



A Level Art and Design

PERSONAL INVESTIGATION

Theme for A level Personal Investigation: Passions and Obsessions

GCE Art and Design

Personal Investigation support

Centres are free to devise their own projects, tasks or themes for the Personal Investigation component.

This document suggests a broad theme that you could use with your students for the A level Personal Investigation component. It also suggests starting points relevant to each of the endorsed titles, although students can interpret the theme according to their own interests and research, or the resources available. Your students' approach to the personal study can be as individual and creative as their own practical work.

The theme and starting points within this document are suggestions and are not intended to be prescriptive. You are free to devise any project, task or theme for the Personal Investigation.

Theme

Passions and Obsessions

People, projects, objects or places can all become focal points of obsession or passion. The driving force behind every artist stems from their own personal passion or fixation. The galleries of any museum or public collection display a bewildering assortment of personal objects that represent past or present human obsessions.

The study and exploration of the human figure has obsessed many artists over many centuries. The sculptor Alberto Giacometti lived in his workshop towards the end of his life, totally absorbed in his figurative explorations and rejecting the outside world. The practice of Sculptors Phyllida Barlow, Elisabeth Frink and Barbara Hepworth demonstrate focus and life-long dedication to their ideas. Artists such as Caravaggio, Rodin, Wyeth, Augustus John, Salvador Dali, Gwen John, Jenny Saville, Rose Wylie, Kehinde Wiley, and Paula Modersohn-Becker have produced intense paintings inspired by their close relationships with their models.

A passion for nature and organic forms inspires many architects and designers who fully exploit the flexibility of modern construction materials to mimic natural forms. The Beijing National Stadium (the 'Bird's Nest'), built for the 2008 Olympics, is a classic example of this. The architect Zaha Hadid used inspiration from natural form for the London Olympic park. Alexander Calder and Jean Tinguely were fascinated by kinetics throughout their lives, producing sculptures that arc gracefully through the air or that intentionally rattled themselves to destruction. Turner prize winner Jesse Darling and Ro Robertson use sculptural materials to provoke discussion and subvert our preconceptions around materials and meaning.

Here are some more ideas that might help you begin your research:

- relationships, families, weddings, christenings
- sadness, joy, disappointment, kleptomania, paranoia
- collections, money, poverty, recycling, charity
- politics, power, religion, trust, war
- ambition, fame, celebrity, television
- birth, presents, carnivals, sport, holidays, travel
- food, security, hygiene
- convents and monasteries.

If possible, begin your work on the theme by recording from direct observation and experience. Try to select sources which are unusual or challenging, sources which will provide you with a variety of visual stimuli from which you can develop your work.

Starting points

The starting points below may help you form ideas. You can follow them closely, use them as a source of information, or produce your own individual response to the theme.

- **Fine Art** – love or obsession has inspired many artists, such as Philemona Williamson, Pierre Bonnard, Andrew Wyeth, Maggi Hambling, Vilhelm Hammershoi and Edward Hopper. Anthony Green shows his love for his family, home and memories in his obsessive depiction of minute details of domesticity. Bonnard's fascination with light and colour inspired him to paint the same figure and bathroom many times over, with infinite variations in colour and pattern. Edward Hopper painted his wife over decades within different interiors and narratives. Cai Guo-Qiang's passion for literally explosive artwork using traditional Chinese fireworks explores themes of destruction and creation.
- **Fine Art** – personal interests and hobbies can be an inspiration for artists, such as Peter Lanyon's experiences with gliding that led to abstracted paintings based on aerial views of the landscape. Early experiences in boxing inspired Sam Rabin's paintings of the sport. Faith Ringold made soft sculptures based on her family and expresses their importance in her life in a very direct and touching stitched and sewn figures. The quilted works of Bisa Butler's 'Anaya with Oranges' 2017 celebrate how formative family can be in development of an artist.
- **Fine Art** - Portrait painting and the relationship of the model to the surrounding negative space create interesting challenges for artists. Gwen John painted interiors and portraits with astonishing intensity and sensitivity to light and form, perhaps reflecting her obsessive relationship with the sculptor Rodin. Jenny Saville explored the female body with an honesty that challenges art historical views of the nude as a subject. Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt paintings transformed intimate subjects in their everyday life into impressionist masterpieces of light, colour and atmosphere. Laura Knight made many paintings based on her fascination for the characters backstage in the theatre and circus, as well as documenting women working in wartime Britain.
- **Graphic Communication** – Designers are often obsessive about the presentation of their ideas with this aspect being given as great an emphasis as the product itself. Fashion designers are passionate about the way their work is presented. In addition to their own sketches, illustrators are often employed to refine the look of a brand. Fashion illustrations function in different ways: they can bring life to a fashion design; they can help to promote a style in the form of advertising; they can also be a work of art in their own right. Julie Verhoeven created a series of designs for Mulberry in 2007; James Jean's designs were used for Prada's summer 2008 show. Aurelia Durand celebrates diversity and African heritage, whilst Camila Rosa's illustration poses questions about identity. Lulu Li is a Chinese Designer whose use of neon signs breaks down the barriers of design in her immersive sculptural work.
- **Textile Design** – textile production can involve the intense working and reworking of materials to create layered, complex pieces. Artists obsessively use combinations of techniques and materials to produce highly individual works. Alice Kettle uses tiny stitches and rich colour to generate pieces which are narrative and evoke human emotion. Billie Zangewa evokes motherhood in layered silk tapestries, and Michael Raedecker makes haunting images concerned with light and composition by combining painting, appliqué and embroidery in creative ways. The work of Eva Hesse is an exploration of the artists mind and body through innovative constructed textile hangings and installations. Virgil Abloh was a designer passionately committed to championing the opportunities for minorities in the fashion world.

- **Three-dimensional Design** – many theatrical productions deal with passions and obsessions and provide designers with unique opportunities to build sets and costumes that exaggerate the tension and energy of such powerful emotions. Examples such as Richard Napier's designs on Peter Shaffer's production of *Equus*, Robert Innes Hopkins' sets for the RSC's production of *Macbeth*, and Maria Björnson's sets for *The Phantom of the Opera* have produced spectacular environments that greatly enhance the visual spectacle on stage. Eileen Gray pioneered modernist architecture and furniture design with a passion for craft and finish, as did architect Norma Sklarek's equally passionate attention to the materials and construction process in her building projects. Kenyan Designer Moran Munyuthe rediscovered a passion for traditional craft in his furniture design.
- **Photography** – many photographers and filmmakers explore our passion for mystery and intrigue. Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) and Tim Burton's *Nightmare before Christmas* (1993) and *Sleepy Hollow* (1999) are good examples of this. Akira Kurosawa's passion for history in his film 'The Seven Samurai' is epic in its cinematography and storytelling. The futuristic artist Mariko Mori also plays with the senses in her videos and installations. In the ambitious piece *Dream Temple* 1999, she combines many disciplines: architecture, computer graphics, video and virtual reality in a piece that comments upon the nature of human consciousness. Contemporary photographer and artist Lorna Simpson's work focuses on details such as braided hair to provoke conversations about Black History, as does the 'Kitchen Table Series' 1990 by photographer Carrie Mae Weems, where intimate and intense dramas are played out in this familiar domestic interior.