WHEN ARTISTS APPROPRIATE
LORETO COLLEGE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA

The Visual Arts Faculty at Loreto Marryatville has a long tradition in delivering art learning experiences that challenge gender stereotypes while providing an aesthetic intelligence to complement a balanced curriculum. Accordingly, this has enabled teachers and their students to embrace the mission of IB Middle Years Programme (MYP).

The case study for this article centres on the work of forty-four Year 10 students who deconstructed the significant concept: When artists appropriate, the end result is a strangely familiar, yet an altogether new creation. The MYP unit question was: How has the work of Monika Behrens, Penny Byrne and Alasdair Macintyre caused me to critique my contemporary world?

In supporting students to address the question we referred to the text of Alasdair Macintyre’s 2004 speech in which he analysed the connections between his practice and that of German surrealist artist Max Ernst’s idea, that an artist, has one eye open, and one eye closed. The open eye is attentive to the immediate environment and world events while the inner eye is focused on the internal mechanisms of the heart.

Making connections with self and others in order to reflect upon and respond to a contemporary world aimed for students to independently explore the significant concept yet be scaffolded by teachers as they interrogated the artwork and writing of the three Australian artists Monika Behrens, Penny Byrne, and Alasdair Macintyre.

In negotiation with students the subject matter was determined to be toys. Toy imagery was used to address contemporary, personal and global issues. Students were encouraged to take the often innocent appearance of toys and through subtle compositions challenge the viewer’s childhood connections with toys while engaging them in issues of personal and global significance. Students developed myriad artworks that explored concerns including new arrivals and political manipulation; corporate greed and childhood obesity; child soldiers in Africa and the links to precious gem mining; Aboriginal people traversing Traditional and Western ideologies; Australia’s suburban sprawl and striving for the fantasy of an ideal life.

In the work by Clare Dekuyer the renown Pinocchio puppet is menacingly manipulated by the hands of politicians contrasted with the simplicity of the bathtub boat purposefully highlighting the plight of boat people. In developing her composition, Clare explored the practice of Behrens who makes exquisite still life paintings from carefully selected toys. Likewise another student uses the Pinocchio icon to explore child trafficking. In her Artist’s Statement Lana Andersson writes “she (Behrens) places quite politically, environmentally or socially opposite objects together to get her point across to the audience”. (Andersson, 2013, p.1).

Alasdair Macintyre’s focus on his personal reaction to the horror images that confront him daily, especially those concerning man’s inhumanity to man, challenged students to question social complicity and to strive to explore ways of visually addressing big issues often resulting in causal linking of ideas and concepts. Many students identified with his simplistic iconography that effectively convey complex social issues in a manner that challenges his audience to grapple with heart and mind matters. Danica Brice’s drawing Breaking and entering Neverland employed the contrasting imagery of a toy soldier and a snow dome; the dome encapsulates the ideal life that some strive for and protects the inhabitants from the reality of the world outside the dome.

Other students connected with Byrne’s reconfigured painted figurines that explore issues surrounding the environment, pop culture and global politics in a satirical and humorous manner.

In conclusion the engagement in the practice and ideas of the three Australian artists has resulted in students’ heightened awareness of contemporary social and global issues and the role the creative arts play in spotlighting these to the Australian viewing public. It has challenged students to consider the issues shaping their world and the role they and others can play in raising social consciousness. Further, having researched the artists’ ideas broadened their skills base to confidently and empathetically engage in issue-based discourse.

JACKY MORRISSEY HAMILTON LEARNING AREA COORDINATOR

REFERENCE
Andersson, L (2013) Artist’s Statement
IMAGES (TOP LEFT) Boat People Clare Dekuyer (TOP RIGHT) Work by Lana Andersson

THE ALLIANCE OF GIRLS SCHOOLS AUSTRALIA