Celebrating Townsville

EDUCATION RESOURCE
ARTIST: ROBERT PRESTON
ARTWORK: Naxos Mirror

Robert PRESTON
b. 1942 United Kingdom

Naxos Mirror 1984
Casein, dry ground pigment, charcoal, pastel, conte, crayon
and chalk on canvas
159 x 125 cm

Purchased by James Cook University from the exhibition,
DRAWINGS x 4 held at Perc Tucker Gallery in 1984 and
travelled in 1985

Photograph: Michael Marzik

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

The image Naxos Mirror is derived from the decorated flat side of an ancient pottery artefact created in the shape of a frying pan. These artefacts, found in graves in the Cycladic islands off the coast of Greece, are around 5000 years old. They nearly all represent female figures with non-functioning legs for a handle. The artist studied these ceramics in the Museum of Archaeology in Athens.

The pictures which appeared on the Cycladic frying pan vessels were either engraved or stamped and in-filled with lime or a white substance. They depict stylised symbols for ocean waves, the sun, moon and stars, dolphins, boats and occasionally seabirds. Archaeologists are not sure of the real intent of these mysterious objects, however, they are thought to have had a magical purpose. Filled with water and placed in the grave, the reflections of the moon and stars would be brought into the grave to give light to the dead as they travelled into the after-life.
INVESTIGATE

_Naxos Mirror_ depicts a number of symbols which are related to the ancient influences which have informed its creation. **Draw** the symbols you can recognise. Here are some clues to help you.

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**QUESTIONS / DISCUSS**

In art, a **medium** is the material that artists use to create their art work. Whatever a piece of art is made out of is its medium. The plural of medium is **media**. So, one piece of art can be made of one medium or several media. Robert Preston used a range of art media to create the _Naxos Mirror_.

Take a close **look** at the artwork and **list** which types of media were used to create it?

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Artists often make drawings from life, meaning they draw in the presence of the object or subject of their artwork. Other artists create work in their studio away from their subject. The marks we can see in Preston’s drawing suggest that the symbolic shapes have been carefully considered and measured.

**Describe** what you think the artist’s process was to create this artwork. Do you think that the artist drew directly from objects or planned the shapes in a preliminary study which evolved onto the canvas?
ARTIST: ROBERT PRESTON
ARTWORKS: S’labicated Monument 1 and 2

Robert PRESTON
b. 1942 United Kingdom

S’labicated Monument 1 2010
Charcoal and black chalk on paper
55 x 75 cm
Collection of the artist
Photograph: Michael Marzik

Robert PRESTON
b. 1942 United Kingdom

S’labicated Monument 2 2010
Charcoal and black chalk on paper
55 x 75 cm
Collection of the artist
Photograph: Michael Marzik

ABOUT THE ARTWORK

These two large drawings are based on the decorative concrete slabs which form part of the architectural design of the School of Creative Arts (SoCA) building on the JCU Townsville Campus. The artist was fascinated by these structures which did not appear to have any particular function.

Photographs of the SoCA building, JCU Townsville Campus by Andrew Rankin
ARTIST’S STATEMENT

A search for meaning in the meaningless

“On the one hand the structures had the appearance of an ancient monument like Stonehenge while on the other they looked like a line of letter forms in the style of ‘Superblock’ Graffiti. I wondered if it was supposed to look like a group of letters and if so had they been arranged aesthetically or to construct a word?

If it was a word, it was a strange one- nlHl. It seemed at first close to the Latin word ‘Nihil’ (meaning nothing). However a further search led to a match in – ‘Pascuan’ – the Austronesian language of the Easter Islanders, the greatest Polynesian builders and carvers of the giant stone statues.

‘Maoi’: Nihi in ‘Pascuan’ means arch or curve and Nihi- Nihi means great curve, bend or arched like the heavens in a bow, the very antitheses of the SoCA structure. Nihi is a word strongly associated with celestial events which suggests a direct link with the forces of nature and signals the great cosmic cycles which directly influence them. If this was not planned by the architect of the SoCA building it represents a lost opportunity of what could have been”.

Figure 4.
Stonehenge seen from the north-east at sunrise
(English Heritage, 2016).

INVESTIGATE

The drawings were made from sketches drawn on site and from the artist’s photographs which looked so bland in colour that he converted them into black and white. He felt this lent some drama and an element of mystery to the structures.

The materials used to make the drawing were charcoal and black chalk with a variety of erasers and a chamois leather pad used to vary the tonal values.

Imagine that you were the architect of the building and needed to construct a decorative structure, like the one in Robert Preston’s drawings, based on a word. Choose a word as the basis of your standing structure. Select what font style would indicate or emphasis your meaning and draw it here.
After reading about the artist’s technique, describe why you think he has chosen to work in the black and white tones of the charcoal medium rather than using a colour palette?

THE ARTWORK TITLES

In order to name these two similar but different artworks the artist has created a new word:

**S’labicated**

The title of these two works was intended to be discreetly sardonic (or mocking) and is a “portmanteau” or blend, that is the fusing together of parts of existing words.

In this instance the made-up word has three parts:

- The S’ at the beginning of the word refers to syllabary – which means a set of written symbols used to write a language. This also relates to the slabs looking like letter forms.
- Slab – A broad flat piece of wood, stone, concrete etc. but also a mortuary table.
- Fabricated – Something made or built but also something fake, false or untrue.

As the artist felt that all these meanings were important to the subject of his drawing, he invented the word **S’labicated**.

Reference List:


Celebrating Townsville EDUCATION RESOURCE for secondary students

The aim of this resource is to offer insights into the works of art featured in the exhibition. It is intended as a starting point for generating ideas, for encouraging student research, and as a basis for discussion during exhibition visits. The resource provides background information on the development of particular works, and offers focus questions and suggested activities. It can be used in a variety of ways, both for student groups, and for individual study and research.

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