Introduction

‘What do I see? I see light. Extra depth, tone and detail. I see shapes – triangles, circles, squares – distortions of all of the above. I see light in black. I see ordinary objects – flowers, rocks, sticks, foam. Seaweed, light bulbs, oil stains, traffic signs. I see life.’

Trent Parke

For the exhibition The Black Rose, artist Trent Parke has taken photographs of his surroundings, everyday objects, and life moments. He transforms the ordinary into something else by photographing under special light, in extreme close-up, or by arranging subjects and images in narratives and sequences. In this way he tells a story about his life.

Teachers should turn to the end of this resource for notes and inquiry questions which will guide an exhibition visit. Words given in bold in the text appear in the Glossary.

Trent Parke has commented

The Black Rose started in 2007 as an attempt to excavate my own histories, reflecting on a night when at the age of twelve I witnessed my mother die of an asthma attack while my dad was at his squash night. As a result I blanked out those first 12 years of my life and much more. After sidestepping the issue for 27 years, a chance incident forced my hand and I began writing and taking photographs as I sought to get those memories back. Autobiographical in nature these … photographs narrate the story of my life past and present, but more importantly pose universal questions relating to our very existence.

In an attempt to reclaim his memories Parke took thousands of photographs of his surroundings and everyday objects, and recorded his dreams and observations in diaries. Between 2007 and 2014 he distilled his images and words into fourteen fold-out books – on display in The Studio – that tell his personal story in a complex series of interrelated narratives. The Black Rose exhibition emerged from these books.

Artist’s background

Sometime after the tragic death of his mother, Parke discovered her Pentax Spotmatic camera. Using the darkroom that she had set up in the laundry, he taught himself to process black and white film. He has been obsessively photographing ever since.

Parke grew up in Newcastle, New South Wales. In 1989, after finishing school, he became a press photographer, and initially worked for the Newcastle Herald, then for the Singleton Argus / Cessnock Advertiser in the Hunter Valley. In 1993 he moved to Sydney to work for the Daily Telegraph. The following year he began work with The Australian, where he was employed as a sports photographer. Parke, who had given up a potential career as a professional cricketer to become a photographer, received his dream assignment: for some five years he covered the tours of the Australian Cricket Team.

When the team was not on tour, Parke was given time off and this provided him with the opportunity to walk the streets of Sydney to take the pictures that he wanted to take. The result of these wanderings was Parke’s first body of work, Dream/Life 1999. Working in black and white, Parke exploited the effects of light, shadow, rain and mist to create melancholic images of anonymous people on the bustling streets – solitary individuals isolated from the rush-hour crowd.

In the years since then Parke has created several major bodies of work, which have been exhibited in galleries throughout Australia, and internationally. Each body of work explores an idea about Australian culture and contemporary life from his personal perspective:

I see myself as an average Australian and the issues that affect me are usually the issues that are affecting a lot of other people too. I want my work to comment on what it was like to live in this country during my lifetime.

For The Black Rose, Parke used different cameras and mediums, favouring large-format film, which gave him the flexibility to achieve a broad technical and aesthetic range. His photographs are often of small objects on large-format film, capturing details that render the objects unfamiliar when printed on a large scale. He often contrasts macro and micro views.

To support this aesthetic, Parke worked closely with his long-time printer in Sydney, Sandra Barnard, to create a machine that could develop his unusually large gelatin-silver photographs and produce prints that at 120 x 150 cm bring the fine detail of his photographs into mesmerising clarity.

Trent Parke’s wife, Narelle Autio, is also a photographer. She began her career as a photojournalist, and works in a personal documentary style. Although their practices are quite separate, they are often complementary. For Parke’s Black Rose project, Autio has provided practical assistance in printing, production and editing. Some of her photographs of Parke are interspersed throughout the exhibition.

In 2007 Parke became a full member of the prestigious Magnum Photos, a photographic cooperative owned by its photographer-members, with offices in New York, Paris, London and Tokyo. Henri Cartier-Bresson, a founding member, described Magnum as a community of thought, a shared human quality, a curiosity about what is going on in the world, a respect for what is going on and a desire to transcribe it visually.

Magnum photographers record the world and interpret its peoples, events, issues and personalities. Parke is the only Australian photographer to be represented by Magnum Photo Agency.
The Black Rose is a very personal exploration of a painful event in Parke’s past. There are several photographs of Parke in this exhibition, including one of him as a small child with his mother, and after an operation on his face to remove a skin cancer. In showing, and arranging, these works, Parke is thinking about, and sharing, his feelings about mortality. About his beginnings as a career photographer, Trent Parke has said:

I don’t remember the exact moment it happened.  
The time when I picked up mum’s Pentax Spotmatic camera and started to take photographs.  
The black box with the hole and silver lens attached.  
And it was that darkroom that would change my life forever.  

Seeing the first photograph come up in the developing tray was the best magic trick I had ever seen.’

Extract from Book 2, Stories from home

Parke is a photographic artist who is fascinated with using film to take photographs. He loves the magic of chemicals reacting with film, and using traditional darkroom skills.

• In the haunting work My darkroom developing tray, Adelaide, Parke’s face appears and disappears as if in a developing tray in a photographer’s studio. Look closely for evidence of the artist’s surgery.

• Why do you think the artist has used moving image for My darkroom… rather than a series of photographs as a medium for the work?

• What insights does this work provide into the artist’s thinking? What ideas and feelings does it raise in you? How might the artist’s use of colour images in this work reinforce these? Discuss.

• What do you think the digital age offers artists in terms of pushing boundaries in art? Discuss in relation to Parke’s moving images.
After surgery, Adelaide is a photograph of Parke taken by his wife Narelle Autio after an operation to remove a skin cancer from his face. Parke recalls the conversation with his doctor when the skin cancer was found.

‘OH ... How long have you had this lump on your face?’
‘You mean that small fleshy piece of skin near my nose?’, I answer a little shocked.
‘YES, but it is not small. It is very large for someone your age.’ Her voice is now rather alarmed.
‘About two years I guess. I don’t really know.’
She looks again through her scope. ‘Has it been continuing to grow?’
I have to think but ‘Yes ... yes I guess it has increased in size since it first came up, but I didn’t think it was a sunspot.’ I answer more than a little shocked now.
‘Do you know a plastic surgeon?’
‘NO.’
‘Do you have private health insurance?’
‘NO.’
‘Ohhh...I need to take a tissue sample immediately. Are you ok for me to do this right now?’
‘YES.’
‘We will notify you of the results as soon as possible.’
Before I leave she freezes two more sunspots off my face. They swell up in lumps.
I look like I have been in a fight.
The walk home seemed to last forever and I couldn’t help but think of all the scenarios.

Why would a photographer want to take, or have someone else take, such a photo? What might be Parke’s intention in exhibiting this personal image?

Look for Tree stump, Newcastle, New South Wales on the same wall. Why has Parke’s image of a cut tree been grouped with other works at this point?
In *The Black Rose* trees and plants take on a symbolic meaning for Parke. The exhibition is titled after a plant the artist finds which he feels is particularly relevant to his quest to remember aspects of his childhood. Parke’s discovery of an unusual plant growing in a white pot outside his motel room became part of a seemingly connected series of events and narratives that he started to record in photographs and diaries.

Symbolically the black rose suggests death or the completion of a long and difficult journey. It is the search for absolute perfection, as a true black rose does not exist.

At the bottom of the stairs to the Gallery’s underground exhibition spaces, you enter an installation, which creates an ‘unsettling’ world, a blurred zone between reality and the imagination, a world where things are not necessarily as they appear. Birds and insects hover in a vast landscape setting, but what is it about those trees?

- Look closely. Are they trees?
- Later you might become aware that they are something different.
Back in Newcastle, where he grew up, Parke has a conversation with an old neighbour, Christine, about the neighbourhood, and his family, including his mother Dianne. ‘We call that tree Dianne...’ ‘The Dianne Tree’, Christine repeats, pointing to a huge white gum tree at the edge of the yard close to our tin fence.

‘Your dad was the first to build in this street and we were second. As the landscapers were clearing the block your mum came running into the yard. They were about to bulldoze the tree, which was only so high (she raises her hand to about the size of me) and your mum stopped them knocking it down. She said it had to be saved.

Extract from Book 4, *The golden man (Childhood home)*

• What story might Trent Parke’s brother, Grant Parke, be telling in this moving image work?
• Who might the figure with the suitcase be?
• What does the tree and its falling leaves symbolise?

• Why has the artist decided to photograph this particular tree?
• Think about objects in the environment that are important to you. Explain why they might also be worth recording through photography.
Parke lives by the sea, and regularly spent time on the beach while working on *The Black Rose* exhibition. The sea, and sea creatures, feature in many of the photographs.

This *moving image* work of a dying squid is central to the exhibition: it conveys Parke’s feelings about life and death. The work captures a four-centimetre section of the pulsing skin of a squid, which the artist has enlarged to five metres in length. Parke has incorporated a soundtrack. For Parke this is the beating heart of the exhibition.

- Look closely and contemplate the work for a while.
- How does the scale of the work affect the way you view it?
- Does the work have aesthetic appeal?
- Explain your emotional reaction.
- What do you think about sound as a part of, or a complement to, a work of art?
In the 365 sunsets, Adelaide, 2010–11 Parke creates meaning through the repetition of one subject. In his desire to capture time, he photographed the sun setting, every day for a year, from his local Adelaide beach. The setting sun over the sea represents the closing of each day, of moments that are never to be repeated. Parke uses colour sparingly in The Black Rose, however this work was photographed in colour.

- How are these sunset images the same, yet all different?

Parke enjoys fishing. In Snapper, backyard, Adelaide he has arranged in a certain formation the fish caught on a particular day. This work is displayed alongside Parke’s dental x-rays as part of a series of photographs.

- What connection is he making?
The Black Rose began as a project about ‘home’. As Parke documented his home and family, he started trying to remember his childhood. In an attempt to recover memories of his mother, he re-visited his childhood home in Newcastle.

- Why is ‘home’ important to us all? What does ‘home’ mean for you?
- What are your memories of home? What type of ‘home’ do you dream for yourself in the future?
- How important is memory to us as individuals? What of our lost memories?
- How important are family, family homes, friends, places, and objects – furniture, old toys and clothes, books, photographs, and videos etc. – in the protection of our memories? What are the most important memories for you?

‘My photography has always been about asking questions. I am on an endless quest to find out why …’

‘The first day of a new project about home and before I start, I am locked out of my house.
It has never happened before.’

Extract from book 2, Stories from home

• Describe what the house might have seen on this particular occasion.
Parke had a recurring nightmare of a giant rat coming to get him.

- Why might the artist have decided to locate the photograph of a rat next to the four images of Dash, his son, restless in bed with a fever?
- Do you have dreams or nightmares that prompt you to consider their importance or meaning? If so, attempt to write one down, and make a work in response to your writing.
- What is the impact of seeing these images in close association?

While entering the sunroom I notice an ornate mirror on the adjacent wall in the hallway.
It looks as though it could have been there forever.
There is no vivid visual memory, but for some reason I know it was mum’s.
I think about how each day the mirror watched my mother brushing her hair.
And how my mother watched her own reflection gazing back.
How the mirror observed the subtle changes in her appearance, as time continued to pass.
The days.
The years.

Her lifetime, until her reflection simply ceased to exist.

Extract from book 4, *The golden man (Childhood home)*

I realise now that like my dad, in a different way, I never really said goodbye.

Of course in later years I never really knew how or where to.
The hallway is my only memory of my mum.
There is nothing before and nothing after.
I continue to hurtle along through space and time.

Extract from book 2, *Stories from home*
Parke’s photographs from his road trips depict the richness and beauty of the natural world, as well as its brutality, and are filled with symbolic meaning. In *Catfish and turtles, Roper River, Northern Territory*, 2011, Parke captures floating forms glowing like phosphorescence in the water. In another photograph, *Spider Web, South West Rocks* taken at night, a spider web suspended between two twigs is caught shimmering in the light of the flash, the web decorated with a constellation of flowers. These images communicate Parke’s sense of wonder at the beauty of nature, and the interconnectedness of all life forms. It is as if in these works he is searching for the beginning of all life – including his own – in the universe.

- Look for the vibrant and colourful image of an innocent girl spinning, a contrast to the black and white images of death in the next gallery space.
Cow, Stuart Highway, South Australia shows a carcass of a dead cow. For Parke life and death is so black and white and visible in the outback, whilst for those of us living in the city there is perhaps not so obvious or constant a connection to the ideas of life and death.

In Dice, country road, Western Australia, we see a forking outback road, the fork highlighted by one white and one black dice. For Parke the forked road represents visually the concept of choices we are faced with in life.

- Can you recall a situation where you were confronted by two paths or two options? On reflection, was the path you took, or the option you chose, the right one? If not, what did you learn from the decision?

Parke’s works are about aspects of life, including things that go on in different communities.

- How does Croc attack news, Northern Territory suggest different Australian lifestyles?
Teachers’ notes

This education resource has been developed by Learning at the Gallery to assist teachers in supporting students’ exploration, engagement, and understanding of the exhibition Trent Parke: The Black Rose. The learning activities are designed to encourage students to take a closer look at key works of art, and to consider Parke’s artistic process through the transformation of his fold-out books (on display in The Studio). The immersive exhibition experience includes a large site-specific installation of collaged photographs, moving image works based on still photographs, as well as text from Parke’s diaries.

This resource provides suggestions for teachers to connect student inquiry to the work of Trent Parke through the curriculums of the South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE) Stage One and Stage Two Visual Arts and Design, and to the Australian Curriculum: The Arts (Visual Arts and Media Arts) linked to the strands of ‘Responding’ and ‘Making’. Suggested activities for these curriculum areas may be selected and adapted according to students’ levels, contexts, and particular interests. Teachers may extend learning by considering the cultural context in which the artist’s works were created, and by connecting to the General Capability theme of critical and creative thinking.

More detailed explanations of works may be found in the exhibition catalogue Trent Parke: The Black Rose. There are opportunities for students to develop visual literacy skills by:

• conceptualising how Parke as a contemporary artist develops representations of themes, concepts and ideas
• discussing the five visual themes into which Parke’s works have been grouped: Self-portraits; Home/Childhood; Trees/Plants; Sea/Sea Creatures and The Road/Road Trip
• investigating Parke’s use of image, text and/or sound to communicate
• evaluating how Parke’s representations communicate his artistic intentions and personal views.

The Black Rose exhibition invites us to also consider the big ideas affecting us all: birth, death, pain, loss, memory and the passing of time.

The Studio

Following a visit to the exhibition, students are able to respond in The Studio to Trent Parke’s works. Playing with a variety of images, symbols and light, students explore the possibilities of making their own visual story by recording a memory or dream in a fold-out book. Bookings essential.

Before your visit

Before you visit Trent Parke: The Black Rose develop with your class a range of questions that will help to define and elaborate how Parke uses ‘big ideas’ to engage audiences and communicate meaning.

View the short film created about Parke for the exhibition. The link is provided at the end of this resource. Consider curriculum suitability for your students prior to using as a starting point to their exhibition inquiry.

Support visual thinking skills by using the Australian Curriculum: Arts Glossary to support students’ understanding and response to the exhibition.

Facilitate a class discussion based on the following questions:

• What is photography? Why is photography important to some societies?
• How did the invention of photography change art?
• When might a photograph or video be classified as art?
• Where and when have you seen photography, moving image and/or installation exhibited previously? How effective were these art forms in terms of making you think and feel about the artists’ ideas?
• Create a collaborative list in class about what makes a successful work of art, be it a photograph, moving image or installation. Use your list in the exhibition to support your inquiry into the success of individual works.

During your visit

• As you and your students view the exhibition, focus on Parke’s big ideas: birth, death, pain, loss, memory, and the passing of time. Observe how he creates a visual story by repeating or contrasting symbols. Some of these symbols include the straight line of the horizon and his mother’s hair (representing time); fish and the roots of trees (representing his teeth), and the majestic standing tree (representing his deceased mother), as well as a sea lion swimming in the ocean (evoking connections with breathing, and his mother’s asthma).
• Ask students to work either individually and/or collaboratively to document their reactions to one of the following five themes: Self-portraits; Trees/Plants; Sea/Sea Creatures; Home/Childhood; and the Road/Road Trip. Locate the works relevant to the chosen theme by using the map at the end of this resource. What stories is Parke telling? What questions might he be posing? Does he prompt particular memories or feelings?
• Ask students to compare and contrast two of their favourite works from their chosen theme, using both design elements and design principles. Consider how the two works have been made (eg. particular photographic technique and manipulation, moving image, or an installation).
After your visit

Responding

Back in the classroom, consider using the following responding activities with students:

- If you could meet the artist, what would you ask him in relation to his ideas, thoughts, feelings, values, beliefs, and/or opinions?
- In your opinion, how well did the *The Black Rose* exhibition communicate Parke’s personal journey over seven years? Were there some works that made you think and feel things that were uncomfortable? If so, how? Which works in particular?
- Does Parke’s work change or shift your view about life’s big ideas? If so, how? If not, why not? Discuss this in small groups.
- How might a viewer’s gender, age, or cultural background make a difference to a response to the artist’s work?
- Parke states that the audience contributes to, or even completes, a work by contributing his or her own personal reflections, experiences and opinions. Discuss this statement in class in relation to your individual experiences of the exhibition.
- With this exhibition Parke has said that he ‘wanted to create an experience for people – something on the grand scale of epic cinema’, and that he was ‘... trying to create an immersive, emotional journey’. Discuss these statements. How successful has he been in achieving these outcomes?
- Parke’s daily experiences and reflections on small, seemingly insignificant moments of life take on greater significance and symbolic meaning in this exhibition. Select one of the ‘big ideas’ and consider the works connected to it. How did it make you feel?
- Use several of the works to describe to the class your personal reactions to the selected ‘big’ idea.
- Write a review of the exhibition *Trent Parke: The Black Rose* for someone who was not able to visit. Compare it to other reviews by your class-mates. How are your views similar or different?

Making

Consider selecting from, and adapting, the following making activities to suit the level and needs of your students.

- Facilitate a class discussion about what makes Parke’s works visually engaging.
- How do the artist’s words (comments, quotations etc.) support your understanding and appreciation of the works?
- Discuss the terms in the Glossary (end of resource) with your class before starting the making process.
- Consider with students the options for using either digital cameras and/or other devices to create a series of photographs related to their selected theme (use magazine and newspaper images if this is not an option). Students might think about possible creative processes to manipulate their photographs. For example, convert images to black and white by using a computer program or by photocopying; experiment with distorting images on a computer, or during the photocopying process by enlarging, overlapping images on transparency sheets, or by moving the image slightly when under the lid of the photocopier to utilise chance as a creative process; make a set of class fold-out books from lightweight card and collage onto your card the final sequence of images; add text to emphasise ideas.
- Display the resulting works. Have students consider an appropriate location, and decide on the best arrangement of the works. Discuss a possible title for the display and create a wall label that describes the making processes and learning experiences involved. Individual student wall labels may also be included.
- Have students take photographs of each other based on the subject’s decisions about background, lighting and composition. Think about the possibilities of using either natural and/or artificial light, as well as taking images at different times of the day.
- ‘I am forever chasing light. Light turns the ordinary into the magical.’ Ask students to reflect upon Parke’s statement, then to select a number of ordinary objects from their immediate environment and arrange and photograph them in an artistic way to tell a story. Images should show awareness of elements such as lighting, contrast of tone and focus, composition and scale.
- Students could walk around their school environment or neighbourhood to look at driveways, gates, trees, gardens, letterboxes, road signs, cars etc., then record their observations in a diary for use later in the making of a fold-out book.
- Ask students to collaborate in small groups to take a series of photographs to be used as a pop-up installation around the school. These photographs might record images of people and places in their environment. Consider how acts of chance and/or coincidence that occur during photographing (changes of light, objects moving in or out of focus) become interwoven within the image taking. Complement, if possible, by using moving image and sound.
- In 365 sunsets, *Adelaide*, 2010–11 Parke created meaning through the repetition of one subject by photographing the sun from the same Adelaide beach every day for a year. Attempt to capture time by photographing the same subject over a period of time. Consider an unconventional way of displaying the resulting images.
Glossary

**Aesthetic:** specific artistic awareness, or a deep appreciation of the meaning of an artistic experience through intellectual, emotional and sensual response to a work of art, in Visual Arts, refers to the philosophical theory or set of principles governing the idea of beauty at a given time and place.

**Audience:** individuals or groups of people who experience the arts in a range of settings and contexts (formal, informal, virtual or interactive) through intellectual, emotional and social engagement. The artist is audience to their own works of art.

**Design elements:** include line, colour, shape, texture, space and form found in works of art, and incorporated in the design of performance spaces (including sets) for dance and drama.

**Design principles:** accepted conventions associated with organising design elements and can include unity, balance, hierarchy, scale, proportion, emphasis, similarity and contrast.

**Focus:** to draw the attention of the audience to a particular point in the work of art.

**Installation:** a three dimensional site-specific work of art which often changes the perception of a space, for example in an art gallery.

**Magnum Photos:** a photographic cooperative established in 1947 dedicated to photojournalism and documentary photography that expresses a fundamental concern for humanity.

**Medium:** the material used in making a work of art.

**Moving Image:** a series of photographs sequenced to appear as moving objects when projected onto a screen.

**Tone:** the lightness or darkness of a colour (value).
Information for this education resource has been adapted from "Trent Parke: The Black Rose" published by the Art Gallery of South Australia in conjunction with the exhibition, 14 March – 10 May 2015.

View the short film which explores the evolution of Trent Parke’s exhibition, his working methods, and his insatiable desire to take photographs.

Learning at the Gallery
For:
• The Studio bookings
• Bookings for visits
• Teacher PL briefing and workshops

Further resources
"Trent Parke: The Black Rose", exhibition catalogue, with text by Trent Parke and essays by Julie Robinson and Maria Zagala

ABC radio - Trent Parke
"Weekend Australian" Australia, 24 January 2015, "Master of Light", Sharon Verghis

Stills Gallery, "Trent Parke – To the Sea"

Magnum Photos: Trent Parke

Hugo Michell Gallery: Trent Parke

Features the series:
• The Camera is God
• To The Sea
• Please Step Quietly
• The Christmas Tree Bucket
• Welcome To Nowhere
• Coming Soon
• Minutes To Midnight
• Dream/Life & Beyond
• The Seventh Wave

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art
Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI)
Centre for Contemporary Photography
National Portrait Gallery

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Curriculum-focused learning programs for early years to senior students and for teachers are created and managed by Mark Fischer, a specialist DECD teacher based at the Art Gallery of South Australia. Please visit the DECD Outreach Education website for more information.
Trent Parke
The Black Rose

14 March – 10 May 2015
Open daily 10 am–5 pm
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