

The art of existence

Les Kossatz

22 November 2008 – 8 March 2009

Education Kit



Les Kossatz

Hard slide 1980

sheepskins, aluminium, Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga sp.*), leather and steel

372.0 x 100.0 x 304.0 cm (installation)

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Presented through The Art Foundation of Victoria by The Ian Potter Foundation as the winner of The Ian Potter Foundation Sculpture Commission, Governor 1981

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INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

The art of existence is the first exhibition to review Les Kossatz's contribution to Australian art in a career that spans the 1960s to today. Kossatz's consistently experimental approach to media and techniques is revealed in works that display a lifelong fascination with humanity and the interaction of man and nature. His paintings, sculptures and works on paper stimulate a questioning and exploration of such concerns, which form the basis of this artist's practice.

Les Kossatz's early works of the 1960s draw on his training and ability to work across a diversity of media, including painting, drawing, printmaking and glass. Early paintings and etchings on the theme of the emptiness of memorials to the Australian 'digger' or soldiers were succeeded by images and objects offering impressions of the world around the artist – the rural domain and interior life of St Andrews in Victoria where Kossatz lived and worked. Such works demonstrated his determination to pursue a figurative practice at a time when abstract art had been imported to Australia and was considered the avant garde.

Remaining a staunchly independent artist, at the start of the 1970s Kossatz painted images of rabbits and sheep from St Andrews. In addition, the practice of working in three dimensions was to become more significant. Kossatz continued to develop familiar themes in the creation of installations and cast objects. Although he has produced drawings and prints across his career, working with sculpture has, since the early 1970s, been his primary mode of art-making. Large scale cast and assembled objects show Kossatz pursuing related themes of caged and packaged landscapes, shrines to the harvest and the still life.

The art of existence surveys Kossatz's monumental life-sized sheep sculptures, which he began making in 1972 from casts of animal parts, and for which he is best known. These include *Hard slide* (1980), his prize-winning commission in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria. Kossatz has won numerous commissions for outdoor sculptures that employ the sheep as literal and metaphorical beings.

Kossatz's work across three decades reveals a number of ongoing engagements, such as his observations of human behaviour and at times its similar manifestation in animals; the beliefs that sustain individuals and communities (such as religion, music and politics); and the forms of the landscape and our understanding of these relationships.

KEY ART TERMS

The key terms below often relate to or describe Kossatz's artworks.

Abstract: Non-representational art usually created from exaggerated or simplified shapes, forms or objects.

Composition: The way that objects and/or visual elements are arranged within an artwork.

Technique: The way an artist uses media and art materials.

Lithograph: A printing method that uses chemical processes to create an image utilising a metal plate which is compatible to a printing ink and water mixture. The ink adheres to the positive image and the water cleans the negative image. The result is a very detailed print.

Pop art: Art movement of the late 1950s–60s. Pop stands for popular culture. This includes advertising and the media which provided subjects for Pop artists. The term first appeared in an article by critic Lawrence Alloway titled 'The Arts and the Mass Media'. Pop artists include Richard Hamilton, Andy Warhol, Claes Oldenburg, David Hockney and Roy Lichtenstein.

Sculpture: A three-dimensional artwork created by shaping hard or plastic material, such as stone, metal, or wood. Sculptures can be created by carving, or can be assembled, built, fired, welded, moulded, or cast.

Casting: A process by which a hot liquid material is poured into a mould. The mould contains a hollow cavity of the desired shape which then solidifies. The solid casting is then ejected or broken out to complete the process. Casting may be used to form hot liquid metals or various materials that *cold set* after the mixing of components such as epoxies, concrete, plaster and clay. Casting is most often used for making complex shapes that would be difficult to make by other methods.

Maquette: A French word for scale model, sometimes also referred to by the Italian names **plastico** or **modello**. It is a small scale unfinished model sculpture. It is used to visualise and test shapes and ideas without incurring the cost and effort of producing a full scale product. It is the analogue of the painter's drawn sketch.

THE ARTS: EXPLORING AND RESPONDING
Artworks, commentaries and questions for consideration



Les Kossatz
Ram in sling 1973
cast and fabricated stainless steel and sheepskin
129.3 x 126.5 x 66.0 cm
Heide Museum of Modern Art Collection
Purchased from John and Sunday Reed 1980
© Les Kossatz

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Les Kossatz, *Ram in Sling* (1973)

EXPLORING AND RESPONDING

Shade the Art Elements bar graph relative to Les Kossatz, *Ram in sling* (1973).
 Show the individual importance of each of the art elements in the artwork's overall composition (1 = Low importance, 10 = High importance).

Art Elements

10									
9									
8									
7									
6									
5									
4									
3									
2									
1									
	Line	Tone	Form	Shape	Colour	Repetition	Scale	Texture	Space

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What do you think *Ram in sling*, (1973) communicates about Australian history and culture?

What materials is it made from and why do you think Kossatz has selected these materials?

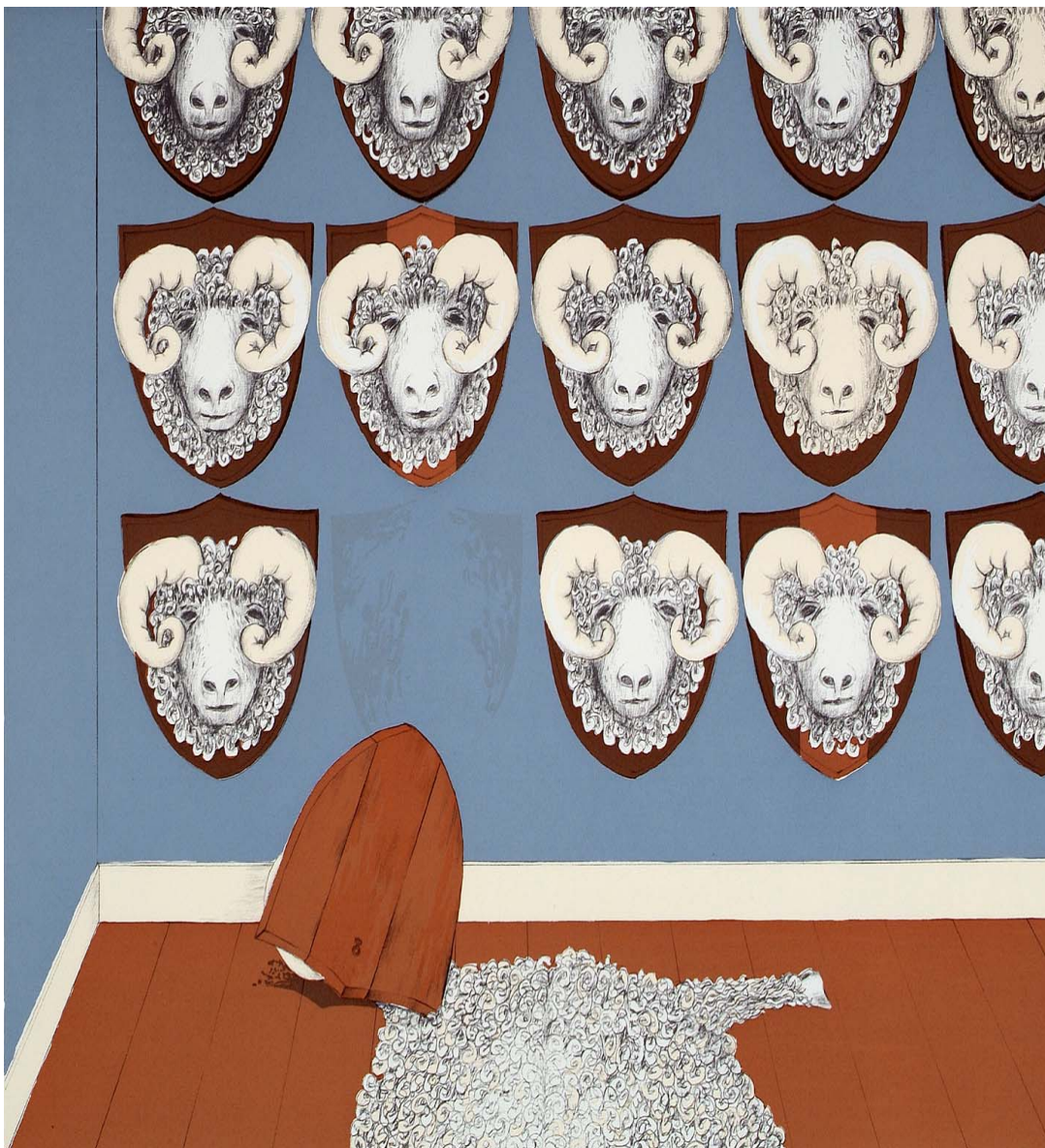
Write a detailed description of *Ram in sling*, (1973) focusing on subject matter, form, and materials.

What do you think Kossatz's sheep sculptures are about?

CREATING AND MAKING

- Kossatz rarely depicts humans in his sculpture. Create a sculpture utilising found objects with the theme of the environment it must also reference an animal/s. Begin by sourcing images or photographs of animals, then sketch these with the intention of distorting the sketches.
- Create an artwork with the title *Hard slide* (1980). Brainstorm imagery in your sketchbook using a mind map.
- Create and design a monoprint based on sheep, emphasizing the elements of line and texture

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Les Kossatz
Trophy room 1975
colour lithograph
74.0 x 76.0 cm (sheet)
Courtesy the artist
Photographer: Viki Petherbridge
© Les Kossatz

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Les Kossatz, *Trophy room* (1975)

EXPLORING AND RESPONDING

Provide the main details of the artwork.

- Artist:**
Title:
Date:
Medium:

Shade the Art elements bar graph relative to your chosen work Les Kossatz, *Trophy room* (1975).

Show the individual importance of each of the art elements in the artwork's overall composition (1 = Low importance, 10 = High importance).

Art Elements

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	Line	Tone	Form	Shape	Colour	Repetition	Scale	Texture	Space



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What is the most important art element in the work (which element created the highest bar in your graph?) Can you suggest why the artist may have done this?

This artwork is a lithographic print. Why do you think this medium is appropriate to the subject matter in this work?

Describe the artwork in detail, focusing on subject matter. Why are the sheep on plaques and placed in an interior? Do you think the colours are significant?

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Describe the composition of the artwork. Where are the main forms placed?
What is the focal point? How is your eye directed around the artwork?
Use adjectives to describe what you see (objects, forms, shapes etc)

How would you describe the style of the artwork?

What do you think Kossatz is communicating to the viewer about sheep in this work?

CREATING AND MAKING

- Create an interior of a room which involves the repetition of a selected animal or form, using the tints, tones and shades of one colour of paint.
- Create an interior by painting from a heightened viewpoint, resembling an architectural plan. Introduce bright colours to distinguish forms.
- Firstly draw the interior of a room from three angles, then introduce three different media to each drawing, e.g. acrylic paint, charcoal and collage.



Les Kossatz
Digger's glory box 1965
silk, felt, canvas, cardboard, wood, brass, ink, fibre-tipped pen and synthetic polymer paint
106.0 x 76.0 x 7.0 cm
Courtesy the artist
Photographer: Viki Petherbridge
© Les Kossatz

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Les Kossatz, *Diggers glory box* (1965)

EXPLORING AND RESPONDING

Shade the Art Elements bar graph relative to Les Kossatz, *Diggers glory box* (1965). Show the individual importance of each of the art elements in the artwork's overall composition (1 = Low importance, 10 = High importance).

Art Elements

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	Line	Tone	Form	Shape	Colour	Repetition	Scale	Texture	Space

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'Kossatz appropriated soldiers' medals and the insignia of the RSL to critique the political machinations and shocking realities of war.'

From essay written by Guest Curator Zara Stanhope, *Les Kossatz: The art of existence*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2008.

Simultaneously, read the quote and refer to the artwork, what is the artist communicating to the viewer? Discuss the elements and subject matter in your answer.

Why do you think the artist has created this work using silk, felt, canvas, cardboard, wood, brass, ink, fibre-tipped pen and synthetic polymer paint? How do you think these materials relate to the subject matter?

Why do you think the title *Diggers glory box* (1965) is significant to this work? Explain your answer.

Do you think this artwork has a main focal point? Explain your answer.



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CREATING AND MAKING

- Create an artwork based on the theme 'glory box.' Use paint on an unusual support material, such as silk, felt, canvas, cardboard, wood.
- Create a soft sculpture that represents a hard metallic object.
- Organise an unusual still life with found objects and mementos from home, opportunity shops etc. Sketch different angles and arrange a composition from these in your sketch books for preliminary ideas for a painting.

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Les Kossatz
Guardians of the last piece (detail) 2003
aluminum and steel
6400.0 x 190.0 x 30.0 cm
Courtesy the artist
Photographer: John Gollings 2008
© Les Kossatz & John Gollings

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Les Kossatz, *Guardians of the last piece* (detail) 2003

EXPLORING AND RESPONDING

Shade the Art Elements bar graph relative to Les Kossatz, *Guardians of the last piece* (2003).

Show the individual importance of each of the art elements in the artwork's overall composition (1 = Low importance, 10 = High importance).

Art Elements

10									
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Why do you think this sculpture is called *Guardians of the last piece* (2003)?

There are three symbols in this sculpture, suggest possible meanings.

Discuss the elements, materials and subject portrayed in this sculpture. How is this sculpture different when compared with his earlier sculptures?

CREATING AND MAKING

- Write a short poem about this sculpture and then derive an artwork based on the poem.
- Group activity: Create a jigsaw puzzle based on contour line. Each student can make a piece which portrays their reaction to the environment and animals.
- Create a sculpture with wire and balsa wood which involves the combination of part animal and part object.

EXTENSION TASKS

- Write a visual analysis of your favourite work from *The art of existence*, Les Kossatz using Worksheet A (over page).
- Compare the artworks of Kossatz from the list below using Worksheet B (page 22):
 - *Diggers throne* (1966) & *Diggers glory box* (1965)
 - *Probed rock, documented and filed* (1996) & *Shearers' toolbox* (1984)
 - *Trophy room & Ram in sling* (1973)
- Write a story based on one of the following paintings or sculptures:
 - *Hard slide* (1980)
 - *Guardians of the last piece* (2003)
 - *Trophy room* (2003)
 - *Ram in sling* (1973)

WORKSHEET A – Extended visual analysis

Provide the main details of an artwork selected from the exhibition.

Artist:

Title:

Date:

Medium:

Describe the artwork in detail, focusing on subject matter. Use adjectives to describe what you see (objects, forms, shapes etc).

Describe the composition of the artwork. Where are the main form/s placed? What is the focal point? How is your eye directed around the work?

Describe the materials and techniques that the artist has used to create the work. Explain the way the media has been applied/handled.

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What is the style of the work? Where do you see evidence of this?

What is the most important visual element in the work? (colour, line, shape, form, tone, texture, scale). Why did you choose this element?

What is the most striking or interesting aspect of the work? Why?

What is the artist communicating to the viewer? Reference the elements from the work in your answer.

WORKSHEET B – Choose two artworks from the exhibition. Categorise the artworks, using the table below. e.g. two paintings or two sculptures.

	Qualities unique to artwork one	Qualities unique to artwork two	Similarities between the two artworks
	Artist:	Artist:	
	Title:	Title:	
	Date:	Date:	
	Medium:	Medium:	
	Dimensions:	Dimensions:	
Media			
Technique			
Style			
Subject matter			
Composition			
Colour			
Mood or meaning			



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FURTHER RESEARCH AND QUESTIONS FOR SENIOR STUDENTS

- Research the work of Les Kossatz and choose two or three artworks to compare with those of Pop artists Robert Rauschenberg, Claus Oldenberg, Tom Wessalman or Richard Hamilton.
- Les Kossatz and Jasper Johns were part of the Pop Art movement. Both artists employed the use of simple schema such as flags, maps, targets, letters, symbols, numbers etc. Choose one or two works from each and compare and discuss how each artist has incorporated these elements in their works.
- Explore the significance of Pop art as an influence in the work of Les Kossatz.
- Research the work of Les Kossatz. What are some of Kossatz's concerns and themes, and how does he portray these themes through the use of materials, subject matter and composition?
- Write an analysis of Les Kossatz's work using the formal interpretation framework.
- Write an analysis of Les Kossatz's work using the cultural framework.

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Written by Anna Caione, Education Officer, Heide Museum of Modern Art

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