Light and Illusion

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Master of Arts by Project

School of Art
Portfolio of Design and Social Context
RMIT University

2008
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and, any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

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Acknowledgements

With great thanks,

Irene Barberis, Godwin Bradbeer and Alan Roberts
Joy Hirst, Shane Hulbert and Michael Evans
Jim Taylor, Luciano Giardina and Lesley Duxbury
Jenny Lincoln, Emma Lincoln, Sophie Lincoln,
Andrew Hewat and Gary Back
for your energy, enthusiasm and support
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Background

Over the centuries artists have always tried to depict reality in their work as a way in which to keep a religious or historical record of events. The technique of perspective was developed to represent a three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional surface, so that the appearance of the objects or the setting appear to recess from the eye. This is, perhaps, one of the most well known examples of an illusion.

Many artists have tried to create images that are immersive, from the frescoes and panoramas of the past to the virtual reality of today. The integration of the viewer and the image were key and considerable efforts were made with the available technologies of the time to achieve the maximum possible effect of experiencing another space.

The word illusion is derived from the Latin word ‘ludere’ which means to play. On exploring the phenomena of light this word play is used extensively. Monet tried to capture the play of light on the landscape. Much of his work gives the ‘impression’ of being a moment in time. Something to be experienced, a snaphot before the advent of chemical photography.

As the photographic image took hold it changed the way in which we saw the world. David Hockney said as a preface in the 2002 film, *Secret Knowledge*, ‘Photographs monopolise reality and truth as painting did in the past’.
Summary

This project is an investigation of light and its capacity to create visual illusions. There are two aspects to my research. The first involves photography of dioramas, the second is the translation of one or more of these images into a three-dimensional light based installation that creates an illusion.
Description

This project is an investigation of visual illusions created through the interaction of light on different surfaces and structures. Illusion implies deception – an optical illusion, in a sense, is misunderstood information that creates a ‘false’ visual reality.

This project will incorporate macro and non-macro photography to generate illusion through scale and shape. Through deliberate acts of deception the images will play on the human desire for mystery. It is through the ‘eye of the imagination’ that the images reveal themselves. The photographic images will be of dioramas created on the top of a light box, using everyday substances and materials such as glass, felt, coloured transparencies, detergents and liquids of varying consistencies. The outcome of this project will be a photographic exhibition, the product of my experimentation and research, in which the ambiguous content of the composition compels the viewer to their own interpretation, and an exhibition of a three-dimensional light based installation of an illusory nature. The installation will involve light boxes, different kinds of materials and the photographic imagery.

Aims

- Investigate the role of visual deception in art
- Research various forms of optical deception and techniques used by artists to create optical illusions e.g. anamorphic drawing and equiluminant colour
- Relate the theories of key visual artists from this field of enquiry to the creative practice of optical illusions. Key theories will include those by John Berger and David Hockney / Charles Falco
- Investigate ways that photography can be used to document objects, materials and fluids that reflect, absorb, transmit, scatter and refract light
- Investigate different kinds of materials that can be used in an installation in order to create an illusion
- Research how optics can assist in the process of illusion
- Explore the use of traditional media and everyday materials in creating illusory images
Questions

• What kinds of materials can be utilised within an installation to create a visual illusion?
• How can I create images that make the viewer question their content?
• In what way can I incorporate a two-dimensional image into a three-dimensional light based installation?
• How can I create an installation which is to be an experience, involving people in the artwork?
Rationale

Since the 1960’s light as a medium to create art has become increasingly popular. At the time artists worldwide were inspired by the advent and accessibility of new technology which lent itself to the exploration of light, space, and colour. Jan Butterfield (1993, p. 9) pointed out in her seminal text *The Art of Light and Space* that while artists working with light at this time were aware of each other ‘The similarity of their investigations in no way indicates cohesiveness; in fact to understand the work of these artists it is crucial to recognise that they constitute neither a group nor a movement’. They did, however, share an interest in human perception. Two artists who came out of this period were James Turrell and Robert Irwin. They both subscribed to a particular theory about how the world is seen, they believed that by experiencing rather than looking at their work that people would gain a heightened sense of their place in the world.

The art critic and theorist, John Berger added to this debate by talking extensively about how people are unwitting victims seduced into a way of seeing constructed by society.

Through their initial investigations James Turrell and Robert Irwin inspired a new generation of artists working in this area. These included Fabrizio Cornelli, Olafur Eliasson and Werner Klotz.

In 2001 it was noted that, ‘Over the past decade, the world of contemporary art has experienced the beginnings of a techtonic shift: digital technology has arrived as a component of everyday life and contemporary art on a global scale. Artists are adopting new technologies in the studio, deploying them in the gallery, inhabiting them through the internet, and making artwork that relects our technology saturated society in a stunning range of ways’(SFMoMA 2001, para. 1).

It is clear change and new technology has been a constant in this area for half a century.

*Light Art from Artificial Light* an exhibition in Germany in 2005/06 demonstrated the influence that new technologies have had on artists, particularly those whose primary concern is light. While computers have enabled the use of new and innovative techniques, they have also imposed their own restrictions. One of these restrictions is the perceived notion that abstract images and illusions are created using computer software programs. Whilst this is increasingly the case it is not always true. It is important to explore the role of traditional media and everday materials as they still hold great potential. ‘Understood in this way, new media do not render old ones obsolete, but rather assigns them new places within the system’(Grau 2003, p. 8).

Emphasis will be placed on the identification of the essential characteristics which underpins the work of the above mentioned artists and the adaptation of these characteristics into my own imagery and installations. This research will celebrate and build on the methodologies of artists from the latter half of the twentieth century who utilised traditional media and everyday materials to create illusory work.
Process

The photographic images will be of dioramas created on the top of a light box, using everyday materials such as glass, felt, coloured transparencies, detergents and liquids of varying consistencies. The dioramas appear rudimentary in nature. Photography is used to document the small happenings which result. Translating one or more images into a three-dimensional light based installation will involve people in the artwork, furthering their experience.

Outcomes

A photographic exhibition, the product of my experimentation and research, in which the ambiguous content of the composition compels the viewer to their own interpretation and an exhibition of a three-dimensional light based installation of an illusory nature. It will involve one or more of the photographs from my experimentation and research.

Location

Field research will be undertaken within Australia. The project will be studio based; artwork will be made at home and at the RMIT city campus. It will involve two-dimensional and three-dimensional elements.
Methods 1st – 2nd year

Preparatory Work

• Writing proposal
• Constructing bibliography
• Submitting proposal
• Developing technical skills
• Researching new digital SLR (single lens reflex) technology
• Acquiring necessary materials and equipment
• Further exploring and advancing my skills in a new environment

Collection of Data

• Collecting related visual and written material
• Researching the nature of optics
• Exploring different kinds of illusions and how they are made
• Researching art and artists that deal with similar and related themes
• Field research involving gallery, library and electronic resources within Victoria and the broader Australian context

Analysis of data

• Identifying the commonality in my research which can inform my art practice
• Incorporating visual elements within the conceptual theme
Methods 2nd – 3rd year

Experimentation

• Documenting progress of research
• Experimenting with different kinds of light
• Investigating materials and substances, such as, glass, plastics and liquids of varying consistencies and their capacity to create illusions
• Macro-photography of dioramas
• Developing ideas into an integrated visual concept
• Developing preliminary models and blueprints

Major Work

• Deciding on the model that best encompasses and articulates my experimentation and research
• Liaising with industry in order to find out what materials are most appropriate to create the final work
• Creating a major work that succinctly communicates the most important findings of my experimentation and research, taking the form of an exhibition of photographs and a three-dimensional light based installation

Documentation

• Documenting experiments
• Selecting work for exhibition
• Researching suitable spaces in which to exhibit my work
• Exhibiting work
• Collating durable visual record
Photography

‘You don't take a photograph, you make it.’
(Ansel Adams, cited in Guillemets 1998, Photography Quotes)
Process

‘the word illusion is derived from the Latin word ludere to play’
In the making...
Inside Out Boxes

‘It is the power of enchantment which matters’
(Magritte, cited in Gablik 1985, p. 170)
Resume

RMIT

Master of Art by Research 2005 current

Bachelor of Fine Art Honors 1st Class 2004

Swinburne

Diploma in Visual Arts 2000

Awards

Siemens Fine Art Scholarship 2004

Exhibitions

Fluoresce Part 3 2008

The Kodak Salon 2007

Fluoresce Part 2 2005

Inside a Fishbowl 2005
Bibliography


Foucault, M 1983, *This is Not a Pipe*, University of California Press, Berkeley.


Grau, O 2003, *Virtual Art from Illusion to Immersion*, The MIT Press, U.S.A.


‘The greatness of art comes from the ambiguities, which is another way of saying it stops us from knowing what to think. It redeems us from a world of moralism and opinionation and clap-trap’.

(Henson, cited in Shanahan 2008, p. 3)