

LOOKING AT ART AT THE DRILL HALL GALLERY

Elisabeth Kruger



Elisabeth Kruger, *Wisteria*, 2003, oil on linen, 91.5 x 152.5 cm, detail. Private collection.

Elisabeth Kruger: On Beauty

Elisabeth Kruger is a master painter. Her attention to detail and her technical skill in creating highly realistic paintings immediately captures our imagination and admiration.

However Elisabeth Kruger's paintings are far more than attractive representations of beautiful plants. The ideas or concepts at the heart of her art are formed by her focus on human relationships with plant life: specifically the personal and fragile nature of the garden and its cycle of luscious growth, flower and blossom which leads to decay, decomposition and then new growth. The plants from the garden become visual metaphors for how we as humans live and react to our natural environment.

The artist creates and cultivates her own garden, growing from seed the flowers and vegetables she needs as models for her work and food for her table. Working in the garden she feels connected with nature and aware that plant and human life are very similar and interdependent. Humans and plants need the same elements, air, light, water and nutrients to grow and exist.

This sense of connection to plant life can be seen in the extraordinary images of the plants Elisabeth Kruger paints. The images of plant forms appear very close in design to that of human anatomical features.

Looking at the painting *Out of the wind* the anatomical shapes and vascular systems carrying life giving fluids for growth and maintenance seem human but grow into plant sprouts and leaves. This morphing of plant and animal life reinforces the closeness the artist feels to her environment and asks us to consider how close we feel to the natural world.



Elisabeth Kruger, *Out of the wind*, 1998, *Asleep in the garden* series, oil on linen, 122 x 91.3 cm, detail. Courtesy the artist, Eva Breuer Art Dealer, Sydney & Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne.

Combining seemingly incompatible forms to create strange and dreamlike worlds is a classic technique developed by a group of artists known as the Surrealists. Elisabeth Kruger also uses this technique, like the Surrealists, to create a sense of high drama and make us very aware of the energy or life force of nature in her paintings.



Elisabeth Kruger, *Spill, 2007, Asleep in the garden series*, oil on linen, 122 x 122 cm, detail. Courtesy the artist, Eva Breuer Art Dealer, Sydney & Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne.

Elisabeth Kruger ensures we fully discover the subject by carefully composing her paintings. We become drawn into the complex designs of the vegetation in the paintings as the artist uses each element of art, colour, tone, shape, line and texture to capture our gaze. Vibrant colours attract our attention, lines and shapes direct our line of sight as they curl, fold and move across and into the picture plane. The scale and closeness of the subject to the front of the picture plane allows us to feel very close to the subject in this new and often surprising visual territory. The textures the artist renders, the soft silky surface of petals, or the velvety slime of the decomposing stems and leaves are so life like we would love to touch them or may even feel repelled.

Like the Dutch Still Life painters of the seventeenth century Elisabeth Kruger is a master of working with oil paints, in particular glazes of thin paint that are applied to create the rich glowing effects in the paintings. The Dutch Masters also selected fruit, vegetables and other objects as subjects in their paintings to convey messages about the transitory nature of life or other moral issues. Elisabeth Kruger develops this tradition using modern ideas and techniques. In *Spill* we encounter a close-up, cropped composition that shows us a casual contemporary arrangement of flowers, unlike the formal arrangements seen in traditional still life arrangements. The artist then divides the painting

in two with as much emphasis on the stems rotting in the water as the blooms displayed. This division or contrast alerts us to the fact this more than a illustrative painting but also a comment on the cyclic nature of life and that the strange beauty of the velvety texture of the slimy decomposing plant stems is as wondrous as life in full bloom.

GLOSSARY:

Composition:

The way the elements of art are arranged in a artwork.

Interdependent:

relating to two or more things dependent on each other.

Metaphor:

something used, or regarded as being used, to represent something else; emblem; symbol. A **visual metaphor**, is a metaphor in which something that is presented visually is compared to something that belongs to another category of things .

Picture Plane:

the plane of a painting, drawing, or the like, that is in the extreme foreground of a picture, is coextensive with but not the same as the material surface of the work, is the point of visual contact between the viewer and the picture, and is conceived as a major structural element in the production of abstract or illusionistic forms.

Surrealism:

A 20th-century literary and artistic movement that attempts to express the workings of the subconscious and is characterized by fantastic imagery and incongruous juxtaposition of subject matter.

Still life:

is a work of art depicting mostly inanimate subject matter, typically commonplace objects which may be either natural (food, flowers, plants, rocks, or shells) or man-made (drinking glasses, books, vases, jewelry, coins, pipes, and so on) in an artificial setting. Still life paintings, particularly before 1700, often contained religious and allegorical symbolism relating to the objects depicted. Some modern still life breaks the two-dimensional barrier and employs three-dimensional mixed media, and uses found objects, photography, computer graphics, as well as video and sound.

This resource sheet is designed to complement the Curriculum Framework for ACT Schools and aims to address specific Essential Learning Achievements for Early and Later Adolescence.

7.LA.4: the language needed to analyse, talk, read and write critically about artistic works.

7.LA.5: technical terms (e.g. elements, concepts, forms) and structural principles (e.g.composition, perspective) appropriate to the art form.

7.LA.11: analyses the technical, expressive or aesthetic decisions an artist has made in order to convey meaning (e.g. represent a theme, idea or feeling)