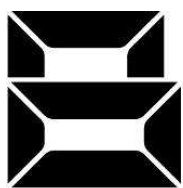




**TITLE:** BILL HENSON / TEACHER NOTES

**AUTHOR:** BENDIGO ART GALLERY

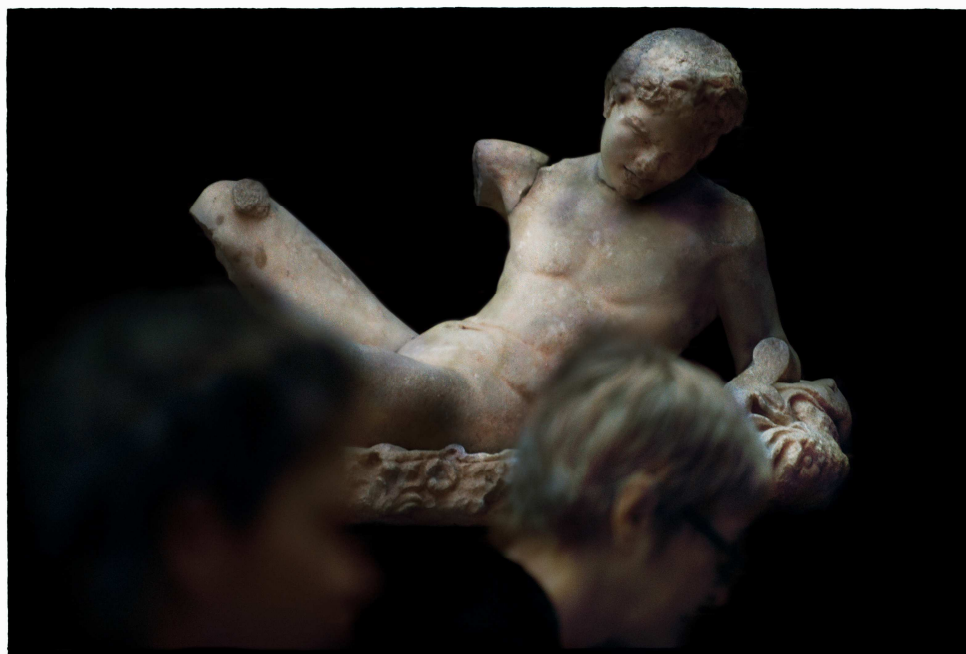
**DATE:** 2013



Bendigo  
Art Gallery

Bill Henson

# TEACHER NOTES



Bill Henson  
*Untitled* 2011/2012  
archival inkjet pigment print  
Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery,  
Sydney

## Introduction:

Bill Henson is one of Australia's leading contemporary artists. Born in Melbourne in 1955, Henson had his first solo exhibition, at the age of 19, at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1975. He has since exhibited extensively in Australia and overseas, including New York, London, Paris, Beijing, Tokyo, Montreal, Barcelona, Vienna and Amsterdam. In 1995 Henson represented Australia at the Venice Biennale, with his celebrated series of *cut-screen* photographs. He holds an honorary doctorate from the University of NSW.

In 2003 Henson's work appeared in *Strangers: The First ICP Triennial of Photography and Video* at the International Center of Photography in New York. In the same year he had a solo exhibition at the Centro de Fotografia, University of Salamanca, Spain. In 2005 a comprehensive survey of his work was held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney and the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne. This landmark survey show attracted record visitor numbers for a contemporary art exhibition in Australia. In 2006 Henson exhibited a major body of work in *Twilight: Photography in the Magic Hour* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Bill Henson's work is to be found in every major public collection in Australia including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Art Gallery of South Australia, the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria and the National Gallery of Australia. Overseas collections include the Bibliotheque Nationale de Paris, the Houston Museum of Fine Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, the Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna, the Sammlung Volpinum, Vienna, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. A number of major monographs on the artist's work have been published internationally over the years.

In this latest group of works, which showed at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery (his commercial Gallery) in Sydney, Henson has created a series which continues his fascination with figures and landscapes in the twilight of adolescence, playing on the darkness and the light. There were nineteen photographs in the Roslyn Oxley9 exhibition, and eight have been acquired by Bendigo Art Gallery (there is a possibility of an additional three to four works to be gifted to the Gallery from a private collection).

This suite of artworks is on display at Bendigo Art Gallery from 26 October 2012 until 24 February, 2013.

## **Influences:**

Henson's influences are broad and not typical of most contemporary artists. He cites a variety of master painters, writers, musicians and composers when interviewed and most of his influences go beyond the visual, with mood and memory often becoming just as important. His artwork is also often compared to *film noir* or dark expressive art films of the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and film is also influential.

### **Influences from master painters:**

**Jan Vermeer –Dutch high Renaissance artist of 17th century (1600s)** – Henson is inspired by the use of diagonal lines and windows of light in Vermeer's interiors and portraits. This can be especially seen in Henson's 1994/95 (collage) series.

**Titian (Tiziano Vecellio or Tiziano Vecelli)– Italian Renaissance artist of 16th century** – the busyness and chaotic yet harmonious compositions in Titian's group portraits and battle scenes are a visual influence and the rich tonalism of the treatment of the figure regardless whether the subject is violent or sensual.

**Rembrandt – Dutch high Renaissance artist of 17th century (1600s)** – The style of lighting seen in many of Henson's portraits, especially in The Paris Opera Project is known as *chiaroscuro* (an Italian term coined during the Renaissance) or Rembrandt lighting – named after one of the most famous High Renaissance portrait painters, Rembrandt. This type of lighting featured strong light on one side which creates a shadow on the other.

**Antoine Watteau –French Rococo artist of the 17th century** – Watteau's sumptuous and large paintings often combined landscape and groups of figure to show scenes symbolizing fertility and love. His use of a warm colour scheme vignette by darker borders is seen in many of Henson's colour landscape photographs.

**Cy Twombly – 20th century Abstract Expressionist painter and sculptor** – Twombly is best known for his scribbly abstract expressionist paintings, but it is his vertical monochromatic and textural sculptures that Henson cites as influential.

### **Photographers**

#### **O.Winston Link**

Ogle Winston Link (known as O.Winston Link) was an American photographer, best known for his nocturnal black-and-white photographs of steam trains in America in the late 1950s. His photographs were characterized aesthetically by using low key tone, rich tonal range, theatrical lighting and the appearance of being candid when they were posed. Henson was fascinated with how Link was able to illuminate a scene that would normally be ordinary into a sublime tonal masterpiece.

### **Film**

Henson has been influenced by the Hollywood Film Noir of the 1940s/50s and also contemporary literature that has been made into film, such as *Silence of the Lambs* and *The Virgin Suicides*. 1970s films that focus on seedy and troubled characters and atmospheric lighting such as *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976), *The Bitter Tears of Petra Von Kant* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1972) and *Network* (Sidney Lumet, 1976) are also said to be of influence.

## **Musical Composers**

### **Gustav Mahler and Richard Strauss**

Mahler was a late-Romantic Austrian composer and one of the leading conductors of his generation. Henson was known to have photographed Sydney conductor Simone Young conducting to air to a recording of Strauss's *Der Rosenkavalier*. Henson is interested in the transformative effects of classical music on the viewer and this is exemplified in the Paris Opera Project, whereby he tries to convey different emotions that an Opera may have on each portrait subject.

## **Writers**

Thomas Harris, the author of *Silence of the Lambs* and Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Virgin Suicides* both of which were made into films. He also likes German writers such as Thomas Bernhard who have blackness to their writing. W. G. Sebald was a German writer whose writings were largely on the themes of memory and loss of memory (both personal and collective) and decay (of civilizations, traditions or physical objects). He relates his stories to his own memory of WWII. "One aspect of Sebald's work that fascinates Henson is the way photographs become part of the history that only the imagination or the heart can verify". *Shadows of great art, The Age, 2005*. "Henson's pictures are more easily related to the atmospheres conjured by some of his favourite writers, especially W.G. Sebald, Robert Musil and Vladimir Nabokov: modes of loss and yearning, mingled with an excruciating intimacy." *Sebastian Smee, London based arts writer, Adelaide Biennale Catalogue, 2004*

## **Techniques, Materials and Processes**

### **Studio and printing**

Henson works alone in a large studio. The array of lights he owns and uses resembles a film studio. For many years he printed his own colour photographs from the negative (which was rare when most contemporary photographic artists tend to *outsource* their photographs because of difficulties of size and lack of access to expensive facilities).

In recent years, he has transferred from printing from the negative (analogue) to digital printing, however still prints his own photographs; he still uses a film camera. Unlike most contemporary photographic artists, Henson shoots in film and scans the negatives. He then manipulates the images in Photoshop and other programs before printing with his own digital printer.

### **Exposure Times**

Henson uses long exposure times for technical, aesthetic and conceptual reasons. Henson's photos are often grainy – this is because they are either taken at night or with low lighting, requiring a fast film to balance the light reading. The graininess is also because of the enlargement process (which enlarges the grain and reduces resolution). Unlike many traditional photographers who aim for high resolution and fine detail, Henson's use of high grain and low resolution give a textural, soft and painterly feel.

### **Use of colour film (C type)**

Although in recent times he mainly uses colour analogue film (not digital) his colour schemes are often deliberately restricted and almost monotone (black and white) or monochromatic (mostly one colour with tones and tints of that colour). He deliberately increases the *cyan* (blue) colour, giving a cool and foreboding aesthetic.

## **On Henson's choice of photography as an art-form**

Although Henson uses the contemporary art form of photography, his artworks are not documentary in style. "One of the great problems with the nature of photography is that people are accustomed to seeing a photograph as authoritative evidence, as proof of something."

*Bill Henson, interview with Janet Hawley, 2000*

## **Dodging and burning in**

Dodging and burning in is used extensively in Henson's photographic practice to intensify tones. When printing from a negative, this requires making masks and shapes out of card to hold over the photographic paper during printing to reduce the amount of time given to some areas of the print and intensify others. For example, skies can be made darker in corners and areas of missed exposure corrected. Now that he has transferred to digital printing, he replaces manual dodging and burning with computer controlled dodging and burning using Photoshop tools. This process draws similarity with the painting and drawing process whereby areas are shaded in for intensity.

## **Themes**

### **Transition**

- **Night to day**
- **Child to adult**
- **Human growth (physically/ emotionally/ mentally)**

"Shakespeare said that in human life there are seven important transitions. One is when we pass from childhood to adolescence. This involves a movement from innocence towards experience, and it can be dangerous."

*Laura Murray-Cree, Awesome, Australian art for contemporary kids*

In most cases there is an occurrence of transition in Henson's subjects. Most of his models are young, not quite children but not adults yet. The viewer can read many interpretations of his choice of youth for subject matter. "What makes adolescents interesting is that they exist in a liminal state, neither wholly children nor fully adults. The same quality can be what makes art interesting." *Deborah Stone, With light must come shadow*

### **The Human Condition**

"There's a strange and fabulous intersection between the interior beneath the skin and what's outside the world and beyond the body". *Henson*

### **Isolation and dislocation**

Many of the sites and backgrounds, whether composed in his studio or taken in buildings or outdoors are dark and isolated and figures appear to look either alone or as if they do not belong. Isolation and dislocation can be both social and emotional and both themes are addressed in Henson's choice of subject matter and aesthetics. The 1983/84 series famously featured juxtaposed images of young people (many assumed them to be junkies) with grand European gallery interiors. Whilst the subject matter itself seemed to be contrasting – high art and low life, the consistent aesthetics of chiaroscuro lighting and low key tone were seen across both subjects. Locations often seem to be on the fringes – not quite city and not quite rural.

### **Beauty**

"I think that what interests me in any art form, whether it's music or literary or anything else, are the same things that interest all of us in life generally. Things that shape our lives – loss, longing, love, a sense of mortality – these are the things that have inspired various artists throughout time. Really beauty is the mechanism that animates those things. That sense of attraction,

longing, fascination. It's got more to do with love, really, but beauty is the agent of that, and it takes different forms.

Beauty is central to all art forms – from a Mozart piano concerto to a Cy Twombly painting. It doesn't really matter what medium or what period in history. You could almost say that everything in the universe runs on attraction, whether it's 2 molecules in a vacuum or an episode of Home and Away.” *Bill Henson - interview by Lucy, The Design Files, 2012*  
<http://thedesigntfiles.net/2012/10/interview-bill-henson/>

Despite the subject matter being at times confronting in its starkness and nudity, there is always a strong emphasis on aesthetics in Henson's artwork. The rich chiaroscuro lighting and gradation of tone evokes the appealing and striking aesthetics of Baroque painting such as that of Caravaggio.

### **Selected series of artworks:**

#### **Paris Opera Project**

In 1990, Henson was commissioned by the Paris Opera to produce a series of artworks that could be displayed at the Opera. As Henson does not work in documentary style, he chose to completely stage the photographs in his studio. The series continued his investigation into the subject matter of the nocturnal landscape but was largely a study of portraiture, using Rembrandt style or *chiaroscuro* lighting. Once again, like the 1983/84 series, he used contrast in subject matter (close-up portraits with long distance landscapes) across the body of work in this series. The various pairings of young and older people in an apparent grand setting left the viewer to interpret a range of possible meanings.

Henson said he wanted to capture “a group of people gathered together in a dark place awaiting some special event”.

The Paris Opera Project shot Henson to international prominence. The effect of the pictures was “to literalise the effect of listening to music”. It also marked the emergence of landscape as an element in his work. *David Edwards, The shadowy world of Bill Henson*

<http://www.theblurb.com.au/Issue49/BillHenson.htm>

To view these images visit: [http://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill\\_Henson/84/](http://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill_Henson/84/)

#### **1994/1995 series**

In this series, Henson began to work on a much larger scale than previous, creating large collages. Pieces are torn and cut from the finished photograph and disparate images, collected over time, are combined. Cityscapes, neon lights and urban landscapes were given the sense of foreboding found in deserted areas of the city late at night. Glassine, tape, pins and the reverse side of photographic paper were used which mirrored what was occurring in the wider art world with artists such as Mike and Doug Starn producing large deconstructed collages. The subject matter in this series saw a return to the use of nude figures, this time showing greater physical interplay between each other. Figures are ambiguously smeared and more active than in the past which has led to a variety of readings including a likeness to representations of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden. The white pieces of photographic paper contrast with the darkness of the subject matter and the diagonal lines give a jarring, yet harmonious effect. This body of work was chosen for the 1995 Venice Biennale.

To view these images visit:

[http://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill\\_Henson/336/](http://www.roslynnoxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill_Henson/336/)

## Works from the current display at Bendigo Art Gallery

**Bill Henson**

Melbourne 1955

*Untitled* 2011/2012

8 photographs (edition of 5 + 2A/P)

archival inkjet pigment print

127 x 180 cm each



*Untitled*, 2011/2012

LS SH27 N11

archival inkjet pigment print

127 × 180cm

Edition of 5 + 2 A/Ps





*Untitled*, 2011/2012  
LS SH158 N35  
archival inkjet pigment print  
127 × 180cm  
Edition of 5 + 2 A/Ps



*Untitled*, 2011/2012  
CL SH795 N27B  
archival inkjet pigment print  
127 × 180cm  
Edition of 5 + 2 A/Ps



*Untitled*, 2011/2012  
CL SH808 N21C  
archival inkjet pigment print  
127 × 180cm  
Edition of 5 + 2 A/Ps



*Untitled*, 2011/2012  
AH-C SH104 N34E  
archival inkjet pigment print  
127 × 180cm  
Edition of 5 + 2 A/Ps



*Untitled*, 2011/2012  
AH SH169 N14C  
archival inkjet pigment print  
127 × 180cm  
Edition of 5 + 2 A/Ps



*Untitled*, 2011/2012  
LS SH122 N23  
archival inkjet pigment print  
127 × 180cm  
Edition of 5 + 2 A/Ps



*Untitled*, 2011/2012  
RC SH6 N31  
archival inkjet pigment print  
127 × 180cm  
Edition of 5 + 2 A/Ps

## Selected References

### Web based:

Taylor, Andrew

#### **Henson returns to the most provocative landscape of all**

September 12, 2012

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/henson-returns-to-the-most-provocative-landscape-of-all-20120912-25rrv.html>

#### **Bendigo Advertiser article re: recent acquisition**

<http://www.bendigoadvertiser.com.au/story/424578/bendigo-welcomes-series-of-henson-works/>

#### **Paris Opera Project**

<http://historyofourworld.wordpress.com/2009/10/20/paris-opera-project-199091-bill-henson/>

#### **The 2007 Controversy**

<http://misociety.com.au/roslyn-oxley-9-gallery-bill-henson-police-close-exhibition/>

#### **Article about Henson's model's reaction to the exhibition banning in 2007**

<http://thevine.com.au/life/art/bill-henson-has-no-regrets/>

#### **Influences:**

Cinematic influences:

<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/29/bill-henson-and-the-cinematic.html>

Sums up influences; includes good artist quotes:

[http://sgp1.paddington.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/art\\_profiles/article\\_1703.asp?s=1](http://sgp1.paddington.ninemsn.com.au/sunday/art_profiles/article_1703.asp?s=1)

Interview with the artist discussing his influences

<http://www.studiotv.com.au/highlights/creative-minds/>

Baroque, Mannerist Influences

<http://artblart.com/2011/04/17/review-bill-henson-at-tolarno-galleries-melbourne/>

<http://www.theage.com.au/news/Arts/Shadows-of-great-art/2005/05/06/1115092634491.html>

#### **Interview with Paul Grabowsky**

<http://www.abc.net.au/arts/stories/s3391796.htm>

#### **Recent interview; relates to recent body of work**

<http://thedesignfiles.net/2012/10/interview-bill-henson/>

#### **Deborah Stone**

##### **With light must come shadow**

September 18, 2012

<http://www.theage.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/with-light-must-come-shadow-20120917-262dp.html>

**Education Resources:**

**Bill Henson** Art Gallery of New South Wales **Education Kit Part 1**

[http://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/data/page/7651/billhenson\\_kit\\_1.pdf](http://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/data/page/7651/billhenson_kit_1.pdf)

**Bill Henson** Art Gallery of New South Wales **Education Kit Part 2**

[http://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/data/page/7651/billhenson\\_kit\\_2.pdf](http://archive.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/data/page/7651/billhenson_kit_2.pdf)

**BILL HENSON:** early work from the MGA collection. **EDUCATION** RESOURCE. A MONASH GALLERY OF ART TRAVELLING EXHIBITION

[http://www.mga.org.au/library/HENSON\\_MGAedukit.pdf](http://www.mga.org.au/library/HENSON_MGAedukit.pdf)

**Notes:**