

Brett Whiteley

How did Brett Whiteley portray the body?

In the same way Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo used techniques to express the body in a way they thought was acceptable – as it was, Whiteley used techniques to express the body in a way *he* thought was acceptable. By doing so, Whiteley added character and life into his artwork, by distorting and changing the form. Instead of simply drawing what he saw, Whiteley expressed in a way he thought would communicate his point the most. By doing so, Whiteley would distort shapes, change lines, and exaggerate certain body parts that he felt were ‘important.’ Leonardo chose to capture the body nearly exactly the way it would be found in reality and that was how he thought would convey his point the most, and so did Whiteley, though he chose to portray the body in a completely different way, proving that it was just as effective.

The use of curvilinear lines is evident in Whiteley’s works as he uses it in most of his works portraying the body. Whiteley also chooses to exaggerate body parts by increasing the size/length. There is a great deal of emphasis in terms of line and shape. Wherever the most curvaceous parts on the body is, Whiteley would thicken the line, placing further accent on the line and body part. The majority of Whiteley’s works are of women, and not men because women tend to have curvier body parts than men. Therefore with the use of women, Whiteley would be able to highlight what he would want to convey.

Artist’s Practice

Whiteley is one of Australia’s most renowned artists, he started his artistic career early in his life, and at 20 years of age, he went to Italy to further his field. His techniques of brushwork have been linked with the technique of Japanese ink drawing. His numerous fresh and innovative techniques distinguish his works from other artists of his era. In a way, Whiteley’s depiction of human body has no sense of gravity. Body parts are defying gravity and can float or sink any direction. He emphasised the abstract nature of his artworks and the feeling of vivaciousness and sensuality, especially of women.

Whiteley produced over one hundred and fifty original prints between 1961 and 1992 and used various printmaking techniques to express the full range of his subject matter, from figurative conception, through to landscape, still life, nudes, animals and birds, to the most explicit erotica. Indeed the very breadth of techniques employed by Whiteley, including etching, lithography, woodcut and hand-worked photo-screen, echoed the boundaries that he challenged through his painting and sculpture.

"Brancusi in sculpture and Matisse in graphics were the two artists that particularly made one aware of respecting the integrity and truth of each medium whether it be marble, cedar, lithography, charcoal etc; that the pen behaves so differently from the brush, that to draw on copper with a fine nail suits certain subjects, that to draw with a greasy crayon on stone is perfect for others, the nude for example. I am not interested in the Marxist side of printmaking Écheaper originals. A good print should have the same feeling of 'rightness' that a one-off drawing should have."

-Brett Whiteley December 1982

Verlaine, Rimbaud, Pascin, Francis Bacon and Yves Klein’s works’ were clearly echoed in Whiteley’s work. Nearly all his mentors embarked on complicated courses of self destruction, as if this were the natural outcome for achieving. The whole pattern of Whiteley’s life was therefore written into his drawings and paintings revealing its excellence and uniqueness.

Social Context

Growing up in Sydney, he was exposed to different mediums of art, and his works have been well received by the public and critics alike. Although he started working in an advertising agency, he decided to seek more from his artistic sides and he attended art classes and took up further practices. He succeeded in Italy after moving in 1959.

In 1960, an Italian scholarship took Whiteley to London where his great natural talent for drawing, his lack of self-consciousness and taste for exotic influences, such as that of Francis Bacon, made the 21 year old painter an exciting prospect for London dealers. His work was shown at the Whitechapel and Marlborough galleries from 1961, and in that year he was selected to represent his country at the 'young Painters' Convention' UNESCO. Even more crucial to his future was his success in winning the International prize at the second 'Biennale de Paris' (International Biennale for Young Artists), which brought with it the excitement, glamour and disadvantages of world publicity in Paris.

After 1961 he returned to Australia. What he learned from his contacts with such countries as Cambodia, Vietnam and Japan is expressed in his drawings and paintings, and even more in sculptures such as his 'Asia', a construction in fur, steel and acrylic in which a white wallaby was depicted with its head stuck in a sewerage pipe. During the 1970s he won a number of national prizes and settled at Lavender Bay.

Whiteley continued to receive a number of awards for his artworks. His colourful life ended in the same nature; he committed suicide in a motel in NSW in 1992.