Richard LARTER

EDUCATION RESOURCE
for senior secondary school students

national gallery of australia
Who is Richard Larter?

Richard Larter is a contemporary Australian artist. He was born in Britain in 1929 and moved to Australia with his wife Pat and young family in 1962. His art has always included an interest in both abstraction and figuration. It explores pattern and colour, portraiture, free expression of sexuality, censorship and the influence of political events on private and public life.

From 1947, Larter spent two years in the British national service, an experience that confirmed his dislike of authoritarian systems. By the late 1940s, Larter was free to pursue his interests in art. As part of a self-directed education, Larter travelled to France and Italy where he saw Monet’s waterlily paintings and the work of Austrian artists Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt as well as the Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna. A visit to Algiers in 1951 added to Larter’s appreciation and knowledge of art, decoration and design. In London, Larter also saw British Pop art and the multiple portraits of John Bratby. Larter’s work began to reflect the influence of youth culture, rock and roll music and the sexual liberation of the late 1950s and 1960s.

In 1953, Richard Larter married Patricia Holmes. With Pat as a collaborator, model and muse, their relationship became a major source of inspiration for his paintings, even after her death in 1996. His art displays an ongoing passion with the process and techniques of painting.
Sarah no. 8
1999  synthetic polymer paint and glitter on canvas  130.0 x 101.0 cm
Collection of the artist

How would you describe the young woman in this painting?

As an image of female sexuality, is this image provocative or playful?

Sarah no. 8 is a double portrait of a young woman with spiked red hair, her hands behind her head, fingers fanned out in a playful gesture. The black garter, studded collar, wristband and tiara are suggestive adornments. In this work, the model’s skin is painted with fine diagonal lines, the colour delicate against the dramatic black-and-yellow background. Sarah’s arms overlap as if in a chorus line, creating areas of positive and negative space.

The model as an active collaborator is an important aspect of Larter’s figurative paintings from the 1990s. By this time Pat Larter had decided she no longer wanted to pose and she began to work with Richard photographing models, which they then independently developed into works in different media.

Since Pat’s death in 1996, Larter has continued to develop paintings from photography sessions with various models. Each session produces numerous images that he uses as an ongoing resource in his paintings.
The hairdresser
1969  synthetic polymer paint on composition board  133.0 x 122.0 cm
Collection of Helen Eager and Christopher Hodges

What makes this painting so appealing?

Is it a contemporary image? Give reasons to support your answer.

The hairdresser painted in 1969 shows Larter’s awareness of the figurative techniques and ideas of Pop art. Larter had seen the exhibition This is tomorrow in London in 1956 in which urban planners, architects and artists explored everyday life and popular culture. In this painting, a row of women sit under hairdryers in a salon, their hands loosely clasped over crossed legs, the last woman dissolving into black-and-white shapes. Positive and negative spaces dissolve as the image shifts from figuration to abstraction, a characteristic of many of Larter’s paintings. The use of black and white is a reminder of the source of the image in the printed media.

As a young man Larter was interested in French painters Georges Seurat and Paul Signac, who developed a system of patches and dots of complementary colour to convey luminosity and emotion. ‘Pointillist abstracts’ was the term Larter used to describe his early works. The hairdresser also shows Larter’s pointillist technique where delicate waves of dots add vitality and tone to the areas of flat colour on the left-hand side of the painting. Stripes of bright colour along the top of the painting add a sense of spontaneity associated with decoration and popular culture. It also playfully references the colour bar from the edge of a photograph used for checking colour accuracy. The subject of beautiful women, glamorous yet ordinary, is a theme that recurs in Larter’s work.
Pause for thought (July)
1973  synthetic polymer paint over pencil on canvas  179.5 x 150.0 cm
Hassall collection

Does this painting reveal or conceal the personality of the subject?

What techniques has Larter used in this painting and what effects do they create?

During the 1950s, while still living in Britain, Larter was interested in the multiple portraits of artist John Bratby of the Kitchen Sink School. Multiple portraits can suggest different facets and complexities of a character. Pause for thought (July) features forty-two faces of Pat Larter in seven different poses. These images of her face are screenprinted onto the canvas and overlaid with carefully painted dots, stripes and patches of solid colour. The different scales of the heads create a wave like effect, suggesting movement down and across the canvas.

Pause for thought (July) is painted in predominantly cool blues and greens. Larter uses a variety of techniques to depict Pat as both exuberant and pensive. The blurred edges created by the fine dotting technique suggest a softer side of Pat. However, her direct gaze and challenging appearance in many of the images convey a strong, self-aware personality. Pat knows she is being looked at. Often her mouth is open in a suggestive and provocative way as she strikes a pose concealing rather than revealing her identity. The collaborative nature of Pat’s participation as a model for Larter seems to be implied by the way she holds our gaze. This defiant look makes us consider the act of looking.
Research

Technique
• What techniques has Richard Larter developed in his work?

Colour
• Discuss the influence of French artist Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947) and Austrian artist Gustav Klimt (1862–1918) in two works by Larter.
• Investigate the colour theories developed by Johannes Itten in *The art of color* and discover why they were important to Richard Larter.

Portraiture
• In many of the images he painted of Pat, Richard Larter challenges conventional portraiture. Discuss.
• Compare *Stripperama no. 3* 1964 with *Sarah no. 8* 1999.

Politics
• What historical, social and political issues does Larter communicate in his work? Make reference to particular works and the techniques used.
• Find out when the Watters Gallery was established and the role this gallery played in the careers of young artists at the time.

Photography/film
• Using examples of Richard Larter’s work such as *Stripperama no. 3* 1964 and *The hairdresser* 1969 discuss the role of photography and film in these or other works in *Richard Larter: a retrospective* at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

Pop art
• Research the development of Pop art in London in the mid 1950s and use the exhibition *This is tomorrow* held at the Whitechapel Gallery in London in 1956 to help establish a context.
• Discuss the ways Larter uses subject matter from popular culture to engage his audience.
Activities

Technique  music, drawing
• Use a number of implements from the kitchen or the garage, such as a basting syringe or roller, to create different paint effects.
• Draw a friend in a number of different poses. Develop these drawings into a work that explores line, pattern and movement.

Colour  painting
• Find a photograph, scan it or enlarge it on a colour photocopier until you can see the individual dots of colour (these are called Ben Day dots). Use this image to create a painting of small dots of bright, unmixed paint.

Portraiture  photography, film, drawing
• Look at Larter’s portrait of Pat in Pause for thought (July) 1973. Take a series of digital photographs of a friend and use these to create multiple portraits.
• Film a friend or yourself for one minute everyday for a week.
• Draw forty-two small portraits of yourself or a friend to fit onto an A3-size piece of paper.

Politics  collage
• Select a number of public figures from newspapers and magazines. Collage these images with others to create a narrative or political commentary.

Pop art  screenprinting
• Look carefully at Larter’s The hairdresser 1969. Find an image from the 1960s that evokes a sense of glamour. Convert the image into a screenprint and then over paint it.
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**Sliding easy**
1970 synthetic polymer paint on composition board
122.0 x 183.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

**What does the title of the painting suggest to you?**
**How has Larter used scale as a compositional device in *Sliding easy***?

Richard Larter objected to the Vietnam War and to the United States president Lyndon Johnson’s support of the conflict. Shocking images of the devastating effects of chemical weapons and landmines on children, women and the elderly appeared in the media at the time.

The photograph of Johnson – repeated three times in black-and-white – has been screenprinted onto the board. Smaller and higher within the overall composition, Johnson’s wrinkled face appears to frown down on the woman on the left who, by contrast, is young and beautiful. Her hair and facial features are painted in flat areas of purple, while her face is softly modelled with a pattern of tiny red dots. She dominates the composition.

Larter often uses images of women to represent the positive forces in the world set against the politics of war. The still-life elements in *Sliding easy* further suggest aspects of everyday life, of leisure and enjoyment. They contrast with Johnson’s stern, unapologetic gaze and, by extension, the harsh reality and destruction of the war in Vietnam.

*Sliding easy* incorporates tiny dots as well as dots of exaggerated scale where large holes that initially appear to be painted have actually been cut out of the surface in a dramatic extension of Pointillism. *Sliding easy* reflects multiple influences and combines colour, pattern and composition to maximum effect.
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Cream filling; phew, finger ring
1971  synthetic polymer paint on canvas  178.0 x 366.0 cm
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

How can the title of the painting be connected to the image?
What kinds of source material and painterly techniques has the artist used?

Although Larter’s titles were often arbitrary, Cream filling; phew, finger ring is a suggestive combination of words and sounds. This playful and evocative title reinforces the underground nature and chance combination of the figures in the painting.

Cream filling; phew, finger ring is a painted collage of images jostling for space. This collision of images suggests flipping the channels on TV or the pages of a rock and roll magazine. The images and text convey the dynamic, ever-changing nature of popular culture – reflected, for example, in the music of each generation. The 1960s and early 1970s were overshadowed by the Cold War, the Soviet repression of eastern Europe, the Vietnam War and conservative political leadership in Australia.

Larter combines disparate images: a skull and monkey face, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, sexually provocative images of women and rock and roll icons Mick Jagger and Elvis Presley along with female performers. Words such as hero, loser, rausche (smoke) and opium are also included in the image. The sources combine to create a diverse and humorous painting suffused with a creative energy that contrasts with the conservative politics of the time.
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Side thrust no. 1–9
1989 (pictured: Side thrust no. 1 and Side thrust no. 2)
synthetic polymer paint on nine canvases
177.2 x 120.0 cm (each)
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

Is this painting abstract or figurative? How does it convey a sense of movement?

In the 1980s, Larter concentrated on painting non-figurative works. He was influenced in part by developments in mathematics and physics and by the landscape near his home in Yass, New South Wales.

His interests in abstraction and luminous colour date back to his formative years in London, where he saw works by artists such as Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse and Georges Seurat as well as Robert and Sonia Delaunay. By the early 1960s Larter had also read the seminal text on colour theory The art of color by Bauhaus artist Johannes Itten.

Larter’s inventive application of colour and his pleasure in painting can be seen in Side thrust no. 1–9. In this over ten-metre-long, nine-panel painting, Larter uses rollers to create the effect of a sliding rainbow of colour against a mosaic background. Areas of white within the rainbow stripes further suggest the changing effects of light in nature.

The use of rollers demonstrates Larter’s experimental approach to painting and his resourcefulness as an artist. He often listens to music while he paints, which is reflected in the dynamic musical rhythms of Side thrust no. 1–9.
Stripperama no. 3
1964  alkyd paint on composition board  91.5 x 122.0 cm
Laverty collection, Sydney

Suggest a number of ways this painting could be interpreted?
What is the effect of the multiple images within the composition?

A woman undresses, revealing her body as she moves, as if on a storyboard for a film. Stripperama no. 3 is a web of raised lines and dots drawn with paint pushed through a syringe – a technique Larter developed in the late 1950s.

The figure is set within an intricately patterned background. The multiple frames allow Larter to experiment with painterly techniques as he observes the human figure moving through space in different states of dress and undress. Clothed, the woman seems familiar, ordinary; as her body is revealed her sexuality is also represented as a normal aspect of contemporary life. Stripperama is a narrative expressing a playful aspect of being alive and it crosses the divide between public and private worlds.

Like many artists of his generation, Larter has been an advocate for freedom of speech. During the 1960s he was interested in questioning conservative middle-class morality and, like various other artists, he challenged the hypocrisy of censorship laws. He felt that sexual expression was censored in a way that images of violence, war and inequality were not, reflecting an authoritarian mistrust of sexuality and creativity.

Larter abandoned his syringe technique in 1965 following the negative association of syringes with drug use, even though for him it was simply a technical innovation.