

Gerard Byrne: A late evening in the future

**8 October -
27 November 2016**

**Education Kit
Australian Centre
for Contemporary Art**



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ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Gerard Byrne was born in Dublin, Ireland, in 1969, and is currently living and working in New York City. He completed a Bachelor degree at the National College of Art & Design, Dublin, in 1991, followed by a Master of Fine Art at the New School for Social Research, New York, USA, in 1996, and was a participant in the Whitney Independent Study Program, New York, USA, in 1999.

Byrne has exhibited widely internationally, including recent exhibitions at Mead Gallery, Coventry, UK; Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, St. Gallen, Switzerland; Lisson Gallery, Milan, Italy; Fondazione Prada, Milan, Italy; and PRAXES Centre for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany. In 2007 Byrne represented Ireland in the 52nd Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy. He has also presented work at the international biennials of Gwangju and Sydney in 2008, and Lyon in 2007. He is represented Lisson Gallery, London and Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm.

ARTIST PRACTICE

Gerard Byrne maintains a prolific multidisciplinary practice that incorporates the media and formal languages of photography, film, multiscreen installation, theatre and live art. Through visually rich and intellectually sophisticated projects, Byrne examines the zone of slippage between time and the act of image creation. The artist engages in specific, analytical research and is known for creating uncanny, laconically humorous reconstructions of carefully selected historically charged interviews, conversations and performances drawn from diverse sources including vintage *Playboy* and *National Geographic* magazines, the 1920s Surrealist publication *La Revolution Surréaliste*, and late night television programs from his childhood and adolescence in Ireland.

In representing these exchanges of opinion and politics within the contemporary context, Byrne tests viewers' perceptions of the past and the present, highlighting the fraught and complex nature of the visual record. His ongoing photographic series *In the News* and *Loch Ness* make light that whilst images are fixed in time, they are always interpreted in flux - emphasising the fact that the visual record simultaneously substantiates and distorts our knowledge of what has come before. Whilst each body of work is conceived independently, they reflect a common preoccupation concentrated on the shaping of specific historical referents. Essentially, Byrne's practice asks the question: *How do we as a society understand the present through revisiting the past?*



CURATORIAL INTRODUCTION

In Samuel Beckett's one-act play *Krapp's Last Tape*, the curtain rises to the *mise-en-scène*: 'a late evening in the future'. For his exhibition of the same name, Irish artist Gerard Byrne employs a similar sense of drama: transforming ACCA into a theatre, and implicating the audience within an intricate, multi-sensory network of lights, flickering TV monitors, video projections and architectural structures.

In the case of Beckett's character Krapp, the 'tape' in the play's title refers to audio recordings made by the protagonist as a younger man. In this first scene he is revealed listening over them and adding new commentary to reflect on recent years. Byrne's exhibition pays homage to this history of recordings, bringing together a dense accumulation of his own video works spanning more than fifteen years.

Throughout his varied practice, Byrne has explored historical ideas, conversations and locations in order to consider their contemporary relevance and to blur distinctions between past and future, myth and reality. The first major survey of the artist's work in Australia, *A late evening in the future* builds on this interest in collective history and dramatic reconstruction, employing the device of a playback system to convulsively shuttle and scroll through moments of memory and cultural amnesia.

- Annika Kristensen, Curator, ACCA

REINVENTION OF PRACTICE

"The whole is other than the sum of its parts"

- Kurt Koffka, Gestalt Psychologist

In the exhibition *A late evening in the future* at ACCA, Byrne presents the viewer with a kind of total reinvention of moving and still image works spanning the last fifteen years of his practice. Byrne's concept is to dissolve the separate and distinct works into one total artwork that will serve to create a sprawling new artwork in installation form. Byrne has used a specially designed audio-visual system to control when and where different works are played and projected within the gallery space. Operating film, video, slide projection and soundtrack, the system will commence and cease each individual element according to a specific schedule written by the artist. This schedule itself is then displayed in the form of a handwritten wall-text on the gallery wall. The idea of a thinking human brain – chopping and changing through various trains of thought – could serve as a metaphor for the functioning model of the exhibition as a whole.



THEATRE & DIRECTION

“I’ve always been interested in theatre as a useful reference for what I do in the gallery space. The space of the stage is always so charged and loaded, and it’s interesting to take that kind of mindset and use it with the gallery space, as if the floor of the gallery is somehow stage-like...”

- Gerard Byrne, Sydney Morning Herald, 2016

Byrne’s interest in theatrical forms is revealed in his film and video installations in his deliberate choice to reconstruct historical source material in specific locations, time periods or fashions. Byrne borrows the tropes of Brechtian epic theatre, connecting the present to the past and in so doing altering the meaning of the original material. Epic theatre was characterised by an interest in responding to – and so revealing – ideas relating to contemporary existence. Unlike more conventional, naturalistic or escapist forms of theatre, Epic theatre relied upon techniques to heighten the audience’s awareness of the artifice of the theatre, such as lighting the seating as well as the stage or having the actors ‘break the fourth wall’ to directly address the audience. Byrne’s videos are similarly uncanny in this regard, revealing settings, costumes or stage directions that appear at odds with the original source material or scripts. The technical installation of his exhibitions, involving lights and choreographed monitors, are also influenced by theatre. At ACCA, Byrne similarly assumes the role of a director – carefully controlling the action within the galleries through the device of a playback system.

TECHNOLOGY & SYSTEMS

“At ACCA, the videos will be presented on free-standing video monitors and leaning “slab” screens. A “slightly obtuse” schedule, drawn up by Byrne, will be affixed to the wall. None but the most committed and patient gallery-goer will see the films in their entirety. Every so often all the screens will go blank, then fast-forward or rewind, like shuttling VHS tape...”

- Gerard Byrne, Sydney Morning Herald, 2016

Byrne controls the viewer’s experience of ACCA’s exhibition, *A late evening in the future*, by dictating the exhibition structure with tightly synchronised arrangements. He employs an installation and programming playback strategy that is controlled through a *Brightsign* media player. To achieve this, Byrne’s work has been adapted and reprogrammed by his technical collaborator, sound artist Sven Anderson. The multi-channelled installation is communicated through video monitors, projectors, sculptural screens, speakers and lighting sequences. The sequence allows potential for playback of segments of footage, making it nearly impossible for the audience to view the exhibition in entirety. The playback system acts as both technological and organisational infrastructure, sequencing audiovisual and lighting scenarios across ACCA’s connected gallery spaces.



MODERNISM: ART & ARCHITECTURE

Gerard Byrne is interested in playing with viewers' sense of time through recreations of historical events and conversations from past history. He frequently references the period of the 1960s when Modernism was at its ultimate peak. Byrne achieves this via symbolic language, incorporating modernist architecture, artworks and costumes in his film and video works as a means of signifying that time period.

The advent of Modernism and Modern Art dates from approximately 1850 when the Industrial Revolution resulted in rapid changes in manufacturing, transportation and other technologies. These changes greatly affected the social, economic and cultural conditions of day-to-day life across Europe, North America and eventually the rest of the world. New forms of transportation such as the railroad, steam engines and subways greatly increased mobility which opened up new avenues for both work and travel, literally expanding the average person's world view and enabling the spread of new ideas at a significantly greater rate than what had been previously known.

ART

The Modernist movement encouraged artists to break away from the traditional styles of the past in favour of an emphasis on innovation and experimentation across artforms, materials and techniques. This can be understood as an effort on the behalf of artists to create artwork that reflected the reality, or *zeitgeist*, of the newly modernised society. Modernism in art reached its ultimate culmination in the so-called minimalist art of the 1960s. In the exhibition *A late evening in the future* Byrne also references 1960s minimalism through using flat, tilted screens for projections, directly referencing the modernist formal language of artist Robert Morris. Although modernism found expression in many different artforms and styles, some general features of modernist art include:

- A rejection of historical and conservative values, such as realistic depiction of subjects
- Innovation and experimentation with form tended toward abstraction and non-objective compositions of colour, shape and line
- An emphasis on new materials, techniques and processes
- A general sense of utopian idealism. Modernism was a project that believed in improving on the past through challenging reinventions of forms and expression

ARCHITECTURE

The effect of Modernism on architecture can be seen in the rejection of ornament and decoration in favour of clean lines and minimal design. Modernism is widely recognised as the single most defining movement in 20th century architecture and design. Within modernist design traditional ornamentation was avoided in favour of refined, minimal forms that emphasised building materials including glass and concrete to their best advantage. The Modernist approach to architecture was also known as either International Modern or International Style. Both these names indicate a less geographically specific approach to design and the reason for this is that the modernist philosophy dictated that function (the purpose of the object or building) would follow form (the look of the object or building), thus regional decoration styles began to disappear in favour of a streamlined 'international look'.

Some characteristics of Modernist architecture include:

- Asymmetrically composed structures
- Use of general cubic or cylindrical shapes
- Flat roofs
- Use of reinforced concrete
- Metal and glass frameworks often resulting in large windows in horizontal bands
- An absence of ornament or mouldings
- A tendency for white or cream render, often emphasised by black and white phot



Left: *Subject* 2009. Three channel video shown on monitors and vinyl wall text. Commissioned by the Henry Moore Institute
Right: *1984 and beyond* 2005-7. Three channel video monitor, vinyl wall text and silver gelatine photographs.
Commissioned in 2005 by If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution

PHOTOGRAPHY

“my work is about appropriation, using photography, that is fundamentally commercial, and turning it into art”

- Gerard Byrne, Independent, 2013

Since its introduction as a commercial process in 1839, an event popularly synonymous with its birth, photography has borne the perception of its inherent ‘truth’, as both a privilege and a burden. This arises from the fact that society routinely, often automatically, views photographic imagery as a record of the world either as it is, or was. Negatively, for many years photography was not accepted as ‘art’ for the reason that it *merely* recorded reality in 1:1 reproduction - this solely documentary definition was out-of-step with traditionally upheld artistic qualities such as technical dexterity (in painting and sculpture) and visibility of ‘the hand of the artist’. Conversely, photography was upheld as a great innovation in the recording and circulation of images of the world, allowing people to learn about sites, objects, animals and people that they were not able to physically visit, due to technological and financial limitations.

Gerard Byrne has been quoted as saying that he uses photography as a means of ‘allowing yourself and giving permission to others to see or reframe things in a certain way’. This statement is at the crux of Byrne’s engagement with the photographic image. Essentially, it is due to photography’s documented relationship to the depiction of the ‘truth’ that Byrne’s work is able to gather force and cause the viewer to double-take when viewing Byrne’s works, as they mentally disentangle whether or not the image that they are viewing a true historical image or a contemporary restaging. This quality is perfectly suited to Byrne’s interest in reconciling the past with the present through media documentation, restaging and performance.



CURRICULUM LINKS

VCE ART

UNIT 2 AREA OF STUDY 1: Art and culture

Discuss how Byrne's work reflects upon the landscape into which he was born. How has his cultural background influenced his work? Investigate some of the social and political contexts of the source material Byrne has used, such as *Playboy*, *Interview* and *National Geographic* magazines. What impact does source material have on his practice?

Analyse the formal qualities of modernist iconography in Byrne's films, such as the architectural environments and settings. Furthermore, research and discuss the historical effects of Modernism on art, architecture and society.

How has Byrne explored gender values from a particular time and social context in his video *New Sexual Lifestyles 2003*? How do these ideas translate in society today?

UNIT 4 AREA OF STUDY 1: Discussing and debating art

Discuss how the exhibition *A late evening in the future* at ACCA has been designed. How has Byrne interrupted the viewer's experience of his work? Why do you think he has decided to control how people encounter his work? How has he staged, directed and projected his work?

Byrne's works, although based on historical stories, often run parallel to current social questions. His film *New Sexual Lifestyles 2003* presents the viewer with political round table discussions around sexuality sourced from *Playboy* magazine in 1973. Discuss and debate: through revisiting the past, do you think Byrne has opened up possibilities to understand current sexual attitudes? Do the same debates around gender politics occur now?

The style of high Modernism is seen as typically masculine, often leaving women excluded or marginalised in discussions of Modernism. Discuss and debate: was Modernism wholly progressive?

Byrne uses source material in his art practice. In relation to his *Loch Ness Project* he has said, "my work is about appropriation, using photography that is fundamentally commercial and turning it into art". Research and discuss how this was achieved in this specific project.

VCE STUDIO ART

UNIT 2 AREA OF STUDY 3: Ideas and styles in artworks

Research and map a brief historical timeline of Modern Art in your visual diary, indicating ten different movements throughout this period and the distinct characteristics of style and aesthetic qualities in each. Choose two different movements and research two key influential artists and works from each. Compare and contrast ways in which art elements and principles have been used to produce aesthetic qualities, communicate ideas and develop skills in artworks by selected artists, using chosen works as example in your analysis.

In the exhibition *A late evening in the future* Byrne references 1960s minimalism through using flat, tilted screens for projections, directly referencing the modernist formal language of artist Robert Morris. While at ACCA, photograph the sculptural screens Byrne has used for his video installations. Back at school research the work of Robert Morris and compare the similarities in visual qualities between the work of Morris and Byrne, using visual examples in your folio.

UNIT 4 AREA OF STUDY 3: Art industry contexts

Move through ACCA's galleries and sketch the layout of the exhibition while in the space. As a group analyse and discuss the curatorial and logistical considerations involved in designing the exhibition *A late evening in the future*, with particular focus on the exhibition infrastructure and playback system. What would be some challenges installing the exhibition? What would the Artist, Curator and Exhibition Manager have to consider in preparing the exhibition?

Follow ACCA's Instagram: *acca_melbourne*. How does ACCA promote exhibitions using this social media platform? What kind of imagery and text is used, and when is it distributed to the public? What would the Online Communications Manager at ACCA need to consider when preparing content for Instagram?



SECONDARY ART: 7 - 8

Explore & Express Ideas

Gerard Byrne is very interested in how cultural change happens over time. He often uses actors to recreate historic texts and conversations. This has the effect of making these conversations seem strange or somehow out of step with today. For instance, in his artwork *New Sexual Lifestyles* 2003 Irish actors carry out a conversation originally spoken by Americans. The Irish accents of the actors add an interesting layer of complexity to the conversation, something not quite right that alerts the viewer to the fact that something strange is going happening.

Activity: In a group of three or four you are going to record a naturalistic conversation together. First, write a short script. Make it as realistic as possible, just like you might have when you meet up at lunchtime. Include references to things that you are into such as games, music, movies and sports. Once you have recorded the conversation (no more than a minute and a half) you will need to find some volunteer teachers to help you out. Show them your film and ask if they would be interested in reperforming the parts. Record this reperformance. Once finished, as a class watch your films. How does your language sound different coming from adults? Does it seem strange? Why? What other effects does reperformance have?

Visual Arts Practices

Photography is a tricky artistic medium. Because it is used predominantly in the media we have the dominant impression that images represent truth. This makes photography a very interesting thing to experiment with in terms of creating illusionistic artworks.

Activity: Time Travel Photography: Look up Gerard Byrne's ongoing photographic series *1984 and beyond* 2005-7. What the artist does is to find sites, objects and arrangements from contemporary life that look as if they could have been photographed in the past, often decades ago. Your task is to find an area of your school that will look as if it could have been photographed a long time ago. Look for old architecture, old furniture, old signs and anything else you think will work. Shoot five images and print them out to stick in your visual diary.

Present & Perform

The title of the exhibition *A late evening in the future* is taken from a play written by Samuel Beckett. It is attention grabbing because it suggests two very different types of time in one short sentence: times of the day and another period, perhaps light-years ahead in the future. It is also an appropriate title because it reflects the artist's interest in exploring time in his artworks.

Activity: You are going to create an exhibition of the photographs that the class has taken. Hang your exhibition of photographs in the school and then as a group take suggestions of titles that reflect the content of your exhibition. Research books and films about time travel to get inspiration, some examples are *Back to the Future* or *Time and Again*.

Respond & Interpret

Gerard Byrne's work sometimes leaves people unsure about when it was made. The artist does this by including historical language, costume and buildings in his contemporary artworks.

Activity: You are going to write a creative response to a classmate's photograph. Write your name on a piece of paper and then put it into a container with everyone else's. The name that you draw out will be the artwork that you will be writing about. Next, write a short story that tells the tale of - either what has just happened, or what is just about to happen. Use the image as a starting point and inspiration for the narrative.





SECONDARY ART: 9 - 10

Explore & Express Ideas

Byrne frequently explores the concept of re-performance to make his film and video artworks. When Byrne recreates a conversation from another time in the present day the sense of time that the artwork represents becomes confusing in an interesting way. Significantly, the materials that Byrne uses for the recreations are often drawn from his childhood and adolescence in Ireland. This kind of confusion can be used to make apparent how ideas, language and culture have changed in the period between the original record and the artistic recreation.

Activity: Back at school ask one of your teachers or another adult what slang and vernacular words were used when they were your age and the type of things that they might have talked about at the time, topics including popular music, movies, politics or fashion for example. List these words and topics and together with your group write a short script in which two or more friends meet up at school and have a conversation. Make sure to use the specific titles and names of things and people along with the vocabulary list that you created. Film yourselves performing the script that you wrote together. Discuss how your film demonstrates how language and topics of conversation amongst teenagers has changed over time.

Visual Arts Practices

Byrne is known for using analogue photographic processes in both his still and moving image artworks. This is partly because the grain of analogue film in photographs has the effect of making the image look as if it is from the past, because by contrast contemporary digital images are crisp, clear and even. Byrne uses this effect to further explore how perceptions of the past and the present can be blurred to create artworks which generate questions about time and the past.

Activity: You will experiment with creating a contemporary photograph which looks as if it was taken in the past. If possible obtain a film camera for the class to share. This will provide your images with a slightly out-of-date appearance. Form a group of four or five people. Each group member is to bring an item from home that dates from approximately the year that they were born. These items could include: books, posters, accessories (such as sunglasses), clothing, souvenirs, family photographs or ornaments. The idea is to create an image that 'pictures' the time that you were all born, creating an illusionistic effect. When finished have your film developed and hold a class exhibition of your images.

Present & Perform

Byrne has exhibited extensively throughout his career all around the world. The significant aspect to Gerard Byrne's exhibition at ACCA is that he is attempting to reinvent his individual artworks by dissolving them into one total artwork through simultaneous playback. This is a significant development in the evolution of his installation methodology.

Activity: Gather each of the recreated films from your classmates and great an immersive installation of all of them. Use any computer screens in your classroom, any overhead projectors and your tablet devices. Think about the placement of screens in *A late evening in the future* and how Byrne has used different angles in his installation. Try a similar layout in your classroom to create an interesting sculptural environment for viewing the artworks.

Respond & Interpret

Activity: Write two short paragraphs. In the first paragraph reflect on the effect that the re-performance had in your film. How did the language and cultural references of the past sound being spoken by you and your classmates? Did it sound strange? What was different to a normal conversation? What was interesting? Did teenagers then sound like teenagers now?

In the second paragraph reflect upon how your work changed when it was dissolved into the total installation of your classmates' video artworks. How did the installation change the way you viewed your video? What was the effect of sound from other videos mingling with the sound of yours? Was the installation productive in adding to your artwork, how? Did the installation detract from the experience of yours and others' works, why?

PRIMARY ART: F-6

Explore & Express Ideas

Byrne uses actors, costumes and theatrical props to create very realistic fictional worlds inside his films and still photographs that make us wonder and doubt about whether what we are seeing is real life or made up.

Activity: Using three of Byrne's images and your imagination write a short adventure story in three parts. The first image will inspire the beginning of the story, the second the middle, and the third the ending.

Visual Arts Practices

Byrne is very interested in cinema and theatre and this is why he often employs actors, costumes and props to create his artworks. It is interesting to see something that looks like a film in the gallery because it makes you think about it in a different way than you might another type of artwork, such as a painting.

Activity: Choose one of your stories to develop into a short play. Before turning the play into a performance you will need to create props and a backdrop. Use the original inspiration images as a guide for the creating the setting.

Present & Perform

Byrne often uses written interviews, advertisements and conversations from the media as the basis for his artworks. By adding life and movement to an a printed text he adds new dimensions to the material that change the way the viewer understands the subject.

Activity: As a group expand the original story to include enough characters and dialogue for everyone to be involved. When you have rehearsed, invite another class in to be your audience. At the end see if they can guess what was the inspiration for your play.

Respond & Interpret

Byrne included many of his artworks in the exhibition *A late evening in the future* all starting and stopping at different times. This creates a total artwork where different parts of artworks mingle and cross over one another.

Activity: As a class sit down in a circle and discuss what you saw at the exhibition. Going around the circle have everyone volunteer one thing that was interesting to them. Use a pencil and a notebook to draw and note what was interesting to everyone. Make notes of each other's different observations. Notice especially the ideas that other people have had that had not occurred to you. Art is interesting because different people can have very different interpretations and there is no wrong interpretation.



FURTHER READING

Artist's website:

<http://www.gerardbyrne.com/>

Lisson Gallery, London:

<http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/gerard-byrne>

Galerie Nordenhake, Stockholm:

<http://www.nordenhake.com/php/artist.php?RefID=109>

Previous exhibitions:

<http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/exhibitions/gerard-byrne/>

<http://www.warwickartscentre.co.uk/whats-on/2016/gerard-byrne-1125-of-a-second/>

<http://www.kunstmuseumsg.ch/en/our-program/archive/gerard-byrne.html>

<http://www.fracdespaysdelaloire.com/fr/programme/2014/au-frac/gerard-byrne>

http://www.imma.ie/en/page_212321.htm

Articles:

<http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.17/you.see.gerard.byrnes.reconstructions>

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/in-the-studio-gerard-byrne-artist-8465432.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/irish-artist-gerard-byrne-to-speak-at-monash-university-20160216-gmvcyl.html>

REFERENCES

Afterall: You See? Gerard Byrne's Reconstructions. This site discusses how Byrne reconstructs narratives from source material. URL: <http://www.afterall.org/journal/issue.17/you.see.gerard.byrnes.reconstructions>

Architecture.com: MODERNISM. A website discussing Modernism and 20th century architecture and design. URL: <https://www.architecture.com/Explore/ArchitecturalStyles/Modernism.aspx>

Gerard Byrne: Gerard Byrne. This site is the artist's personal website detailing his biographical information. URL: <http://www.gerardbyrne.com>

Gender and Modernism: Introduction: Modernism and Gender. A website with lecture notes about how gender informed common understandings of modernism. URL: <https://gendermodernism.wordpress.com/lecture-notes/introduction-modernism-and-gender/>

INDEPENDENT: InThe Studio: Gerard Byrne, artist. A website about Gerard Byrne working in the studio. URL: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/features/in-the-studio-gerard-byrne-artist-8465432.html>

Lisson Gallery: Byrne Gerard CV. This is a downloadable PDF of Gerard Byrne's CV. URL: <http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/gerard-byrne>

Lisson Gallery: Gerard Byrne. This is a webpage dedicated to the artist by their commercial gallery. URL: <http://www.lissongallery.com/artists/gerard-byrne>

Maeve Connolly: The Mechanics of Now. A text on technology and systems used in the exhibition Gerard Byrne: *A late evening in the future*.

MoMA Learning: What is Modern Art? A website on how artists responded to the modern age. URL: https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/themes/what-is-modern-art

TATE: Modernism. An educational site with an introduction to modernism and modern art. URL: <http://www.tate.org.uk/learn/online-resources/glossary/m/modernism>

Warwick Arts Centre: Gerard Byrne Teachers' Resources. An educational resource developed for Gerard Byrne's Exhibition at Mead Gallery 2016. URL: https://issuu.com/warwickartscentre/docs/gerard_byrne_teachers_resources

Whitechapel Gallery: Gerard Byrne: A state of neutral pleasure. Catalogue for exhibition Gerard Byrne: A state of neutral pleasure at Whitechapel Gallery.

Whitechapel Gallery: Gerard Byrne > Press releases. An online press release for a survey exhibition of Gerard Byrne at Whitechapel Gallery. URL: <http://www.whitechapelgallery.org/about/press/gerard-byrne/>

VISITING ACCA

ACCA's Education Programs are FREE and available for Primary, Secondary and Tertiary groups.

Maximum 25 students per group for Talk Think Make programs.




Bookings are required for both guided and self-guided School and Tertiary groups.

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Monday by special appointment

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Education resource written and compiled by Eliza Devlin, Education Manager and Andrew Atchison, Artist Educator, ACCA, September 2016.

TERMS OF USE

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