

Fantastic Forms
Learning Kit



Bundanon acknowledges the people of the Dharawal and Dhurga language groups as the traditional owners of the land upon which this exhibition was made and first presented, and recognises their continuous connection to culture, community and Country.

Bundanon acknowledges the traditional owners whose homelands this exhibition will visit, and recognises their ongoing and unbroken connection with land, waters and culture. We pay special respects to the rich cultural knowledge and storytelling traditions of the First Peoples of Australia.

BUNDANON



Australian Government
National Collecting Institutions
Touring & Outreach Program

This is a Bundanon touring exhibition.

This exhibition is supported by the National Collecting Institutions Touring and Outreach Program, an Australian Government program aiming to improve access to the national collections for all Australians.

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

'The first impulse of the maker of hand pottery is to obtain pleasure in making and decorating an article, and making that pleasure intelligible to others...'

– Merric Boyd, 1930

Fantastic Forms captures the energy, movement and colour in the expansive creative practice of Merric Boyd (1888-1959), an artist often referred to as Australia's father of pottery. Featuring over 200 drawings and ceramics from the Bundanon Collection, in dialogue with contemporary sculpture and animation, the exhibition celebrates the endless creativity of the human imagination.

Beginning with Boyd's idiosyncratic approach to artmaking, *Fantastic Forms* expands from his well-known pottery into the playful drawing practice that captured the world around him. Depicting Australian animals, plants, people and landscapes alongside handwritten notes and free-form poetry, these works on paper reveal a singular approach to spirituality, art and life.

Throughout this exhibition, contemporary artists have selected Merric Boyd's drawings from the Bundanon Collection to accompany their own works. Presented in conversation with Nabilah Nordin's sculptural forms, Stephen Benwell's delicate human figures, and energetic stop-motion videos by Bundjalung artist Rubyrose Bancroft, *Fantastic Forms* connects Boyd's philosophy with the work of Australian artists practicing today.

Fantastic Forms also contemplates intergenerational creative practice, featuring artists that can attribute some aspect of their artistic identity, focus or success to their family. Merric Boyd's parents, wife and children were all artists, Stephen Benwell's mother was an artist, Nabilah Nordin's grandparents were wood craftsmen and florists, Rubyrose Bancroft's mother is also an artist and a First Nations cultural leader.





Merric Boyd

‘[T]he frenzy with which he applied the pencil or brush suggested fiery passions that could be likened to the kind that motivated Van Gogh’

– David Boyd, *An Open House*, p30.

Merric Boyd was a visionary artist with a spiritual approach to his creative life. Widely considered to be Australia’s first studio potter, he began experimenting with clay in 1910, a time when the medium was not commonly used in the artistic community.

Working from his studio in Murrumbeena, Victoria, he explored hand building and traditional throwing techniques, developing a distinctive style that referenced forms from the natural world. His curvilinear pots, painted with images of windswept trees and skies, were influential on the progression of ceramic art in Australia. He worked closely with his artist wife, Doris Boyd, and his creative philosophy shaped the lives of his five children, Lucy, Arthur, Guy, David and Mary, all of whom also became artists.

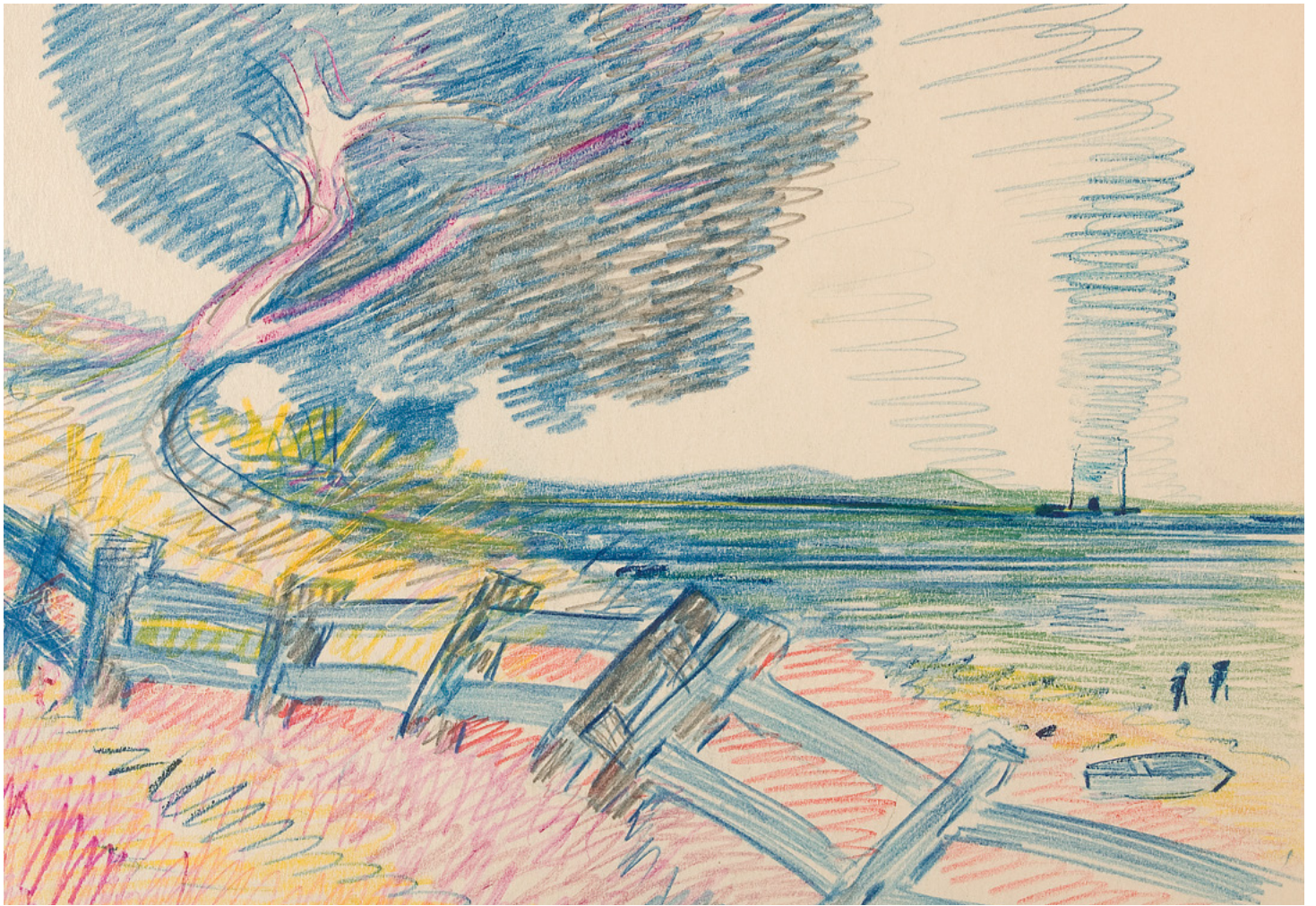
Alongside pottery, drawing formed the backbone of his practice from an early age, enabling him to swiftly capture connections in the world around him. In the last 10 to 15 years of his life, as his ability to hand-model was affected by advancing epilepsy, Boyd’s drawings became his focus. In these later works and their accompanying inscriptions, his spiritual philosophy, eccentricity and joy in making shine through.

The two essays in the catalogue for this exhibition, by Boe-Lin Bastian and David Hurlston, delve deeper into Merric Boyd’s life and work and are essential reading for supporting learners to engage with the artworks presented in this exhibition.

Stand or sit in front of Boyd's drawings of landscapes and trees.

- What do you see or notice about these works? (initially, seek description only).
- What are they made from? How might it have been made?
- What do you think about the drawings?
- What makes you think that? (often materials are discussed here, coloured pencils and line types like scribble).
- Explain that these were drawn by Boyd in the last decade of his life and towards the end of a lifetime as an accomplished artist. Engage in some art analysis with the learners that highlights the sophistication and technique of Boyd's drawings:
 - a. Ask who in the group of learners currently uses coloured pencil and paper in their art making? Do we need expensive, unusual or super messy materials to make art? Why? Why not?
 - b. In this picture of trees, which way is the wind blowing? How did the artist convey that?
 - c. In this picture, how are colours layered, knitted or juxtaposed? To create what effect? How is colour used differently to convey another mood or effect in a nearby drawing?
 - d. How does the use of colour reflect how we, as artists, see a landscape, or an animal, or a domestic object?
 - e. Look at some of the drawings of jugs or vases and Boyd's use of perspective in these. How does the drawing reflect the energy and shape of the object?
 - f. Boyd uses a quick, simple and immediate way of drawing to capture things as they happen. Who do you think he might have been making these drawings for?
 - g. How does Boyd capture in his drawings his love of the world around him?
 - h. How has Boyd made his drawings humorous?





Learning intention

Learners will develop ideas through a focus on mark-making and imagination, leading with intuition and feeling first.

Materials: Coloured wax crayons, butcher's paper, scissors and glue.

Location: Drop-in workstation

Duration: Drop-in, 10 minutes approx.

Provide the following prompts:

- Select a handful of wax crayons and use them all at once to quickly and freely: scribble, zig, zag, stripe, swirl, dash, cross hatch some marks onto the butcher's paper. Try layering some of these types of marks on top of each other.
- Look at your paper, turn it upside down, sideways (younger learners may use a flexible viewing frame of two L shaped pieces of card). Can you see different forms?
- Use tearing, cutting and collage to re-form your work into something else. What can this be? What can it do?



Learning intention

Learners will use drawing techniques that result in varied shapes, forms and textures.

Materials: A2 cartridge paper, coloured pencils, biros, pencils, watercolour paint.

Location: An outdoors location with a stool and board, or an indoor location with tables and windows.

Duration: Drop-in, 10 minutes approx.

Provide the following prompts:

- On a scrap piece of paper, take a moment to practice different mark-making techniques for drawing, using a variety of drawing tools (e.g., hatching, shading, scribbling, stippling etc.)
- Collect an A2 piece of paper and some drawing tools.
- Look at the world in front of you and identify some 'Boyd moments': Notice and draw the clumsy branch, the awkward intersection of tree and sky, the funny shape of paths or plants, the random, the hectic, the interesting, the humorous. Work across the page loosely adding marks, forms, colours trying different tools.
- Firm up some chosen elements of your work with exaggerated, bold and unexpected colours (e.g., a blue branch or a pink fence), continue to use the pens, biros and pencils and/or use watercolours.
- Add a chimera, based on real animals, into your scene. Be inspired by the 'donkey kangaroos', or the 'koala with hands' creatures that Boyd draws.

Optional: For an extended workshop, complete the activity listed above as a warm-up and insert an invitation to use the activity products to collage into the A2 work.



Rubyrose Bancroft

'I try to create work with a sense of unlimited imagination, allowing the scenes to take place in any time or era, making them relatable for many from anywhere in the world'

– Rubyrose Bancroft

Rubyrose Bancroft is an emerging Bundjalung artist based in the Northern Rivers region of New South Wales. She studied ceramics at the National Art School in Sydney, exploring a combination of hand built and wheel thrown techniques throughout her degree. When Covid-19 lockdowns restricted her access to a studio and kiln, she began experimenting with Plasticine claymation at home.

In these two videos, creatures and plants are formed and burst from their sets to beat-driven electronic music. *7 Deadly Sins* explores a sense of escapism through the humorous retelling of Christian narratives, while *Mud* captures the creation and explosion of prehistoric creatures from, and then back to the earth. The third animation,

Claymation captures the immediacy of working with malleable materials in real time. Every frame must be designed, modelled by hand, then photographed, and edited together. At a frame rate of 0.4 seconds these works required between 3000 and 5000 individual adjustments to the plasticine models to be completed.

Alongside Merric Boyd's lyrical drawings, Bancroft's work speaks to a new generation of contemporary artists experimenting with clay and its potential for activation through digital technology. Like Boyd, Bancroft's hand-making sometimes incorporates objects found in nature, such as the leaves and twigs used in *Mud*.

Rubyrose Bancroft, in Jasmine Pirovic, 'Meet the Artists Behind "Fantastic Forms"', the Exhibition Celebrating 30 Years of Bundanon', *RUSSSH*, 3 April 2023., <https://www.russh.com/fantastic-forms-bundanon-art-museum/>

The Bundanon Learning team found that young learners especially connected with these stop motion videos, and many of them had some experience of working with stop motion processes. This is worth exploring to elicit an appreciation for the level of work, precision and hand-modelling involved in each film:

- What do you understand to be the story in the film you have just watched ... what was it about?
- What else did you notice about the film?
- Who here has made a stop motion video before? Tell me a bit about it and how you made it? How long did it take to make?
- So, how do we think these stop motions were made? What would have been easy and difficult about it?
- Rubyrose Bancroft is a First Nations artists from Bundjalung Country. Some words in Aboriginal English are Standard English words but given different meanings: 'deadly' is used to mean 'really good'. How might that impact your viewing/understanding of *7 Deadly Sins*?
- How is sound used in the films? How do the sound and vision work together through editing? What moods or emotions does the soundtrack evoke? If different music was used, how might that change the experience of watching the film – what if it was an opera soundtrack, or a country music soundtrack?



RUBYROSE BANCROFT: Activity

Learning intention

Learners will explore visually communicating movement through drawing.

Materials: Paper, graphite, lead pencils.

Location: Drop-in workstation

Duration: Drop-in, 10 minutes approx.

Provide the following prompt:

- Make some quick sketches of something that you can see that is in motion.



Learning intention

Learners will visually communicate imaginative possibilities through storyboard and/or simple animation.

Materials: Long format paper of your choice (e.g. Kraft paper cut in half lengthways), other papers including offcuts and scraps, collage materials, crayons, pencils, pens, Posca pens.

Location: Indoors, tables required.

Duration: 1-2 hours.

Provide the following prompts:

- Artists, animators & comic artists use storyboards to develop visual stories or present visual stories as finished art works. Do you think Bancroft drafted a story or made a storyboard to plan her stop motion video? What might it have included?
- Think of a one line story that might be set here (use the place you are in as the setting to the story as this provides visual stimulus for background imagery). E.g., 'that tree gets sick of dogs weeing on it and walks away, leaving a hole for the next dog to fall into', 'that barn is a portal into the past where I meet my idol from history', 'when night falls the wombats ...'
- Do some high level-planning / sketching out of 5-6 frames on a piece of scrap paper
- Consider your story and draft plan so far. How might you animate your planned storyboard? For example, could you photograph each frame of your storyboard and use an online GIF maker? Could you cut your frames up and make a simple flick book? Could you make a character into a simple puppet that acts out the story using the storyboard as scenery? Can you turn your storyboard into a circular story: e.g.: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoetrope>.
- Stop planning and start creating the work! Mark out 5 or 6 frames on your long-format paper and start drawing / collaging to make and animate your storyboard.

Optional: A stop motion animation workshop would be a great addition to the program, but would be a multi-day workshop event, and would be separate to the above.

Stephen Benwell

‘The surfaces of [Benwell’s] busts and figures are textured, fractured, even disintegrating, suggestive of architectural ruins and drawing on Benwell’s great love and knowledge of Greek and Roman statues.’

– Boe-Lin Bastian, *Permission to create*, 2024, [p27]

Over a career spanning four decades, Stephen Benwell developed a diverse and technically distinct practice in hand-built ceramics. He is best known for the painterly surfaces of his stoneware and earthenware vases, which reference art historical movements and classical forms.

Like Merric Boyd, Benwell grew up in an artistic family in Melbourne, and for the first half of his career focused on painted vessels in increasingly complex shapes. From the 1990s onwards, Benwell’s focus began to shift to small sculptures in porcelain.

Today he works incrementally - shaping, firing, painting and repainting an individual figure over months at a time. This loving attention to detail is evident in the resulting humble, yet beautiful forms. The figures in this touring exhibition were made in the years spanning 2017 and 2024. While earlier figures were more realistic depictions of masculinity, recent works lean into abstractions of the human form, highlighting its frailty and imperfection.

The *Fantastic Forms* touring exhibition shows twenty-seven of Benwell’s delicate figures alongside a frieze and drawings by Boyd. The exhibition installation promotes conversation between the practices of two significant Australian ceramic artists. Although working several decades apart, Boyd and Benwell’s practices parallel in interesting ways. Both artists pushed the boundaries of contemporary ceramics and created works from daily life rather than idealised forms. Their works show the malleability and push-pull energy of handbuilt ceramics.

When Stephen surveyed Merric Boyd’s drawings to inspire making figures for *Fantastic Forms*, he selected a frieze and watercolour works. The figures that Benwell created for *Fantastic Forms* (*Infanta*, *Crouch*, and *Bend*) seem to draw out the more contemplative aspects of Boyd’s drawing practice.

STEPHEN BENWELL: Discussion

The aim of this discussion is to encourage close observation of the sculptures, and is best undertaken in smaller groups.

- What do you see or notice about this work? (initially, seek description only)
- What is it made from? How might it have been made?
- What does it make you think or wonder about?
- If I told you that these sculptures were a comment on humanity, frailty, imperfection and fallibility, how do you see these ideas communicated through the sculptures?
- Why are the figures shown in this order in the exhibition? Can you explain the chronology of the display?
- Identify *Infanta*, *Crouch* and *Bend* as commissions specifically created for *Fantastic Forms*.



STEPHEN BENWELL: Activity

This guided, in-museum activity is directly informed by Harvard University's Project Zero thinking routine, *Slow Complexity Capture*.

Learning intention

Learners will consider the complexity of art objects.

Materials: Paper and pencils.

Location: In museum.

Duration: 1-2 hours.

Provide the following prompts:

- Find a Benwell figure that captures your interest and sit near it. Look really carefully at all the details of the small figures.
- In a single word, or phrase, write down what it is that you see.
- Spend at least 5 – 10 minutes to make a drawing of it, considering it from multiple angles or perspectives. Your drawing does not have to be 'good', but it should help you focus on as much detail as possible. Try and capture both the shapes in the ceramic form and also the shapes in the coloured glazes painted onto the figure.
- After you have visually explored this figure through drawing, write a short paragraph (or tell a friend) about how it is complex.
- What new ideas and questions do you have about this figure?



Left: Stephen Benwell, *Figure with arm extended*, 2018, earthenware. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: David McArthur. Right: Stephen Benwell, *Statue, red fist*, 2017, earthenware. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: David McArthur

Learning intention

Learners will consider how human qualities and experiences can be communicated through artworks.

Materials: Re-usable handbuilding materials, such as Playdough, Plasticine, ceramic clay. Materials will be re-used for each workshop - no work is fired or dried. Encourage hand washing at the start of the workshop to keep materials clean.

Location: Table space in rooms separate to the galleries is required.

Duration: 1-2 hours.

Provide the following prompts:

- You will be making temporary art objects today. Each object will be deconstructed and returned to this beginning ball of material. If you make something you like, make sure you take a photo or draw it before you move on.
- You will only have seven minutes for each sculpture.
- Create a sculpture of a human figure or a real-life thing (e.g., a watering can, a boat, a cat etc.)
- Now adjust or re-shape it to be a *happy* person, watering can, boat, cat etc.
- Now adjust or re-shape it to be a *confused* person, watering can, boat, cat etc.
- Now adjust or re-shape it to be a *strong* person, watering can, boat, cat etc.
- Now adjust or re-shape it to be a *tired* person, watering can, boat, cat, etc.
- Now adjust or re-shape it to have more than one human quality or experience.

Optional: If you do not have a space suitable for these materials, issue a large format paper (no smaller than A3) that is marked up, or folded, into a six-part grid. Change the prompts to drawing prompts rather than sculptural prompts, with each drawing to fill one section of the grid. To focus learners on expressive forms and lines, consider initially offering greyscale or monochromatic drawing media. If you do this, add a final, additional prompt to render all drawings with colour, if this is what the learner desires.

Nabilah Nordin

'[Nordin] speaks of her relatives as active people, makers who taught her to create abundantly from whatever resources were available, and that you could learn through doing and working with what was on hand.'

Boe-Lin Bastian, *Permission to create*, 2024, [p32]

Born in Singapore, Nabilah Nordin constructs gravity-defying forms from handmade, found and fabricated materials. Her practice is inventive, transforming unexpected materials to challenge the history of monumental sculpture. Nabilah Nordin's three sculptures directly respond to the frenetic energy and bold colouration of Boyd's drawings.

Nordin transforms unexpected materials into sculptures characterised by humour, playfulness, irregularity and absurdity. When surveying Merric Boyd's drawings for inspiration, her selections included purple koalas with many fingers, ambiguous kangaroos and long, lanky trees with branches and leaves balanced precariously on top. Nordin sorted her selections of Boyd's drawings into groups, which are presented as 'clouds' of framed works on paper near the sculptural work they inspired.

Thick Fight is inspired by the shapes and lines of Merric Boyd's drawings. It features forms that stack and collapse over one another as do many of the shapes in Boyd's landscape drawings. *Thick Fight* is covered in epoxy resin. Nabilah pressed into the resin at rapid speed with her fingertips to respond to the sense of frenetic energy she perceived in that group of Boyd's drawings. For *Thick Fight*, Nordin incorporated place as a material by using charcoal from the Bundanon bushfires to make marks on the plinth, this mark making references Boyd's use of 'loopy' lines for drawing.

Pavilion draws direct inspiration from the colour in Merric Boyd's drawings, made of ropes and fabric that are dyed and dipped in similar hues. This sculptural work explores themes of decoration and excess.

Palace, commissioned for *The National* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, reflects the vivid blue hues of Boyd's watercolours and the leaning organic shapes of his ceramic jugs and pots. It is part of a suite of works called *Corinthian Clump* 'a riotous welter of colours, textures, materials, and improbable forms' (Scott Elliot, 2022).

Thick Fight and *Palace* incorporate plinths of exaggerated proportions, testing the possibilities for sculptural supports. Like Boyd's organically shaped pots and robust, muscular animals, her sculptures embrace irregularity. They work against classical ideals of sculpture by combining found materials and intense colours to humorous effect.

When working with learning groups, the Bundanon Learning team found a successful strategy for discussing Nordin's work was to choose one sculpture and undertake a deep dive analysis:

Start with by focusing on the sculpture:

- What do you see or notice about this work? (initially, seek description only)
- What is it made from? How might it have been made?
- What does it make you think or wonder about?
- If you were to create a fantastical form, like Nabilah's, what materials might you use? What colours? How big might it be, and what shape? Would it stand on the floor or on a plinth?

Indicate the group of Merric Boyd's drawings that inspired this work and ask learners to take a close look and infer how these drawings might have informed the sculpture.

Provide the following prompts, but only if they are necessary to take the discussion forward:

- *Palace* is inspired by the neoclassical vestibule at the entrance to the Art Gallery of New South Wales' historic building.
- *Pavilion* is inspired by the colouration of Boyd's drawings; can you identify the colours in the drawings that match the colours in the sculpture?
- *Thick Fight* is inspired by the lines and shapes of Boyd's drawings, can you see the shapes collapsing over themselves in the drawings? What about the drawings convey a sense of energy?



Learning Intention

Explore and manipulate the materials of assemblage considering the possibilities of what sculpture could be. Engage in themes of construction, transformation, perseverance & patience to result in diverse responses.

Materials: Gather a range of materials in a range of colours, for learners to choose from. Ensure these found/reclaimed/recycled items won't shatter if they fall and aren't too sharp on the edges. For example, old lanyards, cardboard tubes from rolls of cling-wrap or foil, bottle tops, pieces of fabric or yarns, old CDs, homemade Playdough), offcuts of lightweight timber, wire, recycled plastic containers.

Location: Drop-in activity spaces, separate to the galleries.

Duration: Drop-in, 10 minutes approx.

Create a word list:

The Bundanon Learning team read reviews of Nabilah Nordin's work for key words that might inspire learners. But you could make your word list from whatever inspires you! Example words could include sensual, beguiling, oozy, rough, bumpy, absurd, gentle, soft, playful, other-worldly, familiar, undone, drippy, wonky etc.

Provide the following prompts:

- Choose a word from the list or think of a word that is inspired by something you can see. Use the loose parts collection to make a sculpture that responds to this.
- Can your sculpture be precarious, balance improbably or look impossible? Can you make it look like it will fall ... but it doesn't?
- What can you add or change before it comes undone?
- Take a photo, deconstruct it, and return the loose parts.



As per the Nordin-inspired loose parts activity outlined above, with some additional considerations for the longer workshop format:

- *Scale.* If you have a whole studio or room to use, can your loose parts collection and sculptures include larger items?
- *Multiple attempts.* If you have more time, you have more scope for higher risk-taking in terms of pushing a large, complex object to its physical tipping point, having it fall, then figuring out how to reconstruct it differently to extend or enlarge it further. You may also have an opportunity to explore multiple ideas or themes through creating and documenting several different sculptures or even create a thematic presentation of several works.
- *Documentation.* Provide a long format paper (e.g., A2 paper cut lengthways) and make a concertina fold. Use this to create an artist book that documents your ideas, materials, binding and connection techniques, sculpture object and the processes you undertook to make it. This book will be as elaborate or as simple as the allocated workshop time allows.
- *Inclusive education.* The studio or classroom can become visually and aurally busy with multiple sculptures and sculptors on the go. Reduce visual overload by having some large, unfolded cardboard boxes as backgrounds for the sculptural works; the cardboard can become room dividers. Encourage learners who may already use noise-cancelling headphones to put them on. Sculptures falling can make unexpected and unnerving sounds.



