

**GERTRUDE  
CONTEMPORARY**

# CONTEMPORARY ART ON THE ROAD WITH JAMES NGUYEN

TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM



## ABOUT THE ARTIST



James Nguyen's work explores the cinematic through short form documentaries, open-ended installations, and performance art. He completed his undergraduate studies with honours at The National Art School with Maryanne Coutts, David Serisier, and Stephen Little. His MFA at Sydney College of Arts (the University of Sydney) was supervised by John Di Stefano, and his PhD supervised by Veronica Tello and Jennifer Biddle at UNSW Art & Design. His work is based on the interrogation of dialogue, relationships, and mutual care that are important when collaborating and working with family, friends, and teachers.

Shaped by the stories and ideas of people around him, James continues to make art to think through the politics of self-representation, collective risk, and doubt. He was the recipient of the Clitheroe Foundation Scholarship, the Maddocks Art Prize, and the Anne & Gordon Samstag International Visual Arts Scholarship which allowed him to complete a Fellowship at Uniondocs, Centre for Documentary Arts in NYC. He has also received funding from the Australian Council for the Arts, ArtsNSW, Creative Victoria and NAVA.

Solo exhibitions and commissions include the Australian War Memorial; Murray Art Museum Albury; PACT Centre for Emerging and Experimental Art; Westspace; and 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art. He has also exhibited and presented work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney for *The National*, 2019; the Immigration Museum of Victoria; ACE Open; Urban Theatre Projects; Guangzhou Academy of Fine Arts; the Studio for Conceptual Art (Post-Conceptual Art Practices) Kunsthalle Vienna; A.Farm, Ho Chi Minh City; *Sydney Festival*; *Underbelly Arts Festival*; *Nextwave*; and *BLEED Festival* (Campbelltown Arts Centre & Arts House Melbourne). James has also co-curated exhibitions with Grace Partridge for *Antidote*, and with Digby Webster at PACT.

### **What ideas/concepts do you base your artworks on?**

My collaborations stem from the conversations I draw from working with my peers and family. We regularly discuss issues such as cinema, gambling, and the settler-colonial violence of Australia.

### **Why are your ideas / concepts / discussion important to a contemporary audience or in a contemporary context?**

I have found that the most important thing about making art are the relationships, friendships, and inevitable connections that you build with the people around you. Oftentimes, art helps me to articulate things in a way that my mouth and brain just aren't capable of doing. Art makes it ok for me to share even my most clumsy, humiliating, and half-baked ideas without the crippling fear of failure.

### **How do you begin your studio practice? Where do you find inspiration?**

Conversations, talking to people who get excited about my ideas, and also with those who are honest enough to completely trash them, significantly takes my work into directions that are much more interesting than what my brain can conjure up by itself. That, and Instagram.

### **How has your practice evolved over time?**

I have made a lot of friends and enemies' overtime. It has definitely become more collaborative and open to failure. As I have come to realise, you end up making heaps of bad art all of the time. However, these things don't matter, so long as you keep making, keep questioning, and keep engaged with the people who are still willing be around you.

### **Who are your biggest influences?**

Politicians, hypocritical people in power, online trolls, and bullies. But on the flip side, the unexpected creativity of my extended family, and the countless artists around me who keep producing transcendent work with very little resources.

### **Artist Website / Gallery Website**

<http://jamesnguyen.com.au/pix/>  
<https://chobotrouble.com/>  
<https://dongsonarchive.com>

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## WORKSHOP SUMMERY

In Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arranging, blossoms, branches, leaves, and stems find new life as materials for artmaking. This artform aims to bring out the inner qualities of flowers and other materials to express emotion.

Throughout Asia and the world, the beauty of flowers and everyday materials from the environment offers us humble moments to contemplate beauty and spend time to create personal offerings to important deities, loved ones, and strangers in our lives.

### INSTRUCTIONS

Enter the garden, walk around your neighbourhood, or simply look around where you are. Note the smells, colours, light, temperature, feel, texture, and form of the different materials around you.

Look at THREE things that most appeal to you, can you touch it, handle it. Can you bear to cut or remove it from where it is? Appreciate what you can't touch and take with you.

Look at THREE other things, things that might not be as beautiful or pretty, but that you can pick up, cut, and take away with you.

Take a moment to clear and create a small quiet space for yourself. It can be just a section of a counter top, or school desk. Lay everything out on a cloth, sheet, paper, just not directly on the floor.

Sit back and look at the materials before you. Beyond physical beauty or ugliness, beyond appearance, what do you feel?

Pick up each item, take time to think about how it physically feels, and the feeling that it gives to you. Does it give you a sense of happiness, disappointment, absurdity, joy, appreciation, or even melancholy and sadness?

### THE VESSEL

Put these items down, find a vessel, support, or binding material, think of this as your body. Think about filling your body like the vessel with the strongest feeling or emotion you had when holding and touching the materials you had collected and are about to use.

Think about how you can heighten this emotion as you start to cut, arrange, squeeze, tear, pierce, break, and bend these materials into a floral composition. Think about how each action affects the whole. How each decision you make affects the shape, smells, colour, proportion, composition, length of the things you put into this vessel.

Like your own body, not everything the vessel now holds and supports has to be in harmony. More often than not, to live is to struggle, nothing is perfect. The arrangement doesn't even have to look that good. What matters is that it now holds the human emotions, thoughts, and feelings from your body into this little arrangement.

### THE OFFERING

Take time to pick up and look at the arrangement. It is a part of you, and you are part of it. You have given it the human beauty of your feelings, your time, your thoughtfulness, and your care.

Think about someone, something, a deity, a loved one, a pet, a child, a mother, friend, cousin, lover, enemy, stranger. Give thanks for being able to have this moment just to think about them. Offer up your arrangement, as if you were offering up a part of yourself.

Take a deep breath feel what you need to feel, touch the arrangement and vessel one more time. Simply leave the arrangement as your offering.

### DOCUMENT YOUR IKEBANA (optional)

Using a camera, smartphone or tablet document your Ikebana. You could share this digitally, or print it out to display. Think about the different forms of display and how, if at all, they change the meaning or the impression of your creation.

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## EQUIPMENT LIST

- Gloves
  - Secateurs or scissors
  - Cloth, paper, tea towel or similar for covering your work bench
  - Tying implements, such as staples, pins, scissors, cable ties, elastic bands, glue gun etc. Whatever random things you have cut and piece things together. Or, florist foam.
  - A garden, a neighbourhood where you can get flowers, fruits, food scraps, paper, trash, random inert materials at hand.
  - A vessel or some kind, this can include a pencil tin, a drink bottle, lunchbox, elastics, bulldog clips, even sticky tape.
  - A camera, smartphone or tablet to document your finished Ikebana (optional)
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## GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

- Through critical and creative re-thinking of the typical mediums of visual art - students will learn how to experiment with different found objects and materials.
- Students will practice and develop processes for creating with out specific visual outcomes in mind.
- Students will develop skills in creative and conceptual thinking towards art making and material.
- Students are encouraged to play with found materials, and texture, shape and form.

### **The activity aims to:**

- Expand students' knowledge about materials, techniques and cultural practices.
  - Encourage imagination and enjoyment through engagement with art making.
  - Teach students to express themselves through abstract and expressive forms, materials and compositions.
  - Expand students' critical and creative thinking, using visual languages, cultural practices and art history.
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## LEARNING ACTIVITY

### **Discussion**

- Discuss the practice of Ikebana and the ways this practice is used by individuals to express who they are, and their emotions. Who are early artists that formed this practice? (Teachers think: Hirozumi Sumiyoshi, Ikenobo Senjo - you can find drawings of their Ikebana online).
- How does James use Ikebana in his practice? Look at the types of objects and materials James has used in his VietIkebana (Instagram). What found objects can you identify? How has James given new life to objects and materials that otherwise might be discarded?
- Talk about the use of craft in the arts. Look at the history and crossover of craft and the visual arts. Who are some contemporary artists that use craft methods in their practice? Can you find any contemporary Ikebana artists?
- Look at James' Instagram @VietIkebana - Why do you think he has chosen Instagram as the platform to share his creations? Do you think this is an effective way to share them? Why? Why not? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this display technique? Do they help to communicate or alter the meaning of the work?

## Concept Development

Students should begin by examining James' @VietIkebana Instagram page, his use of materials and the history of Ikebana practice. They should discuss significant artists that were in this movement or contemporary artists that are inspired by it. Students should take a walk around the school or the neighbourhood and collect foliage, fruits, leaves, rubbish and alike. They should contemplate the colours, smells, textures of the items they collected and say why they were drawn to that item. They will also need a vessel. This could be almost anything they have around the classroom - a pencil tin, a drink bottle, lunch box, rubber band, bulldog clip, or even sticky tape.

## Production

Take a moment to clear and create a small quiet space for yourself. It can be a section of a counter top, or school desk. Lay the items you have collected out on a cloth, sheet, paper, just not directly on the floor or desk. Take a moment to contemplate the materials before you. Beyond physical beauty or ugliness, beyond appearance, what do these objects make you feel? Pick them up and contemplate their physical attributes - are they hard, soft, rough or smooth? Smell them, what do you smell like to you? How do these qualities make you feel? Do you insight any particular memories for you? Do they remind you of anyone in your life?

Follow James' instructions in the workshop summery above and begin to assemble your Ikebana - you can be as playful or as contemplative as you wish.

Optional - once you are happy with your Ikebana you can choose to document your creation with a camera, smartphone or tablet. You can contemplate how you could display your creation or an image of it. How do different display methods create or alter the interpretation or affect the arrangement has?



## LINKS TO CURRICULUM

### PRIMARY & SECONDARY

#### **Present & Perform**

View the location and exhibition of James' work. Students then plan an exhibition of their own artworks. They should consider the audience of the artworks and how they wish the audience to interpret the artwork. They should decide how they can/should display their work and explain why they have chosen that particular display method.

#### **Respond & Interpret**

Level F – 6

Respond to James' artwork by identifying and describing technique and ideas. Consider how he makes his work. Students could also discuss Ikebana art and cultural history.

Level 7 – 10

Analyse and interpret James' artworks discussing ideas and viewpoints. Compare his work with works by other contemporary artists to identify characteristics and features of the works.

#### **Explore & Express**

Levels F – 6

Investigate the ways in which James explores ideas, techniques and materials in his artworks. How are these expressed?

Levels 7 – 10

Explore James' art practice. Through a discussion of his use of materials like plants, discuss how he expresses his ideas and develops a particular style within his work. Discuss his work in terms of the themes that he explores. From this discussion students should develop their own ideas through the use of inspiration, materials, techniques and processes to develop their own artworks.

#### **Visual Arts Practice**

Levels F – 6

Based on the artworks of James students should explore materials, techniques, processes and visual conventions. They describe the use of these in the production of their artworks.

Levels 7 – 10

Think about the intentions that James has when he commences making his work, discuss his artistic practice. Using the artworks of James as a starting point, explore materials, techniques, visual conventions and processes to develop an individual artistic intention.

### VICTORIAN CERTIFICATE OF EDUCATION (VCE)

Studio Arts

**Unit 1 Area of Study 3: Interpreting art ideas and use of materials and techniques:** The work of artists from different times and cultures is studied to gain a broader understanding of how artworks are conceived, produced and exhibited. Students discuss the way in which James has used materials and techniques, cultural and craft practices and interpreted ideas and sources of inspiration in producing his artworks.

**Unit 2 Area of Study 2: Exploration of Studio Practice and Development of Artworks:** Students focus on developing artworks through an individual studio process based on visual research and inquiry. Using this workshop as a catalyst for self experimentation and play with media, students develop their own aesthetic style.

**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 should investigate the ways in which artists have interpreted subject matter, influences, historical and cultural contexts, and communicated ideas and meaning in their artworks. Students should examine James's artist biography to understand the path of his professional development, places and people he has exhibited alongside or collaborated with.

**Unit 4 Area of Study 3: Art Industry Contexts:** You will visit a variety of art exhibitions and examine the different methods and roles undertaken in the preparation and presentation of art to the public. Examine one or two James' exhibition outcomes. Discuss the presentation methods he has used and what they communicate to the viewer.

## RELATED ARTISTS



### **Sidney McMahon** (b.1986)

Sidney McMahon (prev. Anna McMahon) is an interdisciplinary artist who works primarily across sculptural installation, video and performance. Through their practice, McMahon explores a personal queer narrative. McMahon often chooses to collaborate with other artists, and their installations explore such themes as the transformation of bodies by and with language (transitory periods) and identity. They often use materials like leather, chains, hooks, hoists, vinyl, flowers and other organic matter.



### **Katie West** (b. 1988)

Katie West is a Yindjibarndi Western Australia interdisciplinary artist who exhibits multi-sensory installation, often featuring native plants and dyed textiles. Her practice is often based around the process of naturally dying materials with plants materials she has gathered herself. Her objects and installations invoke calm, reflective responses in the audience, who are prompted to consider the ecologies we live and participate within.



### **Camille Henrot** (b. 1978)

Camille Henrot is a French born artist who lives and works in New York, USA. She primarily works with flowers and other plants to create installations, but also works with painting, drawing, sculpture and film. She creates Ikebana style sculptures. She is best known for her 2014 Venice Biennale work *Gross Fatigue*, 2013. Henrot confronts political and emotional issues, and looks at how ideology, globalization belief and new media interact together to create an environment of structural anxiety.



### **Jess Dare** (b.1982)

Jess Dare is a contemporary jeweller who primarily works in glass and metal. She completed a Bachelor of Visual Art specialising in Jewellery at the Adelaide Centre for the Arts, TAFE-SA in 2006, and has practiced Flame-working (a method of glass-making) for over 15 years. Dare is influenced by nature, botanical specimens and memory. She uses nature as a metaphor to investigate the fragility of memory.



### **John Wolseley** (b.1938)

John Wolseley is a painter, printmaker and installation artist born in England who relocated to Australia in 1976. Detailed studies of insects, botany, birdwatching and geology have underpinned his practice over the years. He explores the Australian landscape and its ecosystems by combining collage and mark-markings made 'in collaboration' with the natural environment.



### **Sarah Sze** (b. 1969)

Sarah Sze is an artist who primarily works in sculpture and installation art. Sze's work explores the role of technology and information in contemporary life. She uses every day objects in her installation, often that are of a very specific era or year, and blurs the line between an objects visual appearance and its practical use.



Contemporary Art on the Road is a unique professional development program that provides access to artists and art educators from some of Melbourne's leading art institutions: Gertrude Contemporary, Monash University Museum of Art and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. This resource was created to introduce teachers to hands-on, expertly designed strategies and resources for teaching contemporary art in their classroom.

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Contemporary Art on the Road is an initiative developed by Gertrude Contemporary and in partnership with Monash University Museum of Art, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.