

A JINGO'S GOT MY BABY: ANDREW BUDGE EXAMINES AUSTRALIA'S NATIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH DESIGN IN THE '60S AND '70S.

This article has grown from an interest in the work of All Australian Graffiti, a design and illustration studio established in the early seventies by Mimmo Cozzolino and Con Aslanis. The work of this studio has become emblematic of the exploration of Australian suburban culture that took place during the 1970s. In this article, I want to contextualise and document Graffiti's endeavour and so begin this story during the 1960s.

The 1960s were a time of tremendous social change. There was a growing sense of freedom embodied by new fashion, new music and a burgeoning youth culture, confronting our relationships to history and authority. Australia, however, was still a conservative country, geographically isolated and clinging to its colonial heritage. It was a time of the cultural cringe, of the longing gaze to a distant and receding England. Reflecting this, Australian design tended to follow the English model. Rather than pursuing modernism's self-conscious avoidance of historical reference, we tended to allude to Britain's imperial past, hoping to let our under confident country bask in England's reflected glory.

But cracks were beginning to appear in Australia's allegiance to the Motherland. For one thing, some Australians had managed to work in America, exposing themselves to a design industry that was recognised as having commercial value in the communication of corporate goals and consumer aspirations. Arthur Leydin, an influential designer who worked through the 60s and 70s in Australia, was one such. Leydin gained studio experience in the late 50s with Will Burtin, a European born, Bauhaus influenced, designer who specialised in publication and exhibition design in New York. Burtin's principal clients at this time included IBM and Upjohn Pharmaceuticals, both of whom had a history of understanding and supporting design. This symbiosis between design and industry was not mirrored in Australia. Designers at that time complained that Australian industry was indifferent to the benefits of good design because they enjoyed substantial protection from international competition through trade tariffs. The lack of importance placed on design could have its benefits though...

Max Robinson

'In Australia there wasn't any research or marketing or any of that compromising stuff that you had to deal with in England. You could do anything here, you could design furniture, you could design interiors, you could design exhibition stands, posters. People's expectations weren't very high and when you showed them you could actually do things you were treated with a fair bit of respect. They might think that you were a bit funny because you had long hair and blue suede shoes, but never the less you could do a wider range of work than you ever could in New York or London. Over there they were into streamlining, pigeon holing and getting people to specialise. Australian designers used to be popular in London because we could turn our hand to anything. We could make a three dimensional dummy, or do lettering, or whatever. People trained in the English system couldn't necessarily do that variety of tasks.

Australian designers were also getting information on European and American trends through magazines like Graphis and Gebrauchsgraphik, so the sense of cultural isolation was beginning to break down through the importation of design methodologies, designers and design trends.

Max Robinson

'Arthur Leydin came back to Australia full of the Americanism of New York and Chicago and influenced a whole lot of people. Les Mason had come out from the West Coast of America and had a huge impact on the local design scene. But Max Forbes, Richard Haughton James and Richard Beck were the English people. They came out of Milner Gray and those people from the Royal College of Art, the Design Research Unit and the Festival of Britain. Then, all of a sudden, the Swiss school of typography washed over them like a huge wave influencing people like me, Brian Sadgrove and Martin Pollard.

Swiss modernism's influence on Australian design continued to grow throughout the course of the 60s and 70s. The 'international style' of the Swiss was overwhelmingly rational. Characterised by the use of sans-serif typefaces, it used photography and engineering drawings as its principal illustrative conceits. The work was highly structured with a particular focus on the use of the grid as a means of organising information. Swiss modernism excited many Australian designers because it afforded them the opportunity to rebel against Australia's position as a British colonial outpost. It didn't matter if the designer was working in Basel or Brisbane, the application of its principles resulted in design with international rather than regional overtones.

The Swiss style had its limitations, however. Its rationalism lent itself to formula and many designers sought greater expressive potential. The work of the Push Pin Studio in America typified this trend. Founded by Milton Glaser and Seymour Chwast, Push Pin made a conspicuous effort to explore the wealth of historical and vernacular material available to them. They filtered this visual eclecticism through an understanding of pop art and surrealism. The result was so appealing that Push Pin became one of the most internationally influential studios of the 60s and 70s. Their principal means of expression was illustration and was characterised by curvilinear form, flat colours, flattened perspective and figures with artificially fattened and flattened proportions. The Beatles' animated film 'Yellow Submarine' is a good example of how their work was interpreted and used by other designers and illustrators. The principal practitioners of this style in Australia were Bruce Weatherhead and Alex Stitt.

Max Robinson

'Weatherhead and Stitt had a glorious period. They got together in about 1964 and then all through the 60s and the early 70s they were producing the best work that was being done in Australia. They were enormously influential but they were really absorbing and regurgitating Push Pin principles. They were just re-stating Push Pin and they did it very well.'

In adopting the Push Pin style Australian designers incorporated the studio's Americanism into work that was intended solely for an Australian audience. Applied in this way the work becomes as rootless as the Swiss modernism that it was a reaction against. Nevertheless the exploration of both of these imported graphic styles did represent some sort of loosening up of Australian design, and more broadly of Australian society, from its imperial ties with Britain. Max Robinson had left Australia for twelve years in 1962 and upon his return was surprised by the changes to his hometown.

Max Robinson

'There was a huge change in Australia from '62 to '74 it was wonderful. Melbourne had grown up

and become a real city. It was just a joy to come back and discover how sophisticated it had become.

When I left, advertising was a little bit stultified. Agencies were very British. Very proper and snobby. It was all button down shirt, suit and tie. When I came back jeans and a bandanna were the art director's uniform. They were riding motorbikes up the stairs of the agencies, all that sort of New York stuff. People had become more comfortable with the idea of being Australian, it was much more open, it was great.

One of the studios that exploited and explored Australia's new found self confidence was All Australian Graffiti. Graffiti was founded in 1972 by Mimmo Cozzolino and Con Aslanis, both 'new Australians'. In 1975 after a two year hiatus, Mimmo and Con were ready to take the studio more seriously and invited Geoff Cook and Izi Marmur to join them. By the time the studio ceased operation in 1979 Neil Curtis, Tony Ward and Meg Williams were also working there. Mimmo and Con were interested in exploring the Australian urban environment perhaps because, as migrants, they were acutely aware that the image that Australia presented to the world was at odds with the life that they lived.

Con Aslanis

While I was still in Greece I'd seen a photograph of Australia in my school geography book. It was of Hans Heysen gum trees and, the dust and sheep. So when I came here to Melbourne, one of the world's most heavily suburbanised cities, I was expecting sheep, dust and Chevrolets. But something was different. I couldn't quite get it and that's probably the beginning of how Graffiti came out.

Of course Graffiti was not without influences. Their work clearly draws on the Push Pin style, Pop Art, Martin Sharp and Robert Crumb. However, Graffiti's work is distinct from many of their contemporaries because they used the work they admired as a framework to explore an Australian idiom rather than importing one from America or Europe. They were suspicious of internationalism and its role in the loss Australian iconography and cultural heritage. Mimmo had been collecting old Australian trademarks since he had been in college in the late 60s and felt that their unique character had been lost in Australia's post-war clamoring for international validation.

Tony Ward

The basic premise of All Australian Graffiti was a position taken to oppose the slickness of internationalism, which was the them in the them and us back then.

Izi Marmur

At that time, generally speaking, logos had to be Germanic, TV commercials had to be English and to a great degree illustrations, design and layout had to be American. It was like, 'I want a Milton Glaser poster with a Berlin Graphics logo', and we hated that.

Max Robinson

Some of us were devoted to looking like our heroes, but it was alright because it was like pissing in a dinner suit. It gave you a nice warm feeling but nobody really knew what you were doing. People would just say, 'Oh yeah, I like that!', but would have no idea what your references were.

Mimmo Cozzolino

A lot of the work that was being done at the time was quite derivative, even the work that was

considered to be some of the best around. It was very pretty, but at the end of the day it probably left us all a bit cold. But I certainly didn't have the sense of trying to beat that stuff. We just went out on our own tangent.

The primary focus was to get work. We were first and foremost trying to survive in a commercial environment and one of the tenets of marketing is to try and set yourself up as being as different as you possibly can. If in the process you manage to create something that's not fake, that's got a genuine belief in the difference, then you achieve even more success.

Tony Ward

The first job that Con and Mimmo acknowledge as being central to the beginning of the All Australian Graffiti myth was the Qantas youth travel brochure that they did for Campaign Palace in '70 or '71. It was a drawing by Con of his own environment, which was the view towards the Ford factory. A field of Mountain Ash fences with the tops of people's heads. It was a negative image. You know, why travel? Because you don't want to stay here for the rest of your life. But in actual fact it was iconic. It was the beginning of that process.

To me, the Australian vernacular has a lot to do with making do with an aesthetic. It's sandals made from rubber tyres becoming a very desirable fashion statement. Plastic sandals from China. The Kangaroo salt and pepper shakers from Japan. We chose those things that represented the end of the earth, urban Australia. We weren't particularly interested in where it was made.

Meg Williams

In fine art people were exploring grand Australian themes. Clifton Pugh was very big and people were thinking about themselves in the context of the Australian landscape. But Con had this affectionate view of the foibles of ordinary people's suburban lives and I don't think that anyone else was doing that. That's what made it different from just a commercial illustration outfit.

Neil Curtis

Con was a really unusual guy, he should have worked overseas, because, even though he was promoting an Australian theme he has an international sense of humour.

Izi Marmur

I think we were quite naive, but that naiveté allowed us to pursue our interest in graphical Australiana and to propagate that interest Australia wide, with our commercial clients. But it wasn't easy.

In the beginning we were servicing smaller agencies, the multi-nationals wouldn't have a bar of us. Agencies that were very small at the time like Kutt, Skinner, Bennett and MDA would talk to us. People like Clemengers wouldn't. Even the small agencies that had a little vision were very, very skeptical and careful. Art directors got excited because it's an art director's job to get excited, but the creative director would say, 'wait a minute, how am I going to sell this to the client?' So we started at the low end and after a while we were servicing clients like George Patt's, USP Needham, Clemengers, Grey, Masius, all those places. Because nobody wants to do something unless somebody has tried it first.

Max Robinson

Graffiti had an underground presence, a bit like the psychedelic poster artists of Los Angeles. You'd see these mad posters every now and then. I used to share a studio in the same building that they

occupied and I'd watch Mimmo trudging in and out all day long coming down St Kilda Road looking for jobs, grim faced.

Mimmo Cozzolino

Our business card was about as far way from high design as you could get. If you saw business cards from people like Garry Emery and Cato at the time, they were very white on white. Our card just looked like a Greek Wedding invitation and people really didn't really know how to react to it. I remember there was a lot of uneasiness, more with designers than with advertisers. The advertisers could see the joke in it.

Meg Williams

A lot of people thought they were just a bunch of silly wogs and that the work was trivial because it was cartoony. A lot of people were very condescending. There was still a certain amount of active racism towards the Italians and Greeks. That's hard to imagine now, but the word wog wasn't used affectionately.

Con Aslanis

We were aware that we were pretty good. People saw these young fellas bringing something fresh. Advertising is like that. They'll jump on you, 'let's use these lads.'

Izi Marmur

The first person to shock us into the realisation that our work seemed to be influencing people was John Singleton. He came up with all the Aussie jingles not too long after we started doing what we were doing. Even the graphics he started using, the kangaroos and things like that. There'd been nothing like that for a long time, nobody dared use a kangaroo in a logo. The only time you would see a kangaroo was in a children's book or a soft-toy or something touristy, but nobody would have used it in an annual report.

The problem is that once people produce a successful 'look' it gets produced over and over again because it sells. It's about survival and it tends to inhibit development and exploration.

Tony Ward

Graffiti, isolated elements of the Australian vernacular, other people made them icons. I think we were disgusted by the iconocising of the vernacular, and I still am. I'm depressed by it. As a piece of vernacular the rotary clothes hoist was fine, but as an icon it's awful. It's dishonest.

Neil Curtis

We all suffered when Graffiti finished. As far as I'm concerned we kicked Australiana off and it was just exploited, but we couldn't do that, we stayed true to our roots.

Con Aslanis

I think it backfired on us all in the '80s. Our work was overexposed and people were hesitant to employ us because they couldn't see past the work.

By 1980 the studio had disbanded, from a combination of disenchantment and exhaustion, and its members went their separate ways. The Australian design and advertising industries had become far more self confident over the course of the 70s and were both about to boom in the 1980s.

However they had not become particularly nationalistic. While there was certainly more focus on 'the Australian lifestyle' in the 80s than the 60s, its depiction was more highly idealised or glamorised than it had been in the more egalitarian work of Graffiti. For whatever reason, it was

the studios with a more internationalist stance, like those of Cato, Sadgrove, Lancashire and Emery that achieved longevity. It is true Mimmo Cozzolino now runs a successful studio with partner Phil Ellett, but he still fights the perception that he specialises in 'whacky' work. Perhaps in an increasingly globalised environment explorations of national character are doomed to become sideshows, a passing distraction in an international theme park, no matter how worthy they are. But what are the consequences if we don't try? Are we doomed to define ourselves by whatever internationalism is currently in vogue? Surely there are unique aspects to our culture that are worth preserving and celebrating, but who will profit from it if we do?

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