

Brett Whiteley: Inside the Studio

Art
Gallery
NSW



Learning resource

'Art should astonish,
transmute, transfix.
One must work at the
tissue between truth
and paranoia.'

– Brett Whiteley

This learning resource is designed to engage primary and secondary students with the exhibition *Brett Whiteley: Inside the Studio* and inspire art-making, critical thinking and discussion about one of Australia's most significant twentieth-century artists. In it, you will find images of artworks with exhibition wall label texts, audio links and curriculum-based strategies for making and responding.

This resource examines Brett Whiteley's studio practice through the lens of five artworks in the exhibition, each representing a familiar subject in Whiteley's art: **portraits, landscapes, places, figures and birds.**

Use alongside the Art Gallery online resource [*The art and life of Brett Whiteley*](#) or in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition, on tour across Australia from July 2024 to August 2025.

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Introduction

Brett Whiteley (1939–92) is one of Australia's most celebrated and successful artists. In a career spanning three decades, Whiteley won the coveted Archibald Prize for portraiture twice, participated in significant exhibitions of contemporary art in Australia and Europe, and had his works acquired by prestigious institutions at home and abroad.

Whiteley's practice was predominantly studio-based. He preferred working at an easel, on a table or sometimes directly on the floor, which gave him complete control over the conditions of his art-making. It also enabled him to listen to music and television and refer to his source material – such as preparatory sketches, photographs and books – while he painted and drew.

Whiteley's studio practice began in the mid to late 1950s when he converted his parents' backyard glasshouse into a makeshift studio. His knack for repurposing spaces served him well while he was living peripatetically overseas in the 1960s. He also developed a lifelong habit of working in his living spaces, which frequently blurred the line between life and art.

Inside the Studio considers how Whiteley's studio spaces informed the scale and content of his works, but also became an expression and extension of his artistic identity.

Inside an artist's studio

Key questions for thinking about studio practice

- What is an art studio and why might an artist choose to work in one? What are the benefits of making art in a studio space?
- How is working in an art studio different to working *en plein air*, or outdoors? Can you tell if an artwork was created in a studio or outside?
- How do the contents of a studio, such as personal objects or reference material, inspire art-making?
- How is the scale of the artwork affected by the size of the artist studio? How do artists resolve the limitations of space?
- Consider the studio spaces of a sculptor, printmaker, painter and installation or video artist. How would each of their studios differ?
- What is the difference between seeing an artwork in a studio and in an art gallery? Think about this question from the perspective of the artist, curator and audience.
- Research the traditions of artist studio practice over time. How have these traditions changed or stayed the same?

Robert Walker Brett Whiteley painting 'Self portrait in the studio at Lavender Bay'
1976, black-and-white negative, 2.4 x 3.6 cm, National Art Archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales, donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program by Louise Walker 2008 © Estate of Robert Walker



Inside Brett Whiteley's studio

Key questions for thinking about Brett Whiteley's studio practice

- Whiteley worked in his studio while listening to music and looking at art books, photographs and sketches from the past and present. How do you think this source material and environment influenced his art-making? What inspiration surrounds you while you make art?
- Whiteley often worked in his living spaces, blurring the lines between art and life. What are the advantages and disadvantages of working in this way? Do you see evidence in Whiteley's art that suggests he made art in his home?
- Whiteley worked in different studios on his travels to England, France, Italy, Spain, Morocco, America and Fiji, among other places. How do you think these changing environments influenced his art and the way he worked? Think about your own experience of making art at home and at school as a comparison.
- Whiteley associated with the Yellow House artists collective in Sydney in the early 1970s but did not want to work in their premises. Why do you think Whiteley preferred to work alone in his own studio? How do you think working with other artists might impact an artist's practice on a conceptual or artistic level?
- Whiteley invited photographers and filmmakers into his studio. In documentary images of the artist at work, Whiteley is often behaving theatrically to project an image of himself as a larrikin artist who does not always play by the rules. How does the studio play a role in defining the image or persona of an artist? How do you think this documentation might help audiences understand Whiteley's creative process?
- Whiteley's final studio space, a converted T-shirt factory in Surry Hills, Sydney, was preserved as a museum after his death and opened to the public in 1995. How does being able to experience Whiteley's studio as he left it help us to understand his art, life and practice? Do you think he would have liked the idea of his studio being open to all?

Making art in the studio

Art-making ideas inspired by Brett Whiteley's studio practice

- Make a series of drawings that experiment with some of the same drawing materials and techniques Whiteley used in his art. Use brush and ink, charcoal, graphite pencils, kneadable rubbers, boot polish, watercolour or fine art pens. Consider canvas, paper, cardboard, sculptural forms, ceramics, wood or metal as your base. Experiment by combining materials and approaches.
- Like Whiteley's landscapes, create an evocation of a place. Go outside and sketch the same subject from the natural world every ten minutes for an hour. Take the sketches back to the classroom and experiment by combining elements from each of them to make a large work. What feelings or memories of being outside does your artwork convey?
- Whiteley worked in a range of formats and scales, from small drawings to large-scale multi-panel paintings. Choose one of Whiteley's recurring themes or motifs, like birds, bathtubs or self-portraits, and create three artworks that depict this subject at small, medium and large scales. What is the effect and experience of working with these different sizes? Select the one you think is most effective and turn it into a multi-panel work by creating additional panels to sit alongside it. Do the panels sit in a particular order or can they be rearranged?
- While working in his studio, Whiteley surrounded himself with his favourite music, books and objects. Create your own personal studio environment by turning on music and pinning on the wall any poems, writings, photographs or drawings that you have created or inspire you. Make a body of work that draws from your surroundings. Include collage, drawing, writing, painting and photographs in your artwork.
- Whiteley recorded his thoughts and experiences in sketchbooks, which often became source material for his art. Carry an art process diary with you for a week, adding multiple entries each day when inspiration strikes. Combine text and images. Create an artwork based on this week-long experience and the notes you have made in your diary.

Portraits



Self portrait in the studio 1976

Similar to Brett Whiteley's other major paintings of this period, *Self portrait in the studio* exudes a sense of sumptuous living and the liquid presence of the harbour through what he called the 'ecstasy-like effect' of Windsor and Newton Deep Ultramarine blue oil paint.

Whiteley's tiny mirror self-portrait also reflects the influence of Eastern art in his portrayal of humankind as merely part of a larger landscape. However, as explained by Wendy Whiteley in 1995, the artist was also 'warning himself and other people watching. It was the cage of his interior, his addiction, the window or a glimpse of possible escape into paradise: the escape from one's psyche.'

This painting won the Archibald Prize in 1976 and was acquired by the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1977.

🔊 [Listen to Wendy Whiteley talk about *Self portrait in the studio* 1976](#)



Self portrait in the studio 1976

Discussion questions

- People's personalities are reflected in the things they collect and the environments in which they live. Look closely at *Self portrait in the studio 1976* and list the features of the room and all the objects you see. What do they tell us about Whiteley? Where would you have your portrait painted and what objects would you include to help tell your story?
- Inspired by Alexander Liberman's book *The artist in his studio 1960*, which portrayed some of Whiteley's artist heroes in their studios, Whiteley sought to project a certain image of himself through his art and the documentary videos and photographs made about his life. Study *Self portrait in the studio* and describe what image you think Whiteley is trying to project about himself. How does it compare to other self-portraits in the exhibition?

Landscapes



To Yirrawalla 1972

Brett Whiteley's painting *To Yirrawalla* is a tribute to Kuninjku artist Yirawala (1903–76), who was among a group of artists who began painting at Minjilang/Croker Island in the Northern Territory in the 1950s. Whiteley met Yirawala and saw a touring solo exhibition of his bark paintings at the University of Sydney in 1971.

Whiteley's painting evokes the landscape of the Central West district of NSW, where he spent his early years at school. The yellow undulating forms suggest the rolling hills of a dry paddock, foregrounded by a winding stream and dotted with exotic blue vegetation. Whiteley brings the natural world into the work with the inclusion of a real tree branch, stones and a stuffed platypus, while the bitumen road in the top left corner reminds us of human habitation.

🔊 [Listen to Wendy Whiteley talk about *To Yirrawalla* 1972](#)

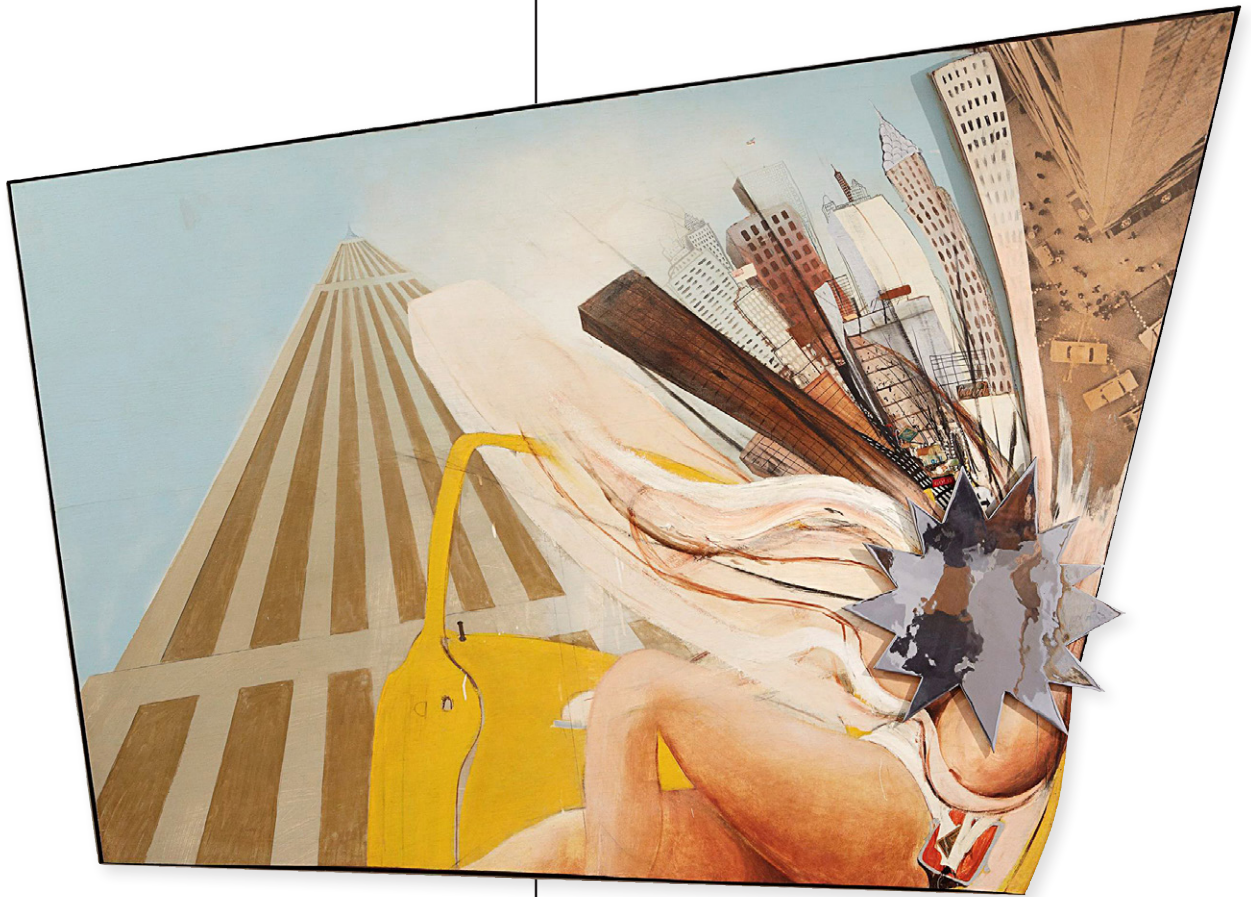


To Yirrawalla 1972

Discussion questions

- Look closely at Whiteley's painting *To Yirrawalla 1972* and imagine walking through the landscape it depicts. List the natural features you might see. What does it sound, smell or feel like? Where are you going on your journey through this environment? Write a letter to a friend describing your experience.
- Observe and list all the materials used to create this artwork. How does the combination of natural and synthetic materials add to your understanding of this painting and the landscape it depicts?

Places



New York 1 1968

'It is an American yellow ... the colour of optimism. It's in the taxis, the mustard, the Kodak boxes ... It's also the colour of madness.'
– Brett Whiteley, quoted in 'Painting: plaster apocalypse', *Time Magazine*, 10 November 1967

Moving to New York in September 1967, Brett Whiteley and his family lived in the Chelsea Hotel on West 23rd Street, a celebrated creative hub for writers, musicians and artists. Initially taken by the energy of the city, he considered it a 'living sculpture', symbolised by the yellow colour that he saw everywhere (according to his interview with *Time Magazine* in 1967).

Whiteley's optimism, however, was short-lived. He became deeply disenchanted by the social and political unrest that defined the period, including the escalation of the Vietnam War, and the assassinations of Robert F Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. *New York 1*, with its unusually shaped canvas and pulsating energy, is an expression of Whiteley's experience in America.

[!\[\]\(e3f8612927870f2e0f9f5989e6dd3064_img.jpg\) Listen to Wendy Whiteley speak about *New York 1* 1968](#)



***New York 1* 1968**
Discussion questions

- Does this artwork give you a sense of moving fast or slow? Is it calm or busy? While living in New York in the late 1960s, Whiteley was inspired by the city's energy and colour. How does *New York 1* 1968 capture the city's fast-paced energy and Whiteley's experience of it? Consider colour, form, perspective, shape and composition.
- Whiteley worked in different studios on his travels. In New York, where this painting was made, he lived and worked in the Chelsea Hotel alongside celebrated American artists, writers and musicians. How do you think this environment influenced his art and the way he worked? Compare this work to others in the exhibition that Whiteley created in different parts of the world.

Figures



Bather and mirror (second version) 1964

Brett Whiteley painted mostly indoors and used his domestic life as inspiration. Whiteley's wife Wendy was the model for many of his figurative paintings, including this abstract figure painting from his bathroom series. 'I was in and out of the bath three or four times a day for nearly a year while Brett was working on this series,' Wendy recalled. 'I must be the cleanest model in the business.'

The distinction between Whiteley's studio practice and domestic life became blurry in London, with Wendy once drawing a line down the centre of their Melbury Road apartment in an attempt to separate their living and working spaces. Whiteley made his artworks at home and in different studios throughout his life.

[!\[\]\(a03a7eb2f4046e1d3c76772003e549ea_img.jpg\) Listen to Wendy Whiteley talk about *Bather and mirror \(second version\) 1964*](#)



Bather and mirror (second version) 1964

Discussion questions

- What elements in *Bather and mirror (second version) 1964* suggest that it's a depiction of a bathing figure? Can you make out a limb, a mirror or the edge of the tub? Notice how the expressive lines and curves in Whiteley's depiction of his wife Wendy in the bath give this work a sense of movement. Can you imagine Wendy washing her hair or the water flowing from the tap?
- *Bather and mirror (second version)* is part of a large body of work Whiteley created in the early 1960s that explored the figure in the bath. Why do you think he focused on this subject for several years? What is achieved by this repetition and what does it say about Whiteley's process? If you were depicting a loved one in a series of artworks, what are some of the factors you would consider? Compare this drawing with others from the bathroom series in the exhibition.

Birds



***Pelican I* 1983–84**

In the 1980s, Brett Whiteley cast two bronze pelican sculptures. These works were likely modelled on pelicans that he saw perched along the foreshore on Sydney Harbour. Whiteley captured the majesty of these seabirds by accentuating their long bills, slender necks and arched abdomens in his sculptures. They look like they are ready to take flight despite being cast from metal and tethered to a plinth. Whiteley painted white feathers and beady eyes on some of these sculptures, enhancing their appearance as pelicans.

Pelican I 1983–84

Discussion questions

- Look closely at *Pelican I* 1983–84. What elements identify this sculpture as a pelican? What action or movement do you think has been captured – rest, feeding, sunbathing or preparing for flight? Compare this sculpture to other works of birds by Whiteley in the exhibition and observe the similarities and differences in how they have been depicted.
- Whiteley's depictions of birds were created in the studio, though many of the birds he painted were inspired by ones he saw out the studio window. How do you think the pelican in this artwork relates to Whiteley's studio and home in Sydney? What birds or animals do you associate with your home or school?

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