

Imaging and Imagining

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The language of art is heavily reliant on images and imagery, and it is connected fundamentally with the notion of *imagination*. Artists conjure impressions and expressions – summoning new visions of the past, the present and the future. The historical narrative of art is one of innovation driven by imagination. Art thrives on evolution– single-point perspective, pigments in oil, camera obscura, cubism, surrealism, conceptualism, minimalism.



Abdul-Rahman Abdullah + Anna Louise Richardson, at Castlemaine State Festival (2019), with visiting students

Each new 'development' registers like the conquering of a new territory. Art broadens the very definition of what it is through these expanded understandings of content, concept and context. It defines itself by its innovation as each seemingly 'successive' adaptation and leap forward fuels its sense of purpose and existence. Art registers *as art* when it offers something new to the canon. Everything else is copy and derivative. Or craft.

Take, for example, one of my favourite artworks of all time, *An Oak Tree* (1973) by Michael Craig-Martin. This is an artwork that pushes definitions of art, material, concept. It is a wonderful example of how an artwork can redefine the very meaning of art through innovation. In this case, an innovative *idea*. An idea that requires nothing more than the already existing materials and methodologies of art to execute its delivery. It does not require new technology. It doesn't really even require new processes. It relies on the recipient's own mental depiction of the idea, and most importantly I think, it honours that depiction as a

power and a source of the artwork rather than the material construction produced by the labour of the artist being the dominant substance of the artwork.



Michael Craig-Martin, *An Oak Tree* (1973), glass and water.

An Oak Tree consists of a glass of water placed on a glass shelf attached to the wall, with an accompanying label. That's it. Utilitarian in nature: a simple glass, common to every household; clean water just as you'd get from a tap; the sort of shelf you'd find in a million domestic bathrooms; and a printed text label like you find in every gallery and museum. However, despite what you *see* in front you, the artist declares that this combination of materials is, in fact, an oak tree. The glass and the water and the shelf are an oak tree.

Does the viewer conjure an image of an oak tree in their mind when they look at the artwork? Is every *imagined* oak tree in each different person who looks at the artwork a different *image* of an oak tree? Is it not now a *forest* of oak trees distributed geographically in the brains of thousands of humans? And what does that say about what an artwork is – a material object like a sculpture, painting, print, vessel? Or the conjured mental responses *imaged* and *imagined* in the mind of 'viewers'?

An Oak Tree riffs on the Catholic faith's notion of transubstantiation. The ability to believe that an object is something other than its physical appearance, which requires transformative vision.

What is innovation if not the imaginative conjuring of new possibilities beyond what is seen in the immediate and obvious reality of the present? To innovate is to produce images beyond what is presented. To imagine something more and to accept that in that act of imagining there is an act of creation.

What I love most about this artwork is that it honours the viewer's capacity to create – to image and to imagine. It acknowledges it is the viewer who co-creates the meaning of the work through the production of the *image* of the art. It requires also, that the viewer first evokes an image of a tree in their mind, then that the viewer accepts their act of imagining is an act of creativity.

Here is where we see a vital and valuable role for art and the experience of art. Here is where we see the most exciting, inspiring and energising outcomes from the presentation of art to audiences of all persuasions – the general public, students from primary school to tertiary education, and arts-interested patrons. Experiences of art allow us opportunities to imagine. They are catalysts of imagination. They honour and respect the power of the viewer to co-create and co-produce meaning, even beyond the direct and tangible obviousness of the present moment and the materials currently before us.

Perhaps now more than ever, when the pathways ahead of us are foggier and less clearly sign-posted, is the time for us to imagine what is beyond the physical appearance of our current reality. Art can provide us with a tool, an occasion, and a freedom to exercise our mental capacity to image and to imagine. Exercising our imagination is an act of exertion. It is a process we can fuel, we can practice and we can improve upon. Art is a resource for the mind to conjure impressions and expressions, to simulate *vision* through a process of imaging and imagining. It is surely easier to move forward when we can *see*, if only in our mind's eye, both the pathway and the destination toward which we know we must strive.