

FUTURE PRESENT

EDUCATION RESOURCE

Guido van Helten

[KEYNOTE ARTIST PRESENTER]



VISUAL ARTS & DESIGN
EDUCATORS ASSOCIATION

'FUTURE PRESENT'

VADEA Conference 2019

Museum of Contemporary Art Australia

Guido van Helten

PRACTICE

Rather than my work, it is my lifestyle.¹

It's not only about taking a photo of someone and putting them on the silo, it's about finding a story and about building true connections with place.²

In 2018, in the small rural town of Portland, NSW, Guido van Helten completed a mural on a series of cement silos. The works, a series of giant monochrome images, represents local people who have a connection to the now closed Portland Cement Works. Guido van Helten's work is part of a community project aimed at revitalising an abandoned industrial landscape:

This work explores ideas of collective memory through nostalgia in regional communities through living connections with the Heritage Cement Works Factory once the thriving heart of this community just west of the Blue Mountains, New South Wales.³

The Portland Cement Works closed in 1991, leaving a community without its core financial reason for its existence. Many workers were left unemployed, families moved away and businesses closed as a consequence. With the sale of the original site, plans were developed for the repurposing of the remaining buildings – to be part of a combined retail and residential complex under the name The Foundations. Guido van Helten was approached to create his mural for this site.

By their very nature, van Helten's works must be executed on site. This practice of working closely with communities has seen him travelling to create similar large-scale mural projects around the world including in Poland, Belarus, Spain, Denmark, Finland, Sicily, Mexico, India, the USA and Ukraine.

Guido van Helten completed a Bachelor of Visual Arts at Southern Cross University, Lismore in 2008, his studies included Public Art as an option with a major in printmaking. He worked initially as a graffiti artist, both prior to and after his studies. Through this practice he developed his skills, with the restrictions and scale often inherent in graffiti artmaking assisting him with his ability to visualise large format images at close range.

¹ Guido van Helten in - Passenger 6A website – interview with Alejandra Abad - <http://www.passenger6a.com/rather-than-my-work-it-is-my-lifestyle/>

² Guido van Helten – Guido van Helten in Conversation – Southern Cross University - May 31, 2018
<https://www.facebook.com/southerncrossuniversity/videos/vl.638731393130947/2009328462433615/?type=1>

³ Facebook page – Guido van Helten - <https://www.facebook.com/pg/guidovanheltenART/posts/>

*van Helten first takes dozens of photographs, and then he studies the space. His photorealistic work consistently uses a soft palette of greys and browns. "I take in the location, the surface matter, the environment. I very meticulously try to match the colour of the concrete so I can use it as much as possible in the work. When you get it right it starts to become part of the wall, turning the building into a statue."*⁴

Initially working with spray paint, van Helten increasingly found that the scale of his projects made this impractical, both from a point of sourcing paint supplies and of ensuring that the colours were true to his concept. He now mixes paint prior to starting a project, giving consideration to the play on light on the surfaces throughout the day and the seasons.

Photography is an integral part of van Helten's art practice, serving as preparatory studies for the final works but also as a means of establishing what represents the essence of the community in which the project will be based. The process of taking the photographs allows van Helten to engage directly with members of the community and to determine which images best represent the spirit of the community.

In comparing graffiti and mural painting, van Helten asserts that there is little difference between the two practices; that the terms are almost interchangeable. The difference stems, mostly from the scale, the level of access and the time allowed:

*I suppose one seems to have more energy and speed to it, graffiti and street art, while mural art seems to be more traditional.*⁵

Guido van Helten uses a cherry-picker to access the large and often precipitously tall structures:
*It's extreme painting; I had to rethink my techniques.*⁶

His practice has conceptual strength through an emphasis on social and political content, recognising the importance of imagery being site-specific – resonating with the local community and its landscape.

*It is an attempt to learn culturally what is appropriate for a large painting in a new place. It is important that the images which I paint culturally belong.*⁷

In 2017, van Helten completed a mural inside a still abandoned, radiation affected nuclear reactor on the site of the 1987 Chernobyl disaster. The image of photographer Igor Kostin is an acknowledgement of the important role he played in documenting the tragedy and its enduring aftermath.

*The whole place is kind of a testament to these dangers — you can't see it and you can't feel it. But when you turn on the radiation reader you can see it.*⁸

⁴ Why Guido van Helten is drawn to the wall – Susan Chenery – Sydney Morning Herald online – October 19, 2018.

⁵ Guido van Helten - Passenger 6A website – interview with Alejandra Abad - <http://www.passenger6a.com/rather-than-my-work-it-is-my-lifestyle/>

⁶ Guido van Helten in: Christian, Bonnie - Australia's forgotten outback is being transformed into remarkable works of art. 2017. <https://www.wired.co.uk/article/guido-van-helton-art>

⁷ Guido van Helten in - Passenger 6A website – interview with Alejandra Abad - <http://www.passenger6a.com/rather-than-my-work-it-is-my-lifestyle/>

⁸ Guido van Helten in – Silva, Kristian - Chernobyl: Australian street artist Guido van Helton (sic) paints mural in disaster zone reactor. 2016. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-04-26/street-artist-guido-van-helton-paints-mural-in-chernobyl-reactor/7357800>

EXAMPLE ARTWORK

Guido van Helten's recent work *A Sicilian Mother* (Una Madre Siciliana) draws on a broader symbolism – providing for the community and its location in Sicily and offering shelter to those seeking refuge. It was painted as a commission for Avis Ragusa 1 – a blood bank in Sicily. Here van Helten draws on what he describes as “the classical iconography of Charity in Art”⁹. The mural, depicting a mother breastfeeding an infant while another child sits beside her, most strongly references the ancient work Goddess Ibla (550BC). van Helten cites further references to works by Carravaggio, Bartolini and Rubens, and other Baroque images of the Madonna and Child.¹⁰

KEYWORDS AND CONCEPTS

Photorealism

Street art

Mural art

Collaboration

Commission

Documentary humanist street photography

Monumentality

Site specific artworks

Documentation

Collective memory

QUESTIONS AND IDEAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Silo Art Trail, Victoria – 26 painted silos in Victoria have become what's known as the Silo Art Trail, a project that has seen both local and international artists, including Guido van Helten, transform functional if sometimes decommissioned rural buildings into a vibrant representation of country landscapes and lifestyles.

What shared roles can artists and local communities have in the commissioning and development of these largescale projects?

Collaboration - Discuss the role that collaborative art projects can have in broadening the appreciation of art within communities.

Looking at Big Things - A study of artists known for their community based large format murals could include Etam Cru, Roa, Vhils, Faith47, Fintan Magee, Georgia Hill, Heesco Khosnaran and Jimmy DVate.

⁹ Guido van Helten - <https://www.facebook.com/guidovanheltenART/>

¹⁰ Guido van Helten - <https://www.facebook.com/guidovanheltenART/>

RESOURCES

- Guido van Helten's webpage:
<http://www.guidovanhelten.com/>
- Guido van Helten's Facebook page:
<https://www.facebook.com/guidovanheltenART/>
- Guido van Helten in Conversation – Southern Cross University – May 31, 2018
<https://www.facebook.com/southerncrossuniversity/videos/vl.638731393130947/2009328462433615/?type=1>
- The Foundations Portland - Tommy Fitzgerald
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z-kfE8XR3uk>
- Portrait of an Artist – Guido van Helten – Selina Miles
<https://savagethrills.com/travel/portrait-artist-guido-van-helten/>
- The Foundations – Portland NSW
<http://www.thefoundations.com.au/guidopaints/>
- Passenger 6A – Stories to Inspire Your Upcoming Trips
<http://www.passenger6a.com/rather-than-my-work-it-is-my-lifestyle/>

RELATED QUESTIONS FROM PAST VISUAL ARTS HSC EXAM PAPERS*

Practice (2016 paper)

Investigate the ways in which artists develop connections between art and society in their practice.

In your answer, refer to specific artists and artworks.

Conceptual Framework (2017 paper)

Explain how the interrelationship between physical site-specific artworks and the resulting documentation communicates meaning to an audience.

In your answer, refer to specific artists and artworks.

Conceptual Framework (2015 paper)

Investigate ways artists have created significant art works in response to significant world events.

In your answer, refer to specific artists and artworks.

Conceptual Framework (2014 paper)

“. . . the function of the audience is to determine the meaning of the work when it is out of the artist's hands . . .”

- Lawrence Alloway, art historian

With reference to this quotation, discuss relationships between audiences and artworks.

Refer to a range of examples in your answer.

Frames (2018 paper)

Investigate how and why contemporary artists sample the past and repurpose it for the present.

In your answer, refer to specific artists and artworks.



Education Resource written by Alan Guihot, VADEA Executive Member - Regional, and developed on behalf of VADEA for 'Future Present' VADEA Conference 2019 at The Museum of Contemporary Art Australia