Education Kit

ABSTRACT MINIMALISM
AND
MIND AND MATTER: MEDITATIONS ON IMMATERIALITY
5 June 2010 – 25 July 2010
Mind and Matter: Meditations on Immateriality

Teachers Notes

The exhibition Mind and Matter: Meditations on Immateriality features the work of glass artists with minimalist and abstract sensibilities. Curated by Margot Osborne, the exhibition demonstrates ‘artists’ concerns with discipline, restraint and understatement in handling the sensuality of the medium. This formal minimalism goes hand in hand with a desire to imbue material form with an immaterial, poetic dimension.’

- Margot Osborne

This education kit is designed for teachers and Stage 6 and tertiary students to explore minimalist and abstract concepts through the work of contemporary Australian glass artists as well as painters, sculptors and architects. The kit focuses on diverse practitioners whose work is connected by ideas related to form, surface, refraction and restraint.

Students are encouraged to enquire into these concepts through art making, research and first hand experience at the exhibition.

Throughout the kit you will find references to symbols, they refer to;

Enquire
Investigate/research before you visit

Experience
The exhibition through questions and activities

Extend
Your knowledge by further research, making, creating and designing.

Object Learning Programs are made possible through the generous support of the John T Reid Charitable Trusts, The Ian Potter Foundation and The Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation.

Education kit was developed by Annette Mauer, Learning Coordinator, Object: Australian Centre for Craft and Design
Design, and Writer: Amy Yongsiri
Photography: various
Front Cover: detail from Masahiro Asaka
Surge 7, 2008
Photo by Rob Little
Setting the Scene: Minimalism and Abstraction

Minimalism is generally considered an abstract art movement that emerged in the late 1950’s. Artists emphasised extreme simplification of form and often a monochromatic palette. Artists practising in this style want the viewer to respond to what is in front of them rather than make associations with the real world.

Minimalism sought to de-mystify, to reveal its most fundamental character, its reality...Exposing its materials and processes, it attempted to engage the viewer in an immediate, direct and unmediated experience...The work was uncompromisingly radical and challenging: it proposed a new way of looking at the world.

- Michael Craig-Martin quoted in Minimalism catalogue, Tate Liverpool 1990

Abstraction is real, probably more real than nature.

- Josef Albers

Minimalism wasn’t a real idea - it ended before it started.

- Sol LeWitt

Research the work of Frank Stella and Dan Flavin.

Left: Mind and Matter exhibition at Object Gallery
Photo by Amy Yongsiri
Masahiro Asaka’s sculptures capture the fragility and danger of glass, qualities that are often associated with the weakness of this material. Asaka exerts control and at the same time allows the material to express its vulnerabilities. The way that the glass has been treated seems to defy gravity and may incite wonder yet there is a familiarity in the form that allows the viewer to contemplate the relationship between abstract references and the artist’s inspiration.

Clockwise from top:
Surge 7, 2008, Cast and cold-worked glass
Photo by Rob Little
Detail from Surge 9.5, 2010
Cast and cold-worked glass
Detail from Surge 7, 2008
Cast and cold-worked glass

Through photographs and sketches, find scenes and forms in nature. Consider how they demonstrate its fragility and ability to defy our understanding through its unpredictable characteristics. Discuss what you have collected and why you think this has inspired artists in their artmaking practice?

Look at the work of Masahiro Asaka. Describe this work using ten words. Consider the subjective words you have used. What has captured your attention? Have the words described your feeling towards the work or is it more considerate of the form? Quickly glance around at the exhibition. What do you notice about this work and its form that is unique to the way Asaka has treated glass?

What do you notice about this work and its form that is unique to the way Asaka has treated glass? What is it about the form of this work that can be considered minimalist? Asaka's sculpture is created using one material only. With this in mind, develop an artwork using one material that captures its essence for example the malleability of wire or the lightness of paper.

Uncertainty - my piece is about the balance of chance and control, or inevitability. The process is very important. It is all about the interaction of my mind and matter, which is glass... I am partly guessing and partly controlling what is going to happen, to capture the frozen moment that embodies the trace of fierce energy.
Until the mid 19th century, glass was a precious substance due to the difficulty manufacturers had in controlling its form and quality. With industrial processes the production of glass became increasingly economical and a highly desired construction material.

Completed in 1949, Philip Johnson’s Glass House is an example of modern architecture that demonstrates the importance of form when employing the use of glass in construction. Whilst the necessity of the steel beams that support the large panels of glass should not be discounted, the wondrous feature is that all walls are made from large ceiling to floor panes glass offering a seamless integration with the outside.

These features of the building may not seem so unique now with glass being used freely in architecture today but in 1949 this building was considered revolutionary.

The geometry of the Glass House with its two long walls that traverse the landscape allowing the eye to look endlessly to it and the sense of intimacy that is created with the natural surrounds described by Johnson as like being on a camping trip without having to bring anything. The glass helps create the feeling of immense space, inviting and refracting light and capturing the changing qualities of the landscape. In this sense the environment is also part of the form of the Glass House.

While Asaka exerts needs great control and high levels of expertise to evoke the fragility of glass with each piece being unique, Philip Johnson’s Glass House celebrates the industrial nature of sheet glass and its ability to be produced uniformly in large sheets to create a work of purity, geometry and transparency.
Whilst the Glass House has been described by critics as uninhabitable due to the transparency of all walls and absence of curtains, the transparency of glass has allowed the inhabitant to feel connected to the outside environment. The properties found in glass are also in the evident in the National Aquatics Centre in Beijing fondly nicknamed the Watercube. Although the Watercube is not constructed from glass, the properties of transparency and playfulness with light also reference those characteristics evident in glass. The surface of the building’s skin allows the sun to light the aquatic centre during the day while the tint on the outside layer reflects that of the sky. At night, the form is seen to transmit light and has been the site of sound and light projections. The pattern on the outer layer of the structure may appear to be random but like that of Asaka’s work, there is a considered level of control which underlies the seemingly organic form. Amongst concepts of balance and historical references to Chinese architecture, the geometric shape of a cube highlights a minimalist tendency to work with the form itself, alluding to the cellular structure of water and avoiding unnecessary ornament. All the details are in the manipulation of the material as can be seen with many artworks in the Mind and Matter exhibition.


Investigate the concepts informing the design of the Watercube. What are some other well known examples of architecture that suggest a minimalist approach?


Consider the success of the Watercube and the Macau casino replica. Do you think that this structure still maintains the minimalist form? Does your understanding change with the knowledge of the replica and its intended use?
Donald Judd: Minimalism and Sculptural Form

Donald Judd is often described as a minimalist artist though he did not refer to himself as such. His use of industrial materials in sculptural forms aimed to highlight the importance of the relationships between artwork as object, the space it was exhibited and the audience. This was indeed in line with a minimalist approach to art. Similarly in the way that the Glass House and the Watercube are designed in response to their environments, Judd’s sculptures place importance on the integration of space as a sculptural element. From the 1960s, Judd moved away from painting in favour of 3D forms as a means of highlighting the integral nature of the environment to a sculpture. Elements often found in Judd’s work include solid boxes that assert the unifying aspects of surface, colour and shape. Later he worked on more complex ways of signifying the ‘whole’ by separating forms into patterns of positive and negative space as seen in Untitled, December 23, 1969. In keeping with the industrial use of materials, this work formed out of highly polished copper reflects and responds to the light and objects in the environment, as well as, the repeating patterns of negative space significant in abstract and minimalist works.

Presenting forms, materials, colours and surfaces in their honest and simplest state may seem commonplace now, but it was a big shift from the abstract expressionist method of composing artworks which preceded minimalism.

http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/judd/

Explore this site to develop your understanding of the importance of abstraction in minimalism.

Investigate some of the other key figures in minimalism. Select two works and combine them to create a new abstract and minimalist artwork. Artworks do not have to be limited by the forms—consider the effect of combining 2D and 3D works.
Janice Vitkovsky

My work is concerned with perceptual experience... I like to work in the realm of the abstract as it relates to the intangible aspects of our experiences, the unseen but felt, describing the ephemeral quality of a thought or an emotion.

Janice Vitkovsky’s approach to glass art is meditative in its combination of muted colours and patterns of murrine glass embedded in the panels. Her interest in exploring the concept of fleeting and the ephemeral is seen through the impression of light playing on and between the murrine glass pieces. The subtle injections of colour into the glass and the visual texture of the work are both ways of highlighting the intrinsic qualities of the delicate material in its purest and simplest form. Abstractions of natural references to elicit an emotional response in this way is not an absolute homage to minimalism and yet Vitkovsky captures the complexity, intricacy of construction and feelings using a deceivingly minimalist language.

What are some of the ideas that are readily associated with the terms ‘meditation’, ‘minimalism’ and ‘abstraction’? Enquire into how pop culture (including movies, tv shows and magazines) have used these terms in satirical and ironic ways.

Using a camera phone or a digital camera capable of taking video, create a short video describing Vitkovsky’s work. In the video, take the role of the curator and describe the work in terms of how it reflects a minimalist approach or one that induces a state of meditation.


Dale Frank uses colour in a way that also references the language of minimalist and abstract art. How is this use of colour different to Vitkovsky’s practice? Develop palettes of 3-5 colours that may suggest a meditative state. Interview friends and family to see what they feel when looking at the different palettes.
The simplicity of my works suggests stillness and silence, a meditation on the elements and concepts of light, space and time that I am inspired by. I aim to concentrate the viewer’s attention on the proportion and linear relationships of the work. In contrast to the method of working with glass used by Vitkovsky, Mel Douglas’ works play with the surface of glass. The vessel form and wall panel in Incline, 2010 and Outline, 2010 are both engraved with the a pattern of strokes to accentuate the form and are also reflective of a meditative use of line. The dark tones in this work emphasise a different quality of glass purposefully austere to draw attention to the subtlety of the work, exposing the lightness of line and altering the perception of these works to become tones of grey. In contrast, the work Delineate, 2010 embraces the lightness and surface manipulation of glass through sandblasting. This minimalist approach is highlighted in the play of hues and use of layers of glass laser cut to reveal the layer underneath and a relationship with the audience that entices requests a level of stillness.

Using lines only, suggest a range of emotions. Try and avoid the extremes such as happy and angry and select emotions that are more ‘grey’ such as anguish and contentment. Consider the thickness of the line and the direction in the interpretation of emotion. Camera angles and photo shot types can be highly influential on how a work is perceived. Capture the work of Douglas and others in the exhibition to highlight the way that the artist intended to view the work as outlines in their statement as well as playing with different interpretations of your own. Select an object that is of personal importance. Using drawing, painting, photography, Photoshop, sculpture etc, replicate the object but reduce the lines and shapes to their most essential forms and colours. Try and capture once emotion that makes the object significant.

Meditation is the soul’s perspective glass.

- Owen Feltham

Above Left: Detail from Delineate, 2010, Kiln-formed and cold-worked glass triptych
Photo by ANU Photography
Above: Detail from Incline, 2010, Blown, cold-worked and engraved glass
Giles Ryder: Minimalism in the 21st century

Pure drawing is an abstraction. Drawing and colour are not distinct, everything in nature is coloured.

- Paul Cezanne

Contemporary Australian artist Giles Ryder’s paintings and installations incorporate the use of industrial materials particularly those that allude to the manufacture of cars. The works often employ bright colours, pearlescent finished and glossy paints to encourage engagement with the viewer. Coloured neon lighting is also used and is reference to the combination of found objects and ready-mades manipulated in the installations, differing from the artworks of Douglas and Vitkovsky and the use of raw material. The intensely bright and shiny surfaces easily draw the viewer into the works similar to the glow of lights in a city. Although his works also reference Pop Art and Op Art in an Australian context Ryder maintains the aesthetic of stripped down lines, forms and colours indicative of the abstract and minimalist style.


How has minimalism and abstraction been adapted by Ryder? What are some of the other stylistic features of the work that can be traced back to other movements in art history? Do you believe it possible to be completely true to the art movements of the past? Record the discussion in an audio that could be made into a podcast.

Illustration:
Silver strutter (daze of disco) 2006
Neon transformers and epoxy enamel on timber panels

Collect images (found and taken) of found objects that suggest a minimalist or abstract style.