

# Metaphor, creativity and art practice

*The following article discusses a way of looking at and thinking about artworks which might be useful for students in Year 11, particularly for those students who are not familiar with the language of art and the practice of art writing.*

*The strategy involves expanding modes of thinking through using metaphor, which in turn, provides students with language for writing and artmaking. References are made to activities involving students and teachers in workshops using metaphor as the means of addressing practice.*

**Metaphor:** a figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable, in order to suggest a resemblance, as *A mighty fortress is our God. (The Macquarie Dictionary, third edition, 1997).*

A metaphor is using one thing to describe another, but it must be not alike in reality, there is a certain poetic effect in using a metaphor. In artworks, symbols are often used as visual metaphors, where an object or form refers to and stands for something quite different.

Art critical writing in the Stage 6 visual arts syllabus can be difficult for students who have English as a second language or who have problems with interpretive writing.

Interpretation of artworks partially depends on students being able to use their imagination and to think creatively. The use of metaphor in critical writing can provide a platform for imaginative response to artworks and generate expressive writing about artworks.

## Metaphor and creativity

Creativity is not dependent on students inventing totally unique and *individual* projects. Rather, it is more about working within given parameters, where students are able to regard the same or similar situations differently. The differences may be small or substantial, but they go beyond the expected, the ordinary, the cliché and the banal.

In art education, students are taught to go beyond their conventional thinking and represent the world in new ways.

Metaphor colours our language and enriches our visual representations. Metaphor used as a device can create relationships between things in the world and foster creativity in artmaking.

Metaphors facilitate the capturing of our phenomenological experience of the world in a unique way. They provide a means by which we can connect together objects, events and actions that appear to be empirically disparate and unconnected and are part of cultural expression.

The following activities suggest strategies for developing creative practice in the classroom, based on metaphoric language. These activities can be employed to generate creative thinking in relation to artmaking and art critical practice in Year 11 visual arts.

## Art historical and artmaking investigations

*Broken Column*, by Frida Kahlo is an artwork about with symbolism. Students referred to this to gain an insight into representation of self and the use of metaphor.

They were asked to list as many signs and symbols in the artwork they could identify and decide on the metaphoric reference.

Responses included:

- brace, as representative of constriction and support
- long, loose hair and revealed breasts as representations of freedom and sexuality
- *monobrow*, a feminist comment on conventions of female beauty
- barren and rocky earth as representation of infertility
- Ionic column as symbol of vertebrae and stalwartness
- drapery as a reference to nudity, a partial disclosure.

The students discovered that metaphors in art are subjective, personal and cultural.

*The fact that metaphors are culturally relative implies that members of the same culture may share many distinct metaphorical understandings in common.*

In response to the art historical activity students proceeded to create self-portraits. They made a list of subjective metaphors about themselves and the way they deal with the world and particular people in it. They used these as sources for artistic imagery.

Metaphors included:

- I feel tied to my sister.
- My brother makes my blood boil.
- Teachers get on my nerves.
- My parents dump on me.
- I am an over-the-top person.
- I keep my cards close to my chest.
- I wear my heart on my sleeve.



I am torn away from the computer.  
I would be lost without sport.  
I put a wall up.

Students developed self-portrait images from these metaphors, which were personal and relevant.

### Language, imagery and art criticism

Description and interpretation in art criticism can enhance a viewers' perception of an artwork. Descriptive writing in a critique of an exhibition, can whet the appetite. In *Criticizing Art* Terry Barrett writes:

*Describing is a kind of verbal pointing a critic does so that features of a work of art will be noticed and appreciated... description is not a prelude to criticism—it is criticism.*<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to define the role of the critic:

*Critics write to be read, and they must capture their readers' attention and engage their readers' imaginations.*<sup>1</sup>

Barrett is confirming the relationship between creative language and its influence on the imagination. Metaphoric language creates imagery for readers.

*We understand experience metaphorically when we use a Gestalt from one domain of experience to structure experience in another domain.*<sup>2</sup>

### Strategies for developing art critical writing skills

In the following activities, teachers developed strategies for enhancing their own art critical writing. These strategies can be adapted for Year 11 visual arts students to develop their understanding of art critical practice.

The teachers were read an excerpt of art criticism, written by the critic Ken Johnson, and asked to identify the artist referred to in the writing.

*...large fields of scorched earth (that) look like slabs of blasted heath itself, danced over by devils, driven over by panzers, tortured by the weather then screwed to the wall.*

The artist referred to was Anselm Kiefer.

Teachers considered:

- how metaphor and descriptive language can be used to represent the images in artworks and the use of media and techniques
- how descriptive art critical writing can conjure up imagery for audiences
- how metaphoric writing can be a stimulus for artmaking
- how descriptive writing can comprise elements of interpretation and judgement.

The group then worked in pairs. One of the pair was given an image of an artwork, in this case, Willem de Kooning's *Woman 1* 1952–6. The teacher with the image wrote a paragraph about a small section of the image, while not revealing it to the other participant, aiming to use colourful and metaphoric language to suggest either the subject or the use of the media. This was given to the other teacher to read. The second teacher then created a small artwork representing the described part of the de Kooning work.

Below is a selection of the descriptions and resulting artworks, which were created in crayon, pencil and charcoal.

Descriptions of sections of De Kooning's *Woman 1*:

- The thick primary colour is scraped on with a frenzy that suggests an urgency or great anger. Tentatively peeking through is a submissive pastel that is totally overwhelmed by the imposing dominant. The shape suggests a bizarre, squashed balloon that is slowly leaking out of one end. The final gesture is a haphazard scraping of black to imitate an outline.
- Grotesque face with tribal, triangular eyes staring, left pointing staring out from an equally inverted triangular skull.
- The image codifies woman as *sexual predator and primitive huntress*. Rather than examine the quality of feminine identity the artist utilises the gestural, macho, mark-making to depict his own primitive, archetypal image of woman.
- A savage, angry female figure dressed in armour.
- The grim reaper smile snarls as it pushes forward from the sickly, palid skin.

The results demonstrate the range of interpretations of De Kooning's *Woman 1*. Several responses combined description with interpretation and elements of judgement. Metaphoric writing provided a variety of insights into the artwork. The combined results curiously suggest De Kooning's artwork.

This activity can be adapted for use in the classroom. The range of responses can alert students to the fact that art critics employ creative writing to provide insight into artworks. However, students need to support their interpretive writing about artworks with art historical information that gives meaning to the interpretive response. This creative writing task needs to be followed up by research of the artworks of De Kooning in a historical context of time and place.

In a second activity, still using De Kooning's *Woman 1*, participants were given another strategy for developing creative art critical writing. A different group of teachers was asked to select a particular colour in a section of the

artwork. They were then required to role play that colour pigment and describe in writing their journey from the bottle or paint tube to the surface of the canvas. It was stipulated that they use first person and present tense. This facilitated a recount of the experiential process. This information can then be converted to third person.

Some examples of these descriptions.

Descriptions of “Being The Pigment” for *Woman 1*

*I am grabbed, squashed, thrust out aggressively—splashed, dripped, pushed around, scratched back. Outlined, covered and remarked with white.*

*I emerge from beneath, glowing through thin layers as a beacon of luminous lush, burning light.*

*My life was safe, nice, safely contained within a glass jar. I could see and enjoy life. I could watch creation and think about concepts. My colour kept me warm and sensuous—the lid is off—the palette knife descends. Pain—anguish. I’m splattered over a surface, scrubbed, pushed, rubbed out. I feel thin, less than myself. Now I’m being overlaid—red and black are added to me.*

*Last—left alone.*

*Isolated, but part of something new.*

*I am the red oil paint squeezed from the tube. I have been tinted, scrambled, scrubbed and dragged, sometimes unwillingly and other times with an abandon, that just pushed other colours*

*into submission. I become a bra strap, a rouge roughly smudged onto a gaudy face, a tart, a mothers’ womb and a tinted pink pair of socks. I feel used like my subject.*

The results reveal rich and colourful language that refers to both the painted image and the process of application of paint. This activity can help students to discuss artmaking process and can elicit language that they otherwise would not use.

### Conclusion

The strategies and activities described in this article employ metaphor as a new way of representing the world, stimulating creative writing. The aim is to increase interest in art critical writing and to help students to appreciate the power of descriptive art critical writing and its potential to generate images.

I would like to thank those teachers who participated in the activities and provided their work samples for use in this article.

Janet Rentz  
Visual Arts Consultant  
Professional Support and Curriculum

1. Barrett T., (1994) *Criticizing Art Understanding the Contemporary*, Mayfield, Mountain View, California.
2. Tilly. C (1999) *Metaphor and Material Culture*, Blackwell.

