

LOOKING CLOSELY AT

The body

There has been a continual preoccupation with representations of the human form, in both two and three dimensions throughout the ages. For example, the classical tradition of beauty and form, introduced by the Roman and Greek culture 2000 years ago has underpinned and influenced much of Western Art practice. Twentieth century artists, however, have been preoccupied with challenging these conventions, as well as looking at issues, such as physicality and spirituality.

Physicality and Spirituality

During the twentieth century experimentation with ways of depicting human bodies has increasingly engaged artists who have become far more scientific in their exploration of the human form.

Artists are no longer engaged in merely representing the body's outward appearance, but also they attempt to express something about the inner and spiritual qualities of the figure and the person.

Abstraction

Abstraction, originating in France at the beginning of the century, is one of the major art movements of the twentieth century. Artists, such as Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, were influenced by traditional African art. They developed a distinctive, fragmented style which applied the shapes found in geometry to figures, still lifes and landscapes.

This Cubist style drew upon the memory of, as well as what was actually seen. Remembered knowledge, as well as observation, of the subject contributed to the final product. In this way, artists felt they were thoroughly investigating the construction of their subjects. Further, by combining geometric shapes with expressive gesture and colour artists could communicate more completely the human subject to their viewers.

The viewer is being invited to take part in the investigation, acquiring knowledge of the body through the experience of the work of art. A good example of this is Annette Seeman's work *Body Cloth*. We can see how fabric, a traditional covering material, is fashioned in a way which expresses the body



Aadjje Bruce *No Comfort* (1995) mixed media, detail

BODY

Works in the Collection illustrate a range of differing approaches adopted by artists in response to the human form. The viewer will thus find objects used to adorn, decorate, and enhance the body, as well as functional objects which contribute to its comfort. There are also works which explore and give the viewer information about the body's relationship to the physical and the imagined world perhaps raising issues associated with the environment, interpersonal relationships and spirituality.

without actually showing its physical form. Seeman also implies shrouds, saris and ceremonial wraps.

Materials and Form

Artists have also become increasingly inventive in the ways that they give physical form to their art works. The materials used often having an additional layer of association, as evidenced in the work of Aadjje Bruce, who has used the female tradition of knitting to form sculptures representing issues related to women.

Confrontation

As in the example shown, the viewer is often challenged and confronted by representations of the body which do not conform to idealised or conventional representations. In fact, artists often use this discomfort as a device to provoke discussion and reaction.

Men and Women

Perhaps the most provocative issue for the viewer will be the representation of the body in relation to gender. In classical times, the male body set the standard for physical beauty. Today we are more understanding of the diverse cultural associations linked to the idea of the beautiful human form. In *Secretary* by Alan Jones, for instance, we see that attitudes to gender may also be learnt. What do you think the artist is saying about women in this particular piece?

The Nude: an Artistic Tradition

The nude, both male and female, has been central to art practice in many cultures. *Allegory: after Corbet* by John de Andrea is a commentary on this convention.

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 *Aadje Bruce*

Aadje Bruce lives and works in Perth. Her work, *No Comfort*, is made up of four individual cushions. Knitting and sewing, traditional skills associated with women, have been used to produce the work. In these knitted pieces the artist has selected a particular part of the female body, the breast, as a vehicle to give the viewer information about the woman as a whole.

The breast is an acknowledged symbol of comfort through its association with nurturing, and sensuality and is where, in times of stress, solace can be found becoming a haven of safety and reassurance. Why then does the artist entitle her work *No Comfort* ?

Does the colour of the piece help you to follow the narrative of the work?

Together with the title, is it possible to understand what it is that Aadje Bruce wants you to think about? Are your own pre-conceptions about women and their representation in art challenged or confronted?

The pieces are cushion shaped although they are clearly not domestic cushions. Perhaps reaffirming that they offer no comfort, merely being placed for decoration.



Aadje Bruce *No Comfort* (1995) mixed media

Each cushion tells the viewer something particular about a woman's body. For example, the first has no breast at all - scars are all that remain. In the second a breast is removed, and the third shows a very full breast and a breast that seems to have been sucked dry. What do you think the artist is suggesting in each piece and in the collective work?

The first element is round and plump, partly covered in fabric which could easily have been part of a party dress. What does this suggest in the context of the work as a whole?

Does the final piece indicate that the woman's role as nurturer and comforter is at an end? The last cushion would give very little comfort, either symbolically or physically. It is flatter and harder than the others with wrinkled and knobby elements. Has the woman's/cushion's usefulness run its course?

