

MARGARET PRESTON
ART AND LIFE
SYLLABUS FOCUS: VISUAL ARTS

Art works in profile

1

Thea Proctor's tea party 1924

oil on canvas on hardboard 55.9 x 45.7cm
Purchased 1942
Art Gallery of New South Wales

2

Implement blue 1927

oil on canvas on paperboard 42.5 x 43.0cm
Gift of the artist 1960
Art Gallery of New South Wales

3

Aboriginal flowers 1928

oil on canvas
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
Gift of the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 1981

4

Self portrait 1930

oil on canvas 61.3 x 51.1cm
Gift of the artist at the request of the Trustees 1930
©Art Gallery of New South Wales

5

Aboriginal still life 1940

oil on canvas
Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery

6

Aboriginal landscape 1941

oil on canvas
Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
D & J T Mortlock Bequest Fund 1982

7

Tank traps 1943

oil on canvas
Morrington Peninsula Regional Gallery
Gift of Dr and Mrs C. B. Christesen, 1978

8

Wheel flower 1929

wood engraving, black ink, hand coloured in gouache on brown mulberry paper 44.1 x 44.6cm
Purchased 1929
Art Gallery of New South Wales

Billabong, NSW 1946

colour monotype
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased 1948



1

Thea Proctor's tea party 1924

oil on canvas on hardboard 55.9 x 45.7cm

Purchased 1942

Art Gallery of New South Wales

1

Thea Proctor's tea party 1924



Thea Proctor 1922
Photograph by Harold Cazneaux, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

Thea Proctor's tea party belongs to the genre of still life, but it is also a kind of portrait. It is a symbolic rendering of the things that Thea Proctor stood for. Preston encapsulates her fellow artist's belief in the importance of surrounding one's self with objects of taste and beauty, and alludes to her enthusiasm for arranged flowers in domestic settings, something the two artists shared. And in giving the work its title, Preston drew attention to the way in which Proctor was as much a social figure as an artist, her studio as much a social space as a work place, where the ritual of the tea party had great importance.

Andrew Sayers Director, National Portrait Gallery, Canberra

Art is a problem of relationships Aphorism 27

Colour is an extravagance of the mind. Colour is the emblem of change Aphorism 56

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ART Set up a still life in the classroom. Choose local wildflowers and/or household objects. Using graphite, coloured pencils and paint draw three studies from three different viewpoints. Display the results in class.

Imagine you are drinking tea at this table. What is the room like that you are sitting in? Draw what you think the room looks like.

Create your own still life of cups and saucers, a tea pot and cakes. Make drawings from different viewpoints and develop your favourite one as a painting.

Research the following art movement: Post Impressionism. Select an artist and study their life and work. How did the events of their life influence their artworks?

ENGLISH Discuss the use of symbols in art. In what way could this painting be described as 'symbolic'? Create a glossary of words that could be used to describe a person's personality.

Research the life of Margaret Preston. What impact did world events play in her personal and artistic life? Write and present to class.

HSIE Thea Proctor knew Margaret Preston and they both lived in Sydney at the same time. Who was Thea Proctor? Write about Proctor's life and work. Compare the personalities of these two artists. Were they similar or different?

Select a decade during Preston's life and list the major world and artistic events. Research the role of women during this decade. Report your findings to the class.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY Create a still life in the classroom, using dramatic light effects. Photograph it, then download or scan it into a computer. Experiment with different effects using Photoshop.

MATHS This work contains many different shapes such as ellipses, squares and rectangles. Imagine you can view it from above. Using only geometric shapes, map it out on grid paper.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Look closely at the artwork. Imagine sitting down at the table. Describe the experience of the tea party. What can you hear and smell? What is happening and who is there? Is it a vibrant or glum affair?

Suggest how the use of colour, composition and framing give a sense of the ritual and activity of the occasion and invite the viewer into the image. Consider why Preston chose to work in this particular colour palette? Change the colours of this work. How does the mood and feeling change?

Define the term *still life* and list its defining qualities. Justify whether you would identify *Thea Proctor's tea party* as a still-life painting. Investigate the origins of still life. Explain why it is one of the most enduring genres in art history.

Thea Proctor's tea party is located in a private, domestic setting. Survey the environments within which most still lifes are located. Are they interior or exterior, private or public, domestic or professional spaces? Why were these obvious and accessible settings for women artists in early 20th-century Australia? What subjects and spaces were male artists painting? What can we deduce about the participation and position of different genders in Australian society at this time?

Who or what is the subject of the artwork: the tea party or Thea Proctor? The tea set and other items in this work were real objects from Thea Proctor's studio, which Preston herself visited many times. In *Thea Proctor's tea party*, is there a sense of the artist's participation in and interaction with the subject?

Discuss how objects can convey ideas about a person's life and personality? Preston's still lifes can be reflective or symbolic of people she knew or even of her. How would you read Thea Proctor's personality through this artwork, both as an artist and a social figure? Investigate why the tea party was an important part of her social life and work. In what way can a still life function as a portrait? Discuss.

Research Thea Proctor's artistic interests and career. How did they differ from Preston's? Compare and contrast this work to *Implement blue* (also in this kit). List the visual qualities of *Implement blue* that may represent Preston's character?

Investigate the dramatic change in Preston's techniques and attitudes about art between the two still lifes. What factors could have stimulated this? Develop a still-life composition using objects to represent a 'you' from the past and a 'you' in the future. Present them to the class and discuss.

Consider the social, technological and artistic factors that motivated Australian artists to travel to Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. What impact did these artists have on Australian culture, both by leaving and upon their return?

Read about Preston's travels. Map her movements through Europe from 1904 until her return to Australia in 1919. Identify and list how *Thea Proctor's tea party* reflects the art styles and cultures Preston was exposed to during this time.

Trace the emergence of Grace Cossington Smith, Thea Proctor and Margaret Preston as independent women artists in 1920s and 30s Australia. List the possible challenges women wanting to pursue such a career faced at this time. Compare to those faced by artists in the 21st century. Have the challenges diminished or increased? Consider the careers and profiles of contemporary Australian women artists such as Susan Norrie, Fiona Hall, Tracey Moffat and Jenny Watson. Can links be drawn between their experiences and those of Preston and her peers? Discuss.



2

Implement blue 1927

oil on canvas on paperboard 42.5 x 43.0cm

Gift of the artist 1960

Art Gallery of New South Wales

2

Implement blue 1927



Margaret Preston at Berowra 1936
Photograph by Harold Cazneaux, Cazneaux Family Collection

Why there are so many tables of still life in modern paintings is because they are really laboratory tables on which aesthetic problems can be isolated Aphorism 46.

A lemon can be an inspiration as well as a fruit Aphorism 53

In *Implement blue*, all trace of organic nature has been eradicated, apart from a single lemon, even then sliced to conform to the geometric matrix and contained within a vessel like a laboratory specimen. There is little intermediary tone; just the colour of the lemon itself, shadows on the table invaded by the fashionable blue of *Home* magazine, and pale reflections on the carefully aligned cups and saucers. *Contre-jour* lighting precedes the camera lens of Olive Cotton, and arcs, ellipses, cylinders and diagonals lock the composition in place: all products of technology. But the severity of this vision may have been too much for Preston, for in other paintings of the time she softened her imagery with Australian flora. And before long, flowers and patterns returned to her work with a vengeance.

Barry Pearce, Head Curator Australian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ART **Look** at this artwork. Using coloured paper, map and **cut** out the geometric shapes. **Create** your own collage based on the artwork. **Consider** your colour arrangement and composition before gluing down.

Examine the genre of still life. What is a still life? How have artists dealt with this theme? Consider composition, realism and technology.

Look at Margaret Preston's still life paintings or prints and **re-create** one in three-dimensions using wire and tissue paper. Papier Mache over the structure; allow to dry and paint.

What is Modernism? **Examine** this art movement and **identify** the Australian artists involved.

MATHS Patterns and shapes. **Deconstruct** this artwork and consider the repetition of line, shape and form.

Explore symmetrical and asymmetrical shapes in nature (flowers and leaves) and compare to man-made forms. **Observe** and **draw**.

HSIE **Look** at the art deco period. **Select** an area to **research** from the following: architecture, fashion, design, transport, advertising and technology.

CREATIVE ARTS **Discover** the musical, literary and dramatic styles that were popular during the art deco period. Consider cultural similarities and differences which occurred in Europe, the USA and Australia.

Listen to music from each decade of Margaret Preston's life. Who were the popular composers and performers? Which is your favourite? Listen to their music while painting – does it suggest different ways to paint?

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY Using the My Virtual Gallery program on the AGNSW website (www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/mvg) **create** an exhibition of Modernist Australian artists. **Write** your own text panels.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Describe this work – its subject matter, formal qualities, use of light and shadow. Identify how they unify the composition. Outline how it breaks from the decorative treatment of *Thea Proctor's tea party*?

Analyse the title *Implement blue*. What is an implement? Speculate on what it could mean here. Does the title give an insight into Preston's interest in the objects and reasons for painting them? What do you think she was trying to achieve?

How would you describe the mood of *Implement blue*? How is this mood influenced by the use of colour and title? Do the forms seem soft and inviting or hard and repellent? How would you describe the objects being depicted – as decorative or functional? To which spaces and occasions in our lives are these objects familiar and accessible?

Within *Implement blue*, cups and glasses become beakers in a laboratory; the lemon, a specimen to be studied under the harsh examiners light. Investigate how the 'machine age' of the early 20th century influenced Preston's attitudes as an artist? Compare and contrast *Implement blue* with other Preston still-life compositions in this kit.

Does Preston approach this composition in a scientific and analytical way? What similarities can be drawn between the laboratory and the kitchen? List evidence of this within the work. Consider why Preston has turned her back on nature and boldly embraced the 'man-made'.

The aesthetic of many of Preston's early still-life compositions has been described as 'decorative clutter' while *Implement blue* as 'geometric order'. Propose how Preston's use of the streamlining technique of modernism has transformed the still life into a functional, technical device, like the objects she paints, a tool for aesthetic problem solving. Discuss.

Research Australian photographers from this period, including Harold Cazneaux, Max Dupain and Olive Cotton. Locate examples of their work and compare to *Implement blue*. Is photography a mechanical or artistic process? Debate. Investigate the ongoing and sometimes uncomfortable relationship between photography and painting in the visual arts. Identify evidence of this relationship and the unique views of the world photography has engendered in Preston's work, including *Implement blue*.

Define the terms modernism and modernity. Investigate the characteristics of each. Research the social and political events that were the catalysts. Outline how they each affected the art world and the individual's experience of Australia?

Research artists from the late 19th and early 20th centuries who are considered modernists, including Cézanne, Léger, van Gogh and Picasso. Consider their intentions, subject matter and direct influences from this era. Investigate whether Preston had been exposed to these ideas and images in her life and travels. Is there evidence of the influence of these artists within her body of work?

Investigate the introduction of electrical 'gadgets' into Australian households and the rise of a consumer culture in the 1920s. Consider the effect on work and leisure time in society, especially for women. How may this have encouraged women to explore a career in the arts? Suggest why *Implement blue* is symbolic of these times.

Examine the role of women in Australian art movements of the early 20th century. What contribution did they make to the introduction of modern painting into Australian art between the two World Wars?



3

Aboriginal flowers 1928

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide

Gift of the Art Gallery of South Australia Foundation 1981

3

Aboriginal flowers 1928



Margaret Preston with gum blossom, Oenpelli, Northern Territory 1947
Photographer unknown. Preston archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales

It is not possible to understand without surrender. As long as the slightest inclination to criticism remains in the consciousness it is hopeless to do justice to what is strange
Aphorism 13

An aesthetic object is authentic if at any moment it is actually perceived as such
Aphorism 38

Aboriginal flowers is Australian modernist painting's exemplary hybrid. The painting comes from the same uncomfortable experimental period that produced *Implement blue* and *Still life* [unlocated], when Margaret Preston was pursuing the terms of a definitively Australian modernism. This ambitious experiment was ahead of its time and its audiences, and certainly in advance of her own mature understanding of the complexity of negotiating cultural relationships between European and Indigenous peoples in Australia. Yet despite the emphatic awkwardness of *Aboriginal flowers*, but because of the rigidity of its intellectual scheme – European forms, Aboriginal colours – this unseductive painting is an early emblem for the artistic 'meeting' that Margaret Preston pioneered between the two cultures.

Julie Ewington, Head Australian Art Queensland Art Gallery

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ART Look at the painting *Aboriginal flowers* and list the colours that Margaret Preston has used. The colours in this painting are muted earthy tones. **Research** how these colours connect with Aboriginal art and identity. **Investigate** how Aboriginal people use natural earth colours, called pigments, to make colours.

Compare *Aboriginal flowers* with *Aboriginal Still-life* (also in this kit). **Describe** the latter work focusing on design, colour scheme and use of line. What parts of the composition show that Margaret Preston was directly inspired by Aboriginal motifs? How is the design different in *Aboriginal flowers*? Do you think this painting is more successful in terms of its Aboriginal characteristics?

Make some flowers out of crepe paper and tissue and some fruit out of paper mâché and put them in a vase and a bowl. **Paint** a still life of your composition.

Using the same still life, **create** a collage of the composition using shapes cut out of coloured paper and tissue to emphasise the flatness of form inspired by Margaret Preston's *Aboriginal flowers*.

ENGLISH Imagine that Margaret Preston's works *Thea Proctor's Tea Party*, *Implement Blue* and *Aboriginal flowers* have been hung together in an exhibition at the Gallery. You are an art critic and have been asked to compare and contrast the works for a newspaper article. **Design** the page of the newspaper and illustrate your written article.

MATHS *Aboriginal flowers* is described as a modernist painting because Margaret Preston has used many circular lines and shapes. On a reproduced copy of the picture, **trace** the curves in this painting. **Select** one simple geometric shape such as a triangle or square and create your own still life line drawing by repeating the shape in various sizes.

HSIE **Investigate** why these feather flowers were made by Aboriginal people and what they were used for.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY Use PowerPoint to create a presentation on the theme of still life. Use examples of works by Margaret Preston as well as by other Australian artists. Write your own text to go with your chosen images.

Research the floral subjects chosen by Margaret Preston in Sydney and create a local native garden in your school playground.

Study the growth and environment required for these local plants. Which plants bring in bird life? Which plants are edible? **Map** out Margaret Preston's Sydney. Has it changed? If so, how? **Discuss**.

Visit your local public gardens. Locate and **record** the variety of plants and flowers.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Look closely at *Aboriginal flowers* and describe everything you see. Using all the 5 senses, create a list of words focusing on the forms, design, colour scheme and use of line. Which words would you associate with Aboriginal art and culture? Explain.

Compare *Aboriginal flowers* with *Aboriginal Still Life* (also in this kit). Describe this work. What parts of the composition show that Preston was directly inspired by Aboriginal motifs? How is the design different to *Aboriginal Flowers*? Do you think this painting is more successful in terms of its Aboriginal characteristics?

Compare *Thea Proctor's Tea Party* 1924, *Implement Blue* 1927 (both in this kit) and *Aboriginal flowers*. All three works were painted within 4 years of each other. Consider Preston's use of colour, composition and subject matter. Note their similarities and differences. What inspirations is she responding to in each work? Justify how each work presents the qualities and characteristics of Modernism. Debate.

Aboriginal Flowers reflected a shift in practice for Margaret Preston. She combined the use of traditional European still life motifs with Aboriginal colours and floral artefacts or feather flowers. The work has been described as a 'hybrid'. Discuss what this may mean. How successful do you think *Aboriginal Flowers* is as an example of a 'meeting' between these two cultures? Investigate how such a work might be a metaphor for Australian culture.

Develop an artwork that explores two or more cultural influences. They can be from your own personal background or a culture of interest. Create a visual list of these cultures and outline the qualities you would explore. Discuss any cultural implications or responsibilities in doing so. Define the 21st century concepts of sampling, globalization and postmodernism. Discuss how these forces have broken down barriers between cultures but may also contribute to their disintegration. Research contemporary artists that investigate these issues through the use of cultural inspirations and create multiple meanings in their work.

Investigate Margaret Preston's relationship with Aboriginal art practice and artworks? Why did she feel compelled to utilise it in her art practice? Discuss how you would classify such an approach – appropriation, incorporation, integration, borrowing or theft? Present your contemporary position in a role play debate between you and Margaret Preston.

Read Julie Ewington's commentary above. Using this kit research how audiences of the 1920's responded to Preston's cross-cultural referencing. How does this compare today? Investigate whether Preston's practice and art works such as *Aboriginal flowers* stimulated a greater interest and / or understanding of Aboriginal art and culture within Australian society at the time? Collect evidence to support your position.

Consider this issue in relation to the permanent collection of your State Gallery. Within the Gallery, is the Indigenous Collection integrated within or separated from the Australian Collection? Margaret Preston also draws inspiration from European art styles and theories. Consider the amount of European works collected in your State Gallery. What relationship does this collection have to the Indigenous collection? Explore the messages sent to audiences and the ideas reflected by public institutions, such as galleries, through the art they display and how they display it. Do you think Preston was conscious of the power of the public display of her art works? Research the range of contexts her work was seen in by the public and discuss.



4

Self portrait 1930

oil on canvas 61.3 x 51.1cm

Gift of the artist at the request of the Trustees 1930

©Art Gallery of New South Wales

4 Self portrait 1930



Margaret Preston in her garden Mosman 1930
Photograph by Harold Cazneaux, Preston archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales

An artist is something on two legs with a simple soul and a belief that he was made before God. Aphorism 2

Art is the autobiography of each individual artist. Aphorism 62

This prestigious Art Gallery of New South Wales commission clinched Preston's reputation as one of Australia's foremost painters. It is a promotional image, a picture of feminine affirmation, professionalism and modern taste making.

The artistic personality that Preston's self-portrait presents was relatively new in the history of Australian art. We see a modern, thinking woman, testimony to a social revolution in which Preston played no small part. So what did she think of? The women of Preston's generation did not, in the main, express the psychological depths of artistic individuality that we have come to expect in modern portraiture. Male modernists such as Picasso or van Gogh could perform the strip-tease of psychological or existential self-scrutiny to reveal pain or wild joy, alienation and even madness. But self-portraits by women moderns do not give much away; perhaps women artists felt that they could not afford to slip their guard. And Preston was no exception.

Dr Catriona Moore, Senior Lecturer, Department Art History,
University of Sydney

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ART **Look** at Margaret Preston's self portrait and consider what this artwork reveals about her and the society in which she lived. What can you tell about her personality? Is she hiding anything? **Find out** more about this work in the exhibition catalogue.

Using hand mirrors, **experiment** with poses, costumes and props and produce a self portrait. **Display** in class alongside an image of Margaret Preston's work.

ENGLISH **Read** about the life and times of Margaret Preston, especially her travels within Australia and abroad. **Discuss** her experiences and how they shaped her life and her art. **Write** a short story about Margaret Preston's life abroad, include her interests and influences.

Imagine you are Margaret Preston on her travels. Write a postcard or letter home describing the things you have seen. **Draw** an image for the front of your postcard.

Look at Margaret Preston and her involvement in Sydney. **Explore** her artistic reflections of living here and her observations of it. Research her articles, interviews and aphorisms.

Select your favourite work from the exhibition and **write** a critique about why you like it.

HSIE Women artists in Australia. **Select** an artist from the early 20th century and a contemporary one from the Gallery's collection. **Write** about the similarities and differences of these women artists. **Debate** whether it was easier then or now to be an artist. Consider such contemporary artists as Simryn Gill, Janet Laurence, Bronwyn Oliver, Fiona Hall and Rosemary Laing.

Create a time line of Margaret Preston's life. Include significant personal, social, artistic and world events.

Research the artists and movements which influenced Margaret Preston. List them in chronological order. How did her travels impact upon her artistic development?

MUSIC Art as therapy. **Research** and **examine** Margaret Preston's involvement in this area after World War I. **Paint** to music, allow students to draw and paint freely by responding to music. **Investigate** colour theory, including colour-music synchrony.

DRAMA **Write** a script based on quotes from Margaret Preston's life. Prepare an interview with her and perform this in class.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Meeting a new artwork can be like meeting a person for the first time. Look carefully at *Self Portrait* 1930 and describe the artist's appearance. Can you discover anything about Margaret Preston the person from Margaret Preston the art work? Speculate about her age and personality? Discuss. Like a detective, write a profile of what Preston would be like to meet. Consider the objects and specific background Preston includes in her self portrait. How do they symbolise her character, her role in society and her approach to art making?

Discuss the power of Preston's full frontal portrait and piercing gaze. Investigate how it alters the relationship between the viewer of the work, and viewed image within the work and the artist who made it. Why would the artist chose this very confrontational strategy? Imagine this artwork from a different visual perspective - elevated or low point of view, profile or rear view, with the subjects eyes averted, covered or not seen by the viewer. Visualise this new composition. How might this depict Preston in a different way, how might it alter the power of her persona for the audience?

Yes, my self portrait is completed, but I am a flower painter – and I am not a flower'. Margaret Preston (Sydney Sun April 1930)

Discuss this statement by Preston and consider how the artist wants to be perceived by the public. Research the role of women in art in the 1930's. Compare Preston's *Self Portrait* with a portrait by another Australian female artist of this time. Why was there a natural alignment between women artists and the new, non-mainstream values and attitudes of Modern art? Consider *Self-portrait* and make a mind map exploring it as a response to the Modernist art theories of the time and Preston's contemporary social world.

Investigate the ways Preston's *Self portrait* can be compared to her floral still life arrangements. If Preston was to be an Australian native flower, suggest what she may be. List the qualities and characteristics of the flower that would represent her personality. Develop a print of your Preston Australian native and give it its own botanical name. Host an 'in class' flower show display of the work.

In the 1920's the Gallery Trustees had commissioned portraits of ten 'notable painters...' (Catriona Moore from the essay on this work)

Research who the ten other 'notable painters' were. Discover if there were any other women artists selected. Choose 2 of these artists and research their significance to Australian art history. Present a case for why they were chosen of a class selection committee. Compare their art practice to t Preston's body of work. Why was Preston included in this commission? Why was she chosen over other Australian female artists at the time?

Using *My Virtual Gallery* on the Gallery's website (www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/mvg), create an exhibition of 10 Australian contemporary artists from the collection that you would propose for self portrait commission today. Outline their significance to the art world that qualifies them for selection. Discuss the reasoning behind your choice and present your 'exhibition' to the class. Include text panels and images. Based on their practice, propose what their self portrait my look like.

Why is identity still an important issue for contemporary woman artists? Identify a self portrait by a contemporary woman artist. Compare it to Margaret Preston's self portrait. Outline how this artist has explored their identity through the image they present? Consider how they have responded to their contemporary world – the age of reality television and celebrities, famous for being famous. Discuss why an audience still believes they can gain an insight into an artist through their self portrait? Examine how contemporary artists tamper with this trust and belief. Does the way these two artists present themselves within their self portraits, seem widely different or closer than at first glance? Debate.



5

Aboriginal still life 1940

oil on canvas

Collection of the Queensland Art Gallery

5

Aboriginal still life 1940



Margaret Preston 1953
Photographer unknown, Preston archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales

Art was developed before religion. The native carved the stick then worshipped it Aphorism 17

Decoration without ornamentation. Enough or too much Aphorism 74

From her birth in 1875, Margaret Preston's life coincided with a timeline, a historical path, of European 'discoveries' of Aboriginal art. This art, however, was not seen by Europeans as 'fine art' but as 'primitive art' or as objects of ethnographic interest made by seemingly unknown, unnamed artists. Yet while paintings on bark and tableaux of weapons and utensils were increasingly included in exhibitions of Australiana and national pride, Aboriginal people themselves had begun to adopt European materials and influences in the form and composition of their art, in an attempt to 'talk' to the colonising population.

As much as Preston herself saw this work as an attribute of the 'new nation', there is a marked irony in her title *Aboriginal still life*. Given the colonial onslaught on the Aboriginal population up to and continuing in that time, is it an allusion to a subconscious form of 'vanitas' symbolising the brevity of human life and the transience of earthly pleasures and achievements? There are no Aboriginal people in the composition – Aboriginal art without Aborigines; the passing of the Aborigines perhaps?

Djon Mundine, curator and art historian

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ART Consider the title, colour palette and subject of this painting. **Read** about Margaret Preston's interest in Aboriginal culture. What was this relationship like? How does it show in the work?

Look at the background of this artwork. What can you see? Why do you think Preston chose these objects?

Arrange flowers in a vase. **Paint** a still life using only the colours in Preston's painting *Aboriginal still life*. How does your painting change the way you feel about the flowers?

Consider the use of patterning in this artwork. **Look** at other still life paintings by Preston and her use of pattern. **Design** your own pattern using flowers, stripes, shapes and colour.

ENGLISH 'Why there are so many tables of still life in modern paintings is because they are really laboratory tables on which aesthetic problems can be isolated' What do you think she means? **Discuss**.

Imagine you are Margaret Preston. **Write** a diary entry about why you have chosen to change and limit your colour palette.

HSIE **Create** a double-timeline of Australian history during Margaret Preston's lifetime (1875-1963) – on one side **include** events and perspectives significant to white Australia and on the other, events and perspectives significant to Aboriginal Australia.

Place *Aboriginal still life* (1940) on the timeline. **Discuss** the work from the context of each side of your timeline.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY **Investigate** and **research** the plants and flowers (flora) that were the subjects of Margaret Preston's art. **Research** which plants are most suited to Sydney's temperate climate.

What are the local indigenous plants in your area? **Identify** them and **collect** examples to study.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Examine *Aboriginal still life*. How has Preston's use of colour changed from earlier works? Identify the objects depicted in this painting, their cultural origins and uses. Would you associate the objects and colour palette with interior or exterior spaces? Discuss.

How would you describe the painting technique – expressive and loose or controlled and tight? Consider how this blurs the objects and abstracts them into a design. Investigate why this technique would be of interest to Preston. Propose what her intention was.

The 1940s was one of Preston's most artistically active decades marked by experimentation and a pursuit of a unique Australian identity. Examine why a major world event like World War II would prompt such a pursuit.

What are symbols? Are their meanings fixed or can they change? List the elements within *Aboriginal still life* that may be considered symbolic of Australia. Explain why. Debate how these may have been accepted or challenged as symbols of Australia in Preston's 1940s. Have attitudes and values toward this changed in 21st-century Australia?

Consider how Preston's attempt at nationalistic images is received by Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within contemporary Australian society? By representing Aboriginal objects without Aboriginal people, what subtle messages could be conveyed to the viewer? Is Preston copying or borrowing in *Aboriginal still life*? Can she be referred to as postmodernist artist by today's definitions?

In 1941 Preston wrote: 'I am humbly trying to follow them [Indigenous people] in an attempt to know the truth and paint it, and so help to make a national art for Australia' (cited in Elizabeth Butel's *Margaret Preston: the art of constant rearrangement*, 1985, p?). Outline why Preston advocated the use of Aboriginal objects and designs and not European ones? Identify issues that are raised by using the images and art of other artists and cultures.

Is Preston copying or borrowing in *Aboriginal still life*? Can Preston be referred to as a postmodernist by today's definitions? Identify other styles and cultural influences evident in her other works. Are non-Indigenous artists still advocating such a position within their art practice today? Locate examples and debate whether such a strategy is appropriate.

Research and trace the attitudes and values of white Australia toward Aboriginal art from 'First Contact' to the present day. How have museums and galleries played a role in the way audiences view Indigenous art and artists? Specifically refer to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island collections in your State Gallery. Outline the history of these collections – when they were established, how the items were acquired, and the various locations they have been displayed in within the museum or gallery over time.

Why do artists choose the still-life genre? Who or what is included and what is excluded within this painting genre? What is the effect of the non-human visual presence in the composition? Discuss these notions and find examples to justify your point of view. In representing Aboriginal objects without Aboriginal people, what subtle messages could be conveyed to the viewer of the painting? Can parallels be drawn between Preston's use of Aboriginal culture for her own agenda and the colonisation of Australia by Europeans?

Preston uses decorative forms, Aboriginal objects and motifs in *Aboriginal still life* to convey a sense of the 'new nation'. Create a still-life arrangement symbolising social issues of the 1940s and one for today's society. What objects, motifs and decoration could be used to reflect an understanding of our contemporary world? In what way does each still-life arrangement differ? Document your display using photography and printmaking.



6

Aboriginal landscape 1941

oil on canvas

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
D & J T Mortlock Bequest Fund 1982

5

Aboriginal still life 1940



Margaret Preston and unidentified man, Daly River Camp, Northern Territory 1947
Photographer unknown, Preston Archive, Art Gallery of New South Wales

Art, to fulfil its destiny, requires to be accepted by a nation or race and not by a few Aphorism 89

Art is universal enough to contain all appeals Aphorism 73

‘Aboriginal landscape’: it would be difficult to imagine two more highly charged words in discussions about Australian art today.

Preston’s interest in Aboriginal culture deepened during 1932-39, when she lived in a house in the Berowra bush, adjacent to Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park. Numerous rock engravings exist therein, which the artist undoubtedly discussed with the anthropologist Frederick McCarthy, one of several friends who lent specificity to her knowledge of Aboriginal culture. This in turn fed her nationalism along with her association with the Jindyworobaks, a literary group which sought to express ‘something of the Australian place spirit’, for example in the ‘rock-rooted ranges’ of the interior. World War II sharpened Preston’s developing need to produce national imagery – her ‘Aboriginal’ paintings – which, widely reproduced, might serve as reassuring icons.

Ian North, curator and art historian

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ART Step into this landscape and **explore** this environment and artwork, through your senses. What do you see? What do you feel beneath your feet? What sounds can hear? What time of day or season is it? **Discuss**.

Look at Aboriginal art and its diverse styles. Consider early colonial art and the European perspective of Aboriginal culture. **Compare** and **discuss**.

En plein air – draw and paint a landscape outside. **Use** your immediate environment, the school grounds, and the natural and man made. **Focus** on a black linear foundation, then add colour afterwards.

Explore your local environment. **Collect** native leaves and make a dictionary of rubbings (frottage). **Cut** them out, **hand-colour** and **compose** on paper to form an abstract landscape.

HSIE Investigate Aboriginal rights during Margaret Preston's life and times. What were the issues which Indigenous Australians faced and fought? **Compare** these with the issues faced today. Has anything changed?

Why was Preston inspired to create a nationalist art? **Discuss** this idea and **examine** what it means to have a national identity.

MATHS Look at the use of angles, diagonals and shapes in this artwork. Use tracing paper over a reproduction and simplify this landscape by tracing the most dominant lines.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY Look at this landscape. What does it tell us about the environment it depicts? Investigate bush environments, the effect of droughts and/or bush fires.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Examine the treatment of forms in this landscape. Would you call it 'realistic' or does it veer toward abstraction? Propose why Preston chose to interpret it in this way? List the qualities that are familiar and unfamiliar to your experience of landscape. Does the composition invite the viewer in to explore the environment or exclude them? Can this landscape be anywhere other than Australia? Discuss.

In what way does Preston show an influence of Aboriginal bark and rock paintings as well as the art of central Arnhem Land in *Aboriginal landscape*? Compare this work with landscapes painted by Aboriginal artists from this area. How are they similar or different? Collect a number of examples and discuss your findings to the class.

Compare Margaret Preston's *Aboriginal landscape* with Albert Namatjira's landscape paintings. Investigate how each represents the realistic and symbolic nature of the land from their cultural perspectives. Compare Preston's and Namatjira's artistic careers and their reception by Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences. Why were their experiences so different? Propose how both artists were challenging social roles and painting traditions in Australia.

'In hindsight, Preston's landscapes and the modernist mythologies of Drysdale, Boyd and Nolan, which drew on Aboriginal themes in an unprecedented way, were perhaps the last manifestation of an nescient white desire for authenticity through connection to Aboriginal art and to country, before Namatjira's paintings and the spectacular products of the Western Desert art movement after them exposed such impulses as built on borrowed land.' (curator Deborah Edwards, Margaret Preston 2005, p 224)

Discuss this statement and the issues it raises about Australian identity and the role of art in creating and affirming it.

Create a plein-air composition of the landscape in your local area. Integrate a strong use of horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines and a limited colour palette to evoke a sense of experience and presence in that place. Experiment with a variety of media, including paint, oil pastels, layers of tissue paper and printmaking techniques. Should a landscape painting represent only what can be seen or connect the viewer with a deeper, more emotive experience? Discuss why this is an important artistic, social and political debate in contemporary Australia.

Develop an exhibition with the *My Virtual Gallery* program on the AGNSW website (www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/mvg) entitled *Shifting visions: Australian Landscape*. Choose artworks from the collection and write text panels that reflect a new way of seeing the landscape of Australia. Consider a range of cultural and gender perspectives. Discuss the rationale and overall position presented through your combination of artworks.



7

Tank traps 1943

oil on canvas
Morningside Peninsula Regional Gallery
Gift of Dr and Mrs C. B. Christesen, 1978

7

Tank traps 1943



Japanese midget submarine being pulled from Sydney harbour

No-one is ever too old to know better Aphorism 15

The law of life is of a fiendish, not of a divine kind; modern art accepts this truth Aphorism 19

Tank traps is best understood as one panel in a triptych depicting wartime Sydney. The conceptual centre would be *Submarine exhibition 1942*, where an armed sailor guards one of three Japanese midget submarines which had penetrated Sydney Harbour in May 1942; notices warn 'Do not ask questions', the antithesis of Preston's approach to life and art. The third panel would be *General Post Office, Sydney, barricaded 1942*, sandbagged as a metaphor for censorship at that hub of communications.

Preston's scepticism about the war reinforced a shift in her understanding of art. In a 1943 article, 'Some aspects of contemporary art', she announced that she had reached a pivotal moment in her own development when she distinguished 'modern' from 'contemporary'. Modern artists, she recognised, drew on the traditions of art in an individual way. She was moving on to the 'contemporary', where the artist's 'forms and symbols will show the conditions and ideas of his time'.

Humphrey McQueen, curator and art historian

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ART **Look** carefully at this painting and **consider** how Margaret Preston has used colour to create mood. How has she used texture and repetitive shapes to enhance this feeling? What time of year is it? **Describe** the weather conditions.

Create your own painting using a limited palette and a combination of man-made structures and natural features in the landscape. From your painting, **design** a print using simplified shapes and strong outlines. **Research** Margaret Preston's prints to give you inspiration.

Recreate *Tank Traps* as a three dimensional sculpture using card and recycled materials.

Tank Traps is part of a triptych (3 panels). **Imagine** what the other panels look like. **Draw** and paint your ideas and exhibit in class.

ENGLISH **Describe** the shapes and surfaces you can see and create a word bank of words and phrases that illustrate the sense of doom and destruction this image conveys.

Imagine being trapped in this landscape. **Write** a story about your adventure.

HSIE **Investigate** the role of Margaret Preston as a war artist.

Compare her works with Grace Cossington-Smith and Stella Bowen. Why did women artists portray the home front? What do you think it would be like to be a war artist? Discuss your findings in class.

Research how Sydney was fortified during the war. What examples are still visible today?

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Describe your first impressions of *Tank traps*. Brainstorm what this image reminds you of. Outline the emotions conjured by the atmosphere and environment presented. Consider the subject of the painting. What is a tank trap? What are they made of? Investigate how, where and when were they used in Australia? Research if there are still examples of these structures in Australia today.

How would you define the painting technique – expressive or controlled? Speculate on the time of year and season portrayed? Investigate how the selection of tones and colours differ from those usually associated with paintings of the Australia landscape, particularly those of Sydney? Examine Preston's reasoning to use such a limited colour palette.

When was this painting made? Outline the major world event it coincided with. What is the 'true' subject matter of *Tank traps*? Is it what can be seen or what is symbolised by what can be seen? Discuss with reference to Preston's first-hand experience of Japanese culture and her belief in the importance of developing closer links to art of Pacific and Asian cultures.

Research the events and atmosphere of Australian society during this time. How would you characterise this time – one of certainty and prosperity or suspicion and anxiety? Propose whether *Tank traps* is a record of Australian history or a product of Preston's artistic imagination? Collect imagery of Sydney and the Harbour during World War 2. Compare these images to *Tank Traps*. Discuss how Preston's painting technique reinforces this subject matter, Preston's feelings about World War II and the audience's perception of it.

Imagine placing yourself in the landscape of *Tank traps*. Record the journey. Write a letter to a friend telling of your physical and emotional experience. Are there similarities to the mood of Australian society at this time? Make photographs of the environment in your local area. Investigate how the manipulation of technique and materials can transform the reading of an image. Photograph the landscape in colour and black and white. How do they differ? What moods have been portrayed? Write a newspaper article about one of the images you have created and present as a documented experience to the class.

Margaret Preston, with other artists of the time addressed the issues of World War II which resulted in canvases "*that could not have been painted at any other time*". (Humphrey McQueen From the essay, How does *Tank Traps* capture the uniqueness of the time?)

Discuss why Preston chooses to depict this imagery? Compare *Tank Traps* with Preston's still life compositions. Identify how Preston has broken from her earlier body of work and pushed the boundaries of her art practice by once more responding to her contemporary world? Examine commissioned Australian war artists and their body of work over time. What is the role of the artist in times of war and conflict? Why is it not the exclusive domain of the photographer? Discuss. Compare Preston's own personal explorations of this subject matter to the Government commissioned artist you have located. How do they differ?

Tank traps is part of a triptych exploring "*the machinery of war*" (From the essay above) and Australian society's response to the threat of World War II. Imagine what the other panels look like and the subjects and events they may have explored. Draw sketches and discuss your ideas with the class and the evidence to support your work.

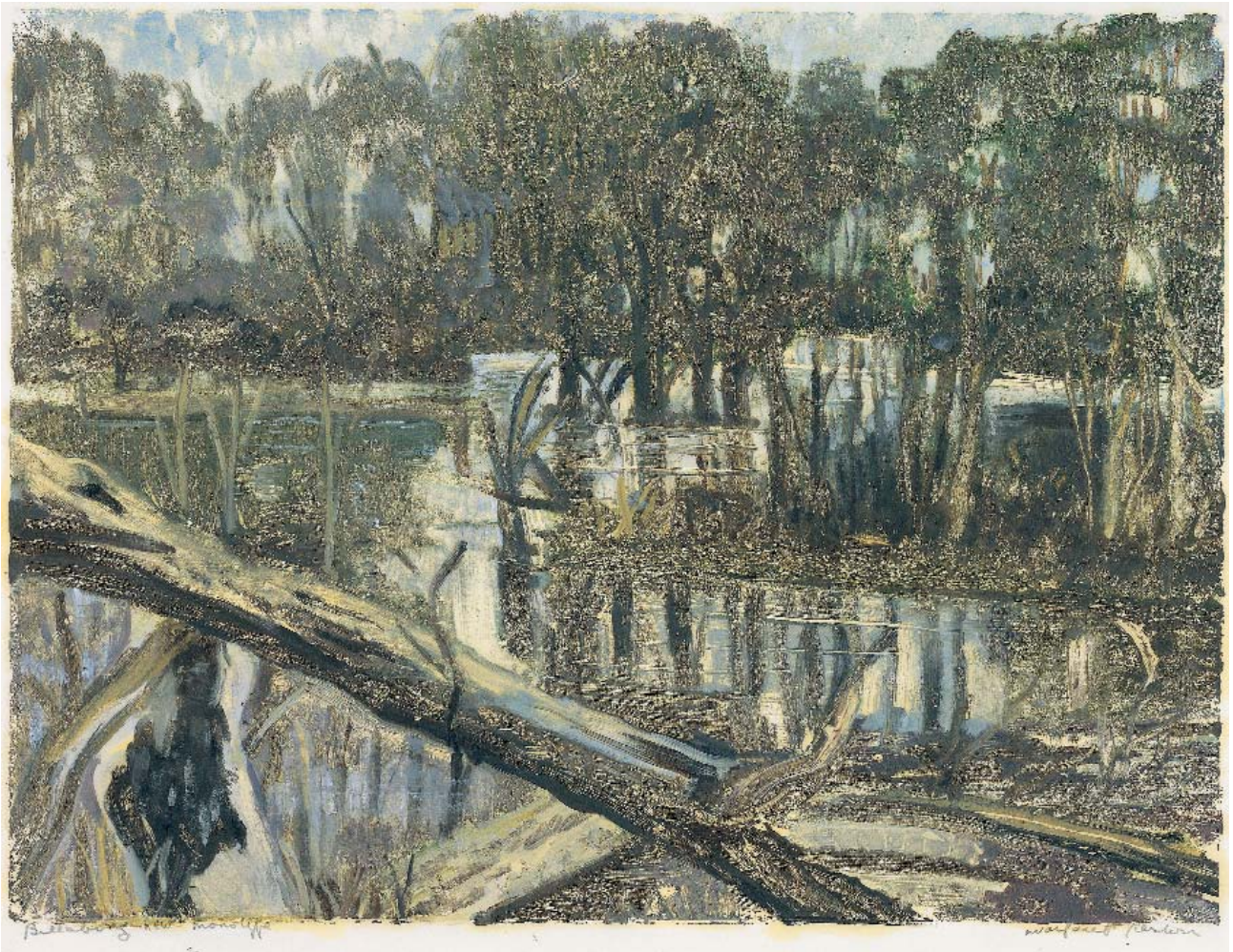
Find the panels that complete the triptych in the exhibition (and also in this kit). When seen together, analyse how they generate a narrative for the viewer? Consider how it may change when the sequence is re-arranged? Research the significance of the triptych in art history. Why not just do one large painting with everything in it? In what way does Preston's choice of a triptych and its loaded meaning and symbolic connections enhance the overall effect of the work? Debate.



8

Wheel flower 1929

wood engraving, black ink, hand coloured in gouache on brown mulberry paper 44.1 x 44.6cm
Purchased 1929
Art Gallery of New South Wales



8

Billabong, NSW 1946

colour monotype

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased 1948

8

Wheel flower 1929 Billabong, NSW 1946



Margaret Preston woodblock printing, Berowra 1937
Photograph by F.J. Halmarick. Fairfaxphoto

The easiest way to understand modern art is to buy an example and live with it. Custom makes consciousness
Aphorism 35

Too much craft in art ruins the art in the craft Aphorism 49

Wheel flower is a bravura work. Its rich harmonies and contrasts, its dynamism and its impeccably composed chaos convey brilliantly, within a consciously decorative style, a sense, above all, of the life force of the plant.

Deborah Clark, curator and editor *Art Monthly*, Australia

Over 1946–c1948 Preston's experiments with technique included an exceptional series of approximately 100 monotypes, including her last major landscapes. The hybrid technique, merging the spontaneity of painting and drawing with surface effects characteristic of printmaking, proved to be one in which Preston excelled.

Deborah Edwards, senior curator of Australian Art, Art Gallery of New South Wales

K-6 LOOKING AND MAKING

VISUAL ART **Make** your own print based on a native flower.

Investigate Japanese woodcuts and the process involved – in particular **look** at the *ukiyo-e* (floating world) period. Place paper onto a painted surface or inked plate. Draw a landscape with a pencil on the back of the paper and lift it off. **Compare** and **discuss** the process and marks made with your print.

Glue string, leaves, petals, sand, and seeds, on to paper to create a collagraph. Emboss by using a press or heavy weights on felt or dampen the paper and dry roll by hand.

Experiment with a variety of materials. **Paint** gouache or acrylic directly onto Perspex, lay paper onto painted surface and rub back of paper. Lift off to see the result and continue by working the painted surface with a skewer drawing in detail, place paper onto painted surface and rub paper again.

Combine a print and drawing. Using a balsa wood block, cut in floral shapes and press onto a painted surface to stamp an image.

Hand colour (either in texta or water colour) and extend by painting the background.

Use foam (polystyrene prints) and scratch into the surface to create a still life from observation. Print your design and hand colour.

Create a flower arrangement and **photograph** it in black and white. Develop the print and hand colour.

ENGLISH **Write** about an imaginary adventure in the landscape depicted in *Billabong, NSW*.

Write a poem about each artwork using words that describe the feeling of and experience of each.

HSIE **Research** and **list** the variety of printing techniques used throughout history. **Consider** the time, culture and impact these developments have made on the way information, (words or images) is generated, shared and accessed.

Locate and source Margaret Preston's magazine covers. Consider her commercial practise, what type of information was contained in these publications? (*Woman's World*, *The Home* and *Wentworth* Magazine). Are there any magazines available today that you think Margaret Preston would be interested in writing and designing for? **Discuss**.

What is a billabong? What is the origin of this word? **Investigate** river systems and how a billabong is made. **Identify** the flower in *Wheel flower*. Is it native to Australia or introduced? **Investigate** the unique qualities of Australian native flowers. List the common bonds between the subject of both artworks.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY What is mechanical reproduction? **Define** and **list** examples. **Using** the computer, **design** an artwork inspired by one of Margaret Preston's magazine covers.

Make a river system, in miniature using a large tray with soil and plants, pour water along in one direction and assess the changes.

List the printing methods and techniques used specifically by artists. **Report** on the history of one of the following: paper, bookmaking, the printing press, lithography, etching, photography, screen printing, computers, film and woodcuts.

7-12 FRAMING QUESTIONS

Examine *Wheel flower* and *Billabong, NSW*. When was each made? Refer to Preston's biography and consider the events that may have influenced each work. Are there aspects to them reminiscent of her previous artworks and interests? Create a mind map for each artwork that links them together.

Wheel flower and *Billabong, NSW* are both the result of different printmaking techniques. Identify these and outline their processes. Consider the use of colour and mark making - one expressive and painterly, the other controlled and graphic. Ascribe a quality to each work and explain why. How does each technique enhance the subject and contribute to the overall reading of the subject?

Discuss the opportunities printmaking gave Preston to expand her profile and success as an artist. Research Preston's relationship with commercial art through her printmaking. How did this contribute to the way women saw the world around them and themselves in this era?

Many of Preston's prints were designed for or used by the popular magazines of the day which promoted household appliances, décor and decorative objects. When does a household ornament or piece of furniture become an artwork? Have designers of functional objects become the artists of today? Collect images of domestic objects that can be defined as fine art objects. What influence do magazines play in our perceptions of this? Do you think Preston was aware of the power of the popular press to promote herself and her work in the commercial market?

Compare the subject matter of both *Wheel flower* and *Billabong, NSW*. What is the effect of capturing nature in the landscape as opposed to nature in a still-life? Discuss this notion in relation to a European modernist artist's and an Indigenous Australian artist's approach to artmaking.

Preston specifically chose the monotype printing technique to evoke the 'shimmering look' of the billabong. Discuss the unique characteristics of this landscape. What can you tell about the natural features of the land? How does this technique enhance the overall effect by its synergy with the subject matter?

'A Billabong is a backwater to a river. This is quiet in tone, as billabongs of Australia are sombre. There seems to be a miasma about them, perhaps from the air rising from the still water or the myriad of insects circling around them.' (from Margaret Preston *Monotypes* 1949)

'The firewheel flowers are depicted in various stages of life and decay – a convention that is common to botanical illustration ...' [Deborah Clark in Margaret Preston: art and life] Find images of botanical drawings either online or through your local botanic gardens. Are these drawings 'artistic'? Can a work be both 'creative' and 'documentary'?

Analyse the arrangement of the flowers in *Wheel flower*. Do you think they were actually like this or did Preston change and manipulate the arrangement to make it more visually pleasing or decorative? Imagine rearranging this still life. Draw as many variations as you can arrange in your imagination. How would the effect of the work differ for each?

Take this image one step further and abstract the composition through cropping and enlarging elements within it. Discuss which elements you would exaggerate or eliminate? Present together your original specimen, your photographs, drawing and paintings as a journey of process.

Margaret Preston produced woodcuts which she then hand coloured. Make a print of your own design using black ink and then hand colour your image. Experiment with simple printing methods such as mono printing, relief printing or scratching designs into polystyrene.