JUSTENE WILLIAMS
THE CURtain
BREATHED DEEPLY
INTRODUCTION

This Education Kit has been produced by Artspace, Sydney, in conjunction with Museums & Galleries of NSW to support the touring exhibition, The Curtain Breathed Deeply by artist Justene Williams.

It is primarily aimed at teachers and students from primary and lower secondary levels. We also encourage gallery staff, as well as community groups to use the information and activities in this resource. This resource offers:

• Insight into the practice of Justene Williams
• A glossary of terms
• Worksheets and back-in-the-classroom activities for primary and secondary students
• Creative activity suggestions for galleries
• A collective online Instagram activity

HOW TO USE THIS EDUCATION KIT

FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS
The information in this resource is designed to provide enrichment and promote deeper understanding of key learning areas including Visual Arts, English, Drama, Music and Film Studies. There is scope to build this resource into existing programs or develop as a stand-alone program. We have included some suggestions for pre-visit preparation and post-visit activities.

FOR GALLERY STAFF, FAMILY AND COMMUNITY GROUPS
As visitors to The Curtain Breathed Deeply, you can build on your experience by enjoying creative activities inside the gallery or back in your community setting. We have provided suggested materials and activities.
About the Exhibition

The Curtain Breathed Deeply is a series of video installations by Western Sydney-based artist Justene Williams. This immersive installation is made up of a collection of videos and sculptures, and is the artist’s largest and most ambitious work to date.

The Curtain Breathed Deeply addresses key themes of life and death, love and desire, emotional vulnerability and the unconscious.

For Williams, the curtain and more broadly, the exhibition pays tribute to her father — to his life and work, as well as the hospital curtain that marked the final stage of his life when he passed away from lung cancer. The Curtain Breathed Deeply is at once poignant and celebratory, acknowledging the life of a loved one whilst also taking pleasure in the movement of living, breathing beings.

Williams draws on many sources as inspiration for her art, from memories of her father’s wrecking yard; to her childhood training in dance; and her experience constructing elaborate retail window displays. Williams also includes a range of cultural references, from the rituals and rites of ceremony to art history. The installation draws on major art historical figures including Pablo Picasso, Fernand Leger, Yves Klein and Dan Flavin as well as references to Modernist Primitivism, avant-garde theatre, Dada happenings, Bauhaus, Constructivist architecture and dance, with a range of everyday pop cultural influences including hip hop, Milli Vanilli and Broadway musicals.

Williams uses found objects that draw upon the Australian suburban vernacular. A backyard pool and barbeque are amongst the many materials transformed to create a series of interconnected environments that together ‘breathe’ like a mysterious body. Williams employs colour for emotive affect as the audience moves throughout the installation.

Williams combines these commonplace, found objects with waste materials to create a dazzling and theatrical environment rich with pattern, colour and texture. The exhibition seduces visitors through a variety of hypnotising sets and performative video installations, often resulting in sensory overload and cacophony.


‘The all-singing, all-dancing, all-or-nothing installation is a macabre expression of the suburban mundane and the human psyche. The irony and comedy of the work lies in its contradictions between surface and interior, reality and desire, and, as the title suggests, the apparent life of inanimate things.’ Justene Williams, by Stella Rosa McDonald, Sydney ARTAND Australia.

‘I sometimes talk about my work or my way of working as a subtle knowledge or an emotional intelligence. I work from the heart and I’m interested in communicating visually – seeing, reading and hearing through colour and movement.’ Justene Williams

The Curtain Breathed Deeply was developed by Artspace, Sydney with the generous bequest of the Catalyst: Katherine Hannay Visual Arts Commission, enabling Artspace to support Justene Williams in the production of this major new work at a pivotal moment in her career. Presented at Artspace from June to August 2014 the work was later presented at Melbourne’s Monash University Museum of Arts (MUMA) in early 2015. A third iteration followed in November 2015 at Performa 15 in New York.
About the Artist

Justene Williams (b.1970) was born in Sydney and completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts at the University of Western Sydney in 1991 and completed a Master of Visual Arts at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney in 2006. In 2005 she undertook the Graduate Program at the Akademie der Bildende Kunst, Vienna.

Selected solo exhibitions include: No Mind, No Disco, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, 2016; The Curtain Breathed Deeply, Artspace, Sydney, 2014; Handbag Hammer Meditation, La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse, Montréal, 2013; Static Ballet, Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney, 2013; She came over singing like a drainpipe shaking spoon infused mixers, a public work for Christchurch Art Gallery, 2013; Turnstile Heaped on Pour Down, St.Paul St Gallery, AUT Auckland University, 2012; and BIGHEAD GARBAGEFACE GUARDS GHOST DERR SONATA, Contemporary Project Space, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 2009.


William has exhibited in The Netherlands, Japan, the United States, England, Austria, Switzerland, New Zealand, Philippines, India, Canada and Australia. Her work is held in numerous collections including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, The Chartwell Collection, New Zealand, The Michael Buxton Collection, Melbourne and private collections in Australia and overseas. She is represented by Sarah Cottier Gallery, Sydney.
Interview with the artist

To start, how did The Curtain Breathed Deeply come about?

I always work by drawing in books and journals. So there are always ideas (brewing in my mind). There are always a lot of drawings and photocopies that already exist. When I was offered the opportunity to make a project at Artspace, I went back and had a look. I also do a lot of research so I spent about a week researching ideas that I was interested in at the time. And particularly for me, they were quite personal issues around death and family. There was this sense of sadness, but then on the opposite side there were a lot of feelings of joy, as I had just met someone and started to fall in love. So there were these two extremes that were going on in my life. I started to think about something that was already part of my art practice, which is the idea of the ritual. When people die, you have to go through funerals, there are all the social occasions and there are these things that you do around seeing someone leave the world or come into the world. Depending on what you believe, as this is also about systems of belief, it wasn’t just about religion or gods, but it was also about dying, living, love and making art.

I really do work in quite an unconscious way: images either come to me in my dreams, or I’ve seen them somewhere, because I also watch a lot of movies. I will see an image [a particular movie scene] for example, that is very striking, and then I kind of want to emulate it somehow, and it sets off all these ideas and reactions and other images that I’d like to create in my own work.

And, from there, how do you refine all those ideas for an artwork?

If it is for a particular space, I go to the space and I like to spend time there. I also like to see how that space is used and how that space may have already been used. I think about the space and then I make drawings about how I would see my ideas, images, videos and performances in the space. I start to think about it as a whole already, as a finished work, before I’ve even started making a video, or a sculpture, or a costume. For me it’s about the end, how people would enter the space, or walk through it or sit down. A lot of the time my work has been seen as manic or erratic or being ‘too much’. But here, I thought colour could create different moods. It is about bringing the pace down, lowering the heartbeat a bit. Once again it’s for the viewer. They could bring out different moods as well. I want people to feel different things in the different rooms of The Curtain Breathed Deeply. So for me, all these things are about how you see people moving through the space. Then I just get into the studio and I start making stuff.
You have cited many different influences for this exhibition, from the early twentieth century avant-garde, to pop culture, to TV shows to rituals. How does one thing relate to another?

I can’t really explain it, because [making connections] is just something you do. We do it all the time without even thinking about it. We are always processing things. We are always taking in images, always processing, weather it is on your phone, on your laptop, on the television, on the radio, you are always taking in information.

Talking about your original practice as a photographer, does this still come into your three-dimensional or installation work today?

In a way I feel like I am always making images, whether they are moving images or still images. Photography is always there, because the work is always a lens-based practice. All the performances, everything is filtered through the lens at some stage and then it comes back out again, even the objects. The objects in the space aren’t just objects that are made, they are only made for the set and then they come back out again. So everything goes through a lens. Also, a lot of the time I am interested in foregrounds and backgrounds and the body within a space, and how the body can be flattened or it can be camouflaged through body coverings.

Can you speak a little more about the performance in your work?

A lot of the time, because [a performance] has often been ad-libbed or unrehearsed, it’s about the unconscious. It’s about just creating an environment where you hopefully build up enough energy for something magical to happen. I suppose that’s where the voodoo idea comes in, that you really go into a zone. So that is about performing in real time, even though it’s only performed for a camera. When you let go of yourself, you’re not thinking about yourself anymore because you’ve covered yourself, and you just let it go.

What is your interest in suburbia that you reference in The Curtain Breathed Deeply?

I am interested in what’s on the periphery. Even when I used to make photographs, a lot of them were just abstract photographs. I was interested in what was happening on the outside of things. Same with the suburbs. It’s outside. You think that the suburbs are just a very straight-forward thing, but actually, there are all these weird things that happen on the outside of them. I am interested in trying to find those places, and spaces and people that exist outside, in the ‘weirdness’.

The tradition of the readymade from the avant-garde period is a significant part of your work.

Of course when I went to art school, they taught us about Duchamp... but the readymade really is about everyday objects that we live with, and I think you can imbue other meaning into these things that we look at everyday. It’s a way of looking at something that you think is ordinary but it can actually be quite extraordinary or unusual if you place it in a different context or change it up a little bit, by adding something to it or taking something away from it. So, that’s where the readymade is coming from [in my work]. It is also about ‘making do’, where you find things that already exist, objects that once had a life. The person that used that thing no longer wants it so they throw it away. So, it is about bringing some life back into an object that has been deemed useless. I believe that there is sometimes energy still stored in these weird things that someone’s used. Performance is a way to imagine. That’s where you find a new life for that object. So this cup is no longer a drinking mug it becomes something to smash or cover something over, to tap so it becomes a sound. I just try and think of a different way of repurposing an object. It’s a weird kind of recycling.

Even the movement of the performers is a form of the readymade in a way, in that they are enacting everyday movements.

Yes exactly, there is that as well. That is exactly right because that repetitive action can also be a dance. There are things that you do everyday. I will never forget, when I worked in retail, there are things that you do everyday and a person becomes this machine. There are always mechanical movements, always, in my works, repetitive movements, because the body is the machine.
About Artspace

Mission

Artspace is Australia’s leading institution for the production and presentation of contemporary art in all forms. Through exhibitions, performances, artist residencies and public programs, Artspace is where artists of all generations present work, test new ideas and shape public conversation. Committed to experimentation, collaboration and advocacy, Artspace’s mission is to enhance our culture through a deeper engagement with contemporary art.

History

Artspace was established in 1983 as a gallery run by artists, dedicated to the presentation of contemporary and experimental art in a critical context. The function of Artspace was clearly defined at this time in its history as an alternative exhibition space to venues such as the Art Gallery of NSW and commercial galleries, which were less focused on working with and representing emerging artists.

In response to ever-increasing demand for space by artists, Artspace relocated in 1992 to the Gunnery, Woolloomooloo - a multi-story warehouse, which in the 1970s was used as a squat by artists and as a space for studios, performances and exhibitions. To facilitate this relocation, the NSW state government together with Franco Belgiorno-Nettis raised $1.5 million in a ground-breaking collaboration to fund the redevelopment of the Gunnery into a centre for experimentation, innovation and collaboration in the visual arts. For the past 20 years, artists have continued to occupy the building through Artspace’s ongoing commitment to supporting artists and their practices. Artspace has played a significant role in transforming the Gunnery from a disused warehouse to a premier cultural landmark.


Programs

Artspace has a multi-faceted approach to programming. Not only does Artspace present art exhibitions, but also organises artist residencies, workshops, performances, public talks and film screenings. Artspace’s vision is to promote investment in living artists across generations, working in expanded and experimental forms, so that Australian artists, writers, curators and producers can be programmed in direct dialogue with national audiences and international peers. Artspace’s program enables ideas to germinate and grow, extending the definition of what art is and what it can become.

Artspace supports living artists in a number of ways: through exhibitions, by providing free studio space for local and international artist and through making connections between Australian artists and the rest of the world.

artspace.org.au

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About Museums & Galleries of NSW

Museums & Galleries of NSW (M&G NSW) provides support for galleries, museums and Aboriginal cultural centres in NSW to maximise cultural impact and create strong and thriving local communities. Our focus is on small to medium sized entities, working with them to grow audiences, programs and capacity state-wide.

M&G NSW runs the largest regional touring program in NSW, delivering the very best contemporary Australian art to regional, remote and metropolitan audiences through the comprehensive network of public galleries Australia wide. We partner with artists, curators, regional galleries, contemporary art spaces, university galleries and other producing organisations to develop innovative exhibitions for tour nationally. We work directly with artists and commission new work for the benefit of Australian regional audiences. Our exhibitions and associated programs balance the programming needs of regional galleries and support their staff, facilitate skill sharing and professional development, foster collaboration and build connections, capacity and networks for artists, curators and arts workers across distance.

Our program reflects the capacity and diversity of the sector with a focus on access and engagement. We present the full spectrum of contemporary art practice by leading artists, both emerging and established including Richard Bell, Shaun Gladwell, Claire Healy & Sean Cordeiro, Joyce Hinterding, Angelica Mesiti, Deborah Kelly, Jason Wing, Fiona Hall, Ken + Julia Yonetani. Each of our exhibitions engage diverse audiences through a range of public and educational programs, interpretative material, digital resources and scholarly publications written by curators, academics and experts.

In the last 3 years, M&G NSW has reached audiences of over half a million through 16 exhibitions of contemporary art and craft that toured to 51 separate galleries across 6 states and territories. Our exhibitions presented 408 works by 410 living artists. 1,024 public programs were delivered and 47,560 students engaged with M&G NSW’s program through educational workshops.

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Key Concepts

READYM Ade | AVANT-GARDE | COLOUR | EMOTION | RITUAL | SUBURBAN MUNDANE

Glossary

The following terms are sourced from http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/glossary and enhanced by Justene Williams.

Appropriation

In the visual arts, appropriation is the intentional borrowing, copying and alteration of preexisting images and objects to create new meanings.

Assemblage

A collection or gathering of things to make an object; a three-dimensional composition made from a variety of traditionally non-artistic materials and objects.

Avant-garde

French for “advanced guard”, this term is used in English to describe a group that is innovative, experimental, inventive and at the forefront of developing a technique or ideology, particularly in the realms of culture, politics and the arts.

Bauhaus

A German school of art, design, and architecture founded in 1919 by Walter Gropius, aimed to re-establish the bond between artistic creativity and manufacturing that had been broken by the Industrial Revolution.

Body language

The gestures, facial expressions and postures that convey a person’s physical, mental or emotional state.

Choreography

The process and design of arranging and organising bodily movements in a space. Justene’s interest in dance runs throughout her work. She uses choreography in many different ways – as virtuosic display, as gesture, as sculpture and as a social collective movement.

Collage

The technique and resulting work of art in which fragments of paper and other materials are arranged and glued to a supporting surface. Justene Williams often uses digital collage, cutting and pasting moving images and visual motifs together on a screen.

Cultural ritual

Rites or ceremonies that are the sacred, customary ways of celebrating a religion or culture. Different communities have different ritual practices.

Composition

The arrangement of the individual elements within a work of art so as to form a unified whole; also used to refer to a work of art, music, or literature, or its structure or organisation.

Constructivism

Developed by the Russian avant-garde at the time of the October Revolution of 1917, the goal of this idealistic movement was to make art universally understandable and essential to everyday life.

Dada

An artistic and literary movement that grew out of dissatisfaction with traditional social values and conventional artistic practices during World War I (1914–18). Dada artists were disillusioned by the social values that led to the war and sought to expose accepted and often repressive conventions of order and logic by shocking people into self-awareness.
Interdisciplinary
Working with more than one art ‘discipline’. That is, combining practices such as dance, performance art, installation, painting or video together in one artwork.

Installation
A form of art that involves the creation of site-specific objects or sensory experiences, often inviting audiences to directly interact or become immersed in the artwork.

Performance Art
In performance art, the artist’s medium is the body, and the live actions he or she or the audience performs are the work of art. Performance art usually consists of four elements: time, space, the body, and a relationship between audience and performer. Although performance art takes the form of live action, it has reached a large public audience through photographic and video documentation.

Primitive Art
A term initially used to refer to the arts of all of Africa, Asia, and Pre-Columbian America, later used mostly to refer to art from Africa and the Pacific Islands. By the late 20th century the term, with its derogatory connotations, fell out of favour.

Readymade
Readymade objects are everyday objects that are displayed as art. Instead of painting an object, artists including French artist Marcel Duchamp and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven began presenting objects themselves as art in the early 1900s. They selected mass-produced, commercially available objects, defining them as art and giving them titles. “Readymades” upset centuries of thinking about the artist’s role as a skilled creator of original handmade objects.

Surrealism
A literary, intellectual, and artistic movement that began in Paris in 1924 and was active through World War II. Influenced by Sigmund Freud’s writings on psychology, Surrealists, led by André Breton, were interested in how the irrational, unconscious mind could move beyond the constraints of the rational world. Surrealism grew out of dissatisfaction with traditional social values and artistic practices after World War I.
Primary Students

This primary program encourages cross curriculum connections and experimental art making. Activities have been designed to involve students in creative thinking, appreciation of visual art concepts and artists, as well as art making.

Activities

Discuss/describe what you see in this exhibition. 
What are the different objects and items Justene has used? What are the different colours in the spaces and how do they make you feel?

Observe the handmade objects in Justene’s work. She makes all her own sets, costumes, photographs and videos. Have a good look and write a list of techniques that you think were involved in making this artwork.

Describe the materials. How do they look? Are they familiar?

Think about what sort of characters might live in the world that Justene Williams has created. Describe what they look like, what they sound like and what emotions they are feeling.
Primary Students

Back in the Classroom

Activity 1

Materials required: one box per student, paper, cardboard, string, paints, plastic, plastic bottle lids, pencils, eraser, coloured markers.

Think
Invent a character. Describe what your character is like. Where does your character live? What do they do? How would they talk and move?

Create

Design and make a diorama for your character and their environment, inspired by the installations in the exhibition.

Using the space below, first make a rough sketch of what you want your diorama to look like. Then get a cardboard box, which will be the frame for your scene, and any materials you will need. Create your background first, then the ground and sky. Then you can add details, place objects on the ground, pin them from the roof of the box or stick things to the walls to create different layers and textures.

Design and create the character’s costume.

Make a sketch of what you want your character to look like. Think about the colours, patterns and textures you will use for their costume. Collect the materials you will use to construct your character. This could be paper, paints and glue, as well as paperclips, bottle tops and other found objects.
Primary Students

Back in the Classroom

Activity 2

This program is designed to be delivered over several sessions and cover the broader creative arts curriculum.

Justene’s interest in dance runs throughout her work. She uses choreography in many different ways — sometimes as gestures or sculptures and sometimes to represent ideas. She draws on what she learnt in dance classes when she was young, as well as what she sees around her.

In small groups, choreograph a dance/movement piece using repeated gestures, movements and everyday actions. Think about objects that we use every day. How do these things move?

Think of a simple action. Try using these techniques to come up with your dance:

1. Repetition
2. Exaggeration
3. Slow motion
4. Double time

Costumes

What costumes could you wear to compliment your dance? Think about colours, style and materials. Experiment and mix-and-match your ideas.

Sets and Props

In your small groups, think about what kind of set would suit your performance? Using found objects and recycled materials, make a set or props. Try to use different materials like Justene Williams does. Think about colours, shapes, and what you will need to do to assemble the props.

Music

Create a soundtrack for your performance. Justene Williams draws on many different musical influences to create the soundtracks for her work. What music could you create for these actions? Would it be rhythmic, loud, fast, slow? Could you make the sounds with your voice, body and found objects?

Performance and Documentation

Perform your work for each other. Document your performance with a still camera, video camera or phone.
Secondary Students

The secondary activities are designed to develop and broaden students’ understanding and ability to critically interpret art concepts, the artist and their practices, as well as design and make artworks using different techniques.

Activities

Justene Williams often uses found objects, also known as readymades, sourced from her immediate surroundings to build her sets. What found objects and materials can you see that the artist has used in the exhibition?

What is the significance of these objects within the meaning of the artwork?

Consider the title of the exhibition. How does this lend to the found objects used?

Performance art often consists of four elements: time, space, the performer’s body, and a relationship between audience and performer. Performance work can be cross-disciplinary, employing visual arts techniques, theatre practices and sound.

Describe how The Curtain Breathed Deeply employs these four elements. How do they add meaning to the work?

Notate as many cultural references and key art concepts throughout the exhibition as you can find.

How does Justene Williams use digital collage in this exhibition? What effects does this create?

Describe the key features of at least one art concept and one cultural reference Justene Williams has drawn on to create the exhibition.
Secondary Students

Back in the Classroom

Activity

Discuss with a partner what cultural references you might consider using as inspiration if you were to make your own mixed media work. Draw on different references from your own life and experience.

Create a collage. This can take the form of your choosing, for example mixed materials on paper, in Photoshop or on Tumblr, a Pinterest moodboard, or a soundtrack. Collect cultural references that you would draw upon to create work. Like Justene, you might want to draw on a mix of art theory and concepts as well as on your own experiences, past and present, for example film, TV, fashion, music and memories.

Write a supporting document to explain what aspects of these references interest you and how you might use them, [e.g. colours, text, mood, performance].

The Readymade

Discuss how Justene Williams uses the readymade in her work, and what effect this creates.

Create your own readymade:

- Select objects from your surrounding environment to create as a readymade. Think about the object's original context and use, and how you can add something or take something away to change its function.
- Brainstorm a list of titles for your readymade.
- Display or take snapshots of your readymade along with their titles.
- How do the titles affect the way these everyday objects are perceived by yourself and others?

Instagram project

Upload your images to Instagram

Use the exhibition hashtags #JusteneWilliams and #TheCurtainBreathedDeeply when uploading your creations to Instagram.
Further Information

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8DOTKFnLy6feature=youtu.be&t=7m1s
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q-XcQK8cCQU
http://www.sarahcottiergallery.com/artist/27/Justene_Williams.htm
http://www.artandaustralia.com/news/reviews-commentary/review-justene-williams
https://www.monash.edu/muma/hs-modules/muma/exhibitions/2016/justene-williams

Justene Williams: The Curtain Breathed Deeply, monograph, 2015, Artspace, Monash University of Museum Art

Managed by Museums & Galleries of NSW, The Curtain Breathed Deeply will tour nationally between 2016-2018 to the following galleries and art centres:

Perth Institute of Contemporary Art  WA  16 SEPT – 30 OCT 2016
Bunbury Regional Art Gallery  WA  12 NOV 2016 – 22 JAN 2017
Northern Centre for Contemporary Art  NT  10 FEB – 26 MAR 2017
Goulburn Regional Art Gallery  NSW  26 MAY – 8 JUL 2017
Griffith Regional Gallery  NSW  28 JUL – 24 SEP 2017
Ipswich Art Gallery  QLD  6 OCT – 26 NOV 2017
Tamworth Regional Gallery  NSW  9 FEB – 25 MAR 2018
Lismore Regional Gallery  NSW  6 APR – 27 MAY 2018
Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest  NSW  28 AUG – 26 NOV 2018

The Curtain Breathed Deeply was curated and developed by Artspace and is touring nationally in partnership with Museums & Galleries of NSW.

The generous bequest of the Catalyst: Katherine Hannay Visual Arts Commission has enabled Artspace to support Justene Williams in the development of this major new work at a pivotal moment in her career. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.