

□ Exam Block Essay □

“Artists pick over culture, seeking to comment, define and reinterpret whether or not this relates to another cultural background or gender, or an interest in repositioning through juxtaposition, contrast and depiction.”

An artist looks at culture, picks something out and responds by remaking it. They look at the object, putting it side by side and reinterpreting it. By looking at culture artists are able to respond to it as a theme of ‘Precious Things’ as a result of their cultural background by delving into their own culture. ‘Like everybody else, artists are affected and influenced by their personal and cultural backgrounds’¹ therefore, linking their intent to Precious Things. Through time and experimentation, artists have expressed their views of culture clearly with their art.

For many centuries, artists throughout the world have aimed to capture and portray a particular theme or subject in accordance to their cultural beliefs, personal influences or moods. “An important part of visual language goes beyond the written word to the visual and performing arts, for they communicate in a less obvious and structured way the personal concerns of the artist as a member of a cultural group and therefore speak in a direct way to others, feeding the human spirit, its goals and complexities.”² Julie Rrap and Colin McCahon are two examples of artists who ‘pick over culture, seeking to comment, define and reinterpret.’³ Their work relates to their cultural background and can be portrayed under the theme of ‘Precious Things.’ Julie has used the element of religion and her own naked body, as a symbol of preciousness whereas Colin McCahon is preoccupied with religious and moral issues that is precious to him. Both artists are able to look at culture and respond by remaking it from their symbols of preciousness.

Rrap’s artwork is conceptual in approach in the way that she works with concerned ideas. In her early work in the 1980’s she focused on the representation of the female body against the artworks of Munch, Degas and Rembrandt to try to challenge our ideas that have been formed from the way the female has been shown throughout art history. The preciousness of Rrap’s work is linked with the subject that she focuses on which is that of feminism.

Julie Rrap’s Christ of 1984, has depicted a Christ like figure in a way that illustrates her personal beliefs and also reflects the public’s stance regarding the depiction of Christ at the time her artwork was completed. In “Christ” we are used to seeing this figure as a man on the cross. Here Rrap has chosen to work with a new version. Christ has been portrayed as a female and the image is broken up and disjointed. Christ seems to be a comment on our changing society and its religious values.

Rrap has used a piece of art by Munch and outlined the figure it depicted, and then positioned herself whilst semi-naked within the outline which relates to the statement through juxtaposition. It is this placement of

¹ D. Williams & C. Simpson, *Art Now-Contemporary Art Post-1970*, Book Two, 1996, pg 129

² D. Williams & C. Simpson, *Art Now-Contemporary Art Post-1970*, Book Two, 1996, pg 129

³ D. Williams & C. Simpson, *Art Now-Contemporary Art Post-1970*, Book Two, 1996, pg 129

herself within the outline that has enabled her to “slip out of the stereotype of the female.”⁴ The image was then divided and abstracted, with the use of thick brush strokes in the background, creating a sense of movement.

Rrap’s ‘Christ’ has been produced in ways that adapt to their specific eras. She has conveyed her chosen subject matter of Christ in such a manner that clearly shows and illustrates the social environment of its time through the value of its preciousness. This has been illustrated through the overall layout and composition, emphasized by elements such as colour and variation. Yet the social atmosphere has been depicted most significantly through the way in which the figure of Jesus has been portrayed.

Colin McCahon on the other hand, observes his environment with consideration of the link between nature and religion. He is concerned with expressing his personal ideas through subjects of culture and preciousness. McCahon aims with his works to relate ‘man to man and man to his world.’⁵ He is an artist who focuses on precious things by exploring his own culture.

McCahon expressed his concerns and ideas through signs, symbols and images, which became progressively simplified, yet more complex in meaning, as his work developed. McCahon was using the typical landforms, to communicate a Christian view of the world: a view in which doubt, sin and guilt play a major part. In ‘Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury,’ McCahon uses Christian symbolism (the six days of Creation from the Bible) within a New Zealand landscape. It is a combination of explaining his personal and spiritual identity. He has painted simplified views of landscapes. They have a feeling of splendour, power and a sense of order and peace. Each is remote, untainted by human existence.

Through such arrangements, he can set up sequences, arrange emphases, and suggest variable readings and possibilities without need of traditional composition or spatial order.⁶ He achieves a radical, fresh and layered presentation, rich in symbolic meanings. ‘My painting is almost entirely autobiographical – it tells you where I am at any given time, where I am living and the direction I am pointing in...’⁷

Both Julie Rrap and Colin McCahon portray aspects of popular culture that had a powerful impact on their contemporary life, presenting them without comment or emotion. It can be seen from the evidence that has been stated that Rrap and McCahon are able to focus on their own culture as an object of preciousness. They are able to use materials differently in order to create the same underlying meaning of their works by centering their own artwork on the theme of ‘Precious Things.’ ‘Being an artist is something that you have to do, a private compulsion, because of the particular constitution of your feelings and history. It is a natural form of activity to me – a personal necessity.’⁸

⁴ Israel, 1997, p.160

⁵ Quoted in G. H. Brown, Colin McCahon: Artist, A. H and A. W Reed, Wellington, 1984, p. 153

⁶ <http://www.freeessays.cc/db/6/ame29.shtml>, Art Expression, 2000

⁷ Quoted in Colin McCahon: a Survey Exhibition, catalogue, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1972, p.26

⁸ Albert Tucker, quoted in J. Mollison and N. Bonham, Albert Tucker, Macmillan Press, Melbourne, 1982, p.35

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