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Visual Literacy and Art Education: Putting Theory into Practice

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Abstract

This case study examined four New South Wales (NSW) Australian Year 12 visual arts students' use of visual literacy to create bodies of artwork. They used the NSW visual arts literacy constructs, the frames – subjective, structural, cultural, and postmodern, and the conceptual framework – artwork, artist, world, and audience, to inform their thinking. Following the art teacher's graphic and writing prompts, the students used visual literacy differently to read/decode/interpret visual statements and write/encode/create visual statements. Students thought visually and deliberately planned artwork to speak to an audience, using visual process diaries (VPDs) and artists' statements that combined images and texts. The study concluded that (1) Teaching visual literacy skills is essential. (2) Visual literacy skills take time to develop. (3) Visual literacy skills involve metacognition. (4) Conveying visual messages through art forms is best accomplished with developed skills in the medium or art form. (5) Visual literacy skills benefit from students' research, analysis, and interpretation of artworks to increase critical understanding. Visual literacy is culturally situated. (6) Visual literacy skills involve an awareness of audiences and a need to communicate ideas. (7) The conceptual framework, rather than the frames, provided a point of dialogue and focus within VPDs, artwork, and writing.

Visual literacy, visual arts education, New South Wales

Art Education and Visual Literacy: Putting Theory into Practice

According to Americans for the Arts (2016), visual literacy is crucial for the thinking skills needed for a digital age and its creative economy. Today's society is a visual culture in which images are no longer just supplements to written information, but are the primary sources of information that incorporate contextual, cultural, aesthetic, intellectual, and technical components (Averinou, 2009). Visual literacy includes seeing, interpreting, evaluating, creating, and making meaning of images and objects (International Visual Literacy Association, 2012; Institute of Museum and Library Services, n.d.). Visual literacy is often a part of the international art education curriculum and takes many forms, such as students' annotated journals and artists' statements, school reports on artists' work, and student summaries of critic's writing, all of which can be found in U.S. Advanced Placement journals and portfolios, International Baccalaureate research journals, and New South Wales art curriculum (College Board, 2025; International Baccalaureate, 2025; NSW Educational Standards Authority, 2016). This case study asks the questions: 1) How do New South Wales (NSW) Australia Year 12 (12th grade) Higher School Certificate (HSC) visual arts students use visual literacy to create a body of artwork? and 2) How do NSW Year 12 HSC visual arts students use the state-sponsored constructs of the conceptual framework and the frames to create a body of work?

Although there is no widely accepted definition of the term "visual literacy," after reviewing visual literacy literature, researchers Maria Avgerinou and Rune Pettersson (2011) discerned that the main components of visual literacy are: visual perception, visual language, visual learning, visual thinking, and visual communication. The researchers concluded the following: 1) visual literacy exists, 2) it's holistic, 3) one must learn it, 4) it may improve learning, 5) it is not universal, and 6) it often needs verbal support. As written language is encoded, so is visual language. Understanding and decoding visual images is an interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, and multidimensional process that speaks to us in both holistic and emotional ways of knowing. Visual language involves cognitive processes that include "communicating as well as evoking feelings and attitudes" (Avgerinou, 2001, as cited in Averinou & Pettersson 2011, p. 8). We encode images with meaning based on our past experiences. If we do not discuss the images with a wider audience, interpret images' meanings, or explain them to others, they are often not understood (Perkins, 1988). Yet, viewers will see what we tell them to see unless the images are critically examined for underlying messages and put into social and historical context. Media advertisements are prime examples of visual images that convey one thing, but imply another; we will be supposedly happy if we buy this product, but will have less money in our pockets. Visual, verbal, and written language are intertwined and reinforce memory and comprehension (Avgerinou, 2003). Images are culturally specific, and viewers see them from their frames of reference. The viewer often becomes the picture's author as they layer their interpretation onto the image (Barthes, 1977).

Literacy and the Arts

The U.S. Common Core State Standards Initiative (2025) and the U.S. National Core Arts Standards (2025) include expectations for visual literacy. The U.S. National Visual Arts Standards categories—Creating, Presenting, Responding, and Connecting—ask that students explain how they respond to objects and "analyze the impact of or cultural associations prompted

by specific images” (Stewart, 2014, p. 9). According to Sullivan (2001), "Thinking in art and thinking about art is language-dependent" (p.5) and is mediated by the art world, the artist, the audience, and the world as we see visual images as texts. The process of viewing and creating artwork, decoding it, and putting it into context does not come naturally. It requires developing critical thinking skills and an openness to varied points of view (Cruz & Ellerbrock, 2015).

Researchers and educators have made connections between students' investigation of artworks, their techniques, materials, and concepts to inspire student artmaking and relationships with the world (Marshall & Donahue, 2014; Stewart & Walker, 2005; Walker, 2001). These conversations are situated within cultural and social values and ideologies and negotiate culture and communication that reflects participants' beliefs and experiences (Morris, Lummis, & Lock, 2017). Discussing artwork helps students to explore, synthesize, and communicate ideas, make interdisciplinary metaphorical connections, become aware of their thinking, and be open to multiple points of view (DeSantis, 2009; Efland, 2002; Lazo & Smith, 2014; Marshall, 2019).

Literacy in the art classroom is a social practice that includes analyzing, interpreting, and creating artwork and often challenges expectations and stereotypes (Barton, 2013). Within the elementary classroom, the process of art criticism—viewing, talking, and writing about art— can lead to meaningful conversations and writing that helps students understand things about themselves and the world (Trent & Moran, 2017).

Engaging students in guided looking and questioning during museum visits can increase creative thinking, empathy, and critical thinking (Krantz & Downey, 2021). Scaffolded inquiry of artwork encourages students to generate more higher-order questions and inspires artmaking in museum-related settings (Erickson & Ramson Hales, 2018). Visual literacy practices can increase college students' oral and written abilities to share observations and ideas, debate, support possibilities, think critically, and develop their voices (Yenawine & Miller, 2014).

However, there is a gap in research concerning students' use of visual literacy practices within the high school art classroom. This study examines how four Year 12 HSC visual arts students in the State of New South Wales, Australia use state and school visual literacy expectations and state visual literacy constructs and techniques to research artists, interpret artwork, ask questions, create artwork and artist statements, and record their thinking processes, including visual, verbal, and written text.

New South Wales

Students and visual arts teachers in the State of New South Wales (NSW), Australia, use the investigation of artists and artwork, art criticism, and artmaking as integral parts of artist's practice to learn about the world, its history, its philosophical ideas, and its relationship to the self (Briggs, 2016). The NSW constructs provide a common language for visual literacy that includes looking and talking about art, writing, reflecting, and making in grades seven through twelve. The frames supply prompts to ask questions about art and reflect upon one's thinking. Beginning in the seventh grade, NSW students learn about the conceptual framework and use the frames as everyday tools when talking and writing about art and engaging in artistic practices (New South Wales Standards Authority, 2003).

The NSW model of investigating artwork employs the constructs of the conceptual framework (artwork, artist, world, and audience), components of artworld interactions, and the frames (subjective, structural, cultural, and postmodern) to represent various philosophical lenses. Students and teachers use these lenses to investigate artwork (New South Wales Standards Authority, 2016). The subjective frame includes the personal and psychological, it

explores emotion, intuition, imagination, memory, dreams, and the subconscious. The structural frame presents art and design as signs and includes visual language, symbolic meaning, materials, and techniques. The cultural frame encompasses understandings shared within social groups that incorporate social and cultural identities. Some of the cultural frame's topics include race, class, gender, religion, politics, technology, and science. The postmodern frame is the disruptive frame that challenges mainstream ideas and values. It recontextualizes ideas to include irony, ambiguity, parody, and appropriation, among other things. One can look at artworks, objects, and practices through one or more frames simultaneously.

Within NSW, visual arts is mandatory in grades seven and eight, elective in grades nine and ten, and seen as a pre-college elective in grades 11 and 12. In grades 11 and 12, students taking visual arts engage in a two-year Higher School Certificate (HSC) course whose final score counts towards college and university admission. A visual arts teacher's curriculum must include 30% art historical and critical studies in seventh and eighth grades, 40% in ninth and tenth grades, and 50% in the 11th and 12th grade HSC course. As students progress through visual arts studies, their visual arts curriculum enables them to become more autonomous in their artmaking, culminating in producing a well-researched body of artwork in the twelfth grade. Within the HSC course and often before, visual arts teachers must present students with a minimum of five artist case studies. Students read, analyze, summarize, and write about the works of artists, historians, and critics, putting them into context. This research often informs their artmaking. These case studies, teach students research and writing techniques that prepare them to take the required final written exams where they form critical art arguments in response to exam questions. The written exam asks students to critically analyze and interpret selected artwork (New South Wales Standards Authority, 2016). Twelve expressive forms are included in the HSC body of work: documented forms, collection of works, drawing, painting, photo media, printmaking, textiles and fiber, graphic design, designed objects, sculpture, ceramics, and time-based forms. Students must keep visual process diaries (VPDs) to document and annotate thought processes, artist research, and artwork development.

State-selected external assessors, master visual arts teachers, grade the bodies of work on both technique and conceptual understanding. State-selected external assessors also score this exam. The NSW assessment rubrics use the language of the frames and the conceptual framework (New South Wales Standards Authority, 2021). The NSW visual arts curriculum views visual literacy and artmaking as both creative and intellectual processes (New South Wales Standards Authority, 2003).

Methodology

Over two weeks in 2017, I visited Gregor Ladies' College, Australia. I attended the school's Higher School Certificate (HSC) art exhibition, observed art classes, studied curriculum and student artifacts, and interviewed Ms. Singleton and four of her 10 HSC Year 12 students. I obtained Institutional Review Board permission from my university and obtained NSW Office of the Children's Guardian permission, school principal permission, visual arts teacher consent, parental permission, and student assent to conduct the study. Gregor is an independent, non-selective day and boarding school for girls (Gregor Ladies' College, 2020) in Sydney. According to Lochmiller and Lester (2017), a case study "focuses on a detailed study of one or more cases within a bounded system" (p. 102). I used pseudonyms for students', the teacher's, and the school's names, photographed participants' HSC bodies of work and their VPDs, and made copies of Ms. Singleton's curriculum materials. Within this study, I used Avgerinou's and

Pettersson's (2011) definition of visual literacy abilities as "(a) to read/decode/interpret visual statements, and (b) to write/encode/create visual statements" and (c) "think visually" (p. 10) to act as the study's conceptual framework and looked for ways students engaged in these processes. Ms. Singleton, the visual arts teacher in this study, was a master art teacher whom I had met in previous visits to NSW schools.

Ms. Singleton has taught visual arts for over 20 years in numerous school settings and socio-economic environments (personal communication, July 26, 2017). Her visual arts students have obtained top scores for written and visual work and they exhibit in yearly Artexpress state-wide exhibitions of top-scoring student artwork (Artexpress, 2025). I designed the research questions to mirror questions asked to visual arts students by their visual arts teachers during the students' artmaking process.

Student Interview Questions:

1. How did you come up with the idea for making this artwork?
 - a. What inspired you to make this artwork?
2. What influenced your ideas?
 - a. What artists influenced you?
3. How has your artwork changed and evolved as you've made it?
4. How does/did this artwork relate to what you are/were studying in art class (the art curriculum you've experienced)?
5. How did you use the Frames (Structural, Cultural, Subjective, and Postmodern) and the Conceptual Framework (the artwork, the artist, the audience, and the world) in your artmaking process?
6. Do you plan to continue your study in art?

Ms. Singleton

Since the HSC assessment incorporates writing and creating artwork, Ms. Singleton knew that teaching writing, researching, and artmaking simultaneously was vital.

Art writing is something that they're encouraged and shown how to do from Year 7 [7th grade] onwards. So, they don't come to Year 12 without some experience, but they've got a new maturity, and every year you've got to build on that. (Singleton, personal communication, July 26, 2017).

Ms. Singleton helped students to scaffold their writing, using techniques that she'd learned from the English faculty. She used the frames and the conceptual frameworks within the class dialogue and class writing to have students answer and create questions from various points of view. Her class case studies asked students to research artists, put them into historical and cultural contexts, analyze how materials created meaning, and note what various audiences thought. (Singleton, personal communication, July 26, 2017). Students recorded memorable quotes as they read artists', critics', and historians' statements, completed worksheets, visited websites, and watched videos. When teaching students to write, Ms. Singleton asked them to use exciting adjectives and descriptive verbs to create compelling writing. They composed sentences that were built into paragraphs. Students used graphic organizers, guided worksheets with prompts, and frames and conceptual framework templates to plan and organize writing. As students summarized information about artists, groups, and movements, Ms. Singleton asked them to follow a CEET framework: Claim, Explanation, Evidence, and Tieback, to compose a coherent argument.

Students kept visual process diaries (VPDs) to record their artistic decisions. The HSC required VPDs as proof of student work. Students in Ms. Singleton's classes focused on their research in the VPDs during the first term of their Year 12 HSC course and annotated and recorded sketches and their thought processes, included images of inspirational work, and showed artist research (Singleton, personal communication, July 26, 2017). Ms. Singleton asked her students to create mind maps to begin. She believed that looking at a wide array of artists and inspirations throughout their studies helped students have a rich visual and conceptual repository from which to draw ideas. The HSC body of work often became a collaboration between student and teacher (Thomas, 2019). A student's verbal or written articulation of ideas was essential to Singleton; she would not talk to students about their artwork without their VPDs. Singleton did not grade the HSC VPDs, but assessed the HSC body of work progress.

You need to have something visual to work with for everyone to have a common understanding of it...for me, the diary is about the visual articulation of ideas along with reasoning in the annotations and the thinking and thought processes in the annotations so that I get the same picture as them and I can help support that kind of journey that they're going on with the body of work (Singleton, personal communication, July 26, 2017).

VPDs, along with students' artist statements, provided evidence of these visual literacy skills.

Ms. Singleton's body of work assessments mirrored the HSC marking standards (NSW Education Standards Authority, 2016). Her top rubric level for creating artwork expected an articulation of ideas, multi-level meaning, technical prowess, and time on task. Ms. Singleton regularly provided verbal and written feedback to her students as they created artwork and drafted artist statements. A closer look at student work illustrates the implementation of visual literacy within the artmaking process.

Diane

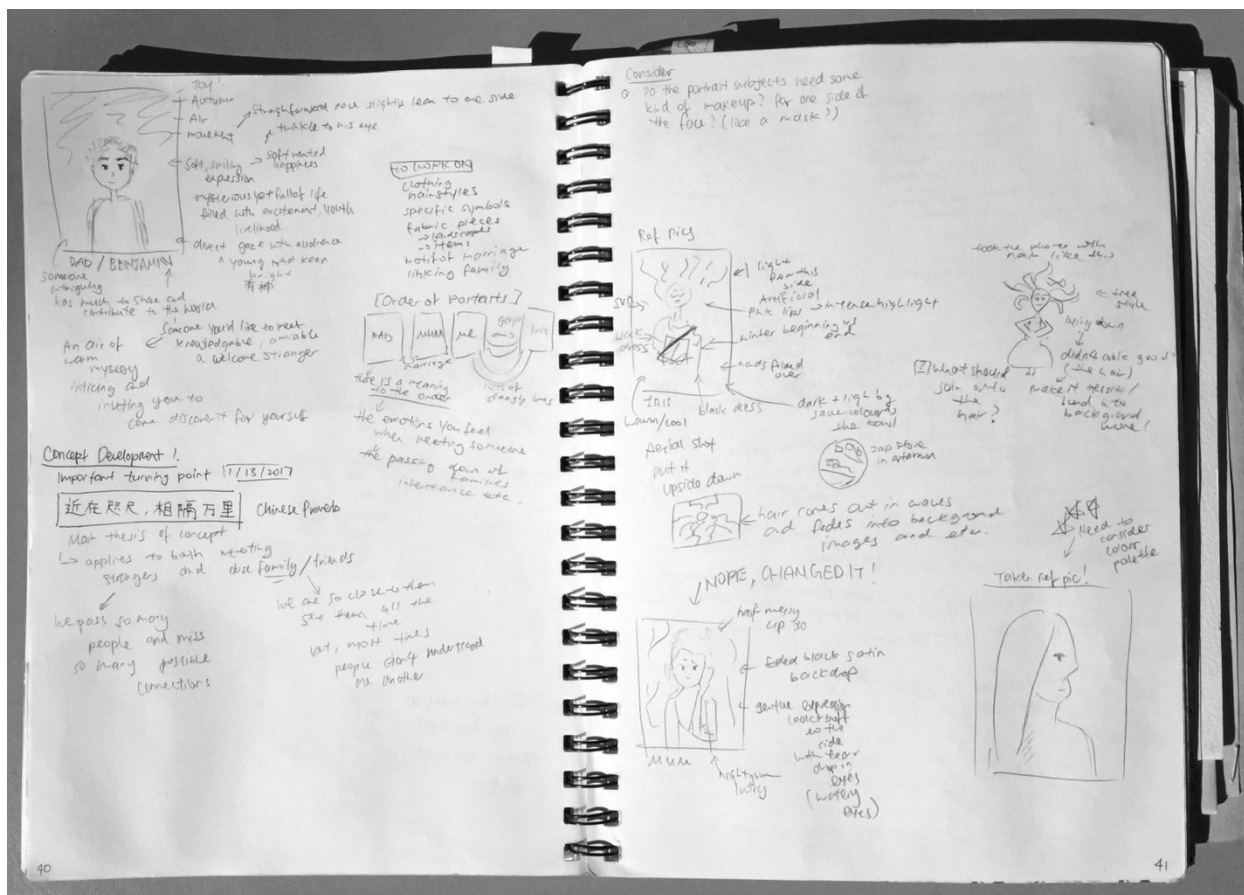
Diane's body of work consisted of four carefully planned, beautifully painted, and thoughtfully arranged large oil portraits of her family:



Diane, 2017, *The Fallen Leaves Return to Their Roots*, oil on canvas

In the first panel, Diane's mother wistfully looks to the right at her family, a swallow and falling leaves in the light, cloud-filled background. The clouds expand to the next panel and turn into water reflections that back Diane's peacefully dreaming younger sister. Her long, dark hair floats upward around her, surrounded by drifting Iris petals and cherry blossoms. A young, self-assured image of Diane's father taken in his native China follows and merges into Diane's final painting of herself, looking confidently towards her family, a sunflower in her hair. Diane carefully planned her visual imagery, stating, "I wanted it to be like a very cohesive piece, so on the fourth panel [Diane] and the first panel [Diane's mother], there are floating petals. It's meant to symbolize that it goes around" (Diane, personal communication, July 25, 2017). She used Chinese stamps, calligraphy, and symbols that connected with family names. Her confident self-portrait contained a sunflower, inspired by artist Ai Wei Wei to represent cultural critique, as well as exceptionalism, in her complex, layered artwork, an example of careful visual thinking (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011).

Diane's extensive VPD revealed pages of ideas, images, and annotations as she worked through concepts such as inner self, memory, and her Chinese-Australian identity.



Diane, 2017, VPD page

Diane initially wanted to work with textiles, but decided upon painting, a familiar medium. Her Chinese class was studying idioms and the idea of being internationally transplanted. The Chinese proverb “The fallen leaves return to their roots” resonated with her. Diane was born in China, and her family emigrated to Australia. Within her HSC body of work and correlating VPD pages, she interrogated the meaning of family, especially her relationship to China. She chose to read and decode the work of Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang, whose imagery and writing conveyed the dissolution of family and individualism during China's Cultural Revolution and the subsequent rise of Chinese consumerism. Using descriptive adjectives, Diane painted a picture of Xiaogang's work. She wrote how Xiaogang's 1990's painted portrait series *Blood Line: The Big Family* used somber colors, dramatic lighting, and smooth painting to convey a sense of nostalgia. In her VPD, Diane connected the photographs that she had taken of her family to Xiaogang's work and the Chinese photographic portrait tradition. Diane decoded the artist's work to create her own visual statement.

Diane stated that she wanted to create a narrative. Within her VPD, she noted her family's traits and planned how she would show them. Diane thought visually when she wrote about her painting arrangement, “consider them as separate people and as a whole entity—must make them individual works that add to the meaning when together.” Her paintings' title, *The Fallen Leaves Return to Their Roots*, references her family name, which means “fruit from the tree.” Likewise, she painted the base of her father's portrait brown to symbolize tree bark and stretched the colors of her father's painting into hers to connect them. In her VPD she created a table that linked her

family's traits to the elements, the seasons, and Confucian philosophy. The last character of her mother's Chinese name means swallow, birds who migrate but return home, and a swallow is in the painting's background. Irises in her sister's painting reference her sister's name.

Ms. Singleton emphasized that artist's practices and materials convey concepts (Singleton, personal communication, July 26, 2017). Diane stated that Chinese words, calligraphy, and the Australian landscape inspired her. She carefully chose the stamp and the color gold to represent her family name/insignia at the bottom of her image and wrote her work's idiom on her mother's canvas in the style of Chinese brush painting. Diane used vibrant colors to represent Australia with its clear blue skies and bright land contrasted with the smog-filled Chinese skies that she experienced as a child (Diane, personal communication, July 25, 2017). She photographed her family for reference, then digitally adjusted the coloring and reworked the paintings' background to achieve the right emotional states, as noted in her VPD. Her paint rendering blended Chinese and Western cultures. In her final VPD pages, Diane contemplated, "What is home?... a verb, a noun. Home is where we find a place to leave a piece of our hearts behind. Home is a feeling." "What is nostalgia/sentiment? Noun. A sentimental or wistful desire/yearning for: happiness felt in a former place, time or situation..." When asked how she used the frames and the conceptual framework, Diane replied that she used the postmodern frame. "You re-envisioned the past, and you re-contextualize and appropriate it" (Diane, personal communication, July 25, 2017). She integrated the conceptual framework into her thought process. Although Diane did not reference any of the course's case study artists, she felt that experiencing several different artists and things made her artwork better

Diane's powerful artist's statement conveys the linkage of visual and verbal messages: Throughout history, the art of portraiture has been used to immortalize memories of people. My autobiographical artwork is my method of capturing the universal value of family through the particular of my own. It is ultimately a life-affirming narrative that sincerely reminds us that no matter how far we may stray, family will ground us to what is honest and true.

I have chosen swallows as they are homing birds who migrate like my family from China to Australia yet they always return by instinct to their home. My tree motif is derived from my surname...literally meaning 'fruit from the tree' portrays us, humans as growing from the surrounding world, a cross-section of Chinese and Australian culture. The iconography of the Chinese idiom which reads "Fallen leaves return to their roots" and golden seal is derived from traditional Chinese ink wash painting to act as a full stop to the continuing narrative of life.

Diane drew upon her ability to analyze and interpret images to create while thinking visually, exhibiting sophisticated visual literacy.

Of the four students, Diane's VPD illustrated the most extensive visual and written literacy as she carefully worked to encode and decode symbolic imagery. Her annotated VPD contained more artist research, visual sketches, and written reflections than the other three participants. Experience as an immigrant, as a participant in a Chinese language class, and as a student of a painter trained in the Chinese tradition added a layer of philosophy and exposure to code-switching that occurs within cultures (Shofner, 2021). In her VPD, realizing that visual literacy is not universal (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011), she explained the meaning of the Chinese symbols and idioms that influenced her thinking and her experiences, knowing that her

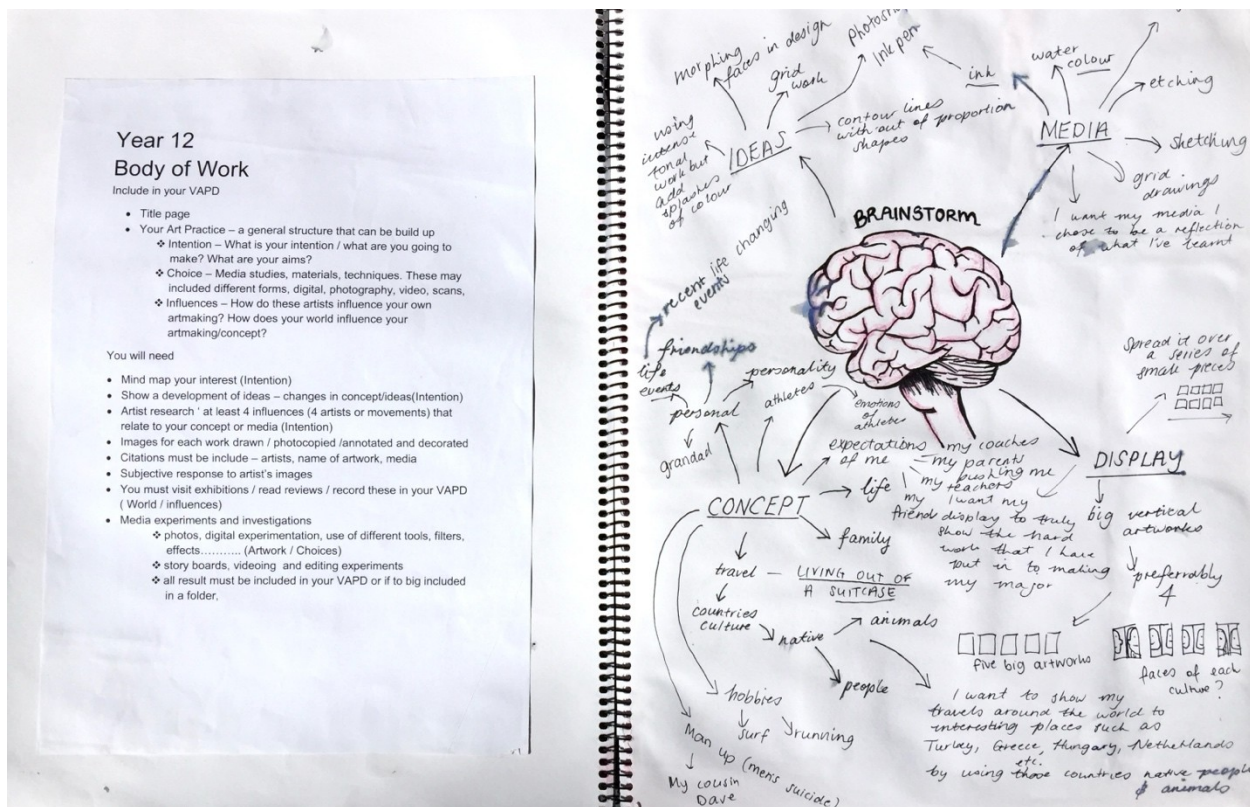
teacher and potential HSC assessors may not be native Chinese. She visually narrated her family's story from left to right, but she wrote her work's title vertically, using Chinese characters to combine the two worlds symbolically. She stated that artmaking is an intellectual process and demonstrated this in her careful reasoning and the encoding in her color choices, subject positioning, and coded symbology, using critical thinking skills much like the artists she studied (Cruz & Ellerbrock, 2015). Her VPD's copious explanations belied an awareness of the audience as an artist, creating artwork within a contemporary Western world framework that encompassed Chinese traditions.

Susan

Susan also chose family portraiture as the focus of her HSC body of work. She created four realistic and metaphoric pencil drawings of her mother, father, grandfather, and grandmother, overlaid with plastic printed with corresponding animal images that represented character traits.



Susan, 2017, *Internal Creatures*, graphite and ink



Susan, 2017, VPD

After much contemplation in her VPD, Susan mounted the pictures in white frames, displaying three vertically across, her grandmother's image horizontally above them as seen in the above illustration. While Susan portrayed her father's and grandfather's faces in a frontal position, she drew her mother in profile, facing the two men. The three bottom images occupied most of their picture frames. Conversely, the grandmother's image was not a face, but a hand, reaching from the right into space to pat a deer, printed in blood red on the left side of the frame. The blank white space in the frame's center contrasted with Susan's father's roaring image, overlaid with a red printed lion, her grandfather's outward-looking face and riveting eyes, topped by a red printed owl, and her mother's peaceful grin overlaid by a bird flying to its nest and egg. After much thought and many annotated VPD sketches, Susan carefully and intentionally thought to visually encode images as visual statements.

In her VPD Susan drew a picture of a brain and created a mind map, broken into sections labeled: concept, ideas, media, and display. She felt most comfortable with drawing and printmaking but couldn't decide whether to focus on her travels with the Australian water polo team. She struggled with a concept and looked at past Artexpress works, the thousands of reference artists on Ms. Singleton's Pinterest page, and asked her teacher, friends, and family. "I changed my mind 100s of times" (Susan, personal communication, July 25, 2017) until her coach suggested she focus on family since that seemed to be most important to her. She used visual literacy to learn more about herself and her attitudes toward them (Trent & Moran, 2017).

Like Diane, Susan's VPD had annotated pages, descriptive analyses, decoding, and interpretations of other artists' images, drawing styles, and color palettes. Her writing explained how formal elements created meaning, a process she learned in previous art classes. She wrote about Matilda Holden's contour portraits, "I like the perspective shifts. I would like to

incorporate it in my major work—gives a sense of shift in time—vivid colors and strong gestural line work." Reading others' images helped Susan determine what ideas she would be conveying to her audience and how she would interpret them. Bill Viola's videos—a former case-study—influenced her decisions to convey emotions through expression. She concluded in her interview:

Rather than do emotions, I wanted to do personality traits, because its more personal...I showed my dad roaring, so it was like he was screaming but then I did the lion on top of it...'cause he's a Leo as well and also like the head of the family. (Susan, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

In her VPD Susan listed several different animals and personality traits alongside her relatives' names, connecting visual images with cultural coding. Susan demonstrated how to decode and code images according to standard English meanings. Susan's VPD was also extensive, but did not negotiate two language systems, unlike Diane. After viewing Anne Zahalka's photo images of hands to show emotions metaphorically, Susan wanted to do the same and referenced Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, as pictured in her VPD, when drawing her gentle grandmother's hand reaching out to touch a deer. A visual media image morphing Usain Bolt's face into a cheetah inspired Susan to do the same with her father's picture. Like Diane, Susan took several reference photographs on which to base her portraits. In the name of preserving her drawings, Susan decided to etch and print the corresponding animal images on a transparent piece of plastic to overlay her graphite images.

Referencing the conceptual framework and the subjective frame, Susan, thinking visually, was very conscious of how the audience would see and translate her artwork.

Initially I kind of thought like what I wanted to do my artwork based on what the audience sees it as...'cause I knew it was going to be put into an exhibition...they each...have their own experience with the artwork...each has their own subjective experience to it...with the lion it could be pictured as like in charge of something but also just like an animal that takes care of its pride. (Susan, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Susan carefully photographed artwork changes and included visual references and notations of her thinking within her VPD, easily interchanging visual and written text, conscious that her teacher and possible other reviewers would be reading it. Susan succinctly stated her claim in the beginning paragraph of her artist statement:

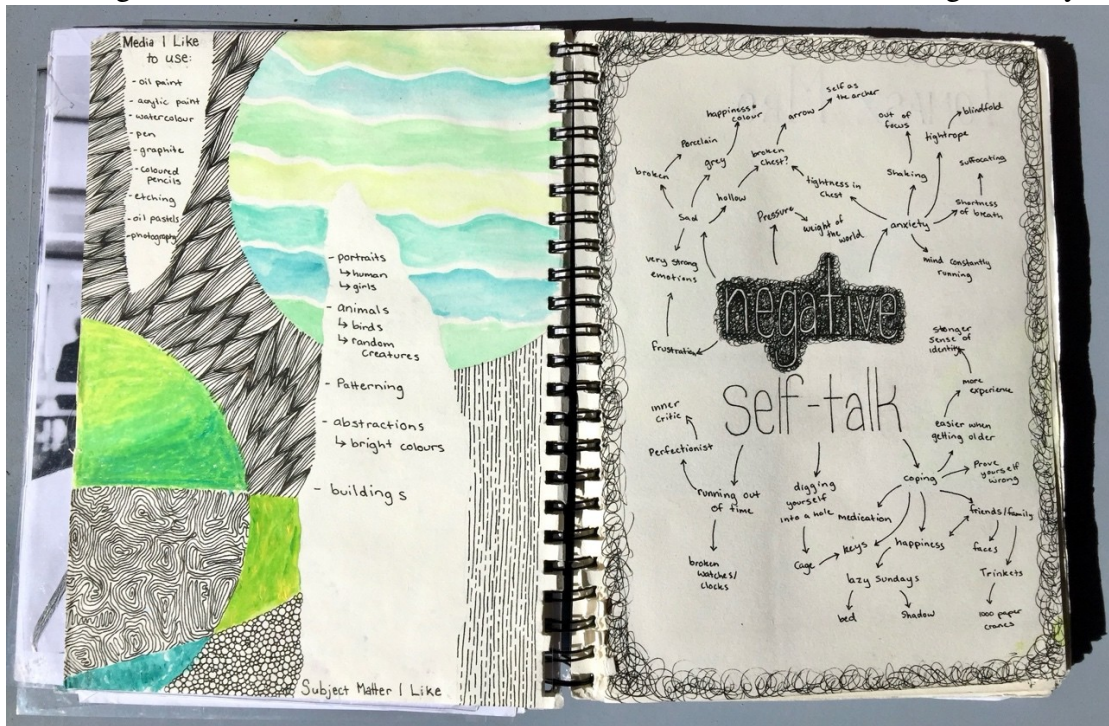
The human world and the animal world often mimic each other. We feel emotions that animals feel and in some ways, behave like animals too. *Internal Creatures* reflects my ideas about peoples' inner qualities echoed through the qualities present in animals. I wanted to achieve a complex, 4-piece body of work in an easily understandable way whilst also slightly ambiguous.

Within her VPD, interview, artwork, and artist statement, Susan demonstrated that she could read and interpret visual imagery, write and create visual statements, and think visually through the many different stages of her artmaking process that resulted in an exhibition arrangement (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011). Her creative process, like Diane's, revealed many various iterations and connections (Marshall, 2019). Her interview and VPD conveyed that she was well aware of her need to communicate visually with an audience (Stewart, 2014). Although Susan could describe the frames she used, she did not consciously reference them during her artmaking and writing. However, she deliberately worked with the conceptual framework, placing herself,

the artists she studied, and the corresponding artwork within a world context in her VPD and interview.

Kim

Kim's creative process and VPD were quite different from either Diane's or Susan's. Like her peers, Kim also focused on portraits, but decided to use exquisitely drawn and painted self-portraits, along with webs of written text and added arrows to tell her chronological story.



Kim, 2017, VPD



Kim, 2017, *Sticks and Stones*, graphite, acrylic, colored pencil on panel

She began her VPD with a well-designed page, listing her favorite media and subject matter within strips of white, surrounded by watercolor and ink linear patterns. A dark, scribbled border, a code for negativity, surrounded her mind map. The words "Negative Self-Talk" were at the center with the space around "Negative" penned in black. The branches contained words phrases like "running out of time," "coping," "anxiety," along with phrases for coping and subsequent ideas for their portrayal. The VPD showed visual thinking by associating images with ideas. Her chosen portraits focused on eyes and facial expressions. She knew that her audience would visually read these emotional states (Avgerinou, 2001, as cited in Averinou & Pettersson 2011).

Unlike her peers, Kim knew what she wanted to create for her HSC body of work from the beginning (Kim, personal communication, July 25, 2017). She used her sparser VPD to document a few process changes, along with pictures of Kintsukuroi, broken Japanese pottery repaired with lacquer mixed with gold, silver, or platinum to represent something that would be stronger and more beautiful than before. The repair embraced imperfection and the object's history (Doyle, 2015). Kim translated this idea into a golden word chain.

Kim's body of work consisted of three large self-portraits draw from the chest upward, supplemented with paint that represented three stages of growth, the first as a despairing young child rendered in grey, hair pulled back from her face, with a large, dark hole in her chest and an arrow going through, her cracked image like fine porcelain. The background was a pale blue sky crowded with grey clouds. A chain of small golden words, positive self-talk – "I will be okay. I am smart, etc." spilled out from behind her right shoulder. The second drawing was a teenage girl with a pale peach face, pensive expression, and furrowed brows. Her brown hair hung long and lank. The black chest hole was slightly smaller, the arrow more prominent with flames curling around it. The background's colors were brighter, with purples and pinks. A larger chain of gold self-talk spilled out from behind her head. The third and final drawing was of a confident young woman, standing tall; brown hair ripples around her brightly lit peach face, eyes staring comfortably forward. Her beautifully rendered hands rose to her chest to deflect incoming arrows. The background was a brilliant range of purples, reds, oranges, and yellows. A golden chain of positive self-talk fully backed this confident self-portrait. Kim used color, form, and body language as visual signals to create a narrative of growing confidence. She made layered metaphorical connections, equating her youngest self with cracked porcelain, the golden chains of positive self-talk with Kintsukuroi reparation, and color symbolism with vibrancy and growth. Although she wanted her audience to read the chains of words, like Susan, she used facial expressions, body positions, and hand gestures to portray personality traits.

Although Kim's diary lacked many annotations, Kim was articulate in the explanation of her work and demonstrated a level of self-awareness.

When asked how she decided upon her idea for her body of work, Kim replied:

I am very much of a stress head. I'm very much of a perfectionist. That's what my friends refer to me as...And then it really stuck with me – negative self-talk and how sometimes why things take me so long to do, why I'm such a perfectionist is, "Oh, that part's not good enough." (Kim, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Kim believed that this was mainly a female problem. She felt that society trains women not to think highly of themselves. She relayed a story of when she applied for a Yale Young Global Scholar's Program, and a young man who also applied told her he was confident that he would get in. Kim doubted her chances, but was happily surprised when the program selected her to

attend and not the young man. The experience was confidence-building for her and an ah-hah moment.

Other artists did not influence Kim's drawing style; she was already comfortable with drawing and painting and decided to work with her strengths, as Ms. Singleton had advised. However, Ms. Singleton's writing prompts - intentions, choices, and influences - guided Kim's decision-making.

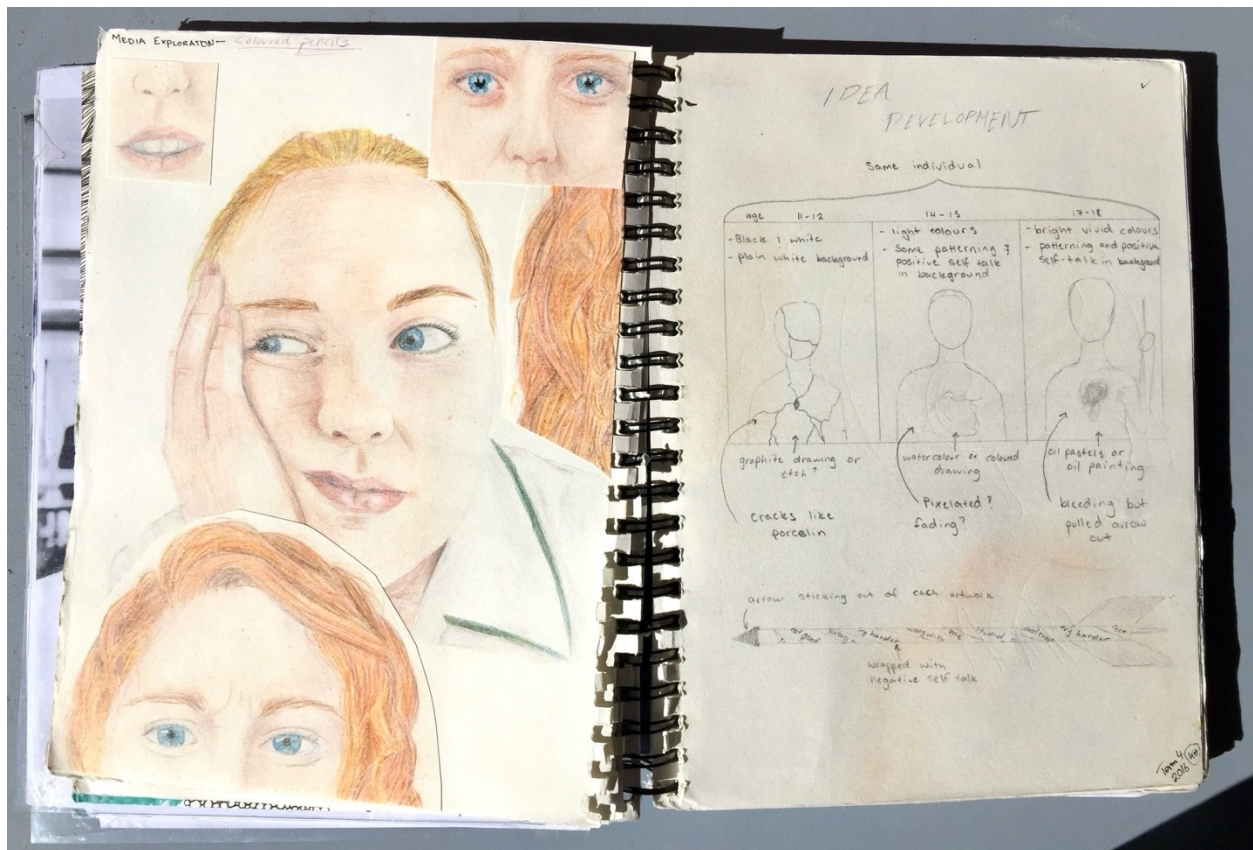
When we were going into our major works are [our] teachers are like, "Okay, what do you want to show through your work? What choices are you going to do in order to show that work? What influences your choices in how you made your work?" And so, you know, my intentions were just of kind of [to] convey my message of negative self-talk can be really harmful, but as you grow older, and you establish yourself it becomes easier to manage...I wanted to convey a message, convey a story. (Kim, personal communication, July 25, 2017)

Kim's work changed as she progressed and sketched out possible solutions for hand positions, facial expressions, color use, and how to display the arrow wrapped in negative self-talk.

When asked about the frames and the conceptual framework, Kim admitted that she didn't use the frames consciously. The conceptual framework, artist, artwork, world, and audience figured mainly in her personal story, as told through images and text. She used her cultural knowledge to arrange the drawings to show a progression of time – left to right. She decidedly used increased color vibrancy to show confidence and the establishment of identity with age. The increase of positive words in the background also showed this progression. Kim associated the cultural frame with being a teenage girl. As an artist, she wanted to show that perfectionism was a part of her personality. She carefully and precisely rendered her image and the letters, letting the material handling convey a concept. Kim emphatically stressed that from the start of her thought process, she wanted to engage the audience. "I wanted them to have to read things. I wanted them to see how things continued and engage with that story" (Kim, personal communication, July 25, 2017). The visual clues worked well with her artwork title, *Sticks and Stones*, referencing the children's rhyme, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words may never hurt me," linking verbal and visual language. Kim's artist statement contained a logical explanation of her visual thinking and subsequent message for different audiences in the following excerpt:

The increasing saturation of each drawing and vibrancy of their respective backgrounds portrays the growth of an individual's identity through these years as they formulate their own beliefs, hobbies, and opinions. The growth of coping mechanisms in regards to negative self-talk is also apparent with the chains of positive words in the background. These chains progressively take over the background and grow larger in size as the individual grows older and is more capable of confronting negative self-talk. The gold colour of the positive words is a reflection of the Japanese practice of Kintsukuroi which repairs broken pottery with gold lacquer and thus portrays a sense of reparation.

For older audiences the artwork is a reminder of the tumultuous times of the teenage years, whilst for younger audiences it is to be a message of hope, a reminder that this too shall pass.



Kim, 2017, VPD

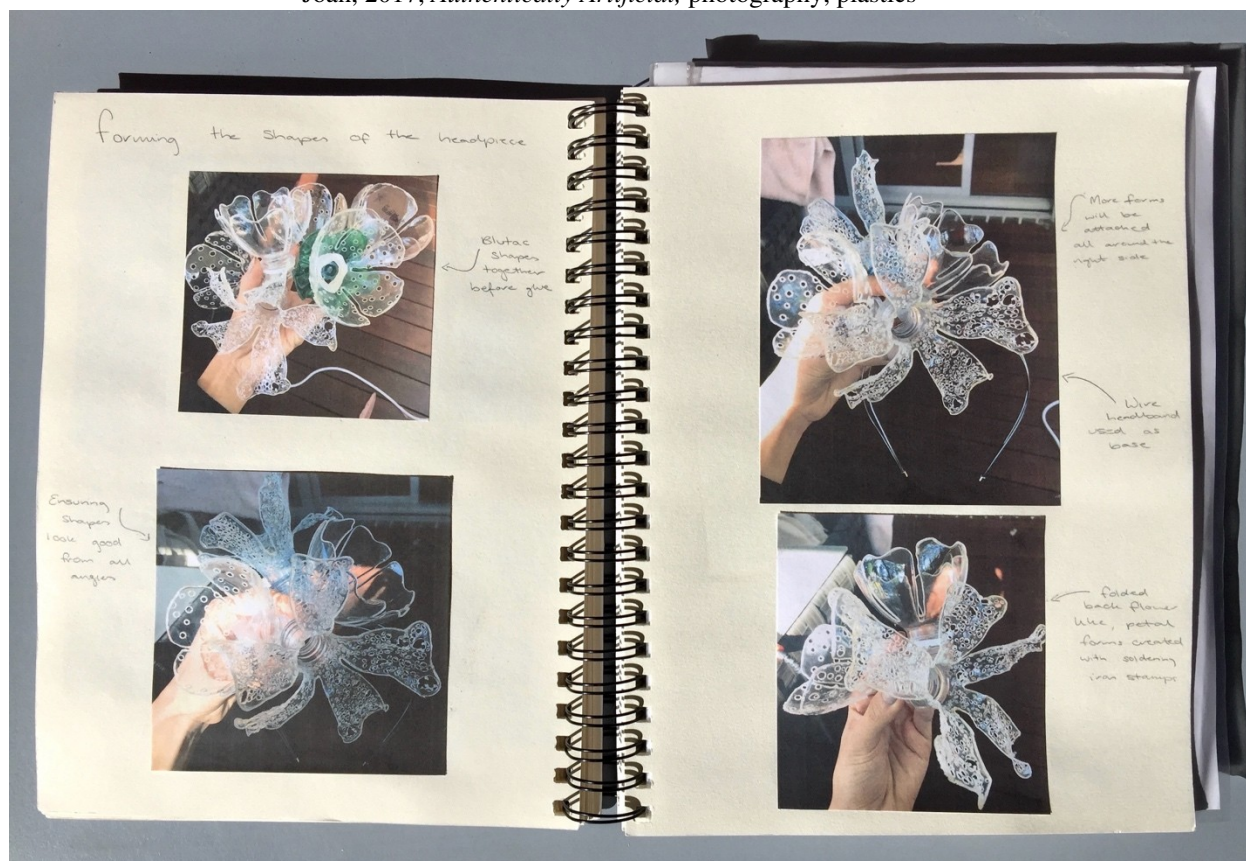
While Kim's VPD showed little evidence of analysis and interpretation of others' artwork, her interview, artist statement, and artwork, demonstrated that she could read, decode, produce visual codes, and defend her reasoning through verbal and written text. Intentions, Choices, and Influences, Ms. Singleton's guide for developing artwork and ideas, acted as a valuable scaffold for focus, creation, and articulation.

Joan

Unlike her peers, Joan's HSC body of work did not build from her initial knowledge of materials, nor did it evolve from VPD pages of annotated notes. Joan seemed less confident with visual expression. She did spend time collecting artist imagery that influenced her artmaking and final artistic form. However, she articulated a concept within her artist statement that helped explain her work's visual clues: three constructed headpieces placed on white Styrofoam heads with photos of models wearing them hung behind them. The female dummy heads' closed eyes and calm faces, set on white sculpture stands of alternating sizes, contrasted with the headpieces' sense of vibrancy and movement and the photos' female subjects and dark backgrounds. The crowns suggested ancient bacchanals and healthier times, although they were composed entirely of plastic. The headpiece on the left was composed of fruits and twine; the center headpiece was composed of clear plastic flowers molded from bottles. The right headpiece was composed of plastic leaves and tendrils.



Joan, 2017, *Authentically Artificial*, photography, plastics



Joan, 2017, VAPD

When interviewed, Joan said that when she changed teachers to Ms. Singleton, she changed her body of work idea from initially exploring her heritage to exploring her veganism and vegan activism, which are her passions. She had no idea of the medium that she would use, as she didn't feel confident using traditional forms. Although she intended to do work about veganism, she couldn't find a visual presentation to communicate her views. Ms. Singleton suggested that she make headpieces. The forms of Hanayuishi's unique headpieces, made from fresh flowers and fruit, inspired Joan. The artist's message was about life, death, and temporality as told through the performance of creating the headpiece (Weiner, 2015). The process referenced Ikebana, the ancient art of Japanese flower arranging. However, Joan didn't analyze Hanayuishi's headpiece's visual or cultural cues in her VPD, which could have added a visual and conceptual layer to her work. Her discovery of Veronika Richterová's (Richerová, n.d.) cut and molded repurposed plastics plant sculptures resonated with her. However, her VPD contained neither analysis nor commentary of Richterová's pieces. Joan explained, "My idea sort of evolved into like exploring our impact on the environment and its impact on us, and the only one of the headpieces was sort of the vegan thing with the food, the fruit one" (Joan, personal communication, July 25, 2017).

Joan stated that she took a long time creating her first headpiece, the cut and burnt clear plastic one. She constantly looked to others for reassurance in the process and eventually became more comfortable with it. The other headpieces came together more quickly, evidenced by the lack of VPD notation and barebone sketches. According to Ms. Singleton's notes in Joan's diaries, Joan was running short on time to complete her body of work, as evidenced by the lack of VPD process images for the other two headpieces. Joan relied upon her artist statement to explain her visual reasoning. She organized her artist statement draft into intentions, choices, and influences. The statement explained that the fruit headpiece represented sustainability and our connection to food. The plastic bottle headpiece represented the overuse of non-degradable materials. The plants and succulents expressed the "negative impacts of human consumerism through manipulation of the natural environment." However, the imagery did not match the statement's explanations. The twisted golden tendrils of the third headpiece did not immediately convey the negative impact of consumerism as the statement suggested nor did Joan's VPD spell out the meaning behind the tendrils' inclusion. The plastic fruit headpiece did not clearly reference sustainability through food. The artificial headpieces did not seem to degrade the model's natural beauty, as Joan claimed. She did not mention her photography, although she had used the medium in previous art courses. Further analysis would help to reveal more layers of meaning within the work (Krantz & Downey, 2021). Joan scored lowest of the four on Ms. Stapleton's in-progress rubric, which included articulation of ideas, multi-level meaning, technical prowess, and time on task.

When asked, Joan explained that her artwork was postmodern, although she didn't think about the frames when making her artwork. She said that she used the conceptual framework, as she believed that researching several artists' work provided her with ideas and time to think and process at the beginning of the HSC term.

Joan's encoded visual statements were less clear in her work. Her artist statement intention was also vaguer than those of her peers:

My intent was to reflect the impact of human consumption on the planet and the inherent ability of the planet to affect us. This evolved into my concept that depicts the irony of natural resource consumption and the idea that we are what we eat, through the

reproduction of natural elements into 'fake' wearable replicas which reconnect humans to their environment.

Joan stated that she enjoyed writing about art more than creating artwork. (Joan, personal communication, July 25, 2017). Her photography and headpieces were well-crafted, even if their visual messages were not completely obvious. Although Joan's VPD artist research showed some evidence of her ability to decode design principles within an artist's work, she struggled to encode imagery and to deeply think visually through research and associations, perhaps due to lack of time.

Discussion

I asked the questions: 1) How do New South Wales (NSW) Australia Year 12 visual arts students use visual literacy to create a body of artwork? 2) How do NSW Year 12 HSC visual arts students use the state-sponsored constructs of the conceptual framework and the frames to create a body of work? I looked for ways in which the participant students chose to (a) read/decode/interpret visual statements, (b) write/encode/create visual statements, and (c) think visually (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011).

Within her classroom, Ms. Singleton had created visual literacy structures and scaffolds using templates and worksheets, class assignments, and discussions that could enhance learning (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011). Tasks associated visual literacy with verbal and written literacy included descriptive adjectives, exciting verbs, and articulating one's reasoning in both oral and written form (Avgerinou, 2003). Case studies expected students to make a claim, explain, provide evidence, and make a tieback when summarizing artists' work, showing evidence within the work to back up one's ideas (Perkins, 1988). Likewise, Year 12 HSC visual arts students used Singleton's guidelines of intentions, choices, and influences to guide their artist statement writing and act as a metacognitive guide for artmaking (Marshall, 2019). Students discussed their body of work intentions with Ms. Singleton, using their VPD images and texts to articulate the meaning behind their work and the process for showing it. Ms. Singleton provided an environment, support, and strategies to develop and use visual literacy skills.

All four students used visual literacy in different iterations. Three students connected their work to the self, commenting on either family or experiences to evoke feelings and attitudes (Avgerinou, 2001, as cited in Avgerinou & Pettersson 2011). The fourth student connected her work to a personal value, sustainability, which conveyed a message that was a bit more emotionally removed. All four created artists' statements, as required, followed a literary template for writing—intentions, choices, and influences—drafts of which could be seen in the VPD to communicate the visual meaning of their work. Visual, verbal, and written language were intricately intertwined (Sullivan, 2001). The artists' statements acted as a form of art criticism that demonstrated connections, higher-level thinking, and metacognition (Marshall 2019).

All four students culturally situated these in symbolic code structures, using text, objects, and associations to layer meaning, although Diane, Susan, and Kim did this more purposefully. Their investigations reflected their beliefs and lived experiences as suggested in the artists' statements (Morris, Lummis, and Lock, 2017). Most used Western symbolic references, adding China and Japan, respectively. Their influences were interdisciplinary and culturally situated. They planned their work's display as a visual statement to guide viewers' comprehension in a final HSC school exhibition; Diane's, Susan's, and Kim's VPD showed evidence of this planning (Avgnou, 2003).

Although the students understood the language of the frames as lenses for viewing or creating work and could locate their body of work within it, they acknowledged that the conceptual framework—the artwork, the artist, the world, and the audience—was something that guided their artmaking and thinking. Although Diane did not specifically mention the conceptual framework in conversation, her VPD, artist statement, and artwork communicated to the audience her experience within two worlds, that of China and Australia. All four students within their interviews stated that viewing and understanding the works of several artists over the years helped them broaden their understanding of the art world and the world. They used artists' art forms to inform their artmaking, adopting brushstrokes, overlays, patterns, and art forms for their body of work. Artists' concepts informed their own: Diane (family and memory), Susan (family, personality, and emotion), Kim (reparation), and Joan (sustainability). All students presented a point of view, some more obvious than others. The students worked within a state system that required literacy—visual and otherwise—skill, conceptual reasoning, and knowledge of the visual world and artist's practice to succeed. None of the participants planned to study studio arts at university in the following year. Still, they enjoyed their visual arts education's art history and theory, attending art exhibitions, and visiting museums and galleries. Their experiences enabled them to become thoughtful and discerning viewers of visual arts experiences.

Conclusion

Although there is no set definition of visual literacy (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011), after reviewing the students' VPDs, bodies of work, artist' statements, interviews, along with reviewing Ms. Singleton's teaching materials and interview, I have come to the following conclusions:

- 1) Teaching visual literacy skills is essential in aiding students' visual literacy abilities. Ms. Singleton's course materials, including worksheets, assignments, exercises, case studies, artist videos, and templates, gave students ample opportunities to practice visual literacy—analyzing, interpreting, and creating artwork to explore personal, social, and cultural explorations (Stewart, 2014). For the most part, students followed some or all of Singleton's guidelines within their VPDs and artist statements.
- 2) It takes time to develop visual literacy skills. The students analyzed and interpreted artwork using formal design elements they had acquired in previous years (Yenawine & Miller, 2014). Students took time to develop their bodies of work, which involved reflection, feedback from Ms. Singleton and their peers, and revisions to strengthen their final visual statements. All students' VPDs illustrated evolution in their thinking.
- 3) Visual literacy involves metacognition—awareness of oneself and one's thinking—and social and emotional connections (Avgerinou & Pettersson, 2011; Marshall, 2019). Students began the thought process for their body of work by creating mind maps of their interests, self-perceptions, and associations, tying them to both media and art forms.
- 4) Conveying visual messages through artwork is best accomplished when one has developed skills in the medium or art form. Diane, Susan, and Kim used media and art forms with which they had experience and demonstrated a sense of control, if not revision, to present their messages. This process reflected Ms. Singleton's teaching that materials and artist practice create meaning beyond the subject matter. Joan, who took time experimenting with a new medium and struggled to make her first headpiece, felt less confident in her process and was less clear in her visual messaging. Her beautiful

accompanying photographs referenced her prior experiences and classes that she had taken in photo media.

- 5) Visual literacy skills benefit from students' research, analysis, and interpretation of artworks to increase critical understanding. Visual literacy is culturally situated. Copying art forms without understanding their origins and meanings can be superficial and may not lead to the layering of meaning and higher-level thinking (Cruz & Ellerbrock, 2015). Joan's artmaking and artist statement could have benefited from connections and further analysis of her influential artists' work. A more developed understanding of their work may have led to a deeper, more directed, intercultural interpretation of her own.
- 6) Visual literacy skills involve an awareness of audiences and a need to communicate ideas. Visual literacy is not universal and often involves visual, verbal, and written language, reinforcing comprehension (Avgerinou, 2003). The conceptual framework, and the need to communicate to teachers, peers, and HSC assessors, were most evident within the students' VPDs and artist statements. Ms. Singleton reinforced this understanding when speaking with students about their thinking. The students worked within a Western framework of knowledge. However, Diane, who wished to navigate two worlds within her work, went to great lengths to explain her Chinese influences, and Kim, who referred to a Japanese art form, described it to the audience, both in the VPDs and their artist statements.
- 7) The frames construct (subjective, structural, cultural, and postmodern) presented a means of analyzing artwork and artist practice within Ms. Singleton's teaching materials, but were not conscious factors in students' artmaking and thinking. However, the conceptual framework (artist, artwork, world, and audience) provided points of dialogue and focus within student interviews, VPDs, artwork, and writing.

The NSW process of teaching visual literacy involves decoding and encoding visual statements, thinking visually, and could inform other teaching practices. Following a curriculum that includes a structure for developing visual, verbal, and written literacy, including conceptual and technical skills, engages students in informed intellectual reasoning and interdisciplinary higher-level thinking.

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