

Sarah Contos

Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars

**BALNAVES CONTEMPORARY
INTERVENTION SERIES**

Secondary Education Resource

NGA
National Gallery of Australia



Teacher's notes

This *Balnaves Contemporary Intervention Series* education resource encourages students to engage with contemporary art practice through responding and making. It explores the ideas that underpin Sydney-based artist Sarah Contos' commissioned installation *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars*, and offers a cohesive thread that guides students through connections between intuition, process, art history and popular culture.

Sarah Contos' installation *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars* is perfectly suited to foster students' critical and creative thinking skills. By applying a sequence of exercises, students will develop an increasingly sophisticated understanding of problem solving processes and interpretation. Through the creation of their own works of art students are required to identify, explore and organise information and ideas.

This resource is directly linked to the Australian Curriculum and is designed to develop successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active, informed citizens. Students are encouraged to reflect on *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars* from a contemporary perspective and to consider and question values, attitudes, perspectives and assumptions. The resource provides an opportunity for students to develop their understanding of how and why artists realise their ideas through different art practices, processes and viewpoints.

This resource is designed for:

- secondary students and can be adapted for upper primary or tertiary students
- Visual Arts students, but also has relevance for English, Philosophy, and Humanities and Social Sciences students.
- senior secondary Visual Arts students undertaking in-depth case studies of contemporary artists.

This resource may be used to:

- complement an experience of *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars* through activities and ideas to assist with preparation for the gallery visit
- as a reference when students are viewing the work
- deepen understanding and engagement post-visit
- support in-depth research into Sarah Contos' art practice.

This resource addresses the following areas:

- **Contemporary Practice**
- **Cultural References**
- **Process and Materials**
- **Visual Language**
- **Experience and Interpretation**

Within each area we have included the following learning activities:

Speak your mind: Talking points or provocations to facilitate contemplation and discussion as well as offer opportunities for students to engage with art history and theory through exploratory research tasks.

Get to work: Creative art making suggestions that explore key concepts.

Think it through: Ideas, considerations and extensions to aid students in their art making.

A glossary of terms and further research links are included on the final page of the resource.

The NGA values the feedback of students and teachers on the education resources we have produced. To share student work or your feedback on the resource please email education@nga.gov.au.



Introduction

Launched in 2018, the Balnaves Contemporary Intervention Series is a multi-year commissioning platform which provides leading artists with the opportunity to present innovative works not previously deemed possible. Delivered in partnership with The Balnaves Foundation, this ambitious program challenges artists to reinterpret familiar locations and reimagine the concept of what a gallery can be. A central aspect of the NGA's renewed focus on contemporary art practice; these interventions will engage and excite as art experiences transform spaces throughout the gallery.

Sarah Contos

Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars **2017–18**

A succession of objects unfolds across the NGA foyer ceiling—black and white stills, metallic holes and drops, disembodied arms and several cigarettes, among other things. These 'frames' merge and overlap to create a series of moving images, a literal 3D movie. *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars* is an exploration of the cinematic experience.

Positioning herself as the 'director', Contos conceives the work in terms of the cast (images), costumes (materials) and scenery (structure). Her aim is to initiate a dialogue between the various elements of her mobiles which punctuate the space. The result is a work which oscillates between sculpture, collage, print, quilting and film.

After casting her images—talent found in second-hand books on cinema, theatre and twentieth century design—they are screen-printed and manipulated with graffiti, applique and studs. Contos' process is one of making the generic personal, recalling ad hoc backyard theatrical shows, internet fan fictions and 'smash-up' decoupage on school books. In the same way

that a film may mean something different to each viewer based on their own experiences, these images which refer to a range of universal themes—love, war, sex, fear and more—are edited and reinterpreted by Contos to invite a more intimate encounter.

Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars acknowledges the inherent duality within cinema as both a public and private experience, psychologically and physically—looking on at the big screen in a crowded movie theatre or within the security of the bedroom, underneath the covers.



Contemporary practice

Speak your mind

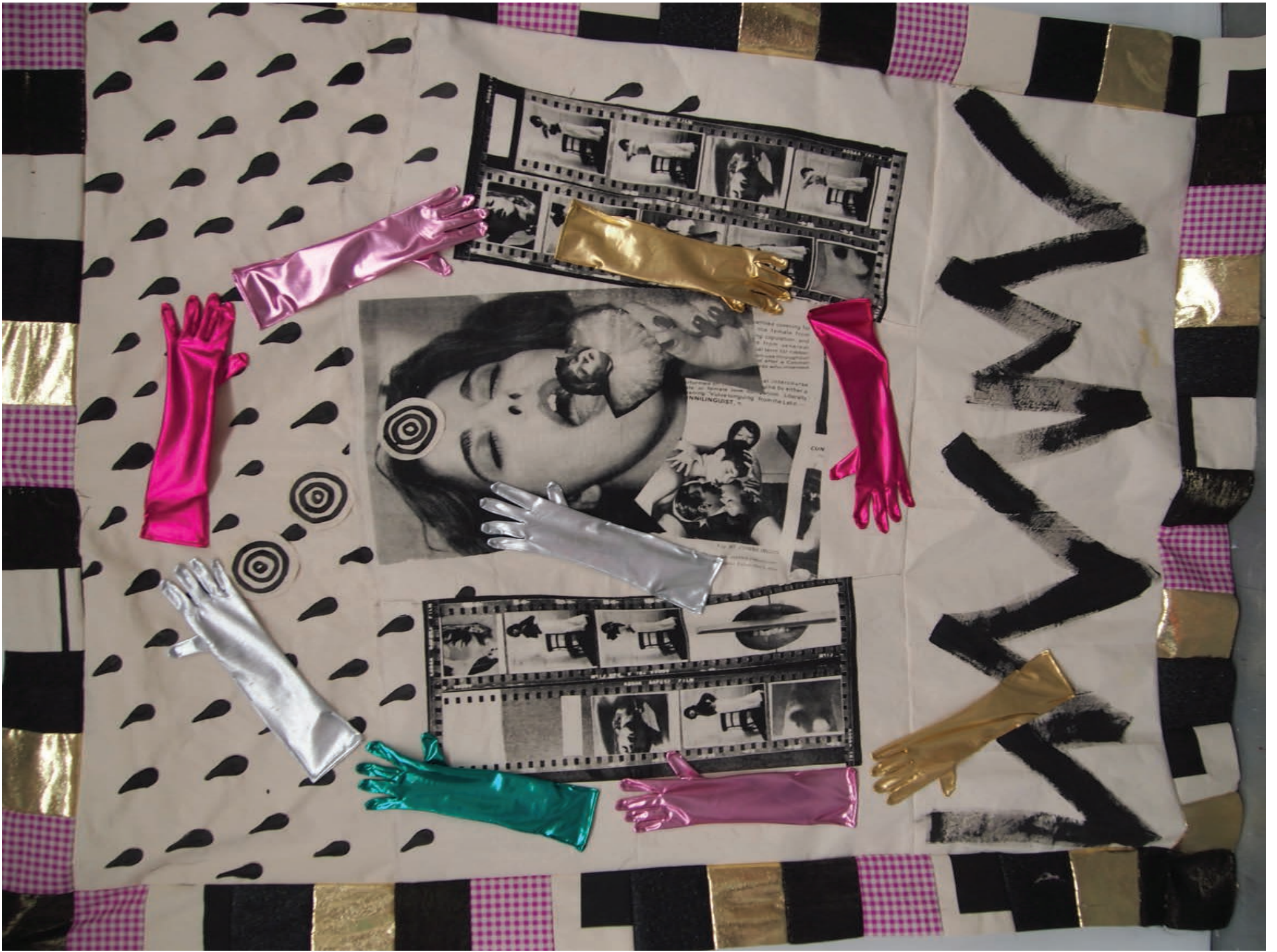
- Sarah Contos describes her art practice as **intuitive**. What could it mean to work intuitively? How might intuition help an artist to generate ideas? Thinking broadly about contemporary society, discuss instances where intuition plays a valuable role.
- Discuss what it might mean to be a contemporary artist in light of Sarah Contos' statement, *"It's kind of like cooking, different ingredients together will generate a particular taste, and then how does that change with a little squeeze of lemon at the end? It's taking things from multiple sources and collaging them together and then seeing what happens—what is it saying? What does it taste like?"* ([Artist Profile](#)). Connect your ideas back to what you can see and experience in the work of Sarah Contos.
- Consider how an artist might be influenced by the space or environment that they work in. Sarah Contos describes her art practice as *"...entirely studio-based, so it is heavily reliant on that space being positive, safe and unrestrictive. It is a private space to be an exhibitionist, a space where I can try and fail proactively and without ridicule"* ([NGA artist interview](#)).
- Discuss the conditions that you think are important for a creative space.

Get to work

Keep a dream diary for a week (if you can't remember your dreams ask a friend about theirs). Highlight key words or elements that appear or recur in your dreams. Compile a collection of images connected to these key words or elements (you may make a folder on your computer, cut up old magazines, or draw in your sketchbook). Think of this collection of images and words as providing a **vibe** for your work of art. Experiment with combining at least two different mediums to create a work of art that explores the emotions, sensory experiences and materials evoked by your dream diary.

• Think it through

Consider combining 2D mediums, such as drawing or painting, with 3D mediums, such as ceramics or sculpture, or time-based mediums, such as video. Think about combining two mediums that you wouldn't expect to see together, for example sculpture and painting or textiles and video. Your work should focus on exploring emotions, senses, and materials—it does not need to communicate a story or message. In this way your work of art might pose questions, rather than provide answers.



Cultural references

Speak your mind

• Consider Sarah Contos' statement, "My core interests revolve around identity, eroticism, femininity, popular culture, history but my position on these constantly shift." ([Artist Profile](#)). In what ways do you see Sarah Contos' interests reflected in her installation? How might the process of art-making cause Sarah to shift her thinking and her position about these areas of interest? Investigate one of Sarah Contos' interests more closely, for example what do you see in her work that relates to femininity? What do your observations make you think about femininity? What questions does the work raise around femininity?

• Sarah Contos has incorporated photographic elements into her installation. What might have inspired her to appropriate photographic imagery from silent films in particular? Research the meaning of **appropriation** in art history. Describe the ways that Sarah Contos has manipulated and altered her photographic source material. Removed from their original context, era, and narrative, what role might these silent film actresses play within Sarah Contos' *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars*?

• Who are Nikola Tesla and Theda Bara? Why do you think Sarah Contos refers to them in the title of her installation? What questions or puzzles do you have about this title and the historical characters it references? Share your questions with your class and discuss some strategies for exploring these questions further.

Get to work

Make a list of your top five interests or hobbies. Collect photographic images that relate to your different interests. Select, manipulate, alter and combine your source material to create a composition made entirely from photographs. You may choose to work digitally in a photo-editing application, or traditionally using scissors and glue. Aim to use at least one element from each of your five different interests. Your final image does not need to be about your interests, but should transform your source material to create an image that might be nonsensical, **surreal**, surprising or imaginative.

• Think it through

Research how Dada or Surrealist artists used the technique of **photomontage** to create surprising new compositions by combining disparate found photographs. For example, look at [Liebe \[Love\]](#) by Hannah Höch or [Pionniers-de l'art du XXe siecle \[Pioneers of 20th century art\]](#) by Kurt Schwitters in the NGA collection.



Process and materials

Speak your mind

- He was an artist, a gardener, a baker and a party host. Discover a hidden side to Jackson Pollock with a Pollock inspired menu on the Australian Garden terrace, some Pollock conversation and a walk-through of our highly anticipated American Masters exhibition. Consider Sarah Contos' use of quilting techniques—who and what might you associate with quilting? In what ways does Sarah Contos embrace the traditions and stereotypes associated with quilting and in what ways does she challenge these traditions and stereotypes? Research and share examples of artists or art movements where you see connections to quilting traditions, techniques or designs. The NGA's [Soft Sculpture](#) exhibition or the prints of [Anni Albers](#) are good places to start.
- Sarah Contos freely engages with materials and processes that have not always been taken seriously as art forms. Reflect on her statement, *"scrap-books, découpage and papier-mâché are a bit "daggy" or perceived as kindergarten medium(s) or old lady-ish. I'm interested in how that responds to art-making in these techno-heavy and polished contemporary times."* ([Artist Profile](#)). Discuss how the processes and materials that Sarah Contos has used compare to what she refers to as the *"techno-heavy and polished"* aesthetic of other contemporary works of art. How might her decision to work with *"daggy"* or **DIY** processes and materials add interest, relevance or power to her work?

Get to work

Work with your class to collect as many recycled and found materials as you can. Think creatively about the kind of materials that could be used to make a work of art. Look at the materials you have collected and play with how they might be rearranged or repurposed. What visual contrasts or relationships can you see? Work collaboratively to transform your found materials into a sculptural installation that responds to a space within your classroom or school.

• Think it through

Select a space where you would not expect to find a work of art, for example rather than working with a wall, your work of art might activate a corner, be discovered under a table, or like Sarah Contos, you might investigate ways that it could hang from the ceiling. Test out multiple options, always taking time to step back, look and discuss with your group. Remember that you are not making a stand-alone sculpture, but a site-specific installation that works with its environment. Research and discuss examples of other contemporary artists whose installations transform spaces in unexpected or inspiring ways. For example, consider how James Turrell's [Within without](#), Dadang Christanto's [Heads from the North](#) and Fujiko Nakaya's [Foggy wake in a desert: An ecosphere](#) respond to their location in the NGA Sculpture Garden.



Visual language

Speak your mind

- How would you describe the visual characteristics of Sarah Contos' work to someone who hasn't seen it before? What might have inspired the development of this visual language? Can you see stylistic connections to imagery from art history, popular culture or other fields of knowledge?
- In her installation *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars* Sarah Contos said she aimed "to create a work that uses cinematic approaches: movement, scale, framing, narrative, montage, cutting, editing, gestures, themes and so on" ([NGA artist interview](#)). Explore *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars* from different viewpoints. In what ways can you see connections to the language of cinema or the idea of a 'motion picture'?
- Discuss the **dualities** that you can see within Sarah Contos' work. Look at contrasts in her use of texture, colour, value, line, shape, form and space. For example, how are qualities such as hard and soft, light and dark or positive and negative space brought together and to what effect? Why might an artist be drawn towards opposites or dualities?

Get to work

Imagine that you are one of the components within Sarah Contos' installation (e.g. a glove).

Use descriptive language to write a poem from the perspective of that component. You might like to imagine how it would feel to be that component or how that component might perceive or relate to its surroundings. Spending focused time looking, drawing, jotting down words or discussing with a partner are all ways that may help you to get started and to get to know your chosen component. Come together as a class to share your poems and draw attention to different perspectives.

• Think it through

Decide whether you would like to write about your chosen component (e.g. a glove) from the first person, for example "I feel as limp and empty as a deflated balloon...", or from the second person, e.g. "Your glistening golden fingers reach down towards me..." Research **ekphrastic poetry** to find further examples of how one art form can be used to respond to another art form.

Sarah Contos often uses poetic phrases to define the 'vibe' she wants to achieve in a work of art, for instance in *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars* she was thinking about "Jumping on a freshly made bed
An autograph book with dog-eared corners
The smell of fairy floss
An overfilled raspberry coke slushy
Looking backwards at a projector in a movie theatre
Looking forwards to seeing someone you love..." —Sarah Contos (Artonview #94).
Imagine how your own poem could be a starting point for further creative work.



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MENS ROOM
 ONE FLIGHT UP
 CHECK ROOM

No Sale

Experience and interpretation

Speak your mind

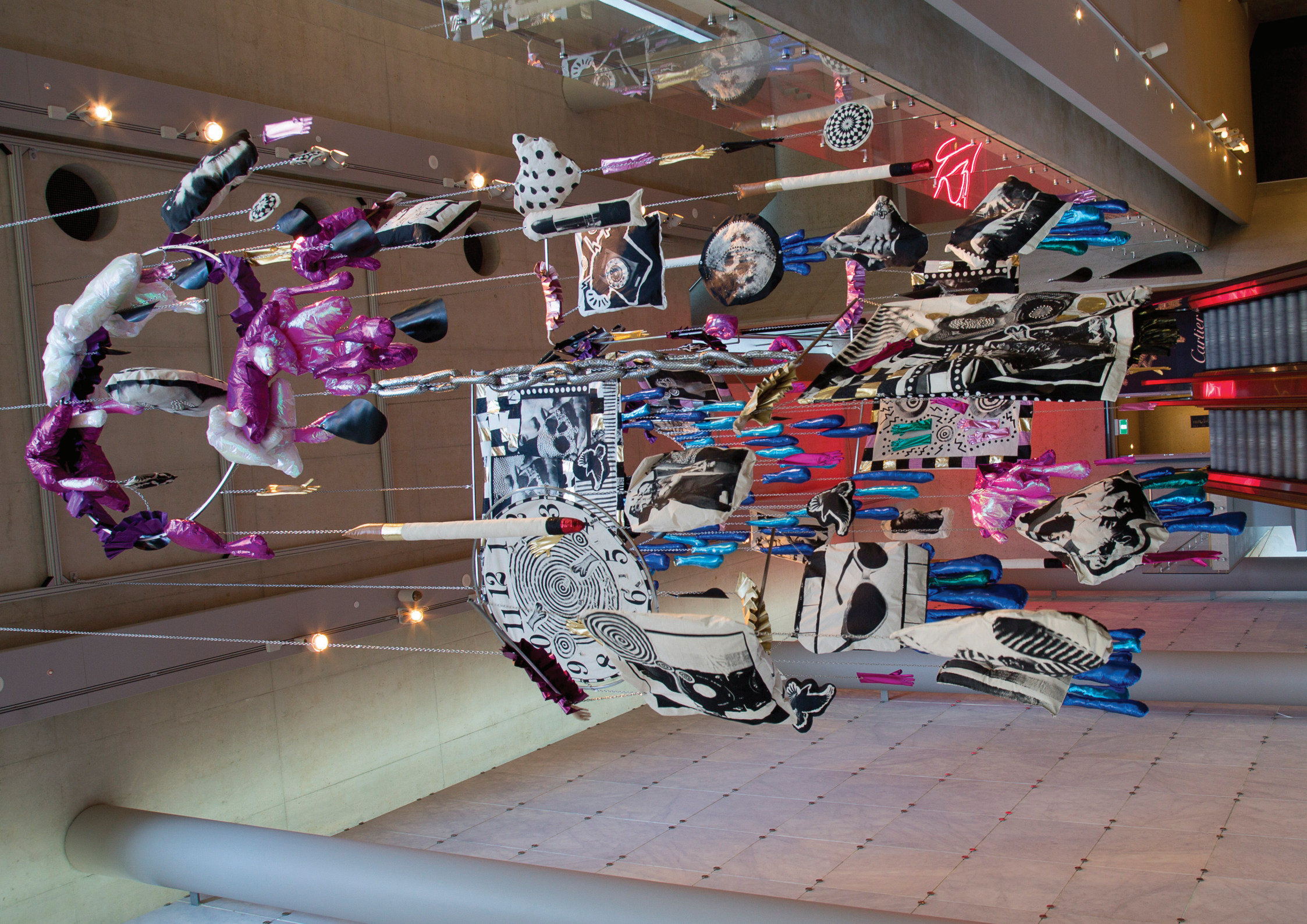
- As you spend time looking at and experiencing Sarah Contos' *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars* make a note of things that you find interesting or important in the work of art. Look over your notes and choose the three elements or ideas that stand out most for you. For one of these elements choose a colour that you feel best captures the essence of that idea. For a second choose a symbol and for a third choose an image that capture the essence of that idea. With a partner or a group, show or describe your colour and share your ideas behind it. Why did you choose that colour to represent that idea? Repeat the sharing process until each member of the group has shared their colour, symbol, and image.
- Discuss how Sarah Contos has responded to the scale and structure of the NGA foyer space. How has she intervened with the way that the space is experienced, used or moved through? How has the hanging structure of the work of art influenced its design?
- How does this work of art make you feel? What do you think might be going on in the work of art? What makes you say that? What are you left wondering? In what ways has this work of art influenced your ideas about what art can be or how art might be experienced?

Get to work

Build a simplified scale model of a large architectural space within your school or community environment. Use cardboard or foam-core to construct the walls. Cut out any major windows or doors and leave the ceiling open. Observe and reflect on the ways that people experience, use and move through your chosen space. Create a proposal for an art installation that transforms the space and intervenes with the way the space is experienced, used or moved through. Begin your explorations by playfully manipulating and combining materials to create abstract sculptural forms in response to your scale model. Use photography to document your experiments and show how your ideas evolved through multiple trials. Present your final installation proposal to your class.

• Think it through

Your school may have a floor plan with measurements of your chosen architectural space, if not you can pace out the distances and estimate heights as needed. Decide on a scale appropriate to the size of your foyer and the size of the model that you want to make, for example if the walls are 10 metres high you might choose a 1:40 scale so that the height of your model would be 25cm.



Glossary

Appropriation involves the intentional borrowing, copying or use of pre-existing images, objects or works of art within a work of art. Pre-existing images or objects may take on new meanings when altered or placed in a new context.

DIY stands for Do It Yourself and refers to low-budget, low-tech, hand-made or amateur craft or home improvement projects.

Dualities are co-existing opposites or contrasting characteristics, such as light and dark.

Ekphrastic poetry uses one art form to respond to another art form. *Ekphrasis* is the Greek word for description. Commonly, oral or written poetry is used to describe visual art. However, any art form can be used to respond to any other art form while also becoming a work of art in itself.

Intuitive thinkers allow their instincts and feelings to guide their actions and decisions. Working intuitively can allow artists to make discoveries that may not have been possible through tightly planned or rational processes.

Photomontage is a collage process in which multiple photographs are altered, combined or arranged to create a work of art. Photomontage may use photographs of unrelated subjects or from unrelated sources, which take on new meanings through the collage process.

Surreal refers to the twentieth century art movement Surrealism, which emerged in Europe following the First World War. Surrealist artists were interested in dreams and the unconscious mind as sources of imagination and expression beyond the realm of rational thought.

Vibe is slang for a distinctive atmosphere, mood or instinctive feeling about a person, place or thing.

Further Research Links

Balnaves Contemporary Intervention Series:
<http://nga.gov.au/balnaves/default.cfm>

Sarah Contos Balnaves project site (includes exhibition poster and artist interview):
<http://nga.gov.au/balnaves/contos.cfm>

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery Artist Profile: <http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists/306/Sarah-Contos/1589/>

Artist Profile interview: <http://www.artistprofile.com.au/sarah-contos/>

Sarah Contos *Nikola Tesla sends Theda Bara to Mars* 2017–18, Balnaves Contemporary Intervention Series, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, Commissioned 2017 with the assistance of The Balnaves Foundation, Image courtesy of the artist; Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and STATION, Melbourne

Art now: contemporary art education programs

See and compare the Balnaves Contemporary Intervention Series with contemporary art practices of artists from Australia and around the world.

In the following programs our educators will support students to respond creatively to the Balnaves Contemporary Intervention Series. Students will discover and experience these immersive works then apply their interpretation through discussion or hands on art making.

[Contemporary art focus tour](#), 1 hour, free.

[See + create workshops](#), 2 hours, \$7 per student, max 60 students per session.

[Digital draw + explore](#), 1.5 hours, \$7 per student, max 20 students per session.

[online booking form](#)

groupbookings@nga.gov.au

(02) 6240 6519