

Practitioner's Statement

Woof Woof

Mitchell Othen

The theme of dogs for my body of work was determined by what I love and what is important to me. My entire body of work is designed to evoke the feelings of naivety and innocence and my preferred drawing style and form is overtly simplified and playful. Throughout this work I have used different styles to capture the same message.

The first series of hand-painted ceramic plates depicting simple images of dogs was inspired by many artists, including Laura Carlin, Dion Beasley and Barbara Hanrahan. The two dimensional, childlike styles they use are whimsical and playful while still having messages and meaning. Indigenous art and mark making has also been a big influence on my work: it allows the layering of messages and symbols and also creates layers of texture. As my first pieces are asymmetrical and flat, texture and patterning have been used to build on the playful and fun feeling that these plates are intended to arouse.

The abstract form of these plates combined with the use of geometric shapes and flat two dimensional perspective highlights the unpretentious, childlike quality of my work. The simplified style of my drawing adds to this approach to convey the message of naivety and innocence.

The second series is a collection of six hand-painted ceramic tiles which, when combined, form one image. I have explored Darryl Austin's and Noel McKenna's use of distortion and Carlin's concept of painted ceramic jigsaw designs. The original image, of a tiger and a dog playing, was transferred onto a grid of six tiles. These tiles were then painted independently of each other. I used this isolated grid style of creation to increase distortion and add interest. To create continuity and unity between the tiles I have used a grass motif that is incorporated into each grid. This is in keeping with my interest in Aboriginal mark making and was used to create depth and interest. Indigenous painter Trevor Turbo Brown's bold canvases were an inspiration for this work. Bright colours are used to emphasise the childlike, playful nature of the image.

The dog has the only face visible in this work, therefore the viewer's eye is initially drawn to this. The fact that this tile is only of the dog's head and could be shown independent of the rest of the tiles adds to this focus. In this image the dog is a bit more realistic than the tiger with its crude stripes and bold colour, which establishes the contradiction in the combined piece. Tigers are wild animals whereas dogs are domesticated. Dogs may be simple, naïve and happy with their lot, but their freedom is questionable.

My third series of work combines my interest in “found objects” and sculpture with my love of dogs. Inspired by Orion’s book, ‘Dogs Hanging Out of Car Windows’, these pieces are symmetrical and a bit more realistic in style while continuing with the same expressive content. Previously I have used simplified, naïve drawings to convey meaning, whereas in this case I am representing simplicity and innocence through the nature of my dogs which are simple, fun-loving and innocent. The simple things in life make them happy, like hanging out of car windows and having wind blowing on their faces. My work was designed to emit a sense of fun and freedom. The addition of buttons as eyes, bold colour and distorted features was used to highlight the dog’s playful nature.

Mounted trophy heads were the inspiration to mount and frame these sculptures. The form is similar but the feeling and message is a complete contradiction. My clay sculptures feel more alive than these once breathing, beautiful wild animals. Grotesque, stuffed trophies of wild animals are supposed to evoke the primitive human emotions of hunting and the chase, whereas mine arouse the feelings of freedom and life accentuated by the playful and lively effects that I have utilised.

On another level, even though the domestic dog is happy with the wind in his face, his freedom is questioned. This time by being enclosed in a frame.

My fourth work is a ceramic sculpture of a dog. It is inspired by the works of Liz Williams and Susan Noll. It is bold, and stylised and slightly out of proportion to the average dog. The balanced features are also too perfect to be a real dog, however realistic colour and patches add a more realistic element to the sculpture. This lifelike element is then contradicted by the patches and colours being placed symmetrically on the dog as this rarely happens in reality. The dog’s expression is one of naivety and innocence. It is again a fun, playful piece of work.

To build on my personal connection to this piece I have incorporated ‘found objects’ that have a significant family link. The collar, registration tag and name are from my dog Charlie. To adorn this collar, I have used trim that was hand beaded and worn by my Nanna.

The last series includes two acrylic on paper paintings of dogs. I have broken the different parts of the dog’s body into a series of simplified, faceted shapes. To contrast these flat shapes I have added texture to the background in the form of organic, wavy lines. With these paintings I have returned to my original two dimensional childlike drawings to complete the body of work. The naivety and innocence is conveyed through the childlike nature of the paintings. I have used unrealistic colour and distortion to help effect this result.

The dogs themselves are in keeping with my overall style and theme of childlike, simple things. I have represented naivety and innocence throughout this body of work using simplified drawings, colour and subjects. The result is playful and lively showing the underlying contradictory nature of freedom and domestication.

