

Practitioner's Statement

Self Portraits

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In the initial stages of practical development, I was interested in the theme of identity. Self-portraits are often used by artists to explore their personality, emotions and circumstances. I began my exploration into self-portraiture interested in these ideas and because I am a readily available subject. I used oil paints because I felt with this medium, I was able to capture realism successfully.

To begin with, I was inspired by the contemporary realistic work of Ruby Chew after completing a painting course with her. I was inspired by Chew's process of alla prima painting (wet-on-wet) and her meticulous investigation of colour and tone. My first attempt at a portrait using oil paints was a painting of Frida Kahlo, following Chew's colour mixing and paint application techniques. This portrait was a technical exercise and sparked my original interest into oil paints as a possible practical medium.

Following my early thinking and sketching, I became more interested in the elements of art in portraiture. After visiting Robert Hannaford's exhibition at the Art Gallery of South Australia, I was inspired by his work and his loose, painterly style. I particularly like the way Hannaford explores light and colour, and how he positions his subjects on the canvas to create successful composition.

When painting my self-portrait, I incorporated technical skills learned from Ruby Chew with a more personal, expressive style inspired by Robert Hannaford's work to reach my own individual style.

I explored visual elements in my first self-portrait including line, shape, depth and colour. I captured shape by accentuating the shadows created by the strong light source, particularly under the figure's right eye. Depth and tone are necessary elements for capturing realism. To successfully achieve depth I used a black and white photograph to locate strong contrasts between light and dark to create tone (chiaroscuro). A major aspect of my piece was colour since I am interested in how it is manipulated in art. I explored the juxtaposition of complimentary colours for my background because I was inspired by Robert Hannaford's strong use of bright blue in the background of "Tom", 1987, oil on board, 91.0 x 122.0 cm. I painted a bright green background to contrast with the red of the T-shirt and included the blue and orange in the T-shirt line work to achieve a bright yet slightly discordant effect. The use of strong colour is an artistic component that fits in my personal aesthetic and these colours in particular attract my attention.

In my composition I placed the focal point slightly to the right of centre, where the light hits the eyes to draw the viewer's eye to the right of the canvas. The viewer's eye then moves down the chin and braid and follows the horizontal lines along the T-shirt and up again so that the eye is maintained exploring the face.

After completing my first self-portrait, I considered taking my work in a semi-abstract direction. I looked back at the work of Brett Whiteley who was influenced by Henri Matisse and their exploration of shape, colour and pattern. I decided to isolate these elements and created various collages by breaking down the structure of my face.

The results were Matisse-like and although I felt my use of colour and shape was strong, I considered the collages to be somewhat immature and unsophisticated.

Around this time I started to delve into a variety of media, predominately ink and wash, charcoal and graphite.

Whilst experimenting with collage, I returned to the work of Ai Weiwei and Andy Warhol. I had the opportunity to visit the Andy Warhol – Ai Weiwei exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria at the beginning of the year and I had enjoyed the way both artists explored irony and social commentary to create humour and wit in their work. This interest sparked my fascination into pulled faces. Within this exploration, I began to explore Ai Weiwei's interest in social media and the comicality in his selfies. I found the pulled face images appealing and quirky since they could be explored in a variety of contexts.

Andy Warhol explored colour extensively in his Pop Art work so I chose to further investigate compositional elements by stencilling my pulled faces. Although spray paints allowed me to work with a more dynamic and immediate way, I found registering multiple stencils was difficult. I created colourful, haphazard backgrounds using objects I found at home and stencilled monochromatic images over the top. I found that stencilling was unpredictable and I couldn't control the results to guarantee a consistent, successful outcome. There was the capacity to have some decorative, original accidents but overall I wanted more control in my work.

The intention behind my second self-portrait with oils was to explore wit within portraiture. The art elements I explored in my painting include shape and colour. Shape was a significant feature of my piece with I captured through the pattern of repeated figures in the background and through negative space. The stencil-like, simplified figures create a grid of natural shapes and by creating rows of three, I increased visual interest. I explored colour by saturating the realistic image to bring out vivid orange tones within the skin and by juxtaposing the complimentary colours purple and yellow, much like my first portrait.

In the composition of my piece, I placed the realistic figure which is the focal point in the lower section of the canvas to draw the eye down and painted the lips of various background figures different colours to draw the eye across the canvas diagonally.

Overall I am considerably pleased with my completed body of work. I have improved my ability to develop processes with which compelling and original art works are constructed. I had not used oil paints before this year and I believe I have demonstrated a high level of skill by painting strong, realistic portraits exploring various artistic techniques and elements.