THE BAKER’S DOZEN

VIVIENNE BINNS
BONITA BUB
DEBRA DAWES
LYNNE EASTAWAY
LESLEY GIOVANELLI
ELIZABETH GOWER
LORNA GREAR
LISA JONES
ELIZABETH PULIE
NIKE SAVVAS
GEMMA SMITH
KERRY SMITH
SAMANTHA WHITTINGHAM

CURATED BY LORNA GREAR
This resource

This resource has been designed to use in conjunction with a visit to UTS Gallery for the exhibition *The Baker’s Dozen*.

This resource is intended to be used for High School Visual Art students but can be adapted to be used as a general guide for other audiences, including Tertiary students, adult learners and all students studying English as a Second Language.

Five of the thirteen participating artists in *The Baker’s Dozen* have been highlighted in this resource. Information focusing on their works on display is given as well as background information on the artists and specific questions. The questions intend to reference the Visual Arts syllabus while also giving students a chance to deepen their understanding of the context of the works’ production from theoretical and practical perspectives.

Words in bold can be found in the glossary at the back of the resource.
Abstract art.

Abstract art is a method of art making that started during Modernism. It is a style that involves the removal of the representational form in art. Some pioneers of abstract art were Pablo Picasso, Piet Mondrian, Wassily Kandinsky and Kasimir Malevich who were all working in the early part of the 20th century.

By definition the word abstract means to withdraw or remove something from something else. When this definition is applied to art making, what is produced is a simplified form of a more complex original. We can take the example of a picture of an orange. The still life of an orange would depict its colour, form, shadows and position such as on a table so that we can see the orange as a representation of an orange, as if it was in front of us. An abstract of an orange could be a two dimensional round shape on the canvas, not a representation but an abstracted form.

Abstract art however does not always reference something external but can also exist as a whole image of colour or geometric form, where its effect and meaning are created by the relationships between colour and form. An example of this is the work of Wassily Kandinsky who created a philosophy of the relationship of colour and form.

Formalism.

Formalism is a critical position in art theory or put more simply, a way of looking at art where the most important element of an artwork is its form; the position of the colour and shapes and how they visually relate, which is also known as the composition. The composition overrides information about the artist and their subjective or cultural influences. Formalist theory also states that the pleasure of a painting is to be found in the painting itself not its subject.

Formalist theory reached its peak in the 1960s with the writings of the American critic Clement Greenberg who supported the Abstract Expressionist movement in New York. Greenberg viewed art only though its formal properties and did not consider the subject matter of the works to be important. Greenberg’s position was challenged by many artists, including some that he considered to be Abstract Expressionists. It was at this time that Formalism began to be challenged by Post Modernism.
Curator and artist Lorna Grear chose artists for *The Baker’s Dozen* who are driven by process and use unusual forms or materials to make their work. She sees the artists as working in ‘New Formalism’—Formalist work that has political or social ideologies behind its making.

Grear has worked against the minimal aesthetic of the ‘white cube’ and also the tightly packed salon hang of the 19th century. Instead she has arranged the works in the gallery to reference the personal, domestic space, placing paintings in close proximity to each other, sharing an intimate space with large scale sculptures.

The title of the exhibition *The Baker’s Dozen* is a reference to the traditional number of bread rolls packed by a baker in a dozen (12) box, one extra was always given to make up the correct weight. An exhibition of all female artists with this title, leads us to think about the distinction between traditional male and female roles in society and in art production.

Grear has mixed established and mid career artists with emerging artists to exemplify mentor relationships that can occur and the different impact of large art movements on different generations of artists, such as **Op Art, Pop art, Minimalism** and **Abstract Expressionism**.

“The aesthetic is contradictory, the minimal will be juxtaposed against the busy, and the optical illusion will be challenged by the three-dimensional.”

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*The Baker’s Dozen* installation shot. Photo: David Lawrey
The artists.

Vivienne Binns.
Bonita Bub.
Debra Dawes.
Lynne Eastaway.
Lesley Giovanelli.
Elizabeth Gower.
Lorna Grear.
Lisa Jones.
Elizabeth Pulie.
Nike Savvas.
Gemma Smith.
Kerry Smith.
Samantha Whittingham.
Vivienne Binns

Vivienne Binns has two works in The Baker’s Dozen. Both are from her series In memory of the unknown artist. The works are a reproduction of an object that Binns has been given or has come across, that would rarely be recognised as art. Through a ‘translation’ process that Binns employs, the original object is reproduced using very different materials or manufacturing methods than the original.

From David’s Jumper mark II, is, as the name suggests, a pattern from her friend David’s jumper. Fifth Translation of Nylon Mat is another pattern taken this time, from a mat sent from a friend who lives in Central Australia. These objects, received as sentimental objects can sometimes stay in Binns studio for years before she realises the best way to undertake her ‘translations’ from original to painterly reproduction.

“I am fascinated by how sticky messy stuff and a few tools can make so many different kinds of surfaces and create so many different and intriguing images.”

She uses acrylic paints, but in very different way to other paints, such as oils. Instead of painting the surface and building colour, Binns uses the acrylic to create a moulded plastic surface. For her it was an important realisation, that acrylic could be used independently of art historical traditions of painting. Her method exemplifies the non-traditional use of the material:

“The acrylic surfaces in both these works are raked with rubber combs. The paint needs to be the right consistency, fairly thick and fairly transparent. Opaque paint obliterates the colours beneath, but gives a textured result that can be very eloquent. Large surfaces need to be divided into smaller ones to maintain control of the texture and drying. Each layer must dry before applying the next. Areas are taped off to form particular shapes and patterns.”

Above: From David’s Jumper mark II 2007-08, acrylic on canvas, 152.5x183.8cm (detail)
Opp. page: Fifth Translation of Nylon Mat 2006, acrylic on canvas, 200x260 cm (detail)
The Bigger Picture

Binns was trained at the National Art School in figurative and formalist modes. From her early artistic years Binns questioned and broke with artistic conventions and is renowned for working across mediums without elevating one over the other.

In the 1970s, against a backdrop of growing unrest concerning the commodification of art objects and a desire by artists to be more political and socially aware Binns began making **community art**. At this time she was a successful mid career artist with a growing reputation as an abstract and **feminist** artist, yet Binns decided to dedicate her time to leading workshops for women in regional NSW. “It was an attempt to move away from the museum and gallery and look for new audiences, new ways of practising, new ways of looking at art.”

Questions:

Binns has been considered an artist when working in paints, a craftsperson when working with enamels and a community arts worker while running workshops for women in regional NSW. Why do we use these different terminologies?

Discuss in groups whether you think these terminologies are valuable in helping us understand the work or whether they restrict our reading of it?

Binns states that she attempted to move away from the museum and gallery and look for new audiences. Discuss in groups what some of the restrictions might be of showing work in a gallery/museum context?

Who were the “new audiences” Binns was looking for? What did the artists have to gain by engaging with new audiences?
Bonita Bub makes sculptural pieces that reference screens or triptychs. They balance precariously on the ground, like unfolded cardboard boxes which have been balanced perfectly to stand upright. She uses everyday materials that aren’t normally associated with art such as plywood, plastic, cardboard, foam and concrete.

Hovercraft, Bub’s work for The Baker’s Dozen is a waist high object made from painted plywood. It sits in the middle of the space, perched uncomfortably on the floor, there is no plinth for this sculpture, instead we are forced to stop in our tracks and walk around it. It forces us to slow down in our viewing of the work and negotiate our movements within the space. Her work uses precarious proportions to create a sense of uncertainty of structure amongst the solid walls of the gallery surrounding it.

“My objects deal with (the) cardboard box as departure point – which (is) associated with transport across suburbs and borders. But my boxes are contentless.”

Hovercraft 2010, ply, acrylic, hinges, dimensions variable
The Bigger Picture

Bub’s work references **Modernist** principles of design and architecture where ‘form follows function’ meaning buildings are designed to assist their intended purpose, rather than decoration being the principle aspect. Bub references this utilitarian aesthetic and prompts the audience to consider it also, by creating work that draws our attention to the purpose and structure of the space around us.

She has just returned to Sydney from a year studying in Vienna. Her travels and experiences have led her to consider what she sees as the temporality of space and time and the disorientation that can be caused in our fast-paced global society.

Questions:

Read Bonita Bub’s quote on the opposite page. Think about how boxes are often used as a transport medium across borders, discuss in a group all the things that are transported in and out of Australia in boxes. What do you think the artist is trying to say by having objects that reference empty open boxes?

Have you or someone in your class flown to another country? Discuss what the experience is like of changing time zones or moving between cultures. Is it disorientating?

Bubs works are stable sculptures made to balance perfectly but they look unstable and precarious. What metaphors do you think the artist is trying to create in her work?

How does Bubs’ work change your movements in the gallery? Consider how the work references the architecture of the space. Write a list of words you could associate with Bubs sculpture and a list you associate with the walls of the gallery. Discuss the difference with a partner.
Debra Dawes.

The primary intention of Debra Dawes work is “to create a visual experience that engages the attention of the viewer in a way that they become immersed in the space of the painting.” Debra Dawe’s paintings disrupt the picture plane. She uses repetition and colour in clever ways to create illusions of space and of movement.

Dawes creates series of paintings, this way, she explores different outcomes using the same system of painting. Dare two and I got a hankering (green) are part of the series Double dealing. In these works Dawes continues her exploration of a method that starts with a grid of points. She works from dot to dot diagonally creating an illusion of three dimensions and positive and negative tension.

“I found this created spatial uncertainties where the eye cannot rest but keeps bouncing between the positive and the negative.”

Got a hankering (green) 2010, oil on canvas, 260x180cm (detail)
The Bigger Picture

Dawes’ choices of colour and form and the tension they create reflect strong political and social views. The *Double dealing* series is a critique on the actions of the Australian government during the Howard administration as the public were confusedly manipulated into supporting fear-mongering under the guise of Australian values.

Dawes often uses a grid structure in her practice and it is the basis for the *Double dealing* series. She grew up in a country town that was designed in a grid structure, and her experience of how this model created hierarchies amongst its inhabitants by including some and excluding others has informed her work.

“The idea is to create a feeling from what is seen. I am not talking about emotion necessarily, it may be a feeling of lightness that makes you feel a certain way or it may be a feeling of weight that you feel in your stomach. It may well be a feeling of confusion. I hope that from this feeling you will ask why does the picture make me feel this way? From that question you will begin to ask yourself the questions that the painting is asking of you.”

Questions:

Dawes experience and observations of grids since an early age have informed her use of the grid structure in her work. What other ways are grids used in society both physically and metaphorically? Have you ever been to a town designed as a grid? (Hint: Australia’s capital is famously designed on a grid structure) How was it different from other towns that grow organically? Which do you prefer and why?

How does her work make you feel when you look at it?

Research the other paintings in the series *Double dealing*. Consider the political views the artist is expressing. How do you think the colour and forms she has chosen might reflect her viewpoints? (Consider complimentary and uncomplimentary colours and the optical effects of the patterns she has used)

The artist has expressed a personal reaction to a political situation in her work and chosen colour and form to create a reaction in the audience. Is your response to the work fitting with Dawes intentions? How would you express political frustration in the abstract form?
Nike Savvas’ series *Sliding Ladder* includes *Truncated Icosahedron #1* and *Mandala*, created using brightly coloured wools, wound in geometric formation to create beautiful shapes on the canvas or within the frames. These works sit somewhere between painting and sculpture.

*Sliding Ladder: Mandala* is a large, white circle with nails embedded in its surface. The wool has been wound from nail to nail to make interweaving lines and colour. Blue, orange, purple and yellow cross over and under each other casting shadows on the white backdrop creating a surface that protrudes from the 2 dimensions of the canvas. The artist has used a material that we are very familiar with but has used it in an unconventional way, extending the possibilities of the material.

*Sliding Ladder: Truncated Icosahedron #1* is a ‘soccer ball’ shaped object. Each panel of the ‘ball’ acts as a frame for a colour of wool to be repetitively wound within. As the viewer moves around the object different relationships of complimentary and uncomplimentary colour are made as we see through one frame to those below or behind it.

Above: *Sliding Ladder: Mandala* 2010, wood, wool, 220cm diameter
Opp Page: *Sliding Ladder: Truncated Icosahedron #1* 2010, wood, wool, 130x130x130cm
The Bigger Picture

Savvas’ series Sliding Ladder is named after an algebraic equation \((\frac{x^2}{3} + \frac{y^2}{3} = \frac{L^2}{3})\), which the artist originally learned about at school. This equation also gave rise to string art in the 1960s and 1970s. Savvas’ series references **Op Art**, short for optical art, an art form that makes use of visual illusions.

Savvas doesn’t give much away about her work, she prefers to leave the readings of her work up to people’s own perception. “I like the viewer to engage with my work in their own terms.”

“The Sliding Ladder series uses wool as a container for the colour and is based on my intuitive responses to the geometric forms that I play with.”

“Colour has a primal effect on people and is the main feature in my work.”

Questions:

What is your emotional response to the Sliding Ladder works? Consider how the colours and forms make you feel, what they make you recall or remember and your association of the materials to non-art objects and activities.

Research Op Art. Write a short piece describing what Op Art is and how Nike Savvas’ work has been influenced by it. Describe the similarities and differences in Savvas’ work to the British Op artist Bridget Riley.
Gemma Smith.

Gemma Smith works in painting and sculpture. Her two pieces in *The Baker’s Dozen*, *Chessboard Painting* and *Tether Tangle* exemplify her interest in “thinking through compositional problems and reflecting on seemingly oppositional approaches to making art. How, for example, might one reconcile intuition with control? How might one apply the logic of sculpture to painting, or vice-versa?”

*Chessboard Painting* has been painted directly onto a foldable and portable chessboard. Smith added coloured planes to the chessboard’s grid as if making a chess ‘move’. The process started from a position of endless possibilities and progressively became limited as the composition evolved.

*Tether Tangle* is part of a larger series of works the artist describes as ‘tangle’ paintings. The finished product is a canvas covered in tightly packed gestural swirls of paint that seem to be ‘tangled’ together. Smith plays with gesture and intuition in the making of these works. She sets rules and systems for herself but follows them in a contradictory way allowing her practice to open up to new possibilities.

“I use a series of rules that kind of make themselves as I went… I remember accumulating rules such as: to not to use the same colour twice, only use mixed colours rather than from the tube, working loosely from most vivid colours (often reds) back to canvas/substrate colour, then to pure white. These rules would change… If I’d feel like the work was becoming formulaic in any way I’d consciously try to shake the rules.”

Above: *Chessboard Painting* 2012, acrylic on wooden chessboard, 38x38cm
Opp. page: *Tether Tangle* 2010, acrylic on board, 140x120cm
Smith works within the legacy of abstract art but rather than following its traditions she uses it as a rule book for her own intuitive art making processes. Her idiosyncratic application of paint that highlights the hand of the artist is at odds with the geometric abstraction of Modernism and its clean, minimal approach. Smith’s work has a playful quality that exemplifies her game-like processes of art making, that uses her many self imposed rules that are made to be broken.

Questions:

What rules are assumed in art making? Consider your own art practice and the rules you follow i.e using a paintbrush when applying paint, painting within the canvas. What would happen if you broke some of those rules? How would you art making change?

Read the quote by Gemma Smith on the oppoite page. With a partner write down some rules you think would be interesting to follow while painting. Separate from your partner and try following these rules while painting a canvas. When you are both finished come back together and compare the similarities and differences in your work. Did you interpret the rules differently? Do your individual styles come through despite the rules you followed?
Glossary.

**Abstract Expressionist** – A post WWII artistic style that originated in America. It is characterised by highly gestural, non figurative imagery

**Community art** – An art form that involves engaging with community members rather than the production of an art object

**Composition** – The arrangement of colour, form and object on a canvas

**Emerging artist** – An artist at the beginning of his/her career. Usually an artist that has just graduated from university

**Established artist** – An artist that is renowned nationally and internationally for his/her work, has been practicing and exhibiting for many decades and has developed a definitive style of art making

**Feminist/Feminism** – A movement/ideology that seeks to advance the position of women in society

**Ideologies** – Beliefs

**Mid career artist** – An artist who has a good reputation and exhibition history, but is still developing his/her artistic practice

**Minimalism** – An art movement that advocated simplistic lines and form with absolutely no decorative elements to highlight the environment surrounding the work

**Modernism/Modernist** – A period of time that spans roughly from the late 19th century to the mid 20th century (1890 – 1960), it is characterised by changes in manufacturing and industrial techniques, rapid growth of cities and shifts in class and gender roles. The artistic movement in this time moved away from decorative and representational art, design and architecture to reductive, often utilitarian forms.

**Op Art** – Short for Optical Art, an art movement that started in the in the 1960s that makes use of visual illusion

**Pop art** – Short for Popular Culture Art, an art movement that started in the 1960s, which uses appropriated images from popular culture

**Utilitarian** – Something that is made and designed to only be used for a functional purpose as opposed to a decorative purpose or design
Table for UTS Gallery workshop.

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This resource has been written by Alice McAuliffe, Education and Outreach Coordinator, UTS Gallery.

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