METAL AS ANYTHING

Ron McBurnie
26 June – 16 August 2009

EDUCATION RESOURCE KIT
PERC TUCKER REGIONAL GALLERY
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Featherless cockatoo thought it was flying 1989
Hard ground etching and aquatint 8.8 x 7 cm, edition of 60

Discussing Dante’s Inferno 1989
Hard ground etching and aquatint 8.8 x 7 cm edition of 60
Metal as Anything is a survey exhibition that showcases thirty years of the diverse and intricate etchings of Townsville artist Ron McBurnie. A place where misbehaving dogs, ducks in box kites, jumping cats and eccentric toad shooters meet to examine their place in the carnival of characters and landscapes that the artist has created.

The diversity of events, both large and small, that inspires McBurnie’s artworks are telling of the artist’s greatest strength - his ability to highlight the weird and wonderful events that occur on our ‘mundane’ suburban environment. It is so easy for these fleeting, humorous moments to be lost, buried underneath the drudgery and commitments of our daily grind. McBurnie, unlike most, captures these moments in his own life and ensures they are not misplaced.
This education kit has been designed in response to Ron McBurnie’s Metal As Anything survey exhibition. It aims to highlight key works and themes from the exhibition and may be used in conjunction with the catalogue/DVD or as an independent pre-visit or post-visit study resource.

Its purpose is to assist both students and teachers with the interpretation of Ron McBurnie’s artwork, as well as provide insight into his art practice.

This kit has been written with reference to the 2009 Queensland visual arts syllabus; Essential Learnings 1-10 and Senior Syllabus. It includes questions and activities for students based on artworks and selected themes that may be adapted to better suit particular curriculum requirements.

Available in conjunction with this Education kit is:

- An exhibition catalogue containing a 20 minute DVD Suburban Etching. Produced by Ben McBurnie, the DVD contains footage of Ron in his studio discussing and demonstrating his creative process. It focuses on his Suburban series and in particular two etchings; Kicking the Quokka and Whistler’s mother’s cat’s third attempt at jumping into a Margaret Olley painting.

- A PowerPoint presentation available to download and use in the classroom. It contains information about Ron McBurnie’s practice and presents images that focus on the series of work covered in this kit.

- Children’s activity sheets are available for completion during exhibition visits.

Contact Hannah Murray at Perc Tucker Regional Gallery for more information. Phone: 07 4727 9011 or Email: hannah.murray@townsville.qld.gov.au

Acknowledgments

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ARTIST’S BACKGROUND

I’ve always wanted to work as an artist and a teacher and I guess as far as achieving these career paths, I have always tried to act on opportunities as they came to me. I know my limits, but I am also happy to be challenged by interesting prospects and the possibility that I can achieve them. - Ron McBurnie 2009

Ron McBurnie was born 7 July 1957 in Brisbane. He currently resides in Townsville where he has been living since 1985. Ron received a Diploma of Arts (1978), a Graduate Diploma of Teaching, (1979) and a Graduate Diploma of Arts (1979) all from the Queensland College of Art. In 2000 he was awarded a Masters of Creative Arts from James Cook University, Townsville.

Ron McBurnie works primarily in the areas of printmaking, painting and artist books. He has exhibited in numerous solo and group exhibitions over the past 30 years and his work is represented in most Australian state galleries and the National Gallery of Australia. He has also lectured and participated in artist-in-residence programs in universities and cultural institutions in Australia and overseas. Ron continues to travel overseas and nationally on a regular basis and this has a significant influence on his work.

www.ronmcburnie.com
Ron McBurnie is best known for his masterful printmaking skills, and in particular intaglio printing. Meaning to cut or engrave, intaglio printmaking practice also extends to a number of other techniques that all involve the incision of designs into metal plates. These include etching, aquatint, mezzotint and drypoint etching.

Intaglio printing is a methodical process where ink is applied to an etched plate and worked carefully into the grooves. All of the relief surfaces are cleaned of ink, paper is placed on the plate and both are run through a printing press. This is important because the paper must be forced into the grooves or incisions on the plate and ink picked up.

Ron McBurnie works from his purpose built home studio in suburban Townsville. When he isn’t teaching Ron is in his studio and prefers to work on his etchings during the day. He often works with an assistant and is usually never without Lou Lou, his faithful pooch. While not directly influenced by music it is an important part of Ron’s practice. He collects, enjoys and plays vinyl records in his studio when painting or making etchings. Music puts him in a particular state of mind.
 WORKS IN PROFILE

Themes/ Influences

I draw information used in my work from a variety of different sources both contemporary and historical. The ideas may come from obscure and seemingly unconnected bits of information but become connected through the visual relationships I bring to them. These new narrative combinations are what form the basis of the work that I produce. - Ron McBurnie 2009

Ron McBurnie creates artworks that belong to a series. Each body of work is built up and added to over several years and are distinctly thematic. Ron’s most well known series of artwork include:

- Suburban
- Pets
- Man ferns
- Romantic
- Rake’s Progress
- The Strand
- Artist’s Studios

Inspired by whatever he is exposed to at the time he gathers inspiration from a wide variety of contemporary and historical sources, and produces artworks that are connected through stories or narratives.

Ron McBurnie’s artwork is characteristic of its masterful skill, reference to historical artworks and innate humour and quirkiness. Ron’s work has the ability to make us celebrate and engage with the simple, everyday events that occur in our suburban environment.

Theme examples (left – right): Giant Man fern 1983 hard ground etching and drypoint on paper, 94.4 x 49.7, edition of 10; The dying day choked in beauty near Murder Island 1991 hard ground etching and aquatint, 8.6 x 17.9 cm, edition of 15; John Firth-Smith’s studio 2003 hard ground etching, aquatint with drilled and cut sections, 51 x 123, edition of 60; Under the light of the hill 1997 hard ground etching and aquatint, 50 x 59.5, edition of 30.
One of my friends owned a cat that on three occasions attempted to jump onto the table in his delicately painted Margaret Olley canvas. I was interested in his account of this incident because I hadn’t realised that cats had the ability to see two-dimensional images in three dimensions – now I wonder why our pets don’t watch more TV. The reference to Whistler’s portrait of his mother in the title is there only because the structure of the etching seemed to relate to it. – Ron McBurnie 2009

- Describe what you can see in this artwork? What types of shapes, objects or animals can you see? What is on the wall? Make a list of everything you can see.

- What do you think the cat is trying to do? Why would a cat want to jump into a painting?

- Investigate who Margaret Olley is? Look at one of her paintings and imagine you are a cat. Describe what it would be like to jump inside one of her artworks.

- Do you have pets at home? Do they ever do crazy or silly things? Write a story about a funny thing your pet, or your friends pet did.

- Create a drawing, collage or print of your pet doing something crazy or weird. Give your artwork a suitable title.

- Create a class book of drawings that presents all pet stories. Present your story books to your friends and family.
They are small statements about variety of life within the repetition of suburbia. It seems that difference can only be noticed within the context of the repetition of the similar. - Ron McBurnie 2009

The Suburban etching series began in about 1983, and is a series which continues through to the present. The images in this series depict the often humorous, unique, and eccentric incidents which occur in ordinary everyday suburban life. Some are McBurnie’s own experiences and observations while others are stories shared by friends or discovered in newspaper reports. Dogs figure frequently in these suburban etchings, as do houses, cane toads, ducks and cats. All works represent Ron McBurnie’s interest in society, history and his quirky and endearing sense of humour.

- Describe what you can see in A Lady of Elephants. What makes this artwork interesting or unique?
- List some Australian films and TV programs that have been set in the suburbs? What image of Australian society do they portray? Is this accurate? What are the commonalities between these programs and real life?
- Look at a number of Ron McBurnie’s suburban artworks and think about what they communicate. Are they accurate representations of Townsville everyday life?
- Compare the work of Ron McBurnie with artists who have responded to the Australian suburbs: John Brack and Howard Arkley. What are the similarities? Discuss any differences.
- Take a photograph or do some sketches of your own house. Include as much detail as possible, including the garden, ornaments or pets. Develop your photograph or drawings and complete a print or painting of your home.
The Rake’s progress series was made over a two year period in Brisbane and Townsville. The etchings, like those made by William Hogarth in his original series, follow the fate of the “Rake” on his journey through life. Unlike Hogarth’s narrative, the Rake in my series is a young artist who both observes and participates in events as they unfold in different environments. As well as recording many local events that occurred while I made the series, I included many historical art references that had some way influenced my early artistic development. – Ron McBurnie 2009

The Rake’s Progress is a suite of twelve etchings completed in 1990 and pays homage to the etchings and painting series of the same name by William Hogarth. McBurnie’s rake character is distinctly Australian, set within suburban Brisbane and Townsville. The Rake’s quest is to find an art gallery in which to exhibit his work. Loaded with numerous quirky art and cultural references Rake’s adventures involve inheriting a suburban backyard barbecue, witnessing the city’s cultural and historical destruction, getting lost in the visual delights of a hypermarket, sales of the century and disappearing into an abyss. Semi-autobiographical the series follows and records the life, events and many influences of Ron McBurnie.
The Rake’s Progress

White dreaming with a black conscience 1989
hard ground etching and aquatint,
74 x 50.1 cm, edition of 30

- Research the original Rake’s Progress by William Hogarth. Compare an artwork of William Hogarth with a Ron McBurnie image. What are the similarities and differences?

- Look carefully and closely at each artwork in the series when you visit the exhibition or at www.ronmcburnie.com. Pick your favourite Rake’s image and complete the attached questions.

- What does this series of etchings tell you about the artist? Are there any visual clues? Consider the titles of each artwork. What do you think they mean?

- Music is an important influence of Ron McBurnie. He is also interested in exploring different levels of conscious. Create a large scaled, interconnected artwork using text, image and collage that represents your personality, environment, family, favourite songs, poems, moods, attitudes, emotions, and dreams.
QUESTIONS
The Rake’s Progress

Choose your favourite artwork from the Rake’s Progress series and complete the questions below.

Title of work: ..............................................................................................................................
Date: ........................................................................................................................................
Medium: ....................................................................................................................................
Edition: .....................................................................................................................................

❖ Description: (describe the artwork in as much detail as possible)

❖ Make a list of all the everyday objects, symbols, art and cultural references you can see and recognise.

❖ Choose two items from the above question and discuss why you think Ron McBurnie has included them in the artwork?

❖ What are the important visual elements and principles of this etching? How has line, shape, texture and tone been used in the artwork?

❖ Describe how the artist has used balance, perspective, space, movement and pattern.

❖ Discuss the meaning or intention of the artwork. What is Ron McBurnie trying to represent? What are the ideas or purpose behind this artwork?

❖ What are your thoughts or feelings about this artwork? Do you like it? Explain your reasons.
1. When did you first realize that you wanted to be an artist?

My mother went to Art College and my grandfather was a designer of buses and trucks so I was brought up in a household where art held some importance. I enjoyed painting as a child but until I went to Art College I had no aspirations about becoming an artist.

2. Which of your works and/or series has given you the most satisfaction?

I really enjoy making every series, but I really enjoy my work more when it gets a response from the public. I like it when someone responds to one of my etchings with one of their own stories that in some ways relates to it. This reaction to it somehow makes the artwork a little bit more relevant to me.

3. What artists do you admire and why?

There are many artists who I admire or have been favourites of mine for sometime. I have a particular admiration for British pastoral romanticism and in particular the prints of William Blake and Samuel Palmer. Recently I have become fond of several of the German little masters of the early 16th Century such the Barthel and Sebald Beham, Heinrich Aldegrever and George Pencz.

4. What is your most preferred medium and why?

I do enjoy painting, but people seem to respond to my etchings. I seem to know the process and it works for me. I enjoy making etchings because for me it has a particular meditative element to it in the way I often painstakingly build up the etching surface with an overlay of linear systems.

5. When do you prefer to do your artwork? Do you have set studio days? Do you prefer to work at night time or during the day?

I prefer to work during the day on the etchings. If I am working on fine detailed areas on a plate I usually try to do these areas during the daylight and leave the more simple broad areas of the plate for night time work. I try to have set studio days but when I am teaching at the University this is sometimes difficult to manage.

6. Have you heard or seen something funny or unusual recently that you would like to make into an artwork?

Yes. In one of the streets near where I live, is a short, round man who walks with his dog every morning around 9am. I would like to make an etching of him and his dog.
He never wears a shirt but has a large belly and an enormous Mexican hat sits on his head. One day his dog had a blue bucket round its neck to stop it from scratching a sore ear. The man is attached to his dog by a long rope. The dog walks wherever it likes. The round man seems to have no control over it.

7. **What would be the best and worst thing about being an artist?**

The best thing about being an artist is that I can make and enjoy making different things. As well as this people seem to enjoy them too. The worst thing is that there is never enough time to make all the things I would like to in the time I have available.

8. **What advice would you give to an artist just starting out?**

Learn from the dead. Don’t just look at what contemporary artists are doing. Look at what those artists of the past have achieved. Don’t be scared off by their brilliance. Try to analyse what they have done then try to use those achievements in your own work.

9. **Your art practice involves a lot of travelling to different countries. What has been your favourite travel destination thus far?**

I like many countries and places. One of my favourite places is Bruges in Belgium. It is a wonderful medieval walled city which has an amazing collection of Renaissance art and sells the best frites (chips) you could ever eat.

10. **If you weren’t an artist or an art teacher what would you be doing?**

Maybe I would have a music shop or be an antiquarian print dealer.

11. **If you were stranded on a deserted island what are three things you couldn’t be without?**

1 My wife  2 Some of my favourite music  3 My dog Lou Lou

12. **What is the most bizarre thing about you that no-one knows?**

That I rode a calf in a rodeo when I was five. I was bucked off but lived to tell the tale.

13. **If you had super powers what would they be and why?**

This is a really tricky question. I think I would like to have the ability to be in more than one place at the same time. That way I could do much more.

14. **If you could be a pet for a day what would it be and why?**

I think if it was just for a day a pigeon would be great fun. I would love to fly.
GLOSSARY

AQUATINT is an etching with tonal variations. It is created by melting a layer of resin dust onto the plate and etching for different times to obtain various tonal effect.

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE is when an artist lives and creates artwork in a new or different location. This could be in another school, town, state or country.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY is a person’s own life story represented in an artwork, song or piece of writing by that person.

BODY OF WORK is a series of artworks produced by an artist over a period of time.

BURNISH is to polish an etching plate surface smooth with a hard steel tool.

DRYPOINT is a printmaking technique in which an image is incised directly into a plate with a pointed etching needle exposing the bare metal. The plate is then dipped in a bath of acid, for “biting”. The acid “bites” into the metal, where it is exposed, leaving behind lines sunk into the plate. The remaining ground is then cleaned off the plate. The plate is inked all over, and then the ink wiped off the surface, leaving only the ink in the etched lines. The plate is then put through a high-pressure printing press. The paper picks up the ink from the etched lines, making a print.

ETCHING is an etching process where an image is scratched or etched into the surface of a plate. The ink lies below the surface of the plate and is transferred to the paper under pressure.

ETCHING PLATE is a sheet of metal, usually copper, steel or zinc, used in the etching process.

EDITION includes all the prints printed at the same time or as part of the same series.

MEZZOTINT print is made by creating a rough surface on the plate that will hold ink and print as a rich black. The whites and greys are obtained by scraping and burnishing the metal flat again.

NARRATIVE is a story that tells the details of an occurrence or course of events.

RECORD or long play (LP) is how music was recorded, stored and released to the public before the invention of compact discs (CD’s). Either 25cm or 30 cm records are played on record players.

STUDIO is a room, shed or building where an artist creates their artwork.

SU SUBURBIA refers to the area or areas of residential communities (houses) located outside a city centre.

SURVEY EXHIBITION is a specific selection of artworks for an exhibition.

HOMAGE is a reference to someone with an artistic work. It is a recognition and celebration of this person’s influence on them.

References

www.ronmcburnie.com
Metal As Anything: Ron McBurnie (catalogue) 2009, 3E Innovative, Brisbane, Queensland.
FEEDBACK Form

We welcome your feedback. Please complete the following feedback form and return by email to hannah_murray@townsville.qld.gov.au or by mail to Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, PO Box 1268 Townsville QLD 4810.

Name ______________________________________________________________
Email ______________________________________________________________
School ______________________________________________________________
Phone ______________________________________________________________

How did you hear about the Metal as Anything Education Kit?
Mailout   Email   QATA Meeting   Other – please specify

What could be done to improve the education resource?
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Did you use the Metal As Anything Education Resource? Yes/No

How useful did you find the:
Printable PDF document Not Useful Somewhat Useful Very Useful
Artist interview Not Useful Somewhat Useful Very Useful
PowerPoint presentation Not Useful Somewhat Useful Very Useful
Printed Visual Resources Not Useful Somewhat Useful Very Useful
Resource activities/questions Not Useful Somewhat Useful Very Useful
Gallery activity sheets Not Useful Somewhat Useful Very Useful

Are there any other Education Kits that you have found useful?
________________________________________________________________________
Please include date and producer.

Was the content of the Ron McBurnie Metal As Anything Education Resource relevant to your teaching in the classroom?
Not Useful Somewhat Useful Very Useful

Please comment further.
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Was the kit used by teachers of other disciplines at your school? Yes/No
If Yes, what department?
________________________________________________________________________

Did your students visit Ron McBurnie’s personal website? Yes/No

Did your students visit the exhibition at Perc Tucker Regional Gallery? Yes/No
If yes please comment on your visit.
________________________________________________________________________
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