

# Marion Deuchars

## ART PLAY

Author of the best-selling *Let's Make Some Great Art* series, Marion Deuchars is an award-winning illustrator with an instantly recognisable style. Her influential hand-lettering and illustration work has been used on advertising campaigns from Samsung and HP to posters for Formula 1 and stamps for The Royal Mail. Here she provides an insight to her thinking and methodology in creating interactive art books for children.



Most of my work starts on what I call my 'play desk'; a desk full of paper, pencils, paint, scissors, chinks and all sorts of creative bits and pieces. Whenever I start to make work (though I often have a rough idea of what I want to do), I love to look out for interesting things that happen in 'the mistakes', like spilling a bottle of ink across a drawing, or accidentally creating new and unusual juxtapositions between two bits of coloured paper. Here, in the mistakes, is where I find inspiration that would fall unnoticed without a willingness to embrace art play.

The notion of encouraging discovery and experimentation through art play is a theme that runs through all of my books, whether they are activity books like *Art Play*, or my picture books about a funny little bird called Bob the Artist. This is partly because playing has always been key to how I have developed my own style and how I work, but it is also because I believe play and creativity through art is as vital for children as any other type of learning.

My children have been great subjects to test my art activities on. I started encouraging them to make art from a very early age without actually teaching them or imposing any rules. I wanted them to enjoy the process of making art as much as the final result. They have always kept a sketchbook

as it is something I encouraged as a way of making art only for themselves, a place to experiment and scribble what you like.

What I do notice with both my children and most other children I've worked with is their ability to improvise. No project ever quite goes according to plan, but I believe as long as everyone is enjoying themselves, let's just see where that takes us creatively. More often than not, the end result is a pleasant surprise.

However, I have noticed that at a certain age in a child's development, play begins to be seen as something unimportant or 'childish'. Often art lessons in schools are focused more on creating something finished, rather than on creating a scenario in which experimentation and play can flourish. But imagination is key to a child's development, and play is one of the best ways to spark imagination. It is this spark of imagination that I have tried to capture and encourage in *Art Play*. It is split up into different sections; Drawing; Colour; Shapes; Paint; Paper; Printing and Pattern. I wanted to explore how children and adults alike can experiment within the constraints of each specific medium.

I've always thought that cutting up paper is one of life's small pleasures, so in the book I have encouraged readers to

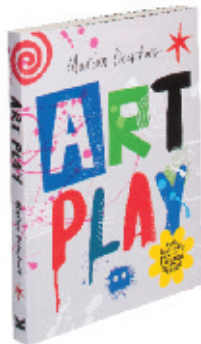


Photo montage spread from *Art Play*.



Photo montage spread from *Art Play*.

discover this for themselves! Give a child a pair of safety scissors and some coloured paper and the joy they have in simply cutting shapes and strips is wonderful to watch. Very soon, and with very little instruction, those shapes turn into something that will make sense to them, and carry a meaning.



A few years ago I ran a workshop in Perpignan with about twenty five kids, all under the age of seven. We were making Matisse-inspired collages with paper cut outs, which is always a popular workshop. The boisterous group of children and parents bustled into the workshop full of noise and energy, and as the workshop began, I watched with amazement as the group transformed that energy into making art. The room became calm and eerily quiet. The level of concentration was tangible.

Matisse was an artist who understood the joy of creating paper shapes all too well, as his famous paper cutting images demonstrate. Some of Matisse's shapes are forms that occurred when he let his scissors move naturally in a curvy way through his paper, and importantly, without too much thought of what was right or wrong. This technique is using the tool to its limits, testing the scissors to see just what you can do with them. Matisse then arranged his shapes into patterns in a way that is very pleasing to the eye. There is no left-brain logic to this; it's a right-brain activity, all about design. And I have found that children, like Matisse, also have a natural sense of design.

Colour, like paper, is also a fascinating subject that I love to explore in my books, and again something Matisse is well known for. So much of colour learning is intuitive, so in *Art Play*, I try to explore this topic in a very simple way. I introduce readers to the way colours can complement each other by fingerprinting one colour next to another. Touching colour with your fingers rather than with a brush gives a real insight into the way you can match and blend colours, and I think the physical engagement helps the concepts sink in much better. I also look at the emotions colour can inspire, asking readers how colour makes them feel. 'Does red make you feel angry or happy?' This also sows the seeds for the sort of emotional, deeper learning that is so often associated with art school.



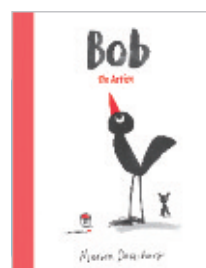
Illustration from *Bob the Artist*.

Another way I like to encourage imaginative drawing in my books is by suggesting fun activities, such as 'draw the missing characters from a circus scene', or 'make interconnecting shapes on paper without looking'. The artist Joan Miró used this process to start many of his paintings, and the Surrealists were experts at using art play as a starting point to making work. But I also interweave imaginative drawing with basic drawing skills, such as how to make tone with cross-hatching and how to make textures with rubbings, as well as a breakdown of simple perspective.

In *Art Play*, all of the fun and playful activities provide readers with the skill to experiment and to 'play', skills that are the basic building blocks of making art, whatever age you are.

I'm happy to say that both my children, who are now eleven and twelve, are still actively practising art. They still enjoy making art from my books and give me lots of tips, but they are also very influenced by their own current interests such as Manga and illusion art. What gives me most pleasure is looking through their sketchbooks, and still finding that sense of play very much present in their work.

For me, the musician Brian Eno sums up how I feel about the activity books very well: "When we grow up, we don't really stop playing, we just continue to play in our own way, through this thing we call art".



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*Art Play* £12.95 ISBN: 978-178067876

*Bob the Artist* £10.99 ISBN: 978-17806777121

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