LEARNING RESOURCE

Danie Mellor
Exotic Lies Sacred Ties

A UQ Art Museum Touring Exhibition

THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND ART MUSEUM, BRISBANE
18 JANUARY – 27 APRIL 2014
This free online Learning Resource is intended for use prior to, during, or following a visit to the exhibition Danie Mellor: Exotic Lies Sacred Ties. Alternatively, it may be used for independent learning experiences, along with the podcast available at http://www.artmuseum.uq.edu.au/public-programs/learning, to provide content and direction for a case study on the work of contemporary artist Danie Mellor for tertiary students, senior high school students and teachers.

To complement this resource, and the exhibition at UQ Art Museum, masterclasses were held for Queensland senior secondary visual arts students on Thursday 13 March and Friday 14 March 2014. These structured two-hour classes enabled participants to gain insight into the materials and techniques Danie Mellor uses to interrogate post-settlement narratives, and create a visual dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Danie Mellor was born of Indigenous and European cultural heritage in Mackay, Queensland, in 1971. He has lived variously in Australia, Scotland, South Africa and England, and now resides in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. The cultural perspectives in Mellor’s work have become increasingly significant since he and his mother strengthened their relationship with family members of the Mamu, Ngagen and Jirrbal peoples on the Atherton Tablelands of North Queensland, and reconnected with particular areas of Country. Mellor’s twenty-first century works unravel connections between his familial cultures and the secrets inherent in Australian history. Starting from what he refers to as ‘post-settlement’ Australia (beginning with European settlement in the late 1780s), his practice focuses on the historical intersections of people, ideas and culture, and the transformations that resulted when Indigenous environments were appropriated and commodified.

Curated by Maudie Palmer, this is the first major exhibition to consider in depth the contribution Danie Mellor has made to contemporary Australian art. The exhibition, Danie Mellor: Exotic Lies Sacred Ties, brings together more than 50 of the artist’s key works drawn from public and private collections and is organised, by the curator Maudie Palmer, around the themes of Ritual and Safekeeping; Cultural Warriors; Memento mori; Silent Witness; and Arcadia.

The images and text in this resource relate to these exhibition themes, and draw on the essays by Maudie Palmer, Lisa Slade, Samantha Littley and Fiona Nicoll in the catalogue Danie Mellor: Exotic Lies Sacred Ties that accompanies the exhibition. The resource also includes a statement by Danie Mellor, a conversation between Danie and Hetti Perkins, and a list of printed and online references.

Supported by:

GORDON DARLING FOUNDATION

UQ ART MUSEUM
The University of Queensland
University Drive, St Lucia, Qld 4072
Open daily 10.00 am – 4.00 pm
www.artmuseum.uq.edu.au

Cover:
Danie Mellor
Et in arcadia ego (of landscape and memory) 2011
pastel, pencil, glitter, Swarovski crystal and wash on Saunders Waterford paper
152 x 226 cm
Private collection, Brisbane
The information and activities in this resource align with the overarching framework of Making and Responding in the Australian Curriculum: The Arts and supports the inquiry-learning model of the current Queensland Visual Art senior curriculum. In addition, the approach reflects the focus on the general capabilities in the Australian Curriculum (Foundation to Year 10), specifically literacy, intercultural understanding, personal and social capability, and critical and creative thinking.

In terms of national cross-curriculum linkages, the resource acknowledges the priority of Sustainability and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures in the Australian Curriculum. With regard to these priority areas, the resource provides opportunities for students to explore the social systems and the relationships of people to their environment, and supports deeper understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures.

The resource also acknowledges the aims of Education Queensland to embed Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum and recognises that, in the senior phase, learners gain an awareness of the contributions of Indigenous Australians at local, regional, national and global levels. This helps senior students develop a greater understanding of their own country of origin and of the cultural, social and political beliefs that influence Australian identity and society. My Land, My Tracks: A framework for the holistic approach to Indigenous Studies, developed by Dr Ernie Grant is reproduced in this Learning Resource, to support learning about Indigenous knowledges, within an educational context.

For senior Visual Art students, the resource aims to provide opportunities for students to develop their knowledge, understanding and skills as they make representations of their own ideas and subject matter, and develop practical and critical understanding of how an artist uses an artwork to engage audiences and communicate meaning.

Teachers may find the learning activities can be integrated into units of study in the senior curriculum areas of Civics and Citizenship, English, History, and Philosophy and Reason, or adapted to suit student needs, help support understanding of, and respect for the stories, languages, beliefs and cultural practices of Indigenous peoples.

For tertiary students the resource reflects The University of Queensland’s priorities in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Strategic Plan 2013–2017 ‘to enrich the UQ Learning experience through inclusion of Indigenous knowledge and experience’.

Protocols outline the roles and relationships expected of teachers and students working with Indigenous communities and Indigenous knowledges, within an educational context. For more information please see www.qsa.qld.edu.au/3035.html.
My Land My Tracks: A framework for the holistic approach to Indigenous studies assists with embedding Indigenous perspectives in the Queensland curriculum. This framework was developed by Dr Ernie Grant, senior Jirrbal Elder and state-wide cultural Research Officer, and published by the Innisfail and District Education Centre, Education Queensland. A summary of My Land My Tracks is provided below.

For Dr Grant ‘Indigenous communities have a holistic view of the world which incorporates the vital link between Land, Language and Culture’. The framework uses this holistic approach and can be a useful strategy for teachers and students to gain a deeper understanding of Indigenous subject matter. Dr Grant writes:

‘Indigenous culture reflects an oral as opposed to a written tradition; it relies largely on observation; it is closely aligned with nature and the environment – with particular emphasis on cycles, patterns and the effect each has on the other; and of course it is based on an undeniable link between Land, Language and Culture’.

When discussing or writing about Indigenous artists, as protocol, information about where the artist is from, who their people are and often the language group they belong to, is provided, where possible. This acknowledges the importance of this information and that it should be considered part of a holistic approach to discussing the work of artists.

Dr Grant’s framework uses the three elements of Land, Language and Culture and contextualises them into the domains of Time, Place, and Relationships. Linking these six components together can provide a flexible framework for organising and presenting on a range of topics, including contemporary Indigenous art and artists.
The focus of my work and research has been engaged with history, and the way in which environments have changed through the process of cultural interaction generally, and colonial histories in particular. This is explored by looking at the ways in which Aboriginal people and culture have been affected by settlement in Australia, and also opens up a dialogue about a number of other key themes as an important part of that discussion.

One of the key elements used in much of the work is the pictorial focus on blue and white imagery. Blue and white engravings that were used for decoration on English dinnerware – and the Delft painted examples from Holland – marked a significant period in which ‘exotic’ cultures and environments were adapted and commoditised as illustrative vignettes on fine bone china, and became one of the most recognisable visual languages of the 19th and 20th Centuries. This language in itself came to be associated with the Oriental and the exotic, and is used in my work as means to show the transformed environment and country, a place that became changed through its development as part of empire. The colour blue then indicates a European footprint and gaze, or more broadly the idea that the scene is itself an exoticised space. The Aboriginal people and animals that are depicted are naturalistic, or ‘real’; it is their country around them that has become changed.

Other aspects of the work that have become important revolve around the themes of Enlightenment, and how this was a critical focus for many developed European countries and cultures. In that sense, the work engages with architectural forms (the embodiment of classical knowledge and industry), secret knowledge and its systems in Western and Indigenous culture, and also explores the notion of naturalness and the constructed, through the theatre of the image.

I am very interested in how the landscape has been read from a European perspective, and how artists, writers and poets explored the concept of Arcadia through this Western tradition in art. The romantic notion of the ‘garden’, the tamed and wild environment are concepts that I will be exploring with a greater focus and asking how the structured and unstructured give rise to comparisons of the civilised and uncivilised, the wild and the tamed. This leads, then, into a continuing dialogue about the notion of ‘otherness’, and the psychology of space that becomes equated with the rational conscious and depth of our unconscious – desires, dreams, realities and knowledge.
Hetti: Looking at your work Danie, there seems to be parallel worlds or visions: black and white, the different mediums whether its sculpture or drawing, past and present – all those things come together in your work. Then there’s the world of academia, the theory and the technical faculty you have, and another world that’s all about enchantment, wonder and indeed discovery.

I imagine that your personality, your enquiring mind, your intellectualism, leads you to this gateway or doorway into another world, whether they’re parallel worlds or worlds within worlds. Maudie Palmer describes it as Arcadia, and that’s something that comes through very strongly; an imaginary world.

A pathway features in many of your works. It’s that Western thing of foregrounding and perspective, but it seems to me it’s a pathway through, as in Atherton in the Tablelands.

Danie: It’s about depth too, and that relates to enquiry and asking questions and being curious. Actually through an initial intellectual framework allowing you to be drawn into almost a wonder about the narrative, and what lies beneath the surface of things.

What’s always been very important to me is also to venture out and experience the environment that you can actually touch and sense. There’s quite often this magical moment when things fantastically dovetail, and a story or narrative begins to unfold. It takes on a life of its own, and manifests itself in terms of my work through imagery.

The work uses what is very much a Western approach, which is based in perspective, objectivity, contrast, foreground, background. It’s the way I was taught, so you could say it’s a conditioned approach, but it’s one I accept rather than resist. They’re your tools so use them, and artistically you can begin to recognise the important theoretical, historical and cultural frameworks.

Ultimately it’s a matter of allowing the magic of that creative process to have its own momentum. What is created, then, are a number of different narratives interlocking, interwoven, connected that continue to unfold with each and every picture or exhibition or sculpture. That’s part of the process of being an artist – it is process-orientated, but there’s also an intuitive thread, like a river that carries you onward.

Hetti: So, depth, not only in its sense of perspective, but also the sense that you’re moving into the work as well as spiritual depth. There is very much a sense of mystery in the work, as in Bayi minyjirral, where that spirit is that wakes people up, you can feel that. The formality of the work is elastic, it’s imbued with a spirituality and mystery. It is magical. I remember Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev [Artistic Director, dOCUMENTA (13)] responding to a criticism that she considered Aboriginal artists work as magical in a ‘primitivist’ sense. She asked, ‘What’s wrong with magic?’ It is such a wonderful term, but it gets derided.

Danie: One word I use to talk about that is ‘cosmology’. Cosmology hints at the idea there’s a connection between material and what’s invisible. So it takes into account ancestry and heritage and especially how knowledge is ordered around the visible material, and invisible immaterial. The spiritual is something I see in my work as being embedded in the material. They’re inseparable.

Hetti: Worlds within worlds, because they’re not incompatible worlds, as your work so beautifully expresses, The whole is made up of those parts, and that makes a coherent vision. It makes me think of Bulluru storywater with the rainforest scene and Jirrbal and Manu text.

Danie: Yes, the re-writing of myth.

Hetti: The natural and the supernatural can exist together?

Danie: Yes, another good word, ‘supernatural’; the natural world heightened in a sense, where those mystical things can occur. I see that as being connected with ancestral stories, Dreaming stories.
Danie Mellor
Bayi Minyirr 2013
pastel, pencil and wash on
Saunders Waterford paper
nine panels, overall 300 x 360 cm
Private collection, Brisbane
Hetti: Where they can be really prosaic?

Danie: Prosaic, but like the first doorway to an initiation of knowledge about Country. So people begin to understand relationships between the narrative, between the characters and the story, the landscape as Country, and then how things come into being. It's tempting to say it's a mythologised way of understanding. In my experience it tends to be very real, because it gives you an expanded view, and it's actually a way of ordering knowledge. It talks about your place in that environment, and can also provide instruction on how to interact seasonally and ecologically. So there's incredible power and wisdom in those things.

Hetti: With your work, you get the sense of layering. It's a bit like an archaeological dig, getting down to the minutiae of the work.

There's all the references, for instance, ceremonial practices, bicornual baskets or jarwun, the flora and the fauna, and of course the people that inhabit these worlds. With that sense of wonderment and discovery there is an element of risk, of personal risk, that somehow is expressed for you as an artist in what you're willing to reveal, and how far you're willing to go on that journey. Almost like an Alice in Wonderland, falling down the rabbit hole.

And thinking about how much of your work is framed and so ornately, by actual frames and by borders in the works. Again this suggests the idea of a journey or a gateway, a Narnia.

Danie: Interestingly, Simon Schama in [his book] Landscape and memory, writes about images from the nineteenth or twentieth century that had borders, and how they were used as a device to suggest a poetic space or allegory. The idea was that you were looking at something that spoke in a narrative sense, not in a, let's say, ‘truthful’ sense. So my pictures perform that function, in that they're not showing a particular historical event, but they are showing history. The pictures speak of Indigenous experience and the transformation of the landscape, and the impact that it has, but it's not one singular event. They talk about a broad experience – that's the allegory. The golden frames touch on the way history paintings and authoritative works were presented in the Academy to signify importance. It also shows wealth and historicity, acting as an elevating device round the pictures. We're looking at a snapshot, about the idea of the transformed landscape and how the ecology of this country was being changed over time.

And the mythology?

Danie: The mythology, totally. I’m fascinated by the Willow Ware design, the blue and white language – the visual language became like one of the first global languages. It was used to show the exotic, the rare, the ‘undiscovered’ in the case of North Africa, India, and China. From my own research, I haven’t been able to find an Aboriginal language word for the colour blue. It’s almost like blue was not conceptualised, it was recognised through words for sky, for instance, or water. So it’s almost like the transformed landscape talks about that which was brought with Western culture – in a way talking about the symbolically manufactured, or the ‘change forever’.

Hetti: Or the intangible?

Danie: Yes, which comes back to your point about the immateriality of narrative, how that has such an important place in terms of ancestral or spiritual story, that magic experience.

Hetti: And that you require faith and immersion in a cultural world. What I think your work does is to explore the nexus, the interstices, the connection between worlds, and allows those worlds to co-exist.

Danie: The bridge, in that sense.

Hetti: With that idea of the grand vision and different ways of framing the work, physically as well conceptually, to reveal what is truthful in a work – it was such a tactic, a tool of propaganda, on the front of imperialism. I’m thinking about your trips to Scotland and Scottish heritage; another colonised country.

Danie: It was brutal.

Hetti: But then you have those ‘stag of the glen’ romanticised views of Scotland sans any torture, bloodshed, starvation.

Danie: Yes. That plays well into thinking about landscape in the way that we’re used to, as a very particular convention in Western history, and Indigenous understandings of Country. Country, as I understand it, is this immersive experience, a knowledge framework which is built up around seasonal cycles, your own relationship to that land through kin or ancestral connection, or heritage and material culture and art.

Landscape was used as a speculative way of observing, but also was like a ‘cartography’. It was framed, squared, presented, mapped out, but ultimately owned. Some of the earlier colonial landscapes in Australia were very much about presenting real estate, land could be used or re-purposed, areas which were to be farmed
and mined. So there are all these interesting intersections and complications that come with using the landscape as I do, but it’s done with the knowledge that what I’m picturing, fundamentally, are ideas around Country.

Hetti: The concept of Country in relation to the waterfall image *A man of high degree* really strikes a chord as it’s a sacred site, a naming place. It is a vessel. There is power, energy in something very beautiful and magical. Some people would look at that as a day trip for their own pleasure, or as a resource. Whereas you would want to become part of that place, so treating it as a resource would be hurting yourself.

[Artist] Judy Watson talks about memory, she says blood and memory seep down into the ground, and so landscape has memory. It’s corporeal, it breathes and it lives. So, the frame represents an imperial context for looking at landscape, but what you’re asking people to look at is not just a landscape, rather what is in a landscape.

Danie: That’s right in that context. It’s a gentle pathway to looking at some of the more, let’s call them, ‘challenging’ elements of Australia’s history: those chapters where there was immense dispossession and disruption of knowledge and culture, and dislocation of people.

I’ve always been concerned with how to engage an audience with the truth behind the work, which ultimately leads to a conversation of history in the country. And, secondly, how cultural knowledge is embedded in the country as well, in a way that is certainly political, but in another sense talks about these broader formal elements of art: composition, harmony – all these things that are an important part of the work. Ultimately, it’s the narrative, and capturing the experience of people who have had the environment radically transformed around them.

Hetti: Yes, the nature of that experience. When you talk to some people the silences are as important as what people were saying. It seems that opportunity for contemplation and consideration is very important to your work. It’s immediately engaging, but because it’s an imagined world, and also imaginary worlds, and the seductive nature of them, it’s a bit of a trap, a tender trap?

Danie: In that sense the charm can be a bit of a foil, but part of the whole truth of the picture. What I don’t try to do as an artist is prioritise experience. Someone might have an aesthetic experience; different audiences will take away something ‘deeper’ and have a different type of reading. So there’s a different grasp of concepts that are embedded within the work.

Hetti: So you allow people just to have that journey, to fall down fully into the rabbit hole or just look down the rabbit hole.

Danie: A peek or a good look.

Hetti: Have a think about or not even see the rabbit hole, fall through it. You’ve said you’ve always liked looking at pictures. Did you have favourite childhood books?

Danie: ‘The Chronicles of Narnia’ and the ‘Earthsea’ series and Dreaming stories. I don’t know where they came from. I found them absolutely fascinating and just beautiful in the way that they would draw me in. I also enjoyed ‘Biggles’.

Hetti: A bit of adventure thrown in for good measure! Looking at your work, there’s an element of the unexpected. You’re never really sure of where you are, or what you’re going to find out, or what you’re going to see hiding behind that palm frond.

Danie: Well of course that’s the foil of the rainforest, it’s beautiful but deadly, and it has that capacity to make you very conscious of mortality. The amount of hidden things in that foliage, whether its stinging nettles or poisonous snakes …

Hetti: Bright and beautiful things, but deadly. I always liked those early settler statements where they describe the birds; they’ve gone from these little twittering nightingales or whatever to these cockatoos and raucous magpies. I just love that amplification.

I knew your mum [Doreen Mellor] before I knew you, we’re friends and colleagues. We’d talk – as you do – about kids and it sounded to me that you must have had a pretty utopian childhood?

Danie: There are some very romantic elements to our upbringing, like travelling and living in different places, the life approach which was for the most part rural, my parents starting a Steiner school … I dreamed of a more normal and structured childhood, which my friends always seemed to have: one house for the whole of their upbringing!

It was very real in terms of what we had to encounter, both in early childhood and our teenage years; of being quite aware that we were growing up in a family that had different cultural heritages. There are attitudinal things that accompany being this sort of person or that sort of person, or belonging to this cultural group or having this heritage.

Beginning to integrate it in a meaningful sort of way is a very important part of someone growing up. To begin exploring that and finding meaning in something like an artistic practice was incredibly important [and] leads to a very different personal understanding of your place within multiple cultures.
– it was such a challenge, but it’s also an incredible gift.

You use the instruments you have, or the tools you have, and mine were drawing and painting, and organising, in conceptual ways, those tableaux and sculptures. I enjoy a variety of media because it provides a holistic approach to interpreting what is a personal narrative, but also a cultural and national history.

Hetti: So were the journeys linked in terms of finding your maturing voice as an artist as well as your maturing voice as an adult with multi-identities, or were they already resolved from the get go and it was just a case of finding a way to express them?

Danie: What I learned very quickly is you can’t leave anything out, otherwise the picture isn’t complete. There’s always a focus for me, which is at the intersection between Indigenous and Western. At the heart of that is the narrative around Country and nature: the experience of a particular ecology and environment, which gives rise to those stories that are so critically important in cultural practice for the passing of knowledge and so on.

It was probably when I went to England where the framework that accompanies you in your early years radically changed. That’s when I met Joanne, my wife, who has a different cultural framework in many ways, and expanded mine to a huge degree. So to be able to look at things from a multiplicity of perspectives was for me an incredible experience. She has been very important to the way that my thinking and practice has developed.

Hetti: It wasn’t until you were 29 when you returned to the Atherton Tablelands.

Danie: I’m often asked, ‘When did you discover your Indigeneity?’ It wasn’t a discovery, it was always there, and we knew this was our family.

Hetti: Everyone just took it for granted?

Danie: In a sense. The conscious search and awakening and looking at the way you fit into the broader picture took place at about that time I went home to trace our extended family. What was remarkable was that they were looking for us at the same time. So, we found each other, and that’s one of the most amazing things that has happened.

Hetti: When did you meet Ernie Grant?

Danie: At about that time, and it was transformative. As a senior Jirrbal Elder, Ernie was able to guide me with a great deal of wisdom and insight. My friendship with him has been one of the most important in my life. It seemed as though a lot of questions were laid to rest about essentially who I was, where I belong, where I fit in – what was important about my artistic process. It gave it a solidity and a confidence that wouldn’t have been attainable had I not experienced that reconnection, and what became an affiliation with Country – almost like conjoining the intellectual or speculative framework with experience and what’s real. That was the point at which a lot of those things became very real, so it was a significant chapter.

Hetti: What was your first impression of the landscape – something that just captured you?

Danie: Something that held me were the mountain ranges and the way the rainforest seemed to hug them and embody them.

Hetti: Like a cloaking or a wrapping?

Danie: Yes, but like skin. It was this massive organism: it was alive and breathing and living and you were part of that and, walking through it, it was just alive around you.

Hetti: I understand that – Country being corporeal, not just a series of different trees and plants, but one organism that is pulsating and moving, inhaling and exhaling, that’s beautiful.

Danie: I tend to see experience of environment as being the Dreaming. The experience, that’s what everything arises from and falls back to. And in the rainforest you see that cycle of life and death very quickly, it’s that sort of environment and climate. What is ‘biology’ is taking place right before your eyes.

Hetti: So that understanding of Country as a sentient being is where understanding this idea of Dreaming starts. That it is as much a real landscape as it is an imaginary landscape, it is both things at the same time, and, indeed, that’s what your work is all about. It’s a portrait as well as a journal – it brings together all of those elements.

I was going to ask you about Freemasonry, because I don’t know what it is.

Danie: I became very interested in Freemasonry and the idea of secrecy...

Hetti: You’re just naturally curious aren’t you? You’re straight down the rabbit hole!

Danie: I was really curious, knowledge is passed on, the way mentorship happens – it’s almost like an [Indigenous] community. So you go beyond orders and look at the way different groups of people begin to organise information and pass that on. In terms of Indigenous knowledge and experience, the initiation of young men into manhood, and how initiations take place after that into different kinds of knowledge that relates to Country – ceremony, story, cosmology. In that sense the pictures were like a question that asked, ‘What were the similarities, what were the differences?’
Danie: Freemasonic instruction is based in architecture and the ‘frame’ changes as you go through the process?

Hetti: It’s an initiation physically as well as mentally, and the ‘frame’ changes as you go through the process?

Danie: You become more self-aware, aware of the world around you. In terms of initiated knowledge, let’s say within Indigenous culture, it’s an expanded worldview. An understanding of how the stories that are transmitted to you or given to you guide the way you interact both with community and with Country. And the responsibilities you have as part of that. The closest Western model that is still preserved, I think, is Freemasonry.

Hetti: People make a joke of it in both instances: ‘Oh, secret men’s business’ or ‘Those Masons and that dodgy stuff that goes on’. It’s a ‘ha, ha, ha’ fear response to a world that they will never penetrate. Did you take that journey as part of your natural curiosity?

Danie: I think so, and my response to the Masonic or Indigenous culture and knowledge was, ‘How do you talk about the experience of these particular ways of organising?’ That was my question as an artist.

Hetti: But you’re not as objective about going back to the Atherton Tablelands as you were about going to the Freemasons?

Danie: That’s right. It’s not a totally objective enquiry that I make; there is subjectivity and it was woven into a historical narrative as well, the idea of the involuntary initiation of Aboriginal culture and people into the Western model. I’m asked often, ‘Is work of this period critiquing Freemasonry?’ I’m not doing it as a critique; it’s using a particular model to talk about similarities and differences between cultures.

Hetti: In much the same way you use the gold frames or the poetic border around the work. It’s not right or wrong. [Artist] Michael Riley used to say, ‘I’m not criticising Christianity, I’m just curious about it’.

Danie: What do the symbols mean, how are they used?

Hetti: Again, in Michael’s case to draw a parallel, to use the cross not in a critical way, but in a way of trying to say, ‘Let’s look at two religions, mine and yours’.

Danie: Freemasonic instruction is based in architecture and talks about architecture in very particular ways. This is probably where it looked like I was critiquing it, as architecture was the means by which empire was established, was a construction of the urban space. But it’s not unique to Freemasonry, as that’s a kind of indication of the universal spread of Western culture. Specific Masonic instruction is grouped around the idea of Western knowledge being ‘embodied’ in buildings, engineering, and science. It was an important model to begin to talk about types of connections, and where the disconnect was located.

Hetti: I guess it’s also a way of plumbing the depth of your connection to Country, the resonance is so much deeper, and why is that? Weighing up the two, somehow enriches your own connection to Country by comparison?

Danie: That square and compass of the Freemasons, the Hebrew script and those icons that appear in your works are like little keys or clues. Like a treasure map, and Alice in Wonderland is finding keys and eating cakes and all sorts of things happen as a result! Her world changes.

In some of your works, the people, the objects, the animals are somehow part of the frame within the landscape. It’s like they’re all looking at something. I think you’re in there, or there’s a presence you haven’t actually drawn.

Hetti: Particularly with the later works, there’s a real focus on how the viewer is engaging with those pieces. The invisible presence you’re talking about is what is created between us and them, and what’s around them. It’s a quality that will develop over time, particularly in large-scale works, because it’s very immersive, it brings you in.

Danie: It’s almost like you are making the doorway big enough for you to get in.

Hetti: The people, the objects and the fauna may be part of the frame, but they also look staged to me, like they’re waiting for something.

Danie: It’s like an ‘anticipation’; something’s going to happen.

Hetti: There’s the element of magic again. You are waiting for the rabbit to come out of the hat. Judy Watson’s called blue the ‘colour of memory’, and for me there is a mystery in the blue shadows of your work. Is the breaking of the blue and white ceramic to create mosaics a class or race-based statement or metaphor?

Danie: No, although the act of breaking creates a shattered narrative. When you break something, you sort of dissemble it. What is interesting about the blue and white is that it is spoken about as part of that Orientalism craze. It has interesting connections with Edward Said’s book Orientalism, where he talks about that idea of ‘othering’. So this properly belongs to a discussion about Orientalism, because in a sense I was ‘Orientalising’ Australia.

You can take that into a post-colonial discussion, which may be more or less valuable, but, with respect to the blue and white transfer ware, what I found fascinating was a global language when people had it either on their tea cups or on their dinnerware. Pictures were revealed as the meal was...
eaten, and people were literally ‘consuming culture’ as a way of seeing the dinnerware design and experiencing something from afar. It was presented in a way that was analogous rather than real, fantastical rather than factual. The blue and white talks about the idea of the exotic space certainly, with the blue as a symbology for it. For me, it was very much about the idea of transformation of landscape. It’s like the European eye gazing, hitting, transforming, and then ultimately changing the place. Think about the gaze of the artist, the Western artist looking at it for the first time, it’s almost like they’re capturing it and putting it into that square frame.

Hetti: Or eating it?

Danie: Eating it, consuming it. And making pictures for consumption.

Hetti: You have literally to smash it to rebuild it in your own frame?

Danie: There is something in that actually, interesting.

Hetti: The idea of people looking at Country with that avaricious, consuming, greedy territoriality, but to go in and consume the landscape would be an act of cannibalism. If you’re not from that place you see it as resource that can be devoured, whether it’s by forestry machines or earth movers or concrete plastered all over it.

Danie: I know what you mean, but it’s always a resource and it depends how you tap that resource, I guess.

Hetti: Clearly the whole agricultural debacle, the rivers and the water table, the salt levels and the dust bowls are evidence of that. That leads me to the idea of ‘eating’ with the Willow plates – consuming countries, consuming cultures, the imperialist imperative to trade with exotic plants. It reminds me of *Forbidden fruit of the 17th parallel*, where the fruit is the landscape in a way. It may look lovely and bountiful, but this is a bounty with nothing to do with the native flora.

Danie: Part of that beauty of looking at historical images and picturing them in blue [is that it] gives them a common thread or a theme that runs across all of those areas. So in terms of engagement, I’m very interested in looking at different ways of telling a similar story – in the sense that pictures or images arise from slightly different narratives – again taking them into a slightly different reality each time. It’s interesting that there are all these facets of human endeavour or behaviour that drive people to ‘new’ places – trade being one of them – and desire for either the exotic or to acquire and build, collect, accumulate and organise.

Hetti: That way it becomes a reflection of the self? Much like your work is?

Danie: When you bring that reading into some of the work that I’ve done, you begin to see there’s a conversation that develops around cultivated spaces, around Aboriginal people, who obviously in that space are the unknown ‘other’. Then to consider ideas of Enlightenment, which began to be mapped out as a way of talking about the cultivated space; the divide between this and the wild space or the unconscious.

Hetti: Where do we fit in that story, and are those worlds parallel or are they two parts of the whole?

Danie: Probably both.
In the work, *A man of high degree* 2011, an Aboriginal man is shown painting a rainforest shield at the base of the Banday Banday waterfall. Mellor references AP Elkin’s book *Aboriginal men of high degree* in this work and Elkin’s acknowledgement of the supernatural and ‘the clever man’ in Aboriginal culture. Danie Mellor draws this sacred waterfall and naming place of the Jirrbal people repeatedly, and it is here that tranquility and spiritual well-being is undisturbed, serving as a potent emblem of natural power.

Mellor’s earliest exhibited works include his sculptural shields or *balan bigin* (the traditional name for the rainforest shields sculpted from the buttress roots of a rainforest *ficus* or fig tree). Constructed from found metal travelling trunks – the kind used to transport the earthly chattels of migrants to Australia from the mid-nineteenth through to the mid-twentieth century – they are moulded by Mellor into forms reminiscent of the traditional shields made for millennia in his mother’s Country, the area now known as the Atherton Tablelands, in North Queensland. A series of Mellor’s reclaimed metal shields were hung in *Culture Warriors: National Indigenous art triennial* 2007.

In later works made in the form of shields, such as *A landscape of desire* 2006, Mellor used high-key colours such as lurid yellows, pinks and mauves to render the geological contours of his mother’s Country and those areas surrounding it. Each coloured expanse indicates the language group of the Atherton Tablelands area, and demarcates the clans affected by assimilation policies and colonisation. This double mapping speaks to the complexity of Mellor’s cultural identity – the original shields can be read by insiders as kinship diagrams and cultural locators, while to outsiders the cartographic contours communicate in geographical terms.

Mellor believes ‘there are similarities and differences in ritual knowledge and ceremonies that are part of Indigenous and Western cultures,’ and these ideas are evident in the exhibition theme of ‘Ritual and safekeeping’. As part of his research into ritual knowledge systems, Mellor has explored the secret society of Freemasonry, from its inception in the Middle Ages and its formal Lodge, first established in England in the early eighteenth century. Mellor’s investigation was based on his own experience of the rituals and ceremonies of the Lodge. This has played a key role in how he has reflected on knowledge systems, the importance of initiation in society and the development of his own distinctive visual account of the cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia.

In a series of works that includes *A balance of power* 2009, *A Western integration* 2009, and *An allegorical scene of history unfolding* 2010, Mellor appropriated images from the mid-eighteenth-century engravings of Johann Martin Bernigeroth, which portray Freemasonry ritual, so as to emphasise what he sees as cultural similarities. In Mellor’s works, however, it is an Aboriginal man who is being initiated.

**MAKING AND RESPONDING**

In the Djabugay language of North Queensland ‘*wayan*’ means ‘clever man’, ‘men of high degree’, or ‘medicine man’. Think about Danie Mellor’s interest in ritual, initiation and ceremonial knowledge systems, including Freemasonry, and how ‘men of high degree’ are represented in Indigenous and non-Indigenous visual culture. With reference to the *My Land My Tracks* framework, developed by Dr Ernie Grant, discuss the significance of the similarities and the differences.

Mellor’s transformation and reinterpretation of the form of rainforest shields from his Mother’s country reflects his commitment to intercultural understanding and connection to his own cultural identity. Choose your favourite shield in the exhibition and describe how the visual language speaks to you. Compare your choice and the words you have selected with your peers.
A sense of foreboding becomes more central in the exhibition theme of ‘Cultural warriors’; new settlement disturbs the bucolic harmony, and native animals and Aboriginal people demonstrate a show of strength. In the work Culture Warriors 2008, kangaroos face off in aggressive combat within a landscape borrowed from Willow-Pattern china. Their hostile stance is a rare, though overt, example of belligerence in Danie Mellor’s works – a reference to contested territory, and to the animals’ instinctive behaviours.

Many of these works reference the iconography of Spode china, and were made following Danie Mellor’s visit, in 1998, to the Spode pottery factory at Stoke-on-Trent, England. Here he observed the craft of transfer engraving and came under the spell of Spode and its elaborate patterns in blue and white, which would become his signature palette. Mellor’s decorative borders are often copied precisely from Spode designs and other imagery from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In addition, the ornate gold frames, and the deliberate ‘ageing’ of the paper refer to the importance, wealth and authority of history paintings.

For Mellor, the visual language of blue and white is a global language that is used ‘to show the exotic, the rare, the ‘undiscovered’ in the case of North Africa, India, and China. I use blue as a primary base for imagery simply because it works, both on material and conceptual levels. It’s more about the transformed landscape, the Country that has become not-country … and I quite like the idea that blue in my own work evokes a sense of otherworldliness as well as material contrasts in its compositions.

Part of that beauty of looking at historical images and picturing them in blue [is that it] gives them a common thread or a theme that runs across all of those areas. So in terms of engagement, I’m very interested in looking at different ways of telling a similar story – in the sense that pictures or images arise from slightly different narratives – again taking them into a slightly different reality each time. It’s interesting that there are all these facets of human endeavour or behaviour that drive people to ‘new’ places – trade being one of them – and desire for either the exotic or to acquire and build, collect, accumulate and organise.

From my own research, I haven’t been able to find an Aboriginal language word for the colour blue. It’s almost like blue was not conceptualised, it was recognised through words for sky, for instance, or water. The colour blue, then indicates a European footprint and gaze, or more broadly the idea that the scene is itself an exoticised space. The Aboriginal people and animals that are depicted are naturalistic, or ‘real’; it is their country around them that has become changed’.

Making and Responding
For Danie Mellor the colour blue works on both a material and a conceptual level. Consider making an artwork that uses colour as a visual device to tell a story about your connection to a place or that of your family, or how you choose to identify yourself.

Mellor’s ornate gold frames, historic decorative borders and sparkling crystals simultaneously invite and challenge habitual ways of looking at Indigenous art. In small groups share your response to Mellor’s ‘framing’ process and reflect on your understanding of contemporary Indigenous art practice.
The phrase *Memento mori*, from the Latin ‘remember that you will die’, is synonymous in art with symbols that remind us of our mortality: skeletons, skulls, and, in the seventeenth-century Dutch still-life tradition, cut flowers and over-ripe fruit. The skull, more frequently than a full skeleton, recurs as an image in Danie Mellor’s work around the theme of *Memento mori* in the exhibition.

In *Bulletu storywater 2012*, a giant skull dominates the rainforest landscape and is surrounded by Jinbal and Mamu text made of shells. For this work, Mellor draws upon a Mamu/Ngagen creation story from the rainforest area of Northern Queensland. The ancestor Budaadji, in his role as a shell trader, is attacked by mythical birdmen on his journey from the ocean to the Atherton Tablelands, and his body is scattered in the bush. The language place names include the word *Bulletu*, which means ‘Dreaming’.

For Mellor the rainforest is both a beautiful and deadly place, and ‘the experience of environment as being the Dreaming. The experience, that’s what everything arises from and falls back to. And in the rainforest you see that cycle of life and death very quickly’.

**MAKING AND RESPONDING**

Dreaming stories pass on important knowledge, cultural values and belief systems about how ancestral beings moved across imagined and real landscapes, and are of great significance within Aboriginal society. Discuss the contribution this knowledge makes to our national identity and cultural life, through reference to Mellor’s rainforest landscapes.
The exhibition theme, ‘Silent witness’, is devoted to sculpted animals suspended between two cultures. German shepherd dogs from Europe and Australian kangaroos appear to stand on guard. The ceramic dogs – glazed with geological survey maps of the Atherton Tablelands, or clothed in downy feathers traditionally applied as ceremonial markings on the body by the people of that Country – are testament to the shared history between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. In contrast, the kangaroos transformed by and encrusted with Spode china, belie with endearing charm the violence witnessed, and denied, following the British occupation of Australia.

Danie Mellor often uses media and technique to create irony in his observations. When he broke up the Spode china to create a mosaic skin on the three kangaroos in Red, white and blue 2008, who ‘see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil’, he recalls that the British had appropriated the Chinese design in the eighteenth century and then later took their Willow-Pattern dinnerware to the southern continent. These three kangaroos are what Mellor calls ‘a mute enactment of the business plan of empire building’. The life-like qualities the trio embody, with their taxidermied paws and ears, recall the use of stuffed native animals in the diorama-style installations of the first natural history museums in Britain.

Mellor’s choice of media, colour and ornate frames are integral to a conceptual understanding of his work. The various media and techniques he employs – drawing, painting, printmaking, glass, ceramic, chrome, bronze, crystal, glitter, gold – provide him with a rich repertoire from which to create the narrative he is compelled, by his heritage, to address. From his earliest years at art school, he quickly learned the value of using a wide variety of media popular during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to reinvent historical perceptions. Fascinated by a reproduction of a mezzotint print in a student prospectus, he recognised the potential that the medium provided for capturing the complexity of meanings. Another medium, taxidermy, evokes a challenging reality when combined with the found, constructed or sculptured mosaic elements in Mellor’s installations.

Danie Mellor
Red, white and blue 2008
mixed media with mosaic and taxidermy, variable, tallest 105 cm
Collection: Australian Museum
Acquired with the assistance of the Australian Museum Foundation

The kangaroo is a potent motif in Mellor’s work, from the naturalistic representations in Cultural Warriors, through to the ironic fantasy created for Red, white and blue. Describe how Mellor’s kangaroos speak to you. Do you have the same reaction to the kangaroo depicted on the Australian coat of arms and souvenir badges of kangaroos?

Consider creating a three-dimensional sculpture of an animal in unexpected materials, using recycled and re-constructed media. Give your animal a name and a back-story, and think about what display techniques you will use to communicate his/her story.
Through the theme of ‘Arcadia’, Danie Mellor portrays an ancient continent with a rich bounty of ‘exotic’ wonders, one where the original people and ‘enlightened’ invaders are revealed in a benign relationship. Within the composition of Postcards from the edge (in search of living curiosities) 2011, the inobtrusive colonial photographer, to the far left of the picture, carefully balances his camera and tripod to photograph an idyllic scene that includes three Indigenous men.

Historically, the British recorded a sanitised version of the occupation of Australia, a story that has been perpetuated by mainstream Australia. Mellor, through his interrogation of history, recreates the colonial era from when the British arrived at Botany Bay in 1788. In his interpretation of events, Indigenous people and the environment are centrally placed. His visual narrative relies on manipulating British imagery from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which he layers with his own distinctive record of the cultural differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. In his borrowing, he uses historical imagery to frame the work as authoritative. Mellor observes that:

‘it is a deliberate strategy, using irony that owes a debt to postmodern artists who developed a language incorporating that strategy. In my work, however, it creates a slightly subversive dialogue around cultural transformation belonging, and the interpretations impacting on, landscape and Country’.

Mellor knows of special places on the Atherton Tablelands, which he imagines as paradise, ‘… a place where unusual things happen … a magical place … of untamed nature … representative in that sense of Arcadia’. The work Bayi minyjirral 2013 shows a great rainforest canopy with Aboriginal people looking up in reverence at the baskets that hold the bones of their dead as they hang in state. The drawing depends on its dominant scale to engage the viewer in the world of nature and ecology that it explores. Its title describes an Aboriginal female creation spirit, whose function is to awaken people, to ignite awareness. Stripped of decorative devices, the work comes closer to the human experience, and provokes profound and poignant emotions. In this Country, Mellor says, ‘the imagined and real intersections of history are played out; … a place of paradise’.

MAKING AND RESPONDING

Discuss how the narrative of displacement and transformation of land and country is represented in Postcards from the edge (in search of living curiosities) and in Danie Mellor’s later work Bayi minyjirral. What formal elements do these works share and how do you respond to them?

Mellor is very interested in how the concept of Arcadia was taken up by artists, writers and poets to explore romantic notions of unspoilt and idyllic landscapes in Western art traditions. Often set in classical Antiquity, the concept was famously used in two paintings by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), with the titles Et in Arcadia ego. The translation of this Latin phrase is ‘Even in Arcadia, there am I’, and Mellor uses this phrase in the title of his work Et in arcadia ego (of landscape and memory). Consider making an artwork that reflects your imaginary Arcadian paradise. Compile a list of other uses of this concept in visual culture, including the world of computer games, to assist you.
FURTHER READING


Caruana, Wally. The great creative golden age of long ago and here and now. Sydney: Caruana and Reid Fine Art, 2008.


### SELECTED ONLINE RESOURCES

- Artcine: Danie Mellor http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppv8ORFZgQo
- Art Gallery of Western Australia: Danie Mellor http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kricy24vSzE
- National Gallery of Canada: artist interview Danie Mellor http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRAzS8rkXTY

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This Learning Resource was written by Gillian Ridsdale, Curator of Public Programs, UQ Art Museum, to accompany the exhibition Danie Mellor: Exotic Lies Sacred Ties. Thanks to Samantha Littley, Liz MacKinlay, Danie Mellor, Maudie Palmer and Lisa Slade for their feedback.

The publisher grants permission for the information in this Learning Resource to be reproduced strictly for teaching and learning purposes, to support the exhibition Danie Mellor: Exotic Lies Sacred Ties at The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane, 18 January – 27 April 2014; TarraWarra Museum of Art, Healesville, Victoria, 10 May – 27 July 2014; and Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory, Darwin, 29 August – 16 November 2014.

All images reproduced courtesy of the artist, Jan Murphy Gallery, Brisbane and Michael Reid, Sydney.

© The University of Queensland, the authors and the artist

93294 MAY14  •  CRICOS Provider Number 00025B