

SUSAN JACOBS - THE ANTS ARE IN THE IDIOM & STILL LIFE



TEACHER RESOURCE PACK

**We respectfully acknowledge the
Wurundjeri people of the Eastern Kulin nation,
the traditional owners of the land on which
Buxton Contemporary is situated.**

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INTRODUCTION

Teachers and students, we are excited to welcome you to Buxton Contemporary at the University of Melbourne for *The ants are in the idiom* and *Still Life*.

The ants are in the idiom is a presentation of newly commissioned work by Australian-born, London-based artist Susan Jacobs. A meditation on the relationship between language and matter, the exhibition is an expansive sculptural environment that draws the viewer into a web of visual riddles.

Jacobs' poetic approach to materials is underpinned by research into systems of thought that have shaped - and mis-shaped - human knowledge. Playful allusions to science, psychology and mythology jostle with visual puns and word games. Enlivened by the imaginative potential of misinterpretation, the exhibition is a rhizomatic sculptural network that stimulates a process of associative looking in the viewer.

Still Life brings together imagination and empirical observation to celebrate the interconnectedness of life.

The exhibition comprises artworks by eleven contemporary artists that explore the complexities of nature, emphasising interdependence and shifting states of being. These works contrast with teaching objects from the University of Melbourne's Herbarium collection, a selection of watercolours and papier mâché models representing artistic and scientific traditions, in which natural organisms are depicted in static isolation from their environment.

Many of the artworks in *Still Life* take as their starting point representational strategies from the natural sciences, such as botanical illustration, macro photography, specimen collection and field recordings. In the artists' hands these methodologies move beyond the observable world into a realm of abstraction, symbolism and fantasy.

EXHIBITION THEMES

- Artistic process
- Everyday materials and forms as art
- The formation of knowledge
- Language and etymology
- Misreading and misinterpretation - human perception
- Close looking and contemplation

See appendix for a detailed description of each theme.

HOW TO USE THIS RESOURCE:

- It is recommended that teachers read this entire pack to plan for your trip to Buxton Contemporary,
 - This resource contains activities for students to undertake before, during and after their exhibition visit and printable student worksheets.
 - A detailed Risk Assessment and artwork labels accompany this teacher resource and are downloadable via the Planning your School Visit webpage on the Buxton Contemporary website.
 - We recommend allowing 45-60 minutes for your visit to Buxton Contemporary to view both of these exhibitions, with time for discussion and to complete the activities provided.
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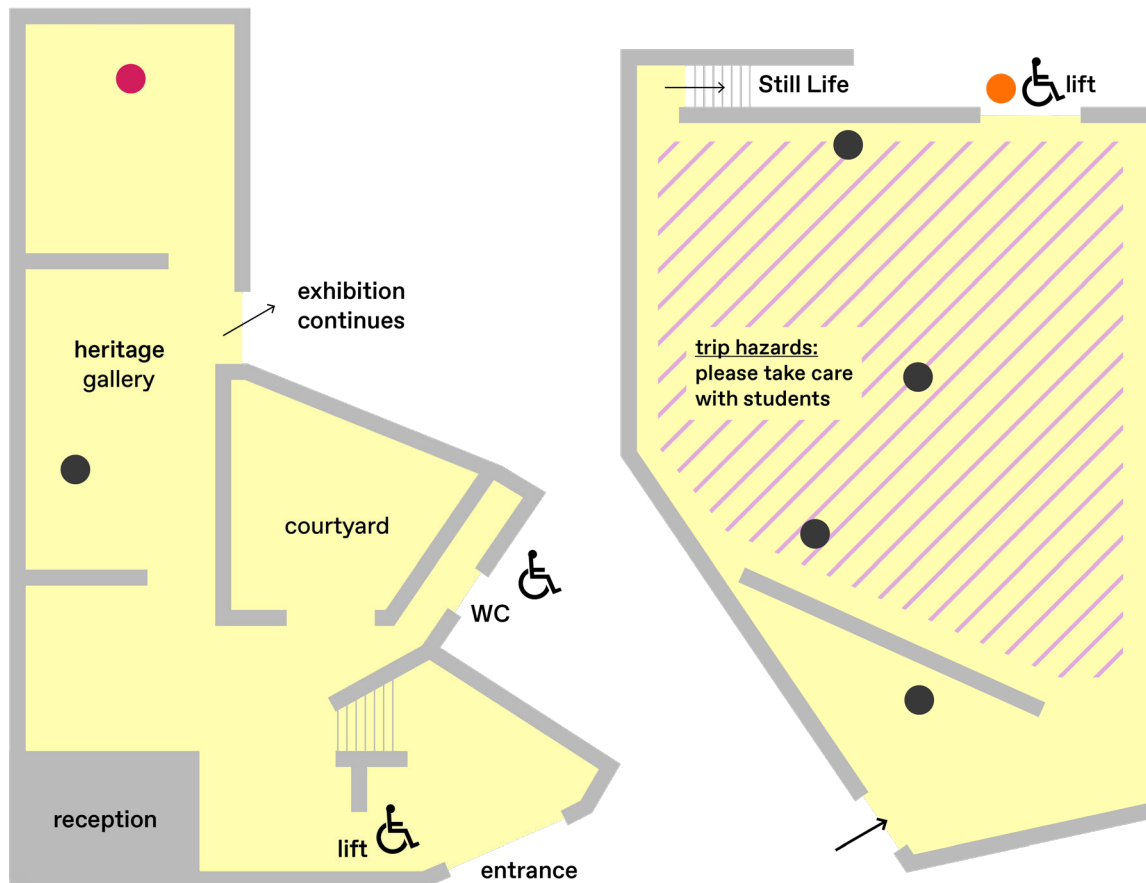


EXHIBITION MAP

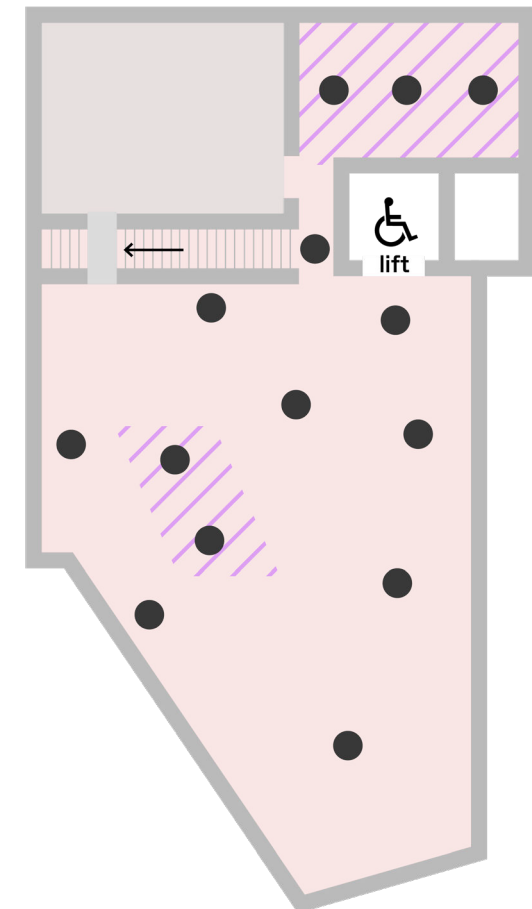
KEY

- Susan Jacobs - The ants are in the idiom
- Still Life
- Artwork
- WARNING: Exposed heat lamp in artwork
- High sensory artwork in enclosed space
- Delicate artwork area

Ground Floor



First Floor



CURRICULUM LINKS

The ants are in the idiom and *Still Life* offer valuable learning opportunities for students in Years 9-12, with strong curriculum links to Levels 9 & 10 Visual Arts, VCE Art and VCE Studio Arts. This learning resource is designed to help you get the most out of the exhibitions, with curriculum-specific activities provided for before, during and after your visit to Buxton Contemporary at the University of Melbourne.

The content provided for use during the exhibition is intended to be printed for students to complete whilst in the gallery. You might choose to lead the students through the exhibition or have them walk through independently for a self-directed learning experience.

LEVELS 9 & 10 (VICTORIAN CURRICULUM)

Visual Arts

- Explore how artists manipulate materials, techniques, technologies and processes to develop and express their intentions in art works ([VCAVAE041](#))
- Analyse and interpret artworks to explore the different forms of expression, intentions and viewpoints of artists and how they are viewed by audiences ([VCAVAR045](#))
- Analyse, interpret and evaluate a range of visual artworks from different cultures, historical and contemporary contexts, including artworks by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to explore differing viewpoints ([VCAVAR046](#))

Science

- Science as a human endeavour: Scientific understanding, including models and theories, are contestable and are refined over time through a process of review by the scientific community ([VCSSU114](#))

Critical & Creative Thinking

- Challenge previously held assumptions and create new links, proposals and artefacts by investigating ideas that provoke shifts in perspectives and cross boundaries to generate ideas and solutions ([VCCCTQ045](#))

VCE ART

- Unit 1 AOS 1, Unit 2 AOS 1, Unit 3 AOS 1

VCE STUDIO ARTS

- Unit 1 AOS 3, Unit 2 AOS 2, Unit 3 AOS 3 & Unit 4 AOS 3
-

BEFORE YOUR VISIT - ALL YEAR LEVELS

ACTIVITY

THE EXQUISITE CORPSE

[10-20 minutes]

Susan Jacobs makes sculptural forms that she refers to as “thought experiments” and “visual riddles”. She plays with ideas, materials and language in ways that venture into the absurd.

Over 100 years ago the Surrealists invented a game called ‘The Exquisite Corpse’ intending to do the same thing, stretching the imagination to generate outrageous new possibilities.

How to play:

1. Take a piece of paper and fold it twice to make four equal rectangular sections - these will be four sections of a body, from top to bottom.
2. Starting in the top section, draw the head of your character or creature. Make it as wild as you can! Be sure to extend the lines of the neck over the fold line.
3. Fold the top of the page over to hide your drawing, leaving only the lines of the neck visible for the next artist to work from, then pass it along.
4. On the paper you receive, draw the torso of your imagined character or creature extending from the neck lines. Again, make sure you finish the lines of the body over the next fold line, fold the paper to conceal the torso and pass it on.
5. Repeat for the next section - add the legs - and the final section - give the character some feet (perhaps more than two!).

Unfold your drawings and behold the glorious characters you’ve created together!

Alternatives: Try using collage to make an Exquisite Corpse, or experiment with language to create hilarious collaborative poetry - this is done by adding single words to a sentence without seeing what was written before. The first word will be an adjective, fold the paper and pass it along; next will be a noun (fold and pass), followed by a verb, then an adjective, then a noun.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

EXTENDED PRE-LEARNING

[40-60 minutes]

YEARS 9 & 10

Play two rounds of *The Exquisite Corpse*, once with drawing, once with words, then lead a discussion using the following prompts:

- Think about your experience of relying on intuition and imagination - was that comfortable or uncomfortable for you? What was it like for your creative process?
- How could an exercise like *The Exquisite Corpse* influence an art process? What habits or attitudes do we learn from this that could be useful for making art?
- Susan Jacobs makes sculptural installations that draw on “the imaginative potential of getting things ‘fruitfully wrong’”. What does this suggest to you about her art process?
- What might you expect to see in the exhibition?

VCE ART & STUDIO ARTS

Read the media release below or the curator’s essay (see appendix).

Working individually, in pairs or small groups, respond to the following prompts:

- List the artists’ sources of inspiration and the key themes of the exhibition
- Make a list of 3-5 questions to think about when you visit the gallery, particularly relating to materials, techniques, subject matter, visual language, artistic intentions, curatorial considerations.
- Susan Jacobs’ work draws on “the imaginative potential of getting things ‘fruitfully wrong’”. What does this suggest to you about her art process?
- What do you expect to see in the exhibition?

Media Release - The ants are in the idiom

The ants are in the idiom is a major solo exhibition by influential Australian-born, London-based artist Susan Jacobs, commissioned by and opening at Buxton Contemporary at the University of Melbourne on Friday 3 June until Sunday 6 November 2022.

*Susan Jacobs’ first presentation in Melbourne since 2017, and her largest solo commission to date, *The ants are in the idiom* is an expansive sculptural environment that explores the relationship between language and matter.*

Jacobs works with form in the way that poets work with words, finding analogies and metaphorical meanings in everyday objects and materials. In her work, a simple sculptural form often has multiple layers of meaning, from its material properties to its cultural significance.

The guiding principle in this exhibition is the quirks and failings of human perception. For Jacobs’, there is great imaginative potential in misinterpretation. In her words,

“The human tendency to seek patterns in random information can see false conclusions dressed as ‘signs from the universe’. The temptation to form links where there are none is a human trait, both flawed and psychologically affirming. The double take or misapprehension that happens in such chance encounters sharpens consciousness and unleashes the magic of the mind’s invention.”

Describing the exhibition as “a series of overlapping ecosystems”, Jacobs has created a matrix of sculptural relationships that encourage accidental connections and a shifting array of understandings.

The ants are in the idiom is both playful and erudite. Allusions to science, psychology and mythology jostle with visual puns and word games.

The artist’s reference points in this exhibition range widely, from street markets and urban architecture, to 17th century scientific writings on the spontaneous generation of life from inert matter.

Teachers

- Print this section (pages 10-15) to use during your visit to Buxton Contemporary.
- Descriptions of each artwork can be found in the Planning your visit section of the Buxton Contemporary website.

Students

- **Take your time.**
Looking at artworks is best done slowly and thoughtfully to allow time for your eyes and your brain to unpack many layers of information, written and visual.
 - **Think, write, talk, think again.**
Artworks can be challenging and aren't always easy to understand at first. They usually have many different possible meanings that are revealed the more we think about it. Ask questions, take note of your thoughts and reactions, and chat to others about their perspective to help you build your own.
-



DURING YOUR VISIT (YEAR 9 & 10)

SUSAN JACOBS: THE ANTS ARE IN THE IDIOM

ACTIVITY ONE

[10 minutes]

View the artworks *A Recipe for Scorpions* and *A Recipe for Mice*.

WARNING: Exposed heat lamp in *A Recipe for Scorpions*. Do not touch artwork.

These two artworks are based on 17th century 'recipes' related to the scientific theory of spontaneous generation. Spend a few minutes looking at each of these artworks and read the exhibition labels.

Choose one of the artworks to answer the following questions.

Title:
Materials:
Describe what you see (look for details, pretend you're describing it to someone on the phone).

What are your initial reactions, thoughts and questions when you look at the work? Does it remind you of anything?

Reaction: I think, I feel...	Question: I wonder...
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DURING YOUR VISIT (YEAR 9 & 10)

SUSAN JACOBS: THE ANTS ARE IN THE IDIOM

ACTIVITY TWO

[10 minutes]

In the main section of the gallery you will find a sprawling arrangement of works called *Market Fray*.

WARNING: Trip Hazards. Please take care in *Market Fray*.

As you explore the space, look for these objects (hint: they may be made to look like something else, so look carefully)

	<i>plastic bag</i>		<i>bones</i>
	<i>mouse heads</i>		<i>brains</i>
	<i>sardines</i>		<i>mealworms (bird catching the worm)</i>
	<i>mortarboard</i>		<i>mandarin peel/snake skin</i>
	<i>grapes</i>		<i>street bollards</i>

Think about how the gallery has been arranged and the objects that you see in *Market Fray*.

Does it remind you of anywhere you've been before? List the visual evidence you see (objects, materials) that references particular places or environments.

Object	Place/environment/setting
<i>eg. concrete pillars</i>	<i>urban environment. basement, car park</i>

DURING YOUR VISIT (YEARS 9 & 10)

ACTIVITY TWO (continued)

Jacobs likes to play with language and materials to create unexpected associations and multiple meanings.

Explore *Market Fray* and try to match the following titles with the objects you find.

Briefly describe what you see, paying attention to the materials used and the visual qualities of the objects.

WARNING: Trip Hazards. Please take care in *Market Fray*.

<i>A Saint, a Scholar and a Nasty Streak</i>
<i>Apple Massage</i>
<i>Bag Hide</i>
<i>Bag O' Bones</i>
<i>Animalls</i>
<i>Bread So White it's Blue</i>
<i>Brains and Brawn</i>
<i>Spiral Bits</i>
<i>Fruit Bones</i>
<i>Pasteur's Grapes Inverted as The Lovers</i>
<i>Understanding Crossed Wires</i>

DURING YOUR VISIT (YEAR 9 & 10)

STILL LIFE

ACTIVITY ONE

[3 minutes]

Read the exhibition text at the entrance to *Still Life*. List the main themes, any key terms and interesting quotes:

WARNING: Please do not touch any of the artworks in *Still Life*.



DURING YOUR VISIT (YEAR 9 & 10)

ACTIVITY TWO

[10 MINUTES]

Choose one artwork in the exhibition *Still Life* for closer study.

Title:
Materials:
Date created:

Objective viewing (I see & know) - Describe what you see
<i>Imagery, symbols, motifs</i>
<i>Aesthetics: colour, line, texture, patterns, form</i>
<i>Key information from the wall label</i>

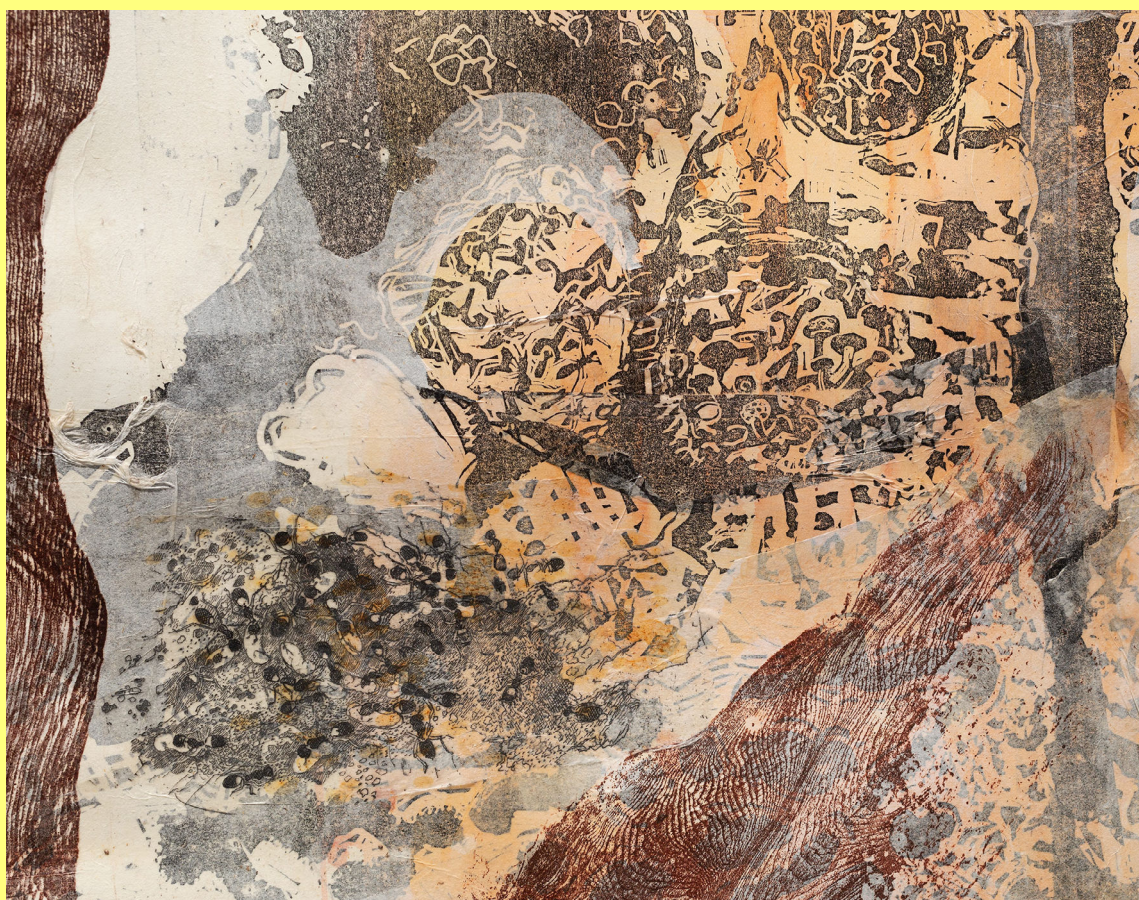
Subjective viewing (I think & feel)
<i>Makes me think about...</i>
<i>The feeling of the work is...</i>
<i>I'd like to ask the artist...</i>
<i>The message/meaning/story I think the artist is trying to communicate...</i>

Teachers

- Print this section (pages 16-21) to use during your visit to Buxton Contemporary.
- Descriptions of each artwork can be found in the Planning your visit section of the Buxton Contemporary website.

Students

- **Take your time.**
Looking at artworks is best done slowly and thoughtfully to allow time for your eyes and your brain to unpack many layers of information, written and visual.
- **Think, write, talk, think again.**
Artworks can be challenging and aren't always easy to understand at first. They usually have many different possible meanings that are revealed the more we think about it. Ask questions, take note of your thoughts and reactions, and chat to others about their perspective to help you build your own.



DURING YOUR VISIT (VCE ART & STUDIO ARTS)

SUSAN JACOBS - THE ANTS ARE IN THE IDIOM

ACTIVITY ONE

[10 minutes]

View the artworks A Recipe for Scorpions and A Recipe for Mice.

WARNING: Exposed heat lamp in *A Recipe for Scorpions*. Do not touch artwork.

These two artworks are based on 17th century 'recipes' related to the scientific theory of spontaneous generation. Spend a few minutes looking at each of these artworks and read the exhibition labels.

Choose one of the artworks to answer the following questions.

Title:
Materials:
<u>Describe the artwork.</u> Note how particular art element and art principles are used to create the aesthetic qualities of the work.

Think about how Susan Jacobs has translated the source of inspiration into an artwork.

Write down three examples of subject matter or other visual evidence that communicates the ideas and meaning.

1.
2.
3.

DURING YOUR VISIT (VCE ART & STUDIO ARTS)

ACTIVITY TWO

[10 minutes]

In the main section of the gallery you will find a sprawling arrangement of works called *Market Fray*. Jacobs likes to play with language, materials and subject matter to create unexpected associations and multiple meanings.

WARNING: Trip Hazards. Please take care in *Market Fray*.

Treasure hunt! Look carefully at the range of subject matter Jacobs has created for *Market Fray*. Try to find objects that match the titles and subject matter listed below. Tick them off as you find them. (hint: objects may be made to look like something else, so look carefully)

Titles		Subject matter	
	<i>A Saint, a Scholar and a Nasty Streak</i>		<i>plastic bag</i>
	<i>Apple Massage</i>		<i>mouse heads</i>
	<i>Bag Hide</i>		<i>sardines</i>
	<i>Bag O' Bones</i>		<i>mortarboard</i>
	<i>Animalls</i>		<i>grapes</i>
	<i>Bread So White it's Blue</i>		<i>bones</i>
	<i>Brains and Brawn</i>		<i>brains</i>
	<i>Spiral Bits</i>		<i>mealworms (bird catching the worm)</i>
	<i>Pasteur's Grapes Inverted as The Lovers</i>		<i>mandarin peel/snake skin</i>
	<i>Understanding Crossed Wires</i>		<i>street bollards</i>

List the various materials you see used in *Market Fray*.

DURING YOUR VISIT (VCE ART & STUDIO ARTS)

ACTIVITY THREE

[10 minutes]

Choose one of the exhibition themes:

- Artistic process
- Everyday materials and forms as art
- The formation of knowledge
- Language and etymology
- Misreading and misinterpretation - human perception
- Close looking and contemplation

Select one of the following artworks and explain how the chosen theme is evident in the artwork.


Think about the artists' use of materials, subject matter, aesthetic qualities and/or ideas and meaning.

Cope (Tree)

Pasteur's Grapes Inverted as
The Lovers

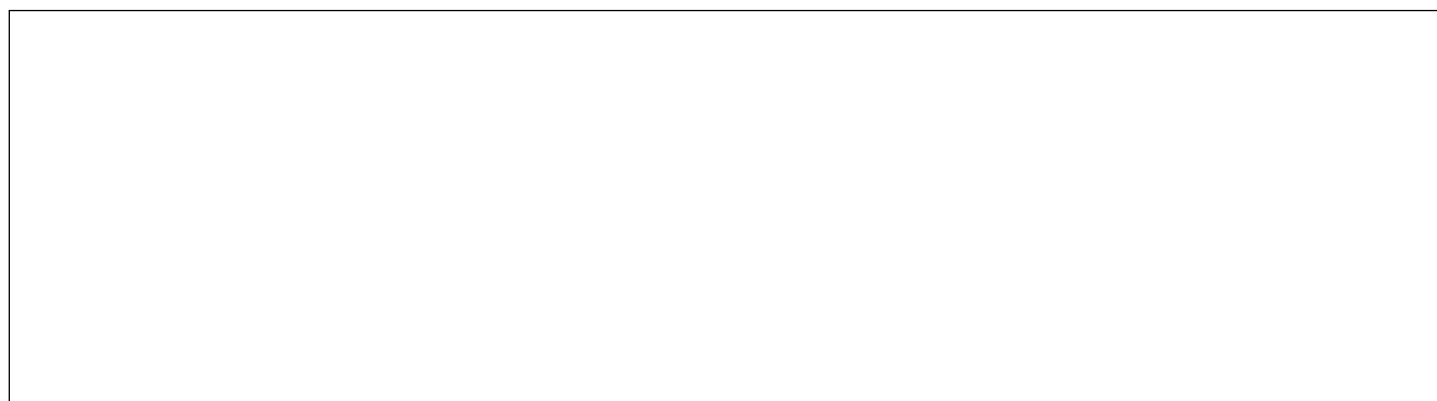
Understanding
Crossed Wires

We Fill the World with Cracks
(A Garden Path Sentence)



Curatorial considerations

Why do you think the artist has chosen to use the gallery space like this? Think about the use of space and lighting. How do these factors affect your experience of the artwork? What might she want us to feel and think?



DURING YOUR VISIT (VCE ART & STUDIO ARTS)

STILL LIFE

ACTIVITY ONE

[3 minutes]

Read the exhibition text at the entrance to *Still Life*. List the main themes, any key terms and interesting quotes:

WARNING: Please do not touch any of the artworks in *Still Life*.

-
-
-

ACTIVITY TWO

[10 minutes]

The artworks in this exhibition all navigate from logic, observation and research as a starting point, to imagination, abstraction and fantasy as an end point.

Choose one artwork in *Still Life* and discuss what the artist is intending to show or tell us, and how this is achieved through subject matter, materials and/or aesthetic qualities.

Title:	
Materials:	
Date:	
Artist intention, key ideas, themes, questions	
Aesthetic qualities (note particular art elements and principles)	
Materials, techniques	
Subject matter	
Other notes, thoughts, questions	

DURING YOUR VISIT (VCE ART & STUDIO ARTS)

ACTIVITY THREE

[10 minutes]

Look at the bark paintings titled *Njädiga Gundirr* by Mulkun Wirrpanda.

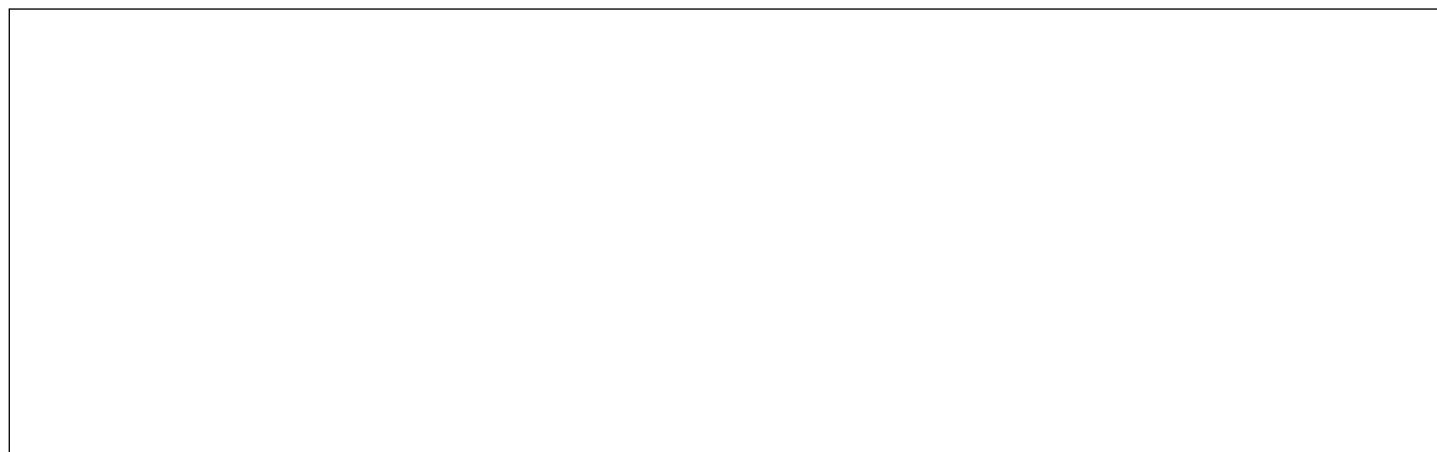
Note significant cultural and historical information about this artist:

-
-
-
-
-

How has cultural knowledge informed this artists' work? What visual evidence can you see that communicates her cultural inheritance (subject matter, materials, aesthetic qualities)?



What historical factors have influenced the ideas and meaning in this artwork?



AFTER YOUR VISIT - YEAR 9 & 10

Note to teachers: this might be completed as an individual response, small group activity or whole-class discussion.

REVIEW & ANALYSE

Look at your notes from 'A Recipe for Mice' or 'A Recipe for Scorpions'

- Discuss your observations, reactions and questions
- What do you think the artist wants us to think about when we look at these artworks?
- These artworks were based on the theory of spontaneous generation which was disproven in the 19th century by Louis Pasteur. What does this tell us about scientific understanding and the evolution of human knowledge?

What did you find unique, distinct or curious about Susan Jacobs' work that makes it different from art you've seen before?

Susan Jacobs transfigures objects that traditionally wouldn't be seen in an art gallery, for example a plastic bag or fruit peel cast in bronze. Why do you think she would choose to do this?

There are many different ways an artist can make work. Why do you think Susan Jacobs chooses to work in this way?

COMPARE

Think about the two exhibitions you saw - The ants are in the idiom and Still Life.

- What did the exhibitions have in common?
- In what ways were they different?
- Historical context: some of the artworks you saw were contemporary art (made recently) and some were made in an earlier time period. How would you know if a work of art was contemporary or historical? Discuss two examples you saw and the evidence for when the artwork was made.

CREATE

Brainstorm the themes and questions considered in The ants are in the idiom and Still Life. Looking at one of the artworks from the exhibition, write a lantern poem (template on next page) in response to a theme or question.

REFLECT

Discuss your key take-aways from The ants are in the idiom and Still Life

- What did you most like/enjoy? Why?
- What did you find most challenging? Why?
- How has this changed or challenged your understanding about art? What do you think or know now that you hadn't thought about before?

AFTER YOUR VISIT - YEAR 9 & 10

LANTERN POEM

Line 1: one noun (person, place or thing)

Line 2: two words to describe and refine line 1

Line 3: three words to describe line 1

Line 4: a phrase that describes line 1

Line 5: one word - use a similar word to line 1

AFTER YOUR VISIT - VCE ART & STUDIO ARTS

Use the following discussion prompts to elaborate on your experience of *The ants are in the idiom* and *Still Life*. This could be done as a written ‘think, pair, share’ activity or as small group discussions.

- “*The ants are in the idiom* is, at its core, an exhibition about knowledge creation” (Jacqueline Doughty, Curator).
- Jacobs’ work navigates the path between observation & imagination, blurring the lines between what is known to be true (eg. objects seen in nature) and meaning that is created through mythology or science (eg. scientific theories, interpretations of language). Think about one of the artworks you saw in the exhibition and discuss how it explores human knowledge. How did the artist use materials, symbols and subject matter to communicate the main idea?
- Jacobs has many varied sources of inspiration, including Greek mythology, scientific theories, 17th Century Sottobosco paintings, language, history, urban architecture and her everyday surrounds.
- Discuss 2 examples from the exhibition where you saw these sources of inspiration translated in her artworks.
- Symbols and metaphors are central to the communication of ideas in Jacobs’ work. Discuss and analyse 2 examples of symbols and metaphors that were used and the meaning that was conveyed.
- *Market Fray* included many examples of found objects that were transfigured using traditional art materials, eg. bronze, ceramic. Why would the artist choose to do this? What questions might she be raising?
- What visual evidence did you see in the artworks and in the way the exhibition was presented (curatorial considerations) that tells us this work was made in the 21st century?

Think about the artworks you saw in *Still Life*.

- Discuss the themes and questions that were central to this exhibition.
- Why do you think the curator at Buxton Contemporary, Jacqueline Doughty, wanted us to see these two exhibitions together?
- Look at your notes about Mulkun Wirrpanda’s *Njādi ga Gundirr*. Use the table on the next page to compare these bark paintings with one of Susan Jacobs’ sculptural installations.

VCE Art: analyse and interpret these artworks using one of the frameworks

VCE Studio Arts: compare these artworks in terms of aesthetic qualities, subject matter and ideas with reference to the artists’ cultural contexts.

AFTER YOUR VISIT - VCE ART & STUDIO ARTS

Use this table to compare Mulkun Wirrpanda's *Njädiga Gundirr* with one of Susan Jacobs' sculptural installations.

	Similarities	Differences
Cultural		
Historical		
Ideas, themes, meaning		
Aesthetic qualities		
Subject matter, symbols, metaphors		
Materials, techniques		
Other notes, thoughts, questions		

APPENDIX - EXHIBITION THEMES

Artistic process

The exhibition provides an insight into sculptural process - Susan Jacobs rarely begins with a set idea of what she wants an artwork to look like. She begins with something that intrigues her - a word, an image, an object she sees on the street, an idea she encounters while reading, and then in the studio she works through its meanings and implications by experimenting with sculptural materials and forms. It is a process of 'thinking through materials' - and she follows wherever it leads her.

Everyday materials and forms as art

Jacobs is interested in materials and forms that are not traditionally considered valuable or worthy to be art. Some of the everyday forms she replicates in this exhibition are fruit peels, seed pods, city fences, the shapes of mortar between bricks, grains of wheat. Some of the materials she uses are plastic crates, bricks, folding market tables. Jacobs combines these found materials with objects she has fabricated out of clay or cast in metal.

The formation of knowledge

Jacobs' work has intriguing historical reference points. She reads widely and is particularly interested in cultural frameworks that shape the formation of knowledge - science, mythology, religion, psychology, philosophy - all the different types of narratives that structure the way we understand the world and how we interpret what we see. One of the key reference points in this exhibition is the theory of spontaneous generation, which persisted in scientific thought from Ancient Greece right through to the 19th century, when it was finally disproven by Louis Pasteur.

Language and etymology

Many of the works in this exhibition involve a play on words. Jacobs is interested in what is called a 'garden path sentence' - grammatically correct but misleading. The final wall drawing is based on a garden path sentence and the etymology of the word 'answer'. She also plays with the origins of the word 'cope' in a sculpture she calls 'Cope (Tree)', inspired by a sycamore seed pod she found on the road.

Misreading and misinterpretation - human perception

Our brains are wired into patterns of recognition - interpretive shortcuts that make it easier to make sense of the overwhelming visual stimuli we encounter every day. Jacobs is interested in the way these shortcuts can lead us to incorrect interpretations. There are many examples in the exhibition of what she calls 'visual equivalences', eg. mandarin peels that she has cast in bronze, which at first glance look like the shed skin of snakes, prompting a confusion between the animal and the vegetable. She wants to cause a double-take in the viewer, a moment of realisation that something is not what it first appeared to be. That moment of cognitive shift is an important part of the experience of viewing this exhibition - it is experiential, not just visual.

Close looking and contemplation - slowing down to consider the details

Jacobs' work doesn't reveal itself in one glance. Every aspect, from the materials, their placement, their relationship to the gallery space, the title, is all meticulously considered. In this exhibition Jacobs has created a body of sculptural forms that she refers to as "thought experiments" and "visual riddles". She wants them to trigger cognitive mechanisms in the minds of the viewer and to put our brains to work. She's asking the viewer to pause and pay attention.

APPENDIX - CURATOR ESSAY

WE FILL THE WALLS WITH CRACKS

by Jacqueline Doughty

A meditation on the relationship between language and matter, *The ants are in the idiom* is an expansive sculptural environment that draws the viewer into a web of visual and verbal riddles.

Susan Jacobs' poetic and intuitive approach to materials is informed by research into systems of thought that have shaped - and mis-shaped - human knowledge. Playful allusions to science, psychology and mythology jostle with visual puns and word games. Stimulating a process of associative looking in the viewer, the work is enlivened by the imaginative potential of getting things 'fruitfully wrong'¹.

The title of this exhibition is a play upon the linguistic confusions of *garden path* sentences, statements in which incorrect readings are induced by ambiguous syntax. Garden path sentences lead the reader in the wrong direction, until grammatical inconsistencies prompt a cognitive double-take, one that requires a shift in interpretation to set comprehension back on track.

The key to decoding *The ants are in the idiom* lies in the etymology of a word that is absent from the title, but haunts it like an echo. If we trace the roots of the word 'answer', from its origins in Old English to its contemporary meaning, we find an unexpected infestation²:

ANDSWARU Old English 'a response, a reply to a question'

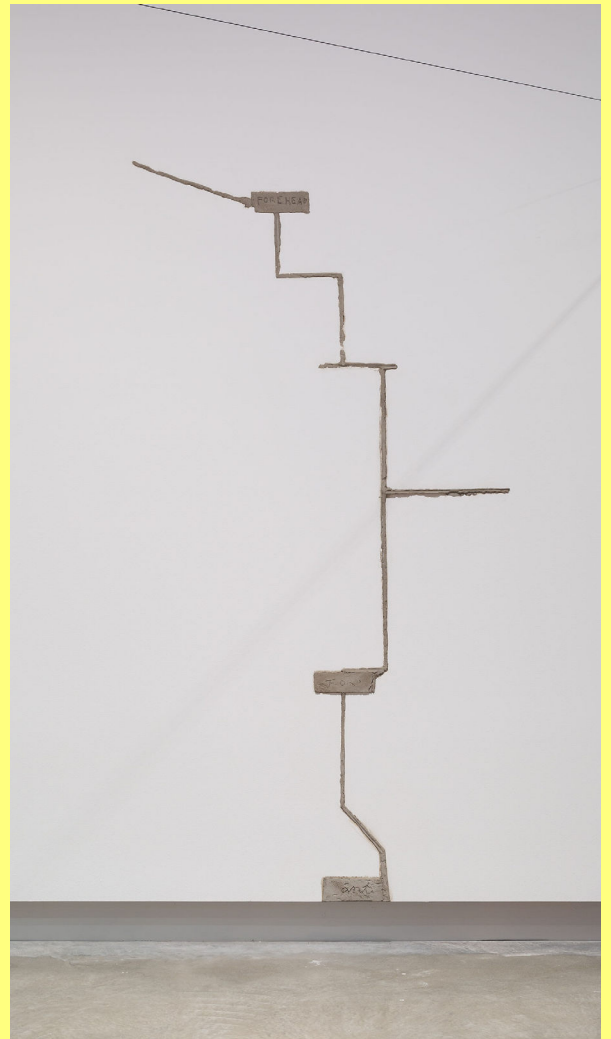
ANT 'front, forehead', with derivatives meaning 'in front of, before'

SWARU/SWERIAN affirmation, 'to swear', a sworn statement rebutting a charge

ANSWER (from c. 1300) 'solution to a problem'

For Susan Jacobs, the answer to sculptural, material problems often resides in the symbolic realm of language. When she delves into its idioms and layered significations, she finds 'hidden pathways to root words where the physical and linguistic meet'.

In nature, as well as art, language and matter are inextricably linked. An interdisciplinary field of research called biosemiotics draws upon biology and linguistics to explore the idea that life is based upon signs and codes, characterising genetics as a proto-language that brings forth matter. More a philosophy than a science, it begins with the proposition that if genetic replication is a coding process, then the basic unit of life, the cell, is a semiotic system. Pushing this logic further, the reproduction of cells to create new life can be viewed as a





form of communication. All living things, animals, plants, fungi and microscopic organisms, are brought into being through a system of signs.

The literalism of this proposition is instructive for an artist such as Jacobs, who shapes figures of speech into sculptural form. Clues to these material translations can be found in artwork titles that reveal all manner of correspondences between the verbal and the visual. These 'equivalences', as Jacobs calls them, are often mischievous, leavened with a dash of physical comedy. *A Saint, a Scholar and a Nasty Streak*, 2022, riffs on various forms of headwear. A perforated rubber cap, used by hairdressers to separate and streak strands of hair, is transformed into a helmet. The distinctive tasselled, black cap worn by university graduates is upturned, attached to a scaffold with a bricklayer's clamp and filled with a generous dollop of cement – a visual pun on the word 'mortarboard' that draws attention to societal distinctions between scholarly achievement and manual labour.

In this exhibition, words, materials and objects are reconstituted in different forms across the gallery space. References to bricks and mortar reappear at several points, as do organising principles such as grids, family trees, calendars, and meshes. Multiple allusions to the word 'bloom' can be found in works that evoke the sprouting of new vegetation, the growth of mould, the yeasty loaves of bread known as *bloomers* and the capacious underwear of the same name. Bronze casts of curling citrus peel look like shed snake skins and draw visual parallels with a cluster of extruded clay spirals, which in turn suggest drill bits or shaved wood, like links in a multiplying chain of references.

The artist has described *The ants are in the idiom* as an 'over-lapping ecosystem', assembled over several years through a chain of visual and verbal associations that spark new sculptural forms. The fertile imagery of the generative spark has been formative to this exhibition, as has the long-disproved theory of spontaneous generation. A sprouting germ of wheat lies at the heart of *A Recipe for Mice*, 2022, an assemblage that recreates a 17th century proposition by the Belgian chemist and physician Jean Baptiste Van Helmont (1577 – 1644):

If a foul shirt be pressed together within the mouth of a vessel, wherein wheat is, within twenty-one days, a ferment being drawn from the cloth, and changed by the odour of the grain, the wheat will itself being encrusted in its own skin, changeth into mice.³

The idea that living organisms can arise spontaneously from inert matter dates back to ancient Greece. In the 1600s, when Jean Baptiste Van Helmont was developing his recipes, the veracity of the theory was in question. Nevertheless, it persisted in the natural sciences and the arts throughout the Enlightenment, notably, for Jacobs' project, in a genre of still life painting known as *sottobosco*.⁴ Informed by the notion that lowly life forms are spontaneously generated from mud, these 'forest floor' paintings eschewed the subject matter of conventional still lifes – exotic flowers, fruits and luxury goods – in favour of less elevated subjects, such as thistles, fungi, snails, snakes, and toads. Implicit in these ideas was the belief in a Great Chain of Being that ranked the earth's elements in a descending sequence, from God at its apex, to humans, animals, plants and minerals.

As a sculptor, Jacobs plays upon hierarchies of value, favouring ignoble materials and creatures. A menagerie of vermin populates her work, from idiomatic ants and spontaneously generated mice and scorpions, to mealworms and rats. Jacobs' penchant for despised creatures carries through to her frequent use of humble materials. She has long been interested in the category of elements in the periodic table known as *poor metals*, and her work often tests the properties of lead, iron and gallium. Everyday objects are painstakingly reproduced in more conventional artistic media. For example, apple peels are cast as delicate bronzes and loaves of bread are fashioned out of gypsum plaster, elevating urban detritus into art objects, and shifting the

transmutations of sottobosco still lifes from the forest floor to the city street.

Systems of value are referred to throughout *The ants are in the idiom*, most notably in the expansive installation *Market Fray*, 2020-22. Comprised of four related bodies of work, this visually dense sculptural field fans out across the main gallery of Buxton Contemporary like the dispersed edges of a street market. Spatial interventions such as bollards and columns channel the viewer's passage through the gallery, in the same way that incidental architecture corrals and controls movement in public spaces. Tables and armatures are arrayed with clusters of small objects reminiscent of the trash and treasure left unsold at the end of a day's trading. Surfaces are withered, cracked, mouldy; there are tableaux of bones, fruit and flesh, all contributing to a sense of decay reminiscent of another form of still life, the 17th century *vanitas* paintings that embedded symbols of mortality amongst objects emblematic of wealth and social status.

One of the works in this milieu, *Market Mesh (Bag Hide)*, 2022, refers quite literally to value systems and economic exchange. It consists of a flat rectangular form, which has been stretched at its corners to resemble an animal hide. The work refers to an ancient form of currency known as *ox hide ingots*, metal discs produced during the Bronze age to transport standard measures of copper around the Mediterranean. Jacobs has created a replica of the ingots by opening out a polyethylene shopping bag, 'flaying' it, in her words, and then casting the spread-eagled skin in various materials, from plaster to metal. Material transposition is a recurrent strategy in Jacobs' practice, and often becomes a circular process of working a form through different manifestations until it returns to its starting point, in a sculptural zero-sum game.

A closer look at this work illuminates Jacobs' multivalent explorations into the physical properties, sculptural possibilities, and cultural resonances of matter. The plastic used to make shopping bags



is a petroleum-based product derived from fossil fuels, 'natural resources' that have been formed over millennia through the decomposition of marine organisms, such as algae and zooplankton. Polyethylene plastic, it has recently been discovered, can be broken down by a particular species of wax worm - or more likely, the microbes living in the worms' intestines - which convert plastic into a liquid substance related to anti-freeze.⁵ From plant, to mineral, to animal and back again, this work weaves a matrix of cultural references through manipulations of materials and sculptural form.

Cycles of making and un-making proliferate throughout Jacobs' iterative process of studio experimentation and research. Clay, plaster and metal are malleable substances that shift states in response to elemental forces, softening or hardening with the application of heat or water. The casting process, in particular, enables fluid shape-shifting, embodying the mutability of matter. While these material transformations are mostly based upon principles of chemistry and physics, Jacobs is not averse to the mystical. Whether scientific, mythological or metaphorical, blurred boundaries between states of being interest her for the way they push at the margins of classification.

Formative to Jacobs' research for this exhibition has been a series of images depicting fantastical hybrid creatures, such as the vegetable lamb of Tartary. Also known as the Borometz, this mythical Central Asian sheep was believed to grow on a stem, grazing on grass within reach of its vegetal umbilical cord. Descriptions of similarly improbable zoophytes can be traced back to ancient mythology, and were revived in the travel accounts and natural history treatises of medieval and early modern Europe, often as shorthand to represent foreign cultures that

the writers lacked the conceptual frameworks to describe.⁶ The vegetable lamb, it is speculated, was conjured from an effort to explain the cotton plant, with its white fluffy seeds so reminiscent of sheep's wool.

The real origin of these fanciful hybrid beings, of course, is the human propensity for analogy, the perceptual and metaphorical operation that finds connections between un-like things. To make sense of our surroundings, the human brain employs a range of mental shortcuts. Cognitive biases, such as clustering illusions and pattern recognition, help us to screen out excess stimuli and process new information efficiently, but they also can lead us to see relationships where none exist. When filtered through pre-existing knowledge systems and shaped by our impulse to imbue everything with meaning, the result can be conclusions that are 'fantastically wrong'. For Jacobs, these eccentricities of human perception are generative. She employs them as an artistic methodology and a source of new sculptural form.

The ants are in the idiom is book-ended by two works that tell stories about cognition and misinterpretation. In the opening gallery, *Hindsight 20/20*, 2022, consists of a grid of wall-mounted tablets, cast in gypsum from a rear-vision mirror that Jacobs found lying on the street. The play of light on the mirror's smashed surface caught the eye of the artist and her friend, creating a shared optical illusion - a reflected apparition of the Virgin Mary. The artist has reproduced this found object again and again, gilding the replicas in lustrous metallic leaf in a futile attempt to repeat her momentary vision. Reminiscent of mosaics or Byzantine icons, the glistening surfaces invoke the hallucinations that sometimes appear in our peripheral vision.

On the closing wall of the exhibition is a sculptural relief, *We Fill the World with Cracks (A Garden Path Sentence)*, 2022, which refers to a method of mending fissures in the brick walls around the artist's local neighbourhood. A drawing in mortar, it traces the etymology of the word 'answer', outlined at the beginning of this essay, and embodies in concrete our sometimes-flawed efforts to assimilate new information into existing world views. Oscillating between apparition and substance, the abstract and the concrete, these two works encapsulate the exhibition's consideration of the suggestive power of words to generate form, and of the mind to mediate sensory perceptions.

An extended metaphor for the translation of ideas into form, *The ants are in the idiom* is, at its core, an exhibition about knowledge



creation. Susan Jacobs plays upon the cognitive mechanisms that shape understanding in a rhizomatic network of sculptural thought experiments. The pathway each viewer chooses to take through this three-dimensional riddle will guide their interpretation of the exhibition, bringing an element of chance and contingency to the engagement. This journey could be read as an allegory for a way of working as an artist or, on a more universal level, for the human drive to make meaning of our surroundings.

1. All quotes, unless otherwise noted, are from email and spoken communications with the artist, between 2019-22.
2. The use of the word 'infestation' relates to an observation made by Susan Jacob's friend and fellow artist, Lou Hubbard.
3. Jean Baptiste van Helmont, *Oriatrike* or, *physick refined*, 1662, accessed 15 May 2022 <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/veeufd87/items>
4. Karin Leonhard, 'Pictura's fertile field: Otto Marseus van Schrieck and the genre of sottobosco painting', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol. 34, no. 2, 2009, pp. 95-118. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20779999>
5. Carrie Arnold, 'Wax Worms Eat Plastic. But Can They Clean Up Our Trash Pollution?' *National Geographic*, 25 April 2017, accessed 16 May 2022. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/wax-worms-eat-plastic-polyethylene-trash-pollution-cleanup>
6. Benjamin Aldes Wurgaft, 'Animal Vegetable, or Both? Making Sense of the Scythian Lamb', *Lapham's Quarterly*, 5 August 2019, accessed 11 May 2022. <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/round-table/animal-vegetable-or-both>

APPENDIX - IMAGE REFERENCES

Cover image (left): Susan Jacobs, *Cope (Tree) 2022* (detail), installation view, *The Ants are in the Idiom*, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 July - 6 November 2022, photography Robert Glowacki, courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne.

Cover image (right): Angelica Mesiti, *Over the Air and Underground*, 2020, commissioned by the Busan Biennale 2020, courtesy of the artist, Galerie Allen, Paris and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne.

Page 3: Vera Möller, *Fictional hybrids 2009-2013*, installation view, *Still Life*, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 June - 6 November 2022 photography Christian Capurro.

Page 5: Susan Jacobs, *A Recipe for Scorpions 2021*, installation view, *The Ants are in the Idiom*, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 July - 6 November 2022. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne, photography Christian Capurro.

Page 10: Susan Jacobs, *A Recipe for Mice 2022*, installation view, *The Ants are in the Idiom*, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 July - 6 November 2022. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne, photography Christian Capurro.

Page 14: Vera Möller, *Fictional hybrids 2009-2013*, installation view, *Still Life*, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 June - 6 November 2022 photography Christian Capurro.

Page 16: Installation view, *Still Life*, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 June - 6 November 2022 with John Wolseley, *Termitaria: Indwelling II - The eusocial life of termite nests with pardalotes and golden shouldered parrots*, 2020-2021, photography Christian Capurro.

Page 27: Susan Jacobs, *We Fill the Walls with Cracks (A Garden Path Sentence) 2022*, installation view, *The Ants are in the Idiom*, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 July - 6 November 2022. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne, photography Christian Capurro.

Page 28: Susan Jacobs, *Hindsight 20/20 2022* (detail), installation view, *The Ants are in the Idiom*, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 July - 6 November 2022. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne, photography Christian Capurro.

Page 29: Susan Jacobs, *Market Fray 2022*, installation view, *The Ants are in the Idiom*, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 July - 6 November 2022. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne, photography Christian Capurro.

Page 30: Susan Jacobs, *Cope (Tree) 2022* (detail), installation view, *The Ants are in the Idiom*, Buxton Contemporary, The University of Melbourne, 3 July - 6 November 2022. Courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne, photography Christian Capurro.