

LOOKING CLOSELY AT *Space*

The construction and delineation of space has engaged artists throughout the twentieth century. Architects, artists and craft practitioners have influenced each other in the production of objects that present real or imagined space to the viewer. This sheet is designed to assist an investigation of space through the study of a two-dimensional work of art.

In ***Flowers and Oriental Carpet (Algeria)***, Kathleen O'Connor has used the still life genre to explore a fundamental issue of painting, the articulation of spatial relationships.

Ways of Seeing Space

Painters of the Renaissance sought ways of reproducing reality or 'real' space in their art. They believed that art was supposed to mimic the 'real' world and that the viewer should feel they were able to enter into the pictorial space.

These artists were attempting to show 3D space on a 2D surface achieved, in part, through the application of the geometric rules of perspective.

In the twentieth century, however, many painters rejected the notion that their art had to appear as if it were an extension of reality. They suggested that such attempts were futile as the flat picture plane of a painting clearly denied both space and depth.

Many modern artists revelled in the flatness of the picture plane, creating inconsistent or ambiguous spatial relationships in their work. They also recognised that scrupulously following the rules of perspective was not the only way of indicating space, and developed other methodologies such as using colour, tonal and textural variations to represent volume and depth.



Kathleen O'Connor, *Flowers and Oriental Carpet (Algeria)* c. 1928-1929, detail

KATHLEEN O'CONNOR

Born in New Zealand in 1876, O'Connor moved to Western Australia with her family in 1891. She completed her early artistic training in Perth but travelled to Europe in 1906 to expand her horizons. She spent time in Paris before moving to Britain during the First World War where she became familiar with exponents of Post-Impressionism such as Roger Fry, Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant.

During the interwar years O'Connor lived in Paris and became part of the group of intellectuals and artists who congregated on the Left Bank. It was here that she completed the painting above, which reflects her bohemian lifestyle at the time and the stylistic influence of Post-Impressionism. The work forms part of a major series of still lifes completed by O'Connor in the 1920s. It can be viewed as an autobiographical statement with various objects in the piece referring to O'Connor's involvement in Parisian cultural life.

Articulating Space in *Flowers and Oriental Carpet (Algeria)*

This work illustrates a number of methods noted above. For example, the artist deliberately experiments with the flatness of the 2D surface by contrasting the linear rendering of the fabrics against the modelling of the pot and the foreshortening of the book and cigarettes.

Spatial Ambiguity

On the left-hand side of the table the tablecloth has been folded, causing a sense of spatial uncertainty. The viewer may find it difficult to work out the distance between the table and the wall-hanging behind.

The overall depth of the arrangement is also ambiguous in that the geometric patterning of the tablecloth and wall-hanging seem to converge, making the table appear to tilt towards the viewer.

In addition, the pot with flowers seems to perch precariously on the table. The wall-hanging becomes a barrier, preventing the viewer from movement through the painting.

The Illusion of Depth

The ambiguous spatial quality of the work does not represent a complete suppression of a sense of 3D space. O'Connor is really encouraging the viewer to explore and challenge the illusions she is creating. As an example, the space on the lower right hand side of the canvas displays a fairly realistic sense of depth by means of the angled placement of the catalogue. This catalogue also rests far more convincingly than the pot of flowers on the table.

Post-Impressionism and Space

O'Connor has not used traditional modelling with light and shade to indicate spatial relationships in the work. rather has followed a Post-Impressionistic approach which uses contrasts of strong and intense colour and tone to indicate depth.

Art changes the way we see the world

Produced by the Art Gallery of Western Australia with the aim of making art more accessible for visitors

LOOKING CLOSELY AT *Kathleen O'Connor*

The folding of the tablecloth causes a sense of spatial ambiguity and flatness. The avoidance of traditional rules of perspective cause the table to seemingly tilt towards the viewer.

When looking at other works in the Gallery note how artists have used perspective to manipulate or define space.

The patterning of the table and the wall-hanging seem to rush together with the tilt of the table creating an opportunity to fuse the various elements of colour and form within the overall design.

Large, flat blocks of colour are characteristic of Post-Impressionist technique. This is evidenced in the red of the wall-hanging which contrasts dramatically with the blue of the table and the light coloured flowers.

This is a catalogue of the 1928 exhibition, 'Salon D'Automne', which included work by O'Connor. Through its inclusion the artist is communicating something of her professional standing and achievement to the viewer.

Darker modelling at the sides of the pot are used to indicate the volume and weight of the item, whilst the mass of the flowers is shown through tonal and textural contrasts.

As you view other 2D works try to identify similar devices used to describe mass, volume and weight.

The pot holding the flowers does not seem to rest solidly on the table.

The inclusion of the packet of cigarettes suggests the relative freedom enjoyed by women during the inter-war years in Paris. Smoking, particularly by women, indicates the liberated, bohemian spirit of the time.

Space is more clearly articulated in this area of the work with a sense of depth being conveyed through the fall of the angular cloth. The catalogue also rests convincingly on the table top.

