

# EDUCATION RESOURCE

## *Hope Dies Last: Art at the End of Optimism*

Curated by Mark Feary

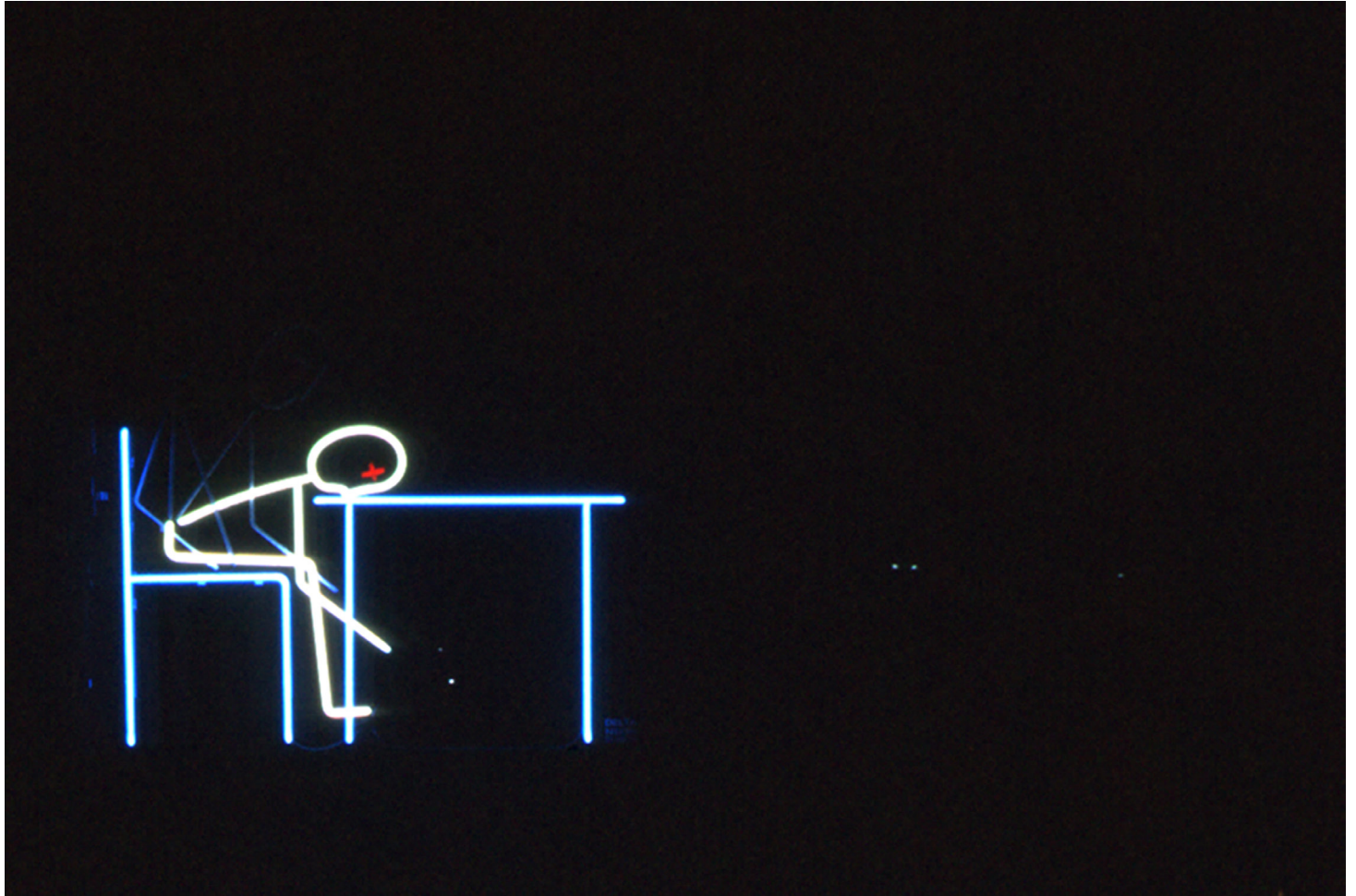


Image Credit: Sanja Pahoki, *Bang Head, Repeatedly* (2007), Neon, motor. Collection of Michael Jan and Peter Lovell, Melbourne

Gertrude Contemporary || Saturday 5 October - Saturday 9 November 2019

Artists: Vernon Ah Kee, Tony Garifalakis, Eric Jong, *Escape from Woomera*, Andrew Liversidge, Todd McMillan, Tracey Moffatt, Nell, Sanja Pahoki, Alex Seton, Grant Stevens and Myuran Sukumaran.

Margaret Lawrence Gallery || Friday 18 October - Saturday 16 November 2019

Artists: Chicks on Speed, Mutlu Çerkez, Jake and Dinos Chapman, Tony Garifalakis, Nell, Walid Raad, Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook and Myuran Sukumaran.

Presented in partnership with Melbourne International Arts Festival and Margaret Lawrence Gallery, Victorian

*Hope Dies Last: Art at the End of Optimism* is a curated exhibition of Australian and international contemporary art presented across two sites, Gertrude Contemporary and the Margaret Lawrence Gallery at the Victorian College of the Arts. The project focuses on how artists consider the depletion of optimism, how they might envisage the end of days, and how they make sense of these tumultuous times. Exploring themes of mortality, fatalism, extinction, pain (both emotional and physical), failure and downfall, the works largely focus on the specific moment when hope evaporates for the final time. Explored with compassion, humour, sadness and resignation, *Hope Dies Last* confronts our individual and collective anxieties around death, reminding us of the certainty of this fate, yet recognising this conclusionary moment as one we will experience alone. *Hope Dies Last* is one of the most depressing events of the year, an exhibition that will riddle us with sadness, and likely leave us more pessimistic than we have ever been before.

On the eve of his execution by Indonesian authorities following his decade-long detention within the infamous Kerobokan Prison for charges of drug trafficking, **Myuran Sukumaran** completed his final painting on the prison island of Nusa Kambangan, a representation of the Indonesian Flag. With the delineation of the red and white within the normally geometrically formal flag, appearing to be that of dripping blood, the work is a powerful coming to terms of the fate that had been sentenced to him in 2006. Powerfully, the work is signed on its reverse by his fellow death row inmates.

**Todd McMillan** presents his photographic work *swim 5*, from the series *Ague* (2009). These works emanate from a durational performative work attempted by the artist to swim across the English Channel. With little physical preparation undertaken in advance, and in spite of all optimism to achieve this physicality demanding feat, the artist's attempt to cross the Channel was perhaps predictably one of failure. In this photographic work from the performance, this realisation of failure is rendered explicit, with the artist's hand rising above the submerged, and potentially descending body of the artist.

**Alex Seton's** iconic marble-carved work *Life Vest (emergency)* (2014) is presented in dialogue with McMillan's work to create a connection between the now politically potent depiction of the life vest, and all of its connotations of dangerous modes of global migration emanating out of zones of conflict and poverty, and the representation of the (potentially) dying figure within McMillan's photographic work. Carved out of white marble, *Life Vest* stands as a symbol of safety, yet one that has a weight which renders it incapable of saving lives.



Image Credit: Andrew Liversidge, *An animal evolves into the shape that is the negative of its mortality*, 2017, Hydrocal White, 99 x 59.5 x 3cm. Courtesy of the artist and The Commercial, Sydney

*Doomed* (2007) is a video collage assembling representations of doom and destruction as depicted within Hollywood cinema by **Tracey Moffatt** working in collaboration with Gary Hillberg. Utilising cut and paste editing techniques, the work creates an unrelenting assault of Armageddon-like footage, taking various forms of flooding, explosions, earthquakes or any other major event likely to cause total destruction. With all other forms of precursor narrative removed, *Doomed* positions itself in the exact moment when disaster presents itself. Drawing on footage from the history of cinema, the work distils an infatuation with cataclysmic events, and how popular film has given visualisation to the end of the world.

Offering a moment of levity, **Nell** offers a pairing of a sculptural work and painting. In the sculptural installation *The ghost who travels will never die* (2018), featuring a glass-blown ghost figure sitting atop a grouping of aged travel cases, as if to suggest that in the moment of passing, we leave behind the baggage of this world. As a spiritual follower of Zen Buddhism, Nell introduces a sense of death as being but a stage of passing into the next stage of existence, rather than an end in itself. This acceptance of the cycle of life is rendered with both humour and fatality in her painted work *Don't You See?* (2018), within which a smiley face is accompanied by the text 'We're all going to die...'

**Grant Stevens'** video work, *The Sun* (2016), presents a digital animation of our solar system's sun while a narrator discusses facts about our closest star. Initially appearing as a scientific documentary, the narrator discusses the composition of the sun and its evolution over the past 10 billion years or so from an enormous cloud of gas and dust to its present form. In discussing the tumultuous nature of the sun's constant state of change, the narrator goes on to elaborate on the what will occur when the sun eventually combusts, leading to the destruction of earth and all life on it. At this point the narrator glibly concludes, 'the laws and logic of physics may remain, but all else will be meaningless. There will be nothing left to salvage in the pure darkness'.

**Eric Jong** contributes the work *Death and Paperwork* (2017) draws upon his work with Bereavement Assistance, a funeral parlour providing destitute funeral services. Working in this role while studying at art school, Jong gathered masses of paperwork produced by the organisation as a means to reveal some of the bureaucracy that impacts us not just in life, but also in death. With all personal information redacted, the 65 framed works offer an unemotional audit of meagre possessions and the absence of next of kin in many of these instances. In this act of presenting these documents as a form of memorial, the artist draws attention to the state mechanisms for the administration and organisation of death, with a clinical distance from what it is to consider the memory and legacy of those who have passed.

Presented in the front window of Gertrude, looking out to passing pedestrians and traffic is a neon work by **Sanja Pahoki** with the resignatory title *Bang Head, Repeatedly* (2007). Rendered as a simple stick figure sitting at a desk, animated to relentlessly

bang its head, the work speaks to the monotony of work life and a frustration with its incessantness. The work takes the form of commercial signage, and indeed, its positioning in the window connects the work to the promotion of a retail business. Yet in this instance, the work is not advertising food or other wares, but rather, sends a proclamation of exasperation.

Appearing as a series of headstones mounted to the wall, **Andrew Liversidge's** death tablets are arranged with a similar formalism to the configuration of cemetery. Each of the ten works is marked by a simple geometric shape and the word DEATH. With this simple word, the tablets direct us to confront our inevitable fate. While all of the works are unique, collectively they initially appear as uniform, omitting any form of personalisation or tribute generally depicted upon cemetery headstones. Through this, the tablets become less a memorialisation for those who have already passed away, instead, registering as a brutal reminder of our own end.

**Tony Garifalakis'** felt banner work *Fucking Optimism* (2007) is drawn from a wider series of works produced by the artist which remake infamous suicide notes, titled Mourning Glory. For this work, a black banner features an inverted red crucifix with gothic text stating 'So much for my Fucking Optimism'. With suicide notes being a form of explanation or apology for a life rendered too painful to continue, as a final message left for those known to the deceased, they take on the gravity of the final thought before one's tragic death. In this work, the message is less one of rationale for the depletion of the will to live, than it is a statement of regret for ever being positive.

Titled *The Doctrine of the Bigot* (2019), **Vernon Ah Kee's** new work continues the artist's engagement in language's capacity to confront. In this work, the artist powerfully defines the respective duties of two opposing forces. It is a binary addressed in the singular, but intended as an expansion of us and them, a recalibration of divides and a rebalancing of power. Addressing the trauma of colonialism in this country, the artist defines what he views to be the doctrine of the oppressor, a motto for continuing bigotry, and reflects this back at us to make us confront our own relation to structural inequity.

In 2003, a group of artists, activists, gamers and hackers banded together to produce *Escape from Woomera*, a point and click adventure video game based upon one of the most secretive and contested sites in the country at that time, the Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre. Foreshadowing the establishment of offshore processing facilities for refugees on Nauru and Manus Island, Woomera became a symbol of the cruel treatment of asylum seekers. In what would later become a source of political contention, the collective received government funding through the Australia Council for the Arts, with politicians taking umbrage at providing funding to a work highly critical of immigration policies. In the unfinished game, players assume the character of Mustafa, an Iranian asylum seeker imprisoned within the facility. With his bid for asylum denied and fearing death at the hands of government forces in Iran, Mustafa decides that he must embark on a daring journey to escape.

# VISUAL ARTS 7 - 10

## **Respond and Interpret**

Analyse how ideas and viewpoints are expressed in artworks and how they are viewed by audiences.

Analyse and interpret artworks to explore the different forms of expression, intentions and viewpoints of artists and how they are viewed by audiences.

## **Present and Perform**

Create, present, analyse and evaluate displays of artwork considering how ideas can be conveyed to an audience.

## **Explore and Express**

Explore visual arts practices as inspiration to explore and develop themes, concepts or ideas in artworks.

Explore the visual arts practices and styles as inspiration to develop a personal style, explore, express ideas, concepts and themes in art works.

---

## **Questions**

**1.** Choose two artworks from the exhibition *Hope Dies Last: Art at the End of Optimism* and consider the intention of each artist.

- What do you think each artist is attempting to communicate through their artwork?
- Do the artworks evoke a particular emotional response from you? How and why?
- Can you observe connections (visual, conceptual etc.) between your chosen artists?

**2.** The concluding line in the *Hope Dies Last* exhibition statement is written tongue-in-cheek. Why do you think curator has used humour here?

'*Hope Dies Last* will be one of the most depressing events of the year, an exhibition that will riddle us with sadness, and likely leave us more pessimistic than we have ever been before.'

# VISUAL ARTS 7 - 10

**3.** What does the gallery need to consider when preparing and presenting a group exhibition such as *Hope Dies Last* over two sites?

- Consider the role of artists, curators, gallery coordinators, and museum technicians.
- When considering this question think too about audience response.

## Activity

This activity is a creative writing activity that asks you to consider the power of art to ignite imagination, evoke emotion and tell stories. For this activity you will need pencils, paper and a clip board.

**1.** Investigate and discuss the exhibition *Hope Dies Last*.

- Consider the individual artworks, and the exhibition as a whole.
- Consider the ways the artworks have been presented in the space.
- Consider the art elements: colour, texture, form, light etc.
- Consider the art principles: movement, rhythm, repetition, scale etc.

**2.** Use the following questions to assist with your visual investigations.

- What makes you curious about what you see?
- Through a process of slow looking, what can you uncover?
- What do you think is happening?
- What do you see that makes you say this?
- Are the artworks in the exhibition communicating with one another?
- Does your experience of *Hope Dies Last* illicit any particular feelings or emotional responses from you?
- Do the artworks tell both individual and collective stories? What are these?

**3.** Use your observations and discussions as prompts to create an imaginative text that references your experience of either a single artwork or the exhibition as a whole.

# VCE STUDIO ARTS + ARTS

## **VCE Studio Art**

### Unit 3 Area of Study 3: Artists and Studio Practices

In this area of study students focus on professional studio practices in relation to particular art forms. Students investigate the ways in which artists have interpreted subject matter, influences, historical and cultural contexts, and communicated ideas and meaning in their artworks.

## **VCE Art**

### Unit 2 Area of Study 1: Contemporary Artworks and Culture

In this area of study students focus on the ways in which art reflects and communicates the values, beliefs and traditions of the societies for and in which it was created. Particular emphasis is placed on the influence of contemporary materials, techniques, ideas and approaches to making and presenting artworks.

---

## **Question**

Consider the following questions in relation to the work of artists, Tracey Moffatt, Alex Seton and Myuran Sukumaran.

- What is the role of artist and art work in society?
- What role do artworks play in determining human value?
- Can artists and artworks draw attention to ethical issues and spur collective and individual action?



# VCE STUDIO ARTS + ARTS

## **Suggestion** (In the gallery)

This activity asks you to observe artworks in the exhibition *Hope Dies Last* and express what you see in clear, precise and creative language. It also asks you to consider the role of audience and listener in visual and spoken exchanges. For this activity you will need a clip board, paper and coloured pencils.

1. Break into pairs before you enter Gallery 1
2. Decide who will speak (Student A) and who will listen and draw (Student B).
3. Student A must choose an artwork to describe in Gallery 1. Make sure student B cannot see the artwork being described.
4. Sitting back-to-back, Student A describes the artwork as Student B listens and draws what is being described.
5. Swap roles and repeat in Foyer or Gallery 2.
6. With your partner share your drawings and discuss what you have discovered through this process.
7. Share your interpretations with another group. Are they similar or different?

## **Activity** (in the classroom)

This activity asks you to consider the ways artists research, develop and express ideas and themes through their work. For this activity you will need pencils, coloured markers and butchers paper.

1. With a partner or in small groups use the previous questions and your experience of the exhibition *Hope Dies Last* to brainstorm a range of contemporary issues and themes you encountered on your visit e.g. death, destruction, violence, the global refugee crisis etc.
2. As you discuss these themes/issues map them out on a large piece of paper (include information on the theme/issue, artwork and a visual reference)
3. In your groups decide on one of these issues and propose a way to represent this issue/theme in an artwork.

As you complete this activity also consider the role of art in helping us to

- understand complex and conflicting issues and ideas
- challenge conventional ways of thinking
- develop and present alternative views

# GLOSSARY OF KEY TERMS

**Optimism:** noun

1. Disposition to hope for the best; tendency to look on the bright side of things.
2. The belief that good ultimately predominates over evil in the world.

**Mortality:** noun

The condition of being mortal or subject to death; mortal character, nature, or existence.

**Fatalism:** noun

1. The doctrine that all events are subject to fate or inevitable predetermination.
2. The acceptance of all things and events as inevitable; submission to fate.

**Extinction:** noun

1. The act of extinguishing.
2. The fact of being extinguished; condition of being extinct.
3. Biology a becoming extinct; a coming to an end or dying out

**Compassion:** noun

A feeling of sorrow or pity for the sufferings or misfortunes of another

**Empathy:** noun

The mental entering into the feeling or spirit of a person or thing; appreciative perception or understanding.

**Resignation:** noun

The state of being submissive; submission; unresisting acquiescence.

**Pessimism:** noun

1. Disposition to take the gloomiest possible view.
2. The belief that the evil and pain in the world are not compensated for by the good and happiness.

**Hope:** noun

1. Expectation of something desired; desire accompanied by expectation.
2. A particular instance of such expectation or desire: a hope of success.
3. Confidence in a future event; ground for expecting something: there is no hope of his recovery.
4. A person or thing that expectations are centred in: the hope of the family.

# RESOURCES

**Gertrude Contemporary:** <http://www.gertrude.org.au/exhibitions/>

**Margeret Lawrence Gallery:** <https://finearts-music.unimelb.edu.au/events/margaret-lawrence-gallery/hope-dies-last>

**Melbourne International Arts Festival:** <https://www.festival.melbourne/2019/events/hope-dies-last/#.XaZY2uczY8Y>