

# Jenny Sages

## Paths to portraiture

*Jenny Sages: Paths to portraiture* explores the process of portrait making through large-scale portraits, abstract landscapes, preparatory and finished drawings, photographs, and objects and materials related to the work of the artist Jenny Sages.

Jenny Sages was born in Shanghai in 1933 to Russian Jewish parents. When she was fifteen her family relocated to Australia. After studying in New York and Sydney, Jenny established herself as a commercial artist, illustrating fashion, travel and lifestyle features. In the mid-1980s, after a decisive trip to the Kimberley region of Western Australia, she became a full-time artist. She mainly creates abstract landscapes, painting a portrait perhaps once a year. Yet she has twice won the Portia Geach Memorial Award for portraiture, and has been a finalist nineteen times in the Archibald Prize for portraiture, offered by the Art Gallery of NSW. She won the Wynne Prize for landscape in 2005.

*Jenny Sages: Paths to portraiture* was developed and exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra from 23 September 2010 to 16 January 2011. In an expanded form, made possible by a partnership between the National Portrait Gallery and Tweed River Art Gallery, the exhibition is touring to venues around Australia in 2011–12.

### Learning resource

This learning resource is written for teachers and provides suggestions for before, during and after the Gallery visit. Designed for middle-school students, it can be adapted to suit a range of pupils and their learning needs. The resource encourages:

- development of skills of observation and analysis;
- exploration of artistic choices, materials, processes, ideas and influences;
- understanding of an artist's process;
- consideration of the construction and representation of identity; and
- understanding of relationships between artist and subject/s.

### Before the visit

#### 1 Thinking about portraits

- What is a portrait?
- Who might be in a portrait?
- What else can be in a portrait?
- Where do you see portraits?
- Why are portraits made?
- How are portraits made?
- What types of portraits are there?
- Have you created any portraits?
- Do you have any portraits at home?

Create a mind map to assist developing and expanding your ideas on each of these questions.

Compare and contrast some historical portraits and some recent ones. What features might indicate to you that a portrait is contemporary?

#### 2 Thinking about creating portraits

If you were going to create a portrait, what would you need to consider? Draft your personal 'portrait map'.



Jenny Sages 1995 Greg Weight Gift of Patrick Corrigan AM 2004 National Portrait Gallery, Canberra  
Donated through the Australian Government's Cultural Gifts Program

### 3 The film

*Jenny Sages: Paths to Portraiture* (2010)

Director / Producer: Catherine Hunter

Running time: 17 minutes

This film introduces the artist Jenny Sages and her creative influences and choices. It also features the curator of the exhibition, Dr Sarah Engledow from the National Portrait Gallery. It is the curator's job to make a selection of an artist's work for an exhibition, bringing together works from a particular period of an artist's career, perhaps, or works that follow a particular theme, or tell a particular story. Quite often, the artist would not have thought of combining their own works in this way. Sometimes, a curator can see aspects of a work, or a group of works, that an artist might not have thought about, or valued at all.

- 1 What stood out for you about the artist? About her work?
- 2 How would you describe the kind of work that this artist makes?
- 3 Describe the difference between what Jenny Sages says about her own work, and what the curator, Sarah Engledow, says about Jenny's work.

In the film, Jenny Sages talks about her emotional and personal approaches to making art. She says that having fallen 'so in love with the person' she has a 'huge need to make a portrait'.

- 4 What does Sages have to say about the relationship between artist and subject? How do you think an artist's personal response to a subject might affect the portrait they produce?
- 5 Describe how you think the artist's meeting with the Indigenous Australian artist Emily Kame Kngwarreye was significant to her.
- 6 What do you see as evidence of connection to country in the portrait of Emily Kame Kngwarreye?

In her self portrait, Jenny Sages uses text from a poem by the early twentieth-century Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. Can you recall what the artist said about the text?

- 7 What do you think about the inclusion of text in Jenny Sages self portrait? Would you include a song or poem in your self portrait? If so, what would it be?
- 8 Why would an artist want to 'shroud' identity in a self portrait?

The writer, Helen Garner describes being the subject of a portrait as 'uncomfortable'. Jenny Sages had to pursue the writer to get her agreement. Garner says she was reluctant to 'sit' for Jenny because some portraits in the past had been too flattering – but on the other hand, she feared this portrait might show her 'inner awfulness'.

- 9 Can you see any of Garner's reluctance in the portrait? What is your evidence?
- 10 Do you think a portrait can really show 'inner awfulness'?

Dr Sarah Engledow, curator of the exhibition, says that the portrait of Helen Garner is a good example of what is called a 'speaking likeness'.

- 11 Do you remember how she explained this term?
- 12 Describe Helen Garner's expression in this portrait. Take turns to say what you think she might say, if she were to speak.

Jenny Sages uses a variety of approaches and materials to create her work.

- 13 What are some of the materials used by Jenny Sages to create her works?
- 14 Look around the exhibition, and find examples of works made in ways that you saw in the film.
- 15 How can you tell if a large portrait is an encaustic work, or an oil on canvas?

Of the portrait of Gloria Petyarre, Jenny Sages says 'hope she approves!' Why might she have said this?

# NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY EXHIBITION

King Edward Terrace Canberra  
ACT 2600

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### At the gallery

These questions can be used to start conversations about the portraits in the exhibition.



*Each morning when I wake up I put on my mother's face* 2000

encaustic and oil on board

150.0 x 100.0 cm

Collection of the artist

- 1 This work is titled *Each morning when I wake up I put on my mother's face*. What do you think the artist means by this?
- 2 What are the words in this painting communicating? Whose voice is written in the text?
- 3 Look closely at the surface of the portrait. Where else do you normally see carved words?
- 4 What would you say about the position of the figure in this work?
- 5 Look at the abstract work hanging beside this portrait. Why do you think the curator placed the two works side by side?
- 6 Why is the case of objects near this portrait? Why do you think the drawing, by Jenny's granddaughter, is in the case?

### Ephemera from the home of Jenny and Jack Sages.

- 1 Choose an object. Describe it. What do you think it is?
- 2 What do you think connects these objects as a group?
- 3 Why do you think some of these objects are displayed in the exhibition?
- 4 Do you know anyone who has a collection of objects? Do you collect anything? Do you display what you collect?



*Gloria Tamere Petyarre* 2005

encaustic and pigment on board

80.0 x 244.0 cm

private collection

- 1 What is your eye drawn to first in this portrait?
- 2 Where do you think Gloria Petyarre is located?
- 3 Imagine what Gloria is telling us. Give one word which describes what you think the subject might be thinking or feeling.
- 4 How does the cropping and framing of the figure influence meaning in the portrait? What is your evidence?
- 5 Compare this composition to Jenny Sages's self portrait. How does this suggest Jenny Sages thinks about portraiture?



*Parallel lives: Heidi and Sarah-Jane* 2009

encaustic, oil and pigment on board

200.0 x 240.0 cm

(two panels, each 200 x 120 cm)

Tweed River Art Gallery

Gift of the J Sages Family Trust 2009

Donated through the Australian

Government's Cultural Gifts Program

- 1 What do you see?
- 2 Can you see any clues about the relationship between the subjects? What do you think is being said?
- 3 Look at the abstract work hanging beside the portrait. Why do you think the curator placed these two works side by side?
- 4 Do you know who these women are? Does that influence your reading of the portrait?



*True Stories: Helen Garner* 2003

encaustic, oil and pigment on board

122.2 x 200.2 cm

National Portrait Gallery, Canberra

Gift of the artist 2004

Donated through the Australian

Government's Cultural Gifts Program

- 1 Can you see aspects of this portrait that look like the artist's abstract landscapes?
- 2 Looking at the four oil sketches and the final painting, describe your view of the relationship between Jenny Sages and Helen Garner.
- 3 Consider the studies for *True Stories* displayed in the showcase. What creative decisions has Jenny Sages made for the final portrait?
- 4 Discuss the similarities and differences between this portrait and the one of Emily Kame Ngwarreye, made six years earlier.



*Emily Kame Ngwarreye with Lily* 1993

oil on canvas

213.5 x 182.5cm

National Portrait Gallery, Canberra

Purchased 1998

- 1 Why might Jenny Sages have chosen to position the figures this way?
- 2 Consider the words Sages has written on the series of six sketches of Emily. Describe what happened over the course of the women's meeting.

- 3 In what way does the light contribute to the portrait?
- 4 Which sketches, in your view, contributed directly to the final portrait? What might the artist have gained from having made the sketches she did not end up 'using'?
- 5 If you were to create a painted portrait, how would you recall your subject?



*Seeing the lights: Anthony Hopkins, artist 2004*

encaustic and pigment on board  
122.5 x 210.0 cm  
Collection of the artist

- 1 Sages has said that this is the first work of hers to 'join the abstract and figurative strands of her work in encaustic'. What might she mean by this?
- 2 Look at the whole portrait. Stand back, what do you see? Move closer, do you see something different?
- 3 Look at the subject's gaze. How do you think he is thinking and feeling?
- 4 Look at the surface of the figure around the eyes, beard and cheek. How has the artist created his expression? What colours has she used?



*Untitled (Skylarking schoolboys)*  
*Untitled (Women in leopard skins)*  
*Untitled (Anna with parasol)*  
*Untitled (Jenny and two amahs) c. 1996*  
pencil and pastel on red cedar panels  
23.0 x 19.0 cm each  
Collection of the artist

- 1 Having read the information provided in the exhibition, describe these works.
- 2 Do they seem different from other works in the exhibition? In what ways?
- 3 Describe what you think someone might be thinking as they drew old photographs from their family albums.
- 4 These four works are from a series of twelve. Why do you think the curator chose these to include in the exhibition?



*Fashion drawings 1986*

charcoal on paper  
published in Doris Pooser, *Always in Style With Colour*, St. Peters, NSW: Little Hills Press, 1986

Collection of the artist

- 1 Describe the similarities and differences between Jenny Sages's fashion drawings and her drawings of Emily Kngwarreye.
- 2 How do the figures in fashion drawings differ from figures in life drawings?
- 3 What are fashion drawings for?
- 4 Why do you think the curator put the case of fashion drawings where she did?

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National Portrait Gallery  
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### After the exhibition visit

Reflecting, reviewing, discussing, debating, researching and experimenting are ways to extend and consolidate the gallery exhibition experience.

#### Reflect

What did you think/feel/say/wonder about this exhibition? Who would you tell about this exhibition? What would you say? The most interesting thing was...? 'I'd like to know more about...?' 'I didn't understand...?' 'I was less interested...?' 'I didn't know that...?' 'This reminded me of...?'

#### Research

Research a range of self portraits from the National Portrait Gallery collection [portrait.gov.au](http://portrait.gov.au) or other collections.

#### Review

Write a review of the exhibition for publication, e.g. art magazine, website, blog or school magazine.

- What were your first impressions of the exhibition?
- Describe one or more of the people in Jenny Sages' portraits.
- Describe their relationship to Jenny Sages and how that relationship is important to the portrait.
- Include how these subjects are connected to the locations shown in their portraits?
- Would you recommend this exhibition to others? Why?

#### Create

Create a self portrait in the style of Jenny Sages.

- What ideas do you want to convey about yourself?
- How will you determine your gaze, pose, gesture, props and clothing?
- What will the background contribute to your identity?
- How will the composition and focal point assist in the communication of ideas?
- What materials will you choose to use? Why?

#### Research

Make a poster or a PowerPoint presentation on one of the following topics:

- The National Portrait Galleries in Canberra, London and/or Washington
- The Archibald Prize
- The life and work of an Australian portrait artist

- A portrait in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery of Australia
- The life of Europeans in Shanghai in the early twentieth century

#### Create

Create a storyboard or a comic based on the life of a portrait artist and/or subject.

- Identify key points and achievements in their life or lives.
- What was society like in their time? What was their historical situation?
- How did they come together?
- Why were they creating portraits, or having their portrait made?

#### Debate

- Select a portrait and debate its effectiveness.
- Debate the idea that a portrait painter can reveal the 'soul' or 'inner awfulness' of a person.

#### Read and share

Read *The Picture of Dorian Grey* by Oscar Wilde, or the short story 'The Portrait' by Edith Wharton. Re-tell the story, verbally, or in a short film, powerpoint or graphic presentation.

#### Write

Write a short story or poem about a person drawing their own family photographs.

#### Experiment

What are ochres and pigments? Where can they be found? How does Jenny Sages use them? How can they be used? Try to find local examples. Experiment with ways to use them.

#### Other resources

[portrait.gov.au](http://portrait.gov.au)

[portrait.gov.au/site/exhibition\\_subsite\\_jenny\\_2.php](http://portrait.gov.au/site/exhibition_subsite_jenny_2.php)  
Exhibition curator, Sarah Engledow, discusses the life and work of the artist Jenny Sages in this exhibition walk-through for *Jenny Sages: Paths to Portraiture* at the National Portrait Gallery.

[portrait.gov.au/site/exhibition\\_subsite\\_jenny.php](http://portrait.gov.au/site/exhibition_subsite_jenny.php)  
Jenny Sages exhibition online images and text

[portrait.gov.au/magazine](http://portrait.gov.au/magazine)  
*Portrait* magazine is produced quarterly by the National Portrait Gallery. It can be

searched online by content and subject. If you find the articles below, you will soon find your way to others with information about Jenny Sages.

*Portrait #34* (Dec 2009 – Feb 2010) "Lovingly observed" by Dr Sarah Engledow  
*Portrait #37* (Sept – Nov 2010) "Paths to portraiture" by Dr Sarah Engledow

Jenny Sages's exhibits at King Street Gallery [kingstreetgallery.com.au/artists/jenny-sages](http://kingstreetgallery.com.au/artists/jenny-sages)

#### Blog

[portrait.gov.au/blog](http://portrait.gov.au/blog)  
Join in conversation with National Portrait Gallery staff and other educators.

#### Contact us

We welcome your feedback. [education@npg.gov.au](mailto:education@npg.gov.au)  
Tell us how your students responded to the exhibition and the resource.

#### Exhibition venues

National Portrait Gallery  
24 September 2010 – 16 January 2011  
Tweed River Regional Gallery  
21 October 2011 – 4 March 2012  
Toowoomba Regional Gallery  
12 May – 17 June 2012  
Artspace Mackay  
19 October – 2 December 2012  
Burnie Regional Gallery  
14 December 2012 – 27 January 2013  
Mosman Art Gallery March – May 2013

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