Life aquatic

Narelle Autio | Ruth Maddison | Catherine Nelson
About this Education resource

MGA: THE AUSTRALIAN HOME OF PHOTOGRAPHY
MGA EDUCATION RESOURCE

VCE Studio Arts | Unit 4 | Area of Study 3: Art Industry Contexts
Case study Life aquatic: Narelle Autio | Ruth Maddison | Catherine Nelson

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Exhibition introduction

Scientists like to tell us that Earth was misnamed. Given that over 70 per cent of Earth’s surface is covered by ocean, it would be more accurate to say that we live on planet Water. Scientists also point out that up to 60 per cent of the human body consists of water, and that all of life as we know it is infused with water, from the cells of organisms to the air we breathe. Our existence is a watery one.

It is not just scientists, however, who draw our attention to the omnipotence of water. Artists, musicians and writers have frequently drawn inspiration from the mysterious depths of the oceans, the drama of stormy clouds and the water cycles that seem to carry all of life along in their currents. Over recent years, with our increased sensitivity to Earth’s precarious ecology, artists often work with images of water in order to reflect on the interrelated and transient nature of our existence.

This exhibition features the work of three contemporary photographers who plunge the viewer into underwater landscapes where life forms are suspended, interconnected and bubbling with quiet potential. In different ways, each artist asks us to sink below the horizon of our upright, civilised lives and to immerse ourselves in planet Water.
Art Industry Contexts - Overview

In this area of study students focus on the analysis of artworks and the requirements and conditions of the environments where artworks are displayed.

Students examine a variety of art exhibitions and review the methods and considerations involved in the preparation, presentation and conservation of artworks. As part of this requirement, students visit at least two different art exhibitions in their current year of study. Students analyse how specific artworks are presented and demonstrate their understanding of the artists’ and curators' consideration of how artworks are displayed within the art exhibitions.

The conservation of artworks in an exhibition is the concern of artists and the personnel associated with art spaces where the artworks are placed. With reference to specific artworks seen and studied, students develop an awareness and understanding of processes and considerations involved in the display of artworks to the public. Students research art exhibitions and compare the preparation, presentation, conservation and promotion of art in at least two different exhibition spaces. Students may select artworks exhibited in public art galleries and museums, commercial and private galleries, university art galleries, artist run spaces, alternative art spaces, outdoor spaces and online galleries.

Outcome 3

On completion of this unit the student should be able to compare the methods used by artists and considerations of curators in the preparation, presentation, conservation and promotion of specific artworks in at least two different exhibitions. To achieve this outcome the student will draw on the following key knowledge and key skills outlined in Area of Study 3.
Key knowledge

- the methods and intentions of public art galleries and museums, commercial and private galleries, university art galleries, artist run spaces, alternative art spaces, outdoor spaces and online galleries in exhibiting artworks
- the curatorial considerations, exhibition design and promotional methods involved in preparing and displaying artworks in current exhibitions
- the methods used by and considerations of artists and curators working in galleries in conservation of artworks, including lighting, temperature, storage, transportation and presentation of specific artworks in current exhibitions
- the processes associated with the production, presentation, conservation and promotion of specific artworks in current exhibitions
- the characteristics of different types of gallery spaces visited in the current year of study
- appropriate terminology

Key skills

- identify and describe the characteristics of different types of gallery spaces visited in the current year of study
- describe and compare the methods of and intentions in exhibiting artworks in public art galleries and museums, commercial and private galleries, artist run spaces, alternative art spaces, university art galleries and museums, outdoor spaces and online galleries, which have been visited in the year of study
- analyse how specific artworks are presented in different exhibitions and demonstrate an understanding of the artists’ and gallery curators’ intentions
- analyse and evaluate curatorial considerations, exhibition design and promotional methods involved in preparing and presenting specific artworks for display
- analyse and evaluate methods and considerations involved in the conservation of specific artworks related to exhibitions visited in the current year of study
- employ appropriate terminology
Monash Gallery of Art

Outcome 3 | Key knowledge

- the characteristics of different types of gallery spaces visited in the current year of study
- appropriate terminology

Monash Gallery of Art is a public municipal gallery in the City of Monash. The gallery has an extensive photographic collection and is known as ‘The Australian home of photography’. MGA has a Gallery Director and is governed by both the City of Monash and a Committee of Management (a board of volunteers). The gallery also employs two curators, an education and public programs coordinator, operations manager, a gallery coordinator, a fundraising and marketing coordinator, a registrar and a framer.

Monash Gallery of Art has five seasons of exhibitions per year. These are mainly photographic exhibitions from a range of sources including curated exhibitions of the MGA collection, exhibitions of solo artists or groups of artists around a theme or event; or exhibitions from other galleries interstate and internationally, known as ‘travelling exhibitions’.

Exhibitions are generally curated by the two curators in consultation with the artist or touring manager.

The gallery has two major exhibition spaces, and a distinctive third smaller space that can also be configured to include a fourth space for projections or video work.

Often the first two major spaces (Gallery 1 & Gallery 2) are used to display one large exhibition, with Gallery 3 presenting a smaller hang of complementary work. As the gallery is a flexible space, it can also be used to display three separate exhibitions, or one exhibition across all three spaces.

The curators consider all the spaces, and how they fit together at all times.
Exhibition concept

Outcome 3 | Key knowledge

- the methods and intentions of public art galleries and museums, commercial and private galleries, university art galleries, artist run spaces, alternative art spaces, outdoor spaces and online galleries in exhibiting artworks
- the characteristics of different types of gallery spaces visited in the current year of study

Outcome 3 | Key skills

- describe and compare the methods of and intentions in exhibiting artworks in public art galleries and museums, commercial and private galleries, artist run spaces, alternative art spaces, university art galleries and museums, outdoor spaces and online galleries, which have been visited in the year of study

Life Aquatic is an exhibition of three contemporary photographers at Monash Gallery of Art: Narelle Autio, Ruth Maddison and Catherine Nelson. The exhibition is based around a scientific theme of ‘aquatic life’ including life on water and the concept of a ‘body of water’ with the human body and the physical environment. The work of the three artists all investigate the concept of ‘under water’ and are interconnected through ‘plunging, bubbling and suspended underwater’.

This theme connects the images by the three artists that all use different materials and techniques in their photographic work. The exhibition has been planned to be interactive and ‘family friendly’ so there are various experiences planned to allow viewers from all ages to interact with the work. The senior curator planned the exhibition and then the educator worked alongside them to establish some of the interactive experiences.

The curator established the theme and then approached the three artists to exhibit. The curator had discussions with the three artists and collaborated with them in different ways. As Catherine Nelson was overseas living in Belgium, the curator requested works from the artist.

In the case of Narelle Autio, the gallery who represents the artist was approached and the artist consulted for the best works that suited the exhibition.

Ruth Maddison worked directly with the curator by bringing in a large selection of work into the gallery to hang and decisions were made between the artist and the curator.

The overall lighting and mood of the exhibition is related to this theme. The walls are painted muted tones of black and white to reflect the tones of photographic works as being ‘Black and White’. The theme of...
the exhibition also reflects the architecture of the space with the curved walls in the space and also in the roof of the main gallery. The lighting across the exhibition is subdued to reflect the underwater theme. There is also moving refracted ‘waterwave’ lighting moving across the ceiling to create an underwater effect.

In the corner of the first room there is an installation, which invites the public to immerse themselves in a similar underwater environment. The viewer is invited to move through the streams of ribbons suspended from the ceiling. The work has been commissioned by MGA from a group of event decorators, Poppies for Grace, who planned the experience for young children. In the second room viewers are encouraged to use a range of craft materials to create a work in response to the works in the exhibition. The artworks are pinned to the wall by viewers to create a collaborative work. These artworks have been planned by the curator and educator to encourage the audience to interact with the artworks by creating a visual response or physically experiencing an underwater environment.
Exhibition design

**Outcome 3 | Key knowledge**

- the curatorial considerations, exhibition design and promotional methods involved in preparing and displaying artworks in current exhibitions

**Outcome 3 | Key skills**

- describe and compare the methods of and intentions in exhibiting artworks in public art galleries and museums, (...) which have been visited in the year of study
- analyse how specific artworks are presented in different exhibitions and demonstrate an understanding of the artists’ and gallery curators’ intentions
- analyse and evaluate curatorial considerations, exhibition design and promotional methods involved in preparing and presenting specific artworks for display
- analyse and evaluate methods and considerations involved in the conservation of specific artworks related to exhibitions visited this year

The exhibition has a room for each artist. The main information about the central theme of the exhibition is on the wall of the main gallery. This allows the viewer to experience the exhibition when they enter, rather than reading about the exhibition before they experience it. There are wall panels with the information about each artist in each room. The other labels provide titles of the works, materials and information about ownership of the work. The text labels for the (children’s) installation works is curved to mirror the curve of the walls and to differentiate it from the artworks on exhibition.

The exhibition has been planned by the curator using a plan created as an Illustrator file on computer. The works were positioned and scaled accordingly to each exhibition space. Some of Autio’s works have been hung higher than the standard 1.5 metres to give the impression of being underwater.

**Gallery 1 – Catherine Nelson**

This room has 4 series of works by Nelson. The series are grouped together. Nelson creates digital collages of photographs taken underwater in natural environments. The artist’s work fits in with the theme of the fragility of life underwater and highlights the effects of global warming on the environment. The photographs are composited into digital collages so they appear to be surreal worlds. The left wall has two series of works ‘Submerged’ and ‘Unstill life’ of digital collages taken from a lily pond in Belgium. ‘Origin’ is an image composed from shots taken from a mangrove swamps in South East Asia. It is positioned with a new work by Nelson, a digital animation sequence of shots of rare exotic plants from the Belgium botanical gardens. The artworks are digital pigment prints and the colours reflect the submerged life underwater which is highly naturalized in terms of colour, tone and texture. The digital work is positioned close to the installation so an area that the audience can interact with is created.
Gallery 1 – Catherine Nelson
installation photographs

View of the ‘Underwater Garden’ interactive space in context with the Catherine Nelson artworks
Gallery 2 – Narelle Autio
The larger exhibition space features the work of Narelle Autio and provides a focus for the exhibition. The space feels brighter due to the lighting of the walls with flood lights rather than using spot lights on the artworks only, as seen in Gallery 1 and Catherine Nelson’s work. Autio’s works are larger and hung in series. The main theme of Autio’s work is underwater sequences and hence it is the focus of the exhibition.

Autio is a documentary photographer and her underwater scenes capture the spontaneity of everyday life. There are four series of Autio’s work which are printed large scale in strong dramatic colours. The ceiling also has windows which let in some additional light and add to the effect of being underwater. Some of the works are hung slightly higher than eyeline (MGA’s standard eyeline is 155cm) to emphasis both above and below the water line. Part of this exhibition space has a curved wall with artworks created in the public program activities which contrasts with the dramatic nature of Autio’s work. However, as the subjects of Autio’s works are captured fleetingly, at surf carnivals and swimming holes, the chaotic nature of the audience collage work adds to the atmosphere of the room.

Most of Autio’s photographs form part of large bodies of work - the curator’s selection of work shown here are grouped by series ranging from groups of 3 to 12 but none display the full series. The ‘Waterhole’ series are framed with black wooden frames and perspex glazing. They are chromogenic prints and hence their colour is dramatic. Each work is titled ‘Untitled’ and then numbered (Eg. ‘Untitled #10). There are 10 works on the wall but the display of artworks is not sequential, so it appears that the curator or artist has selected the works from a greater number that may hang together aesthetically as a series. Additionally three of the works are much smaller than the rest of the series and are...
hung justified to the top of the larger works, so they appear to float to the surface/top of the room.

On the opposite wall there are eight works from the ‘New Colour works’ series. These are pigment prints that are unframed but are double hung in two rows four over four. Each work has a title such as ‘Passage’, ‘Rush’, ‘Abyss’ which depict swimmers. The titles are placed to the right of the display, so it is up to the viewer to associate the titles with the corresponding images. There is also a series of three works entitled ‘Nippers’ that were created by Autio when she was selected as a finalist in the Basil Sellers Art prize (2014), depicting surf life saving carnivals and children. These works are less abstract than the other works as they include the surface of the water as the nippers break through the waves. This series is hung higher than all the other of Autio’s work in the room, adding to the sensation that you the viewer are underwater.

The final series of works is entitled ‘The place in between’. They depict abstract underwater swimmers with bubbles and shafts of light. Each of these works are entitled ‘Siren’ with a number (Eg: ‘Siren IV’). However the display of the prints is also not sequential in numbering, like the ‘Waterhole’ works, suggesting the same curatorial selection has been made.
Gallery 2 – Narelle Autio
installation photographs

Exhibition introductory text is displayed at the entry to Gallery 2.

View of the ‘Coral wall’ interactive corner in context with the Narelle Autio artworks.
The works of Maddison are very different to the techniques used by the other two artists in *Life aquatic*. Hence these works are displayed quite differently. Maddison’s work is located in Gallery 3 which is often used as a project space for individual artists or to display works from the MGA Collection. The room has a distinctive curved wall that runs the full length of the space. The works are ‘Lumen prints’ which are photographic prints made by placing objects directly on the photographic paper and exposing it to the sun for long periods of time. The photographic paper is then fixed in chemicals and washed. The prints feature found objects from the shoreline, such as seaweed and debris, in Eden on the South Coast of NSW where the artist lives. Maddison has used sheets of photographic paper of various sizes and papers, which are hand cut. Maddison received many of these papers from other photographers when they closed their darkrooms and switched to digital.

Beginning with an extensive body of work, the curator worked with Maddison to plan the ‘salon hang’ of these works. Sharing sketches and layout plans over email in the months prior to the show due to the distance of location. The artist claims that there is no formal arrangement of the images and that they flow and interconnect like the microcosms they depict. Around some of the prints, the artist has written descriptive words in bronze pen in keeping with the tones of the prints. The words also describe the theme of the works of nature and interconnectedness of sea life. The exhibition of this work has more of a ‘bespoke’ style created by the subject matter and techniques. However, three of Maddison’s works from the same series ‘Girt by Sea’, which have been acquired by the MGA, hang framed on the opposite wall to the salon hang. The title of these works is in relation to the shoreline of Australia and the line of the Australian National Anthem ‘Advance Australia Fair’.
Note the framed work from the MGA Collection in contrast to the salon hang of works borrowed from the artist.

Clear push pins are used to attach the works to the wall with a mylar tab which is attached to the print to prevent damage to the work, to show the edges of the paper, and to appear unobtrusive to the viewer.

Gallery 3 – Ruth Maddison
installation photographs
Conservation, presentation and promotion

**Outcome 3 | Key knowledge**

- The methods used by and considerations of artists and curators working in galleries in conservation of artworks, including lighting, temperature, storage, transportation and presentation of specific artworks in current exhibitions.

- The processes associated with the production, presentation, conservation and promotion of specific artworks in current exhibitions.

The gallery has used controlled artificial low level lighting (50 Lux) with all the works in the exhibition. The style of lighting changes across the three spaces (flood lights and spot lights), so they appear different to the eye, but do not affect the Lux levels.

The works that are not framed are pinned to the wall. Often plastic (mylar) tabs are attached to the back of the prints, and pinned through the tabs preventing damage to the actual print. Magnets are also used in some works to prevent damage.

Often the works that are not owned by the gallery are unframed. Those that are framed have frames that are minimalist so the prints can be appreciated without much interference. The framing is standard for most photographic work. However, the work of Ruth Maddison is very different to that of Autio and Nelson due to the nature of the artist’s techniques and that they are owned by the artist and not commercially available through gallery representatives which store works in a stock room.

MGA has a monitored air conditioning system that ensures the gallery spaces are kept at a constant 20 degrees and around 45% humidity, which is appropriate for the care of works on paper such as photographs.

The exhibition has been extensively advertised on the gallery website. The front page of the website has moving gifs of the work of the three artists and the installation. There are also small advertising postcards available with Autio’s work on them and information about the exhibition on the back. The gallery also hired a marketing company to promote the exhibition to their target audience: families looking for school holiday activities with relation to the interactive areas of the show.
Narelle Autio studied visual arts at the University of South Australia before embarking on a career as a photojournalist. Being an avid traveller, who works in a documentary mode, Autio takes most of her photographs in public spaces where she can capture the drama and spontaneity of everyday life. Autio’s use of saturated colours and high contrast helps to accentuate a sense of drama in her subject matter. She began exhibiting her photographic prints in art galleries in 2000 and since that time has regularly exhibited new bodies of work.

Public beaches, swimming holes and river systems are recurring themes in Autio’s photographs. Working both above and below the waterline, Autio has photographed a range of subjects including children jostling in the waves, stacks of seaweed on isolated coastlines and the flotsam that holiday-makers leave behind in the sand.

*Life aquatic* offers an overview of Autio’s underwater photography, which is one of the most sustained and erudite aspects of her practice. Across the four series featured in this exhibition, Autio demonstrates an ability to express the athletic action of crowded surf beaches as well as the reflective solitude of inland swimming holes. She documents the spontaneity of live action like a street photographer, but she also transforms plunging bodies into sublime figures that float in an aquatic abyss.
Exhibition text – Ruth Maddison

Ruth Maddison is a self-taught photographer and artist. Maddison began working as a documentary photographer in 1976, and she has been regularly exhibiting her artwork since 1979. Photography has been her primary medium, but in recent years her artistic practice has expanded to include moving-image, textiles and sculpture. In 1996 Maddison relocated from Melbourne to Eden, on the south coast of New South Wales, where she continues to live and work.

*Life aquatic* features a series of lumen prints that Maddison created using seaweed from her local beach between 2000 and 2006. A lumen print is a camera-less photograph that is produced by laying objects (in this case seaweed) directly onto the surface of silver gelatin photographic paper, and allowing it to sit in the sun for an extended period of time. Over the duration of the exposure, which can last from 20 minutes to hours or even days, the paper will gradually change colour and leave a ghostly silhouette of the objects. The print is then simply fixed and washed, with no use of photographic developer (which would turn the paper black after such a long exposure). Lumen prints are typically low contrast images, with subtle tones and casts of colour.

Maddison prefers not to specify a viewing orientation for most of the works in this series, fostering the notion that these forms belong to a fluid realm. To enhance this sense of aquatic life, the prints have been hung as a constellation of interconnected microcosms.
Exhibition text – Catherine Nelson

Catherine Nelson studied painting at the College of Fine Arts in Sydney and then spent her early career employed in film and television. Nelson refined her skills in digital photomedia working as a special effects artist on films such as Harry Potter and Moulin Rouge, before re-establishing her own studio practice in 2008.

Putting her digital toolbox to work in the context of an artist’s studio, Nelson has developed a seductively hyperreal form of photography. She ‘paints’ fantastic landscapes by digitally combining and distorting photographs that she has taken of her actual environment. Nelson’s most recent series of images have adopted a submarine perspective on aquatic landscapes. Origins was created using photographs of mangrove swamps in south-east Asia, while Submerged and Unstill life were composed from thousands of close-up photographs taken in a small lily pond in Belgium.

Life aquatic also features Nelson’s new video work ‘Supernova’. Using a database of rare and endangered plants held at the National Botanic Garden of Belgium, Nelson has compiled an animated sequence that celebrates the fluid vitality of organic microcosms.