

Brett Whiteley: On the Water

Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre

16th November 2012 – 27th January 2013

Education Kit: K to 6

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About this Exhibition

Brett Whiteley was one of the most celebrated Australian artists of the twentieth century. This major exhibition *Brett Whiteley: On the Water* features over 60 works including drawings, paintings, prints, photographs and sculptures. A highlight being his last unfinished work, *Unfinished Beach Polyptych*: six imposing panels leaving the Brett Whiteley Studio for the first time in 17 years.

Whiteley was an artist who had a deep fascination with nature. Two subjects were the mainstay of his work – the landscape and the nude – and with stunning virtuosity and outstanding draughtsmanship he rendered them with a sensuousness and unique lyrical quality.

Brett Whiteley: On the Water explores this special relationship Whiteley had with these subjects, the deep blue of Sydney Harbour, the glistening beaches and the pleasurable lifestyle of the bathers languidly basking in the sun. The images tell of sensory pleasures derived from total immersion in the surf, to the meditative mood of simply staring out to sea and gazing at the harbour from his beloved home in Lavender Bay.

Brett Whiteley: On the water is presented by Hazelhurst Regional Gallery in association with the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Brett Whiteley Studio and from private and public collections. This exhibition is especially relevant given Hazelhurst Regional Gallery's location in Sydney's south, surrounded by beaches, bays and rivers nestled in the Royal National Park.

Brett Whiteley (b 1939 – d 1992)

...art was as much an essential of life as life was an essential of art. It was a creed rich in opportunity for an artist devoted to the exploitation of the human figure, just as he was devoted to the exploitation of the human opportunity in life. Edmund Capon, director Art Gallery of New South Wales in Pearce 1995, p 7

A charismatic character and inspired talent, Brett Whiteley had a prodigious career spanning four decades creating some of the most iconic images in Australian art. His extraordinary and intense practice included drawing, printmaking and sculpture, but his deepest passion was painting.

Brett Whiteley was born in 1939 in Sydney, NSW and grew up in the harbour side suburb of Longueville where, along with visits to Boat Harbour, he spent his childhood exploring coves and bays, observing birds and fish, gathering rocks, shells and eggs, establishing an admiration of nature in all its guises. By the age of seven he had won his first art competition and during his prolific career would go on to win many more including in 1978 when he became the only Australian artist ever to claim the Archibald, Wynne and Sulman art prizes in the one year.

He attended Julian Ashton Art School in Sydney during the late 1950s and whilst working at the advertising agency Lintas won his first major prize, the Italian Government Travelling Art Scholarship awarded by Sir Russell Drysdale when Whiteley was just 20 years old. This enabled him to travel to Europe and satisfy his voracious appetite for art, experiencing the great masterpieces in museums and churches. He was one of the most luminous young talents and his early paintings startled critics and fellow artists, with his work acquired by the Tate Gallery when he was only 21.

During the 1960s Whiteley predominately lived in London, though he returned to Australia frequently and for many months at a time. While in London he had many local and international exhibitions held in: Berlin, Switzerland, Africa, Canada, Belgium, Italy, and France and participated in *documenta iii* in Germany. He also participated in several group exhibitions in Australia. It was on his return home in the summer of 1965-66 staying at Whale Beach that Whiteley found the perfect setting for his fascination with the nude and nature on the clean, dazzling beaches of Australia, with its local birds and wildlife. He discovered the more expressive possibilities of the female nude and the spectacle of Australians enjoying the sand and surf. The bikini clad beauties provided Whiteley with endless muses.

After a brief period in New York, Whiteley returned again to Australia in 1969, and found a new embrace of nature from his harbour-side home in Lavender Bay which he, along with wife Wendy, purchased in 1974. Some of his most famous works were created from his home including *Big Orange (sunset)* 1974 and *Lavender Bay in the Rain* 1978. In 1976 he won his first Archibald Prize for portraiture and the Sulman Prize for landscape; in 1977 and again in 1984 he won the Wynne Prize for genre; in 1978 winning the Trifecta of the Archibald, Wynne and Sulman prizes. During the

1970s he still traveled extensively, but to new destinations such as Mauritius and Kenya.

In 1985 Whiteley purchased an old t-shirt factory in Surry Hills to use as his new studio. He used this space as a studio and, after his divorce from Wendy, as a home until his death. The Brett Whiteley Studio, managed by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, is open to the public as a permanent gallery and presents a fascinating insight into Whiteley's life and work, in context with his contemporaries. In 1999, Brett Whiteley's mother, Beryl, established the Brett Whiteley Travelling Art Scholarship in her son's honour for young Australian painters aged 20-30 years – offering them the same opportunities as those which were given to her son.

In 1991, Whiteley was awarded the Order of Australia (General Division). Brett Whiteley died in 1992 at the age of 53, ending one of the most prodigious careers in the history of Australian Art.

Process

Whiteley created works in many mediums, often combining many of them in one mixed media work. He created drawings, prints, paintings, sculptures and photographs, which he considered were drawings of the eye. Characteristics of Whiteley's style include the exaggerated use of line and colour, the distortion of shape and the elongation of form. Aspects of Pop Art, Expressionism, Abstraction and Japanese calligraphy are referenced in his works. The influence and inspiration of many artists, such as Lloyd Rees, Vincent van Gogh, Francis Bacon and Henri Matisse, can also be seen in the works in this exhibition.

PRINTMAKING

Whiteley was inspired by Japanese calligraphic ink drawings and woodblock prints. Many of his drawings and prints display a flattening of the picture plane, an unusual perspective of a very high horizon line, if any; all of which are present in Japanese art. The highly gestural and emotive qualities available through ink allowed for his personal expression to become present in the crash of a wave, the flap of a bird's wing, or a bather drying themselves with a towel. Although able to stand alone as highly resolved and refined works, many of Whiteley's charcoal, pencil and ink drawings and etchings were created as studies for paintings and sculptures. Examine *Designs for shark sculpture* 1965 (drawing) and *Shark (female)* 1965 (sculpture). This practice is not uncommon for artists to develop and explore ideas in their work.

PAINTING

The paintings... begin from the... highest point of affection – points of optical ecstasy, where romanticism and optimism overshadow any form of menace or foreboding... Almost all the works have been rendered in a lyrical and personal style where colour... has been used in saturation.

Brett Whiteley, 1979.

Brett Whiteley produced many paintings reflecting his love and respect for the ocean. He was seduced by the ultramarine of the water, its curves, rhythms and tranquility. Its large liquid presence was the perfect vehicle for his gift of composing works with large, empty spaces, as seen in *Wategos Beach* 1989, *The pink heron* 1969 and *Coincidence* 1973. His paintings from the early 1970s, after the purchase of his Lavender Bay home, evoke a strong feeling of claim; that he had come home. *Big orange (sunset)* 1974 and *Lavender Bay in the Rain* 1978 are examples of his paintings with totally flat picture planes; without horizons, but with little pockets of nature distributed masterfully. These works, like many of his ink drawings and prints, reference his love of the orient and influence by Japanese materials and techniques.

SCULPTURE

Sculpture is totemic, phallic, something that grows from the earth – or from the gallery floor. Brancusi was the first kick-off, and a lot of African carving... it's reaching up to the sky... Maybe I should devote two years to doing nothing else but courting and causing sculpture. I love it. I love moving around something and I love sculpture next to or in front of paintings – a kind of dialogue can bounce between a sculpture and a painting. Brett Whiteley in the documentary *Difficult Pleasure*, 1989.

Although primarily known as a painter, Brett Whiteley displayed an assured confidence as a sculptor. Sculpture played a significant counterpoint to his drawings and paintings; it was where he seriously explored formal possibilities. Whiteley experimented in a number of media: mangrove wood, bronze, fiberglass and found objects. His figurative forms convey the sensuality he saw in nature. Whiteley would seek out trees and branches that expressed his desire for the curve and then release his vision from nature by carving away to better see the form captured within.

MIXED MEDIA

He was mad about eggs, loved their shape and symbolism... I was almost crucified for stealing eggs from a bird's nest for Brett. His huge appreciation of nature was evident from childhood – he rejoiced in the optical look of the world and delighted in making art out of it. Fran Hopkirk, Brett Whiteley's sister, 1993.

Brett Whiteley's early mixed media work, *The beach II* 1966, reflects his early combination of materials and techniques with found objects. The inclusion of found objects became crucial for Whiteley to communicate his rich experience of the environment with the audience. Whiteley's later urban and rural landscapes, such as

Thirroul 1988, *Far North Queensland – Port Douglas* 1992, combine brush and ink collage, oil paint and found objects and the techniques acquired throughout his life to emulate the vision and experiences of memory and emotion.

K-6: Thematic approaches to *Brett Whiteley: on the water*

Across the curriculum – KLA`S

Theme: The beach and the coastline

Visual art: focus on your local area, draw en plein air to create a bird's eye view drawing. Simplify this aerial perspective to shapes and colours.

Look at other artists and their interpretations on this subject: Monet, Matisse, Max Dupain, Turner, Margaret Preston, Hokusai and the great wave, other cultural responses - Asian and Aboriginal art.

English: Compose a story about one of these places. Describe the landscape surrounding you and use all your senses.

Music: Listen to composers inspired by the sea and water.

Classical music – Handel's water music, Debussy (*Le Mer*) and Ravel (*Jeux D` Eau*). Include popular music, the Beach Boys. Create music inspired by water, creeks and the beach.

Science and Technology: Look at maps of coast lines, weather and climate, topography, tides, boating, surfing, water safety, weathering and erosion, the water cycle. Research: life along the coast (beach, tidal, sea); Animals and birds, their life cycles.

HSIE: How was the coast used by people in the past? How is it today? Find similarities and differences.

Use the local library and council to find further information about these times and changes. Consider work, social and recreational relationships of people with the coast.

Maths: Grid the seasons, the months and list temperatures on a calendar.

Home Economics: Cook various seafood dishes from different cuisines. Taste the sea. What was your favourite seafood dish? Consider seasonal produce. Visit a seafood market or shop.

Create a tropical fruit salad inspired by the work *Far North Queensland – Port Douglas*, 1992. Research fruits grown in the tropics.

EDUCATION K to 6

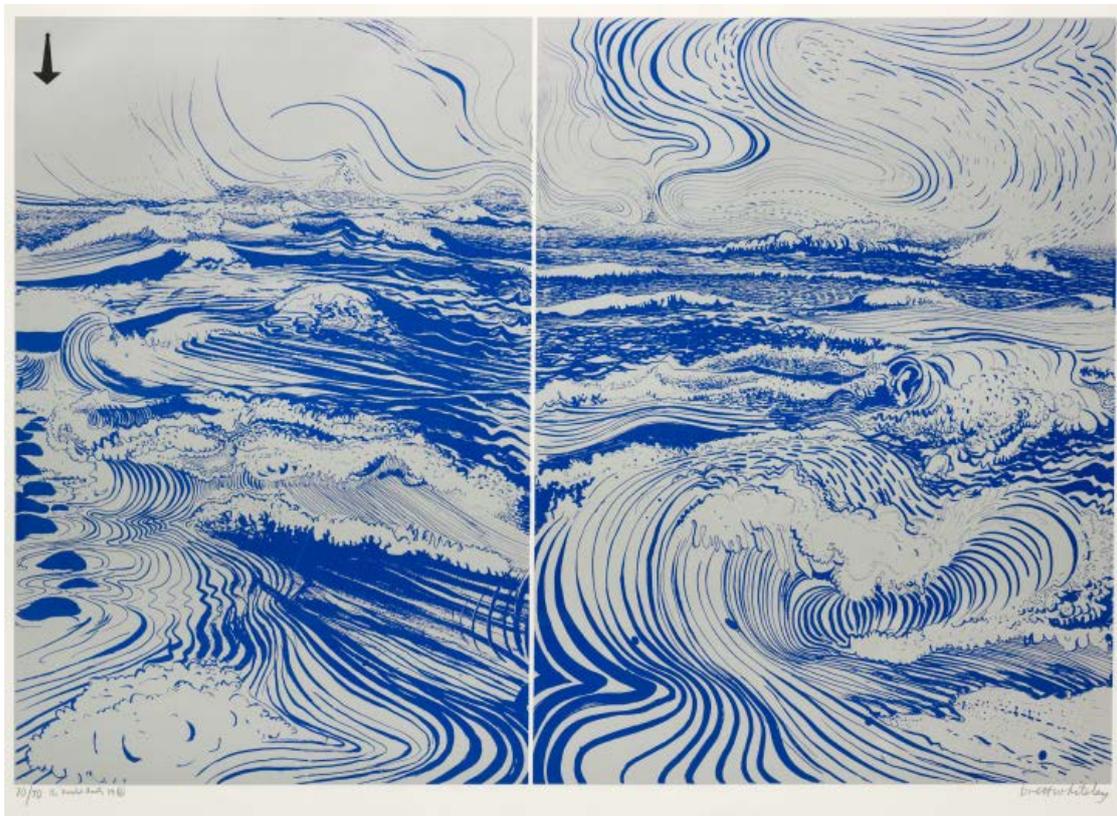
Pre-visit Activities

1. Discuss some gallery rules with reasons why. State the positive behavior you want at the gallery.
2. Pre-visit familiarisation with the artworks to be viewed: reproduce images from education package and display in the classroom. This will aid the student's connection to the work once they enter the exhibition.
3. Discuss some of the art terms found under the Glossary of Terms.

Post-visit Activities

1. These should involve the display and critique of works created. Students should be encouraged to use positive artistic terminology when discussing each others' work and using art language/ terms to describe it.
2. Suggested activities accompany each of the following selected works.

Brett Whiteley, *The Divided Unity* 1974 screenprint on white wove paper, 66.2 x 93.6cm image. Brett Whiteley estate. © Wendy Whiteley



The vibrations of movement, currents (air and water) and sound are illustrated as various lines.

Subject: PLACES AND SPACES

Appreciating Activities:

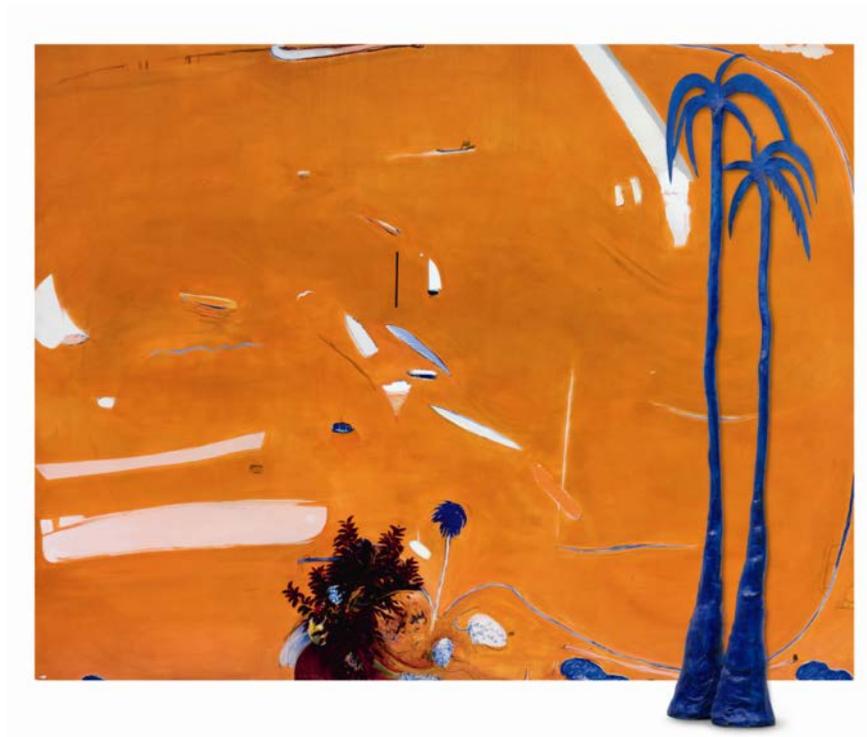
Can you find any straight lines? What do the lines suggest? Compare this work with another in the exhibition which you think looks clam, and examine the techniques Whiteley used to display movement and stillness.

Describe how this work makes you feel. What is it that makes you feel this way? Repeated lines, patterns?

Making Activities:

Using ink on paper, draw continuous lines representing ripples in water or crashing waves. Remember not to take your brush/ bamboo pen off the paper.

Brett Whiteley, *Big orange (sunset)* 1974 oil and collage on wood, 244 x 305cm; and (*Free standing ultramarine*) *Palm trees* 1974. Art Gallery of New South Wales, gifts of Patrick White 1975. © Wendy Whiteley



Many of Whiteley's works are monochromatic (one-colour) artworks.

Subject: PLACES AND SPACES

Appreciating Activities:

We know that this is a painting of water. Why has Whiteley painted the water orange? Why are the palms blue? What time of day would this be?

Making Activities:

Consider the colours you feel represent your local area. (Many trees equal lots of greens, lots of water equals many different blues.) Use these colours as the basis for a painting of your favourite place. Use drawing, painting or collage and specific colours to represent a landscape in different seasons or at different times of the day.

Brett Whiteley *Shark (female)* 1965 fiberglass, plaster, maplewood, chrome, copper, shark teeth, 157 x 64 x 45cm. Brett Whiteley Estate. © Wendy Whiteley



Whiteley would search mangrove swamps looking for natural forms that he could release when making his sculptures.

Subject: LIVING CREATURES

Appreciating Activities:

What materials did he use? Discuss the size, shape and colours used. Whiteley used mixed media collage in many of his works.

Making Activities:

Draw a living creature found on the coastline. Draw this again, reduced to geometric shapes.

Collect man-made shapes (including small boxes, lids), natural shapes and materials such as wire, paint, cardboard. Arrange these to create a sculpture of your creature.

Brett Whiteley *Thirroul* 1988, pencil, gouache, pen, brush & black ink, collage, ink wash, synthetic polymer paint on five sheets of cardboard, 63.4 x 253cm. Brett Whiteley Estate. © Wendy Whiteley.



Brett Whiteley liked to travel to Thirroul, a small beach side town on the coast near Wollongong. This work uses many different materials to create a panorama of his journey to the beach.

Subject: PLACES AND SPACES

Appreciating Activities:

What do you see? What are the different parts in this work? Are there any living creatures? Does it tell a story?

Consider direction. How is line used to show movement?

How has the artist used collage? What information does this add to the work?

Making Activities:

Recall a journey to a favourite place. How did you get there? What did you do?

Use two sheets of paper to tell this story in a drawing. Use mixed media to complete this work. Add collage for detail and texture.

Glossary

Abstraction: art that does not portray a physical likeness or representation of the real or imagined world. Instead, abstract art tends to use colour and form in a non-representational or subjective way.

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.

Autobiography: a person's own life story written by that person.

Background: area in a painting that appears in the distance.

Body of work: series of artworks produced by an artist over a period of time.

Collage: a work made from the assemblage of different materials, such as photographic images, news cuttings and fabric into one whole form. Collage became an accepted artistic technique in the early 20th century with the production of various printed publications.

Calligraphy: is the art of handwriting. In China and Japan the practice of calligraphy with brush and ink is one of the three perfections (calligraphy, painting and poetry).

Composition: the plan and arrangement of the elements in a work.

Curator: preserves and cares for artistic, historic or cultural items in a collection, gallery or museum.

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

Distortion: to pull or twist out of shape.

Elements of art: formal qualities which make the basis of many works of art: Texture, colour, line, shape, tone

Exaggeration: to give an impression that makes something seem larger or greater than it really is; enlarge or alter beyond normal proportions

Expressionism: a style of art where more importance is placed on expressing an emotional experience rather than realistic images

Figurative: a drawing or painting of something actual rather than an abstract rendering.

Foreground: area in a painting that seems closest to the viewer.

Genre: a style or theme in art (eg still life, portraiture or landscape)

Gesture: significant movement of the body, calculated or spontaneous.

Illustrative: to make clear with pictures.

Landscape: a piece of land-based scenery. Landscape art is the artistic depiction of landscape scenery.

Homage: is a reference to someone within an artistic work. In this sense, homage is the artist's recognition of this person's influence on them.

Metamorphosis: a transformation from one state of being to another.

Mixed media: the use of a variety of media in an artwork.

Perspective: the accurate representation of distance or depth as viewed by the human eye.

Picture plane: in a figurative artwork, most of the elements appear to recede from this plane

Pop Art: art based on modern popular culture and the mass media

Portrait: a painting, photograph or other artistic representation of a person.

Portfolio: a selection of an artist's work to highlight their skill and strengths.

Pose: position in which the body is held in place without moving

Organic: based on natural forms or shapes; curved, flowing, irregular

Reductive: to take back to the basics.

Retrospective: the specific selection of artworks for an exhibition of an artist's life.

Repetition: the action of doing something again.

Scholarship: financial support for education, often made by an institution on the basis of academic or artistic merit.

Self-portrait: the representation of yourself in a work of art.

Still life: a work of art depicting inanimate subject matter, both natural (eg, flowers, fruit) or made (cups, vases) objects.

Studio: the workroom of an artist, such as a painter, sculptor or photographer.

Style: a characteristic way or technique of producing things, especially a work of art.

Traditions: the principles held and generally followed by any branch of art or literature acquired from and handed down by experience and practice.

References

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Acknowledgements

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