Visual arts
Comparative study
Student B (HL)

Please note that these sample materials have been fabricated to allow for translation and copyright issues. These samples are not intended to prescribe how materials should be presented for assessment.
This comparative study examines links between Gordon Bennett’s *The Outsider* and the Van Gogh imagery appropriated in it. It looks at connections to Indigenous Australian art of the Central Desert and explores the themes of identity and isolation.

1. Bennett appropriates van Gogh’s Bedroom at Arles (specifically the second version completed in 1889 in which van Gogh uses a blue-green in the timber floor boards)

2. Unlike van Gogh’s bedroom, the window is ajar in Bennett’s work. Does this suggest a disturbance?

3. Again, unlike van Gogh’s bedroom, the chair has been knocked over, possibly from a struggle or intrusion.

4. A central decapitated male figure is visible in the room, behind van Gogh’s iconic bed. It is violent – it represents a loss of identity.

5. The blood erupting from the neck spurts upward into a sky that simultaneously resembles van Gogh’s *Starry Night* 1889, but also the paintings of the Indigenous people of the Australian Western desert.

6. Bloody hand prints line the walls, resembling a violent homicide scene, but also the hand prints found in the traditional Eastern Australian Aboriginal rock painting.

7. The male figure has an apparent dark complexion and has the identifiable markings of traditional Aboriginal ceremonial body paint. The figure is an Australian Aboriginal male.

8. Looking closely at the hands, they are outlined (in black) in such a way as to be able to see the bedhead through them. The wrists are bloodied as if the hands have been dismembered. The hands appear ghost-like.

9. Two plaster or marble heads in the Classical Greco or Roman style rest on the bed. The two hands appear to reach down to take one of the sculptural heads. The heads are symbolic of Western Culture. The figure is attempting to take on a Western identity to replace his decapitated Aboriginal identity.
Contextualising Gordon Bennett’s *The Outsider 1988*

According to Adrian Newstead of the Australian Indigenous Art Market Top 100 (http://www.aiam100.com/profile.php?id=BennettGordon last visited 16/02/2013), Gordon Bennett’s prolific art career began at the age of 33 after graduating from the Queensland College of Art, Brisbane, in 1988. *The Outsider* (1988) is one of a number of his early works that reflect the slow realization of his shame at age 11 of his part-Aboriginal heritage was a result of a white working-class upbringing. This led increasingly to Bennett’s dissatisfaction with the received histories of Australia and stereotypical castings of identity:

I decided that I was in a very interesting position: My mind and body had been effectively colonised by Western culture, and yet my Aboriginality, which had been historically, socially and personally repressed, was still part of me and I was obtaining the tools and language to explore it on my own terms. In a conceptual sense I was liberated from the binary prison of self and other; the wall had disintegrated but where was I? In a real sense I was still living in the suburbs, and in a world where there were very real demands to be one thing or the other. There was still no space for me to simply ‘be’.

I decided that I would attempt to create a space by adopting a strategy of intervention and disturbance in the field of representation through my art.

Contextualising Gordon Bennett’s *The Outsider 1988*

*The Outsider* (1988) was created in the year of Australia’s Bicentennial, celebrating the 200 years of European colonisation of Australia. Kelly Gellatly, curator of the Gordon Bennett exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, suggests that it was not merely coincidental, but that the work was indeed fuelled by the unfolding national celebrations. This was a time when questions surrounding Australia’s colonial history were hotly contested and debated.

Gellatly argues that as an indigenous Australian who had a “strictly Euro-Australian upbringing and education” and who was unaware of his own indigeneity as a child, Bennett’s early interrogations of the construction of identity, both personal and cultural continue to be themes that are an ongoing concern in his work, although represented with greater subtlety in his more recent work. His interest in labelling or categorisation and his own identity as an artist operating between Western artistic traditions and indigeneity is powerfully conveyed in *The Outsider*, from the title itself, to Bennett’s association with and appropriation of van Gogh.

Applying McFee King’s conceptual framework to Gordon Bennett

AUDIENCE’S WORLD

Australia 1988: Multicultural, celebrating 200 years of European colonisation / white invasion. 200 years of systematic alienation of its indigenous population, initially through the notion of Terra Nullis, then decimation through exotic disease brought by first settlers and later through government determination of assimilation which resulted in half-caste children being abducted from Aboriginal families and placed in care of white families (Stolen Generation).

AUDIENCE

Would most likely recognise the appropriated imagery from van Gogh. Some would be familiar with Bennett being Aboriginal: “I think people knowing my Aboriginality does have a large bearing on how [the audience] read the work. I don’t know if that is fortunate or not. It’s just a fact that these things do have an effect.” Gordon Bennett cited in Gellatly p. 9

ARTWORK

Bennett, Gordon
The Outsider 1988
Oil, synthetic polymer on Canvas 2 90cm x 180cm
University of Queensland, Brisbane

ARTIST

Discovered his Aboriginal heritage as an adolescent and was ashamed of it. Wrestles with his cultural and professional identity: Aboriginal? Australian? Contemporary Artist? Aboriginal Artist? (not a “Professional Aborigine”)

ARTIST’S WORLD

Euro-Australian middle class upbringing and education.
Formal training at Queensland College of Art
Immersed in postmodernism, postcolonial theory
Bennett and van Gogh as “outsiders”.

Kelly Gellatly concludes that Bennett’s appropriation of van Gogh’s *Bedroom at Arles* 1889 and *Starry Night* 1889 was deliberate and considered. It purposefully evokes the clichéd but long-held notions of the tortured artist and connections between artistic “genius” and insanity.


*It is only too true that a lot of artists are mentally ill - it's a life which, to put it mildly, makes one an outsider. I'm all right when I completely immerse myself in work, but I'll always remain half crazy.*

Vincent van Gogh in a letter to his brother Theo

In placing the decapitated Aboriginal man within the peaceful sanctuary that van Gogh is said to have created for fellow artist Paul Gauguin, Bennett places himself, as creator, within the questionable parameters of “insanity” and “genius” and, Gellatly suggests, uses this position and the elements of the “grotesque” to highlight the violence at the core of Australia’s colonial history and the related denial and suppression of indigenous culture.


**Bennett, Gordon** (Australian, b.1955)

*The Outsider* 1988

Oil, synthetic polymer on Canvas 290cm x 180cm

University of Queensland, Brisbane
Evoking “the outsider” through appropriation

van Gogh, Vincent
(Dutch 1853 – 1890)
*Bedroom at Arles* Second version, September 1889
Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 cm,
Art Institute of Chicago

van Gogh, Vincent
(Dutch 1853 – 1890)
*Starry Night* 1889
73.7 cm × 92.1 cm
Museum of Modern Art, New York City

Bennett, Gordon (Australian, b.1955)
*The Outsider* 1988
Oil, synthetic polymer on Canvas 290cm x 180cm
University Art Museum Collection, University of Queensland, Brisbane
Comparing and contrasting the original and the appropriation:

- **van Gogh, Vincent** (Dutch 1853 – 1890)
  **Bedroom at Arles** Second version, September 1889
  Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 cm, Art Institute of Chicago

- **Benne3, Gordon** (Australian, b.1955)
  **The Outsider** 1988
  Oil, synthetic polymer on Canvas 290cm x 180cm
  University Art Museum Collection, University of Queensland, Brisbane
Van Gogh as the archetypal “outsider”

As previously stated, Bennett’s choice to reference van Gogh in his work *The Outsider* 1988 was a considered choice. Van Gogh remains the archetype of the artist as insane genius. It is well documented that van Gogh was very much the outsider at various stages of his life:

- **His early aspirations as a Protestant Minister** ended when he failed the entrance exam in 1877 and failed a three month Theology Course in 1878.

- **In 1879,** he was dismissed from a lay (unpaid) missionary role where he lived and worked among the impoverished coal miners in Belgium. In living as they did, he was seen to bring “indignity to the priesthood”.

- **Practicing as an artist from 1880,** van Gogh never sold a single painting, despite placing his craft above his own physical well-being.

- **While exhibiting with the Impressionists from 1886,** who were his contemporaries, he remained very much on the outside of the social circle. His artistic intentions diverted significantly from the intent of the Impressionists of capturing the fleeting effects of light against a surface.

Hulsker (1990), pp. 60-73

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*van Gogh, Vincent*  
(Dutch 1853 – 1890)  
*Bedroom at Arles* Second version, September 1889  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 cm,  
Art Institute of Chicago
Van Gogh as the archetypal “outsider”

Lack of understanding between the public’s lack of understanding and critical reception van Gogh received can, according to Nathalie Heinich (1996), be explained in terms of the difference between two levels of recognition: a conventional interpretation tends to lump the public (or audience) together in a global manner against the artist. Heinich suggests that reality is much more complex. Heinrich identifies at least four subsets of audience and critical consumers of van Gogh’s work. They are uneven in number and removed in varying degrees from the artist:

- **PEERS** (who are simultaneously colleagues and competitors);
- **CRITICS**;
- **DEALERS and COLLECTORS** and;
- The **GENERAL PUBLIC**.

These form four circles of recognition (illustration), the closer to the artist, the narrower the field.

Applying McFee King’s conceptual framework to Heinich four subsets

**WORLD**
Cultural contexts, worldviews

**PEERS’ WORLD**
Predominantly Impressionists and Neo-Impressionists. Celebrating the excitement of modernity. Capturing the effects of light.

**CRITICS’ WORLD**
Aware of Impressionism, and likely to be warming to them – not as confronting as they were to Louis Leroy in 1874.

**DEALERS’ and COLLECTORS’ WORLD**
By 1889, Monet’s dealer Paul Durand-Ruel was making him a prosperous living selling his paintings. There was a growing market for Impressionism.

**The GENERAL PUBLICS’ WORLD**
More ware of an academic painting styles. Possibly aware of van Gogh’s (or other Modernists’) reputation

**AUDIENCE**

**PEERS (Colleagues and Competitors)**
Possibly positive of van Gogh’s desire to be an artist. Confronted by the difference in his artistic intention. Saturation of colour and expressive brushwork would challenge ideals.

**CRITICS**
Compared to Impressionism, van Gogh’s Bedroom must have appeared cruder and garish. The perspective is imprecise, the colours are saturated and lack tonal rendering.

**DEALERS and COLLECTORS**
Apart from his brother Theo, van Gogh would have attracted little attention from dealers and collectors. No work was sold until after his death.

**The GENERAL PUBLIC**
The general public were in favour of, and more familiar with a more conventional, academic painting as see in the Salon or Ecole des Beaux Arts. Modernism was for bohemians

**ARTWORK**
van Gogh, Vincent (Dutch 1853 – 1890)
Bedroom at Arles Second version, September 1889
Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 cm,
Art Institute of Chicago

Annotating Vincent van Gogh’s *The Outsider* 1889

Pure, saturated colours are used expressively rather than mimetically. Van Gogh’s letters to his brother Theo reveal the consider approach to his choice of colour palette, the “simplification” of colours and tones.

*van Gogh, Vincent*  
(Dutch 1853 – 1890)  
*Bedroom at Arles* Second version, September 1889  
Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 cm,  
Art Institute of Chicago

Recognisable (other van Gogh paintings) pictures within picture – a device used in other Dutch and Flemish interiors such as Vermeer.

Imprecise use (if at all) of linear perspective. (note the two vanishing points created by the bed and door panel). The actual room at Arles was a trapezoid shape, and not square.

Large areas of strong saturated colour. Expressive use of texture but limited tonal modelling is evident.

Broken colour as used by the Impressionists but with strong, longer, expressive brushstrokes
This time it simply reproduces my bedroom; but colour must be abundant in this part, its simplification adding a rank of grandee to the style applied to the objects, getting to suggest a certain rest or dream. Well, I have thought that on watching the composition we stop thinking and imagining.

I have painted the walls pale violet. The ground with checked material. The wooden bed and the chairs, yellow like fresh butter; the sheet and the pillows, lemon light green. The bedspread, scarlet coloured. The window, green. The washbasin, orangey; the tank, blue. The doors, lilac. And, that is all. There is not anything else in this room with closed shutters. The square pieces of furniture must express unswerving rest; also the portraits on the wall, the mirror, the bottle, and some costumes. The white colour has not been applied to the picture, so its frame will be white, aimed to get me even with the compulsory rest recommended for me. I have depicted no type of shade or shadow; I have only applied simple plain colours, like those in crêpes.

Letter (no 554) from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh
Arles, 16 October 1888
Significance of van Gogh

In the episode "Wheatfield with Crows" in Simon Schama's Power of Art, 2006. Documentary series, Schama reflects upon van Gogh’s admission in his last letter to his brother Theo, that while he had no children, his paintings were his progeny. Schama suggests: 

van Gogh did have a child of course, Expressionism, and many, many heirs.

Images of cultural identity in Gordon Bennett’s *The Outsider* 1988

While the hands are reminiscent of a *CSI* crime scene, they also reference traditional Aboriginal (but not exclusively) mark making such as found in the Red Hands Cave in Glenbrook NSW Australia.

Most obviously, the ceremonial body painting in the decapitated figure

In *The Outsider*, Bennett uses a pair of white heads in the Classical style to represent his longing to put on a Western/European identity.

Head of Alexander the Great after the Classical Greek Style. Artist and other details unknown.


While the sky is an obvious reference to van Gogh’s *Starry Night*, the representation is not as laboured as for his reference to *Bedroom*. This enables him to make a connection to the dot painting of the Central Western Desert like the image above. The dot is a motif Bennett uses to give a nod to the publics expectation of him as an “Aboriginal Artist”.

Red Hands Cave | NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service
www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au

Milatjari Pumani (born 1928, Yankunytjatjara people, South Australia)
*Ngura walytja [This is my place]* 2009
Synthetic Polymer Paint on linen 180.5 x 181.5

Bennett, Gordon
*The Outsider* 1988
Oil, synthetic polymer on Canvas 2
90cm x 180cm
University of Queensland, Brisbane

To see this image please search:

Red Hands cave, Australia

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Annotating Milatjari Pumani’s *Nguru Walytja [This is my place]* 2009

*Nguru Walytja* is a part of the modern tradition of the Western Desert art movement which arose out of an intervention by Euro-Australian art teacher Geoffrey Bardon in the Papunya settlement in 1971. By introducing modern acrylic paint and canvas, Bardon encouraged the community to make permanent the ephemeral sand and body painting that had been the tradition for a millennia. Cumpston, N. *Desert Country* 2010 Art Gallery of South Australia pp12-18.

I’ve chosen the work, not because Bennett directly references it in *The Outsider*, but it has similar formal qualities as in Bennett’s lose interpretation of van Gogh’s *Starry Night*.

Of *Nguru Walytja*, Milatjari Pumani has said: *In this painting I have painted a map of the land as I see it. I can tell where I am by the rocks, waterholes and trees. I could be dropped off somewhere out in the bush and I could find my way home by looking around at the land, it tells many stories.* Milatjari Pumani cited in Cumpston, N. *Desert Country* 2010 Art Gallery of South Australia p 192

The art of the Western Desert is largely about “Country”. When Indigenous Australians talk of country, they use the phrase in much the same way as non-Aboriginal people refer to their relatives. Works are often embedded with esoteric beliefs that are sacred and belong to a particular language group and even a gender within the language group. A range of iconography is used to convey meanings – some a widely understood. Others remain sacred and restricted.

Like other Western Desert works, Ngurua Walytja can be viewed as an aerial image

In this context, the concentric circles represent waterholes, but can also be used to represent campsites, fires, holes, rocks

The horseshoe shape usually signifies men sitting, except when a group is large and sitting around a campsite, in which case, they are usually women

Milatjari Pumani (born 1928, Yankunytjatjara people, South Australia) *Ngura walytja [This is my place]* 2009 Synthetic Polymer Paint on linen 180.5 x 181.5
Significance of Gordon Bennett’s *The Outsider* 1988 to my own work

**Influence on Form/Media**

Body Painting – “contemporary” tribal designs

**Thematic Influence**

- Identity
- Cultural Identity
- “Outsider” – alienation
- Belonging

Historically significant photograph taken by ethnographers and explorers Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen (1912) showing ground painting being made and ceremonial body paint being applied before a ceremony (Corroboree) during an expedition through the Central Desert. Source: McCulloch, Susan Contemporary aboriginal art: A guide to the rebirth of an ancient culture. p52

The modern acrylic painting of the Central Desert, such as Milatjari Pumani’s *Ngura walytja* are based on the designs used in sand painting and body painting. The designs are linked to concepts of “Country” and identity. I set myself the task of developing a body of work using body painting that use contemporary media, imagining a contemporary youth tribal identity, submitted as a series of photographs with motifs and poses/gestures conveying self-identity and alienation.
In this pose, I perched the model on a short plinth and had her gazing into an imaginary pond – like the Greek myth of Narcissus,

In this pose, the model gazes at the palms of her hands, the pose is a reference to the decapitated man in Bennett’s The Outsider and the hands contain the finger prints associated with identity.

In all honesty, I shot this pose to emphasise the design on the leg, but chose it to include in this Triptych as it echoed the first image, and the model appears pensive, vulnerable and defensive which I feel conveys a sense of the alienation that I sought to communicate.

I had intended to use myself as the model in the images, as the work is essentially about self identity, but my teacher insisted that I use an external model as a self-analogue for two reasons. Firstly, I do not turn 18 until after the examinations. Under NSW Child Protection laws, I cannot be photographed either nude or semi-nude – particularly as a school student. Secondly, if my work was considered as photography, rather than body art, it was important that I actually took the photographs, so I used a semi-professional model. The designs I painted on her body are not as precise as I had planned in my Visual Journal: the application of the paint took longer than I expected, and was cold, and the model was charging an hourly rate, so I had to work very quickly.
In this version of *Incognito*, I have chosen to go much closer to the model, all the shots were taken in the horizontal format and the model fills the frame. I introduced the element of a mirror which was placed on the floor of the black colour-rama studio paper. The mirror becomes a symbol for self identity. The images can be read from left to right, almost like a story board, as the figure moves from a position of isolation in the first image, to recognising self in the second, to facing the audience in the third.
References (with annotations)

Bennett, Gordon ‘The manifest toe’ in Ian McLean & Gordon Bennett, The Art of Gordon Bennett, 1996 Craftsman House

Cumpston, N. Desert Country 2010 Art Gallery of South Australia: Adelaide


McCulloch, Susan Contemporary aboriginal art: A guide to the rebirth of an ancient culture. 2001 Allen and Unwin: Sydney


Newstead, Adrian “Profile: Gordon Bennett”, in Australian Indigenous Art Market Top 100 http://www.aiam100.com/profile.php?id=BennettGordo last visited 16/02/2013


The Manifest toe is an artist’s statement prepared by Gordon Bennett explaining his artmaking practice. It reveals his interest in semiotics and post-colonial theory.

As an Aboriginal writer, Cumpston provides sensitive insights into the traditions and works presented in this exhibition catalogue of a recent survey of Indigenous art from the Central Desert.

Kelly Gellatly was the curator of a major survey exhibition of Gordon Bennett’s work, presented chronologically at the National Gallery of Victoria.

Heinich’s suggestion regarding the circles of recognition (which I have illustrated), goes someway in explaining how his contemporary public were able to fail to appreciate the qualities that van Gogh was celebrated for shortly after his death.

Useful source of background information, particularly outlining some of his personally felt vocational failings.

Useful source of background information.

June McFee King in her occasional paper proposes a constructivist framework for considering function and significance of cultural objects from the perspective of the author and the viewer, considering the culture or experience of the world that the author and viewer bring to the work.

The Australian Indigenous Art Market Top 100 is a web site pitched toward the contemporary art collector as investment. It promotes leading Indigenous Australian Artists.

Schama’s documentary articulates van Gogh’s significance and influence on Modern Western Art which I have put into a diagrammatic form.

Van Gogh’s letters to Theo (and others) provide art historians with a wealth of insight into van Gogh’s practice, sometimes revealing his torments, but often dispelling some of the widely held mythology surrounding this archetypal artist as insane genius. The extracts I selected reveal a purposeful choice of colour palette and style at odds with his contemporaries, but not reflecting a vision distorted by ill-health, chemicals or insanity.
Bennett, Gordon (Australian, b.1955)
The Outsider 1988
Oil, synthetic polymer on Canvas 290cm x 180cm
University Art Museum Collection, University of Queensland, Brisbane
Gordon Bennett
Self portrait (nuance 2) 1994
Australian Bicentennial Foundation logo
White Australia has a Black History logo
van Gogh, Vincent
(Dutch 1853 – 1890)
Bedroom at Arles Second version, September 1889
Oil on canvas, 72 x 90 cm,
Art Institute of Chicago
van Gogh, Vincent
(Dutch 1853 – 1890)
Starry Night 1889
73.7 cm x 92.1 cm
Museum of Modern Art , New York City
van Gogh, Vincent
(Dutch 1853 – 1890)
Bedroom at Arles Sketch for, October 1888
Ink on paper
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
Milatjari Pumani (born 1928, Yankunytjatjara people, South Australia)
Nguro walytja [This is my place] 2009
Synthetic Polymer Paint on linen 180.5 x 181.5
Red Hands Cave, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service , Blue Mountains National Park, Glenbrook NSW Australia
Head of Alexander the Great after the Classical Greek Style.
Artist and other details unknown.
Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen Historically significant photograph taken by ethnographers and explorers showing ground painting being made and ceremonial body paint being applied before a ceremony (Corroboree) during an expedition through the Central Desert. (1912)