

# **Ruark Lewis: Survey 1982 – 2012**

**Hazelhurst Regional Galley & Arts Centre**

**29<sup>th</sup> September – 11<sup>th</sup> November 2012**

## **Education Kit Year 7 to 12**

Contents:

About this Exhibition

Ruark Lewis, brief Artist Biography

Process

Curriculum Connections

Art Historical and Critical Study Questions

Artmaking Activities

Glossary

References

Appendix: Images

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## **About this exhibition**

*Ruark Lewis: Survey 1982-2012* curated by Dr James Paull, is the first mid-career survey of Sydney-based artist and writer Ruark Lewis. Working for over three decades, Lewis has established an international reputation across an extraordinary range of creative genres. This exhibition displays a sample of his multi-disciplinary work from paintings, drawings and installations to performance, theatre and audio-video works.

The exhibition also includes Lewis' most recent series *Star Shelters* (2012) in Hazelhurst gardens. These Star Shelters, which are like prisms and are influenced by the stars of the night sky and invite the viewer to engage, interact, perform and play in and around them. Another participatory work displayed is *Catscradle*, a collaborative work between the artist and audience. Throughout the duration of the exhibition families are invited to make their own string art in Hazelhurst Foyer.

Collaboration is a key aspect of Lewis' artmaking practice and this exhibition highlights some of his varied collaborations. Lewis' large-scale installation *Homeland Illuminations* is an artistic partnership with Australian artist Jonathan Jones and the composer Rik Rue. Rue also

collaborated on *An Index of Emotions*

*Ruark Lewis: Survey 1982-2012* at Hazelhurst is to be the first of two shows providing a full 'Lewis experience'. Phase two of the survey show will be held at the Macquarie University Gallery (30 January 2012 – 13 March 2013).

## **Ruark Lewis (b 1960)**

Ruark Lewis is a visual artist and writer renowned for his practice of linking art, poetics and politics. He creates in a wide range of media such as painting, drawing, installation, artist's-books, public art, theatre, performance, audio-video works. He often works in artistic collaborations with other poets, composers, choreographers, anthropologists, writers and visual artists in a method that he calls *transcription drawing*.

Through this unique practice Lewis says he makes "quoted references to everyone else's works in my art". (Lewis 2012).

Describing himself a "language artist" (Lewis, 2012), Lewis completed his studies at Sydney College of the Arts in 1984. Lewis has won many public art commissions such as *Relay* an art installation for the Sydney Olympic Games and Paralympics Games Festivals, 2000 and *Residence* for Randwick City Council, 2010. Lewis has held several residencies including the Cite Internationale des Arts, Paris in 1991, Araluen Art Centre, Alice Springs in 1997 and Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre, 2007. Lewis exhibited at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery in *Our Lucky Country (difference)* in 2006, and *Our Lucky Country (still different)* in 2007. In 2006, Lewis exhibited in the 15<sup>th</sup> Biennale of Sydney at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Ruark Lewis has exhibited widely and his works are held in public and private collections in both in Australia and overseas. He is represented by Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne.

## **Process**

Ruark Lewis is an artist who moves with ease between disciplines, defying categorization. He works in an extraordinary range of genres in an effort to present the expressive possibilities of language – both written and visual. The mediums he works across include drawing, painting, sculpture, performance, installations and audio-video. Lewis has created a unique technique which he calls *transcription drawing*. Lewis uses poetry and language extensively in his art to communicate to the audience. Put simply, "Ruark Lewis puts letters on canvas and paper, on walls, sticks, and even books." (Selenitsch, 2007)

Lewis refers to himself a "language artist". He says he does not want to be "locked into one single artistic area" otherwise the poetic nature of his work is denied. He uses language as a playful way to engage people and "hook them back to the work" (Lewis, 2007). Many of Lewis' works seem to present accidental arrangements of letters even though they are much more. This sensitive linguistic elusiveness has the ability to appeal to a diverse audience – most people can identify letters. Lewis' made-up language can appeal to everyone, no matter what language is spoken, level of reading ability or knowledge of poetry. People can make their own

entries into the narratives of his texts. The elements of texture, colour, line, shape combine with the principles of balance, contrast and rhythm in each of Lewis' works. This establishes a play between geometric and organic patterns, creating another layer to the language.

When creating, Lewis follows a method of looking, listening, reading and then responding to already existing poems, music and visual material. He asks his audience to follow a similar process in their engagement and interaction with his works. As is similar with most contemporary art or poetry, the viewer is challenged to draw their own understandings of the work.

Collaborative partnership is a significant aspect of Lewis' practice. In addition to his partnerships with composers, musicians, dancers, authors, poets and anthropologists, Lewis has joined forces with many fellow artists.

### **Overview of Lewis' process through selected works**

Lewis' father owned copies of drawings by Cubist artist Godfrey Miller. Growing up, Lewis copied and studied these, like the "studying art student copying the master" (Lewis, 2012). Lewis copied the drawings with a ruler so he changed the original intention – the sketchy drawing, rhythms and movements were disguised. In 1982 Lewis used a ruler to produce straight lines joining a series of dots. Today he still uses this process, present in his recent *Star Shelter drawings* (2012).

In *Mertz Transcriptions* (2001) Lewis placed tracing paper over the collages of Schwitters to capture his compositional intention. In doing so, Lewis was concerned with looking for the edges of the collages – where the layers meet. This was very pedagogical and required "re-training – learning new drawings" (Lewis, 2012). This tracing technique was developed in the *Yirrkala Transcription drawings* (1989) where he traced over Aboriginal bark paintings, recording the voids between the marks made in the original bark paintings. He created a drawing of the space between their marks (like a negative image).

*False Narratives* (2001-2004) includes an artist's book accompanied by audio from the wall with chair for people to sit, listen and read. Also lithographs – printmaking practice. *False Narratives*, Lewis's second artist book published in 2001 contains transcriptions from every-day text into lists he terms "banalities", "indexes" and "euphemisms". *Just for Nothing* and *False Narratives* later became gallery installations, their modular capacity enabling them to be reconfigured (to cover large wall spaces in grid-like formation).

*Just for Nothing* (1991), Lewis worked in Paris on the play *Just for Nothing*, by Nathalie Sarraute, using a colour-coding system which underscores the language between friends, its omissions and silences.

*Transcription Drawings – Directional Modality* (1988) were created while listening to 'Alpha Solstice' (1987), performed by Robert Douglass. These drawings are based on electronically generated music (computer/ sample based music). Until Lewis created his drawings of the

sounds, there was no traditional sheet music produced for the composition. Essentially his drawings have become the only score.

*Water Drawings (1997)* are a series of canvas oil paintings, not framed but in a scroll like presentation. Lewis says they have “no formalities” (Lewis, 2012). Lewis has transcribed the writing of Carl Strehlow, who became a missionary at Hermannsburg in 1894. As a linguist he added to the understanding of the Aboriginal languages of the area. The works are transcriptions of three different writings: Carl Strehlow’s German transcription of the Arrente Rain song cycle of Kaporilja (Blue); the same passage in English sourced from Charles Chewings’ unpublished English translation of Carl Strehlow’s publication (Yellow); and Ted Strehlow’s (son of Carl) subsequent publication *Songs of Central Australia* 1971 (Red). They were inspired by the life of nomadic culture as the work can be rolled up in an instant and easily transported. These were Lewis’ first drawings created in the medium of oil on canvas and represented a shift away from graphite on paper, a medium less durable than oil paint on canvas. The *Water Drawings* were generated as somewhat of a response to Lewis’ physical limitations (who has difficulty walking or standing unaided for long periods). Lewis can roll out the long, panoramic scroll paintings, work on little sections at a time and not have to move much to get around the entire work.

*Homeland Illuminations (2007)* is a large-scale collaboration with Aboriginal artist Jonathan Jones, uses wooden beams on the floor to create a raft-like vessel, carrying the text. Written upon the work are the stories of Jones’ grandfather. Jones contributed the stories to form the basis of the text as well as illuminating the work from below (use of lights is a key element in Jones’ practice). The work conveys issues on identity and documents Jones’ cultural heritage.

*Star Shelters (2012)* are Lewis’ most recent works. The prisms exhibited in the garden were created in association with **W. E Lucas & Associates Architects** and generated from designs based on drawings made in June 2011 while Lewis was in hospital for six weeks. These designs are made with dots on paper, linked to Aboriginal astronomy and stories of the stars, which we can all relate to because we all look up! The dots provide points from which straight lines radiate. These are painted alternatively in black and white stripes while some are red and white. To create these *Star Shelter* sculptures Lewis simply “took his drawings, cut along the axis and folded them like origami.” (Lewis, 2012)

In conversation Lewis discussed the conceptual strength and critical thinking skills inherent in the works. He commented that “an artmaking activity such as this would engage students and allow them to see the cognitive process involved in developing conceptual art.” (Lewis, 2012)

*Catscradle* has been recreated, although never exactly the same, in many different locations throughout the world. The photographed and filmed performances were created many times using heavy wool in multiple colours. Wool is crisscrossed throughout the gallery where audience members are forced to interact and walk between the wool. Audience members become part of the work: “The audience is forced to intervene in the works”. With a work like this “documentation is the key to capturing/ creating the conceptual art”. (Lewis, 2012)

## **Curriculum Connections**

The exhibition Ruark Lewis: Survey 1982 – 2012 is a survey exhibition of the practice of contemporary artist Ruark Lewis, including paintings, drawings, photographs, films, installation and performance pieces. Ruark Lewis: Survey 1982 – 2012 Education Kit contains background information on the exhibition (detailing specific works), artist biographical information, a brief description of the artist's processes, a Glossary of related art terms, and a selection of images.

This Education Kit aims to facilitate learning under NSW Visual Arts Syllabus requirements for Years 7 – 12. This is done by providing information about the Artist's Practice, questions regarding Art History, Art Criticism, the Frames and the Conceptual Framework. Suggestions for relevant Artmaking activities are also included.

## **Ruark Lewis: Survey 1982 – 2012**

### **Art Historical/ Critical Study**

Please use these questions in conjunction with the exhibition or use images from the catalogue. Don't forget to view the *Star Shelters* in the gardens!

### **Examining the Artworks: Year 7-12**

1. Make a list of all the expressive forms and media used by Lewis
2. Describe three of Lewis' works which are different in materials and techniques. (You can choose from painting, drawing, sculpture, film and installation). Use descriptive language: imagine you are describing it to someone over the phone and they have never seen the work before.
3. Are there any colours, shapes or patterns which recur in this exhibition more than others?
4. Look at Lewis' sculptures and installations: What materials does he use? Discuss the size, shape and colours used.
5. Do the patterns and text used by Lewis remind you of any symbols or writing from a specific culture? Describe which ones and where you may have seen these patterns before.

## **The Frames: Years 9-12**

### **Structural Frame**

6. Explain how Lewis uses various disciplines (painting, drawing, film, performance, installation, language, text) to create a visual language (composition, elements/ principles, signs/ symbols) to convey meaning.
7. Describe how Lewis creates rhythm and balance in his works through his connection to the structural frame.

### **Subjective Frame**

8. Describe how Lewis' works make you feel.
9. Choose a work and explain how Lewis has used it to convey his feelings or beliefs.

### **Cultural Frame**

10. Evaluate Lewis' contribution through his art to breaking down cultural boundaries. Consider the titles of specific works, transcription drawings of Aboriginal bark paintings or those from French theatre.

### **Postmodern Frame**

11. Explain how Lewis' works challenge past traditions, conventions and methods of display. Evaluate these aspects of his practice with reference to two works.
12. Consider the role of text in postmodern/ contemporary art. Explore Lewis' use of text as sign; his use of text as layers of meaning, and as a reference to mass media.
13. Explain how Lewis' performance art and interactive art challenges traditional notions of art.
14. What advantages does Lewis' performance and interactive art have to communicate the meaning of his works?

### **Conceptual Framework: Years 11 & 12**

15. Explain the distinctive relationship of Lewis (artist) to society (world).

16. Describe how Lewis has developed his own personal system of language, with reference to two of his works, in order to convey meaning and engage his audience. (artist, artwork, audience)
17. Give the students the statement: "This is just scribbles, my kid could do it!" After viewing the exhibition and reading curatorial/ exhibition rationale and suggested references, students are to address this statement in essay format. They must argue against the statement, by analysing the practice of two artists and two examples of their works. Students must evaluate the success of each work, based on its visual language/ aesthetic qualities, as being more than just 'scribbles'. This would be good exam practice for stage 6 students.

## Practice: Years 10 to 12

18. Describe the importance of language in Lewis' artmaking practice
19. Analyse the role of video, performance and photography within Lewis' practice.
20. What role does collaboration play in Lewis' practice?

## Artmaking Activities

### Stage 4 -5

- *Star Shelters* drawing – On a blank page, students draw a set of dots, then use a ruler to join the dots and add stripes in different directions. For junior students, a pattern of six dots could already be placed on the page with the first lines drawn. Students only have to finish the lines drawn.
- From their *Star shelter* drawings students can create their own paper prism. Cut the page along four of the adjoining shapes, fold along the lines and paste together.
- *Transcription Mirror* drawings – lay tracing paper over existing artworks and trace the negative space between the marks. Build up the paint using black, white and two colours, creating patterns and shapes. Display the paintings and discuss how they are linked to original artwork. How does the texture and surface look?
- *Transcription Music* drawings – draw while listening to music. Allow yourself to relax and embrace technique used by the Surrealists called 'automatism'; where your hand is

allowed to wander across the page without thinking. Similar to blind continuous line drawings. Focus on the rhythm, harmony, and dynamics of the music. Complete this activity a few times while listening to different styles of music and compare your drawings. Which do you prefer?

- Dada drawings/ collage – Create a collaged artwork based on two of your favorite poems or stories. Print them big and cut out each line at a time. Lay one strip of text horizontally and another from the other poem vertically so they overlap. Repeat this with all the strips, weaving them together to create a new story or poem. Can you still read it? Does it look like another language?
- Painting in my own language – Students create their own language (make an alphabet) where they allocate a symbol, dash or mark for each letter. Students write their name on cardboard using their new language. Use as a bookmark.

#### Stage 5-6

- Create an abstract postcard – Students find a postcard of an existing artwork. Deconstruct and reconstruct the postcard to create a new artwork. The students can simply draw over the original design, work into it or completely re-arrange it. This can also be done electronically by scanning the original postcard and using editing software such as Photoshop, they can edit the artwork to create their new work. Students are to write an artist's statement as accompanying text on the back of the postcard. Students then send the postcard (via email or post) to another class member to bring back to school and present at class.
- As a cross-curricular task, senior students could create a painting based on the first text which they study for their HSC English course – Belonging. Students could read the text and using symbolism, lines or colour, convey the narrative from the text. The teacher can draw connections between the theme of Belonging in the novel and in the works in the exhibition.

## **Glossary**

Automatism - A technique used by the Surrealists, where your hand is allowed to wander across the page without thinking

Appropriation – A postmodern technique of borrowing images or elements from other sources (artworks, poetry, songs) and using them in a new way which changes their meaning. Generally altered using new technologies, changes the subtext and adds humour, parody or irony.

Anthropologist – Someone who studies mankind, especially of its societies and customs

Artist books – Works of art in the form of a book; generally published in small editions, though sometimes they are produced as one-of-a-kind objects

Association - to work in a co-operative partnership

Banality – Having characteristics of being trivial, obvious, predictable, feeble or commonplace

Choreographer – Someone who designs the arrangement, steps or movements in a dance

Collaboration – To work jointly in the creation of an artistic work. This can be amongst two individuals or a whole group, where participants contribute and share ideas and practices.

Commissions – The production of a work of art for a group (e.g. government) or individual who have paid for the work. Generally both parties agree on the specific features of the work before creation.

Composers – A person who composes music

Conceptual – The idea behind something. Conceptual art refers to art in which the ideas and thoughts present in a work are stronger than the material practice

Disciplines – A term to describe the methods, mediums or techniques of artists (e.g. paintings, drawings, installations, performance, theatre and audio-video works). Multi-disciplinary is when an artist works across many disciplines, sometimes within the one work

Elements of art - Texture, colour, line, shape, tone

Elusiveness – Difficult to define or describe; vague.

Euphemism – A mild or somewhat vague expression which is substituted for one which is thought to be too harsh

Geometric – Based on man-made forms or shapes; angular, straight lines, precise, rigid

Genre – A style or theme in art (e.g. still life, portraiture or landscape)

Graphite - another term for lead pencil

Illuminating - to use light to make brighter or to make a decorative picture from someone else's writings

Installation – An artwork created for a particular site or gallery, generally created within the environment and may consist of any number of artworks, films or objects

Interactive - where the audience and work can act on each other. In this case, visitors can play, climb on and hide in the prisms

Linguistic – A term to describe the use of languages or the study of languages

Missionary - someone who works in a community, generally conducting religious work

Nomad – A member of a clan who roam from place to place looking for shelter, food or work. Clans do not live in one fixed place, but rather move around within their language areas depending on the seasons. Many traditional aboriginal groups lived a nomadic lifestyle

Organic – Based on natural forms or shapes; curved, flowing, irregular

Performance art – A form of art practice that involves the human body in live action. This may involve movement and/or speech

Principles of design –Balance, contrast, rhythm, harmony and dominance

Prisms - a geometric solid shape

Process – steps followed to complete an activity or task

Repatriation – The process of restoring or returning a person to their native land

Residencies – Programs where artists receive government or private funding and/or housing to spend time studying or creating art. Generally internationally or away from the artist's usual location of living and creating

Survey - an exhibition of artworks selected from a period of the artist's practice, in this case the years 1982 to 2012

Transcription – A term devised by the artist Ruark Lewis to describe his drawing practice. His methods include the process of tracing the negative shapes of an existing work; recording the sounds of music or poetry through repeated lines and patterns

Translate – To express the sense of a word, generally from one language into another; also to interpret the significance of something

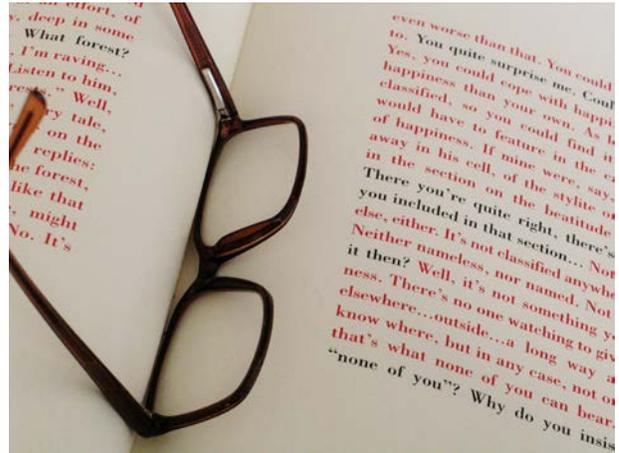
## References

Lewis, R (2012) *Unpublished interview with Ruark Lewis* at the artist's studio (28/07/2012), for Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre. Interview conducted by Kate Milner and Marisa van Eijk.

Paull, J (2012) *Transcription for the Perfect House: The Art of Ruark Lewis*, catalogue essay for Ruark Lewis Survey: 1982-2012 at Hazelhurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre (20/09/2012 – 11/11/2012)

Selenitsch, A (2007) Words, words, words: Mike Brown, Rose Nolan, Ruark Lewis, *Artlink*, Vol. 27, no. 1, pp. 50-54

## Appendix: Images



Left to right:

Ruark Lewis *False Narrative* 2006, artist book, performance and digital animation. Courtesy of Die Schachtel Gallery, Milan, photo Ryan Leech.

Ruark Lewis *Just For Nothing* 1997, artist book, installation (with Nathalie Saurraute) offset lithography, pen and ink on paper, audio. Courtesy of Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.



Ruark Lewis *Yellow Water Drawing*, transcription of *Rain Phases* from T.G.H. Strehlow, *Journal 10a*, 1935, 1997, oil on canvas.



Ruark Lewis *Homeland Illuminations* 2007 installation (with Jonathan Jones) stencil, acrylic, fluorescent lights, electric cable, audio design (Rik Rue). Courtesy The Performance Space @ Carriageworks, Sydney, photo Hiedrun Lohr.



Ruark Lewis *Star Shelters* 2012 installation in gardens, ply with gouache, mobiles.