

TALKING POSTERS
GARAGE GRAPHIX
1981–1998

Nadia Odlum

**Blacktown
Arts**

Political posters are unparalleled in their ability to speak. The pairing of punchy imagery with memorable text is essential to their purpose – to inform, to persuade, to deliver a message.

The better they do this, the more likely they are to remain up on walls. This immediacy also allows political posters from the past to talk across time—through them, we hear voices that have shaped conversations today. The posters and objects in this exhibition are potent examples of this. They are the work of Garage Graphix Community Arts Inc., a pioneering arts organisation that for almost two decades supported cultural development in one of the most disadvantaged and economically depressed areas of Sydney. Representing a small sample of an impressively large output, this selection presents an array of voices championed by ‘the Garage’, which speak with power and relevance to political issues today.



Wendy Holland, in collaboration with Alice Hinton-Bateup

Australia Day = Invasion Day
1987
screenprint on paper

Screen printed posters are a significant artform in Australian art history, with a heyday stretching from the 1970s through to the 1990s. Funding from the Whitlam government through the Australia Council for the Arts supported the development of community arts practice, which sought to empower marginalised communities by providing them with access to artistic expression. Screen printing was inexpensive, easy to teach, and suited the collaborative process favoured by most communities and artists working with them.¹ Poster workshops and collectives spread across Australia, with the best known in Sydney being the Earthworks Poster

Collective at the Tin Sheds at Sydney University, where many Australian poster makers gained training.² Other collectives included Redletter Press and Another Planet Posters (Melbourne), Redback Graphix (Wollongong and Sydney), CoMedia (Adelaide) and Megalo Press (Canberra).³ These workshops often produced posters and leaflets for community organisations and grass roots political causes, creating a radical fusion of political and artistic activism.⁴



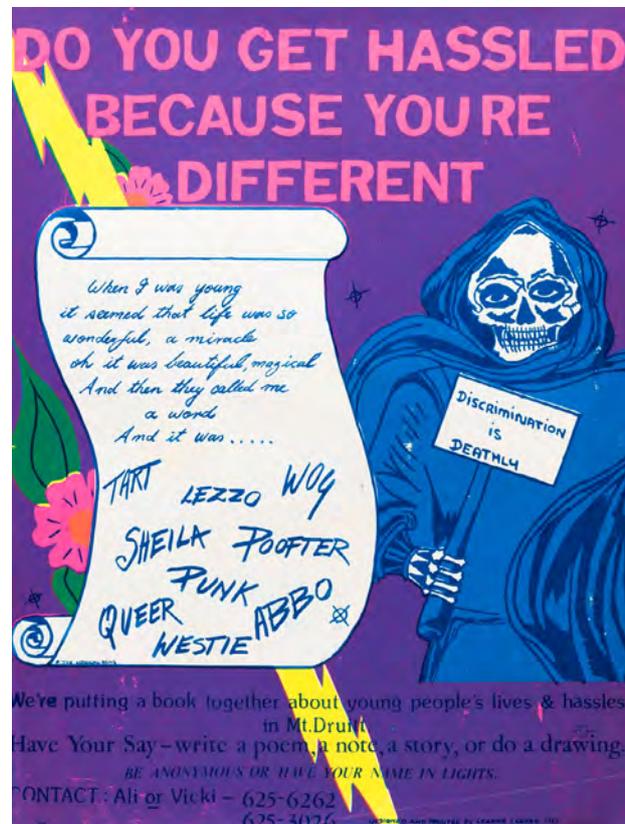
Marla Guppy

Liverpool Young Women's Resource Centre
1987
Screenprint on paper

Garage Graphix occupies a distinct place within this broader lineage. It became established as a leader in the field through the depth of engagement with community, including significant work through the ground-breaking Aboriginal Arts program.⁵ Its services were embedded in Western Sydney at a time when suburban landscapes were undergoing substantial change: large government investment in public housing in the 1970s led to rapid urban growth in Western Sydney, and the creation of suburbs such as Mount Druitt, Tregear and Macquarie Fields.⁶ In these new low-income suburbs there was a high proportion of working class families, many single parent households, and a large youth population.⁷ Close proximity to migrant hostels in areas like Villawood, Cabramatta and Wallgrove resulted in communities with many immigrants and refugees.⁸ It was also a time of suburbanisation for Aboriginal people, who through a combination of poverty and racially-targeted housing policies were moved off Country, or from inner city suburbs such as Waterloo and Redfern, to these new areas of 'affordable' housing.⁹

Poor urban planning—inadequate public transportation, a lack of community and childcare centres, and large distances between shops and homes—made it difficult for communities to thrive.¹⁰ Moreover, Western

Western Sydney people were blamed for their problems. As Diane Powell shows in her 1994 book *Out West: Perceptions of Sydney's western suburbs*, news media had a voracious appetite for negative reporting about these 'problem areas'.



Karen Vance

Tenants Have Rights!

1995

screenprint on paper

Leanne Clerke (Crissy)

Do You Get Hassled Because You're Different?

1983

screenprint on paper

Sydney people were blamed for their problems. As Diane Powell shows in her 1994 book *Out West: Perceptions of Sydney's western suburbs*, news media had a voracious appetite for negative reporting about these 'problem areas'.¹¹ In comparison to the rural poor, who were often portrayed as courageous battlers, the urban poor were stereotyped as dysfunctional, and lazy.¹² The frequency of media references to Western Sydney in association with negative qualities created a perception of 'the West' as an undesirable social category as much as a geographic area.¹³ The slur 'Westie' emerged as "a topographic stigma of class, race and difference".¹⁴

Within the popular media it was rare to hear from people who actually lived in Sydney's western suburbs. In reports on issues such as poverty, health, unemployment and crime, Western Sydney people were treated as "subjects without a legitimate speaking position."¹⁵ In the pre-digital era it was almost impossible for marginalised communities to control the narrative, to speak about their own issues to broader audiences. As former Garage Graphix arts worker Marla Guppy states in her essay *Suburban Life in Print*, "The need for a suburban discourse was increasingly apparent. Equally apparent was the need for active engagement of communities in such a discourse."¹⁶



Jenny Pitty, with The Rooty Hill Residents Action Group

Heavy Industry & Homes Don't Mix – Together We Are Bigger Than 'The Big Australian'

1988
screenprint on paper



Marla Cuppy

Don't Blab!

1984
Screenprint on paper

... the work of Garage Graphix was extraordinarily important. Situated in Mount Druiitt, one of the most economically depressed and reviled suburbs in the Blacktown local government area, Garage Graphix “actively aligned themselves with the marginalised and their struggles.”

In this context the work of Garage Graphix was extraordinarily important. Situated in Mount Druiitt, one of the most economically depressed and reviled suburbs in the Blacktown local government area, Garage Graphix “actively aligned themselves with the marginalised and their struggles.”¹⁷ Founded by arts workers active in the women’s movement, the Garage was dedicated to creating space for alternate voices, and striving for a fairer and more equal society.¹⁸ There was a fundamental belief in the potential of the community arts process to empower people, and the ability of people to tell their own stories.¹⁹ Moreover, by serving their community for almost two decades, Garage Graphix were entrusted to speak with and for Western Sydney people, to partner with them in making change.²⁰

The name of the organisation speaks to its size—it initially operated from a double-door garage, owned by Blacktown Council, attached to the Rutherglen Community Centre. Within this small space Garage Graphix ran an impressive operation.²¹ The Significance Assessment prepared by Dr Lee-Anne Hall for Blacktown Council in 2021 lists a community arts program of remarkable breadth: “Operationally it included a community access program, arts projects, skill development workshops, artist residencies, innovative partnerships, a community design and production service and a comprehensive Aboriginal arts program that included design, printmaking and traineeships.”²²



Karen Vance

**Women's Dreaming
Continues**

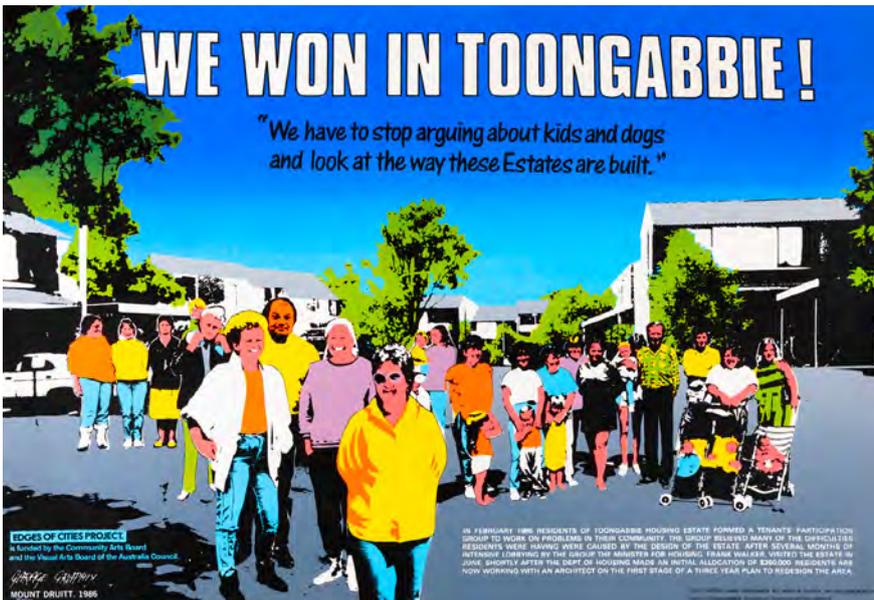
1988

Screenprint on paper

When invited to curate this exhibition, I was presented with an archive of almost four hundred prints. They spoke on crucial issues: Aboriginal rights, environmental activism, domestic violence, women's issues, resident action, workers' rights, and homelessness, among many others. Coming from a community arts workshop, run by a team of highly skilled arts workers, these prints also represented the work of “literally many hundreds” of people who were guided through the process of poster creation.²³

This exhibition is not a retrospective. To tell the whole story of Garage Graphix is a challenge best tackled by a larger institutional space. The selection I have made here relates primarily to voice: to the voices in the posters; to the role of Garage Graphix in developing the voices of their community; and to the statements that the posters make, which still have impact today.

“Every time Aboriginals are forced to move because of poverty, harassment or white housing policy we lose more of our connection to the land and our people. So we travel through halfway places in our own land”.

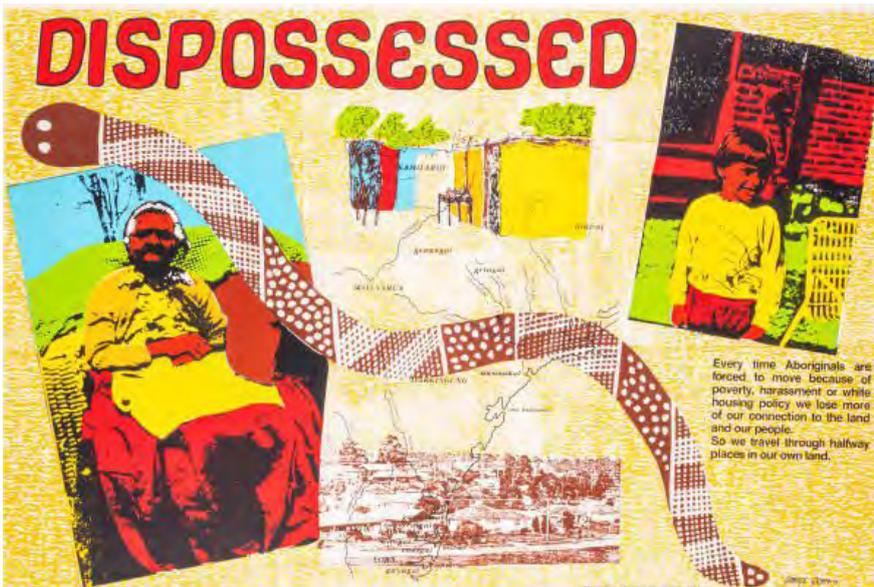


Marla Cuppy

We won in Toongabbie

1983

screenprint on paper



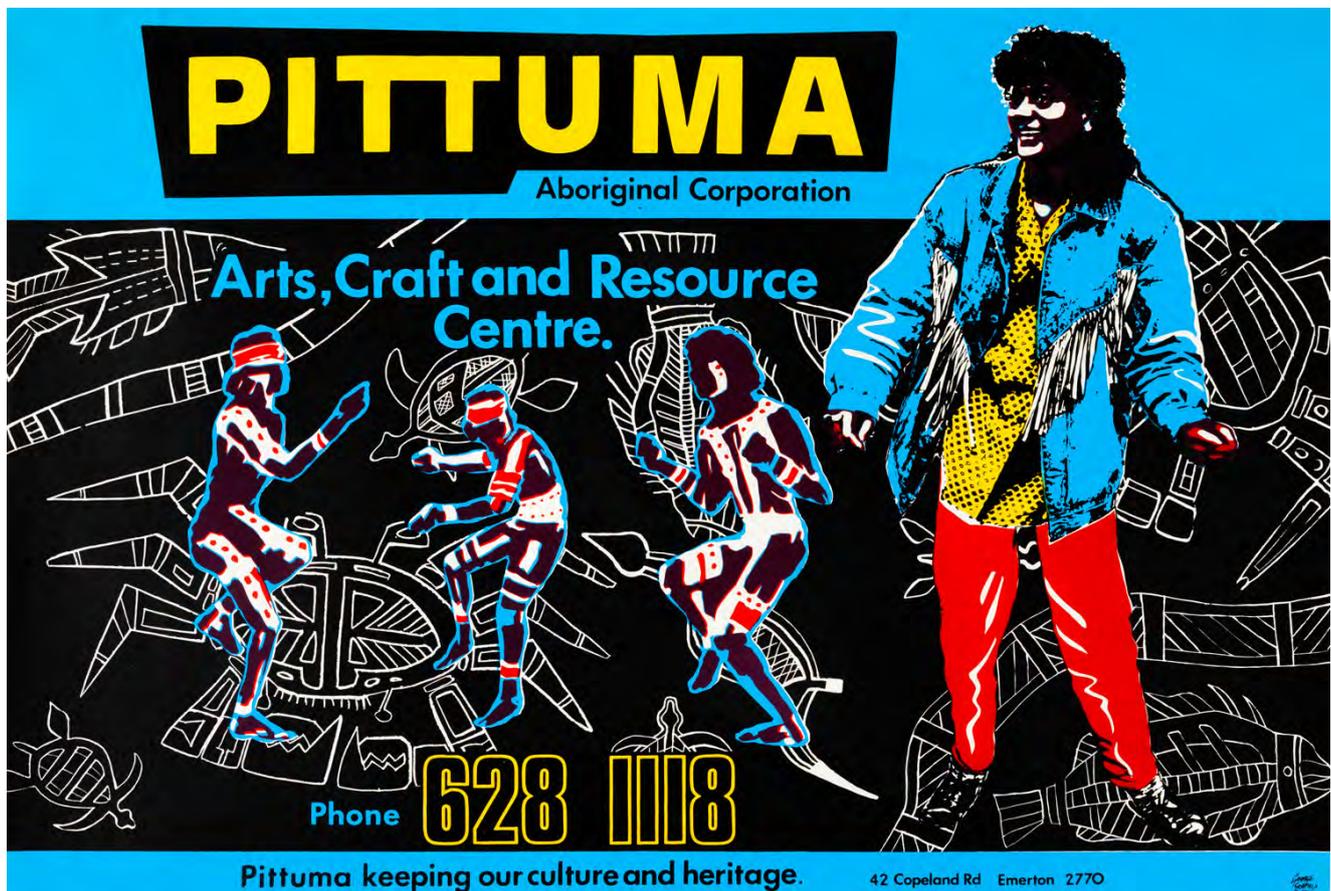
Alice Hinton-Bateup

Dispossessed

screenprint on paper

One of the most innovative aspects of Garage Graphix was the Aboriginal Arts Program. While many poster collectives of the day engaged with Aboriginal issues, or worked with Aboriginal clients, Garage Graphix was possibly the only one to have Aboriginal people hold core positions within the organisation.²⁴ Led by Maxine Conaty and Alice Hinton-Bateup, this pioneering program trained Aboriginal artists, worked with Aboriginal students within schools, and collaborated with community groups.²⁵ It was a time when many Aboriginal people were grappling with the creation of a suburban Aboriginal identity. As Alice Hinton-Bateup says in the poster *Dispossessed* (1986):

“Every time Aboriginals are forced to move because of poverty, harassment or white housing policy we lose more of our connection to the land and our people. So we travel through halfway places in our own land”.



Alice Hinton-Bateup

Pittuma Arts, Craft and Resource Centre

c. 1988

screenprint on paper

The works produced at Garage Graphix represent a key period in the development of suburban Aboriginal art.²⁶ Patterns and symbols draw from the iconography of desert or remote Aboriginal communities, while the red, yellow and black of the Aboriginal flag is a recurring colour scheme. This is combined with figurative elements, such as photographs or fingerprints, to create strong statements about issues such as the Stolen Generations, deaths in custody, and the dispossession of Aboriginal people from their land.²⁷

Garage Graphix had close relationships with other Aboriginal organisations in the area, such as Pittuma Arts, Craft and Resource Centre in Mount Druitt. This had a significant effect on the ability of Garage Graphix to speak on Aboriginal issues, with an Aboriginal voice. There was a sense that Garage Graphix was a place for Aboriginal people, and that they could be trusted with issues of grave cultural and political importance. One example is Ruth's Story. In 1988 a Koori parents' seminar was held at Pittuma. It was a powerful gathering of truth-telling, songs and tears, as Aboriginal parents shared the ongoing intergenerational trauma caused by the experiences of the Stolen Generations. Afterwards, on a visit to Garage Graphix Ruth, Alice Hinton-Bateup and Lee-Anne Hall worked to create a print telling her story, in her own words.²⁸ The honesty and vulnerability in the text testifies to Garage Graphix being a space where difficult conversations could occur. The text is subtly embedded in Ruth's flowing hair. It encourages the viewer to come close, and to take time to absorb her words.



Lin Mountstephen... says the arts workers “were all there because they had a commitment—a caring about people, about things getting better...they were all trying to make a difference.”

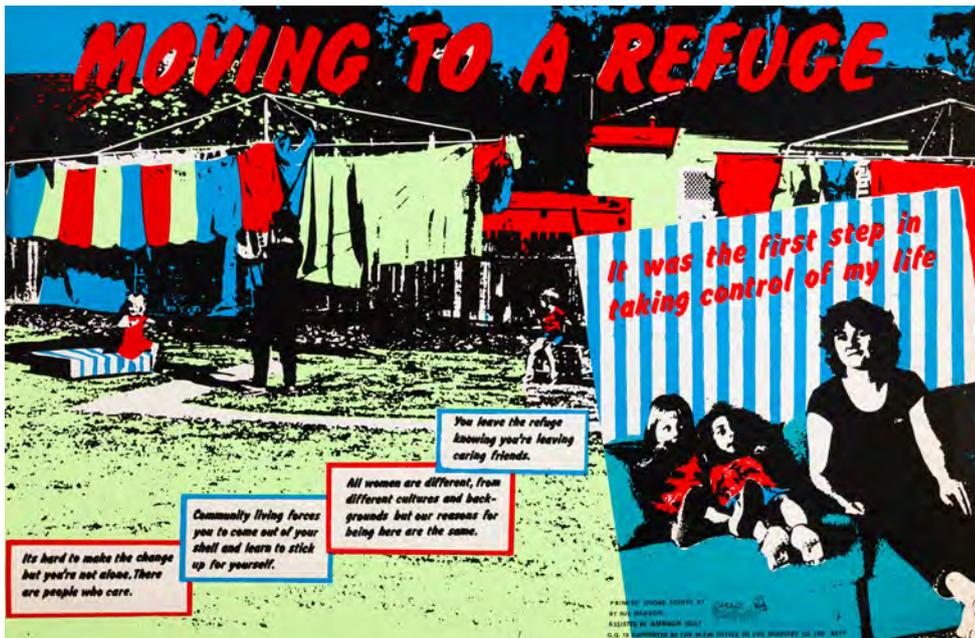
**Alice Hinton-Bateup,
Lee-Anne Hall, Ruth
Whitbourne**

Ruth’s Story

1988
screenprint on paper

Ruth’s Story speaks to the nuanced way that Garage Graphix community activism fed into the creation of posters. Indeed, the term ‘arts worker’ rather than ‘artist’ was used by the Garage to recognise the contribution of all of the workers to the creation of artworks, regardless of their formal roles.²⁹ This type of non-hierarchical structure was a common feature of feminist arts organisations, reflecting a broader commitment to aligning themselves with marginalised voices.³⁰ Lin Mountstephen, who steered the directions of the Garage for over fifteen years, said the arts workers “were all there because they had a commitment—a caring about people, about things getting better...they were all trying to make a difference.”³¹

For Garage Graphix the work with Western Sydney women was particularly important, as the area was home to a large population of struggling families and many single mothers.³² As Hall states, Garage Graphix posters would both identify the cause of an issue and also a course of action: “Fundamental to this approach was the commitment to empower women through working with them directly on the issues which most kept them disenfranchised.”³³ In the poster *Moving to a refuge* (1989) this solidarity is expressed in the text “It’s hard to make the change but you’re not alone. There are people who care.”



Sue Measom

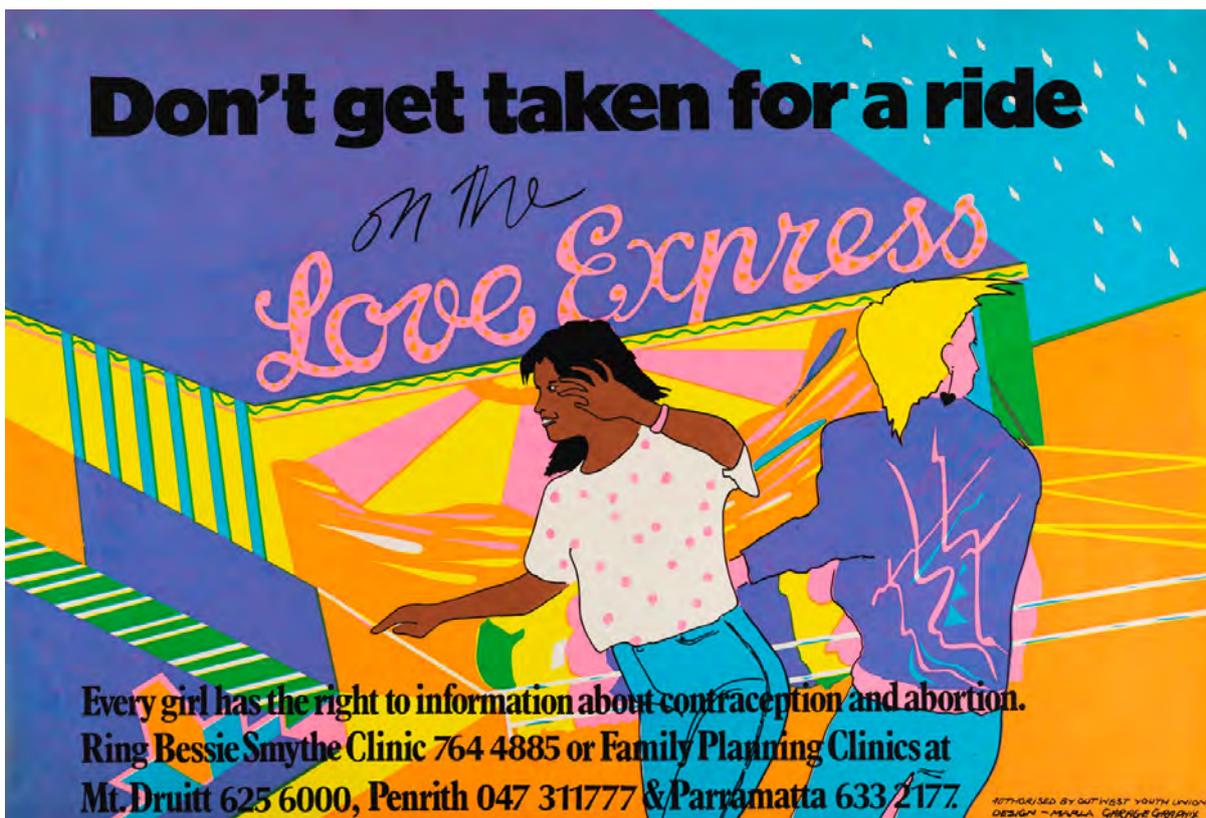
Moving to a refuge
screenprint on paper



Marla Guppy

*Home Care Service
in Mt Druitt*
screenprint on paper

The feminist politics of the Garage also show in the strong sense of humour that runs through many posters. Arts workers at the Garage were not “stereotypic dour, negative ‘no fun’ feminists” but rather melded a “sassy attitude” with Australian larrikinism, and an unashamedly suburban vernacular.³⁴ Quotes like “Don’t get taken for a ride on the love express!” and “Childcare, a political issue? Too right it is!” are phrases so distinct that they could have been shouted to us over the fence. Of the use of humour as a tool, Marla Guppy says: “Western Sydney a was big, bold community, and people had a good sense of humour. They had to! I think part of the culture of poster making is the wit of it. You have the politics, but you say it in a witty way, and people look at it. And they think, “Yes, that’s so true.”³⁵



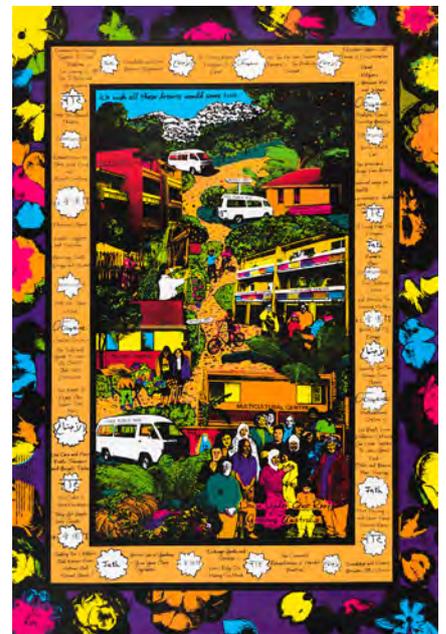
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Carole Manners (Zoey) and Lin Mountstephen

Childcare, A Political Issue?
screenprint on paper

Marla Guppy

Love Express
1983
screenprint on paper



Jenny Pitty and Penny Richardson

Together In This Place - Everyone Left Their Countries Hoping For a Better Life in Australia

Together In This Place - Now We Are All Here in Villawood Growing Friendships, Vegetables and Babies

Together In This Place - We Wish All These Dreams Would Come True

1990
screenprint on paper

The melding of image and text in Garage Graphix posters would emerge through considered collaboration between the arts worker and the client or community group. It was a skilful, considered process that “began with discussion of the lived experience—of injustice, of environment, of home, of suburban life—and was completed with the production of artwork which could be shared widely.”³⁶ Positions such as ‘Artist in community’ that were funded by the Australia Council allowed for a sustained engagement, building trust between the artist and local people.³⁷

The three posters developed in 1990 from the Villawood Multicultural Women’s Community Arts Project exemplify the Artist in Community process. Garage Graphix artists Jenny Pitty and Penny Richardson worked with women from Villawood to create dense images that tell potent stories of migrant experience, urban realities and community aspirations. Reflecting on the process, Jenny Pitty said:

We gave all the women a little disposable camera with a flash on it and just said, take photos of everything in your life. And it was fantastic, because we got the cooking, and we got the cleaning, we got the vacuuming. And the fridge! When everyone had taken all their photos we put them all on the photocopier, and then we had these huge cut-up sessions...I think they must’ve wanted to kill us at the community centre because there was just paper everywhere.³⁸

The content of these particular posters evidences their powerful role in facilitating community connection and action. The first-person text integrated in the works speaks plainly about the realities of migrant experience in Western Sydney in the eighties: “Some things are much better than we expected, and some things are much worse”. In the third poster the women propose improvements to the urban environment that would make their neighbourhood better. Pitty recalls that prior to the workshops many women had not spoken to each other, fearing the language barrier was too great. Making the posters connected them, and empowered them to speak collectively.³⁹



As Lin Mountstephen says,
 “When people get together, they draw confidence and strength from exchanging their ideas. And they develop skills together.”

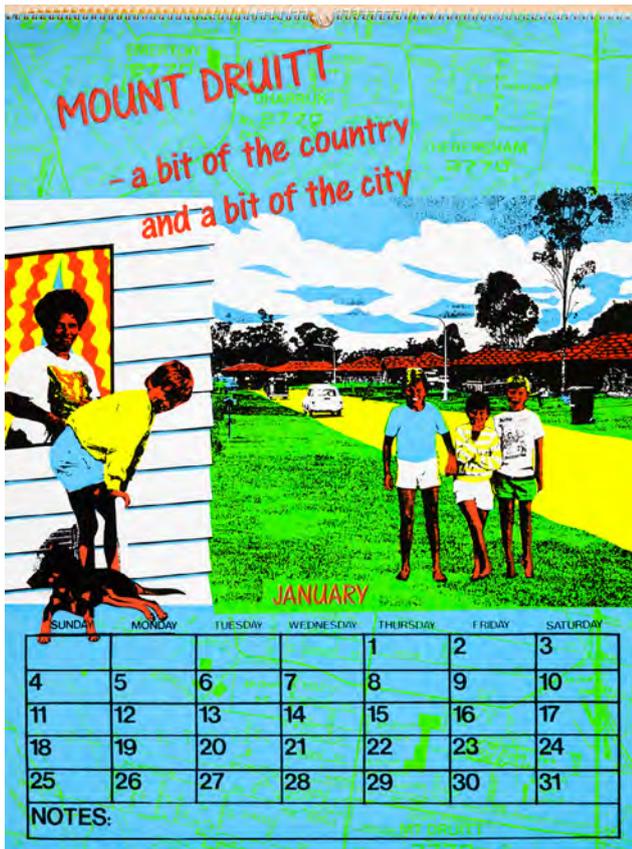
Garage Graphix Artswokers

Garage Graphix 1986 Poster Calendar

1986
 screenprint on paper

Counter to negative stereotypes, Western Sydney was a place rich with people making homes and lives, and building stable communities. Garage Graphix projects such as Mt Druitt 365 days: a community calendar (1986) offered residents a chance to express what their home meant to them. This type of collaborative arts process can have far reaching effects for community agency. As Lin Mountstephen says, “When people get together, they draw confidence and strength from exchanging their ideas. And they develop skills together.”⁴⁰ Statements such as “Mount Druitt wasn’t planned for people, but people are changing that” simultaneously name the source of community problems whilst conveying optimism at the possibility for action. This empowering process of image creation defied regular characterisations of the West as the urban fringe. It put Western Sydney people at the centre of the narrative.⁴¹

When considering the significance of enabling people to make images of themselves it is important to place Garage Graphix works within their era, and available technologies of the day. While contemporary audiences are used to smart phone cameras and instantaneous documentation, Garage Graphix operated when personal cameras were expensive. Garage Graphix arts workers used SLR cameras, and developed photographs in a dark room onsite. They also taught others these skills, a crucial step in the process of community development.⁴² Images of everyday activities, such as Aboriginal children playing backyard cricket in Mt Druitt 365 Days, show us an “insider’s understanding of suburban life”.⁴³ The use of collage and photocopyers

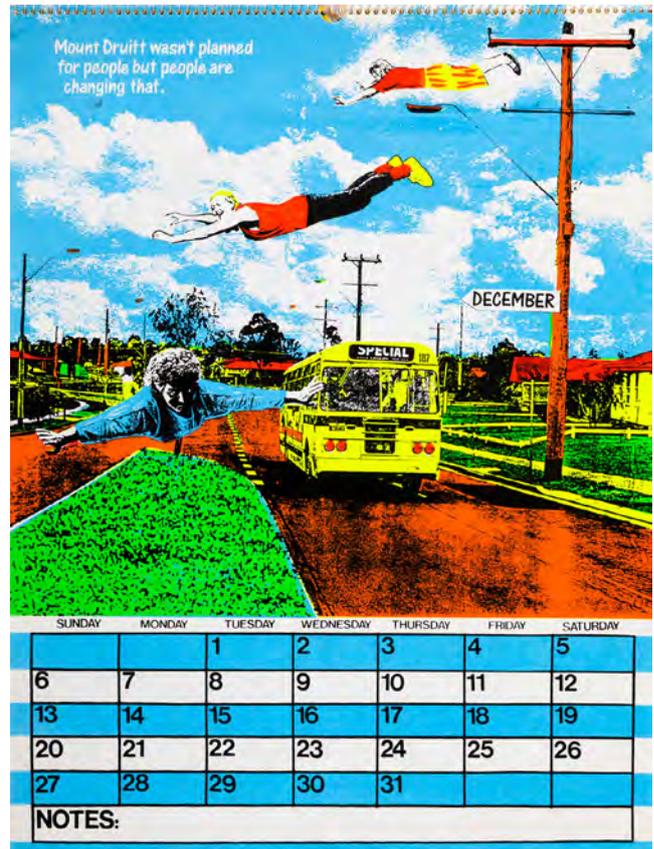


Joanna and Janine Lord

Mount Druitt Wasn't Planned for People But People are Changing That, Mt Druitt: 365 Days A community calendar project (December page detail),
1987
screenprint on paper

Maxine Conaty

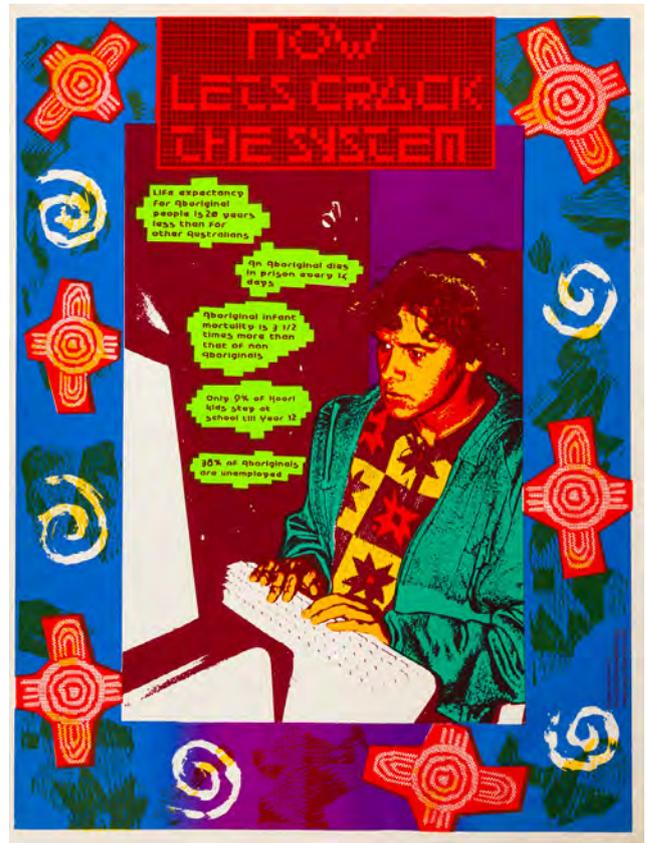
Mount Druitt – a bit of the country and a bit of the city, Mt Druitt: 365 Days A community calendar project (January page detail),
1987
screenprint on paper



to 'edit' images gave people the tools to re-imagine familiar scenes. This empowered personal expression refutes negative stereotypes and replaces them with personal, familial and, eventually, civic pride.

The technological moment is also significant to the works *We Have Survived and Now Let's Crack the System* (1987). Created by Alice Hinton-Bateup and Marla Guppy, they pair 'cutting edge' technologies of computers and video games with Aboriginal political activism. What's even more intriguing is the entirely analogue ways these 'digital' images were created: the artists recall colouring in square graph paper to get the look of 'pixels'.⁴⁴ These prints were created in the lead up to the Australian Bicentenary, and were featured in the nationally touring exhibition *Right Here, Right Now: Australia 1988*, curated by Lee-Anne Hall, which brought together over thirty Australian printmakers to critique the celebration of the Australian Bicentenary in the face of ongoing social injustices.⁴⁵ In the catalogue essay, Julie Ewington speaks to their significance: showing Aboriginal people "...battling with new electronic weapons, with information and education."⁴⁶ As Hall puts it, these images were "hugely audacious, in their revelation of Aboriginal ambition and destiny."⁴⁷

Today, digital technologies have long since replaced screen printed posters as the most effective tool for activism. May 2020 saw a huge increase in activist work on platforms such as Instagram, following the murder of George Floyd by police in Minneapolis in the USA and the subsequent international acceleration of the Black Lives Matter movement. Posts were used to organise and to inform, spreading



Alice Hinton-Bateup and
Marla Guppy

We have survived

Now let's crack the system

1987
screenprint on paper

Todd Fernando, Alice
Hinton-Bateup and
Marla Guppy

Death Sentence
1987
screenprint on paper

information about violence and racism perpetrated against people of colour.⁴⁸ In Australia, the conversation centred on the ongoing scandal of Aboriginal deaths in custody. The poster *Death Sentence* (1987) provides an important record of the history of activism from Western Sydney around this issue. It tells the story of Eddie Murray, a rugby league player who died in custody in Wee Waa gaol in 1981, just after being detained under the controversial 1979 Intoxicated Persons Act.⁴⁹ It was created by his cousin Todd Fernando, with assistance from Garage Graphix arts workers. The poster supported the family's fight for justice, which continues to this day.



“When you look at what goes on in this world you’d be crazy not to want to do something. We should fear for ourselves and our planet. It’s people who close their eyes and say nothing’s wrong who are crazy and illogical. One way of doing something is to tell others what you think. And you can do this on posters.”

Leeanne Donohoe, with text by Marla Guppy

Talking Posters Project Promotional Poster
1985
screenprint on paper

Garage Graphix ran for longer than most organisations of its kind.⁵⁰ After the doors finally closed in 1998, the collection of prints, equipment, and records was moved to a storage facility managed by Blacktown City Council. They remained there, largely inaccessible, for over twenty years.⁵¹ This exhibition is one part of a larger effort to make this important collection accessible. Seen together, these artworks speak powerfully to the history of Western Sydney, a place that has always been full of passion, humour, strength, and pride. They evidence the continued power of art, and arts workers, to build the voice of community.

Talking Posters (1985) by Leeanne Donohoe, with text by Marla Guppy, perfectly captures this potential:

“When you look at what goes on in this world you’d be crazy not to want to do something. We should fear for ourselves and our planet. It’s people who close their eyes and say nothing’s wrong who are crazy and illogical. One way of doing something is to tell others what you think. And you can do this on posters.”



Acknowledgements

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Curating this exhibition has been a process of personal learning. I was born close to Garage Graphix in the midst of its operating years. As a person of settler colonial ancestry living on unceded Aboriginal land, it has been humbling to have the opportunity to learn from Western Sydney Aboriginal people. As a queer person, and a feminist, it has been inspiring to spend time with women whose activism and artistic activity laid the ground for the world I live in today. My thanks to Lin, Alice, Marla and Lee-Anne for their patience and guidance, and to Paul and Alicia and the Blacktown Arts Team. Thank you also to Julie Ewington for her mentorship throughout the project.

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- 17 Hall, *Significance Assessment*, p. 35
- 18 *ibid.*
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- 22 Hall, *Significance Assessment*, p. 10
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- 46 Ewington, *Right here right now*, p. 8
- 47 Hall, *Significance Assessment*, p. 27
- 48 Jonah Kay, 'The Evolution of Instagram Activism,' *Hyperallergic*, published 31/10/2020, accessed 20/03/2020, <https://hyperallergic.com/597846/the-evolution-of-instagram-activism/>
- 49 Nakari Thorpe, 'We're sick of being swept under the rug': One young woman's fight to see justice for her uncle, SBS News, published 04/07/2020, /03/2020, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/were-sick-of-being-swept-under-the-rug-one-young-womans-fight-to-see-justice-for-her-uncle/5zk05ij4w>
- 50 Louise Mayhew pg 4; Astute management, and the diversification of income streams accessed through the development of the design service, helped to keep the Garage afloat and offset the gradual reduction in government funding for western Sydney community arts. A loss of key staff in early 1996, and the increased cost and decreased popularity of screen printed posters were factors that led to the closure in 1998. Hall, *Significance Assessment*, p. 13 - 14
- 51 Hall, *Significance Assessment*, p. 4