

Exhume the grave—
McCubbin and contemporary art



Exhibition

Kit



About this resource

Drawing largely from the Gallery's permanent collection, *Exhume the grave—McCubbin and contemporary art* brings together works by artists Juan Davila, Robert Hague, Jill Orr, Polixeni Papapetrou, Christian Thompson AO and Anne Zahalka that re-interpret key paintings by Frederick McCubbin and explore recurring themes in his work, including those represented in the complementary exhibition *Frederick McCubbin—Whisperings in wattle boughs*.

This exhibition kit provides learning support and discussion questions for students and teachers during their visit to Geelong Gallery, and/or virtual learning class.

Students are encouraged to examine how artists communicate their ideas through different visual representations, practices, processes and viewpoints.

This kit includes information on the key works included in *Exhume the grave*, curatorial texts, discussion questions and an artmaking activity to assist students in secondary levels in considering the ideas and themes presented in this exhibition—learning opportunities are aligned to the Victorian Curriculum and support the four general capabilities of building; Critical and Creative Thinking; Intercultural; Personal and Social; and Ethical Capabilities.

Victorian Curriculum levels 7 to 10— The Arts (Visual arts)

Explore and express ideas: Students explore visual arts practices and styles as inspiration to develop and express ideas, concepts and themes in their own artworks.

Visual arts practices: Students select and manipulate materials, techniques, and technologies and processes in a range of art forms to express ideas, concepts and themes. Inspired by the works included in this exhibition, students conceptualise, plan and design works that express their ideas, concepts and artistic intentions.

Respond and interpret: Students analyse and interpret the works included in this exhibition to explore the different forms of expression, intentions, and viewpoints of artists. Including a range of visual artworks from different cultures, historical and contemporary contexts, including artworks by First Nations Peoples.



Introduction



At the time of his death in December 1917, McCubbin was one of the most widely known and successful artists of his time. He was celebrated and critically acclaimed for his large-scale 'national narrative' paintings including *Down on his luck* 1889, *A bush burial* 1890, *On the wallaby track* 1896, and *The pioneer* 1904.

The acquisition of these paintings by major public collecting institutions has undoubtedly played a significant role in the now-iconic status of these works. *Down on his luck* was acquired by the Art Gallery of Western Australia in 1896; *On the wallaby track* entered the collection of the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1897; *A bush burial* was purchased by Geelong Gallery in 1900; and *The pioneer* was acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria in 1906.

The sentiments and emotive subjects of these works have helped develop for them a popular visual literacy: they are images that have impressed themselves powerfully on public consciousness over time.

Not surprisingly, their significant public profile has also led to these paintings being the subject of re-evaluation and reinterpretation by contemporary Australian artists, through the lens of gender, cultural diversity and inclusion. More than a century after McCubbin painted these works, our ideas of nationhood have evolved: we understand the negative impacts of colonialism, and we have a greater understanding of the wide social diversity of immigrant experience, of the capabilities and integral contributions of women—beyond the prescribed gender roles depicted in historical narratives—and of the significant environmental impacts caused by clearing the land.

[The Introduction and artist summaries are sourced from the exhibition catalogue *Frederick McCubbin—Whisperings in wattle boughs*, Geelong Gallery, 2021]

Frederick McCubbin
Down on his luck 1889
oil on canvas
State Art Collection,
Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
Purchased, 1896
Photography: AGWA



Juan Davila

Born Chile 1946; arrived Australia 1972;
lives and works in Melbourne

In Juan Davila's *A bush burial* 2000 the artist recasts McCubbin's melancholy image of 1890 in the context of our country's cultural diversity and complex contemporary politics. Davila invites us to consider the humanitarian and social crisis of the asylum seeker and the refugee (an issue that remains as relevant today as it was two decades ago).

The work is from a series of large-scale paintings that chronicle episodes in the imagined life of the artist's alter ego Juanita Laguna—the disheveled, dispossessed figure of the 'other' whose reflection we see in the cracked mirror.

The figure of Juanita has arrived at the gateway to a new and promised land only to have their luggage torn open, brutally examined and, it appears, held to scorn, by a burly, bare-chested customs official. The rabid customs dog is a century away from McCubbin's loyal and sorrowful pet at the graveside.

The dense native flora of McCubbin's composition is largely cleared, replaced by a contained garden of imported plants, a mirage-like watery mass, and a distant sunlit city. The seemingly idyllic landscape and cityscape is counterpointed by the prominent fence line, the menacing, freshly dug grave in the middle distance, and the scene of degradation or dystopia in the foreground.

Learn more about Davila's practice:

kallirofcontemporaryart.com/artists/juan-davila/works2020.html



Juan Davila
A bush burial 2000
oil on canvas
Geelong Gallery
Gift of the Helen Macpherson Smith Trust
and the Geelong Gallery Foundation, 2001
© Juan Davila, Courtesy Kalli Rolfe
Contemporary Art



Jill Orr

Australian, born 1952;
lives and works in Melbourne

The ritual of burial that is depicted in McCubbin's *A bush burial* inspired Jill Orr's performance *Exhume the grave*, staged at Geelong Gallery in April 1999.

In this work Orr explored the mystery in McCubbin's painting as to the identity of the grave's occupant, and an element of the composition that hints at his interest in the Spiritualist movement: the veil that hangs from the cart is thought to symbolise the transparent divide between the living and the dead.

By the late 19th century, Spiritualism had gained popularity in Australia, espousing the concept that spirits of the dead could communicate through a living female medium.

Through the central character of the medium, Orr channeled the spirits of those who may have been buried in McCubbin's painted grave: a farm worker, Opium Lil, a mother, and a bride.

Learn more about Orr's practice:
jillorr.com.au/



Jill Orr
Exhume the grave: Medium 1999
C-type print
Geelong Gallery
Purchased through the Victorian
Public Galleries Trust, 1999
© Jill Orr, Courtesy of the artist
Photographers: Bruce Parker
and Joanne Haslam for Jill Orr



Polixeni Papapetrou

Australian, born 1960;
died 2018

In Polixeni Papapetrou's *Haunted country* series she frames the Australian bush as a site of mystery, dislocation, and danger. Papapetrou focused on historical episodes of lost children in the bush: a subject that was widely documented and interpreted in Australian newspapers, literature, and works of art like McCubbin's *Lost 1886* and *Lost 1907*.

In the Wimmera 1864 #1 recalls the disappearance of three children who were lost in mallee scrub in the Wimmera District in August 1864.

Learn more about Papapetrou's practice:
polixenipapapetrou.net/about/

Papapetrou stated:

My desire was to create photographs that embodied the harrowing psychological aspects of these stories. I wanted to somehow draw the viewer into this emotional space, experience the undercurrent of the psychological drama unfolding and make connections between past and present consciousness about land and country.



Polixeni Papapetrou
In the Wimmera 1864 #1 2006
pigment ink print; edition 4/6
Geelong Gallery
Gift of Dr Robert Nelson through
the Australian Government's
Cultural Gifts Program, 2010
Courtesy of the Estate of
Polixeni Papapetrou



Anne Zahalka

Australian, born 1952;
lives and works in Sydney

Anne Zahalka reframes the landscape and nationhood in photomontages from the series *The Landscape Re-presented* 1983–85. Zahalka deconstructs McCubbin's paintings to present an alternative viewpoint: one that is more reflective of actual experiences and some of the realities of life in the recent history of Australia.

In *The Immigrants* 1983 Zahalka reworks a commercial reproduction of McCubbin's *The pioneer* 1904, collaging photographs of herself and family members over the archetypal Australian pioneering figures that populate the original version.



The impact of these interventions rises from Zahalka's personal narrative: her parents came to Australia as post-World War II refugees, and as a first-generation child of immigrants she questioned the place of her family within Australia's then predominantly Anglo-Celtic demographic. Zahalka draws on the iconicity of McCubbin's work to literally implant her family's story on the Australian landscape.

In *The Pioneer* 1992 Zahalka reworks the central panel of McCubbin's triptych, removing the seated bushman to emphasise the role of women in settling the land, and to rewrite the dominant narrative of the role of men in nation-building. In creating this new framework based on diversity and inclusion, Zahalka is cognisant of the impact of altering much-loved paintings, reflecting in a 2016 interview:

Seeing [historical images] subverted and parodied can be affronting to some, especially when the pieces represent very different social, cultural or ethnic backgrounds. Not only do they occupy a space reserved for these revered characters, they, in fact, replace them ... I feel a responsibility [however] to give voice to these groups and individuals, and to present them through familiar and powerful images of the past.

Learn more about Zahalka's practice:
zahalkaworld.com.au/

Anne Zahalka
The Pioneer 1992 (printed 2021)
pigment ink on rag paper mounted onto gatorboard
Courtesy of the artist, Arc One Gallery, Melbourne,
and Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney
© Anne Zahalka



Christian Thompson AO

Australian (Bidjara People, Central Western Queensland),
born 1978; lives and works in Melbourne

Christian Thompson AO assumes various characters in his 2009 series *Lost together* through which he investigates issues of identity, family history and place, prompted by an extended period in Amsterdam. In these works, the European landscape becomes the context for the artist to further explore his First Nations and British heritage. In certain works, Thompson appropriates the compositions of McCubbin's paintings, drawing attention to the (historical) Eurocentric framing of Australian art history.

In *Dead as a door nail* 2009, the tartan-clad and bearded Isaac from Bampton, Oxfordshire (from where the artist's maternal ancestors originate), is named after the artist's great grandfather. Here, Isaac assumes the seated position of the prospector, or swagman, in McCubbin's *Down on his luck* 1889—albeit far less despondent—while the axe leaning against the log directly references the central panel of McCubbin's *The pioneer* 1904.

Of the *Lost together* series Thompson has stated:

I recreated this camping scene from one of [McCubbin's] paintings, but in a forest in Amsterdam. It was one of the first bodies of work I had made outside Australia and I wanted to employ the formality of the Dutch landscape as a backdrop for the works. The *Lost together* series was about living in Europe, looking out into the world and exploring. So I utilised my memories of Australia through the eyes of McCubbin, but as a young Bidjara man exploring the new frontier of Europe.

In *Dead as a door nail*, Thompson rewrites the narrative of the outsider or pioneer struggling in a foreign landscape: the comical personae he assumes, and the temporary dwelling constructed from painted branches suggest his integration with a new location has been effortless (in contrast to the evident trials and despair of McCubbin's settlers of the Australian landscape).

Learn more about Thompson's practice:
christianthompson.net/



Christian Thompson AO
Dead as a door nail 2009
C-type print on Fuji Pearl Metallic Paper;
edition of 5 + 2AP
Courtesy of the artist, Yavuz Gallery,
Singapore/Sydney, and Sarah Scout
Presents, Melbourne
© Christian Thompson AO



Robert Hague

Born New Zealand 1967; arrived Australia 1985;
lives and works in Melbourne

Robert Hague appropriates McCubbin's *Down on his luck* 1889 in his 2015 lithograph *Blue Claude (after McCubbin)* and a similarly titled three-dimensional porcelain plate dating to 2020.

In both works, Hague transposes McCubbin's despondent prospector into a hybrid composition by French painter and printmaker Claude Lorrain (born Claude Gellée c.1600–1682).

Claude spent most of his life in Italy and is one of the Baroque period's most studied landscape painters. His painting of a bustling port—on which Hague's composition is largely based—*Seaport with the Embarkation of the Queen of Sheba* (National Gallery, London), was completed in 1648 and refers to the Biblical story of the Queen of Sheba's journey to visit King Solomon in Jerusalem.

Of his composite image Hague has stated:

McCubbin's failed gold prospector sits mournfully in a Wedgwood paradise ... its broken porcelain traced with veins of gold. Lorrain here depicts an idealised urban landscape, a pre-Romantic image of utopia and one senses that McCubbin's miner has realised that his dream of creating Australia in this image is not only futile but was perhaps the wrong dream all along. *Blue Claude* is a work about the squandering of Australia's mining boom, both then and now, and about how we choose to commemorate history within our domestic lives.

Robert Hague, Artist statement, 2015 Geelong acquisitive print awards.

Learn more about Hague's practice:
roberthague.com/



Robert Hague
Blue Claude (after McCubbin) 2020
porcelain with transfer print, gold and brass
staples; edition 1/25
Geelong Gallery
Dorothy McAllister Bequest Fund, 2020
© Courtesy of the artist



A bush burial

Frederick McCubbin 1890

Frederick McCubbin's painting *A bush burial* 1890 holds a significant position in the history of Geelong Gallery as one of only ten works acquired in its first year of collecting: made possible through the support of community donations.

At the time of the acquisition, Frederick McCubbin had established his reputation as one of the founding members of what came to be known as the Heidelberg School of Australian Impressionism. Throughout the 1890s and into the early 1900s he created a series of large-scale paintings focusing on pioneering history.

Here, Frederick McCubbin translates the melancholy subject of graveside or funeral scenes into the local landscape, referring to the history and achievements of the pioneers in Australia whilst acknowledging the loneliness and hardship they experienced.



Frederick McCubbin
A bush burial 1890
oil on canvas
Geelong Gallery
Purchased by public subscription, 1900



Discussion questions

Discussion questions to provide context behind the works and to promote conversations around relevant themes and ideas.

What do the art terms 'appropriation' and 'recontextualisation' mean and how do they apply to works included in this exhibition? Choose one artwork that you are drawn to and discuss how the artist has appropriated the work of Frederick McCubbin and their use of pre-existing images and/or objects in new ways?

As a class discuss the different materials, techniques and artistic practices that have been employed by artists in this exhibition?

As the viewer, what is your own personal response to the works on display? Consider how your own cultural background might influence your understanding of these artworks.

Split into groups and choose one artwork each and discuss how that artist has reinterpreted themes and challenged ideas in McCubbin's paintings? Consider contemporary views on nationhood, multiculturalism, gender, art history, and/or the landscape itself? Each group is to present their findings to the class for further discussion.

Discuss which artists have drawn on their own personal histories and cultural background, to explore issues of identity and Australian culture in their work?



Jill Orr
Exhume the grave: Mother to be.
Mother not to be 1999
C-type print
Geelong Gallery
Purchased through the
Victorian Public Galleries Trust, 1999
© Jill Orr, Courtesy of the artist
Photographers: Bruce Parker
and Joanne Haslam for Jill Orr



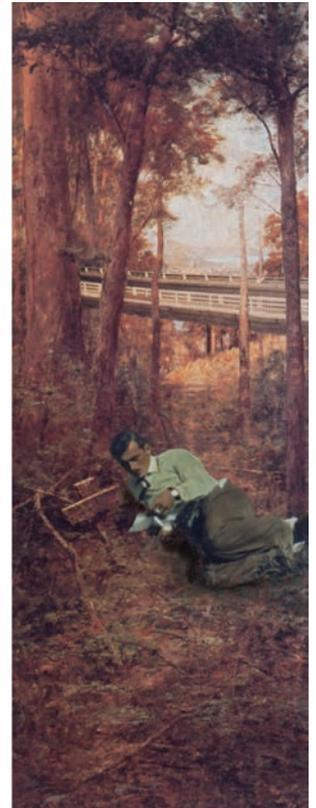
Artmaking activity

Create your own collage that represents the richness of your own identity, culture, and community.

Think about your own identity or sense of self and how it has been shaped by where you live? Do you live in the country, a city dwelling, a suburban neighbourhood, or in a seaside town? What kind of community exists there? What's the history of the area? What stories or myths have you heard? What other factors have shaped your identity?

Think about your heritage, family traditions, friends and interests.

Consider how you could appropriate imagery from art, archives, historical photographs, popular culture and the natural environment to communicate or challenge new ideas in your own artwork?



Let's get started:

1. Brainstorm some ideas in your visual diaries of what you want to create and how you could appropriate or borrow imagery from existing artworks or photographs to communicate your ideas.
2. Collect imagery from different resources.
3. Try different ways of arranging and combining your images on paper to create different compositions.
4. Explore how you could use narrative and symbolism to create meaning in your artwork.
5. Maybe you would like to add your own drawings or coloured paper.
6. When you are satisfied with your arrangement glue your images in place.
7. After you have completed your artwork share it with the class and discuss your process, ideas and how you have appropriated existing imagery to create a new artwork.

Anne Zahalka
The Immigrants #2 1983
(printed 1987)
C-type print stretched
on balsa wood frame
Courtesy of the artist,
Arc One Gallery, Melbourne,
and Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney
© Anne Zahalka

Back cover:
Anne Zahalka
The Pioneer 1992 (printed 2021)
pigment ink on rag paper mounted
onto gatorboard
Courtesy of the artist, Arc One Gallery, Melbourne,
and Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney
© Anne Zahalka

