

EDUCATION RESOURCE KIT  
A CASE STUDY

# GUAN WEI



## INTRODUCTION

*Written by Carol Carter and published by Museum of Art and Culture, Lake Macquarie (MAC), this education kit is designed to assist senior secondary Visual Arts teachers and students in the preparation, appreciation and understanding of the case study component of the HSC syllabus. MAC is proud to support educators and students in the community with an ongoing series of case studies as they relate to the art museum's exhibition program. This education kit is available in hard copy directly from the art museum or online at [mac.lakemac.com.au](http://mac.lakemac.com.au)*

## A CASE STUDY

*A series of case studies (a minimum of FIVE) should be undertaken with students in the Higher School Certificate (HSC) course. The selection of content for the case study should relate to various aspects of critical and historical investigations, taking into account practice, the conceptual framework and the frames. Emphasis may be given to a particular aspect of content although all should remain in play. Case studies should be 4–10 hours in duration in the HSC course.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

cover:  
Guan Wei painting a mural at  
Museum of Applied Arts and  
Sciences (MAAS), 2006.  
Image courtesy of the artist and ARC  
ONE Gallery, Melbourne.

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## THE ARTIST

*I use my Chinese eyes to create an Australian story.<sup>1</sup>*



In the following quote, Guan Wei gives his thoughts about his art practice:

*I try to emphasise three elements in my work, wisdom, knowledge and humour. I believe people need wisdom to choose from the many different cultural traditions that confront us every day; knowledge is the key to opening our minds to the diversity of the world; and humour is necessary to comfort our hearts.<sup>2</sup>*

left:  
Guan Wei painting a mural at  
Museum of Applied Arts and  
Sciences (MAAS), 2006.  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne.

above:  
Guan Wei drawing on a  
ceramic form in France, 2015.  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne.

Guan Wei is a Chinese Australian artist who was born in Beijing in 1957. His works are informed by his personal journey between China and Australia. His first trip to Australia was for an artist residency at the Tasmania School of Art, Hobart in 1989.

## THE ARTIST

Guan Wei grew up in Beijing during the Cultural Revolution, which was a time of extreme political upheaval in China, and resulted in the current Chinese Communist Government system. Many people died during the time of the revolution and in the years leading up to the failed pro-democracy rebellion in 1989 in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, where government forces killed hundreds of young protestors to quash the rebellion. Guan Wei could see the way China was changing, giving people limited political and personal freedoms, and so made Australia his home in 1990:

*At that time, most of the works of Chinese artists were propaganda. The content was very political and serious. But I prefer to combine playfulness and humour with visual language.<sup>3</sup>*

The beauty of the natural environment in Australia, especially the blue ocean and the colourful plants and animals, was a source of great joy for Guan Wei and became an essential part of the motifs in his work. In his work, concern for the environment is apparent. There is longing for the beauty and the exotic of the pristine natural world. The freedom he found in Australia to express himself as an artist, with various social and political viewpoints, is also embedded in his practice.

Aspects of the real world, for example, world events and political commentary, are incorporated into narratives that can also include imaginary elements. He has a playful sense of humour and loves to tell stories that explore his belief in the interconnectedness of people and the environment. His strong graphic sensibility facilitates storytelling. His practice makes use of Chinese visual elements, creating works that interweave imagery from his Chinese heritage with his life experience in Australia.

The work is instantly recognisable for its distinctive style and highly personal visual vocabulary; swirling waves and floating Chinese clouds, large expanses of colour (mostly blue) and strange beasts and fleshy pink, Buddha-like figures inhabit a timeless world where creating artworks is a continuous journey, reflecting self and knowledge acquisition. The artist challenges our cultural bearings as his works offer a different perspective on history and Australian politics, especially with issues related to immigration, the 'war on terror' and the colonial occupation of Australia. He has a rare gift to highlight problems. His playfulness (and sometimes neutrality) can diffuse tensions and bring a more positive view to global situations so his audience may engage fully and not turn away.

## THE ARTIST

*We, who come from different cultural backgrounds, need to better understand one another, connect with one another and seek friendship with one another. It is imperative that we find a shared set of values to ensure our survival.<sup>4</sup>*

The timeless theme of journeying is prevalent in classical Chinese literature and scroll paintings. Drawing from this, Guan Wei, when depicting historical journeys, such as colonial explorers ‘discovering’ Australia, or more modern-day journeys such as those being undertaken by unauthorised immigrants trying to escape persecution, invites his audience to share his ideas of a reinterpreted or re-imagined history in a contemporary context. In doing so, he incorporates a moral dimension that embodies his reinterpretation of social and historical events with the aim to provide a better understanding of different cultures and promote a shared set of values. He gives his audience clues for interpretation through the use of rich symbolism.

After completing his residency in Tasmania, he was invited to undertake two further residencies: one at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney (1992), the other at the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University (1993). Since then he has been a recipient of many grants, including the Australia Council’s grant for the Greene Street New York studio in 2003 and for the Cite International des Arts Paris in 2007. He received a fellowship for the Cite International des Arts in 2008–2009. He has exhibited widely both in Australia and overseas. Guan Wei’s works feature in the collections of numerous important institutions, including the Gallery of NSW and the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Sydney.<sup>5</sup>

Guan Wei works between Australia and Beijing. He spends much of the Australian summer months in Beijing, where he established a studio in 2008. His Australian studio is in Sydney, where he lives most of the year.

## PRACTICE

**Students... learn that practice refers to the social structures, positions, actions and sequences that affect choices, perceptions, directions, ways of working and views of those involved in the visual arts. Students learn that the nature of practice involves the inculcation of beliefs, actions and ideas over time.**

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

## CONCEPTUAL PRACTICE

Guan Wei has produced a large body of work. He is essentially a storyteller, of real and imagined histories. Themes have evolved over time but essentially relate to his journey to Australia and how Australian culture, history, environment and politics have made a lasting impression on his viewpoint as a Chinese immigrant. He moves between the two cultures with ease, humility and humour. For the purpose of this case study the three themes below will be considered:

- ▲ Bearing witness – issues of immigration and the dispossessed
- ▲ Harmony and respect for the environment
- ▲ Other histories – mapping alternative journeys

### Bearing witness: issues of immigration and the dispossessed

Guan Wei is calmly reflective in his choice of subject. In *Journey to Australia*, a large temporary mural commissioned for the entrance wall of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in 2013, he illustrated a narrative of immigrants coming on boats to Australia. His social commentary reveals the injustice of the tragedy that is part of the immigration history of Australia.

Guan Wei came to Australia at the same time as other immigrant Chinese artists, such as Ah Xian, who were seeking greater artistic freedom.<sup>6</sup> The massacre of students in Tiananmen Square in 1989 certainly influenced him to stay in Australia. His work at this time was political and expressed his concerns for the lack of democratic freedoms and the brutality inflicted by the Communist regime.



## PRACTICE



In *Journey to Australia*,<sup>7</sup> Guan Wei is reflecting on his own journey to Australia. The work depicts numerous open rowing boats overcrowded with faceless, naked people heading towards Australian shores. Above the vast expanse of blue ocean are the stylised clouds that have become cultural symbols of Guan Wei's artistic expression and the faces of two winds, one from the north and one from the east, that blow the 'boat people' to shore. The work makes reference to the continuing political debate about 'boat people' and immigration in Australian politics. Guan Wei has spoken about his 'boat people':

*You can see the political situation in my work, with these bodies with no eyes, no mouth; they can't talk too much.*<sup>8</sup>

As a witness, he reveals the absolute tragedy of the situation. Figures are leaping into the water as their boats sink, some reaching out to those stranded in the water. Some figures have open mouths forming screams and calls for help. Threatening sea monsters lurk in the water alongside military boats, with helicopters in the air – all machinations of warfare and all used to control potential immigrants. They also symbolise the political banter about border protection in Australia resulting in the vilification and incarceration of refugees.

Guan Wei  
*The Journey to Australia*, 2013  
installation view (and details)  
Museum of Contemporary  
Art Australia.  
Synthetic polymer paint on  
wall, commissioned by the  
Museum of Contemporary Art,  
2013. Image courtesy and  
copyright of the artist.  
Photograph: Alex Davies.

## PRACTICE



The mural includes silhouettes of the original Aboriginal inhabitants, the Gadigal people, who lived on the shores of Sydney Harbour where the MCA currently stands. The people are gathered around a campfire cooking food, one holds a spear and one is dancing. There are native animals such as a dingo, kangaroos and birds, including a pink cockatoo, one of the most exotic of birds, rendered in vivid colours in the foreground. It suggests that this is a normal gathering of people going about their lives.

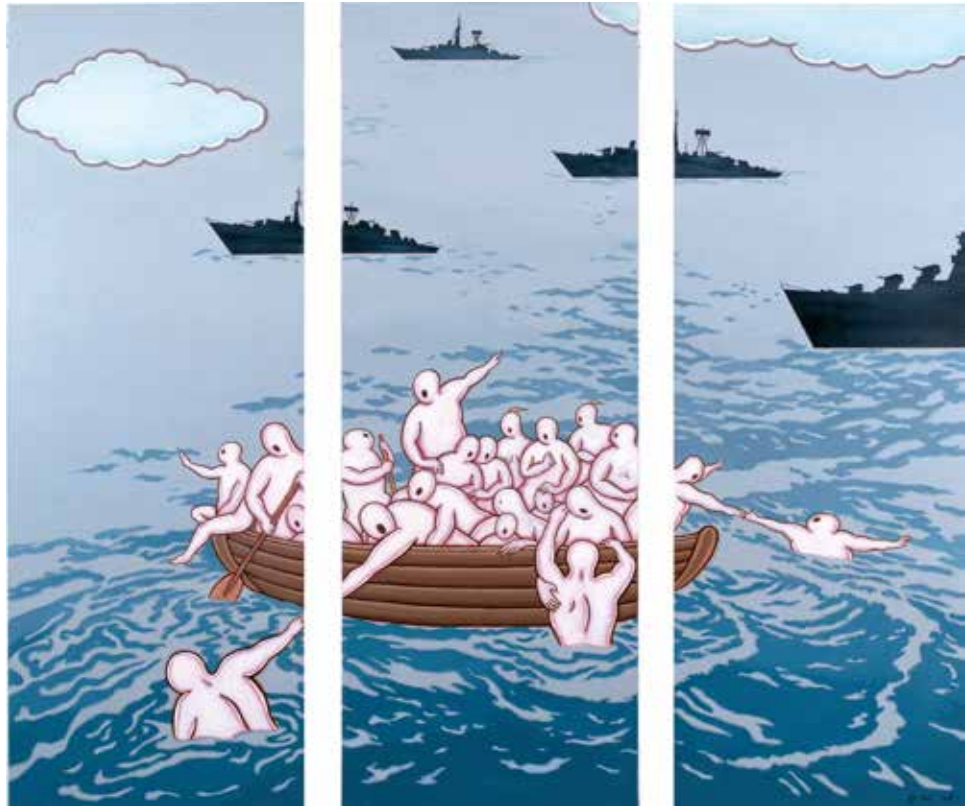
In later works, colonial history is explored focusing on the first settlers as the newcomers to Australia (the British first came ashore in 1788 on Gadigal land). In these works, lines between past and present are blurred to expand the narrative through time.

Guan Wei speaks about this mural and his intentions:

*I have observed that much of our daily news is filled with stories of refugee ships arriving in Australian waters... As an Australian immigrant and as an artist, I am able to not only identify but also to help relate and bear witness to (the refugees) solemn, tragic, stirring and tragic story... From a historical point of view, the MCA's location at Circular Quay is a place where, in the past, many immigrants have landed – a place which links the past with the present, you with me, and Australia with the world.<sup>9</sup>*

In another work, *Boatman No. 1* 2005, again the threat of illegal immigration is symbolised by the inclusion of silhouetted military vessels similar to computer game imagery to create an ironic scenario of search-and-destroy.<sup>10</sup>

## PRACTICE



This work comprises three canvas panels joined to make one image. The figures are similar to those in the *Journey to Australia*. Over time Guan Wei has made many variations of these human forms – they are soft and vulnerable with no nationality, only need. The military boats are threatening like modern day sea monsters.

*An artist of our time Guan Wei, does not seek to educate in a didactic manner, but uses humour and an economy of painterly means to help us see more clearly the folly of our ways and the importance of our common humanity.<sup>11</sup>*

Guan Wei  
*Boatman No. 1* 2005  
acrylic on canvas  
137cm x 162cm  
Image courtesy of the artist and  
ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne  
© Guan Wei /Copyright  
Agency, 2020.

## PRACTICE

### A brief history of Communism in China

Twentieth century China has a history of bloodshed on a scale that is hard to imagine from a Western perspective. The Boxer Rebellion in 1900 (to rid China of foreigners) was followed by many uprisings, the Japanese invasion, the Civil War in 1949 (Republic of China versus the Communist Party) and the establishment of a Communist state under Mao Zedong. Communism is an economic structure that professes a classless society in which all property and wealth is communally owned, instead of by individuals. During this time, millions died from famine (due to weather and political policy) as well as violence.

China went through a period of extreme struggle called the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution began in 1966, when Chairman Mao Zedong, the ruler of Communist China, became worried about his control over the country. Blame had fallen on Mao for widespread hunger and death after a failed plan to increase industry and the economy, called 'The Great Leap Forward'. Many were killed because they didn't agree with government methods and the pace of change was too slow. Mao decided that China was drifting too far away from its communist political beliefs. His solution was to enlist young people and students into an organisation called the Red Guard (red is a traditional colour of communism), who would inform on members of the Communist Party thought to be not true believers. With the schools shut down, kids of all ages joined the Red Guard and began to harass or even attack people thought to be enemies of the communist revolution.

The Cultural Revolution was meant to totally destroy all the aspects of Chinese culture that didn't align with communism. Students were called on to destroy 'The Four Olds', meaning culture, habits, ideas, and customs that might have been historically popular but were not compatible with communism. Many historical sites were destroyed, ancient customs abandoned and beautiful objects lost.

Everything changed with the death of Mao in 1978 and the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping, who drastically revised the economic system of China to include elements of capitalism. The pro-democracy movement in 1989 resulted in a government crackdown on demonstrators and the death of hundreds in Tiananmen Square by government soldiers. The action was widely condemned internationally. Guan Wei came to Australia in 1989 and decided to return in 1990 to live. He could see that there was great difficulty in remaining in China, especially with the lack of artistic freedom.<sup>12</sup>

## PRACTICE

### Harmony and respect for the environment



This gigantic mural made up of 120 panels and over 18 metres long is concerned with a harmonious relationship between all living things. The grid lines formed between the panels act like lines on a map. Additional lines could be weather isobars or indicate currents flowing across the ocean. There are figures, who swim underwater or backstroke, and are seemingly calm. The figures can see the wonderful marine life that is rendered in great detail with bright colours – a stingray, exotic fish, sea turtle, corals and sponges. A sea monster in the form of a giant fish swims on the surface. There are islands and the Australian coastline complete with silhouettes of emus and kangaroos.

A fleet of 18th European sailing ships is heading towards the land to colonise. Many small islands have exotic, colourful birds sitting on the small areas of land and the four winds blow from the main compass points. The artist has appropriated the personification of the winds from 17th century European exploration maps. He includes his motif of the Chinese clouds to provide a contrast to the blue of the ocean, in which the subtle modelling of darker and lighter hues suggests both variation of ocean depth and recession into another spatial plane. The clouds, people and animals seem superimposed. The distinction between different times is again blurred – the mythological, historical and present-day events and objects can exist together.<sup>13</sup>

Guan Wei  
*Feng Shui* 2004  
acrylic on composite board  
(120 panels)  
540 x 1800cm  
Museum of Contemporary Art,  
donated through the Australian  
Government's Cultural Gifts Program  
by Cromwell Diversified Property  
Trust, 2017. Image courtesy of the  
artist. Photograph Dr Allan Chawner.

## PRACTICE

The artist's sense of the relatively pristine and harmonious environment and animals of Australia was heightened when he revisited China after some years in Australia. Guan Wei was acutely aware of the pollution of his homeland. In this work he seeks to find balance and harmony through the placement of visual elements – floating figures and clouds, beautiful marine creatures and birds – in the blue space of the infinite ocean. The concept of balance to create harmony and calmness comes from Taoism philosophy (Yin and Yang) and the placement mantras of feng shui. To quote Guan Wei:

*Harmony is the marrow of eastern philosophy. So in my painting I always use this idea.<sup>14</sup>*

### FENG SHUI

Feng shui is an ancient practice that was formalised over 3000 years ago in China. Historically, feng shui was widely used to orient buildings in an auspicious (favourable) manner – often spiritually significant structures such as tombs but also dwellings and other structures. Feng shui means ‘wind water’, two of earth's flowing elements. You can see elements of wind and water in Guan Wei's large mural *Feng Shui* 2004.

In Chinese culture, wind and water are associated with good health. Good feng shui came to mean good fortune. Some elements of feng shui practice relate closely to Taoism and the belief that a balance of the feminine (Yin) and the masculine (Yang) is essential.

Feng shui is sometimes thought to be the art of placement – understanding how the placement of yourself and objects within a space affects your life in various areas of experience.<sup>15</sup>

## PRACTICE

### Other histories: mapping alternate journeys



Guan Wei's work is exemplified by the remarkable project commissioned by MAAS, Sydney (2008): *Other Histories, Guan Wei's Fable for a Contemporary World*. The detail from *The God of Longevity* is a small part of a huge installation. Other Histories 'was based on an imaginary history and the idea of a Ming dynasty admiral's epic voyages in the early 15th century'. The exhibition, Guan Wei hoped, would function as a 'floating corridor in which history and memory, fact and fiction are blurred'.<sup>16</sup>

In this work, Guan Wei paints the darkness of the night sky. The horizontal and vertical lines in this artwork represent elliptic lines; the circles with constellational dots represent images of a hexagram and elements of feng shui from *The Book of Changes*.<sup>17</sup>

The galaxy extends throughout the whole picture. *The God of Longevity*, seen in the top section riding a deer, is auspicious in Chinese culture. He is being blown through the cosmos by the wind. The dragon represents magic and power and the humorous 'sky pig' part of the Chinese zodiac, speeds across the heavens. There is a silhouetted figure of an Aboriginal man with a spear in the bottom corner of the work looking at the night sky to witness the cosmic changes that herald this re-imagined journey of Chinese Admiral Zheng He. There is the real possibility that Admiral Zheng He could have navigated to Australia in 1400s.

Guan Wei, *God of Longevity*, 2008, 450 x 240 cm, installation view at the National Gallery of Victoria, Ian Potter Building, Melbourne. Image courtesy of the artist and ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne © Guan Wei / Copyright Agency, 2020.

## PRACTICE

As a storyteller, Guan Wei included historical items from the museum's collection, such as a model of Captain Cook's HM *Endeavour*, and cabinets of ancient Chinese artefacts, maps and old navigational tools.<sup>18</sup>

There are works painted directly on the museum walls that add to the narrative. Guan Wei incorporates a Chinese stylised sea pattern borrowed from blue and white porcelain, and integrates it with an early European map-making style, complete with scary sea monsters to deter would-be mariners from sailing too far from their known land.

### The God of Longevity

The star of the South Pole in Chinese astronomy is called Shouxing, or the old man of the South Pole. It represents the God of Longevity and is believed to control the life spans of mortals. According to legend, the God of Longevity was carried in his mother's womb for ten years before being born, and was already an old man when born. He carries a peach as a symbol of immortality. The longevity god is usually shown smiling and friendly, and he may sometimes be carrying a gourd filled with the elixir of life.<sup>19</sup>

The Celestial God of Longevity represents good fortune. He can be recognised by his large forehead, extended earlobes and trailing beard, and is usually represented riding a deer. Whenever this celestial god shines, felicity prevails. In his heavenly form as the Southern Cross, the celestial God of Longevity shines his light on this unique and wondrous continent. For centuries these brilliant stars have lured people to seek their future in this Great Southern Land.<sup>20</sup>



## PRACTICE

### MATERIAL PRACTICE

Guan Wei works with different media and his work has evolved as he continues to try new materials and techniques. He began primarily as a painter, working on a much smaller scale with available materials. His recent mural works and installations are enormous. He has also created many solo exhibitions that include works on paper (paint, collage, silkscreen) and canvas, sculptural pieces in bronze and ceramic, wall paintings and videos based on his exploration of ideas.

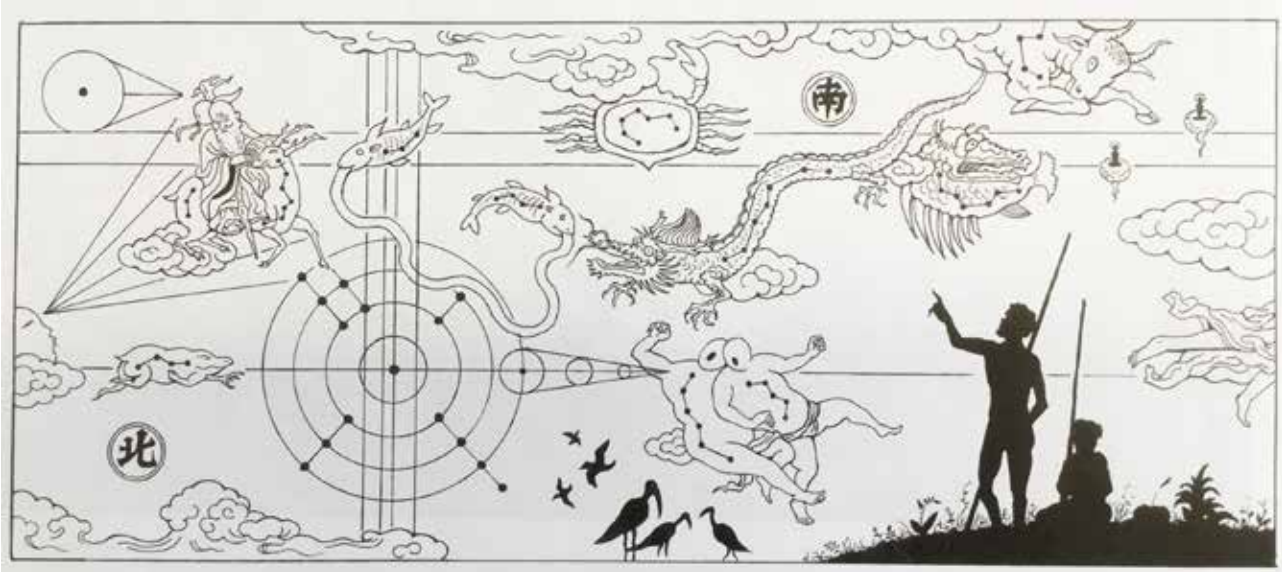
Guan Wei plans his work by developing ideas from research combined with his cultural background knowledge. For example, in order to understand the colonial settlement of Australia, he studied primary source material from archives and museums found in London during an Australia Council for the Arts residency in 2015. He also visited an art camp in Darwin in 2006 to gain some understanding of Aboriginal belief/lore and connection to Country. His Chinese background allows accessibility to a rich tapestry of cultural symbols and beliefs and knowledge of Chinese aesthetics.

Pencil drawings are made first and then coloured (see below). In the plan for Feng Shui (MCA 2019–2020), you can see the hung works, the projection and the vitrine (containing a hand scroll), plus the works that were painted directly on the gallery wall.

Guan Wei often works directly on the walls with acrylic paint and brushes. He also employs other artists who he directs to work on specific sections of his work. The author asked him about these collaborations:

*Every artist I work with will be based on their individual characteristics to make some of the details of the work. If you have Jia, he is good at drawing water. Some are good at drawing animals; some are good at painting flowers and so on. I'm controlling the big picture. Because of the different skills of these artists, the final work can be made more meticulous, rich and exquisite.<sup>21</sup>*

## PRACTICE



Top: From Guan Wei's sketchbook: pencil sketch from a public art proposal *Starry Night* (2015) that did not go ahead.

Above: From Guan Wei's sketchbook: colour version, *Starry Night* proposal, 2015. There are many elements here that can be found in the MAAS exhibition of 2008, *Other Stories – Guan Wei's Fable for a Contemporary World*, 2008.

Bronze sculptural works are cast by commissioned fabricators in Beijing, using a mould taken from the sculpture shaped by the artist. Guan Wei also goes to the pottery town of Jingdezhen, China, where he decorates his pottery forms traditionally manufactured in the workshops there.

The work *Plastic Surgery – Portrait of an Immigrant Artist* 2015 is a complex work that shows how Guan Wei uses ideas and materials in his practice. *Plastic Surgery* consists of four canvases.<sup>22</sup>

## PRACTICE



The first one represents Guan's memory of China as a young person and shows the cover of his secret personal file held by the Communist government. The second and third canvases reflect Guan Wei's life after coming to Australia. There are diagrams of his DNA and blood type as analysed by computers, a health report, along with a chart of Westerners' features, such as thin lips, high nose and blue eyes for reference and possible change. It was an emotional experience for Guan Wei to establish his identity in a foreign place.

The fourth canvas represents a confirmation of a new identity and we see Guan Wei with blond hair and fair skin. This canvas includes the 887 immigration form (for a skilled regional visa), a certificate of Australian Citizenship and the documents that can prove identity. The name on the business card also changed from Guan Wei to David Guan. Many immigrants have faced a similar situation. They are either accepted or rejected.

*Plastic Surgery* is based on memories of a difficult time; however, the artist tries to incorporate humour into his identity change. The 'plastic surgery' was metaphorical rather than physical. In this work, he uses an extensive vocabulary of symbols drawn from Chinese language and communist bureaucracy, scientific notation, facial features, graphs, stamps and flags to communicate this idea. It's a strange-looking, fully assimilated Guan Wei in the last canvas and it makes us think about how we make judgements about immigrants in Australia and how emotionally difficult it is for people from an entirely different culture to become truly Australian.

Above: Layout plans from Guan Wei's sketchbook for the installation *Feng Shui*, at MCA, 2019–2020. Note the large works that are painted on the gallery walls. *Paper War* 2004, is seen in the bottom panel. There is a video screen under the silhouette of the helicopter (commission for SBS & Australian Centre for the Moving Image, Melbourne).

Right: Guan Wei  
*Plastic Surgery – Portrait of an Immigrant Artist* 2005  
acrylic on linen  
4 panels, each 180x100x5cm  
Image courtesy of the artist  
and ARC ONE Gallery,  
Melbourne © Guan Wei /  
Copyright Agency, 2020.



## THE FRAMES

**Students learn about the frames – subjective, cultural, structural and postmodern – that provide different philosophical/theoretical and interpretive frameworks for understanding the layering of meaning, significance, value and belief in and about the visual arts.**

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

## ARTWORK ANALYSIS USING THE FRAMES

### STRUCTURAL FRAME

**Students...consider how artworks can be read and their meaning understood in terms of how specific symbols refer to the world.**

**Students...study how visual information is transmitted in artworks, how the formal and organisational relationships in a work mean certain things and how the visual arts can operate as a visual language at a certain time and over time.**

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

*Secret Histories No. 2* 2005 is a triptych in monochromatic blues. Guan Wei often uses blue, for example, in the large mural *Feng Shui* 2004, as the most prominent colour, usually in reference to the spectacular blueness of the ocean. Each section is in a vertical format similar to the traditional format of Chinese scroll painting (see 'Chinese Scrolls', 33). There is the recognisable silhouette of Ned Kelly (he has appropriated the symbol of the slotted armour used by Sidney Nolan in his substantial series on Ned Kelly <sup>23</sup>), classical busts of two Europeans, two cloaked, partially hidden figures and an emu. There are four faceless ghost-like figures symmetrically mirrored within the composition that has a feel of balance sought in the practice of feng shui (see 'Feng Shui', 14). The dark silhouetted figures contrast the curious white forms suggesting difference, perhaps Eastern versus Western viewpoints.

The cloaked figure is seen in another series, *Reflection No. 10* 2017 <sup>24</sup>, which is a vision of utopian early settlement of Australia. There is a demon figure with wings and tail, possibly derived from medieval European imagery.

## THE FRAMES

The foreground includes plants and the pierced rocks typical of formal, walled Chinese gardens, with the shadowing and darkness of tone suggesting night. Traditional Chinese gardens were meant to evoke a feeling of being in the larger natural world, so by visiting the garden one could experience the sensations of wandering through landscape. Compositions of garden rocks were viewed as mountain ranges: miniature trees suggested ancient forests: small ponds represented rivers and oceans.<sup>25</sup> The garden represented the world of nature in microcosm. Gardens in China are designed as places to provide refuge and spiritual comfort. The composition provides a formal spatial construct for the narrative that Guan Wei has devised.

The emu silhouette is a symbol of Australia and in *Secret Histories No. 2* it is an exotic creature in a Chinese garden. Guan Wei includes many animals, both real and imaginary, in his works, as fundamental to the existence of our world. The work is painted with slightly modelled areas of flat colour that are carefully outlined in Guan Wei's characteristic graphic style. The line wraps around the shapes in a similar way to comic design, which had an influence on Guan Wei's early works.

As the title suggests there is a secretive playfulness as Ned Kelly is hiding behind the garden wall. Ned Kelly was an Australian outlaw who robbed and murdered. He has become in some ways a heroic anti-establishment figure from the early settlement of Australia. Guan Wei in this work has made Ned Kelly an international visitor to a Chinese world.

The classical busts in the centre panel are reminiscent of the life-like sculptures of important figures of power – generals, royalty and the wealthy – commissioned to emphasise their importance and immortalise the subject. Here, in this work, they could be seen as important colonial visitors. Are they searching for Ned Kelly? This idea is supported by another work by Guan Wei titled *Where's Ned Kelly?* 2004.<sup>26</sup>

## THE FRAMES

In *Where's Ned Kelly?*, an unknown land is seen as an aerial map, labelled with the word 'secret' and surrounded by dark silhouettes of military ships, aircraft and invading troops. There are two aiming sight symbols and a boatload of Guan Wei's pink, distressed figures escaping to 'the sea of plenty', which is marked on the map. It suggests that the infamous Ned Kelly has also escaped.



Left: James Waltham Curtis (1839–1901)  
*A strange apparition: Ned Kelly's Fight and Capture*  
wood engraving printed in *The Age*. Image public domain.

Right: Guan Wei  
*Secret Histories No. 2* 2005  
acrylic on canvas  
127 x 159cm  
image courtesy the artist and  
ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne  
© Guan Wei / Copyright  
Agency, 2020.



### Ned Kelly, Australian Bushranger

Ned Kelly was born in June 1855, in Beveridge, Victoria. He died at the gallows in Melbourne Gaol on 11 November 1880. He is well known as a bushranger and it is undisputed that he was a notorious criminal, feared around Victoria and beyond as a robber and murderer. Despite this, he had many sympathisers who believed that he was a symbol of the Australian spirit – an enduring underdog with the courage to challenge the authorities.

The 'Kelly gang' wore a 'letterbox'-style headpiece and matching body armour that feature prominently in the work of artists such as Sidney Nolan and Albert Tucker as well as the work of Guan Wei. The suits allowed the gang to walk away unharmed from close-range shooting and made the gang members seem larger, more intimidating; even ghostly.<sup>27</sup>

## THE FRAMES

### CULTURAL FRAME

....students...consider how notions of cultural identity can inform the production of artworks. Students may study differing cultural attitudes towards the visual arts and the effects of scientific and technological innovation, politics and economics. They may study concepts of social and cultural identity (e.g. gender, Indigenous, regional, national, modern, contemporary etc.) on artistic practices in particular places at a certain time and over time.

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

Another example of Guan Wei moving between the two cultures of China and Australia to draw inspiration is *Buddha's Hand #13* 2010, a part of a larger series of small poetic works on paper composed of delicate soft hues with a gentleness of touch. The compositions are masterly balanced and controlled. Guan Wei makes a direct reference to Buddhism in the depiction of the posed hand, which is a symbol of Buddhist teaching. One example is the ancient Chinese wall painting, *Buddha and Bodhisattvas*,<sup>28</sup> from Dunhuang's Mogao Caves (see 'Buddhism', 26). Guan Wei refers to these caves as a source of Buddhist imagery. You can see the teaching gesture of the main figure in the way the hand is posed.

What is Guan Wei trying to teach us in this work? The hand of Buddha rests on a floating cloud; the stylisation of the cloud is seen in many of Guan Wei's works. Most traditional Chinese landscape paintings show mist or clouds, which symbolise good fortune and happiness and are understood to arise from the union of the two main principles, Yin and Yang.<sup>29</sup> The artist is sending a message about harmony, and the idea that the natural world needs balance in order to achieve harmony.

Guan Wei also includes a single, naked figure, curled into a foetal position and floating in the mist. Harmony, between self and the environment, is the intention. The red dots, which appear in every work in this series, represent acupuncture points in traditional Chinese healing, and are used as a graphic device to provide contrast and visual interest.

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For the Chinese people the colour red represents happiness, beauty, vitality, good luck, success and good fortune. This interpretation is supported by this quote from Guan Wei:

*I hope that we will be able to transcend the restrictions imposed on us by such notions as nation, ethnicity, ideology, cultural and history, and redefine our relationship with one another and nature.*<sup>31</sup>

*Buddha's Hand* is connected to a second series titled *Salvation* 2015 through subject matter. In *Salvation*, a number of sleek and playful bronze sculptures depict little human figures tethered to the Buddha's head. The scale of these works is also small compared to the scale of Guan Wei's mural and installation works, suitable to be shown within an intimate and domestic space. The mask-like head is a smooth, curved form with the closed eyes, long ear lobes and calm expression characteristic of Buddhist sculptures. The face of the Buddha sits quietly at the base of the sculpture and the figures playfully interact with it. Guan Wei explains in the following passage:

*Each of us wishes to be good, and has an innate yearning for happiness. But amongst a busy, bustling world and our stressful, uncertain and secular lives, we have lost ourselves. Salvation is to present a happy life of Zen. A spirit, which believes in people's inherent tranquillity and goodness, Zen requires a person's heart to be free and to discover their true self – ultimately leading to a life of wisdom and happiness.*<sup>32</sup>

Zen is a meditation practice where knowledge can be achieved through the emptying the mind of thoughts and giving attention to only one thing. There is gratitude for a life lived well in the feel of these engaging works. Guan Wei is asking his audience to seek a happy and good life and to not stress. The figure in *Salvation No. 1* has just the legs, poised on tippy-toe on the nose of the Buddha, with its torso literally in the clouds. The visual pun of the work would bring a smile to the audience. In the other works in this series, the figure is balancing upside-down, balanced precariously on the head of Buddha or entering the mind of the Buddha through the back of the head.

Previous to making these two series, in 2009 Guan Wei created a series of sculptural works titled *Cloud*. His familiar amorphous figures are seen to dance with clouds often balanced on their extended limbs. The recurring



## THE FRAMES

use of perfectly rendered clouds is one aspect of Guan Wei's 'very personal visual symbols', representing leisure and ease of movement; they are a positive and joyful element and a metaphor for thought:

*Freedom, like a cloud habitat in the mountains, sea, ground and wind there, clouds on the move to where there is no resistance, nor a struggle – quiet, nothing to achieve, and nothing to lose except to enjoy the presence of inaction, to celebrate the joy of the moment.*<sup>33</sup>

The evolving nature of Guan Wei's practice is seen in these three series of sculptural works. Through them ideas are expanded and different media used to express the artist's purpose.



*Top left: Buddha's Hand #13 2010  
acrylic on canvas, 25 x 30cm  
Image courtesy the artist and  
ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne  
© Guan Wei /Copyright Agency,  
2020*

*Top right: Salvation No. 1 2015  
bronze, 33 x 19 x 32cm  
Image courtesy the artist and ARC  
ONE Gallery, Melbourne  
© Guan Wei /Copyright Agency,  
2020*

The artist in 2016 at his Beijing studio. Image courtesy the artist and ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne.



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### **Buddhism**

Buddhism started as a Hindu-influenced religion in India. Buddha's life and original teachings come from the 1st century BC. Buddhism has had a long history in China and has been instrumental in shaping Chinese culture and tradition. Although communism disrupted the following of Buddhism as a religion in China, beliefs are still strong in contemporary China.

Chinese Buddhists believe in a combination of Taoism and Buddhism, meaning they pray to both Buddha and Taoist gods. Just like Taoists, Chinese Buddhists also pay homage to their ancestors, with the belief that they need and want their help. It is believed that enlightenment, existence after death at a higher level of being (reincarnation), can be achieved within a lifetime by following the teachings of the Buddha. Good conduct (virtue) with meditation to train the mind to be pure and calm will result in wisdom, and therefore a better life.<sup>34</sup>

Buddhists try not to harm animals. The doctrine of karma teaches that wrong behaviour will have to be paid for in a future life. Buddhists treat the lives of animals and animals with equal respect. Guan Wei includes many animals, both real and imaginary, in his works, as fundamental to the existence of our world.

The 'Laughing Buddha', also called Budai, has been the most common and most popular depiction of Buddha in China for centuries. Chinese Buddhists' main goal in life is to 'be happy', and it's for this reason that depictions of Buddha in China show him as being fat, and laughing or smiling.



*Buddhist Monk Budai*  
Qing Dynasty  
17th-18th century China  
porcelain  
17.1 x 18.4 x 14cm  
The Friedsam Collection,  
Bequest of Michael Friedsam,  
1931, Metropolitan Museum, NYC.  
Image public domain.

## THE FRAMES

This sculpture from the Chinese Qing Dynasty (1644–1911) is of Budai, a tenth-century monk. Named after the cloth sack (budai) that he carries under his arm, he is believed to be the incarnation of Maitreya, the future Buddha, who helps common people in the mortal world. *Budai* is made from porcelain from Fujian Province, China, and is characterised by its thick, lustrous, clear glaze and white paste. It is generally referred to in Western writings as blanc de chine or ‘China white’.<sup>35</sup>

### **Buddhist Hand Gestures**

The *Vitarka mudrā* or ‘mudra of discussion’ is the hand gesture of intellectual discussion and transmission of Buddhist teaching. It is done by joining the tips of the thumb and the index together and keeping the other fingers straight. There are variations but generally it refers to teaching. Guan Wei often uses Buddhist hand gestures in his work.<sup>36</sup>

Guan Wei refers to these caves as a source of Buddhist imagery. You can see the teaching gesture of the main figure.<sup>37</sup>



*Buddha and Bodhisattvas*, wall painting from Dunhuang, Mogao Caves, China.

Image public domain.

## THE FRAMES

### SUBJECTIVE FRAME

**... students ...develop personal responses to artists and artworks that are highly significant to them. They can explore artworks as expressive and unique objects, develop notions of individual styles, and interpret the work and the influence of those artists who are of great personal interest to them**

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012

*Extraordinary World No. 1* is part of a set of ceramic forms exhibited in 2014 in a show called *Archaeology* at ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne. The works were made at the porcelain workshops in Jingdezhen, China (see 'Blue and white porcelain from China', 29) and include combined imagery from European, Chinese and Australian sources.

Guan Wei has used a traditional method of drawing on the white surface with cobalt, which gives the dark blue line. The largest motif of the work is a disembodied leg that crushes a demonic figure beneath the foot. The work has a number of mythological figures with wings and horns that come from medieval European sources. One winged demon, which could be riding a broomstick, is chased by a snake; snakes are much feared in Australia.

There are angelic figures with halos looking on from the stylised clouds. Lyrical human figures float through the white space. The line work is energetic and precise and there is a sense of an unknown narrative taking place. Lines and letters add to the view that the work makes reference to the cosmos where human existence, demons and beasts, animals and plants are juxtaposed across time and space. Maybe it is a reminder that human beings are just a small part of an infinite and ancient universe that is filled with mythical and magical creatures. The demons are being subdued in the work, perhaps sending a message from the artist that we can all do this in our lives.

Guan Wei creates traditional shapes made on a pottery wheel. The forms are vase-like with a narrowed opening, a shape made as early as the Tang Dynasty in China (618–907 AD). The older forms are a great source of research for archaeologists as they reveal cultural knowledge of the time. Guan Wei talks about his use of ceramics:

*...I have discovered the wonderful medium of ceramics, a form that has a very deep and long history, in itself holding the password to all culture and historical legends. The name 'Archaeology' inspires within me ideas that are mysterious, sensual, and distant, ideas that are all linked to our memory of culture.<sup>38</sup>*

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*Extraordinary World No. 1* 2014, ceramic, 44cm x 32cm. Image courtesy the artist and ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne © Guan Wei / Copyright Agency, 2020.



### Blue and white porcelain from China

The blue in this porcelain is made using cobalt oxide to create designs on shaped clean, white clay that is then covered in a layer of transparent glaze and baked in a kiln at high temperatures. Traces of blue and white wares are found beginning in the Tang dynasty (618–907), but it was not until the Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) that the art reached perfection. In the early 14th century, mass production of fine, transparent blue and white porcelain started at Jingdezhen, sometimes called the ‘porcelain capital of China’.<sup>39</sup>

Guan Wei makes his porcelain forms in the workshops in Jingdezhen using the same techniques. His drawings are used to decorate the surface of the porcelain forms using a brush and cobalt oxide. The Chinese artist Ah Weiwei made the porcelain sunflower seeds for his mammoth work at the Tate Modern in the workshops in the same area. The artist Ah Xian creates decorated porcelain busts that reflect his Chinese heritage.<sup>40</sup>

Guan Wei, *Fish God* 2017, bronze, 42 x 56 x 62cm. Image courtesy the artist and ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne

© Guan Wei /Copyright Agency, 2020.



## THE FRAMES

Guan Wei, *No 1 Sky Pig* 2017, 80 x 40 x 35cm, bronze, ed 1-3/3. Lake Macquarie Cultural Trail, Warners Bay Foreshore. Acquired from the Artist with funds from the Tourism Demand Driver Infrastructure Program through the NSW Department of Industry.



The exhibition has a small bronze, *Fish God* 2017. Both this work and *Sky Pig*, a larger version of which can be viewed on the Lake Macquarie sculpture walk (Warners Bay), are from the same series based on the Chinese zodiac. The third work is a dragon. The happy fish that we see here is poking its tongue out. It is full of boisterous charm and cheekiness as it sits atop its cloud throne, which is in keeping with the royal title. The fish is one of the eight Buddhist symbols of good fortune. It is a symbol of abundance and wealth.

*Sky Pig* is also a very happy beast. It sits on a cloud and appears to be flying at speed through the heavens with human legs and arms stretched out. He is the speeding pig. His eyes and smile show great contentment. It is a sinuous, elongated pig form with tiny delicate ears and pointy tail. The pig in Chinese culture represents luck, overall good fortune, and honesty, symbolising a hardworking and peace-loving person. If you were born under the pig zodiac you would be a sociable person with a large sense of humour and understanding.

These are both whimsical and humorous sculptures of anthropomorphised (combining human and animal features) mythical creatures. Guan Wei talks about the relationship between humans and animals in the following quote:

*The relationship between humans and animals goes way back. People across all societies attribute different human characteristics to animals, and vice versa; the mystery of dragons, the agility of eagles, the power of lions, and the fear and cunningness of snakes. Based on these traits, I have used human qualities in their opposite to create three 'mascots', Sky Pig, Power Dragon, and Fish God. They have delicate details and uniquely humorous appearances.*

*I hope that they can bring you joy and luck in life.<sup>42</sup>*

## THE FRAMES

### Postmodern Frame

*students ...question practice in art and the generally accepted classifications of artists, artworks, movements and styles. They can identify inconsistencies in what is written. They can re-evaluate notions of the artistic genius and the masterpiece, and study influences and chronologies to reveal power relations, disjunctions and hidden assumptions.*

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012



Guan Wei, *Platypus* 2006  
acrylic on paper, 27 x 36cm.  
Image courtesy of the artist  
and ARC ONE Gallery, Melbourne  
© Guan Wei /Copyright Agency,  
2020.

*Platypus* was one of the works shown in the exhibition *Other Histories – a Fable for a Contemporary World* in 2008, at MAAS, Sydney, along with a vast installation of paintings, sculptures and artefacts. *Platypus* has the appearance of a Chinese scroll painting with a vertical, long and narrow format. Guan Wei said that he first used this format due to having lots of old window frames that he reused for his canvases. However, in this work he deliberately sets out to imitate a traditional landscape scroll.

## THE FRAMES

It is executed in black ink with calligraphic brushwork on paper in the style of ancient traditional works. The paper has been selected to suggest age, most likely handmade rice paper and has the graphic qualities of woodblock. The signature seals or chops are typical of Chinese traditional scroll paintings. Guan Wei's father introduced him to traditional Chinese painting and calligraphy when he was a young person in China (see 'Chinese Scrolls', 33).

From ancient times, Chinese landscape paintings have been understood as both an intimate expression of nature and as a way of conveying profound emotions. Literally translated, the Chinese characters for landscape mean 'mountain and water'. The mountains represent long life, and water the sea of happiness. In harmony, mountains and water symbolise a long happy life. This work shows a serene composition with the favourable element of water flowing around the platypus and rocks. Guan Wei has created this work to make a cultural connection with traditional Chinese history and aesthetics. He often combines imagery from different times and places to re-imagine an historic narrative. This work is the ancient Chinese naturalist version of the platypus.

In the work there are two platypuses. They are strange and unusual animals that caused great puzzlement for the early English colonial explorers and naturalists. The platypus was not supposed to exist, as there were no animals in the known world with similar physical features and behaviours. It was first colonially documented in 1799. The first drawings of this strange animal by colonial artists are almost comical and had little resemblance to a real platypus.

*The unusual appearance of this egg-laying, duck-billed, beaver-tailed, otter-footed mammal baffled European naturalists when they first encountered it, and the first scientists to examine a preserved platypus body judged it a fake, made of several animals sewn together.<sup>45</sup>*

In this work, Guan Wei has given the two platypuses smiling faces. They are friendly, beautiful and curious creatures from a magical place. He arranges them within a simple drawn landscape, the line work suggesting a receding space and the movement of the water as it flows around rocky forms. As an artwork it pretends to be what it is not and is shown in a contemporary context as a document from history.



## THE FRAMES

### Chinese Scrolls

Chinese scrolls are in two different forms. The most well known is the hanging scroll. These are vertical in format and several scrolls may be hung together to complete a story. The subject matter can vary, from landscapes, people and animals to calligraphy. The materials are usually handmade papers with inks or coloured pigments mounted on silk surrounds. Scrolls are hung on the walls.<sup>46</sup>

Guan Wei first used this format as a young artist in Beijing when he found many window frames that he could use as canvas stretchers. He has a laugh when critics link his use of long narrow vertical formats to the influence of traditional scrolls. Today he chooses to use the format as he has gotten used to it and enjoys the composition.



Shen Zhou  
*Lofty Mount Lu*  
Ming Dynasty 1467<sup>47</sup>  
hanging scroll, ink and colours  
on paper  
193.8 x 98.1cm  
Collection National Palace  
Museum, Taipei  
Image public domain.

## THE FRAMES

Hand scrolls are made with similar materials and techniques but are in the form of a long strip, the narrative of the painting revealed in sections reading from right to left as the scroll is unrolled. Hand scrolls are read more like a book and are much more private.



Guan Wei  
*Shoe* 1992  
paint on canvas  
127 x 46cm  
Private Collection  
© Guan Wei /Copyright Agency,  
2020.

*Shoe* 1992 is an early work by Guan Wei. It depicts a nude couple holding hands with a heart-like form in a vessel, perhaps a glass beaker, above a hand that holds a woman's shoe. The man has his eyes covered with a black rectangle that in a contemporary world is a symbol of censorship. The woman holds a cloth to her breasts for modesty. The depiction of nudity is censored in China and Guan Wei might be making reference to new artistic freedoms after immigrating to Australia in 1990.

There is an obvious parallel with the Northern European work *The Arnolfini Portrait* 1434, by Jan van Eyck,<sup>48</sup> as the hand gestures and relationship between the two figures is very similar. Guan Wei appropriates some of the symbolism used in both works. The work is titled *Shoe* and the way the shoe is lifted up to the couple by another suggests that it has significance. In the Jan van Eyck work there are two shoes on the floor of the couple's bedchamber. The shoes have been removed in acknowledgment of the sanctity and holiness of marriage.

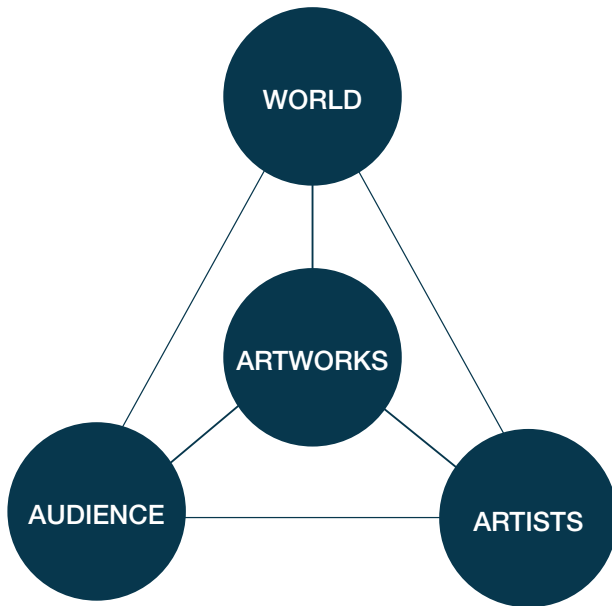
Shoes are often removed in religious settings, both Eastern and Western. In both works the man's hand is raised vertically. A Western view might see this gesture as one of authority. In Buddhism, the hand in this position is one of blessing or protection.<sup>49</sup> In both paintings the couple hold hands signifying their commitment to each other, although in a contemporary context this might mean more choice and independence for the woman.

In the Jan van Eyck painting the green of the woman's dress symbolises hope and fertility, possibly the hope of becoming a mother. In *Shoe* the cloth is also green and perhaps this couple are already pregnant. The tadpoles in the blue section of the composition could be sperm. An interpretation of this work could be 'you hold my heart in your hands'.

## THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework provides a model for understanding the agencies in the art world – the artist, artwork, world and audience, and the relationships between them. Through the conceptual framework, students learn about:

NSW Board of Studies, Visual Arts Stage 6 Syllabus, 2012



### WORLD

(Refer also to the Cultural and Postmodern Frames and Conceptual Practice)

**How interests in the world are represented in art**  
(art as a representation of experience, class, ideology, age, events of significance).

### AUDIENCE

(Refer also to the Subjective Frame and Conceptual Practice)  
**The role and value of the audience** as a body of critical consumers.

The concept of the audience includes art critics and art historians as well as teachers, students, entrepreneurs, patrons and other members of the public. Audiences for works change over time and bring different meanings to artworks, artists and interpretations of the world.

Guan Wei first came to Australia in 1989 as an artist-in-residence in Tasmania. From 1990, Guan Wei has been living as a permanent resident and now has studios in Sydney and Beijing. He has received large commissions for public spaces; the most significant has been the mural work *Journey to Australia* 2013, which was commissioned for the foyer for the new extension of the Museum of Contemporary Art.

This work showed his concern for the 'boat people' refugees who faced the hardships of a dangerous journey to escape persecution and possibility death. Every visitor to the MCA would have seen this work.

Guan Wei's works are underpinned by his Chinese heritage. He grew up in the time of the Cultural Revolution and realised after visiting Australia in 1989 that Australia was to be his preferred home. As an immigrant, he experienced difficulties with his new identity. He also was acutely aware of the lack of personal freedoms in China and the political banter in Australia about 'boat people' and 'the war on terror'. He makes reference to the history of colonial settlement and the magical and spiritual world of Aboriginal peoples.

He likes to re-imagine histories to create new narratives about the past that blend with contemporary issues. He is able through his work to provide an alternative history; for example, in *Other Histories – Guan Wei's Fable for a Contemporary World*, a Chinese seafarer who 'discovered' Australia in the 1400s. He has a strong belief about the interconnectedness of all people in the world and through greater cultural understanding the possibility to achieve a better world. These themes have become embedded in his work. There is a growing concern about the environment. There is longing for the beauty and exotic of the pristine natural world.

## ARTIST

(Also refer to the Cultural Frame and Conceptual Framework)

**The role of the artist:** the who, what, how, and why. The concept of the artist encompasses practitioners such as artists, craftspeople, designers and architects. The artist can be thought of as an individual or as a group, school, movement, etc.

Guan Wei sees his role as an artist to create aesthetically beautiful works that tell a story. He is a maker of myths and re-imagined history. He is a social commentator. He is able to create a magical vision of the natural and cosmic world. Guan Wei creates a hybrid space, both Eastern and Western, where cultural and historic beliefs are questioned. In the quote below, he comments on his intentions as an artist:

***I hope that we will be able to transcend the restrictions imposed on us by such notions as nation, ethnicity, ideology, cultural and history, and redefine our relationship with one another and nature.<sup>2</sup>***

Guan Wei employs other artists to collaborate with the production of his artwork, especially the larger commissions and installations. He provides the concept and planning and directs additional artists who bring their individual skills to the project.

The MCA has a large collection of Guan Wei's work and he has been an artist-in-residence for this well-known public institution. He continues to produce a large body of work through his studios. Guan Wei is playful with his engagement with his audience. There is often humour and whimsy. He has been influenced by Buddhist teaching and seeks to remind his audience that there are alternative viewpoints where compassion and harmony in the world are promoted.

## ARTWORK

(Refer also to the Structural Frame and Material Practice)

**Artworks as real objects,** as material, physical and virtual objects.

The concept of artworks includes art, craft and design as two- and three-dimensional works (including architecture), and four-dimensional and time-based works. Artworks also exist as representations of ideas that reflect such things as personal responses, cultural views, symbolic interpretations and critical reinterpretations of other ideas.

Guan Wei's large public commissions and complex installations have a strong physical presence and energy as well as complexity in the story telling. Other works are smaller in scale and can be intimate expressions about human experience. His conceptual and material practice has evolved over time and new materials and technologies introduced. A spirit of enquiry, a curiosity and playfulness with ideas about his world, are a constant in the artworks of Guan Wei.

Guan Wei's work is instantly recognisable for his distinctive style (flat areas of colour with tonally blended edges that are outlined) and highly personal visual vocabulary; swirling waves and floating Chinese clouds, the large expanses of colour (mostly blue) and the strange beasts and fleshy pink, Buddha-like figures that inhabit a timeless world where creating artworks is seen as a constant journey to reflect on self and gain knowledge. In Guan Wei's words, he seeks balance and harmony:

***Harmony is the marrow of Eastern philosophy. So in my painting I always use this idea. The balance between elements of the work and balance between the visual and conceptual induces calm. The constantly reinvented traditional Chinese references create a new language that invites dialogue.<sup>50</sup>***

## PREVIOUS HSC EXAMINATION QUESTIONS RELEVANT TO THIS CASE STUDY

### PRACTICE

- 1** Discuss how cultural experience informs the practice of artists, art critics, art historians and/or curators. (2012)
- 2** As part of their practice, artists navigate emotional states and rational choices. Discuss this statement with reference to a range of examples. (2012)
- 3** Artists often employ others to assist in the production of their artworks. With reference to a range of examples, explain how outside assistance affects artists' practice. (2012)
- 4** Explain how and why practice in the visual arts evolves over time. In your answer you may refer to artists and/or art critics and/or art historians. (2013)
- 5** Explain how artists have transformed ideas into sophisticated and challenging works of art. In your answer, refer to specific artists and artworks. (2018)

### FRAMES

- 1** Artworks shape the way we understand culture. With reference to this statement, explain how artists raise awareness of economic, political or social issues. (2004)
- 2** Using the structural and cultural frames, interpret the work of an artist you have studied. (2006)
- 3** Most artists have critical and productive relationships with their culture. Explore this statement with reference to a range of examples where these relationships are demonstrated. (2011)
- 4** Analyse how artworks represent and document cultural histories. (2013)
- 5** Art does not need to imitate life. With reference to this statement, analyse how and why artists have used approaches other than realism. (2014)

- 6** All art is an individual's expression of culture. Cultures differ, so art looks different' Henry Glassie. With reference to this quotation, examine how artists interpret aspects of social and cultural identity. In your answer, refer to specific artists and artworks. (2016)
- 7** Analyse how meaning is communicated through the use of signs and symbols. In your answer, refer to specific artists and artworks. (2019)

### **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

- 1** Consider the following view: Artists often say what would otherwise remain unsaid.  
  
Discuss this view, using examples of artists whose functional role is to challenge mainstream values. (2007)
- 2** Art is an effort to create... a more humane world – Andre Maurois, French author  
  
To what extent does this quotation apply to artists and artworks you have studied? (2018)
- 3** To what extent are artworks a mirror and a lens of their time? In your answer, refer to specific artists and artworks. (2019)

## GLOSSARY

**acupuncture** – a medical treatment from China that involves putting special needles into particular parts of the body

**amorphous** – with no clear shape, design, or structure

**anthropomorphic** – considering something such as a god, an animal, or object as having human qualities or features. Guan Wei's *Sky Pig* has human features

**asylum** – the right to stay in a country, given by a government to protect someone who has escaped from war or political trouble in their own country.

**auspicious** – showing signs that suggest that something is likely to be successful

**bronze** – a hard brown metal used for making statues and objects. It is made by mixing copper and tin. The hot metal is poured into a cast of the sculpture

**Buddhism** – a religion of eastern and central Asia growing out of the teaching of Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) that suffering is inherent in life and that one can be liberated from it by cultivating wisdom, virtue, and concentration

**calligraphy** – writing done with pen or brush with ink and developed as an artform in China

**cartographic/cartography** – the work of making maps

**casting** – used to make sculptural works. The artwork is formed into a particular shape by pouring liquid into a mould

**constellation** – a group of stars that form a particular pattern in the skies. For example, The Southern Cross

**Cultural Revolution/Communism** – see 'A Brief History of Communism in China', 12

**diaspora** – The movement of a large group of people from their home country to another country. This produces large populations of people who are refugees

**fable** – a traditional story, usually about animals, that teaches a moral lesson

**feng shui** – see 'Feng Shui, 14



## GLOSSARY

**hybrid** – in biology, it is an animal or plant that has been produced from two different types of animal or plant. This idea can be extended as a blend of two different forms. In art practice it could be about combining ideas or media

**iconography** – the way in which a social or religious group represent their ideas in pictures

**isobar** – a line drawn on a weather map that connects places with the same air pressure

**juxtaposition** – to place things together or describe things together so that people can see how they are different

**meteorological** – the scientific study of weather

**monochromatic** – something that is monochromatic has only one colour, or shades of the same colour

**mythology** – a collection of ancient myths or stories, especially those of a particular country or religion

**narrative** – a story, or an account of something that has happened

**porcelain** – see “Blue and white porcelain from China’ 29

**Taoism** – an ancient Chinese religion and thought that says people should live a simple, natural, and honest life

**Terra Nullius** – in Australia, the legal idea that when the first Europeans arrived in Australia the land was owned by no one and therefore they were free to live there. This idea is not now part of Australian law. It is a Latin term

**The Book of Changes/ I Ching** – an ancient Chinese book of divination, in which 64 pairs of trigrams are shown with various interpretations. The I Ching is used to make future predictions

**triptych** – a painting done on three separate pieces that are joined to each other

**Yin and Yang** – In Chinese philosophy, the two opposite principles and forces that are thought to exist in all things

**vitrine** – a glass showcase or cabinet especially for displaying artworks or specimens

**Zen** – a form of Buddhism, originally developed in Japan that emphasises that religious knowledge is achieved through emptying the mind of thoughts and giving attention to only one thing, rather than reading religious writings

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

### VIDEO RESOURCES

*Australia and Me*, Guan Wei, 2010

Produced by the [Australian Department of Home Affairs](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3pNqlqdf7Wg>

Produced by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, Australia. 2019

Artist Guan Wei recounts his long-standing relationship with the MCA. From his 1989 residency and 1999 solo exhibition – the MCA's first ever solo exhibition – to his MCA Foyer Wall Commission in 2013 and second solo exhibition in 2019, drawn from the MCA Collection.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4047p3xnCg>

Paul Power on themes in Guan Wei's *The Journey to Australia*, 2013. Paul Power, CEO of the Refugee Council of Australia, discusses the refugee situation in Australia – the inspiration for Guan Wei's building commission *The Journey to Australia*, 2013.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3n4zwetNIN8>

### QUESTIONS FOR GUAN WEI

Email from December 2019; Guan Wei's responses in italics.

**1. Working with artist/collaborators on large projects, e.g. murals and installations. How do you direct these artist/helpers? Do they contribute artistically to the works in some way?**

*Usually before large-scale murals and installations. I'm going to think very deeply and then I'm going to make very detailed renderings. So in the self-production, basically will not leave my design too far. Every artist I work with will be based on their individual characteristics to make some of the details of the work. If you have, Jia is good at drawing water. Some are good at drawing animals; some are good at painting flowers and so on. I'm controlling the big picture. Because of the different skills of these artists, the final work can be made more meticulous, rich and exquisite*

**2. The colour palette in some works is often restricted, sometimes close to monochrome. Blue is a favourite. Also pink. Does the use of certain colours have a reason?**

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

*I am very strict in the use of colour when making large works. First of all, the first two or three basic colours, such as blue, pink, green, red and so on. Then the details will be mixed with a lot of colour. Blue and pink are my favourites. The blue colour comes directly from the ocean of Australia. Pink is the most representative of the soft, fresh life of the human body!*

**3. When you install an exhibition, there are works that are hung that have been completed in the studio. In addition, there are often paintings done directly on the walls. What influences your choice of imagery painted onto the walls directly?**

*Because my work is big enough, so the canvas works hang in my studio I can show the effect of the exhibition. But I still have to base it on the mural, space, time, place, theme and other factors to choose the image. For example, in 2013, MCA's Journey to Australia I chose the sea and the boat. Because the content of the murals and the environment of the garden-shaped pier are very fit. In Another History, The Great Voyage I chose a lot of ancient monsters because of what people imagined about the world more than 600 years ago. The sea is very afraid, imagine a lot of monsters!*

**4. Why have you included Ned Kelly? Other Australian artists, Tucker and Nolan for example, have used Ned Kelly in their paintings. What does Ned Kelly mean for you?**

*I have been living in Australia for many years and I know something about Ned Kelly. He's supposed to be a local hero in Australia. But Ned Kelly has painted a traditional Chinese landscape. So that the hero out of the country, more international.*

**5. Will issues about the environment be included in future works?**

*In the creation of future works. I may pay more attention to the negative effects of the rapid development of high technology, such as bioengineering and electronic engineering, on the natural environment, society, and our human life.*

## REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

**6. Your large installation at the Powerhouse, Other Histories included many objects so that the audience was immersed in the story. Would you ever consider including sounds? I ask this because sometimes when I look at your work I can imagine the sound of the birds and the song of the whales.**

*This proposal of yours is very good. I'll think it over. In the future exhibition, in addition to the visual effect. I'll factor in the hearing. Make the exhibition richer and more stereoscopic.*

**7. Your recent works on porcelain have included figures derived from Aboriginal art/stories. Will you explore Aboriginal stories, especially creation stories, in future works?**

*Yes, I am fascinated by the paintings of Aboriginal people and I love them very much. I will continue to understand and experience the spirit of it. Will be reflected in my future work.*

### ADDITIONAL WEBSITES

Unfamiliar Land Guan Wei written by Nicholas Jose, titled 'Fantastic Cosmographies' <http://www.jurn.org/ejournal/catalogue.pdf>

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