



This PowerPoint slideshow is suitable for secondary teachers to use in the classroom or during a self-guided tour of the exhibition in the Gallery of Modern Art (GoMA). It has been designed for use with data projectors, school interactive whiteboards, or as a colour print-out.

The slideshow explores the ways contemporary Australian artists are actively engaged in creating works which aim to incite change in society. Some artists celebrate the passion of optimism, others irreverence, and some, the humour of contemporary Australian culture.

(Tony Ellwood, 'Director's foreword', in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, p.16.)

The notes sections provide background reading information for teachers, and include questions (in italics) which can be read aloud when discussing each of the art works.

Additional information about 'Contemporary Australia: Optimism' can be found in the exhibition catalogue, including essays on each of the artists featured in the exhibition.

The curriculum information included in this resource has been developed from the:

- Assessment and Reporting Framework for The Arts, focusing on learning and assessment around the Essential Learnings and Standards for Visual Art and Media (© The State of Queensland, Queensland Studies Authority, 2007).



## 'Optimism' artists

### CURRICULUM INFORMATION

(NB: Relevant artists for specific curriculum areas are noted in brackets.)

This slideshow investigates the following ideas and issues:

- optimism as an inherent idea in artists' drive to create
- artistic expression as an agent for promoting positive change
- the way artists address contemporary social and political concerns in Australia (e.g. through humour).

### ESSENTIAL LEARNINGS BY THE END OF YEAR 9

#### Visual Art

Visual Art involves manipulating visual arts elements, concepts, processes and forms (both 2-D and 3-D) to express ideas, considering specific audiences and specific purposes, through images and objects.

Students will investigate the way:

- ideas are researched to inform visual responses that consider social and cultural issues (e.g. using ideas about the current political climate in Australia to inform positive responses about reconciliation such as those of Vernon Ah Kee and Tony Albert)
- design and visual documentation are used to develop images and objects from visual, verbal and tactile stimuli (e.g. James Dodd and the way he borrows language to create texts which reflect personal thoughts, feelings and ideas).

#### English

##### Cultural: Making meanings in contexts

Students will:

- consider the relevance of the issues presented in relation to contemporary political, cultural and social contexts.

##### Operational: Operating language systems

Students will:

- discuss the ways in which visual and multi-modal texts are used today in print media (e.g. political cartoons), television and film.

Critical: Evaluating and reconstructing meanings in texts

Students will:

- encounter ways in which an artist's work can effect our understanding of texts and images (e.g. signs, celebrities, pop culture)
- consider the effects of the use of text and language in other media such as advertising (e.g. Scott Redford)
- analyse statements which challenge authority and dominance (e.g. Vernon Ah Kee)
- explore the symbols and statements of advertising signs and the way these function as 'selling tools' (e.g. Scott Redford)
- identify Australian colloquialisms (e.g. Aleks Danko).

Making

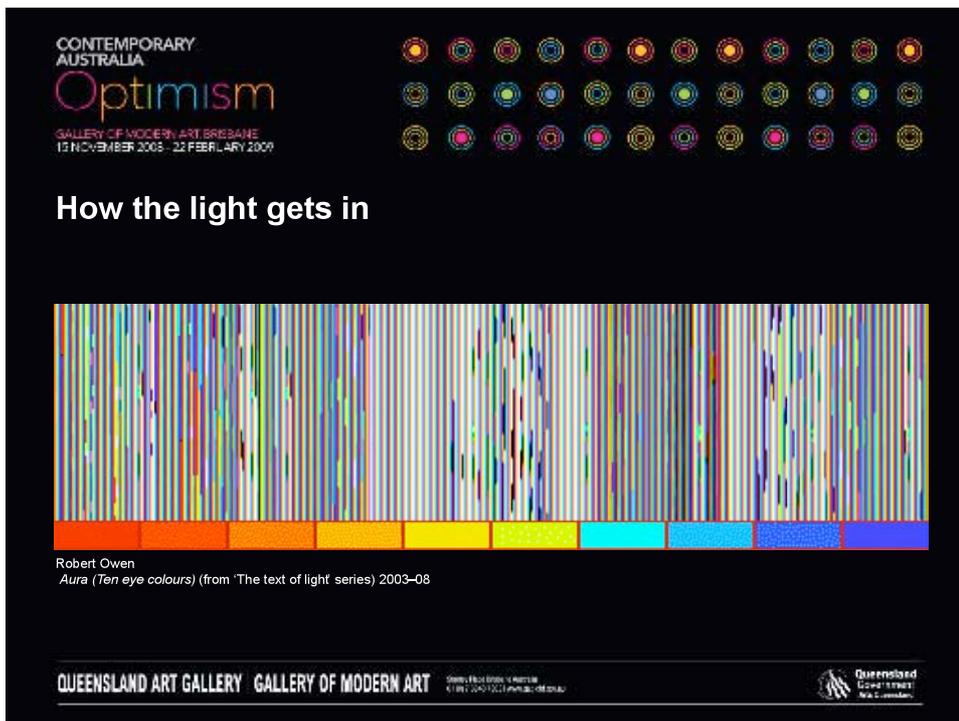
Students will:

- research by observing, collecting, compiling and recording visual, verbal and sensory information and ideas from a variety of sources and contexts
- use skills, techniques and processes to explore and manipulate a diversity of materials, techniques, technologies and processes.

Appraising

Students will:

- demonstrate knowledge and understanding of art works in contexts that relate to concepts, focuses, contexts and media
- analyse, interpret, synthesise and evaluate information to discern meanings
- critically appraise, evaluate and justify the meanings of concepts that can be communicated through visual objects, imagery and expression
- analyse and reflect on the meanings and values of visual art from personal, social, cultural and historical contexts
- synthesise information to provide an understanding of the roles of artists and critics and their function within a range of sociocultural contexts.



## Robert Owen

Here Robert Owen plots his feelings and sensations into a graphic system of colours, each band representing approximately 24 hours in his life. As Owen reports in an interview in 2004, he introduces chance and intuition to make selections, invoking entropy and its relation to order, disorder and chaos:

Wonder is the ground and generator of it all: the beginnings of philosophy, science and the investigations following this trail. What I like to do is to materialise ideas and feelings.

(Angela Goddard, 'Robert Owen: How the light gets in', in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, pp.175-8.)

## Questions for discussion

- Robert Owen often relies on intuition when making his work so that the outcome is an unknown factor in the making process. *Do you think artists such as Owen have a certain fearlessness which allows them to work through states of uncertainty?*
- Curiosity plays a large part in any kind of experiment whether it is scientific or artistic. Robert Owen explains in an interview that 'Art does not tell you about what you already know'. *Do you think art has the power to reveal new ideas or ways of looking at the world?*

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## Memory and hope



(Click on the above space to activate the movie)

Kathy Temin  
*My monument: White forest* 2008

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 111 BRISBANE STREET BRISBANE QLD 4000  
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### Kathy Temin

Kathy Temin likes to use cheap materials that are tactile and soft (e.g. as fake fur, lamé, cord and felt). Each of these is deeply intertwined with identity and memory — with how we construct our place in the world from our own experiences, and what we consume.

Temin's *My monument: White forest* 2008 was prompted by the artist's recent journey with her family to Holocaust sites in Europe. We find our way through a maze of trees, recapitulating many previous journeys in a ritual pilgrimage. The four benches at the corners of Temin's walled garden offer a moment for contemplation, for remembering, and for gathering strength for the continuing journey.

Her work conjures a place that is simultaneously present and absent, real and imagined. We make our world with what we have, although our capacity for hope is limitless. The crucial role in modelling the future necessarily aligns artists with the project of optimism, even when, paradoxically, they are mourning the past.

(Russell Storer, 'Kathy Temin: Bringing it all back home', in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, pp.220–3.)

### Questions for discussion

- *What types of materials can you see? Do the materials contribute to the meaning of the work?*
- *What impression does it leave you with? Does it appeal to your senses? If so, in what ways?*
- *How could the act of making a monument as a tribute to Holocaust survivors be considered a shared strategy for survival?*
- *Can you think of any other tragic events that have led to positive change in the world?*
- *Can you name any other contemporary Australian artists who reference painful stories, experiences or memories to promote an optimistic future or message?*

### Questions about video clip

- *What does optimism mean for Kathy Temin?*

- *What personal experiences have led her to develop the work My monument: White forest 2008?*
- *What does she mean by oppositional ideas?*
- *What types of materials does Temin like to use? Why?*

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## Drawing as a form of optimism



(Click on the above space to activate the movie)

**Warning:** Please be advised that this art work contains adult content or mature themes.

Arlene TextaQueen working on *They took it very seriously (Brides of Frank)* at Mount Coot-tha, Brisbane, 2008  
 Photograph: Ray Fulton

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### Arlene TextaQueen

Using a variety of markers (including Fine Liners, Letraset Pantones, Poscas, Crayolas and Textas), Arlene TextaQueen collaborates with female models to select accessories and environments that reflect ideas of self-image and interpersonal relationships.

For her recent outdoor drawings, TextaQueen embarked on campervan trips with individual models, spending a concentrated time developing both the individual portraits and the friendship between artist and model. Drawing *en plein air*, TextaQueen then returns to her Melbourne studio where she experiments with colour palettes and begins the final process of colouring in. The ongoing 'Naked Landscape' series that emerged from these expeditions situates ideas of performance, memory and identity within the context of Australian culture and history, and considers more broadly questions of contemporary urban identity, myth and nature.

(Jose Da Silva, 'Arlene TextaQueen: Undressed up', in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, pp.225–7.)

### Questions for discussion

- *What does drawing en plein air mean?*
- *How did TextaQueen get her name?*
- *What is it about drawing that TextaQueen enjoys?*
- *Do TextaQueen's illustrations resemble images from colouring-in books in any way? What's similar or common?*
- *In what ways does TextaQueen consider her work optimistic?*



### Vernon Ah Kee

Vernon Ah Kee is an Aboriginal wordsmith. Taking statements from books, songs, vernacular, quotes and everyday life, he has built up an armoury of slogans which confront and encourage dialogue about contemporary Aboriginal experience.

Ah Kee is a fan of the comic–political cartoon genre. The parallels between his own works and these quasi-representational characters speaking in witticisms are strong. The allure of introducing a character may be that almost anything, save perhaps some religious commentary, can be made acceptable or even funny if accompanied by a cartoon image. In *Who let the dogs out 2008*, Ah Kee has found a tactic to broach taboo topics in Australia, such as questioning nationhood and nationalism and commenting on race politics. The work critiques the history of Palm Island off the coast of north Queensland near Townsville, particularly the Palm Island Mission where Aborigines were sent to from 1918 as punishment. Several members of the artist’s family were uprooted and sent to Palm Island for challenging the status quo and displaying signs of having ‘a troublesome character’. Ah Kee regards Palm Island as a metaphor for ‘the end of living and beginning of survival’.

The optimism in this and Ah Kee’s other works is neither overt nor necessarily universal. The power of these works comes from an act of Aboriginal empowerment. For Aboriginal people, at least, these statements that challenge authority and dominance are heartening. Although they engage in a centuries-old struggle, the fact that this struggle remains — undefeated — is cause enough for momentary celebration.

(Bruce McLean, ‘Vernon Ah Kee: Keeping them in line’, in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, pp.38–41.)

### Questions for discussion

- Vernon Ah Kee’s work highlights the ongoing strength, defiance and struggle of Aboriginal people. *How might the very making of this work be seen as an act of optimism?*
- Investigate the history of Palm Island, which is located between the coast of Queensland and the Great Barrier Reef. Now have a second look at *Who let the dogs out*. *Can you identify the connections?*

- *Does the black and red text have a new meaning in light of the historical context to which it refers?*
- *Think about some of the heroes in Australian culture. Which of their characteristics are admired? What does this say about our values?*
- *Why is it important to keep in mind that 'one set of heroes is not necessarily the ideal set for another group of people'?*

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## Film, music and popular culture

(Click on the above space to activate the movie)



Darren Sylvester  
*I was the last in the Carpenters' garden* (stills) 2008

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### Darren Sylvester

*I was the last in the Carpenters' garden* 2008 reconstructs the Japanese-style garden built by musicians Karen and Richard Carpenter — during the pinnacle of their success as the pop duo the Carpenters in the 1970s — at their home in California. Sylvester's garden is obviously fake: the lighting mimics the passing of a whole day and at one point the artist himself walks through the garden, a forlorn and nostalgic figure, as if lost in memories.

Sylvester employs a tightly constructed assortment of cues and visual strategies. Crucially, his situations are always familiar; his protagonists look like they could come from TV soap operas or reality television. The constructed nature of these images leaves an aftertaste — the poses impossibly sleek, the expressions incongruous — as if they were drawn from a catalogue of stock photography.

Titles are as important to Sylvester's works as images; indeed, they dictate their reading. Sylvester is also a musician, a one-man band composing, playing and mixing his own music. Like the Carpenters, love and longing figure prominently in the lyrics of his rock/pop songs.

(Angela Goddard, 'Darren Sylvester: Close to you', in *Contemporary Australia: Optimism* [exhibition catalogue], Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, pp.212–5.)

### Questions for discussion

- *What is your first reaction to this work? What words come into your head?*
- *What does the title of this work allude to? What is the artist trying to say?*



## Classroom activity suggestions

### BY THE END OF YEAR 9

#### Knowledge and understanding

- How do each of the artists included in this slideshow respond to the theme of 'optimism'?
- Ask students to research and list some typical Australian colloquialisms.

#### Creating

- Discuss the superhero of Arlene TextaQueen. *What superhero identity would you adopt to fight the cause of optimism?* Design and make a costume which matches the values you prescribe to.

#### Presenting

- Invite students to photograph graffiti street art and bring to the classroom to share and discuss. *What types of words or imagery are depicted?* Compare to the graffiti on James Dodd's bus shelter.

#### Responding

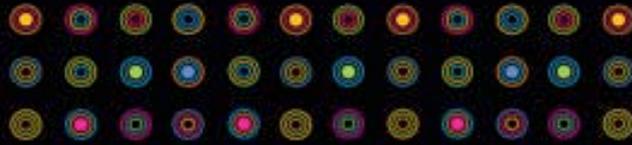
- Explore the representation of identity through some contemporary approaches to portraiture, and compare to the work of Arlene TextaQueen.
- See if you can find out more about the music Darren Sylvester composes. Listen to songs by the Carpenters and see if any similarities exist between the two.
- Write a personal journal entry on why the word 'Sorry' expressed by the Prime Minister was a historical moment for Australia. *What impact do you think this will have on the future of reconciliation in Australia? How have authors and artists responded to this word?*

#### Reflecting

- Think about tragic events as a means of promoting the need for optimism (e.g. in the way that Kathy Temin does).
- Debate the following: *Can optimism exist without pessimism?*



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Stable Pass Brisbane Australia  
 61 75 390 1300 www.qag.qld.gov.au

