ABOUT THIS RESOURCE

This resource explores the work of the artist Trevor Bell. As a resource for teachers, the document can be used to help teach elements of the art and design curriculum.

It has been written to coincide with the exhibition ‘Trans-Form’ by Trevor Bell, produced in partnership between The Box, Plymouth and Peninsula Arts, University of Plymouth.

The exhibition was curated by Joseph Clarke, an independent curator, writer, film maker and gallery executive director of Anima-Mundi in St Ives. He has curated in excess of 100 exhibitions over a twenty year period, working with international artists in all media.

The Box is a major redevelopment scheme and a symbol for the city’s current regeneration and future. Set to open in 2020, it will be a museum for the 21st century with extraordinary gallery displays, high profile artists and art exhibitions, as well as exciting events and performances that take visitors on a journey from pre-history to the present and beyond.

The University of Plymouth is renowned for high quality, internationally-leading education, research and innovation. With a mission to Advance Knowledge and Transform Lives, Plymouth is a *top 50 research university with clusters of world class research across a wide range of disciplines including marine science and engineering, medicine, robotics and psychology. A twice winner of the Queen’s Anniversary Prize for Higher Education, the University of Plymouth continues to grow in stature and reputation.

*Research Fortnight Research Power League Table 2014
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Trevor Bell was awarded a scholarship to attend The Leeds College of Art from 1947 to 1952 and, encouraged by Terry Frost, moved to Cornwall in 1955. St Ives was the epicentre for British abstract art and home to influential artists such as Patrick Heron, Peter Lanyon, Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo, Barbara Hepworth and Terry Frost. Bell soon secured his reputation as a leading member who helped establish British Art on the international stage.

From these artists and peers, Bell received advice and support. Ben Nicholson, alongside his then dealer Charles Gimpel, encouraged him to show in London and Waddington Galleries gave Bell his first solo exhibition in 1958. Patrick Heron wrote the introduction to the exhibition catalogue, stating that Bell was ‘the best non-figurative painter under thirty’.

In 1959 Bell was awarded the Paris Biennale International Painting Prize, and an Italian Government Scholarship and the following year was offered the Fellowship in Painting at the University of Leeds, so he moved back to his hometown. He went on to become a Gregory Fellow at Leeds University and it was during this period that Bell developed his shaped canvases, setting his work apart from other artists of his generation.

Throughout the 1960’s Bell showed work in major exhibitions in the UK and USA and during this time his work was first purchased as part of the Tate collection. In 1973 he presented his new work at the Whitechapel Gallery in London, having just taken part in a major exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC. Over the course of the next thirty years Bell combined painting with teaching in various locations, eventually moving to Florida State University in 1976 to become the Professor for Master Painting.

Here, with the provision of a warehouse-sized studio and time to really develop his painting he produced the large-scale, intensely coloured works for which he is best known, reflecting the influence of the climate and landscape on his work. He went on to spend the next 20 years in America. Important exhibitions were held at the Corcoran Gallery and the Academy of Sciences in Washington, the Metropolitan Museum in Miami, The Cummer Gallery and the Museum of Art, Florida.

In 1985 Bell was included in the London Tate Gallery’s St Ives 1939-64 exhibition and in 1993 he was part of the inaugural show at Tate St Ives, where he was again re-established as part of the St Ives artists’ movement. He moved back to Cornwall in 1996. Bell had a major solo exhibition at Tate St.Ives in 2004 and in 2011 a further 14 works were obtained by Tate for their permanent collection.

Bell was twice a recipient of fellowships from the Fine Arts Council of Florida, an Honorary RWA from the Royal Western England Academy, An Honoury Fellow of University College Falmouth and an Emeritus Professorship by Florida State University.
INTRODUCTION

My good friend, Trevor Bell, passed away on Friday 3rd November 2017, after a short illness. He was 87 years old. Trevor was a wonderful, generous, ambitious and humble man who also happened to be an incredible artist. Up to the end he remained one of the most focussed and determined artists that I have had the challenge and privilege of working with. ‘Transform’ was our final collaborative project.

Many will have mourned his passing as the departure of the last of the ‘St Ives’ Modernists. In the past, I encountered those wanting to discuss with him this ‘St. Ives Modernist’ legacy, with exclamations of how they love his work from the 50’s and 60’s. Trevor, would wryly reply “Oh that’s a pity, I don’t make those anymore”. You see Trevor’s most important work was the work yet to come.

As someone who has worked closely with him for the last 10 years of his life, I had the privilege of continually encountering an artist capable of capturing and distilling physical and metaphysical complexity with a graceful rawness and sophisticated simplicity. As he often said he “was just in the middle”.

The curator Chris Stephens (when head of displays at Tate Britain) said “Bell’s art is, in the loosest sense, spiritual. It evokes, or reflects, an idea of some abstract force that exceeds material reality... Bell’s work, one might say, has always derived in one way or another from this new sublime.”

Albert Einstein once simply stated “Energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be changed from one form to another.” For Trevor the role as conduit allowed these expressions of force and energy, part of, yet greater than, oneself to be expressed on to the canvas. This role of conduit is one where the artist becomes an edge breached, where energy moves beyond threshold. This liminality is central to the art objects that Trevor has created. It was not about that energy being illusionistically represented on the canvas, but a gestural record of its journey. The shaped form allowed for that expression to continue beyond the edge of the work itself. The work was just an ongoing trace.

The conceived project became an exciting one, to take key and favoured paintings from the studio, where transference of energy was intrinsic and allow them to serve as conduit for further forms of expression.

I’m so proud to be a part of this most fitting of tributes.

Joseph Clarke, 2018
“I feel that what we should get from art is a sense of wonder, of something beyond ourselves, that celebrates our ‘being’ here.”

Trevor Bell (1930 – 2017)
Bara-lacha la, also known as Baralacha Pass or Bārā Lāchā La is a high mountain pass in the Zanskar range, India. It is situated at an altitude of 4890m (16040 ft).

Baralachala means ‘summit with cross roads’ - roads from Spiti, Ladakh, Zanskar and Lahaul meet here. It is the boundary between two separate regions - the true, Himalayan region covered in perpetual snow and rising from dense forests with large, flowing rivers. Alongside this is the barren or Tibetan region, where little grows amongst the gravel.

Baralacha Pass is noted for its stunning views of snow-clad Himalayan peaks, shimmering glaciers, crystal clear streams and flower-carpeted meadows. Often, Baralacha Pass is visited as part of a trek from Chandra Tal or ‘Moon Lake’, a glacial lake at an altitude of 4300m (14100 ft).
In 2007, Bell made a series of work exclusively using black and white paint - raw white and raw black straight from the tube - known as the ‘As Whites’.

As Whites, Shore is from this series and conforms to the loose rule of ‘no back-tracking, no illusionism’ that Bell had set himself. A small black mark on the left edge is its most obvious painted element, with an overpainted black horizontal mark running across towards the right edge.

It has been said that Bell was thinking of a large, 18th Century Korean ‘full moon jar’ when making these paintings. He had seen the jar at the British Museum and kept an image of it in his studio. The jar once belonged to the potters Bernard Leach and Lucie Rie.

The jar itself has a noticeable horizontal seam at the centre of its body, indicating that two bowl-shaped halves were joined to make the whole jar. Due to shrinking and sagging during firing it has a unique, asymmetrical shape. The surface decoration is a clear, pale white glaze with small dark ash spots.
In Hinduism, as in many other religions, asceticism has been historically observed. Asceticism is a lifestyle characterised by abstinence. Ascetics may withdraw from the world for their practices or continue to be part of a wider society, but often reject material possessions and spend time fasting while concentrating on the practice of religion.

In the ancient Vedas, a large body of ‘knowledge texts’ dating to the period roughly equivalent to the Bronze and Iron Ages in Britain (around 1500 - 150 BC), asceticism-like practices are hinted at. They mention the Muni (‘silent ones’), who ‘spend long periods of time in absorption, musing and meditating’. They are described as wearing clothes made of yellow rags, or more likely without clothes at all, covered in the yellow dust of Indian soil. Most importantly, they are lost in thought.
THE COLOUR AND THE SHAPE

Bell used shaped canvases from the late 1950s onwards, ranging from angular and geometric to rounded and amorphic, to the most recent balancing or rolling shapes. Often these canvases have deep, bevelled edges that recede back to the wall with a painted finish that can affect the colour of its shadow.

These paintings use or activate the space surrounding them, so much so that they blur the boundaries of painting and sculpture.

Using large sheets of paper or fabric, cut different shapes to use as painting supports. Try stretching or mounting them to other unusually shaped objects - old cushions for example, or make basic supports from cardboard that have a deep edge. Even a simple circle would be a starting point.

Ask your pupils to use strong or intense colours or more subtle colours to create their own abstract paintings. Also, try using a variety of brush sizes - Bell even used floor brushes to make some of his marks.

How difficult was it for your pupils to think about how to paint on an unusual shape? Did they have to change they way they made marks?

COLOUR OR COLOR?

Despite being associated with St Ives early in his career and with Cornwall more generally later in his career, Bell spent a large amount of time working and teaching in the USA. He moved there in 1976 to become Head of Painting at Florida State University.

With the change of location came a major shift in his use of colour - he began to use stronger and more intense colours in works he described as ‘heatscapes’, reflecting the sub-tropical climate and landscape he found himself in.

Ask your pupils to explore either your school grounds, or perhaps ask them to explore a public space or garden. While exploring, ask them to try and match colours they have found in their sketchbooks. This could either be through the use of paint, crayon, oil stick or similar, or simply through using old magazines and finding swatches of colour.

Ask them to present these colours as an artwork and compare the colours discovered across the class - did they all discover similar colours?
THE PRESENT MOMENT

Using mindfulness exercises in the classroom is an interesting way of asking your pupils to consider some of the spiritual or meditative aspects of Bell’s work.

Try this simple exercise:

Ring a bell and ask your pupils to listen carefully to the vibration of the ringing sound. Ask them to remain silent and raise their hand when they can no longer hear the sound of the bell. Once everyone has raised their hand, ask them to remain silent for a further minute and pay attention to the other sounds they can hear.

Once the minute is up, ask your pupils to share every sound they heard with the rest of the class. The sounds may range from birds outside to the hum of classroom lights.

This exercise should help with children’s focus, make a connection to the present moment and explore the sensitivity of their perceptions – did some children hear different things to others?

Can these experiences be translated to visual art? When your pupils look at the paintings on display, are they all really looking or just glancing?

SOUND AND VISION

The artist and musician Jamie Mills has been commissioned to write a piece of music that responds to Bell’s paintings. He has also collaborated with a choreographer to produce a dance performance to accompany the music.

The recording was made by Mills using different instruments and overdubbing them (recording one part over another). The instruments used include piano, flute and Tibetan singing bowls.

Using instruments from school and other objects (such as the bell from the last activity), why not try and create your own overdubbed music? Mills used the wooden body of a piano to create the drumming sound in his music, so use the instruments in interesting and unexpected ways. Try using a violin bow on a bell, or blow across electric guitar strings, or pluck the strings of a piano to make unusual sounds.

Recording overdubbed audio can be achieved in school - if you haven’t got your own recording equipment, try using ‘Soundation4Education’ or other free online software. You should be able to record directly into a computer with a microphone, or record on an iPad or similar and transfer your sounds across as ‘samples’.
WHAT CAN WE DO FOR YOU?

A variety of exhibitions, activities and opportunities are available for schools to visit including the ‘Plymouth – From Destruction to Construction’ exhibition on Floor 5 of House of Fraser.

You can also continue to visit Smeaton’s Tower, and we’d be happy to help arrange visits to the Mayflower Museum, Mount Edgcumbe and Plymouth and West Devon Record Office.

For further information on our current offer for schools, please email:

museumvisits@plymouth.gov.uk
As we move into a new phase of our activity for The Box, a number of our services for schools will change. We will continue to provide free resources to schools but need to ensure that these are being produced to the highest standards. Please take the time to complete this short survey to feedback on this resource.

SURVEY
‘Trans-Form’ is a partnership exhibition delivered by Peninsula Arts and The Box, Plymouth.

The exhibition is conceived and curated by Joseph Clarke.

Associated commission of new music by Jamie Mills and dance by Sarah Fairhill and Lois Taylor.

Photography by Joseph Clarke and Steve Tanner.