

art study:

australian artists and the vietnam war

WARS HAVE BEEN DEPICTED by artists throughout history. Works by Australian artists survive from every conflict in which Australians have been involved. Art from the Vietnam War belongs to this tradition. Art from the Vietnam War was created by official war artists, Vietnam veterans, interested observers and opponents of the war. It also includes political and social cartoons and posters.

The Australian War Memorial appointed two official war artists to go to Vietnam and paint the experiences of the Australians serving there. Bruce Fletcher was the first of these and served in Vietnam from February to September 1967. Ken McFadyen's commission lasted from July 1967 to May 1968.

Back in Australia artists were as divided as the rest of the Australian community over Australia's commitment to the war. Many artists actively opposed the war and used their art to express the horror and human tragedy of war.

During and since the war some veterans and their families have expressed their experiences of and feelings about the war in artistic form.

This exhibition includes examples from each of these perspectives. What is their art saying to you ?



Ken McFadyen

Diggers sitting on an armoured personnel carrier 1968
oil on canvas on hardboard, 34 x 54 cm
AWM (40670)

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suggested questions

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PRIMARY LEVEL

- What is an Australian official war artist? What did Australian official war artists of the Vietnam War choose to paint? List the subjects of the paintings by the two official war artists.
- Find the art of Vietnam veterans Trevor Lyons and Ray Beattie. How does their work compare with the images produced by the official war artists Bruce Fletcher and Ken McFadyen? Think about the subjects the artists have chosen and the way the works of art make you feel.

SECONDARY LEVEL

- Imagine yourself as an official war artist in a combat area. Your task is to record the images and feelings of Australians at war while the war is happening. What are the skills you would need? What are some of the restrictions that might be placed on you?
- Australians were very divided in their attitudes to the war. From the art on display can you make assumptions about how each artist felt about Australia's involvement in the war? Did some support the war while others opposed it? Justify your answers.
- Study the use of the images and symbols in the war art displayed. What emotions do they evoke? How have the artists used colour and light in their work to create an atmosphere and convey emotions?
- Wars continue to affect people long after they are over and change the lives of many who never experienced the war at first hand. Trevor Lyons created *Journeys in my head* 19 years after he left Vietnam and Jennifer McDuff's *One man's war, a woman's perspective* was made 22 years after her husband returned from Vietnam. What do you think motivated them to produce these powerful works of art? What messages do they have for you? Discuss.

EXTENSION QUESTIONS

- Research the work of official war artists from the First World War (1914-18), like Will Dyson, and the Second World War (1939-45), like Ivor Hele. Compare and contrast their paintings with those by official war artists Bruce Fletcher and Ken McFadyen from Vietnam.
- Seek out any reminders of a war you might have at home: part of a military uniform, grandad's medals, an old photograph of a soldier, sailor or airman, even a newspaper headline about a war in another part of the world. Think about how the objects make you feel and try to capture that feeling in a painting, sketch or photograph.

References:

Gray, Anne, 'Artists' visions of Vietnam', in Pierce, Peter, Doyle, Jeff, Grey, Jeffrey (eds.), *Vietnam days: Australia and the impact of Vietnam*, Penguin, Ringwood, Victoria, 1991
Fry, Gavin and Gray, Anne, *Masterpieces of the Australian War Memorial*, Rigby, Australia, 1982