

Arthur Boyd

AN ACTIVE WITNESS

Education Guide





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Theme 1: Artist as Witness



This education guide for Arthur Boyd: An Active Witness is designed to complement a visit to the exhibition, highlighting the five themes and providing a series of discussion questions and activities for students to explore with the guidance of teachers. Choose the discussion questions appropriate to each age group and ability. The guide makes substantial use of the exhibition catalogue essay by Curator and Author Zara Stanhope.

Arthur Boyd (1920–1999) combined his own experience with parallels in literary and historical narratives in his artwork. This exhibition highlights the enduring relevance of a number of subjects for Arthur Boyd, connected to the act of witnessing.

Boyd was largely self-taught as an artist. The creative context of the Boyd family home ‘Open Country’ in Murrumbidgee, Melbourne, encouraged his talents for painting at an early age. His father Merric Boyd was a studio potter and his mother, Doris, a painter. Arthur Boyd’s grandparents, Arthur Merric and Emma Minnie Boyd, influenced his art. Emma Minnie impressed the Old Testament biblical tales on Arthur, and Merric fostered plein air and figurative painting in Arthur’s formative years. ‘Open Country’ welcomed a creative community of writers and artists. These included Yosl Bergner, John Perceval, Peter Herbst, Max Nicholson and Noel Counihan.

Boyd relied largely on informal art training. Leaving school at thirteen to work in the paint factory owned by his aunt’s husband Ralph Madder meant that Boyd could only paint in the evenings and on weekends. He attended formal evening classes for a little over a year at the National Gallery School in 1935 and 1936.

From 1936 Boyd returned to full time painting, living with his grandfather Arthur Merric Boyd at his cottage at Rosebud. Boyd spent nearly four years on the Mornington Peninsula concentrating on painting.¹ During this period he came to realise the paradoxical nature of the existence of the artist, focused on creativity yet needing to make an income. This puzzle would continue to be reflected in Boyd’s practice.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

World War Two and conscription into the army in 1941 extended Boyd's painting beyond realism. Boyd met Yvonne Lennie at art classes in 1942, and they married in 1945. Lennie was a pacifist, and for a time a member of the Communist Party. Whilst sharing her social concerns, Arthur Boyd remained disinclined to join organised politics. Like Lennie, Boyd drew on the surrounding context for his art; especially his army experiences in Bendigo, South Melbourne and Fitzroy.

This exhibition highlights the enduring relevance of a number of subjects for Arthur Boyd, subjects connected to the act of witnessing and significant for a greater portent. These include the ethical paradoxes faced by individuals and humanity, outsider figures and the power of groups and individuals, the futility and violence of war, and the beauty, vulnerability and savagery of nature. Boyd's subjects were often conveyed by reassembling familiar motifs and imagery into new compositions more relevant for the times.

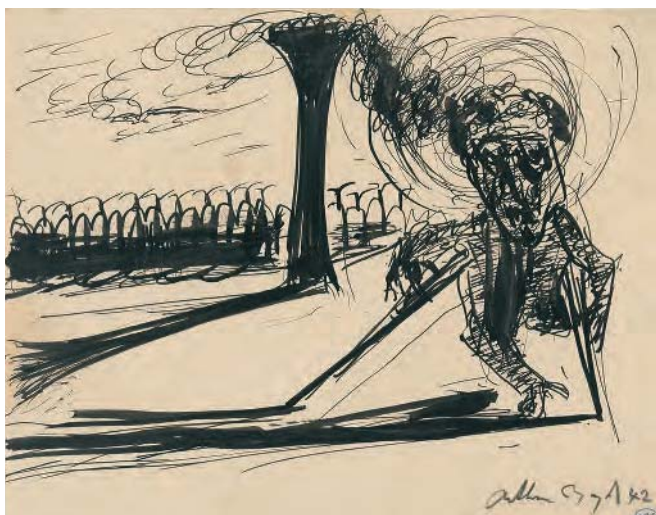
*'In the army I was stationed in Port Melbourne for a while and all the background of these things are all Port Melbourne or South Melbourne. But the figures, or the goings-on in front of them are purely imaginative.'*²



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Progression*, 1941, oil on composition board, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne

These questions are about the artwork *Progression* (1941)

- Describe how you feel after looking at this painting.
- Describe the depiction of the human figures and use of space.
- What effect does cropping have on the composition?
- What is the emotional impact of the artwork?
- Compare the cripple in *Progression* with the cripple in *Cripple in smoke from factory chimney*.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Cripple in smoke from factory chimney*, 1944, reed pen and ink, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, The Arthur Boyd Gift

The paintings during the war years combine real and imagined worlds, depicting crippled figures and other aspects of reality. The surroundings in these works often resemble theatrical backdrops, seen in the painting *Progression*. *Progression* depicts Arthur's brother David Boyd pushing Carl Cooper, a friend of John Perceval, in a wheelchair. Perceval had suffered from polio in his youth, and became associated with the image of the cripple in Boyd's imagery — a figure both witnessed and imagined.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are about the artwork *South Melbourne* (1944), on the following page. Read the break out information in the blue box before answering these questions.

- Describe the way the figures are portrayed in Boyd's *South Melbourne*.
- Find Brueghel's *The Blind leading the Blind* through an image search. Describe the way the figures are portrayed in Brueghel's *The Blind leading the Blind*.
- Select and compare a figure by Boyd and a figure by Brueghel from each painting.



Use this break out information to assist you with your answers to the questions on the previous page.

Boyd’s grandparents were Christian Scientists, and as a child, he was read bible stories by them. Boyd noted that the engravings in his grandmother’s Old Testament Bible, as well as prints of images by Brueghel and Rembrandt, informed the subjects of his early paintings, especially the iconic narratives of good and evil. Boyd admired the narratives of daily life in the work of Bosch and Breughel in books in the Melbourne Public Library. The Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder (1525c-1569) was active during turbulent times in European history. Brueghel specialized in genre paintings and he created some of the early images of acute social protest in art history.

South Melbourne (1944) is a response to the act of witnessing urban life during the war years filtered through Boyd’s creative mind. Boyd noted observing irrational behaviour from soldiers on South Melbourne beach, such as a man in uniform blowing a trumpet and waving a handkerchief that he concluded evoked the madness of war. In the painting, dogs and creatures surround the crippled and hollowed-eyed group are coffin bearers for a skeleton. A regrowth of life appears to be emerging from the feet in a poetic cyclical return.

Boyd drew the people and details he observed during his army postings in Bendigo and South Melbourne. Boyd moved to industrial Fitzroy with Yvonne in 1942. Both artists drew on the environs for their painting. In the innovative paintings of 1942–3 Boyd combined the views of this environment with earlier experiences such as the blossoms of Murrumbidgee, his grandfather’s death, the mocking girls, smoking chimneys and social conditions of work life he recalled.³

Symbols of Witness

Boyd places figures observed in life (including people with crutches, prams and the dog) as witnesses in images evoking relations between man and beast. This association continued throughout his practice, manifest in the active watcher, who at times also appears as victimised witness. This exhibition highlights the enduring relevance of observation and experience in Boyd’s art practice. Boyd admitted that the half animal, half human figures were stylistically informed by his father’s drawings:

“The butterfly or dragonfly who is half-man or the dog-like figures with human heads are images that seem to be an extension of the kinds of figures I had seen father model and draw.”⁴

Above: Arthur Boyd, *South Melbourne*, 1944, oil on cotton gauze on cardboard mounted on composition board, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; Purchased 1972

Boyd's subjects were often conveyed by reassembling familiar motifs and imagery into new compositions more relevant for the times. Boyd's imagery explored the metamorphosis between human and animal figures, and landscapes experienced and remembered.

There are many forms the witness takes in Boyd's compositions. Animals often feature as bearers of evil. The dog in *Two figures with ram and a dog* (c.1960s) is interchangeable with a ramox (half ram, half ox) or dark birds appearing in other images. Boyd would create numerous sketches of his ideas and then reinterpret these in a variety of ways in his paintings. *Two figures* is typical of Boyd's drawings; fluent drawings of ideas more resolved than the minimal notes of images in sketch books, but less detailed than works in print media and painting.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions refer to artworks in the exhibition.

- Find an example of a ramox or other symbols of witness in an artwork from this exhibition.
- Describe the image of this ramox or other symbols of witness and its place in the composition.
- Discuss the role of this ramox or other symbols of witness in the meaning of the artwork.

ACTIVITY

- Imagine, describe and draw your own beast which is a metamorphosis between two animals.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *The Kite*, 1943, oil on muslin on cardboard, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are about *The Kite* (1943).

- Describe the witness figure in *The Kite*.
- What does *The Kite* witness from above?
- Describe the structures and forms in the composition which link the figures.
- Describe the focal point of the composition.
- Below is another painting by Arthur Boyd which uses the kite figure as a witness. Compare the kite figure in both paintings.

ACTIVITY

- As a reporter on a news program, describe the next two minutes of this scene in *The Kite*.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Lovers on fire in a boat with kite*, c.1965, oil on canvas

Theme 2: Self and Society

'You must do something which is connected to the community.' Arthur Boyd

The art of Arthur Boyd reflects the artist's empathy toward others. Boyd was however, reluctant to speak in the name of others. Instead, he used his visual imagination to reinterpret and synthesise existing narratives and personal experience to generate reflection on the world. Arthur Boyd largely withdrew from public alignment with causes. He preferred to offer private support to campaigns affiliated with his social concerns.

Travelling to central Australia in 1951, Boyd's attention was drawn to the marginalisation of Indigenous Australians. Like most Melbournians, the Boyds had little contact with Aboriginal people in the 1940s. Yvonne Lennie signaled an interest in Indigenous Australians in her drawings of Aboriginal girls in 1941. Shocked and dismayed at the living conditions of Aboriginal people in the Simpson Desert, Boyd produced numerous small observational sketches, made as notes, during travel by car and truck in and around Alice Springs. Over time Boyd processed these experiences into a narrative, which first manifest in the medium of ceramic tiles. The groom and his bride were the protagonists in Boyd's *Bride series*, which includes the significant paintings *Bride in a Cave* (1958) and *Bride drinking from a pool* (1960) and convey his concern for the stigmatisation of Australians of mixed race. Arthur Boyd did offer direct support for Indigenous causes, lending his name and donating artworks to causes including The Aboriginal Treaty Committee, a body lobbying for a Treaty between the Commonwealth of Australia and Aboriginal Australians in 1979. Sidney Nolan shared Boyd's interest in the rights of Indigenous people, and Nolan's *Land rights* (1982) is amongst artworks Nolan gifted to Boyd on subjects related to Indigenous Australia.



Above: Arthur Boyd *Bride in a cave*, 1958, oil and tempera on composition board, acquired 2002, TarraWarra Museum of Art collection

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions refer to *Bride in a Cave* (1958)

- Describe the landscape and figures in *Bride in a Cave*. How does this painting make you feel?
- What meaning is there in the use of the reflecting figures, the cave, the figure holding flowers in the background and the dark sombre atmosphere with rainbow? Research these symbols of Arthur Boyd, within his practice of painting.



Above: Sidney Nolan, *Land rights*, 1982, oil on board

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions refers to the Sidney Nolan painting *Land Rights* (1982), above.

- Describe the figure in this painting.
- Look at the Sidney Nolan work *Land rights*. In this artwork, Sidney Nolan uses the genre of portraiture, which often portrays an individual's character, to symbolise universal ideas about the land rights movement.

ACTIVITY

- Find examples by other Australian artists which approach the subject of land rights. You could research artists such as Gordon Bennett or Imants Tillers, Lin Onus and others. Describe how the issue of land rights is conveyed in a visual way by these artists.
- Complete some reading on the land rights movement in Australia. Research the Yirrkala Bark Petitions of 1963 and the Australian Land Rights Commissions of 1973.

Lovers, Myths, Greed and Warning

Myths and fairy tales were as important as personal experience and emotions in Boyd's art. Boyd also employed fairy tales and myths in a narrative extension of his concern for human actions. Icarus, the mythological character who flew too close to the sun, depicted in *Icar* (c1960s), conveys a moral warning. Boyd's *Icar* falls under the weight of his arrogance and his pride in an expectation of his failed flight. Boyd depicted many such moral dilemmas, including *Susannah with the Elders* (1945) and *The Kiss of Judas*, in his visual interpretations of secular and sacred narratives. Egoism, pride and greed are portrayed as degrading human vices.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Icar*, c1960s, ink on paper

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions refer to the drawing *Icar* (c1960s), above.

Research the myth of Icarus on the web.

- What part of the story of Icarus is shown in this pen and ink drawing by Boyd?
- Why has Boyd chosen to show this part of the story?

ACTIVITY

- Research the story of Icarus and find visual examples by other artists of a figure in flight.
- Create your own figure with wings combining three stages of movement using drawing, painting or sculpture

Boyd appreciated the ethical and moral values conveyed in fables written by Russian author Alexander Pushkin (1799-1837). Pushkin's fairy tales combined contemporary humour and the bare facts of contemporary Russian life with traditional folklore. Boyd's *The Magic Fish* (1978) is one of several fairytales he illustrated, an interpretation of Pushkin's tale of the 'Golden Fish'.

After a poor fisherman lands a golden fish, it offers to fulfill the man's wishes if he returns the fish to the sea. The fisherman's wife takes up the fish's offer, and asks for a new wash trough, and then in succession: a new house, to rule the province, and finally to be the ruler of the sea over the fish. The fish responds to her greed by returning the wife to her old cottage and broken trough.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *The Magic Fish*, c1978, oil on canvas

ACTIVITY

This activity refers to *The Magic Fish*, above.

- Use a web search to find the full story of the magic fish. Read this in class.
- Find a different fairy tale and create a drawing or painting based on this story. Try to simplify the story to the most important ideas and characters, and make the setting of the fairy tale in contemporary Australia. Try to show the moral of the story.

Theme 3: Madness of War

*'For a long time I was obsessed by war, all those dark thoughts about the individual slaughter in the First World War, people with their legs hacked off and throats cut. Then war got more mechanical and more scientific and more awful.'*⁵ Arthur Boyd

Arthur Boyd deeply felt the futility of war and forgetting of history. Whilst disinterested in organised politics, Boyd at times joined political actions. He participated in exhibitions protesting against the Vietnam War and commemorating the bombing of Hiroshima, and signed appeals to the Mexican government for clemency for artist David Sequeira.

Concern over the threat of nuclear disaster led him to join a protest march at Aldermaston, England in the early 1960s. Boyd's selective support of political causes was distinct from his artistic practice, and the role he hoped art could play in conveying collective meaning. The *Nebuchadnezzar* series of paintings and images Boyd began in the 1960s was spurred by the news of the self-immolation of an anti Vietnam War protestor on Hampstead Heath, London.

The grey zone between human and inhuman states inhabited by men during war is evoked by Boyd's drawings of skeletal figures, and characterised in the Mars drawings and lithographs. Boyd created a large series of images for joint publication with the poetry of Peter Porter in the book *Mars* (Andre Deutsch, 1988), the title referencing the pagan Roman god personifying war. Boyd's images from series such as this confront the violent, and at times debauched and grotesque inhumanity of war, authority and betrayal in which all mankind is implicated.

News of the atrocities undertaken by Hitler's German army reached Boyd through friends and colleagues including European refugees Yosl Bergner and Peter Herbst.

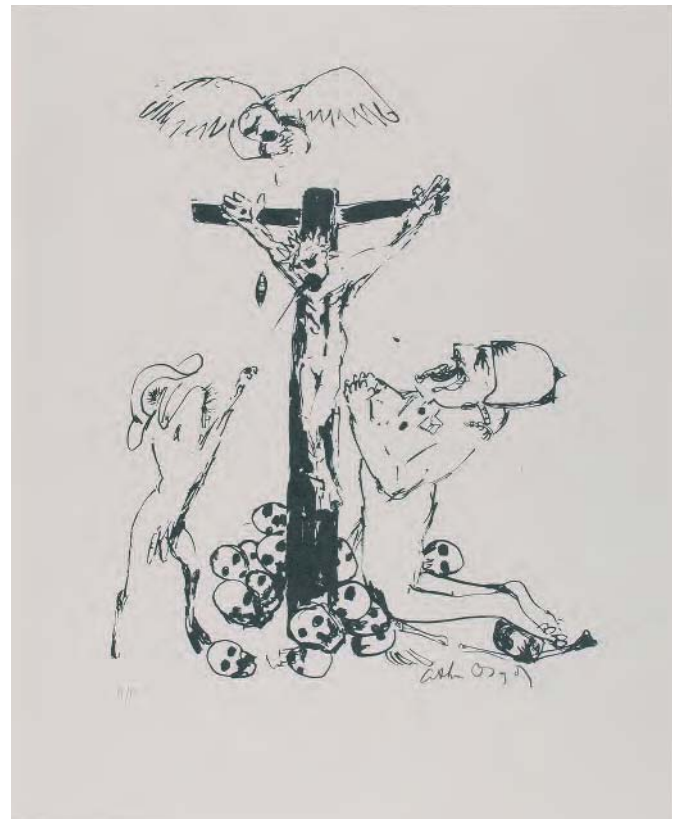


Above: Arthur Boyd in his studio in London, circa late 1960's

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions refer to *Mars - Sponge treatment* (1987), below

- Describe the scene, the figures and their identifying hats and the composition.
- How do these symbolic figures relate to the theme of war?
- What do you think are the meanings of this image, and how does it comment on the atrocities occurring during wars?



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Mars - Sponge treatment*, 1987, ink on paper

In subsequent decades Boyd continued to engage with the subject of war in ways ranging from poetic allegory to gruesome symbolism. Yet his sketchbooks suggest that the treatment of Jews during World War Two was equally present alongside the threat of the nuclear bomb.

Boyd's army conscription and attention to the psychological as well as physical effects of conflict during the 1940s informed his depictions of war and its victims. His continued engagement with the subject of war ranged from poetic allegory to gruesome symbolism. Boyd took a special interest in poetry that could convey the tragedy and absurdity of human aggression.

Responding to Australian-born writer Jack Lindsay's translation of Aristophanes' tragi-comedic play *Lysistrata*, Boyd's inky black etchings place the story in a timeless context. First performed in Athens around 400 BCE, the play is based on a plot by Greek women to convince their husbands to negotiate peace in the Peloponnesian War between Greece and Sparta under the threat of a sex strike.

The *Lysistrata* suite of 20 etchings, was inspired by Aristophanes' bawdy comedy, set around 410 BCE, about the women of Athens who occupy the Acropolis. Withholding their sexual favours from their lovers, the women refused to surrender until the men of Athens and Sparta end the Peloponnesian war.

Boyd was inspired by the great ancient Greek writer of comedy, Aristophanes, whose plays combined fantasy, wit and graceful lyrics with serious criticism of politics, manners, education, music and literature. The translation used by Boyd was by the London based Australian writer and scholar, Jack Lindsay (son of Norman Lindsay).

The *Lysistrata* etchings was produced in 1970 during the Vietnam War, so while Boyd comically illustrates Aristophanes' witty tale, the underlying theme is the futility of war. The women take action, highlighting the price women pay in war is too high – losing husbands, lovers and sons. The *Lysistrata* suite of etchings were commissioned by Ganymed Original Editions, London. Ganymed's Director, Bernhard Baer said

'We were encouraged to suggest to him (Boyd) a suite of etchings based on Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*.he went to work on the subject which so obviously inspired him. Two months later he had a display of forty proofs on the wall of his studio – a staggering exhibition of dramatic invention and brilliant technique, completely original and at an antipodean distance from such famous predecessors as Beardsley and Picasso.'⁶



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions refer to the *Lysistrata* etchings (1970).

Use the break out information in the blue box at left about the *Lysistrata* suite to assist you with your answers.

- Describe the movement and tension in the composition of *Earth is delighted now*.
- Compare the figures in *Lysistrata calls the women* and *Earth is delighted now*.
- Compare the etching composition of *Lysistrata calls the women* and the figures in the photograph Arthur Boyd at the Aldermaston protest march.
- Setting the human tragi-comedic tale against a black inky background and the use of naked figures, Boyd's etchings place the story in a timeless context. Why?



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Earth is delighted now*, 1970, etching and aquatint



Above: Arthur Boyd at the Aldermaston protest march in England c1961, Photo Tom Sanders
Left: Arthur Boyd, *Lysistrata calls the women*, 1970, etching and aquatint



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Picture on the wall Shoalhaven*, 1979-80, oil on canvas

The threat of atomic or nuclear explosions appeared in Boyd's imagery from the 1940s onwards. While nuclear clouds appear as a distant threat in a number of images, this exhibition indicates Boyd's multiple and distinct attention to militarism and the madness of war.

ACTIVITY

- Find photographs of the atomic bombs dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan towards the end of WW2 (1945).
- Describe these images of the nuclear mushroom cloud created by the explosion of the bomb.
- Compare the photographs and Boyd's images in the paintings in this exhibition.
- Research other paintings by Boyd which include the image of the nuclear mushroom cloud.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions refer to *Picture on the wall Shoalhaven* (1979–80)

- Describe the artwork *Picture on the wall Shoalhaven*
- Take a journey down both the rivers depicted in the artwork. Describe your journey and the feelings and ideas you experience as you travel.
- In what way could this artwork be considered to be a “reflection” type of painting, as seen in other works by Boyd?
- Using Google Earth, make a virtual flying journey over the Shoalhaven River, starting at Nowra. Discuss the experience.

Theme 4: One World

'Its fair to say I am still obsessed by the Australian bush.' Arthur Boyd

Boyd was passionate about the environment. From being a compositional device and carrier of emotion in his early paintings, the landscape came to offer multiple meanings and required protection from human intervention.

Boyd became absorbed in the dry Wimmera region in the late 1940s and early 1950s, after the family stayed at Horsham in the house of poet Jack Stevenson. The vast, empty landscapes presented a new challenge and appreciation of a region Boyd would later revisit. Whilst Boyd valued the distinctive qualities of the Australian and English landscapes, he also populated images with elements and symbols of human habitation.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Wimmera landscape*, 1950, oil on board, Private Collection.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions refer to *Wimmera landscape* (1950), above.

- List all the elements in the painting *Wimmera landscape*, which identify it as an Australian landscape.
- Describe the painting techniques Boyd uses in this artwork.
- Describe how you would feel if you were lost in this landscape.
- What interpretation of the landscape is Boyd making through this artwork.
- What does this artwork communicate about the life of farmers in Australia?



Above: *Cyanide tanks, Bendigo*, c1950, tempera on composition board, Art Gallery of South Australia

This painting *Cyanide tanks, Bendigo* (c1950), is set in the Gold Rush town of Bendigo, where Arthur was stationed during his WW2 army service. It depicts the environmental destruction caused by the processing of gold and its waste products, the everyday life of people is also shown in great detail.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions refer to *Cyanide tanks, Bendigo* (c1950)

- Describe three of the everyday activities of the people in this landscape.
- Identify and list the evidence of environmental destruction in this painting
- How has Boyd's used tone, colour and texture to create the atmosphere in this painting.

Compare the painting *Cyanide tanks, Bendigo*, with *Wimmera landscape*. Describe the similarities and difference in techniques, compositions and representation of the landscape.

ACTIVITY

- Find some photos using a web search which show other views of the effects of the gold rush on the landscape. Compare these with Boyd's painting.

LINKS

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bendigo>

http://www.nma.gov.au/exhibitions/landmarks/about_landmarks/gold#Bendigo

- 12 From 1974 Boyd began a new focus in his art, based on the Shoalhaven region around Bundanon, in New South Wales. He first visited Bundanon in 1971 whilst on a Creative Arts Fellowship at the Australian National University, Canberra. Boyd purchased his first property, Riversdale, on the Shoalhaven River near Bundanon in 1972, and the Bundanon property in 1979.

Alarmed by the indifference of authorities to land degradation and subdivision in the mid 1980s, Boyd approached state and federal governments to accept ownership of the property.

The Australian Government accepted the gift of the properties in 1993 agreeing to Boyd's proposal to preserve the property as a base for research and work by artists and for the education of young people and the Bundanon Trust was formed.

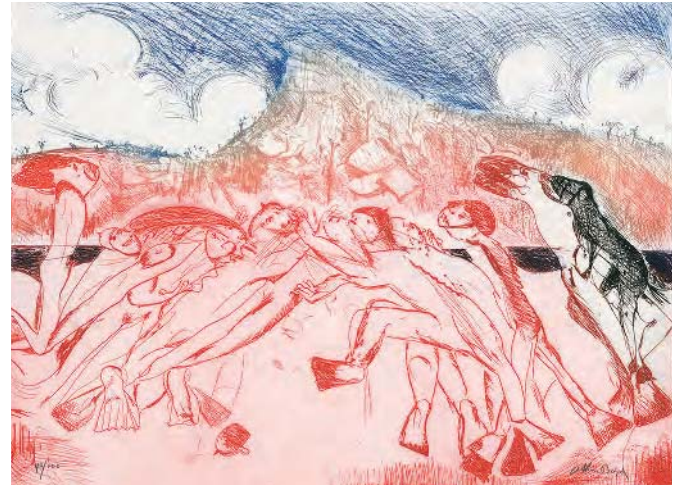
Boyd subsequently turned his energies to related initiatives, including becoming involved in a Landcare and Environment Action Plan in the 1990s. More significantly he led and won a case against a plan to sand-mine the banks of the Shoalhaven River opposite Bundanon in 1982.

Boyd responded to the large blue skies, the drama of the Shoalhaven River and scale of Pulpit Rock towering above the water in paintings that revel in nature for its own beauty, and as a stage for other meanings. Boyd often gave the landscape an anthropomorphic character, just as animals and humans underwent a metamorphosis under the artist's eye.



Above: Photo, Pulpit Rock at Bundanon

In the colour etching *Shoalhaven bathers* (1987) water-skiers, boat owners and other self-absorbed intruders are depicted as aquatic invaders, some approximating the guise of Mars. These protagonists are ignorant of the possible threat they hold for the river environs. In Boyd's imagery Bundanon was not only a stage for ideas of collective significance but also a site worthy of raising awareness regarding impending ecological disaster.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Shoalhaven bathers*, 1987, colour etching

ACTIVITY

These activities and questions are based on the etching *Shoalhaven bathers* (1987), above.

- Draw the composition of human figures and the landscape in this etching?

DISCUSSION QUESTION

ACTIVITY

- Describe the relationship between the human figures and the landscape in this artwork?
- The landscape in this etching features Pulpit Rock, a rock overhanging the Shoalhaven River at Bundanon. Find three other images of Pulpit Rock created by students who have visited Bundanon using the link to Bundanon education workshops below:

www.bundanon.com.au/content/pulpit-rock-bundanon

Compare the use of different drawing media to create responses in line, tone and texture.



Above: Time Magazine special edition cover. November 1988

Arthur Boyd created artwork in many forms including book covers, illustrated books and sets for plays. The magazine cover above shows a painting commissioned by Time Magazine for the cover. This Time Magazine special issue focussed on the Australian environment – its struggles and conservation.

DISCUSSION QUESTION

ACTIVITY

- Write a comparison of the Time Magazine cover and the etching *Shoalhaven bathers* (1987).
- Create your own magazine cover for a current environmental issue

Research how Bundanon Trust is caring for the environment through the Living Landscape project and documenting the flora and fauna. Use the link below:

www.bundanon.com.au/content/living-landscape

14 *Anthropomorphism*

Large skate on grey background (1979) is a painting confirming the significance of observation and realism for Boyd, as well as the potential of associative meanings. The upright and exposed underbelly of *Large skate on grey background* presents a vulnerable or wounded body and is anthropomorphic in its suggestive, fleshy appearance.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Large skate on grey background*, 1979, oil on canvas

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions refer to *Large skate on grey background* (1979), above.

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of a human form, human characteristics, or human behaviour to nonhuman things, such as animals in children's stories.

These questions are about *Large skate on grey background*. A Skate is a large stingray.

- What human characteristics is Boyd showing in *Large skate on grey background*?
- Explain your feelings towards the fish in this artwork.
- Why has Boyd painted the skate in isolation, similar to a portrait?

Animals became more than witnesses, harbingers of evil or emblematic of human behaviour after Arthur and Yvonne visited an animal research unit at Maudsley Hospital, a London psychiatric institution.

At the hospital laboratory the Boyd's witnessed experiments

on live cats and rabbits. *Nude with rabbit and syringe* (1968-9) and subsequent paintings showing caged figures with rabbits or dogs indicated Boyd's response to witnessing the shocking mistreatment of live animals. Almost immediately the subject of inhumanity to animals also became associated with man's monetary greed and the figure of the artist, a drama played out in Boyd's *Caged Painter* (1972-3) series and other images.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Nude with rabbit and syringe*, 1968-69, etching and aquatint

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Examine the etching *Nude with rabbit and syringe* (1968-69)

- How does this artwork portray animal cruelty?
- How are the humans depicted in this artwork?
- How does this artwork comment on human nature and suffering?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are based on *Crescent moon and muzzled figure* (1973) on the following page.

- Identify the symbols in *Crescent moon and muzzled figure* and describe what they mean?
- How is the artist figure depicted in this artwork?
- How does this artwork comment on the role of the artist as a commentator on social issues?

Theme 5: An Active & Empathetic Eye

'I'd like to feel that through my work there is a possibility of making a contribution to a social progression or enlightenment. It would be nice if the creative effort or impulse was connected with a conscious contribution to society, a sort of duty of service.' Arthur Boyd

Arthur Boyd signalled a personal responsibility toward others and the world in his art. Boyd's images of 'the artist' are at one level self-referential. The artist is often depicted as unable to act. The Biblical figure of Jonah and the artist share this fate in *Jonah on the Shoalhaven – Outside the city* (1976). Tormented by the gold in his belly, the beastly artist can only watch the approaching armed threat. Boyd's Jonah goes beyond the Old Testament story of a call from God and struggle with the whale to show man struggling with his demons.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are about the painting *Jonah on the Shoalhaven – Outside the city* (1976)

- Identify and list images and symbols you have already seen in other Boyd artworks in the exhibition.
- Why did Arthur Boyd set this biblical story in the Shoalhaven area of Australia?

Boyd deployed powerful allegorical stories from the Bible and other historical and literary sources, alongside images of lovers, beasts and humans, in an interweaving of symbolism and direct experience.

Set originally in 605-561 BCE, the Old Testament story of Nebuchadnezzar described the punishment of the King of Babylon, for presuming to create an empire without the aid of God. Cast into the wilderness for seven years, Nebuchadnezzar led the life of an animal until he acknowledged the rule of God.

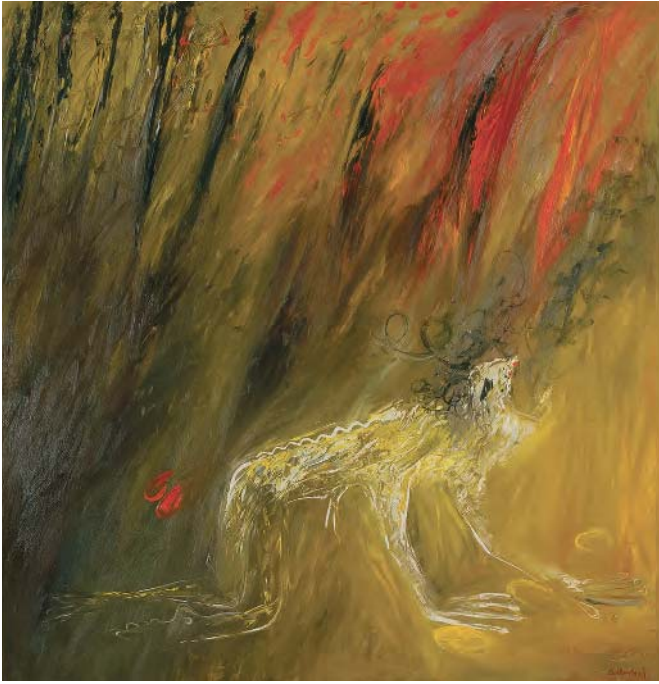
Researching the story in Jewish literature in the British Museum in the late 1960s Boyd produced a large number of paintings on the subject of Nebuchadnezzar's exile, including *Nebuchadnezzar in a fire* (c1969) and *Red Nebuchadnezzar fallen in a forest with lion* (1969). The original series of paintings were published in collaboration with T.S.R. Boase in *Nebuchadnezzar* (Thames and Hudson, 1972).



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Crescent moon and muzzled figure*, 1973, oil on canvas



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Jonah on the Shoalhaven – Outside the city*, 1976, oil on canvas



Above left: Arthur Boyd, *Nebuchadnezzar in a fire*, c1969, oil on canvas

Arthur Boyd's interest in the subject of Nebuchadnezzar was partly inspired by seeing English poet William Blake's coloured etching *Nebuchadnezzar* (1795- c1805) in the Tate Gallery, London. The Nebuchadnezzar narrative symbolised the necessity for an individual acceptance of guilt, a sentiment Boyd considered relevant, saying:

'The only way to deal with [guilt] as an artist was to paint it out of my system. To expunge my own guilt by painting it and in a way face up to it. I mean guilt in a general sense, because although I do the painting, everyone else who then looks at it is in the same position as myself. I hopefully have helped them to face their guilt also.' Arthur Boyd



Boyd's extended interpretation of the trials of Nebuchadnezzar extrapolated associations regarding ideas of greed, religiousness and bestiality.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These questions are about *Nebuchadnezzar in a fire* (c1969)

- Describe what you can see in this painting.
- What messages does the artist convey in this artwork?
- What messages does the audience perceive from this artwork?
- What relevance is this biblical story to people living in today's world?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Consider these two paintings: *Red Nebuchadnezzar fallen in a forest with lion* (c1969) and *Nebuchadnezzar being struck by lightning* (1968-69)

- Compare the settings for each artwork - the time of day and the surrounding landscape.
- Compare the placement of these figures within the composition.
- Describe the painting techniques evident in each artwork.
- Describe the emotional impact of each artwork on you.
- What messages are conveyed to the audience by each artwork?



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Nebuchadnezzar being struck by lightning*, 1968-69, oil on canvas
Left: Arthur Boyd, *Red Nebuchadnezzar fallen in a forest with lion*, c1969, oil on canvas



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Hanging rocks with bathers and Mars*, c1985, oil on canvas

In both life and art Arthur Boyd evoked a social conscience and concern for the world. Boyd's art arose from an active witnessing of life, and a concern for the world in the face of history. Humankind's recklessness is foretold in the burning book observed by Mars in *Hanging rocks with bathers and Mars* (c1985). Both humans and gods appear detached from their environment, guarding as well as actively despoiling a world understood as a resource.

Art historians consider the landscape in this painting shows signs of regrowth after fire, and find a resemblance between the form in the distance and a nuclear power plant located close to Boyd's Suffolk studio in England and also a water tower located near Bundanon. Boyd was aware of the changing character of the Australian landscape across recorded history, prior to human impact.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

This question refers to *Hanging rocks with bathers and Mars* (c1985)

- How does this artwork combine the past and present?
- Describe the images in each of the foreground, middle ground and background.
- Describe the use of space in this composition and the balance created by the figures and landscape elements.
You can see Arthur Boyd's drawing preparation for this painting opposite.

- This artwork combines elements of the imagined, remembered and real. Describe one example for each of the three elements.

'I'd like to feel that through my work there is a possibility of making a contribution to a social progression or enlightenment. It would be nice if the creative effort or impulse was connected with a conscious contribution to society, a sort of duty of service.' Arthur Boyd

DISCUSSION QUESTION

This question is based on *The journey* (1996), below

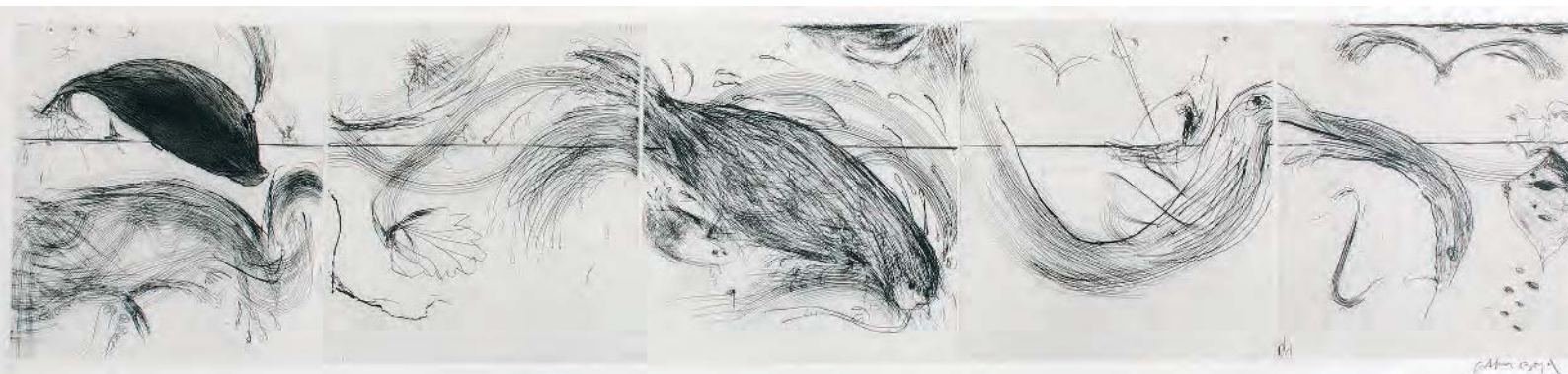
- How does Boyd convey movement, time and the idea of a journey through the composition?

ACTIVITY

- Select an environmental issue which concerns you. Develop four different images as a response to this issue and connect them by creating a "journey" artwork inspired by Boyd's *The journey* (1996). You could use drawing first and then translate your ideas into a printmaking technique.



Above: Arthur Boyd, *Sketch for Hanging rocks with bathers and Mars*, c1985, pencil on paper
Below: Arthur Boyd, *The journey*, 1996, etching



Definitions

Allegory – a work in which the characters and events are to be understood as representing other things and symbolically expressing a deeper, often spiritual, moral, or political meaning

Anthropomorphic – the attribution of a human form, human characteristics, or human behaviour to nonhuman things, such as animals in children’s stories

Cropping – to cut off or conceal unwanted parts of an image

Empathy – the ability to identify with and understand somebody else’s feelings or difficulties; the transfer of somebody’s own feelings and emotions to an object such as a painting

Focal point – an image or place of concentrated attention, the focus of an artwork

Genre painting – one of the categories into which artistic works of all kinds can be divided, usually depicting household and everyday scenes

Icarus – In Greek mythology, Icarus was the son of Daedalus, who drowned in the sea while attempting to escape from Crete after attempting flight, only to have the sun melt his wings of wax and feathers

Mars – in Roman mythology, the god of war and the father of Romulus, the founder of Rome

Metamorphosis – a complete or marked change of physical form, structure, or substance. In Boyd’s work this refers to the transformation from human to animal, or a combination of images of different animals such as the Ramox,

Narrative – the art or process of telling a story

Nebuchadnezzar – Nebuchadnezzar was a King of Babylon (605–561BC). In an Old Testament story God punished and banished Nebuchadnezzar to the wilderness for seven years to lead the life of an animal. Nebuchadnezzar demonstrated great arrogance by presuming to create an empire of his own, without the aid of God.

Ramox – is a hybrid beast created by Arthur Boyd. It is part ram, part ox.

Witness - to see something happen; somebody who gives evidence after seeing or hearing something.

Footnotes

1. Boyd lived with his grandfather Athur Merric Boyd after the death of his grandmother Emma Minnie Boyd. Arthur Merric paid for Boyd’s paints, and the subsequent construction of a studio designed by Robin Boyd at Open Country, in which Arthur and Yvonne Boyd lived for twelve years from 1943.
2. Arthur Boyd in “Interview with Mr Arthur Boyd by Richard Haese, Melbourne, 2 December 1974,”
3. Zara Stanhope, Exhibition Catalogue Essay, *Arthur Boyd: An Active Witness*.
4. Arthur Boyd in Barry Pearce, “Arthur Boyd” in Lou Kelpac, ed., *Australian Painters of the Twentieth Century* (Sydney: Beagle Press, 2000), 154.
5. Arthur Boyd in Janet Hawley, “Leaving the Landscape,” in *The Good Weekend*, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 May 1998, 36–49, 34.
6. Hendrik Kolenberg, essay “Works on paper” in *Arthur Boyd Retrospective*, AGNSW, 1993, p163



Above: Bundanon Homestead

About Bundanon

Arthur and Yvonne Boyd's 1993 gift of the Bundanon properties and collections has given Australia a unique cultural and environmental asset. The gift was borne out of Arthur Boyd's often stated belief that 'you can't own a landscape' and the deeply felt wish that others might also draw inspiration from Bundanon. The Bundanon properties are located on 1,100 hectares of bush and agricultural land overlooking the Shoalhaven River in New South Wales. Bundanon Trust supports arts practice and engagement with the arts through its residency, education, exhibition and performance programs. The Trust is a platform for scientific research and a range of environmental projects.

In preserving the natural and cultural heritage of its site, Bundanon Trust promotes the value of the environmental empathy and engagement in personal, social and community life.

bundanon.com.au



Top: Photo, Students on a sensory walk for 'Touched by the Earth' program, Bundanon.
Bottom: Shoalhaven River; Boyd Education Centre, Riversdale

Exhibition Tour

Arthur Boyd: An Active Witness opened on 8 May and continues until 29 September 2013 at the Museum of Australian Democracy, Canberra.

For information on further venues please go to bundanon.com.au

Exhibition Credits

This is a Bundanon Trust Touring Exhibition. All works from the Bundanon Trust Collection unless otherwise stated.

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Australian Government
National Collecting Institutions
Touring & Outreach Program



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Further Reading

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Other Education Resources By Bundanon Trust:

Arthur Boyd Timeline and other resources are available here: www.bundanon.com.au/category/education/resources



