

Works in profile

1 from **Untitled 1977/87**
gelatin silver photograph, lead sheet 61.1 x 51.3 cm
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
© Bill Henson

2 from **Untitled 1980/82**
gelatin silver photograph 32.2 x 46.9 cm
© Bill Henson

3 from **Untitled 1983/84**
type C photograph 76.2 x 63.5 cm
© Bill Henson

from **Untitled 1983/84**
type C photograph 76.2 x 63.5 cm
© Bill Henson

4 from **Untitled 1985/86**
type C photograph 106.5 x 86.5 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
© Bill Henson

from **Untitled 1985/86**
type C photograph 106.5 x 86.5 cm
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5 from **Paris Opera Project 1991**
type C photograph 124 x 125 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
© Bill Henson

from **Paris Opera Project 1991**
type C photograph 123.5 x 124.5 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
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6 from **Untitled 1994/95**
type C photograph, adhesive tape, pins, glassine 244.3 x 278.8 cm
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7 from **Untitled 2002/03**
type C photograph 104 x 155 cm
© Bill Henson



from **Untitled 1977/87**

gelatin silver photograph, lead sheet 61.1 x 51.3 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
© Bill Henson

Untitled 1977/87

Untitled 1977/87 is a series of 26 gelatin silver photographs printed on lead. Exhibited as 13 pairs, like the open pages of a book, the series layers images taken over time which were then manipulated in the printing process. The effect of the soft lead blurs the density of images - some of which appear in **Untitled 1985/86** or **Untitled 1983/84**.

Many of the images approach abstraction so that identifying how layers have been built up or peeled away is impossible. Others have a ghostly, ectoplasmic feel as though the subjects were reaching out across eons of time towards the viewer, or sinking back into the darkest recesses of memory.

9–12 Framing questions

As a photographer, Henson does not simply point, shoot and print his images. His unique results are dreamlike, with almost painterly effects. Select three works in the exhibition and consider whether Henson's technical and aesthetic approach sets him apart from other contemporary photographers and links him more closely to historical painters.

Henson's photographic practice has changed over time and yet his themes or subject matter have remained fairly consistent. Trace the continuities in his use of the model, pose, gaze, expression, pictorial space, environments, architecture and atmospheric effects.

9–12 Art making activities

Stage a photographic shoot on location focusing on portraiture, using fellow students as models and your local environment as the backdrop. Consider exploring urban or rural locations, a variety of models, variations of light and time of day or night.

In the darkroom experiment with alternative techniques such as diffusion, texture screening, negative sandwiching, toning, or photo montage to expand the aesthetic and atmospheric qualities of the images with the same images. How do these various wet photography techniques alter the impact and reading of the same image? Discuss the emotional impact they have on the portraits. Compare with portraits in other mediums from art history and Henson's body of work in the exhibition.

Installation view of the series **Untitled 1977/87** from *Bill Henson*, Art Gallery of New South Wales





from **Untitled 1980/82**

gelatin silver photograph 32.2 x 46.9 cm

© Bill Henson

Untitled 1980/82

Untitled 1980/82 has been shown in various forms but in total it consists of 220 images configured in 26 groups. There are seven different shapes in the series and the groups can be just three images or as many as 17. The groups may follow a single line or be layered three deep on the wall.

As with the untitled sequences from 1977 and 1979, there is often intensive manipulation of the medium, making relationships between figures in an image fluid and organic. Individuals involuntarily take on classical poses, and faces can be distorted by extremes of expression or stilled by interior thought.

The buildings in **Untitled 1980/82** were still to be seen in Dresden and East Berlin in the 1970s, when Henson travelled there specifically for the purpose of documenting these structures. Their history and tragic beauty are paralleled in the faces of those in the crowds.

9–12 Framing questions

Bill Henson stated, '...the entire series should in fact amount to one image.' Henson pays particular attention to the sequencing and arrangement of each series he creates but also to its installation in the Gallery space.

Examine how this practice, as part of his overall process, might stretch the role of the artist into that of the curator. Is this approach evident in this exhibition design and the arrangement of the works? Consider how this curatorial intervention contributes to the audience's understanding of Henson's works.

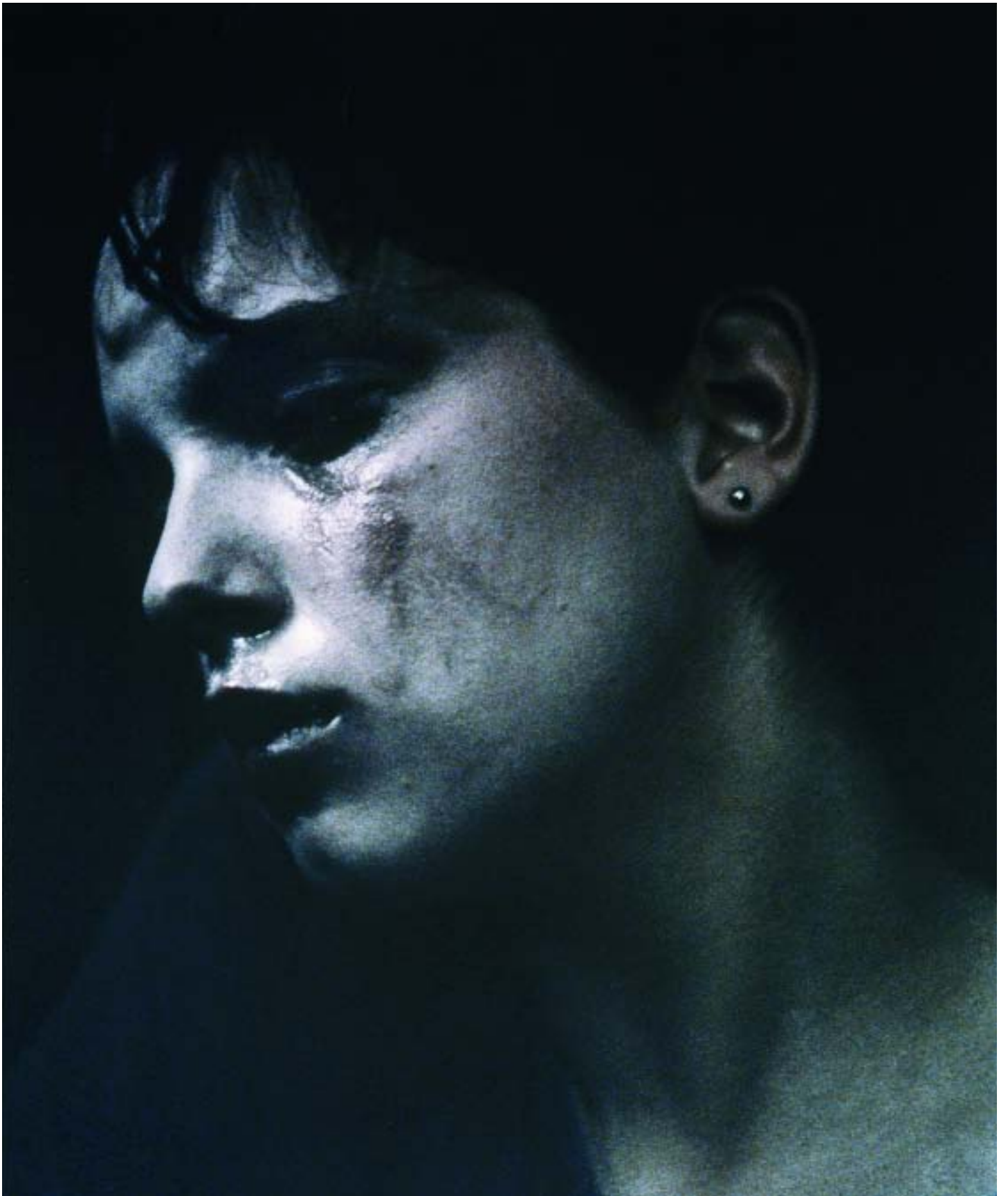
9–12 Art making activities

Create a series of digital photographic stills in response to the Bill Henson exhibition and transform them into a continuous Powerpoint slide show on the computer. Carefully select and add music to emphasise the subjective atmosphere and mood of the images. This may be data projected in large scale on a wall and could become a class multimedia project.

How does the sound and scale of the installation affect the overall meaning and impact of the works? Consider how the dimension of time evident in the slideshow affects the viewing experience of the images as compared to a still installation. Investigate Henson's manipulation of time and rhythm within his sequencing of still images.

Installation view of the series **Untitled 1980/82** from *Bill Henson*, Art Gallery of New South Wales





from **Untitled 1983/84**

type C photographs 76.2 x 63.5 cm

©Bill Henson



from **Untitled 1983/84**

type C photographs 76.2 x 63.5 cm

©Bill Henson

Untitled 1983/84

This is a small selection of images from **Untitled 1983/84** which consists of 121 images in total. Arranged mainly in diptychs and triptychs and layered floor to ceiling, this series as originally conceived and exhibited was overpowering in its visual richness and emotional impact. While Henson had continued to work privately in colour over the previous years, this was his first exhibited colour work since 1975.

In most images in this series the colour is leached out so that the effect is cold and bruised. Interiors appear to glisten in half light and wintry exteriors have the diffuse effect of dusk. The faces and figures of Henson's subjects, emerging from the darkness, can appear demonic, sad or barely conscious. As always with Henson's work, it is not the individual image which is critical but the nuances and ellipses from one image to another and the nature of the overall sequencing.

9–12 Framing questions

Henson's photographs occasionally present beauty and squalor in equal measure and intensity. Investigate how they can be understood as a celebration of the aesthetic and the abject. Define these terms and find where they might apply within the exhibition. Discuss the collision and contrast of these terms and how they may contribute to an off-balanced, or complementary, emotional experience for viewers.

Research the historical periods, artistic practices and visual languages of the European renaissance, baroque art and romanticism. How have influences from these periods been absorbed by Henson? Compare specific European paintings to key works / series by Henson.

9–12 Art making activities

Create a film or video based on an appropriation of a baroque period landscape or interior painting. Reproduce the artwork as a set or backdrop in the classroom, using costume, props, furniture and drapes. Devise a narrative with minimal or no dialogue, instead focusing on lighting, aesthetics and design, reflecting an emotional state rather than a strict narrative.

Edit the same film footage in small groups independent of each other utilising varying techniques with music, transitions, titles and cuts. Present the resulting films to the class discussing the similarities and differences. Consider the power of the groups' range of interpretations of the same subject. Discuss this idea in relation to the audience's experience of and response to the Henson works and the exhibition as a whole.

Installation view of the series **Untitled 1983/84** from *Bill Henson*, Art Gallery of New South Wales

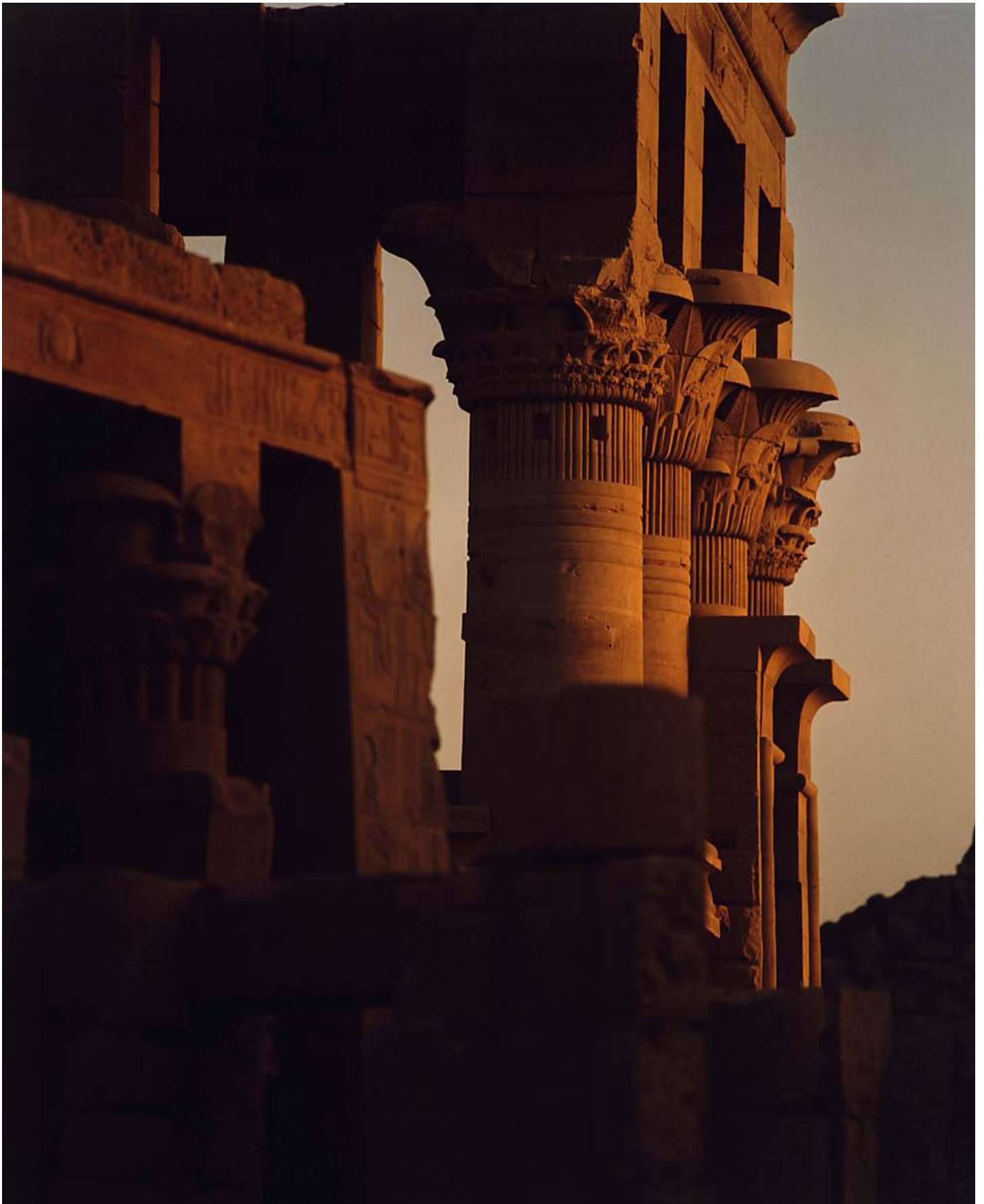




from **Untitled 1985/86**

type C photograph 106.5 x 86.5 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
© Bill Henson



from **Untitled 1985/86**

type C photograph 106.5 x 86.5 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
© Bill Henson

Untitled 1985/86

Untitled 1985/86 consists of a total of 154 images taken in Egypt and in suburban Melbourne, of which this is a small selection. As with Henson's previous series, this was first exhibited layered from floor to ceiling.

The monumental faces of Henson's subjects parallel the arcane remoteness of ancient temples and the structures to be found at the fringes of modern cities. Are the people and locations the result of dreams? Or are the people dreamers and the environments the stuff of their dreams?

9–12 Framing questions

Henson's characters rarely look into the camera and/or the eyes of the viewer. What effect does averting the subjects' gaze have on the dialogue between the subject and the viewer, the subject and the photographer, the viewer and the photographer? Consider notions of voyeurism, the invasive power of the camera and the defencelessness or complicity of the object of the gaze. Would this change if the subjects' gaze met that of the onlooker?

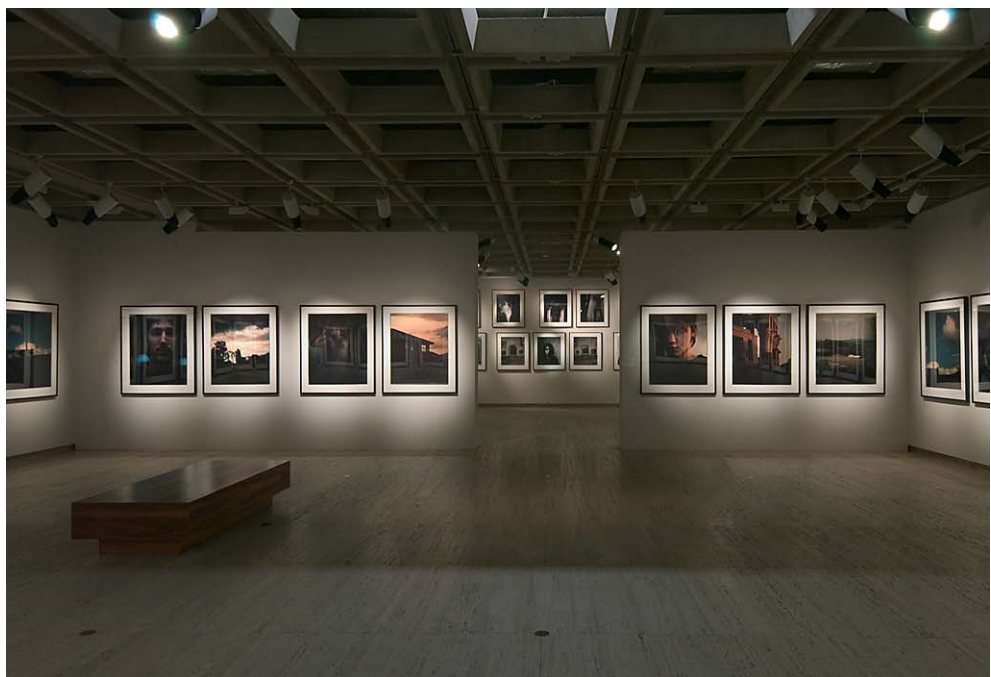
View Henson's work, both as reproductions in this education kit and the originals in the exhibition. Describe your immediate response. Comment on the scale of the work and its relationship to you physically. Examine how this physicality affects your experience. Write a short, emotive narrative or poem about one selected photograph or series using your own experiences and memories as inspiration.

9–12 Art making activities

Create a series of images inspired by the work of Bill Henson, manipulating a range of visual texts with the use of digital media. Research and import historical images such as paintings by European Masters, classical architecture or contemporary urban/suburban places and spaces. These may be sourced from the internet, scanned from magazines, clippings of printed material or may include your own drawings and photographs.

Use software such as Adobe Photoshop to develop new images from old, creating layers and manipulating subtle toning, lighting effects and focus effects with the use of filtration tools. Modify and reinterpret these images to create works depicting your understandings and experiences of adolescence in the contemporary world. Exhibit in diptych or triptych formats or in sequences as a large installation series.

Installation view of the series **Untitled 1985/86** from *Bill Henson*, Art Gallery of New South Wales





from Paris Opera Project 1991

type C photographs 124 x 125 cm, 123.5 x 124.5 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
©Bill Henson



from Paris Opera Project 1991

type C photographs 124 x 125 cm, 123.5 x 124.5 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
©Bill Henson

Paris Opera Project 1991

In 1990, Bill Henson was commissioned by the Paris Opera to produce a body of work. The resulting 50 images were constructed entirely in the studio and include landscapes, cloudscares and people.

After visiting Paris and the Opera House, Henson found it necessary to concentrate on the total effect of music, a time-based medium, and how it could be translated into the silent, still form of the photograph.

9–12 Framing questions

Investigate the language of cinema, literature and music. Discuss how these other creative forms engage an audience. Is there evidence of similar techniques and strategies being used in Henson's work?

Link your answers to specific works. Discuss how a visual medium can implicate other sensory experiences and form a bridge to other creative art forms. Why might Henson be interested in these interdisciplinary and inter-media links?

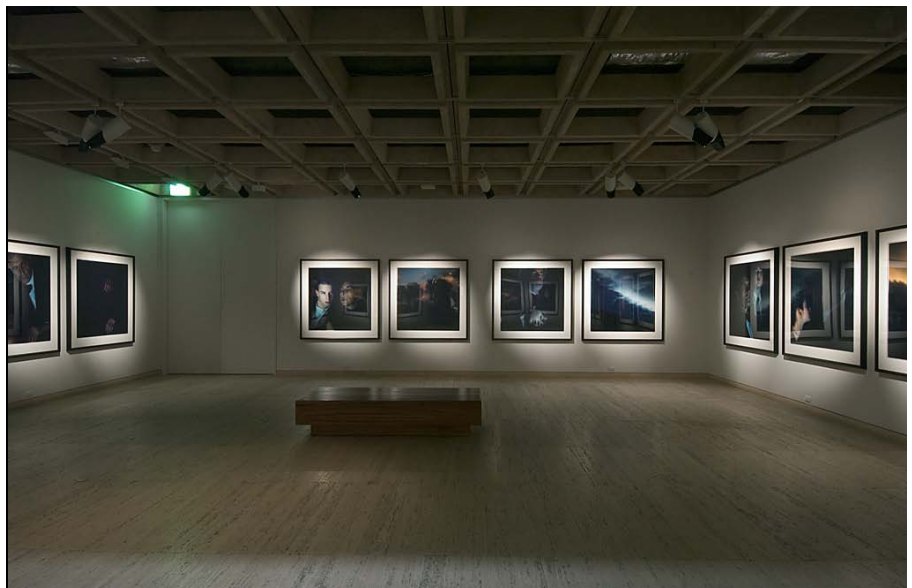
9–12 Art making activities

Construct a studio-based photographic work of a contrived scene inspired by a film, piece of music or literature. Consider incorporating an image of a European master work projected by an overhead projector to create an illuminated backdrop. Drapery, furniture and other props could be used to suggest a particular time period, space or imaginary, otherworldly place. Set up the camera on a tripod and construct images of fellow students with a wide range of poses, facial expressions and gestures, reacting to or against each other. Attempt to generate cinematic moods and narratives. Compare your results to the original piece of inspiration.

Create a group short film or video as a response to a work by Bill Henson. Consider your personal experiences with contemporary cinema and extend the frozen moment presented by Henson into an extended narrative. The narrative can present either the pre or post narrative of the chosen Henson image.

Plan and storyboard the sequence with sketches or still photographs (which may become artworks in themselves). Individuals in the group can take on specific roles including directing, sets, lighting, sound, and camera operation to achieve a cohesive and coherent final sequence. Present both the art for your storyboards and the film as an exhibition or film festival. Consider carefully the form in which this work will be presented to an audience and how this can influence their experience.

Installation view of the series Paris Opera Project 1991 from *Bill Henson*, Art Gallery of New South Wales





from **Untitled 1994/95**

type C photograph, adhesive tape, pins, glassine 244.3 x 278.8 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
©Bill Henson

Untitled 1994/95

In 1992/93 Henson began a major cycle of 'cut-screens' which continued for the next four years and includes the body of work which was shown at the 1995 Venice Biennale. These differ from his collages of 1987/88 in that they are usually bigger, incorporate glassine, the white obverse of photographic paper, are pinned as much as taped, and are presented on narrow stretchers.

The locations are no longer urban, though the city may be glimpsed in the distance, and the models are naked. The effect is sometimes infernal and at others arcadian. Bodies can be patterned with leafy shadows and seem like apparitions of nature or they may be severed with bold slashes of cut paper. Mountain scapes, skies and bodies can be repeated from one 'cut-screen' to the next.

9–12 Framing questions

Analyse the relationship between the 'real' and the 'imaginary' in one or more of Henson's series through his strategy of fragmentation. Locate and discuss examples of collage, cutting, layering, editing, soft and hard focus and variations of scale within his body of work. Consider how such devices may imply a strong sense of isolation and alienation while also opening up the work to multiple interpretations and meanings.

Henson's sitters are anonymous yet somehow seem familiar; they operate in definable yet ephemeral spaces. They seem to experience both ecstasy and turmoil and, as adolescents, can be classified as no longer children but not quite adults. In what ways can these subjects represent the 'other', within or without the mainstream of today's society and culture? Discuss how deliberate, simultaneous polarisation might contribute to the otherworldly qualities of Henson's images.

9–12 Art making activities

Reinterpret a figurative photograph by Bill Henson in large-scale drawing. Set up a life model (nude or clothed) in a constructed studio setting with controlled spot lighting and props. Collage two or three of these drawings by tearing and taping sections to create one unified image. Reverse sections of the paper may be used to introduce slashes of white to fragment the composition.

Experiment with selected areas of colour and tonal variations to highlight or obscure selected aspects of the final drawing. Consider how this process compares to traditional methods of drawing. Discuss the use of such techniques in other media. In what ways does Henson's technique bridge more than just photographic practice?

Create an installation with large-scale figurative drawings in an urban/suburban context creating a contrast to the images. The drawings may be suspended within the site-specific surroundings or attached to objects or surfaces within the scene. Document the installation with a digital or SLR camera. Consider how the meaning of the work is altered or extended with the addition of the site-specific context. Display the photographs and critically discuss them in relation to Henson's 'cut-screens'.

Installation view of the series *Untitled 1994/95* from *Bill Henson*, Art Gallery of New South Wales





from **Untitled 2002/03**

type C photograph 104 x 155 cm

©Bill Henson

Untitled 2002/03

Henson's recent work is located on the fringes of the urban environment. It incorporates his recurring motifs of the rural, industrial, and celestial, ranging from twilight to the depths of night illuminated as much by natural as artificial effects.

This edge of the city, where the mundane and forgotten can become romantically charged, is populated by occasional figures who linger and dream. Their longing and loss is as potent in the recent colour works as it was in Henson's earliest images from the 1970s.

9–12 Framing questions

Henson is renowned for his dramatic use of shadow and light, enabling him to conceal or reveal figurative and abstract forms, resulting in mysterious and ambiguous meanings. Discuss how these technical decisions allow him to provoke a range of responses and interpretations.

Read the commentary *The elusive Bill Henson* by Judy Annear, senior curator of photography (page 6 of this kit). Highlight or underline key terms and phrases in the text. What new insights about the artist have you understood from this article? List five key points about the practice and/or issues surrounding Henson's work you have learnt.

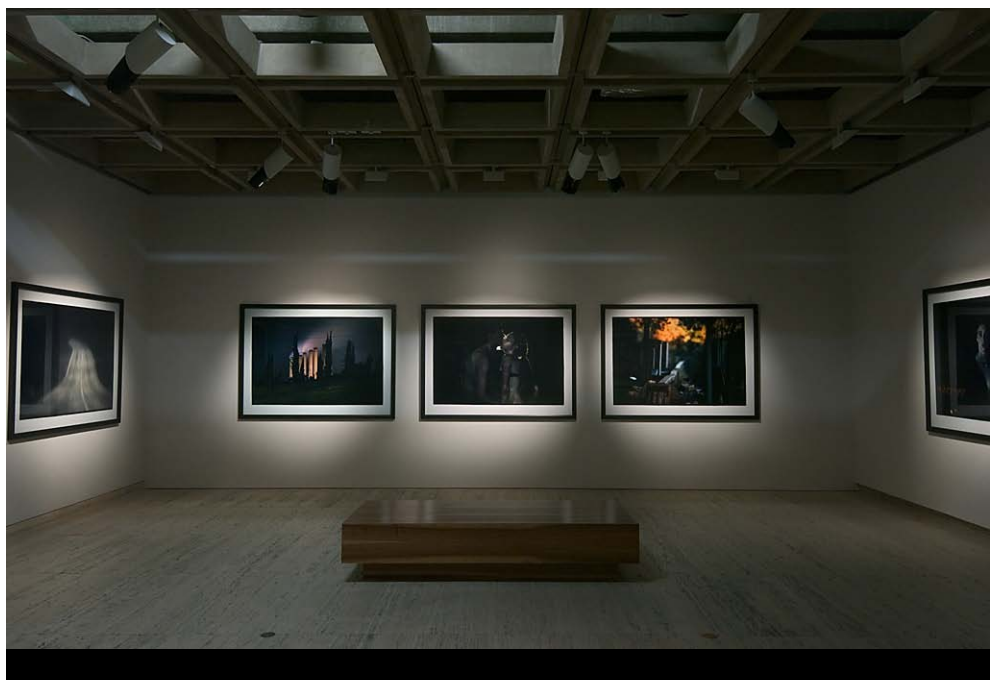
Locate evidence of your key terms within works by Bill Henson. Write your own critical response to this exhibition using your identified examples and terms. Compare your critical response to reviews of the exhibition. As a class discuss how written language and text can communicate visual ideas.

9–12 Art making activities

Devise a photographic shoot around the fringes of your school environment and local community in areas which would not usually be considered beautiful. Using selective focus while shooting or digital manipulation software experiment with blurring forms to abstract the landscape. Consider how these techniques shift the image from a vehicle of direct description to aesthetic impression, breaking concrete images into their formal qualities and elements.

Use wet photographic or digital toning techniques to create a romanticised image, transforming the ordinary in everyday life into the extraordinary. Juxtapose these images with more classical, beautiful or mainstream images of readable, known subjects. Consider how the interpretation of a whole series is the result of relationships between the individual works within it.

Installation view of the series *Untitled 2002/03* from *Bill Henson*, Art Gallery of New South Wales



Bill Henson: quotes

The work might begin with a fleeting impression from first-hand experience or in a piece of music I am always drawn back to, or perhaps in a paragraph of writing I cannot forget – and then it takes its own course. I become like a participant in some larger process I happen to be fascinated by.

Bill Henson in *Bill Henson: Untitled 1983/84*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 1986

In every form of art, you really want the experience of the images to transcend the medium, for the medium to disappear into the greater experience of viewing the work. So that you forget you're looking at a painting, or a photograph.

Bill Henson in *Sebastian Smee in conversation with Bill Henson*, Sydney, 11 April 1996.
Published *ArtMonthly Australia*, July 1996

... I'm interested in that tender proximity, that ineffable, fragile, breathing closeness or presence which photography can animate while, at the same time, allowing no possibility for any familiar connection with the individuals in the picture.

Bill Henson in *Sebastian Smee in conversation with Bill Henson*, Sydney, 11 April 1996.
Published *ArtMonthly Australia*, July 1996

Henson's work is a celebration of the amoral. He makes no judgements, takes no position, addresses no issues and yet reveals all manner of human instincts, intuitions and imaginings.

Edmund Capon, director, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2004

Henson's achievement, which lies not so much in the twist he gives to the subject of disenfranchised youth but in the almost premodern beauty he conjures from such a familiar and clinically post-modern source.

Dennis Cooper in *Artforum*, New York, February 2002

The photographs dramatise the distance between a subject who is indifferent to the camera, taken unawares, and a viewer who looks on with intensified awareness.

Michael Heyward in *Bill Henson*, Pinacoteca, Melbourne, 1986

We know nothing of those he photographs; indeed their anonymity is an important aspect of his work ... Few sitters make eye contact. When they do face the camera, and us, their gaze is neutral and their features are impassive. At such times these anonymous people transcend their corporeal natures to become extra-ordinary.

Isobel Crombie in *Bill Henson*, 46th Biennale of Venice, Australian exhibitions Touring agency Ltd, Melbourne 1995

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