



**SUZANNE ARCHER:**

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***Afterlife // Education Kit***

A MAITLAND REGIONAL ART GALLERY TOURING EXHIBITION CURATED BY JOSEPH EISENBERG

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*As death is feared man would like to prevent it. He is also apt to regard himself as an exceptional creature with intellectual and moral stature that makes his death seem incongruous*<sup>1</sup>

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**John Hinton**

[cover image] *Aftermath*, 2005 oil on canvas 275 x 275 cm <sup>1</sup>Hinton, J. (1972, 2nd edition) *Dying*. Penguin, Great Britain.

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[above] Suzanne Archer, *Guardians*, 2007 oil and wax on canvas 242 x 242 cm

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## Notes on use:

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This document has been produced by Maitland Regional Art Gallery (MRAG) as supporting educational material for the touring exhibition *Suzanne Archer: Afterlife*. Because of themes and motifs present in Archer's work, this document focuses its support on teachers of secondary or tertiary students, and particular sections of this kit are based on NSW Visual Art Syllabi for years 7-12, omitting K-6. Additionally, this resource can be utilised by public program staff and the general public whilst visiting the exhibition.

MRAG strongly supports experience-based learning, particularly in the area of arts and culture. This education kit should be used as part of a unit of work that includes a visit to the art gallery to view *Suzanne Archer: Afterlife*.

Suggestions for developing students' understandings have been included at the end of this education kit. This section contains several suggestions for further study, art making activities and questions or concepts relating to the exhibition that could be expanded upon in the classroom. You may need to adapt these ideas to suit the specific needs of your students.

### > ADDITIONAL EXHIBITION PUBLICATIONS

*Suzanne Archer: Afterlife* (2010). Catalogue, Maitland Regional Art Gallery, Australia.  
Catalogue essay by Joe Eisenberg OAM. ISBN: 978-0-9807520-5-2

# Afterlife

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*I suspect this work has come from a spontaneous playfulness... Each piece draws on an inherent wealth of previously absorbed and deeply stored imagery, rather than an intention to tell any premeditated story.*<sup>2</sup>

Suzanne Archer

*Afterlife* is a touring exhibition presented by Maitland Regional Art Gallery, and is an exhibition of painting and sculpture, a selection from Archer's creative output during 2004 - 2009. The works from this exhibition are a compilation from recent solo exhibitions; *Horsepower* (2004), *Breathless* (2007), *Mistress of the Dead* (2008) and *Shelf Life* (2009). The connecting factor shared across all these works is the influence of Suzanne's experiences while life drawing in the anatomical laboratories of Veterinary Science, University of Sydney.

Over the last forty years Suzanne Archer has developed a significant exhibition history, including 32 solo exhibitions, numerous curated exhibitions and is represented in many public and private collections. Her prolific art making is informed by constant explorations of the world - in particular Europe, the U.S., Africa, Southeast Asia, and Australasia, as well as constant explorations of new subject matter. *I am not someone who stays still – I like to keep moving through subjects and usually that culminates in a show.*<sup>3</sup>

Curiously enough, the exhibition *Afterlife* is not, in fact, about the spiritual idea of the afterlife. Additionally, this exhibition is also not centrally

<sup>2</sup> Sourced 19 April 2011 from the Wilson Street Gallery media release, written by Janet Clayton, for the exhibition *Shelf Life*. Available: [http://www.wilsonstreetgallery.com.au/pages/news\\_details.php?newsID=56](http://www.wilsonstreetgallery.com.au/pages/news_details.php?newsID=56)

<sup>3</sup> Suzanne Archer, during an interview by Joe Eisenberg, 28 July 2010.

concerned with death. Dispelling these ideas at the onset is intended to speedily reset the audiences' perspectives before we embark. It still must be acknowledged that whilst the afterlife and death are not central concerns they are, nonetheless, essential motifs. Certainly, the twenty four works compiled in the exhibition *Afterlife*, encourage the audience to consider ideas of mortality, decay, grossness, disgust, morbidity, the magical and the macabre. But this reveals the true character of Suzanne Archer's works: a dynamic series of paintings and sculptures motivated by the animated qualities of life, curiosity, fascination and investigation.

For the past twenty six years, Archer has shared her life with her husband, David Fairbairn, a painter and drawer, well known for his large-scale portrait drawings. She lives in Wedderburn, Southwest of Sydney, in a stone house constructed, almost as if it is a sculpture itself, by the two artists over a number of years.

In 2002, Suzanne began visiting the Veterinary Science Laboratory at the University of Sydney to draw whilst the students were doing horse dissection, after a chance opportunity arose through one of her students. She attended her first drawing session at the laboratory with a small group of her nervous students. At the end of the session she spoke to the Professor and asked if she could attend on a regular basis as she had decided she wanted to do a body of work on the subject. After 2 years of sporadic excursions, Suzanne eventually requested a hoof and some teeth and was even given a complete horse's skull, hoof, ribs and vertebrae to keep. She was then able to work directly from these specimens in her studio in Wedderburn.

A personal collection of fascinating objects began to accumulate around her, some given to her by friends, others she found whilst walking in the bushland of her Wedderburn home. *Icon II* 2008, (Plate 1) is an example of





Image: The horse's skull donated to Suzanne Archer.

a work inspired by one of these additional found objects as is *Guardians*, 2007 (Plate 2), featuring to the right of the composition a dehydrated kangaroo carcass donated to her by an artist friend. *My studio looks like a museum...*<sup>4</sup> Archer remarks. Her studio has walls lined with animal skulls, display cabinets and drawers full of specimens either collected by her or donated to her. Because this body of work occupied Suzanne a lot longer than she had initially envisaged, she went on to expand the subject to include other animals, eventuating in several exhibitions covering mediums such as paint on paper & canvas, etchings and sculpture.

A sense of the museum has extended itself from Archer's studio into the exhibition *Afterlife*. Works such as *Shelf V – Topsy* 2008, (Plate 3) created from a variety of mixed media including papier maché, fabric, string and paint, are contained within plastic vitrines for the exhibition. The sculptural objects within the vitrines are placed similarly to the false

<sup>4</sup> Suzanne Archer, J. Eisenberg Interview, 28 July 2010.

scenes often simulated in museum arrangements of taxidermied animals, reminding the audience of menageries of stuffed, lifeless birds or small mammals frozen in stances of attack. These works also recall some of the idea of the *Wunderkammer*, or cabinet of curiosities. Many contemporary artists and curators have begun to revisit the idea of the *Wunderkammer*. Artists such as Kate Rhode, and curators such as Lisa Slade<sup>5</sup> have recently investigated museum objects and modes of presentation in their professional practice, contributing to a noteworthy current trend of blurring the distinction between galleries and museums in order to create new dialogues about Australian history and colonialisation.

*I suppose to be quite honest, I don't think about the audience when I'm making my work. I am actually much more engaged with what excites me as a painter to make... I am much more interested in them [the audience] being surprised or prodded a bit, or shaken up a bit and realise art is not all about vases of flowers.*<sup>6</sup>

Suzanne Archer

In the veterinary laboratories, horse carcasses used for anatomical educational purposes, are hung from the ceiling, suspended in mid air. The sketch on the following page from Archer's sketchbook captures some of the activity of students and teachers within the laboratories. Many works, such as *Epona* 2004, (Plate 4) are direct responses to Archer's experience of the labs. In describing works by Archer like *Epona*, Joe Eisenberg describes them as *lifeless, untaught puppets; stooped,*

<sup>5</sup>The exhibition *Curious Colony: a twenty-first century Wunderkammer* (2010) curated by Lisa Slade for Newcastle Region Art Gallery exhibited objects such as the *Macquarie Collectors Chest* c1818, (Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW collection) and etchings by colonial artist Joseph Lycett, alongside response pieces by contemporary artists. Joan Ross and her work *When I grow up I want to be a forger* (2010) amongst them.

<sup>6</sup>Suzanne Archer, J. Eisenberg Interview, 28 July 2010.

*crestfallen, headless.*<sup>7</sup> The sculpture's over exaggerated limbs give a sense of caricatured melancholy, emotionally exaggerating the experience of seeing once fine horses hanging limp from the ceiling. Archer explains, *The musculature [of the horses she sketched in the labs] is all given up, because it's not alive, so nothing is pulling it up into the positions it would normally be in, it's just all dangling.*<sup>8</sup>



Image: A sketch from one of Suzanne's visits to the veterinary laboratories.

Sioux Garside wrote of Archer's works in the *Mistress of the Dead* exhibition, *Archer's exploration of the disintegration of flesh and bone is a way of probing the meaning of life and death...these coruscating paintings of transience display her courage to confront aging and mortality without vanity... However, painterly abstraction is the defining quality of Archer's paintings.*<sup>9</sup> The surface quality of Archer's paintings introduces two perspectives from which the audience appreciates the works. Standing from afar, the

<sup>7</sup> J. Eisenberg (2010) *Afterlife* Catalogue essay, produced by Maitland Regional Art Gallery.

<sup>8</sup> Suzanne Archer, J. Eisenberg Interview, 28 July 2010.

<sup>9</sup> Sourced 24 April, 2011 from: [http://www.wilsonstreetgallery.com.au/pages/artists\\_details.php?artistID=83](http://www.wilsonstreetgallery.com.au/pages/artists_details.php?artistID=83)

total composition leads the eye through floating objects - skulls, carcasses and grotesque self portraits of the artist's own dismembered head. *Masks, (self portrait with horse's skull)* 2005, (Plate 5) features Archer's head and the skull of a horse, floating a symmetrically on either side of a nuanced, cross hatched background. The second perspective given in these works, replicates that of the human compulsion experienced by most of us when we see a dead animal or bird on the street or in the bush. Imitating the same morbid fascination that compels us to bend over to inspect a dead animal, the audience can approach the canvas to inspect more closely the whole miserable subject, a textured mess of paint and intersecting stripes of colour. Archer's fondness for working on large scale canvases adds to the effect.

Janet Clayton says of Archer's paintings, *Whimsy in colour, composition and imagery remind us that the subject of life and dying is anything but dull and depressing. While there is a profound sincerity in this work, it is also awash with personality.*<sup>10</sup> Indeed, something of Archer's dry wit and humour seems to come through, in works such as *Scamper*, 2007 (Plate 6). Larger than life at almost 2.5 metres square, the canvas features a dehydrated dead rat captured in an animated pose, appearing to skip across the canvas. The frivolity of the title also adds something to our understanding. To scamper is to dash or run about, the word has affectionate connotations and is usually adhered to little children. Essentially it encourages us to consider the rat adorable.

...

The intrinsic human qualities of curiosity and morbid fascination are key themes to the works in *Afterlife*. Instilled in all of us is a desire to investigate and understand the strange and unknown, which boils down

<sup>10</sup> Sourced 19 April 2011 from: [http://www.wilsonstreetgallery.com.au/pages/news\\_details.php?newsID=56](http://www.wilsonstreetgallery.com.au/pages/news_details.php?newsID=56)



in real life to some rather odd compulsions we all exhibit in some way, the compulsion to smell 'off' food before we throw it away, slow down at car accidents, or crouch to inspect the decomposition of roadkill. *Afterlife* may seem like a misleading title, but its aim is actually to acknowledge the carcasses, body parts and items which have proved such creative fodder for Archer. *I am giving them [the objects and dead animals] some other kind of life... because they become my models for painting, for my work.* Archer says. *That is where the title comes from. It's really not loaded.*<sup>11</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Suzanne Archer, J. Eisenberg Interview, 28 July 2010.

## Artist's Life - Suzanne Archer (1945 - )

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- 1945** Suzanne Archer was born in Guildford, Surrey, England.
- 1961 -1964** She studied at Sutton School of Art in London. During this period she stayed in a country annex for art students in Suffolk, where after seeing dead birds and rabbits in the hedgerows there, she painted her first dead bird.
- 1965** Suzanne married a painter and had her first daughter, Clea. The three of them immigrated to Australia, and lived in Thirroul, north of Wollongong.
- 1967 - 1969** in 1967 she had her first commercial exhibition at Clune Galleries in Sydney, a two-person show with Julius Sher. Two years later she had her first solo exhibition at Clune Galleries. In her early 20's the experience was exciting for Suzanne. The exhibition received a lot of media coverage, including television interviews on *Terrence Cooper's Sydney Tonight* and the *Today Show*, and inclusion in the publication *Present Day Art in Australia* published by Ure Smith.
- 1969** Suzanne returned to England, living in London for a year. Whilst in London, she exhibited at Pinkney Gallery.
- 1971** Suzanne returned to Australia to live in Paddington, Sydney. Suzanne also separated from her husband. She worked as an occupational therapy assistant at Gladesville Psychiatric Hospital where eventually she ran the therapeutic pottery and began to make painted ceramic sculptures.
- 1973** With her new partner, a clinical psychologist, Suzanne gave birth to her second daughter, Meena. Suzanne also made a series of ceramics sculptures which were exhibited in the exhibition *Ceramic Sculptures and Drawings* at Watters Gallery, Sydney in 1974.

**1974** Suzanne received a grant from the Australia Council's Visual Arts Crafts Board (VACB) for her ceramics, and began teaching part-time at Sydney art schools.

**1975** Suzanne separated from Meena's father, and began a new relationship with a painter/printmaker.

**1977 -1980** in 1977, Suzanne's ceramic sculptures featured in *Modern Australian Sculpture* by Ron Rowe. The next year, she was awarded a VACB Travel Grant, Suzanne and her partner travelled to the UK, Europe and the US, beginning a series of artmaking experiences that would influence Suzanne's work for the next few years, and also mirror the mediums and materials Suzanne has used in the exhibition *Afterlife*.

Suzanne began part-time teaching at East Sydney Technical Collage in the late 70's.

Suzanne undertook a residency at Greene Street Studio in New York, and whilst there, completed a number of large acrylic paintings, works on paper and several papier mache sculptures (celluclay). Whilst in Europe, Suzanne also undertook a residency at the Power Studio, Cite Internationale des Arts Paris.

After returning from abroad in 1979, Suzanne exhibited her works in an exhibition titled *Paintings from New York & Paris*, shown at Watters Gallery. Suzanne was awarded an additional VACB grant to extend and develop paintings based on her experience in New York and Paris. In 1980, Suzanne separated from her partner.

**1981** At thirty-six, Suzanne met her current partner, English painter David Fairbairn, at the 'Artists Bar' at the Royal George Pub in Pymont, Sydney.

**1984 - 1985** Suzanne secured a VACB Travel Grant, this time visiting the UK, Europe and Zimbabwe, Africa. Suzanne and David undertook the trip in 1985. During the flight back to Australia, they decided to get married. Suzanne and David were married in May 1985.

**1987** Pregnant with her third child, Suzanne began creating new paintings and sculptures for an exhibition *Portrait of Myself as a 41 year old Pregnant Woman*, funded by the VACB.

Suzanne gave birth to her son Corrigan. Suzanne, David and Corrigan moved to Wedderburn, south-west of Sydney, to a five acre bush block. They lived in a temporary dwelling whilst a large studio was built. The studio - made out of aluminium much like a shed - was divided into two, providing generous and private work spaces for the two artists.

**1988-1989** Suzanne travelled again to Europe and Africa.

**1993** Suzanne was the winner of the Prime Time TV Painting Prize held at Newcastle Region Art Gallery. She was also awarded a Fellowship by the VACB.

**1994** Suzanne won the Wynne Prize with a work titled *Waratahs Wedderburn*. The work was a celebration of discovering Waratahs in bloom on her property, after Suzanne saw flashes of red in the gorge whilst bushwalking the season after it had been back-burned during a bushfire.

The prize for winning the Prime Time TV Painting prize in 1990 was two round the world airfares and some accommodation. In 1994, Suzanne and David travelled to England, France, Spain & Singapore. Whilst in Spain, the pair visited Barcelona and Madrid. They went to the Prado and saw the works of Goya, Ribera, El Greco and Velasquez, an experience which lead Suzanne to make a series of artworks appropriating the works of these artists, such as the work, *Martyrdom of St Philip* by Ribera.

**1995** Suzanne and David began building a stone house at their Wedderburn property, using the method of a slip-form technique. David collected the stone and did most of the set up and preparation, while Suzanne placed the



stones inside the forms. Suzanne compared the process to a sculpture, and enjoyed the experience immensely, watching the house grow day by day.

**1997** Suzanne travelled to England, Spain & Zimbabwe.

East Sydney Tech became the National Art School where Suzanne continued to teach Painting & Drawing as a Sessional teacher.

**2001** After six years, Suzanne and David finally moved into the stone house they had begun building in 1995. They called the house *Imba Yomatombo*, which means *house of stone* in the Shona language. (The house now features in *Sticks Stones Mud Homes* by Nigel Noyes, 2004, Hardie Grant Books). (image below)

**2002** Suzanne and David travelled to Singapore and Thailand.



- 2002** Suzanne was given the opportunity to visit the Veterinary Science Laboratory to make drawings of the animal carcasses there.
- 2003** Suzanne had an exhibition *Horses for Courses* at the War Memorial Art Gallery (now Sydney University Gallery).
- 2004 - 2005** Suzanne held an exhibition, *Horsepower*, at Campbelltown Arts Centre. Some of these paintings included her own floating head a companion for the Horse's skull. See Plate 5, *Masks (self portrait with Horse's skull)*.
- 2006** Suzanne travelled to Zimbabwe, England, France and Singapore. In London, she saw the Rodin exhibition at the Royal Academy. Whilst in Paris, she visited the exhibition of Rauschenberg's Combines at the Pompidou Centre. The experiences were significant highlights for her.
- 2007 - 2008** In 2007, Suzanne held an exhibition, *Breathless*, at Wallspace Gallery, Sydney, and another, *Mistress of the Dead* exhibition, Tin Sheds Gallery in 2008.
- Suzanne moved into her new large studio; a split level farm-shed building erected next to the one she had shared with David who in turn took over that building.
- 2009** *Shelf Life* exhibition, Wilson Street Galleries, Sydney.
- 2010** Winner of the Dobell Drawing Prize, Art Gallery of NSW.
- 2011** Suzanne is currently working on drawings, sculptures, large oil paintings and artist books with her own dismembered head as the main focus for her forthcoming exhibition *Library of Disturbance* at Wilson Street Gallery at Danks, in Sydney, 27 July 2011 until the 20 August 2011. She continues to teach as a sessional teacher at the National Art School

# Exploring Suzanne Archer: Afterlife through art, literature and music

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## > *Suggestions for Secondary and Tertiary students*

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*Life is a tragedy when seen in close up, but a comedy in long shot*<sup>14</sup>

Charlie Chaplin

*Writer's note:* Whilst researching this education kit, a diverse range of texts, cultural practices and historical events kept surfacing as potential sources for developing students' understandings. Each section of the Conceptual Framework (artist, artwork, world, audience) both focuses on and incorporates the investigation of Suzanne Archer's works in the exhibition, and also a wide range of jumping off points for research. While this kit is intended for secondary and tertiary students, many of the points below may only assist to increase the educator's understanding and the delivery of these concepts will need to be adapted to suit the students.

Lauren van Katwyk  
Education Curator  
Maitland Regional Art Gallery

<sup>14</sup>As quoted in his obituary, Guardian Dec 28, 1977

## > ARTIST

- > What does the content of an artwork suggest about the artist? Look around the works in the exhibition, and write down a series of personal attributes you think the artist might have. For each attribute, refer to evidence you have found in the artwork. Do the same for the painter Francis Bacon, to give some comparison.
- > Archer has been heavily influenced by her international travels. Read the *Artist's Life* section of this education kit and look up the different areas of the world that Suzanne has visited. What impact do you think international travel has on an artist?
- > Research, then compare and contrast the diorama style artworks of Kate Rhode to Suzanne Archer. Discuss with the class what the differences are between museums and galleries, and compile potential reasons why contemporary artists are increasingly borrowing from museum practices.
- > Archer was inspired by the works of Goya, Ribera, El Greco and Velasquez. Research these artists and create information sheets on them.

## > ARTWORK

- > Look critically at the works in *Afterlife*: stand as far back as you can, then observe the works from close up. Look for the application of paint and the mixture of colour. What textures are made visible up close, and then lost from far away? What psychological implications could be inferred?

## > ARTWORK [CONTINUED]

- > The artworks in *Afterlife* maintain a limited palette of colours. Many of the pigments that Suzanne uses are mixed with black to make them darker in tone. List adjectives that could be used to describe the colour palette.
- > Research the poetry of TS Eliot. The poem, *The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock*, records the wandering thoughts a timid, middle-aged and awkward character, a pitiable anti-hero, deriding his indecision in life and contemplating his own mortality. Eliot however, wrote the poem over several years in his 20s, and was only 27 when the poem was published. In one line of the poem, the evening is compared to *a patient etherized upon a table*. Consider the metaphor of early evening light and the impending notion of death. Read the poem, and consider the comparisons between Archer's works and their visual exploration of mortality, and a young TS Eliot's exploration of a middle aged man's fear of death. Afterwards, use the title of your favourite work from *Afterlife* as the inspiration for a poem.
- > Use anatomical drawing books to create collages, and investigate the Australian surrealist artist James Gleeson to inform your compositions. Gleeson worked in large scale painting on canvas, but also did several interesting bodies of collage works using illustrations drawn from a range of sources, including anatomical texts.
- > Archer enjoys working in large scale when painting on canvas. Often the impact of the work is greater because of the physical size. Find examples of other artists for whom scale is essential to understanding their work, for example Ron Mueck.



> ARTWORK [CONTINUED]

- > Musicians often use their lyrics as a vehicle to raise issues in society, and with regard to death, war protest songs have become archetypal during periods of war. Listen to the music of PJ Harvey, from her latest album *Let England Shake* (2011). In the song *All and Everyone*, Harvey sings:

*when you rolled a smoke  
or told a joke,  
it was in the laughter  
and drinking water*

She refers to an ever-present fear of death, inspired by the 1915 landing by ANZAC soldiers at Gallipoli in WW1. Harvey also explains that in her research for the album she was influenced by the work of many photojournalists and artists, including Goya's *Disasters of Wars* series (which Archer has also explained was an influence on her work). PJ Harvey studied art before becoming a musician. Listen to American songwriter P.F Sloan's 1965 song *Eve of Destruction* or Australian songwriter John Schumann's 1983 song *I Was Only Nineteen*. Research other songwriters such as Bob Dylan, Neil Young, or John Lennon. Talk as a class about the different ways that visual artworks and aural songs convey their meaning to the audience.

## > WORLD

- > Write a newspaper article about the exhibition. As reporters often look for the unique qualities of a story, what aspects of Archer's exhibition can you highlight to create interest? Read the Education Kit and the *Afterlife* catalogue to find quotes.
- > Investigate the traditional display techniques of museum artefacts, perhaps even by visiting a museum. How are the works by Archer encased in plastic boxes similar?
- > Research the role of the curator. This exhibition has been collated out of bodies of works that were originally in several other gallery exhibitions. What purpose is there in collecting selected works across several exhibitions?
- > Archer often found new objects that fascinated her whilst walking on her property, or had things donated to her by friends. As a class, encourage everyone to find one object of morbid fascination that is appropriate to be brought into school. Draw these objects in still life arrangements, and create your own Wunderkammer.
- > Study the history of Dutch and Flemish still life paintings, with particular interest in Vanitas paintings.
- > Study the traditions and customs of the Mexican Day of the Dead celebrations.

## > AUDIENCE

- > How are we the audience positioned by the artworks? Are we forced to look at them from a particular place? Stand up close to the works and inspect their detail. Next, withdraw as far as possible from the works and look at them from that distance. What different details do you notice?

## > AUDIENCE [CONTINUED]

- > Consider what impact our own individual experiences have on us when we look at artworks. To appreciate a work of art, we can understand its meaning or intent, or we can also appreciate its aesthetic value and how it was made. Archer's works challenge us as an audience because they do not comfortably adhere to a popular notion of aesthetic beauty. What impact could that have on different audience types? Consider, for example, an extremely squeamish person who is not fond of blood, as opposed to someone who watches zombie movies.
- > Some members of the audience might find Archer's works to be distasteful, and yet, there is a strong history of artists, particularly performance artists, such as Mike Parr, who have used shock and disgust with deliberate intent. Research Australian artist Mike Parr and his work, and English artist Damien Hirst, with particular reference to the 1991 work *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. Should artists be considerate of their audiences reactions? Why would an artist deliberately aim to incite disgust?
- > Using a camera, develop a small series of photographs of aspects of the ordinary world and your home, which are considered distasteful, such as the contents of the garbage bin. Consider your compositions to make them as beautiful as possible.
- There seems to be a great trend in today's television and movie culture towards vampire stories, stories of magicians or wizards, and even zombies. Why do you think that is so? Use your own anecdotal experience to provide fodder for discussion.

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