RICKY SWALLOW
WATERCOLOURS
INTERPRETIVE GUIDE

A UQ Art Museum Touring Exhibition
The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, 24 July – 27 September 2009
Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, New Zealand, 11 December – 28 March 2010
ABOUT THIS INTERPRETIVE GUIDE

This interpretive guide is intended for use in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition Ricky Swallow: Watercolours. It may be used prior to, during or following a visit, in association with the downloadable vodcast that has been produced to accompany this exhibition. Alternatively this online guide, together with the vodcast, may be used for independent teaching and learning experiences, to provide content and direction for a case study on the work of Ricky Swallow for senior students.

These resources aim to enhance understanding of Ricky Swallow’s practice for new audiences, and enrich the appreciation of his watercolour practice for those already familiar with his sculptures.

The images and text in the guide relate to the themes explored by curator Steven Alderton in the exhibition Ricky Swallow: Watercolours. The guide includes extracts from the essay by Justin Paton and the conversation between Steven Alderton and Ricky Swallow in the publication Ricky Swallow: Watercolours, with additional text by Lisa Slade.

The information and activities in this interpretive guide are intended to support the inquiry learning model of the Queensland Visual Art senior curriculum and align with the general objectives of making and appraising. This guide provides opportunities for Year 11 and 12 senior students to:

• extend their knowledge and experience of contemporary visual arts practice and career paths;

• develop their capacity to research, develop, resolve and reflect on their own and others’ art works in the specific context of audiences and purposes; and

• explore how the visual arts reinforce and challenge their own individual experiences.

Gillian Ridsdale
Curator Public Programs, UQ Art Museum

Photo: Steven Alderton
THE PRACTICE OF DRAWING

Often, after I make a batch of drawings, I separate them out into pairs or groups and start to curate them into bodies of work that I can add to as new drawings are made. In some respects, the way you suggested we put this show together expands on this working method. I’m usually working from source material that’s close at hand: images, magazines, record sleeves and directly from objects in my studio environment. So, as subjects, they are there to return to and call upon when I’m in a drawing spell. I don’t so much consciously start out to produce a series, so much as one image leads to another and becomes a larger family of images.

Ricky Swallow

Drawing for me is not a consistent practice that happens on a daily basis, compared to working on a sculpture. My patience for it is perhaps less sustained, and the rewards of completing works with this medium are more immediate. When I’m drawing it’s usually for a certain number of hours, a day, or a weekend in between other studio commitments, and I think this pattern of working has always produced thematic groups of works sparked by different interests at different times.

Ricky Swallow

Over the last 10 or so years, watercolour has enjoyed a quiet renaissance in the hands of artists looking for an alternative to big gallery spaces and the big art that predictably fills them. For Swallow, the very things that give watercolour such a marginal, trembling place in the public gallery hierarchy are at the heart of its appeal. Instead of delivering a museum-sized visual hit, legible from 50 paces and instantly memorable, his watercolours insist that we go to them and attend closely to whatever is emerging from the spills of paint. They’re more like letters sent from one person to another than speeches addressed to a crowd.

Justin Paton
Senior Curator at Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu

This exhibition focuses on drawing, a lesser-known aspect of Ricky Swallow’s practice. Drawing is often described by artists as a perennial aspect of their practice – a constant companion in their daily lives and something that underpins the work they do in other media. For Swallow, sculpture is his constant practice, whereas drawing often happens when he is working outside of his regular studio-based practice. In his interview with the exhibition curator Steven Alderton, Swallow describes his sketchbooks as portable or condensed studios. He states that he makes better drawings in domestic or removed settings. He mentions hotel rooms, his parents’ kitchen table, and also the periods he spends on residencies elsewhere, including his time at the Linneaus Estate in New South Wales in 2009.

For Swallow, using watercolour is ‘so intimately powerful’ and provides respite from the demands of making sculpture and installation. Across all of his art-making practices, Swallow is not afraid to use materials or techniques that challenge traditional hierarchies of value. His wood carvings, for example, require a level of skill and technique that today is more often associated with craft workers than contemporary artists, who sometimes reject a high level of finish in their work.

Lisa Slade
Education Consultant

ACTIVITIES

REFLECTING
Consider Ricky Swallow’s statements about what drawing means for him. Compare and contrast this with the way others artists who you have studied approach drawing. Compose your own artist’s statement that begins with Drawing for me is….

DEVELOPING
Create your own series of watercolour drawings. Begin by choosing a subject that is close at hand and experiment with different ways of representing this subject. Try working wet on wet, by dampening the paper before you apply colour, and experiment with using different types of paper and different styles of brushes.

RESOLVING
Assume the role of curator and consider the best way to exhibit your body of work. In planning your exhibition of drawings you might like to consider Justin Paton’s poetic statement ‘They’re more like letters sent from one person to another than speeches addressed to a crowd’. How does the intimacy of drawing impact on exhibition practice?
The main actors in Swallow’s early watercolours are intelligent and faintly menacing monkeys. They read books, operate laptops, listen through headphones, pilot spaceships towards other worlds, and generally run the show. Swallow records their actions and antics with all the enthusiasm of a field researcher with notebook flipped open: here they are reading books; there they are fondling guns. It’s zoology shaded by comedy, a kind of diary of evolutionary downfall. However, like William Hogarth’s many eighteenth-century paintings and engravings featuring preening and puffed-up monkeys, Swallow’s watercolours of this type are not about monkeys at all, but rather us humans. They are about our failing and preposterous attempts to make progress, get ahead, extend ourselves in space and time. Whether they are tinkering with gadgets, piloting spacecraft, spraying graffiti on walls, or creating fresh versions of themselves in the lab, Swallow’s monkeys might all be considered surrogate artists, using whatever is at their disposal to reach beyond themselves. The resulting watercolours are science fictions of a comic and wondering kind, gently dwelling on the absurdity of our efforts to make ourselves known in a limitless universe.

Like many artists across history, Swallow projects human qualities and behaviours on to animals. This anthropomorphism reminds us of our basic biological identity as primates, and also of our simian forebears. By representing the monkeys at work and play – mimicking (or aping) human behaviour – Swallow also pokes fun at humanity and our relentless pursuit of progress.

Lisa Slade

**ACTIVITIES**

**RESEARCHING**
Research other artists who have referenced monkeys, apes or chimpanzees in their work. You might like to begin with William Hogarth and compare his representation of monkeys with the work of contemporary artists such as Lisa Roet, Christopher Langton, Xu Bing or Patricia Piccinini. What themes or ideas do these artists have in common?

**RESPONDING**
Brainstorm all of the expressions or sayings used in everyday conversation that refer to monkeys. Could any of them relate to Swallow’s watercolours of monkeys?

**DEVELOPING**
Select your favourite expression about monkeys and consider creating a body of work inspired by this expression. You might like to think about including social or political commentary in your work.
Swallow is known to be an obsessive listener, someone whose art is motivated as much by music as by the work of other visual artists. Since moving to Los Angeles he has immersed himself in Californian music of the 1960s and '70s. On that count, these watercolours might be considered the notes of a fan, Swallow transcribing these faces from album covers into the scrapbook of his own enthusiasms.

So is Swallow farewelling these figures or bringing them back? Reclaiming them or letting them go? In the end I think the watercolours must be counted as acts of commemoration – modest, indistinct and partial, certainly, but commemorative acts nonetheless. The evidence for this lies in the simple fact that he made them in the first place. Having listened to their music and looked at their photos, he set to work with paper and brush. And what led him to do so, I suspect, was not the looking so much as the listening. Songs bring the past vividly into the present because voices are such intimate things. Push play on a recording and the voice of someone long-gone is right there with you all of a sudden. Little wonder that Edison’s phonograph recordings were once thought to offer the chance to listen in on the dead.

Justin Paton

The hangman’s beautiful portraits depict a series of brightly clad bohemian-looking characters. These portraits were sourced from an album cover called The hangman’s beautiful daughter by The Incredible String Band. Released in 1968, the album was considered to be the ultimate expression of hippie culture. The original artwork on the album cover was a photograph depicting the band, their family and friends gathered together like a band of gypsies (the photograph was actually taken at Christmas in 1967). By isolating several of the faces depicted on the album cover, and by translating a sharp photographic image into watercolour softness, Swallow severs the connection to the initial context and invites the audience to respond to these images in a new way. However he appropriates the album title to create his own title. Like the cover version of a hit song from long ago, the new artwork is completely fresh to some audiences, while being a source of nostalgia for others.

Lisa Slade

ACtIVITIES

RESPONDING
Devise your own cover version of an image found on a CD or album cover. Is your work a tribute or a parody? Decide on a title that quotes from the original and also makes clear your intention.

REFLECTING
Carefully re-read Justin Paton’s account of the importance of music for Swallow. In your own words, write an account of why you think music is important to visual artists. Consider the role of music in your own work.

DEVELOPING
Create a series of two-dimensional works inspired by your favourite music. Listen to the music as you make the work. Consider how the work that you have made could be recontextualised as an album or CD cover, or a t-shirt design.
I don’t know why, but I think of Ned Kelly as a kind of modest or reluctant hero, the antithesis to Jagger’s indulgent persona. Maybe I’m wrong, but in the film, despite it being a bad match, Jagger makes a compelling subject as he attempts to fill Kelly’s armour. He’s not only trying to be Kelly, he’s also perhaps incapable of being seen as anything but the lead singer of The Rolling Stones. So it was interesting to be making works of Jagger and of Ned Kelly and the Kelly Gang concurrently, as if equalising them all on paper. Most of the images of Kelly that exist have been doctored, or altered in some way; very few ‘authentic’ images remain. And this limited photographic archive seems to make the images more powerful or iconic. There’s both an empathy and darkness in Ned Kelly’s legend that is specifically Australian; I wanted to distil that in my drawings somehow.

Ricky Swallow

Since his execution in 1880, bushranger Ned Kelly has inspired generations of artists, writers and filmmakers. In his watercolour portraits of the Kelly Gang, Swallow chooses dark gloomy colours and uses an expressive technique, where the watercolours bleed across the paper, to conjure the faces of the famous outlaws. The work succinctly titled Ned was inspired by the first-known photograph of Ned Kelly – a police mugshot taken of Ned Kelly at age 16 at Melbourne Gaol, after he was convicted of stealing horses. Swallow’s watercolour, despite the youth of its subject, is death-like and seems to prefigure Kelly’s death. The grim palette consisting of blue, black and sickly yellow, gives Kelly a menacing and haunting expression.

At least one film inspired by the exploits of the Kelly Gang has been made every decade since 1906, when the world’s first feature-length film, The Story of the Kelly Gang, was made. In 1970, The Rolling Stone’s front man Mick Jagger starred as Ned Kelly in a film by the same name directed by Tony Richardson. This film inspired Swallow’s portraits of Jagger as Ned Kelly where, in the words of Justin Paton, ‘pop cultural memory bleed[s] back across colonial history’. This act of transformation, where Swallow recreates Jagger as Kelly, is akin to Jagger’s performance as Kelly. In both the film and Swallow’s watercolours, the pop star Jagger never convincingly becomes the bushranger Kelly.

Lisa Slade

**ACTIVITIES**

**REFLECTING**

Speculate on the reasons why you think the story of Ned Kelly and the Kelly Gang continues to be such an enduring subject in Australian cultural history. Can you think of other contemporary artworks that have focussed on this story?

**DEVELOPING**

Select a well-known event or figure from Australian history and think about creating a a series of works on paper inspired by that person or event. Consider how you will manipulate your materials to suit the story.

**RESPONDING**

What does Swallow’s work say about Australian identity? What other Australian subjects are represented by Swallow? Why do you think Swallow chose these themes, when he has now spent as much time working as an artist overseas as he has working in Australia?
FURTHER READING


Ricky Swallow www.rickyswallow.com


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