

## 5.7 Context: The personal and contemporary

Art practice involves identifying and connecting with your personal understanding of the world by referencing authentic experiences. The contemporary context informs how artists generate visual responses that communicate diverse viewpoints and layers of meaning through art.

Experimentation or practice-driven research involves a continuous cycle of observation and reflection on personal viewpoints. The reflective process challenges and refines a personal lens.

**“Perception is conditioned by a context from which observation and evaluation are made. Instead of general models of understanding, it is conditioned by numerous factors, including political, social, cultural, gender and racial. It affects how we see art and what meanings we attribute to it but is also an active factor in artistic creation.”**

ELI ANIPUR, WRITER AND EDITOR, *WIDEWALLS*

The contemporary context is often cited as the key driver of visual art, as contemporary art is the art of today, globally influenced, culturally diverse and embracing technologies. The contemporary artist employs a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts and subjects that challenge traditional boundaries and create meanings that reflect a changing world.

As a viewer, you will have personal visual preferences. Art has always presented a challenge to audiences. The manipulation of visual imagery to evoke pleasant, confronting or emotional responses has, for centuries, been a powerful disruptor of cultural frameworks that define beauty or aesthetics.

The process of creative inquiry aims to alter, change, distort, challenge or justify your authentic



**FIGURE 5.27** Leigh Schoenheimer, *Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing: Construction #10*, 2018, acrylic on board, 3 panels. Image: Louis Lim

viewpoints through your representations of the material world. In summary, representations in visual art build upon sensibilities, experiences and interpretations that communicate meaning. They do this through figurative and non-figurative representations, some aesthetically beautiful and some quite confronting. This unique three-panel artwork by Leigh Schoenheimer embraces all three.

These multi-panelled works investigate the relationship between perception (seeing a subject) and meaning (knowing a subject). The starting point is an abstract assemblage painted in stripes. A realist description of the 3D abstraction on the left begins the ‘storyboard’ with a visual pun. The subsequent panels move beyond realism to explore text and a gentle deconstruction offering alternative interpretations of the object.

Your own perceptual and conceptual responses will provide a tantalising glimpse into the creative space where experimentation with materials, techniques and processes can empower you to implement ideas and generate meaningful imagery that is relevant in the contemporary world.

Embedding the painted object into a repeated background similar in colour and pattern collapses spaces and plays with how we perceive form, in the same way that the Modernist art movement explored form.



**FIGURE 5.28** Workshop with artist Leigh Schoenheimer where students made a simple object and then set about camouflaging it after a study of the artist's image *Construction #10*.

### INQUIRY LEARNING 5.5

Try this experiment by making your own simple object using polymer clay or using a found object that you can paint. Repeat a pattern and limited set of colours and then create a simple backdrop. Photograph from different angles using different lighting effects.

Research signature patterns and colours (reverse chronology). Artists such as Yayoi Kusma, Roy Lichtenstein, Cezanne and Bridget Riley are relevant artists to reference.

Shaping a viewpoint through a specific lens while referencing traditional visual forms is the purpose of contemporary art. It is in this creative space where possibilities are infinite and problem-solving is considered an inspirational process.

Personal and contemporary contexts require you to work with a focus that feels familiar so you can begin from a personal or authentic starting point, by referencing things in your everyday life. As the artist, you will aim to communicate ideas that rely upon an honest voice, ensuring that you have something meaningful to communicate.



**FIGURE 5.29** St Peters Lutheran College, object experiments using a box to support a painted backdrop. This is also a valuable photography and lighting activity.



FIGURE 5.36 John Honeywill, *Like the earth remembering*

“ I hope for a quiet beauty, a luminosity of colour and sometimes a sense of ‘otherness’ – a vague term to describe how my interest in some objects is about capturing a feeling that doesn’t directly have to do with the physical reason of the subject, e.g. the sweets such as Turkish delight, meringue, rocky road. It might be about its colour, it’s form or how it might suggest miniature worlds, e.g. the rocky road paintings have a cliff face and landscape feel.

JOHN HONEYWILL



FIGURE 5.37 Sophia Liu, *Roses*, acrylic on cradleboard, 30 x 30 cm

A body of work can signal how the artist engages with perception as a tool, and how they have developed or refined their focus and responses throughout their art practice.

This student has explored the application of light and a personal context in a similar manner to John Honeywill.

## 5.10 How do artists use visual language to communicate a narrative?

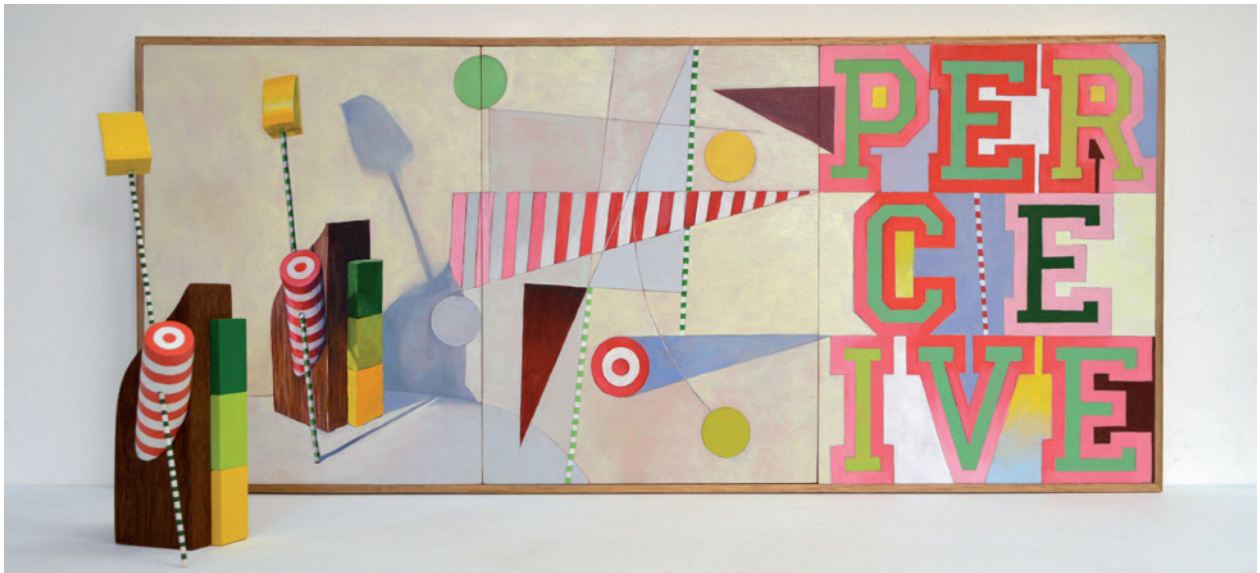
### Artist Leigh Schoenheimer

At first glance, artist Leigh Schoenheimer shares some similarities with Honeywill, as they both explore place, space and objects through the lens of still life.

Schoenheimer employs varying degrees of realism and selectively references art theories and techniques from well-established traditions as part of the storytelling. Her imagery explores aesthetic engagement and how to connect with and stimulate the viewer in a contemporary world saturated with media imagery.

A painter and sculptor, Schoenheimer is best known for her expanded still-life works, assemblages and her more recent series, ‘An Unnatural History.’ She focuses on devising engaging multi-panelled paintings known as a **trptych** to captivate the viewer and set up dialogues about the phenomenon of how we ‘perceive conceive’ imagery.

.....  
**trptych** (pronounced trip-tick) usually three closely related panels or images of the same size  
 .....



**FIGURE 5.38** Leigh Schoenheimer, *Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing: Construction #13*, 2019, oil on plywood triptych and free-standing polychromed timber assemblage, 32 x 73 cm (painting) 25 x 8 x 8 cm (assemblage). Schoenheimer is also interested in pixelation or tessellation of imagery, pattern and vibrant colour, which stimulates the brain and challenges the 'bottom-up processing' that predicts what the viewer hopes to see. Her venture into still life, landscape, and abstraction is also about how to reset or challenge the singular lens.

Schoenheimer overlays conversations between perception, representation, and interpretation with a broad range of styles, ideas, symbols and viewpoints that reference art itself. Her sculptures made from found objects are sometimes paired with paintings and utilise the same personal visual vocabulary that brings wit, humour and a bowerbird curiosity to the hybrid works that simultaneously connect the aesthetic and intellectual realms.

People, place and object are present in the traditional sense, yet contemporary environmental concerns can be read and understood by a diverse audience. She enjoys a play on words and double meanings such as 'still life' and 'still scape'.

Schoenheimer's response to a place suggests that things are not always as they first appear!

**FIGURE 5.39** Leigh Schoenheimer, *Still-Scape: Tweed Weeds #4 - return*, acrylic and oil on plywood. Each panel 30.5 x 40.5 cm. Featuring Rag Weed, Lance-leaved Rattlepod, Verbena Bonariensis



## *Artist's statement*

The Tweed Gallery is located high on a hill south of Murwillumbah and takes in panoramic views across the verdant Tweed Valley to Woolumbin/Mt Warning. While in residence, I sipped my morning coffee each day blissfully soaking up those views, before going on a daily bicycle ride down through the valley. In amongst the landscape, it became evident that the roadsides and beyond were populated by camphor laurel trees and a proliferation of low growing, flowering weeds – a truth not seen from a distance. The idea for 'Still-Scapes' was born from this realisation.

This series of 'expanded still life' paintings feature arrangements of pretty weeds picked from the district's roadsides, and words appropriated

from the computer keyboard (control, escape, return, save as, etc), which take on new meanings when inserted between these micro and macro views of the area. The various readings suggested by the text elements create shifts in understanding.

If invasive enough, weeds ultimately cause the collapse of local ecosystems, which are in part responsible for the mass extinction process that is currently underway in Australia. Since completing the Tweed-Weeds Still-Scapes, I have begun looking at the invasive weeds in my local Brisbane area – Toohey forest. Different place, same story! ...

LEIGH SCHOENHEIMER

Exotic plant species have shaped our landscapes, in a variety of pretty ways. The extinction of native flora and fauna has been the unintended consequence of this importation. The still life arrangement features the collected weeds that have shaped the landscape. Words appropriated from a computer keyboard are inserted between the two observations symbolising our digitally mediated lives and understanding. These words take on new meanings in this context. The application of colour to form structure and distance is reminiscent of a Cezanne landscape. How artists respond to place and develop ideas is demonstrated through this work.

In summary, John Honeywill talks about avoiding the narrative while skilfully adapting and mastering classical techniques to paint objects in spaces that mine our emotions through the dramatic, sublime or beautiful.

Leigh Schoenheimer focuses on environmental issues building on her personal response to both objects and place, while referencing the story of art from Modernism through to Contemporary art, to communicate an environmental message.

Both artists communicate a viewpoint that challenges how we see and understand the material world.

In Unit 1, you explore representations of people, places and objects that make up the material world. The lists in Table 5.2 show how each of these artists draws inspiration from multiple aspects of their material world to inform their focus. For example, Leigh Schoenheimer considers plants as both still life, responding to aesthetic qualities, and a transmitter of knowledge, reminding the viewer that not all is as it sometimes appears. Context and knowledge are significant tools for the artists to employ.

**TABLE 5.2** THE WAYS IN WHICH ARTISTS DEVELOP MEANING ON MULTIPLE LEVELS

ARTIST	OBJECT	VISUAL LANGUAGE
John Honeywill	Nostalgic representational	The artists have a common interest in the power of composition, the still life genre, and the manipulation of form.
Leigh Schoenheimer	Symbolic deconstruction using the language of Modernism and Contemporary art	



### DISCUSS

Collaborate and brainstorm to identify other possible links in Table 5.2.



Lenses are ways of seeing that frame everything we perceive. They make sense of the situations we find ourselves in, the people we meet – even the ways we see ourselves. They allow us to understand everything from science and art to relationships and teamwork.

DOUG MARMAN, INNOVATOR, JOURNALIST AND PHOTOGRAPHER



### INQUIRY LEARNING 5.7

- Take photographs regularly of your work mid process.
- Compare what you see physically with the image on the screen and observe how scale and resolution are altered. Some imagery may become the process work for developing future photographic images.
- The space between the work and the viewer plays an important role in perception. Some contemporary artists aim to deconstruct this space altogether by making works interactive or controlling space in the form of an installation.
- View the work of Leigh Schoenheimer, noting the dimensions of the work. This demonstrates how critical it is that you always indicate the scale and materials when recording your imagery for assessment and an audience.
- Identifying similarities and differences assists in analysing the artist's intent and the manipulation of perception. Create a comparative table and with reference to a selection of images that appear to have a similar subject matter. Describe the connections between visual perception and application of the elements and principles of art and design that the artist(s) have applied as a result of their focus.



### DISCUSS

Technology potentially offers new possibilities and may ultimately redefine art as lens. Discuss innovations such as time-based media, four-dimensional imaging, digital platforms and communications. How might they influence how art is made in the future? Consider the role of the contemporary art gallery in the future and what it might look like. What are some locations and public spaces where audiences view and participate in artworks/forms?

Art as lens directs and embraces the analytical process of critical and creative thinking and reflection, culminating in independent viewpoints expressed through visual language and communicated through art. It aims to challenge the subconscious and develop a more mindful engagement with the artwork so the viewer can critically reflect upon what they see, understand and consider to be a valid representation of the material world.

## 5.11 How do students respond to the work of artists?



**FIGURE 5.40** Bianca Van Zyl, *Alone in the Feed*, 2023, digital photograph printed on canvas and stretched onto frame, 91 x 61cm. In this work, the student, Bianca Van Zyl, explores the 2D into 3D concept and the idea of a story board.

### Supporting Evidence 4



Leigh Schoenheimer, *Cup and Cowrie*, acrylic on canvas, 25 x 20cm, Schoenheimer's acrylic painting *Cup and Cowrie* depicts a display of collected items transformed into simplified forms that use the same visually appealing colours and patterns. Literally, the painting portrays a stacked tea cup and seashell sitting on a roll of tape on a cup and block, next to a stick. Each form uses bold colours that contrast with each other making them stand out. These were simplified to spell out the word 'view' with each letter in a colour from one of the forms. Non-literally, the paintings symbolise how technology in the modern world generates saturated imagery that takes away from objects' form.



Bianca Van Zyl, *Slice of Cake*, 2023, acrylic on canvas, 25 x 20 cm

This experimental work was inspired by Schoenheimer's *Cup and Cowrie*. Literally this work depicts a cake painting that has been simplified to a 2D form using letters. Non-literally, this work symbolises how modern technology removes and saturates art to transform them into simplified pieces made to look 2D. The camera lens that flattens images down to shapes and colours, rather than capturing the full form and depth of objects in real time. The letters in the simplified form all resemble colours from the cake and patterns from the table cloth to enforce this. A strength I found when experimenting with this, was how easy it was to draw the main colours and shades from the cake, and simplifying the forms into letters, with the letters literally spelling out cake. A limitation I experienced was replicating the pattern of the tablecloth onto a 2D surface (letter) rather than an angled position that lay flat on the table. This experimentation has informed my art, as I would like to explore further into flattening painted images.

**FIGURE 5.41** Student process page. Here the use of pattern and bold primary colours is adapted into the image while pursuing the inquiry question – what do we really perceive?



**FIGURE 5.42** Leigh Schoenheimer, *Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing: Construction #7*, 2017, oil on plywood – triptych with free-standing, polychromed timber assemblage, triptych: 50 x 122 cm, assemblage: 26 x 12 x 12 cm

Artists devise unique viewpoints and representations that challenge the audience to consider their connection to images, objects

and perspectives. Specific lenses potentially filter or distort a viewpoint and influence how we communicate a viewpoint about the world.



**FIGURE 5.43** Leigh Schoenheimer, *Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing: Construction #8*, 2017, oil on plywood, triptych with free-standing, polychromed timber assemblage, triptych: 62 x 92 cm, assemblage: 61 x 17 x 11 cm



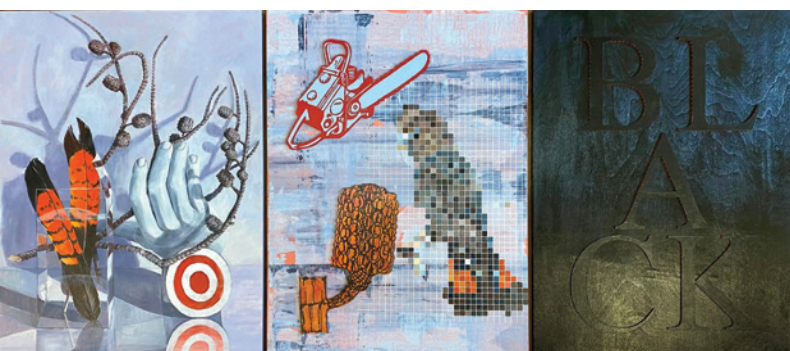
## Leigh Schoenheimer

*Glossy Black #1* and *Glossy Black #2* build a story to convey a message, with the consequences growing as the images are viewed together. Schoenheimer aims to capture attention through stylistically diverse images, shared symbology and carefully calibrated colour harmonies that oscillate between distinctly different yet visually coherent narratives.



**FIGURE 7.25** Leigh Schoenheimer, *Glossy Black #1*, triptych, acrylic on ply, with cut plywood shape and gloss medium, 137 x 61 cm. Private collection. Addressing the plight of the Queensland glossy black cockatoo

The glossy black cockatoo, found across eastern Australia, is the smallest of the five species of black cockatoo living here. Due to a decline in habitat and seeds, *C. lathami* or the glossy black cockatoo is listed as vulnerable by the Queensland Department of Environment, Science and Innovation.



**FIGURE 7.26** Leigh Schoenheimer, *Glossy Black #2*, triptych, acrylic on ply, with cut plywood shape and gloss medium, 137 x 61 cm. Private collection. Addressing the plight of the Queensland glossy black cockatoo

Beyond its attention-grabbing graphic-design power, the target symbol has evolved as a metaphor in my environmentally themed paintings. It appears often in my work, as a way of saying ‘look here! – ‘pay attention!’ – ‘focus on this’ – ‘we need to target this issue’.

LEIGH SCHOENHEIMER ON USING TARGET MOTIFS AS A CODE (IN CONVERSATION)

### DISCUSS

Identify the symbols and objects in the imagery and chart what they communicate as codes.

As a starting point what might the hand suggest about human intervention in the environment?

Looking at the pixelated central panel of Figure 7.26 – which modernist art theory does this technique approach reference?

Schoenheimer’s body of work, *The Meaning of (Still) Life: An Unnatural History*, presents ecological narratives about Australia’s threatened species and environmental issues via a set of expanded, conceptual, still life paintings that feature symbols, metaphor and text to present narratives around biodiversity issues.

In each work, a realistic, still life painting is juxtaposed with a set of appropriated clip art equivalences sourced from Google searches. Text panels provide another interpretive layer in many of the works.

Utilising a panoply of sources, styles and symbols these works are simultaneously a study in semiotics – inviting a decoding of visual language and ideas – and a precautionary tale about the plight of our natural environment.

LEIGH SCHOENHEIMER (IN CONVERSATION)

Viewing the three-panel works becomes a decoding process as the viewer searches for clues that are both literal and conceptual. New languages are continuously developing through the impacts of technology on our connectivity and visual environment. Emojis, clip art and words from the computer keyboard (Control, Shift, Return, Escape, Alt etc) are codes that take on new meanings in Schoenheimer's compositions. Codes are key organisers of knowledge in areas such as science or a cultural form of dialogue that continually changes, reflecting an identity that is not necessarily accessible to all and therefore motivate further enquiry.

### INQUIRY LEARNING 7.7

Investigate artworks where text is referenced in or as imagery and consider its function and purpose. Does it convey coded knowledge or cultural meaning?

Schoenheimer cites American artist Robert Indiana as influential in her decision to explore text as code, form and colour to communicate messages in her works. Research the history of Indiana's *Love* sculpture being recognised around the world and discover how people have responded to the image being replicated around the world!



**FIGURE 7.27** Robert Indiana's *Love* – stacked serif capital letters with the tilted o, remains publicly acclaimed around the world. People felt they owned the concept. In response, Indiana has authorised over 50 versions in many languages.

### DISCUSS

As language is technically a code, interesting questions arise around appropriation and when it is valid.

Australian artists Tony Albert and Jon Campbell offer diverse examples of the application of text.

Albert's *Sorry* is an Australian political statement steeped in the search for reconciliation, while Campbell uses snippets of conversation, vernacular words and phrases typically associated with Australia yet not always understood outside the country.

Like Schoenheimer, Campbell transforms the original function of the words by applying the conventions of formal abstraction to both confuse and to elevate them to a pictorial object.

### INQUIRY LEARNING 7.8

Experiment with the use of text or words as visual elements that communicate meaning. Numbers, and short words such as *eat*, *hug*, *die* and *hope*, remain embedded in Robert Indiana's visual repertoire. A simple cut and paste exercise using recycled printed material, photocopied multiples or a design function on your computer will get you started.

Research Schoenheimer's use of code across her practice. Explore the commonly featured target and trace the links back to Jasper Johns.

### About the artist

Brisbane artist Leigh Schoenheimer engages in a multidisciplinary contemporary art practice, emphasising vibrant paintings and assemblage constructions. Her work frequently explores the codes in the images she creates, through

colourful, multi-panel still-life compositions, often addressing environmental themes.

Schoenheimer’s distinctive sculptures, which often share the visual language of her paintings, add a playful and inquisitive element. Her art seamlessly blends aesthetic appeal with intellectual depth.

## Focus: codes, symbols, signs and art conventions

The role of the artist is to use codes, symbols and signs that are often unconscious to the everyday person and bring them into their conscious thinking. The artist may purposely combine what

appear to be unrelated signs in an attempt to jolt the viewer’s thinking; to make them ask: ‘What is this about?’




Your aim through your art-making is to find signs and symbols that have meaning to you and combine them with art making conventions to create an impact on your audience.

## Codes in our everyday

Experiment with language in art that can be verbal, inaudible, literal or implied, narrative, metaphoric, persuasive, or decorative.

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**TABLE 7.1** METAPHORS, METONYMS, ALLEGORIES, ICONS, SYMBOLS, MYTHS AND OLD SAYINGS

	DEFINITION	ARTWORK EXAMPLE	MEANING
Metaphor	an expression, often found in literature, that describes a person or object by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to that person or object	 <p>Sancintya Mohini Simpson, <i>Vessel (iteration #2)</i>, 2020</p>	Simpson substitutes the meaning of the <i>lota</i> vessel from an everyday object to that of a human or boat.
Metonym	a word or expression that refers to something using the name of one of its qualities or features	 <p>Jonathan Tse, <i>Portrait of an Australian Medium</i>, hand screenprinted artist's book</p>	Tse uses a passport with personal images printed on each page as a representation of all immigrants to Australia
Allegory	a story, play, poem, picture, or other work in which the characters and events represent particular moral, religious, or political qualities or ideas	 <p>Sancintya Mohini Simpson, <i>kūlī / karambu</i>, 2020–2021</p>	This style of miniature watercolour paintings was traditionally done for wealthy families or to tell a religious story, but Simpson has employed this process to change the narrative to tell of the stories of those that were indentured workers on sugar cane farms.

(Continued)