

6.2 Case study: Leigh Schoenheimer



Figure 6.4 Leigh Schoenheimer

Artist quote

Through my work I investigate the nature of 'perception', by setting up a dialogue between seeing and knowing a subject.

– Leigh Schoenheimer

Concept: A lens to explore the material world

Context: Contemporary

Focus: People, place, objects

after the invention of photography in the mid 1800s, completely rewrote the rulebook on image making. Through this work, I pose questions about what it is to make 'pictures'.

– LEIGH SCHOENHEIMER

Artist Leigh Schoenheimer lives in Brisbane and focuses on painting and sculptural forms, having developed a philosophy about the virtues of modernism and abstraction in contemporary art. Her experiences as an art educator influence the dialogue around navigating abstraction. As a designer, Leigh handcrafts bespoke jewellery that features aesthetic influences from her painting research, resulting in contemporary and innovative objects.

The theme of 'Perceive | Conceive' explores constructs or visual explanations about how aesthetic cues work within visual art:

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Through my work I investigate the nature of 'perception', by setting up a dialogue between seeing and knowing a subject. This is often achieved by referencing the imagery and styles of the many 20th century artists who,

INQUIRY LEARNING 6.2

- 1 Contrast seeing and knowing a subject.
- 2 What are the implications of these two realms upon image making?

Leigh Schoenheimer paints images that require her to selectively mine stylistic shifts in representation, referenced from art movements such as Cubism, Suprematism and Russian Constructivism. The viewer is taken on a visual journey from realism to abstraction or the figurative to the non-figurative, so they get to know the imagery.

Western/European 20th century art is the lens that informs Schoenheimer's body of work 'Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing'. The logical process of deconstruction into abstraction is revealed to the audience in a storyboard format that features visual explanations.



Figure 6.5 Leigh Schoenheimer, *What – Not Box*, 2015, oil on plywood (33 x 50 cm), based on a collection of formally arranged curios or objects in a shadow box

The left panel of *What – Not Box* (Figure 6.5) is a realist observation of the arrangement and the right panel is a deconstructed set of essential visual elements reduced to colour and shape. The result is an instructional sequence with the two panels individually conveying specific meaning yet reading as one resolved painting. This work becomes the process of analysis and an exploration into ‘how we see’.

Of her work *The Meaning of (Still) Life: The Elephant* (Figure 6.6), Schoenheimer says:

Figure 6.6 In a unique twist, the question ‘what is a still life?’ becomes the subject matter itself in Leigh Schoenheimer’s work titled ‘Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing’: *The Meaning of (Still) Life: The Elephant*, 2017, oil on ply (42 x 60 cm).



ARTIST’S STATEMENT

A set of disparate objects are tightly packed into a box that cannot quite contain them. The arrangement spills out into the foreground space. White contour lines suggest shapes that optically float across a conceptual space of tessellated squares in a pixelated style reminiscent of Pointillist colour theory. The pixels are simultaneously suggestive of the digitisation of images, a process which often degrades the contemporary experience of viewing art on a digital device.

– LEIGH SCHOENHEIMER

A sense of light and space is controlled through hue saturation and side-by-side colour relationships. Schoenheimer explains the origin of this idea: ‘the traditional, representational scene is about what you see from a fixed viewpoint, a Western art construct, driven by the conventions of **perspective**’.

perspective refers to the representation of objects in three-dimensional space (i.e. for representing the visible world) on the two-dimensional surface of a picture

In essence, a formularised representation of the world resulted. In the early 1900s, the Cubists started to break down the division between the subject and its surroundings to create a deconstructed field or picture plane, demanding that all elements including the background were of equal importance.

– LEIGH SCHOENHEIMER

INQUIRY LEARNING 6.3

- 1 Collect and collate objects that are personal and organise them into a considered format.
- 2 Manipulate visual weight through colour, cutting in half or embedding into a surface.
- 3 Record the process: drawing, photography, collage, sculpture or painting.
- 4 Investigate and analyse how artists use the genre of still life and manipulate the compositional values of the imagery to communicate an idea.

The Cubists explored multiple viewpoints and gave rise to the concept of simultaneous vision at a time when the invention of the camera offered a new version of a fixed viewpoint. The photograph was embraced as the true representation of ‘what we see’.

The Cubists were a group of artists influenced by Paul Cézanne’s (1839–1906) ideas about the representation of three-dimensional form, and included Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, Robert Delaunay, Fernand Léger and Juan Gris.

In response, the visual language of Cubism and Futurism gathered together ‘all that one knows and has experienced’ of a subject rather than illustrating just what is seen with the eye.

Having analysed the works of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris from the Analytical Cubist period (1908–12), Schoenheimer thoughtfully dissects and gives visual form to explanations about the shift in art away from the conventions of traditional representation to cerebral and more abstract ways of seeing and thinking.

DISCUSS

The modernist art movements occurred over a short period of time but are well documented. Do you believe that the theories of 100 years ago remain relevant today?

In the painting ‘Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing’: *Gumnuts with African Head*, a Cubist lens is implied by asserting the picture plane, devising curves, angles and toned facets synonymous with Analytical Cubism (Figure 6.7). The realist still life is processed into an oval window and further abstracted, resulting in a shape/text interchange. Three images or panels entice the viewer to reassess *how we see* or *perceive* the objects – a strategy favoured by the Cubists.

The artist has responded to stimulus from the material world by designing the traditional view of a still life with a circular fruit bowl and round tray that she then deconstructs into a swirl of curvature. The contrasting block of text is cleverly configured into three rows rather than the linear left to right sequence inherent in reading English and European

Figure 6.7 Leigh Schoenheimer, ‘Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing’: *Gumnuts with African Head*, 2016, acrylic on ply (54 x 123 cm)



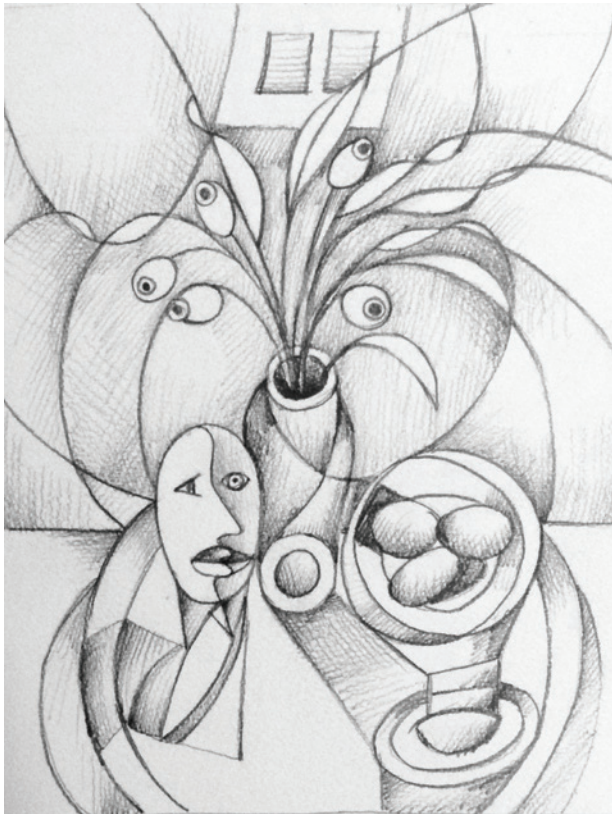


Figure 6.8 Leigh Schoenheimer, sketch for 'Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing': *Gum Nuts and African Head*, 2016, graphite on paper (approx. 28 x 40 cm)



Figure 6.9 Leigh Schoenheimer, scanned graphite sketch digitally coloured for 'Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing': *Gum Nuts and African Head*, 2016, graphite on paper (approx. 28 x 40 cm)

syntax. The planning sketches explore composition, colour placement and tone.

Multiple possibilities in relation to the scale and shape of the support is explored during the planning phase of a deconstruction (see Figures 6.8 and 6.9).

The visual elements invite the brain to interpret the three images in Figure 6.7 as one painting. The traditional still life arrangement of objects in a realist space first engages the eye. The mind is then stimulated by the reorganised colours and shapes in the deconstructed fields, reminiscent of the original objects. A cool deep green is plotted across the panels with a **focal point** landing on the pointillist rendered 'L'. The green-blue of the

vase dominates the central oval and works as a negative shape to form the text, thus creating visual balance. This colour continuity reinforces the idea of 'equivalence', which is central to the intent of the work. The vibrant colour and use of text creates a playful entry point to understanding this three-part dialogue about perceiving vs conceiving.

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focal point in art, the area to which the eye is drawn

In *Construction #6*, the small sculpture that provided the starting point for the work features an appropriation of readily recognisable elements from pop art. The text 'Form' offers a focus point and the

Figure 6.10 Leigh Schoenheimer, 'Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing': *Construction #6*, 2017, painting details: oil on plywood (21 x 62 cm), sculpture details: recycled timber, found objects, paint (18 x 13 x 9 cm)

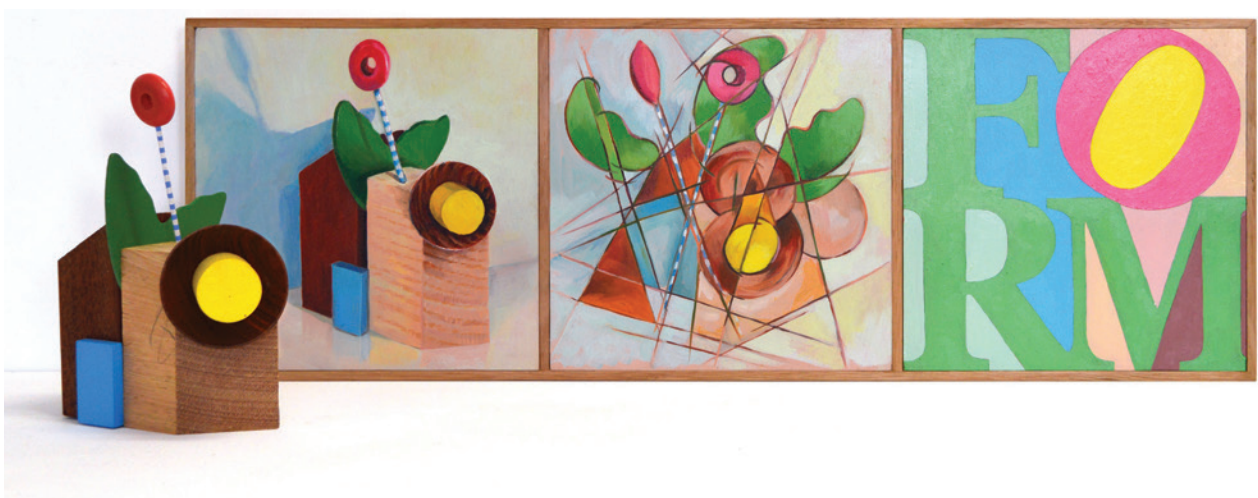





Figure 6.11 Leigh Schoenheimer, graphite and watercolour on paper (each panel 23 x 15 cm) – inquiry process, provided from the artist folio

composition is cleverly equalised across the painting with the strategic placement of the primary hue of yellow. The  in *Form* visually connects the three yellow circles that lead the eye across the picture plane into the space in front of the sculpture and back into the picture plane. The triangular pathway travelled is echoed by the fine directional lines on the central panel, which clarifies through drawing the multi-view understanding of Perceive | Conceive.


Process drawings focus on text as shape. When analysing the content of the composition, the seminal work *LOVE* by American artist Robert Indiana (first original in 1970) comes to mind (Figure 6.12). The appropriation of the compositional  (tilted 'O') exploits the semiotic language developed during pop art that has received public acclaim. Indiana willingly embraced this visual tool and has produced more than 48 authorised versions of the work around the world.

Figure 6.12 Robert Indiana, *LOVE*, 1970



In the inquiry process, the postmodern use of text elements sets out to replace what the eye beholds in favour of a semiotic interpretation (Figure 6.13). Schoenheimer pushes this process by focusing on 'what we see and what we know' by manipulating what we Perceive | Conceive.

INQUIRY LEARNING 6.4

Experiment with the use of text or words as visual elements that communicate meaning. Numbers and short words such as *eat*, *hug* and *die* remain embedded in Robert Indiana's visual repertoire. He created the work *Hope* in 2008 to support Barack Obama's US presidential campaign.

Figure 6.13 Leigh Schoenheimer, form sketch, 2017, watercolour on paper (20 x 20 cm)



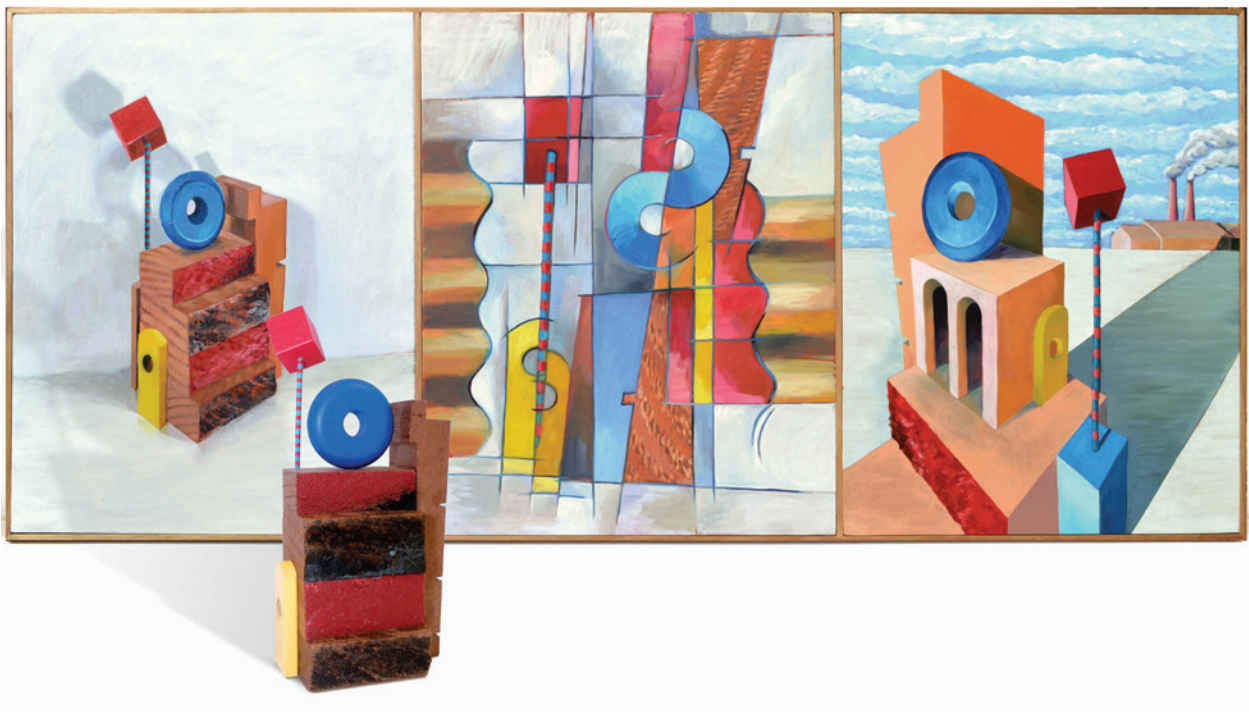


Figure 6.14 Leigh Schoenheimer, 'Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing': *Construction #7*, 2017, painting details: oil on plywood (50 x 122 cm), sculpture details: recycled timber, found objects, paint (26 x 12 x 12 cm), with sculpture

Schoenheimer's *Construction* series features wooden assemblages that are appropriated into the subject matter or imagery and purposely placed in front of the painting. *Construction #7* features a wooden assemblage that is an abstract form devoid of meaning but reminiscent of children's wooden toys.

The still life is skilfully rendered in oil paint to communicate an austere yet nostalgic space. The sensitive painting of the wood grain surface contrasts with the primary hues of red, yellow and blue to replicate the solid form. A visual pun emerges as the aesthetically pleasing abstract sculpture is precisely

rendered from a fixed viewpoint through the manipulation of light, shade and a local colour palette. A visual shift or disruption of the form occurs in the centre panel as the observational image energetically deconstructs and is rearranged as a third panel into a mystical space reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico's 1919 urban scapes and iconography. Remnants of figuration, specifically the blue disc that emerges as a key object, guide the viewer across the panels and contribute to a melancholic sense of detachment. This innovative process directs the viewer to oscillate between looking backward at realism and forward to surrealism as they interpret the imagery.

Figure 6.15 Leigh Schoenheimer, 'Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing': *Construction #8*, 2017, oil on plywood (62 x 92 cm)



Audiences' reactions to abstraction fascinate Leigh Schoenheimer.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

Everyone gets a picture! They seem to prefer literal images.

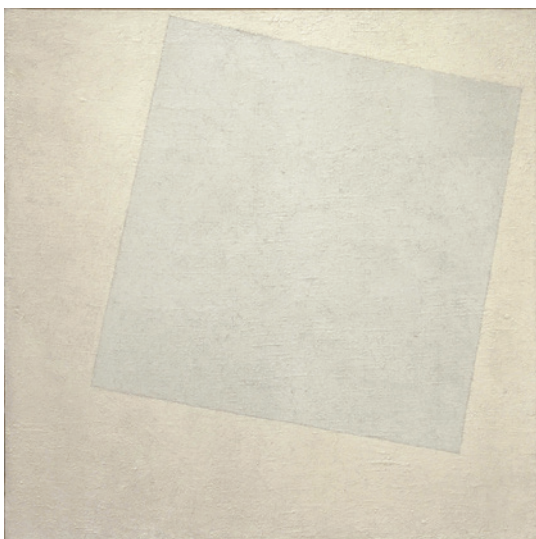
Figuration seems to be more readily embraced by the viewer and this motivates me to develop works that offer a journey across observed realism through deconstruction to the conceptual use of text as a form. The works are intended to become a lesson about the history of art, the theories and stylistic explorations of the previous 100 years and the visual solutions that although devised by painters and sculptors of the 20th century remain challenging to audiences today.

– LEIGH SCHOENHEIMER

Art history offers a relevant lens. It identifies visual struggles from the past and proposes possible aesthetic solutions that remain relevant into the future.

The language and purpose of art was significantly altered by Kazimir Malevich, a Russian Suprematist, when he painted *White on White* in 1918 (Figure 6.16). This work was considered absurd at the time

Figure 6.16 Kazimir Malevich, *White on White*, 1918, oil on canvas (79 cm x 79 cm), MoMA, New York City. Appropriating visual vocabulary to explore the essence of seeing, perceiving and conceiving an image reminds us that 'old' yet radical ideas remain relevant in the contemporary art world.



by many and remains a step too far for some today! In this type of minimalist abstraction, the painting is the subject matter.

Leigh Schoenheimer reflects on this:

As an art teacher, I noted that students ascribed value to a painting by its degree of realism and an assessment of the skills required to create the realist image. Yet, abstraction is ever present in one form or another in contemporary art. It emerged in response to massive developments in knowledge and mechanical change that impacted upon the human experience.

– LEIGH SCHOENHEIMER

Art as lens or a 'way of seeing' offers a commentary on change. The theories that have shaped visual language in the recent past have morphed into a conceptual lens where the nature of art is often the subject of art itself. Postmodernism embraces this notion and reminds us that nothing is new, everything is up for grabs!

DISCUSS

What do you really think about abstraction? Do you have ideas about what it might mean? Research and further examine its contribution to visual language and how we engage with contemporary art.

Schoenheimer's paintings insist upon an intellectual conversation with the viewer. The formal qualities of the work are uncompromising as the multiple panels are never separated. The images are governed by colour schemes, pattern and surfaces that are visually appealing. In the contemporary context, technology generates imagery to the point of saturation. Potent visual language requires a discerning lens.

Leigh Schoenheimer regularly reflects on the process and refines her inquiry question: What is left when you have a pure abstraction? Her answer is 'solving equivalences': a point in visual problem-solving when all elements or components are considered of equal value and importance, and generate a contemporary solution to the visual problem of achieving equivalence between realism and abstraction.



Figure 6.17 Leigh Schoenheimer, 'Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing': *Construction #5*, 2017, painting details: oil on plywood (31 x 73.5 cm), sculpture details: recycled timber, found objects, paint (20 x 15 x 12 cm)

In *Construction #5*, the seduction of realism is balanced with a surreal Joan Miró–inspired space. Employing a technique attributed to painter Gerhard Richter, the physical image is built, then erased back to the bare minimum to create a heightened sensibility and subtle presence of form under the paint layers.

Schoenheimer sums up her practice:

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

If any one panel is viewed in isolation it would not be contextualised. The realist panel serves as a context for a departure to abstraction. Pixelated, blurred or scraped surfaces hide and reveal, challenging the viewer to on occasion squint at the pixelated image or read a shape as text. The progression always purposely moves the viewer away from realism.

– LEIGH SCHOENHEIMER

Leigh Schoenheimer responds to the material world through a lens informed by the way we Perceive | Conceive the world. Modernism provides the foundation for contemporary responses that challenge our understanding of image-

making practices. The work requires the viewer to participate in a conversation and consider the relevance of abstraction as a 'Way of Seeing' in the contemporary context.

Other artworks by Leigh Schoenheimer

- 'Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing': *Callistemon*, 2017, triptych, oil on plywood (74 x 32 cm)
- 'Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing': *Construction #11*, 2017, triptych, oil on plywood with polychrome, recycled timber assemblage
- 'Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing': *Construction #9 (The Three Graces)*, 2017, triptych, oil on plywood with polychrome, recycled timber assemblage

References

- Leigh Designs: available online via the link at <http://cambridge.edu.au/redirect/8173>.
- Onespace: available online via the link at <http://cambridge.edu.au/redirect/8174>.