

## **PERSONAL STUDY: JELLYFISH**

Jellyfish - one of the main reasons I think twice before plunging freely into the sea! Having grown up in Cyprus, the sea has always been a part of my life and during the hot summer months I am in it every day. I have always loved the sea but jellyfish have always been a concern of mine, maybe because I have been stung by them so many times! There is nothing worse than trying to cool down in the water and feeling that excruciating pain of a jellyfish's wondering tentacles. Therefore, ever since my first sting, I have always had at the back of my mind the fear of getting stung by a one.

From a younger age I often exerted enthusiasm for the unique creature we call the jellyfish. As children always like to do what they are not allowed to do, I always was fascinated by the creature that I knew would hurt me if I touched it. I still would like to pick one up and touch its jelly-like outer texture. I therefore decided to research the jellyfish further and base my Art Unit 3 on it.

Few marine creatures are as mysterious and intimidating as the jellyfish - at least for me. Even though one can easily recognise them, jellyfish are often misunderstood. Most bathers and beachcombers react with fear as I do upon encountering this invertebrate, but the truth is that most jellyfish, especially in Cyprus, are completely harmless.

Jellyfish are barely animals. They do not have a brain, merely a nervous system which detects the basics, mainly light and odour. A jellyfish doesn't decide where it is going to swim to, it is just pushed along by the sea current, and that is why so many are found on beaches. I read somewhere that if you were to float in the sea and open and close your one hand repeatedly, that is the power a jellyfish has for moving.

During the summer of 2007 I went on a 3 day scuba diving course. My immediate reaction was the thought of seeing jellyfish in their natural habitats under the water. However I only got to see one, as you never can find something when you go looking for it! Still, I was pleased to see this beautiful creature gracefully gliding through the open water, senseless, just moving with the sea's current.

For my first piece of work I looked at a contemporary artist named Gail LeBoff. She now lives in Brooklyn, New York and studied photography and studio art at NYU. She mainly works with photography but I found her work truly inspiring. LeBoff states that through various printing and toning techniques new forms are created. Most of her work is made up of different forms and shapes which she makes by altering photographs. She has had numerous solo exhibitions, mainly in the United States, and also participated in lots of group exhibitions. The most interesting of all is her "Mystery Forms" collection. The photographs (an example is Figure 1) were made by suspending natural forms (flowers, branches and even crystals) using several lighting techniques including fibre optics.



Figure 1

I however used a different approach to LeBoff's techniques. I found her forms very interesting so I took the idea of portraying the jellyfish as a form, instead of a traditional painting of one in the sea. Taking the jelly-like texture into consideration I decided to use clear UHU glue in order to create my own form of a jellyfish. I found that glue creates a very jelly-like texture, as I imagine the texture of a real jellyfish would be, without the painful sting of course. Glue worked well, but I wanted to add some colour to the piece as the most beautiful of these creatures come in all sorts of colours. I therefore added drops of glass paint into the glue and somewhat swirled it around in the glue creating a very interesting pattern like the one below: (Figure 2)

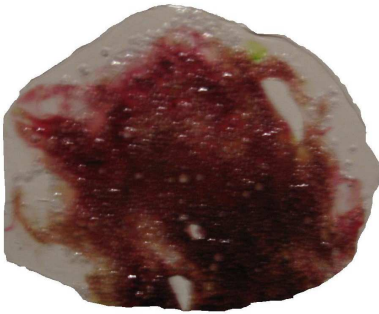


Figure 2 (UHU glue with glass paint)

Happy with my result, I decided to explore this technique further and tried to turn my pool of glue on a page into a jellyfish form. I therefore simply took the end of a paintbrush and while swirling the glass paint into the glue I “lifted and pulled” it downwards so as to create tentacle shapes. (Figures 3 & 4 – sketches from my journal)

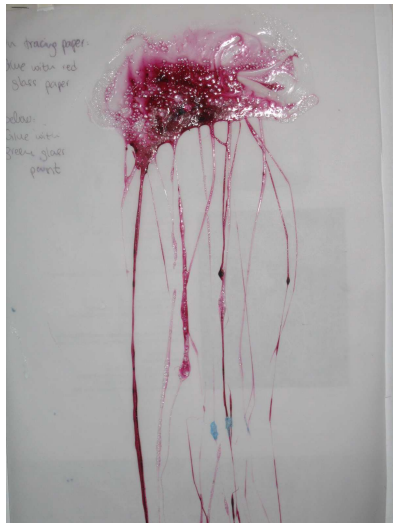


Figure 3



Figure 4

Using UHU liquid glue pleased me with my end result for my first piece so I decided to look at another substance similar to it, which would hopefully create an even better effect – silicone. I decided to look it up before using it and found out that silicone is actually a crucial substance in today's world. It was first discovered in 1823 by Baron Jacob Berzelius from Sweden.

Browsing through a magazine, I came across “Cocktail”, a Japanese invention which is basically a decorative toy for office desks! “Cocktail”, made by the Japanese company “Banpresto”, is a one of a kind mini jellyfish aquarium with 12 colour settings that lights up the jellyfish in the dark. Each jellyfish is made out of thin silicone and you have them in a mini fish tank on your desk floating around, giving a relaxing feeling. (Figure 5)



Figure 5

Inspired by the Japanese company’s toy I decided it was time to move on to something 3-Dimensional. I figured with silicone it would work nicely to try and make my own jellyfish and maybe even have them in a fish tank. I found silicone worked incredibly well for the jellyfish hoods, which were quite a challenge to make! For each one I would cover a polystyrene ball in half and cover it with silicone. When dry I would add thinner to the silicone for it to melt, leaving me with a jellyfish-like hood.

I didn’t find silicone worked well as tentacles, so after a lot of experimenting I came up with the idea of using “Scoobies” (see Figures 6 & 7).

“Scoobies” or “Scoubidou” have been around for years; simple, extruded plastic lace that comes in all sorts of colours. It seems that this children’s craze for making bracelets, key rings and knots using these pieces of plastic lace originates from France. It was very popular back in the 1960’s and has recently enjoyed a revival worldwide, especially in England and the United States.

I could not find any art history to base this idea on as nobody has ever incorporated “Scoobies” into their art before. I may be the first artist to be using them!



Figure 6



Figure 7

I ended my second piece by having four silicone hoods with different coloured “Scoobies” hanging from their inside. You can see one of them in Figure 8.

Generally I found that plastic worked very well with my idea of jellyfish as they do often remind people of plastic. The amount of times I have mistaken plastic bags in the sea for jellyfish are countless.



Figure 8 – one of my four silicone jellyfish for my 2<sup>nd</sup> minor piece

Leaving the plastic scene behind I wanted to experiment more with creating 3-D models of jellyfish to have hanging like my 2<sup>nd</sup> minor piece. I therefore moved on to Alexander Calder who uses wire for his constructions.

Calder was born in 1898 in Philadelphia, the son of Alexander Stirling Calder and grandson of Alexander Milne Calder, both well-known sculptors. After obtaining his mechanical engineering degree from the Stevens Institute of Technology, Calder worked at various jobs before enrolling at the Art Students League in New York City in 1923. During his student years, he did line drawings for the National Police Gazette.

In June 1936, Calder moved to Paris. He took some classes at the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere and made his first wire sculptures. Calder created a miniature circus in his studio; the animals, clowns and tumblers were made of wire and animated by hand. Many leading artists of the period attended, and helped with, the performances.

From the 1940s on, Calder's works, many of them large-scale outdoor sculptures, have been placed in virtually every major city of the Western world. In the 1950s, he created two new series of mobiles: "Towers," which included wall-mounted wire constructions, and "Gongs," mobiles with sound.

Calder was prolific and worked throughout his career in many art forms. He produced drawings, oil paintings, watercolours, etchings, gouache and serigraphy. He also designed jewellery, tapestry, theatre settings and architectural interiors. Calder died in 1976.

I experimented by making my own jellyfish forms out of wire but found that plain wire was somewhat monotonous, and didn't quite resemble my idea of a jellyfish.

I therefore moved onto using plastic bags which I would melt onto the wires, inspired by Alberto Burri.

Alberto Burri was born on March 12 1915 in Città di Castello and was an Italian abstract painter and sculptor. Città di Castello has memorialized him with a large permanent museum of his works.

Burri earned a medical degree in 1940 from the University of Perugia and was a military physician during World War II. After his unit was captured in North Africa, he was interned in a prisoner-of-war camp in Hereford, Texas in 1944, where he began to paint. After his release in 1946, Burri moved to Rome; his first solo show was at the Galleria La Margherita in 1947.

Burri soon turned to abstraction and unorthodox materials, making collages with pumice, tar, and burlap, and started a series of canvases that bulged into the 3rd dimension. His work is related to European Tachisme, American Abstract expressionism, and Lyrical Abstraction. In the mid-1950s, Burri began producing charred wood and burlap works, and then welded iron sheets. In the early 1960s he was burning plastic, and in the early 1970s started his "cracked" paintings. He created a series of works in the industrial material, Cellotex, from 1979 through the 1990s.

Burri was awarded the Italian Order of Merit in 1994. He died in Nice on February 13, 1995.

I was particularly interested in Burri's "Grande Rosso" (Figure 10), which I actually got to see for real when I visited Rome with my art class.



Figure 10 – "Grande Rosso" by Alberto Burri

Amazed by Burri's unorthodox tactics for his time, I decided to base my 3<sup>rd</sup> piece of work on his work, combining a wire jellyfish skeleton inspired by Alexander Calder. I constructed a large jellyfish shape using wires and then melted plastic bags all over it. I even poured hot glue onto it from a glue gun which helped melt the plastic bags and also linked it to my previous work. I added colour to the glue as well which gave the piece a colourful, yet still translucent effect.

My theme of jellyfish truly exited me as a continuously wanted to research more and more techniques so as to portray the beauty and yet fear of this wondrous creature.

During my art course I visited a friend in England who is studying Fine Art at Farnham Art College. Throughout the college campus students had displayed their work, one of which caught my eye and helped me come up with the idea of my final and major work. (See Figures 11 & 12)





One student had made a form of a human being using wire and then tangled up electricity wires into it to act as the nervous system. This piece gave me the idea of tangling up “Scoobies” into a wire jellyfish, also linking it to my second minor work.

I didn’t want to use Burri’s technique of melting plastic again as it would make my major work look to similar to my 3<sup>rd</sup> minor piece. I therefore made another jellyfish wire construction, this time tangling up different coloured “Scoobies” with the wire as I went along. To finish the piece I dripped runny UHU glue all over it which added a very effective gloss to the construction and also kept the main idea of the jellyfish’s texture. I also decided that by adding flashing lights to the piece would give a good impression of the jellyfish’s luminous figure in the sea. (See Figure 13)



Figure 13

Through my experimentations and my whole Art Unit 3, I came to learn a lot about the creature that has fascinated me from such a young age. These amazingly beautiful creatures merely float around the sea, unaware of their surroundings, just living the moment. They don’t think about hunting other animals, or see what is around them. They are simply there, looking totally harmless, but will give you a terrible sting if you attempt to touch them.

I have enjoyed my Unit 3 thoroughly as my theme was of great interest to me. I finally had an excuse to research the jellyfish and even have the enjoyment of

incorporating it into my Art. Through the help of a number of artists including Gail LeBoff, Alexander Calder and Alberto Burri, I managed to portray my theme exactly how I wanted to. As no well known artist has ever done a piece on the jellyfish I thought it would be hard to base a whole unit on it at first. I liked the challenge however and through the techniques of the above artists, and my imagination of course, I managed to finish my Unit 3 successfully, basing it on a theme that interested me thoroughly.

2219 words