

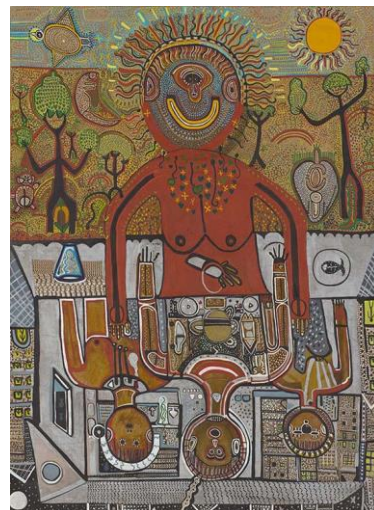
VISUAL ARTS: AUSTRALIAN CULTURE & IDENTITY

Discuss how artists have attempted to interpret their worlds and experiences. Make reference to 2 or more artists.

Many people today are often troubled with their sense of identity. This is becoming increasingly common in the multicultural country Australia, since many have more than one ethnic background, yet feel like they belong to neither one. In making sense of who they are and where they belong, partially Indigenous artists Trevor Nickolls and Gordon Bennett explore and attempt to interpret their worlds and experiences through their individual artworks.

Trevor Nickolls is an Australian whose interest lies in the nature of the conflict caused by humanity trapped in an isolated and industrialised, urban society. He often incorporates these themes into his artworks through juxtaposing the nature and the urbanisation within a single painting, often attributing a sense of happiness towards the natural aspect and a sense of confinement and isolation in the urban aspect. His traditional dot-painting style (learnt the technique only after his 20s) and concept stems from his interest in his own cultural identity; as his mother was an Aboriginal and his father was of English-Irish origin. He aims to explore, interpret and convey the dissonance which he feels living in a contemporary world through his paintings.

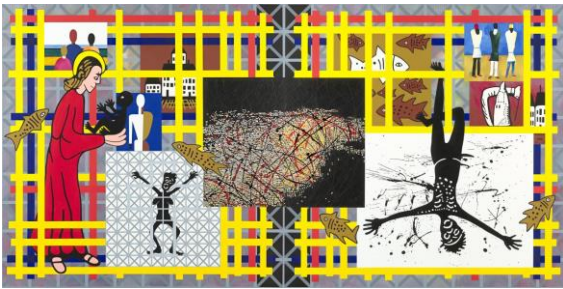
“From Dreamtime 2 Machinetime 1979” (on the right) is one of Nickolls’ most renowned artworks which succinctly characterise his style and concept. He describes this painting as a *“balancing act, like walking a tightrope between my dreams and my life when I’m awake – from Dreamtime to Machinetime”*. The painting is structured symmetrically - almost like a playing card, where the paintings in the bottom half is flipped upside-down - with the top half depicting the earthy outback and an Aboriginal figure with a broad smile on her face, while the bottom half depicting the cramped, concrete-based urban environment and three figures who seem to be emotionless with blank expressions. Nickolls represents the unhappiness and hostility in the urban environment also by the use of saturated, grey colours to the bottom half of the painting. The painting is also filled with connotative symbols; the bird (top left) which suggests freedom, the human-ised trees that appear dancing which adds to the sense of joy, while in the bottom half he paints headphones which suggest the selfish, isolative modern culture.



Similarly, *“Urban Scream 1994”* is another piece which Nickolls explores in order to make sense of his world. Referring to the famous painting *“The Scream (Edvard Munch)”*, an Aboriginal man stands naked in the middle of the painting, screaming with horror-struck eyes. The cityscape appears as though it is on fire; the buildings around him are distorted in shape and surrealistically have a similar expression to that of the man’s. One could not disagree that a silent scream pierces their ears as they look into the painting; in this way, Nickolls reinforces the idea of the land & the nature suffering from the tall buildings and paved streets. His restricted use of the Aboriginal colours red, yellow and black also represent the receding of the ancient culture as well as convey the devastation. Through juxtaposing the two cultures (which he is torn between) by means of expression, colour, and use of space, Nickolls has attempted to interpret his world, critique the Western world as well as make a social statement about ‘less is more’.

Gordon Bennett is another painter who endeavours to interpret the world through investigating and reconnecting to the way history is constructed after an event in his artworks. Bennett is also concerned with identity: *“to be free we must be able to question the ways our history defines us”*,

and this is reflected in his exploration of contrasting cultures and historical events within his paintings. His intellectual and insightful paintings offer a new perspective of history which engages and challenges the audiences to develop their opinions on the subject matter.



In a diptych “*Home Decor (preston+Stijl=citizen) panorama 1997*” (left), Bennett depicts the colonisation of Australia using strategies of symbolism and appropriation to contrast the harsh domination of the whites to the innocence and vulnerability of the Indigenous people. The intention of the painting is similar to Nickolls’ “*Urban Scream 1994*” in terms of the message that it conveys of the disregardance of the Indigenous population in today’s society. The

almost symmetrical structure of the painting allows a clear layout for the audience to compare and contrast between. A sense of confinement is achieved by the vivid primary coloured grids on the painting and the grey fencing of an Aboriginal mother screaming for her kid hints the sufferings caused by the Stolen Generations. The shooting of the black man on the left and the symbol of the Ku Klux Klan suggests the violence and the injustice that was inflicted amongst the peoples, and the incorporation of the sacred Christ satirises the ‘justification’ of the white’s actions. Through these symbols and appropriations, Bennett successfully questions and challenges the audience’s ways of perceiving the world, all the while searching what makes him and exploring his identity.

“*Notes to Basquiat (The coming of the light) 2001*” is another painting by Bennett that displays his eagerness in interpreting the world and its construction through history. Instead of appropriating images from other artists like he had done for “*Home Decor (preston+Stijl=citizen) panorama 1997*”, Bennett paints in a similar style to the referenced artist, Jean-Michel Basquiat. Basquiat is known for his ‘graffiti-style’ artworks with discordant colours, popular American symbolisms & street jargons that has personal meaning and comment on racial issues and contemporary city life. In “*Notes to Basquiat (The coming of the light) 2001*”, Bennett incorporates a myriad of symbols; the two planes and the twin towers recall the incident on 9/11, the skeletal figure on the left suggests the universality of racial experiences, a list of words that suggests the coming of a new age: “*modern, contemporary, current, fashionable, fresh, latest, live, mod...*” and last but not least the torch that is gripped firmly on the top left of the painting, which represents the hope for a new age, also an allusion to Picasso’s *Guernica*. By making his artworks a platform for his search for identity, Bennett is able to attempt to interpret and reconnect with his Aboriginal past.



Artists such as Nickolls and Bennett both use painting to seek understanding of the complexities of the world as well as explore their identity through it. Nickolls focuses in comparing the modern urbanisation to the traditional, natural way of life, while Bennett looks into the past and attempt to establish links between then and the present. Through this, both are able to look deeper into the complexities of the world and its history.