of ethical life over morality and the limitations of simply a hermeneutic insight and the importance of practical discourses grounded within inter-subjectively shared and reflexive ethical understandings. This shifts the ethical thinking from a teleological position of 'what can I do' to a deontological perspective where an individual critically justifies their decisions and action within a frame work of what are the common intentions of the group, community or culture (Habermas, 1990, p.71) or mutual visibility.

Lovat (2004) claims that searching for truth is a methodological act or praxis as much as it is a theoretical act and that 'coming to know the truth involves

engagement of the whole person, not merely cognitive action or even inter-subjective experience” (p. 7). Artmaking in contemporary visual art curriculum is an operative act that connects cognition and action and provides multiple entry positions and reflective perspectives for students. Artists through representational acts as performance, refine their communicative awareness about themselves shaped by the way their work is produced and viewed both by themselves and by others. It acknowledges that over time, how others or audience interpret the symbolic and intentional aspects of their images (artwork) will impact on the conscious and intuitive new actions of the artist and their awareness of self. Being both subject and object are simultaneous aspects of knowing self in artmaking. Artmaking is a praxis that accommodates the instability and susceptible of images to interpretive possibilities of new meaning making as a means of representing becoming (Deleuze, 1990).

The act of making requires that the creator to give attention to a balance between the structural technicity of their craft and a desire to be more aesthetically reflective (Lovat, 1999). This process finds artist’s symbols becoming intense personal aesthetic aspects of self. Contemporary art practice as aesthetic communicative and reflective knowing reveals the interpretive dimensions of self and other through phenomenological praxis. Artistic knowing acknowledges personal feelings, experiences and opinions and that the creating forces of self are referential. Creating artworks is the process of being re-presented and re-constructed and artmaking a performative praxis that in the classroom facilitates reflection in action and on action (Grushka, McLeod, Reynolds, 2005).

### **The Multi-disciplinary Inquiry Context of the NSW Visual Art Curriculum**

The architects of the Visual Art curriculum in New South Wales (NSW), the Visual Art Stage 6 syllabus (1999) and the subsequent revision of Stage 4-5, (2003) have drawn heavily on the philosophical thinking of Habermas (1976, 1990) and on the theory of Danto (1964). In orientating the curriculum or syllabus in contemporary arts practice and critical communicative knowing the syllabus acknowledges that for many students visual art experiences at school have much to do with vocational ends and a significant amount to do with developing learning dispositions, intuitive, imaginative

and critical understandings through the productive, reflective transference of experiences underpinned by practical visual cognitive skills. More importantly it draws on the tenet of many previous visual educators including Dewey (1934) and Eisner (1972) that being educated is marked by a disposition towards a reasoned and imaginative understanding gained through interpretive practices.

The case study revealed in this paper draws on a student's experience of the post-compulsory final examination of artmaking which culminates from a possible 5 years of studying and producing visual works. The curriculum has been informed by a multi-dimensional range of fields including the fields of cultural studies, postmodernism, art history, sociology, history and visual culture, science and technology to name a few. Students studying or making an artwork conceptually position their inquiry at the centre of the communicative understanding between self, audience, world and artist and consider the discourses generated from these perspectives within a range of critically framed positions these include, the subjective, the cultural, structural and postmodern frames. Students work beyond the conventional platforms of painting and sculpture to include multiliteracy, multi-modal meaning making systems (Duncum, 2004) that include sound, sight, movement, video, animation, installation and the interactive platforms.

In contrast to more traditional visual art education curriculum postmodern art education, exemplified in the NSW Visual Art syllabus, reject notions of image unity, singular origins, singular ancestry, bounded nationality and allow students to explore the multiplicity of self, drawing on the full range of postmodern practices including appropriation, re-contextualisation of images from history and their imaging practices. It will also draw from popular cultural contexts to make new meanings. The curriculum acknowledges postmodern orientations and is a discipline with the pedagogical tools to discern and deconstruct the dominant conditions of visual production and legitimisation of certain authorities (Grierson, 2003).

The study therefore seeks to reveal the student learning outcomes from a curriculum that has focused on making and critiquing artworks within a postmodern framing and that acknowledges the iterative nature of arts inquiry and the skill of visuality. It seeks to reveal the performative nature of visual artmaking and how it provides personal

agency for a student as they inquire into one's identity, society and cultural heritage. It seeks to identify the ways they have selected to position their inquiry and the nature of its form. Further more it seeks evidence of how artmaking as socio-cultural inquiry provides deep intrinsic understandings about self, other and society.

The case study is further informed by examples drawn from a longitudinal research qualitative inquiry and image analysis of the NSW State wide final examination process as part of the Higher School Certificate that examines student artmaking and the public ARTEXPRESS exhibition that accompanies the examination. The research draws on student artwork, student-artist statements and the Visual Art Process Diaries (VAPD). In the case of this inquiry assumptions acknowledge the interpretive and phenomenological experiences that the researcher brings to the inquiry and the critical contribution of the significant other(s), the teacher, parent or critical friend as co-constructors of meaning making as they operate as audience, critic and observer of the artistic journey.

The study draws on a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Plager, 1994) combined with a critical hermeneutic understanding (Kinchelo & McLaren, 2005). Consideration is given to cultural critique and discursive forms that reveal power dynamics within social and cultural texts and how they inform the historical and cultural boundaries of an artwork. It will draw on the acceptance of various types of data representation that resonate the nature of the phenomenon, rather than conceptualise it (Eisner, 1991; Sullivan, 1998, Neilsen, 2000).

It acknowledges that the student artworks in this inquiry are bound by the limitations of an educational institution, an external examination process and a curriculum that presents the field of study and shapes the pedagogical environment. All the empirical evidence in the form of student artworks must acknowledge the teacher as co-constructor and the role of audience in shaping the final artworks which includes examiners and the wider community.

**The Case Study of Ceara: 'what I'm not' portraits on Australian culture'**

*'I wasn't sure what I was, but I knew that I was Australian, but there were so many things about the culture that I did not understand and weren't part of me, but I decided to do them anyway'*  
(Ceara, 2005)

### ***The HSC Visual Art Learning Context and its Value for Ceara***

Ceara attended a co-educational public high school in a regional centre of NSW. It has been six years since she finished her schooling and her favourite subjects were Design and Technology and Visual Art. Coming from a family of artists, her world had always included art galleries, creative festivals and had always been concerned with aesthetics and the imagination. The value of art as a way of knowing and expressing the world had always been encouraged. She had had many opportunities to develop her skill base in Visual Art outside of formal schooling, the significant areas being photography and printmaking.

Ceara, chose to approach her visual art inquiry through a critical cultural window and extensively worked with appropriated imagery gathered from a wide range of personal photographs and media contexts. She worked across a range of materials, including photography, collage, silkscreen printing and block printing.

Understanding Australian culture and, in particular, understanding the phenomenon of the Melbourne Cup as an Australian ritual with associated iconic imagery provided Ceara with the means to explore human nature with personal insight. Reflecting on and understanding the values and behaviours of others helped her assess her own beliefs, particularly her identity struggle. 'I was an American citizen... I had been born in Australia...I wasn't sure what I was, there were so many things about the culture that I did not understand and I wasn't part of, but I decided to do them anyway.' The journey into her own Australian identity took her on a study tour across a wide range of knowledge fields. The process of creating a body of work for her senior HSC Visual Art examination saw her study Christian religious iconic art, western aesthetics, religions, American and Australian popular culture, the media, the horse racing industry, her own life journey and the effects of gambling, drinking and crime on the individual and society.

### ***The Artwork: Our Lady of the Melbourne Cup***

Having a strong working understanding of the way artists and the art world work to communicate ideas to an audience provided Ceara with the confidence to tackle the creation of an artwork that could appropriate the intentions of one of the great artistic genres, religious art. Her contemporary relief iconic altar was to be representative of the sport of horse racing. 'I chose the religious work because of the whole idea of sport and religion. I juxtaposed Australian culture and the iconic Madonna'. 'I wanted it to be like an alter piece [but] religion wasn't part of my family'.

The idea for this exploration was the culmination of a series of different human situations or events that strongly influenced Ceara at this time. In her senior years Ceara worked casually in a supermarket, here she met many people that represented a world far from that of her immediate family and friends. From the perspective of her stepmother, Ceara's prints were 'definitely about a subjective response to the characters she met and were definitely social comments'.

The impetus for her 'iconic alter' major work developed from another, yet related incident. Outside a local tavern on Melbourne Cup Day Ceara saw a drunk lady, who she explained, 'was extremely drunk and abusive and her hat was squashed... it struck me...what of this phenomena in Australia how we love sporting events ...the Melbourne Cup thing'. The events and rituals that surround the sporting phenomena then became the basis for her inquiry. Ceara reflected on the irony of her work as 'I am not really a sporty person'. What Ceara had done, was to choose to explore her own world, through an understanding of what it was not. In trying to understand her own developing values and beliefs she assessed them against a culture and social practice that she had never experienced and in many ways was very alien to her life style and experience.

### ***What is Melbourne Cup Day?***

To Ceara it is:

A day to flaunt whatever you've got and more,  
A day to get all made up, feel rich, feel lucky in a lucky country,  
Bet your money  
If you loose it doesn't matter

If you win it's your shout of VB  
Everyone get drunk.

Melbourne cup is not really about horses,  
It's about celebrating nothing,  
Calling in sick,  
Stopping everything to listen to the race,  
Waving fists and pounding feet.  
Wearing frills, flounces and polka dots  
About dresses, suits, shining shoes,  
Getting drunk on champagne,  
Feeling rich even if you lost,  
Even if you're not  
Most importantly it's about – a wonderful hat! (Ceara's Diary, 2001)

“Our Lady of the Melbourne Cup” was a mixed media iconic work. ‘This is about me, my perspective on Australian Culture’. She has appropriated the central panel from Moulin’s Triptych 1498-99. She re-contextualised it into her own environment. Gai Waterhouse a successful horse racing trainer is her Madonna, her symbolic Australian sports woman. She was to symbolise women, sport, mothers, society and glamour. Ceara also played with the possible meaning of Madonna and the idea of women not as the sports person but in the supporting role, ‘Always mothers at the soccer’.

“Our Lady of Luck” (the Madonna of Horse Racing) is wearing a necklace that has horse shoes on it for good luck. The iconic Australian racehorse Phar lap’s heart is also included in the imagery as symbolic of passion and strength. These and other such representations of Australian sporting mythology she found most fascinating. The work is heavy with appropriated symbolism, each representative of another aspect of cultural inquiry.

On religion and gambling, Ceara has worked with the idea of the TAB as the priest’s home and the track its church. In her diary, there is evidence of the questioning of many of the Australian rituals and ceremonies such as demonstrated by the following poem from her diary.

'Anzac day- war-memorial- two up

Australia Day- invasion- white settlement (should it be celebrated?)

Queens Birthday- monarchy- nobody cares

And what of the Melbourne Cup as a ritual?

There is a questioning of Australian Values:

'What is white? What is our country made of? Who are we? I am a first generation Australian... I have dual citizenship..... I am looking at this from an outside perspective (Ceara's diary, 2001).

Reflecting on her work after five years Ceara states, 'I don't think it has a lot of me in this work. It's about something I was never a part of. I have never actually been to the races in my whole life. And I did my entire thing about something that was sporty... an event like that...it helped me [get through my HSC] because I picked something that was not personal'. The work's main purpose was to present to an audience the phenomena of the horse racing industry as a cultural ritual in Australia. 'One lady thought that I was making a statement about how sporting culture had taken over from religion in a negative way... but I never really saw it as a negative or positive. I just saw that sport was like religion'.

### **Appropriating images, creating collages and layering the world**

The methodology of inquiry used by Ceara was to research widely through how society and culture are represented in historical imagery. She would then critique the images and appropriate those she felt best suited her more popular culture and expressive perspective. I 'spent a lot of time doing experiments...I did a lot of printmaking collage'. She describes herself as a 'gatherer... little bits of picked up paper and pictures'. These fragments of her world as images and texts were then rationalised, organised and layered. 'Layers of glue with collage between layers- layers of society- race, religion all coming together to celebrate a holiday festival – Melbourne Cup Day'. She finds images and ideas across the broadest spectrum of popular culture's representational forms. She investigates the media, from racing tips to betting tabs, from stable talk to the society column, into the world of pony clubs, gambling and pub culture, Melbourne Cup Day culture.



Ceara (2001). **'Melbourne Cup Day Madonna No. 2'**; *Silkscreen print, detail*

Ceara (2001). **'No Stopping Gai'**; *Photo montage and text (Ceara's diary)*

The detail of the silkscreen print 'Melbourne Cup Day Madonna No. 2' above is in juxtaposition with the image 'No Stopping Gai' to demonstrate the depth of Ceara's investigation and her flexibility to use what ever imagery she felt most appropriate for what she wished to express. In the image 'Melbourne Cup Day Madonna No. 2' she features her expressive, grotesque representation the drunk lady she drew from the tavern. The 'one behind her shouting is from [another hotel], shouting with the crowd for her horse' on Melbourne Cup Day. 'No Stopping Gai' is a page from her diary, it's a recorded perception of one of her visualisations about this phenomena.

### ***Capturing meaning through Visual Art***

Ceara presented for her body of work her large mixed media work and a series of prints. The prints explore a wide range of emergent ideas. Her diary is full of re-representations of the printed image of the 'Lady with the Hat'. The hat series and the Melbourne Cup are synonymous icons for Ceara. The portraits of ladies in hats are images that are 'very masculine...dark...evil'. It was through her ladies in hats series that many of aspects of life that Ceara found difficult were mediated.

However, it is in her self-portrait series that she takes a more intentional and closer look at the 'Who am I' big questions. The following extracts from her diary reveal some of her questioning and demonstrate how artmaking allowed her to find a 'sense of meaning in everyday life...habitual practice...Is it possible to generalise about the

beliefs, values customs of a nation? What does being Australian mean? I am Australian’.

The work ‘Ceara legend in her own mind’ is a metaphor of her own journey of inquiry. In the image below the appropriated 1955 lady from an American National geographic has Ceara’s face superimposed and over worked.



Ceara (2001). ‘**Ceara legend in her own mind**’,  
*silkscreen print.*

She reflects in her interview the following, ‘While I am telling my story you can see my influences, the jet aeroplane and the text about the American navy signifies my American heritage, the horse my ‘British’ (actually Scottish) heritage (the horse comes from a book printed in England, also where ‘this is my wonder book and [where] retold for little children comes from’). The Australian Council for the Arts symbol signifies Australian culture- it is one of the institutes which gives us our culture.

One of the key lessons Ceara has taken with her from her Visual Art education has been the ‘value of using visual art to tell a story’. Working with visual narratives remains a strong part of Ceara’s communicative skills. Reflecting on the understandings she gained from studying visual art Ceara states: ‘visual language is everywhere you go, there is always something to decipher, signs and things like that’ and ‘I don’t think there is another subject you could do [images in].I never learned to do any of those things in any other subject’.

‘I think the history and the making are both very important’ and ‘I think studying art made me aware of a lot of different things ... it makes you culturally aware’. ‘I think in art you are encouraged to think differently where as in other subjects you are not’.

The study of Visual Art has given Ceara a ‘strong understanding of the way the visual informs and is informed by society and culture’ and her HSC study demonstrates she has developed the skill to use her artmaking to help her reflect on a wide range of cultural, social and ethical dilemmas that confront her.

### **Reflections on the Visual Art Learning Experience**

The Ceara case study encapsulates the kind of approach to artmaking taken by many of the students in the longitudinal study. Over 70% of the student artworks analysed dealt issues about self and one’s life. The majority commented on self in relation to issues within society such as cultural identity, gender and sexuality; consumerism, desire and identity; conformity and identity; politics; war; science; media and identity; technology; the time and space phenomenon of modern living and the arts as mediators of culture. Below are further examples drawn from the longitudinal study that inform how the post-compulsory visual art students used their immediate cultural and life experiences to construct visual narratives that inform their beliefs and values.

Ceara’s fascination with her subjectivity as self-portrait is mirrored in many student artworks. Portraiture is an obvious choice for students who seek to interrogate themselves through affective, intuitive and critical means within the wider lens of society and the world. Eun Joo Lee (ARTEXPRESS, 1997, p. 433) reveals an emotional complexity in her work that has allowed her to “overcome difficulties to do with my different background as a Korean immigrant in a new country” (p. 76). Working with images of herself, juxtaposed with Koran cultural icons (masks) and the Australian flag, she has worked towards reconciling both aspects of her identity through a focus on the activities which she sees define her unique self. In this case her love of playing the piano.

Other students take more speculative approaches to the investigation of self. *Street Spirit* by Toby Pike (ARTEXPRESS, 2001, p. 28) represents an exceptional series of

works communicating the emotions experienced as a youth fights to hold himself together while confronting difficult aspects of an apparent self-destructive society. Using photographic manipulation to blur reality and fantasy, the works show how imagination and representational forms provide spaces to explore one's capabilities and projected possibilities about self. The artist is positioned as both the controller and controlled, capable of enormous power while at the same time vulnerable, despairing and reflective.



Toby Pike (2001), *Street Spirit* [digital media], ARTEXPRESS, 2001, p. 28.

Analysis of the themes represented in the student work highlights a preoccupation with reflecting on how society's normalisation practices are enacted and its performative influences impact on one's evolving ethical behaviour and constituted self.



Kerryn Eades (2003), *The Boys* [painting], ARTEXPRESS, p.108.

Finally, *The Boys* (Eades, 2003, p. 108), above provides insights into the rights of passage for the student and marks this defining moment. Through an investigation of a family's social generational drinking behaviours, the young adult works through the normalising behaviour that connects a family as he reflects on and affirms an aspect of self. Connecting these relationships across three generations is achieved through the act of layering and constructing an accumulated image of many identities as one, with the past simultaneously part of the present. There is an affirming moment in this work, when the student elects to place a photograph of himself in the frame, making it a strong and purposeful autobiographical statement demonstrating the how visual artmaking is a significant communicative platform for social and cultural inquiry.

## **Conclusion**

Visual art education adds an important dimension to the communicative capacities of students in a visual twenty-first century. It is an authentic and legitimate medium for socio-cultural inquiry and allows students to performatively challenge assumptions about existence, reason and the contemporary world view. Contemporary artmaking links traditional and popular culture perspectives and provides rich visual territory upon which to test assumptions about how current social and cultural representations influence the individual. The case study and accompanying ARTEXPRESS examples reveal how artmaking may have a vital function to play in the formation of an ethico-aesthetic consciousness that informs individual well being and citizenship. It links the personal (private) and the public as arts knowledge is both instrumental and intrinsic to ones communicative capacities (NRVE, 2006).

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