



MONASH UNIVERSITY MUSEUM OF ART
EDUCATION KIT

MUMA

JUSTENE WILLIAMS: THE CURTAIN BREATHED DEEPLY

ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource is designed to support the exhibition Justene Williams: *The Curtain Breathed Deeply*. It encompasses learning and teaching activities that can be adjusted to align with Visual Arts curricula at various levels. Starting points for discussion and selected artworks highlight the key practices and ideas within the exhibition. Introductory text and a glossary provide background information for students.

The resource is designed to be used in conjunction with the exhibition catalogue.

EXHIBITION INTRODUCTION

The Curtain Breathed Deeply presents a series of newly commissioned video installations by Sydney-based artist Justene Williams. A rich environment of pattern, colour and texture, curtains and screens act as thresholds between the energy of one realm and another.

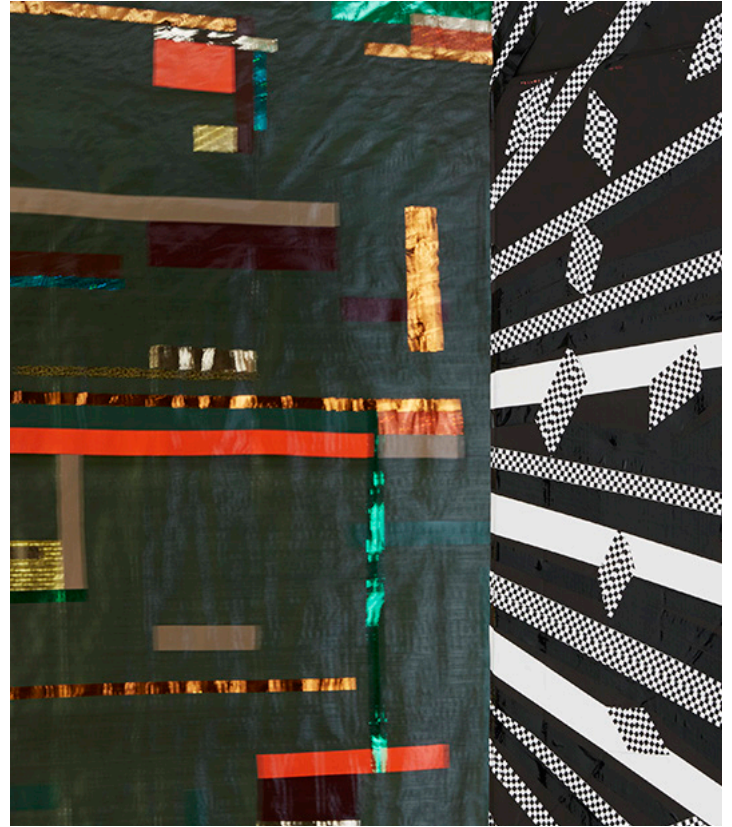
For Williams, the curtain and, more broadly, the exhibition pays tribute to her father – to his life and work, as well as the hospital curtain that marked the final stage of his life when he passed away from mesothelioma. The exhibition is at once poignant and celebratory, acknowledging the life of a loved one whilst also taking pleasure in the movement of living, breathing and sensual beings.

Williams' draws from many sources including her personal experiences of dance classes and memories of time spent in her father's wrecking yard; early twentieth century avant-garde art; and contemporary pop culture. Found objects that draw upon the vernacular of the everyday Australian suburban backyard such as the garage, inflatable pool and barbeque are amongst the many materials transformed to create a series of interconnected environments that together 'breathe' like a vast and mysterious body.

Coming to MUMA from Artspace in Sydney, Justene Williams: *The Curtain Breathed Deeply* has been developed with funding through a Catalyst: Katherine Hannay Visual Arts Commission.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Justene Williams lives and works in Sydney. She has exhibited widely throughout Australia and internationally. Her work is held in numerous collections including the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, National Gallery of Australia and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. She is represented by Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.



ARTISTIC PRACTICE AND INFLUENCES

Memories of growing up in suburbia have provided Williams with a rich source of material for her art practice. She remembers: 'most weekends were spent at my father's wrecking yard where a colourful graveyard of cars created a beautiful field of iron and paint pattern'. As a teenager Williams developed a lifelong interest in dance and performance, participating in numerous school dance Eisteddfods.

Williams graduated with a Bachelor of Visual Arts from the University of Western Sydney and a Post-Graduate Diploma from Sydney College of the Arts. She created her early photographs in familiar urban locations such as shopping centres and night clubs, applying a low-fi, grunge aesthetic.

Moving to Boston, Massachusetts in 2005 led to a significant development in Williams' practice as she replaced still photography with performance and video. The artist's basement became a home studio where she spent months constructing elaborate sets and costumes from cheap and recycled materials. Within these fantastical environments, Williams made a suite of performance videos using choreographed actions, rituals and gestures to express her ideas.

More recently Williams' practice has shifted from artist-as-performer to artist-as-director. As a recipient of a special one-off philanthropic visual arts commission, Catalyst: Katherine Hannay Visual Arts Commission, in 2013, Williams' working process has become increasingly stylised in terms of cinematography, post-production, editing, sound and lighting. Professional performers now mix with the artist's family and friends and Williams is more focused on the spatial aspect of her works.

LEARNING ACTIVITIES FOR THE CLASSROOM

Creating

1. Recalling the different colours, patterns, materials and textures in the exhibition, construct your own fantastical mask or costume.
2. Using the video performances in the exhibition as a starting point, create a series of gestures, dances or rituals. Record your performance.
3. Draw or construct your own film set using memories from your own backyard/childhood.
4. As a class make your own 'collaborative curtain' using materials such as tarpaulins, gaffer tape, holographic papers and plastic tablecloths. Present the artwork in a public space at school.

Responding

1. *'I sometimes talk about my work or my way of working as a subtle knowledge or an emotional intelligence. I work from the heart and I'm interested in communicating visually - seeing, reading and hearing through colour and movement'* Justene Williams

As a class discuss the way the Williams communicates visually through colour, pattern and movement.

2. Discuss the symbolic meaning and significance of the curtain in the exhibition.
3. What is a non-linear narrative and how does it differ from a linear narrative? What kind of narratives does Williams use within her video works? Why?
4. Williams coined the term 'dumpster diva' in relation to her practice. Why do you think she describes her practice and the act of making in this way?
5. List the ideas, materials, techniques and processes that Williams explores in *Santa was a Psychopomp* 2014.
6. *'My work is based on images seen, experienced and sourced anywhere and everywhere that refuse to go away and give rise to whole scenarios and obsessions that must be- revived, enacted, imagined and made real and unreal simultaneously'* Justene Williams

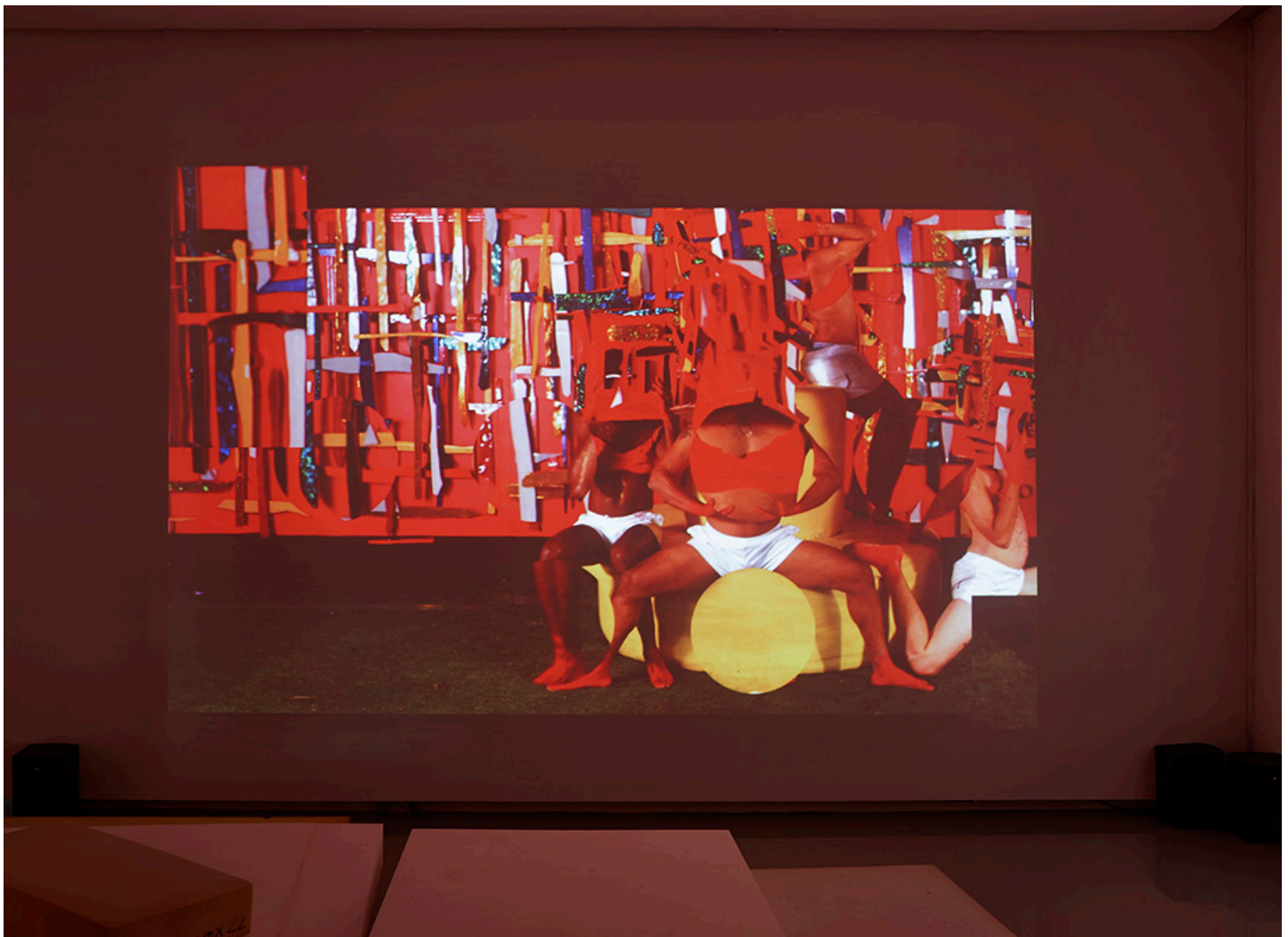
Images and objects from suburbia and consumer culture are presented throughout the exhibition. Name all the objects and images you can see that reference these themes. Discuss the way Williams transforms this everyday subject matter.

7. In an essay examine the personal and cultural background of Justene Williams and reflect upon how this has influenced her art making. Use examples from the exhibition to support your discussion.



8. Reconstructing the zeitgeist from particular moments in avant-garde art history is an important aspect of Williams' art practice. Select any pair of historical and contemporary works from the list below and consider how Williams has referenced the earlier piece within her own artwork. In your discussion compare and contrast the meanings and messages within the two artworks.

HISTORICAL	CONTEMPORARY
Pablo Picasso, <i>Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)</i> 1911-12	Justene Williams, <i>The Joy of Life after Matisse/Madonna/Marcel</i> 2014
Henri Matisse, <i>Dance (I)</i> 1909	Justene Williams, <i>The Joy of Life after Matisse/Madonna/Marcel</i> 2014
Max Ernst, <i>The Hat Makes the Man</i> 1920	Justene Williams, <i>A ceremonial hat worn for eating finger cheese</i> 2014
Max Ernst, <i>L'immaculée conception (from La Femme 100 têtes)</i> 1929	Justene Williams, <i>Given That/You put a spell on mine/Uterus</i> 2014
Piet Mondrian, <i>Broadway Boogie Woogie</i> 1943	Justene Williams, <i>In advance of a broken wing, 2014</i>
Piet Mondrian, <i>Broadway Boogie Woogie</i> 1943	Justene Williams, <i>In advance of a broken wing, 2014</i>
Dan Flavin, <i>Monument to V. Tatlin</i> 1966-69	Justene Williams, <i>Given That/You put a spell on mine/Uterus</i> 2014



GLOSSARY

Assemblage: the process of making three-dimensional or two-dimensional artistic compositions by putting together found objects.

Avant-garde: innovative, progressive and experimental art making at the forefront of contemporary culture.

Choreography: a sequence of movements, most often used in reference to dance

Dada: Dada was an artistic and literary movement that began in 1916 in Zurich, Switzerland. It arose as a reaction to the horrors of World War I and involved wildly diverse practices ranging from photography, sculpture, painting and collages to performance art and poetry. Many Dadaists believed that the middle-class ideals of reason and logic had brought about WWI; therefore they expressed their rejection of these values through an embrace of the nonsensical, chaotic and irrational.

Experimental: involving a radically new and innovative style.

Fantastical: the product of an unrestrained imagination. Usually something odd, remarkable, bizarre or grotesque.

Found object: an object used in an art practice not originally produced by the artist. For example, a found piece of wood used as a sculpture.

Installation art: three-dimensional works that are often site-specific, and designed to transform the perception and physical experience of a given space.

Multi-channel video: a term used for video art that involves multiple monitors or screens playing at once.

Noh theatre: Noh theatre is a major form of classical Japanese musical drama that has been performed since the 14th century. Noh theatre is often based on tales from traditional literature and involves a supernatural being transformed into a human who narrates a story. Masks and costumes are commonly used in Noh performances.

Performance art: performance art is a live medium, where an artist or actors perform for an audience. The performance may be scripted or unscripted, spontaneous or carefully orchestrated. It sometimes involves audience participation.

Pop culture: the mainstream of a given culture, especially Western culture.

Post-production: a term usually referring to filmmaking, video production and photography that involve the stages of production that occur after the shooting or filming is complete. Some of these processes include sound and video editing.

Psychopomp: An archetypal figure who guides the souls of the dead to the afterlife. Stories of psychopomps are widespread in mythology.

Ready-made: everyday objects selected by the artist and designated as art. The French artist Marcel Duchamp is recognised as the inventor of the ready-made.

Shaman: a person with access to the world of spirits. A shaman typically enters into a trance state during shamanic rituals.

Spectacle culture: a notion put forward by the French theorist Guy Debord in his 1967 publication, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Debord's 'spectacle' refers to the mass media, which is simultaneously enticing, deceptive, distracting and superficial.

Suburban vernacular: utilitarian and domestic forms of architecture such as a shed.

Surrealism: a cultural movement beginning in the early 1920s most known for its visual art and writing practices. The movement was concerned with representing the subconscious, and relationships between dream and reality.

Video art: a type of art that emerged in the 1960s and 70s with the wider public availability of video recording technology. Many early video artists used the medium to explore relationships between themselves, the physical world, whilst other people used video as a convenient medium for recording performance art and events.

Voodoo: a form of religion practiced among people in Haiti and the southern USA. Voodoo was appropriated by Hollywood in the early 20th century, leading to the introduction of the 'voodoo doll' in popular culture.

Zeitgeist: the 'spirit of the time' or way of thinking that typifies and influences culture at a particular time.