

# AGSA

## Dusan Marek Perpetuum mobile & Equator

Interpretive Resource



Dušan Marek (1926-1993) was born in Czechoslovakia and arrived in Australia (Sydney and later Adelaide) in 1948 after spending five months in a German refugee camp. Marek migrated with his brother Voitre as they feared for their safety under the Soviets (a communist regime) who had taken control of Czechoslovakia. While in Europe, Marek studied painting at the Prague School of Fine Arts where he was influenced by works of Surrealists such as Max Ernst. Marek was committed to surrealism throughout his career, interested in objet trouvé (found objects) and had a preference for painting on scrap materials.

The double-sided *Perpetuum Mobile* and *Equator* was painted aboard the SS Charlton Sovereign on the artists' journey from Bremerhaven, Germany to Sydney. Painted on the ship's gaming table stripped of its felt covering, *Equator* depicts a surreal image where the distinctions between flesh and machinery are unclear, and figures and motifs float in space. The work may be displayed with either (or both) sides visible. It describes a universe where dual relationships and spatial dimensions are confused – even the painting itself doesn't have a correct 'front' or 'back'.

**Image (below) and image detail (cover)**  
 Dusan Marek, Australia, 1926–1993, *Perpetuum mobile*, 1948, SS Charlton Sovereign, oil on board, 121.7 x 91.2 cm; South Australian Government Grant 1972, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

Dusan Marek, Australia, 07/03/1926 – 09/03/1993, *Equator*, 1948, Gibraltar, SS Charlton Sovereign, oil on board, 121.7 x 91.2 cm; South Australian Government Grant 1972, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

## Dusan Marek – *Perpetuum mobile* & *Equator*



# Early Years and Primary

## Responding

What familiar symbols do you recognise in *Equator* and *Perpetuum Mobile*?

Locate Czechoslovakia on a map. Notice how Czechoslovakia is land locked, meaning that it is cut off from the ocean. When Marek arrived in Australia he was impressed by Adelaide's beaches and the Coorong and would spend lots of time simply floating in the water. What are some special places you have been to? What was unique about this place?

Marek and his brother spent time in a refugee camp and later decided to immigrate to Australia. What is the difference between a refugee and an immigrant?

List some reasons people migrated to Australia in the 1940s and 50s. Why do you think people migrate today?

Discuss some reasons people travel. What are some things you gain through the experience of travelling to a new place, particularly one which has a different culture to your own? What place would you like to travel to and why?

## Making

*Equator* was to mark the occasion of crossing the equator. Think of an important event that has happened to you. Create a painting celebrating this event.

Play a series of surrealist games as a way of exploring ideas. Some of these might include:

### Exquisite Corpse (small groups)

Write a sentence on a piece of paper, fold your paper so the other people in your group cannot see what you have written. Pass your paper to the person next to you and so on. Repeat this process until you have 5 sentences. Read your written piece aloud and create an illustration to accompany it. Exquisite corpse can be adapted for a drawing activity too!

### Surrealist story

Using a newspaper article or an unwanted book, cut and paste words at random to create a new story.

### Decalcomania – Ink Blobs

Inspired by the Surrealist method Decalcomania, create a series of blobs onto paper using watercolour paint or diluted acrylic paint. Move the paint around by tilting the paper to create random shapes. Once dry, draw over or around these shapes to transform them into something else.

### Photomontage

Create a surrealist photomontage by gluing together fragments of found images from magazines and newspapers. Consider strange combinations, fantasy or dream like compositions.

# Secondary

## Responding

Surrealism was an artistic and literary movement which began in the 20th century and explored the unconscious mind as a way to unlock the imagination. Artists were inspired by dreams and included imagery which defied logic and suggested a new reality. Investigate other Surrealist artists such as James Cant, Leonora Carrington, Ivor Francis, James Gleeson, René Magritte, Joan Miró, Meret Oppenheim, Peter Purves Smith, Dorothea Tanning and Remedios Varo. How do these artists compare to Marek's approach to surrealism?

In 1949 the Contemporary Art Society in Adelaide rejected *Equator* for its annual exhibition, stating it was too obscene. In 1987 the same painting was acquired by the Art Gallery of South Australia and in 1993 it was included in the exhibition *Surrealism: revolution by night* at the National Gallery of Australia alongside other surrealists such as René Magritte. How else did Marek challenge the mainstream with *Equator* and *Perpetuum Mobile*? Investigate incidents in Australian art history where contemporary works of art have caused controversy or debate.

Janus is the God of beginnings, gates, transitions, time, duality and doorways and is usually depicted as having two faces, looking forward and looking back. Is the double-sided *Equator* and *Perpetuum Mobile* looking forward and back?

A diptych is often a pair of paintings which are usually hinged together and displayed side by side. If *Equator* and *Perpetuum Mobile* were two separate paintings displayed next to each other how would this alter your perspective?

Sculptures are often viewed in the round, so that all sides are shown. *Equator* and *Perpetuum Mobile* is displayed so that both sides are shown. Would you consider this work of art a painting or a sculpture, or is it both?

Marek was impressed by Australia's vastness and in particular the bright colour and hard clean light in South Australia. Research artists who have emigrated to Australia. How did their works capture their experience of a new place?

**Tip** Yosli Berger, Khai Liew, Inge King, Wolfgang Sievers and Guan Wei.

## Making

Speak to someone in your community who has immigrated to Australia. Document their story and create a work of art which captures the essence of their experience with migration.

Surrealist artists sometimes used *Automatism* (automatic writing) as a way of encouraging spontaneity and stimulating image-making. Artists would write as fast as they could without thinking, nothing is corrected or re-written. Practice automatic writing. Use your writing as inspiration for a work of art using either *objet trouvé* (found objects) or a salvaged surface.

Make a double-sided work of art. How might this work be displayed so that both sides can be viewed?

## Image

James Cant, Australia, 1911–1982, *Surrealist hand*, c.1936, London, wax, oil paint on plaster, wood, glass, 38.0 x 28.0 cm; Dora Chapman Bequest Fund 1999, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Estate Dora Chapman and James Cant.



# Resources

Australian Biography: Dusan Marek

<https://bit.ly/2F6xbhy>

Art Gallery of New South Wales

<https://bit.ly/2TpiqKD>

Artsy: How the Surrealism Movement  
shaped the course of art history

<https://bit.ly/2jStgIo>

## Art Gallery of South Australia

Open daily 10am–5pm

North Terrace

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[agsa.sa.gov.au](http://agsa.sa.gov.au)



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