

# Suburban Life in Print

**Marla Guppy** revisits *Garage Graphix*, suburban printmaking and community engagement in the pre-digital decade. This essay is the winner of the 2019 Ursula Hoff Essay Prize.

Political printmaking is a child of time and place. The social context makes it relevant, capable of recognition and response. Yet there are spaces within the political landscape where a synergy of media, message and engagement produces distinctively local art. Such spaces sometimes exist on the cusp of change – in a moment before the product is generalised or overtaken by other cultural expressions. The last decades before the introduction of digital technology marked an important time for poster-making, a time when the use of photography in print making enabled a style of community commentary. The concurrent emergence of the global city with its neglected outer suburbs became a new focus for community art practice.

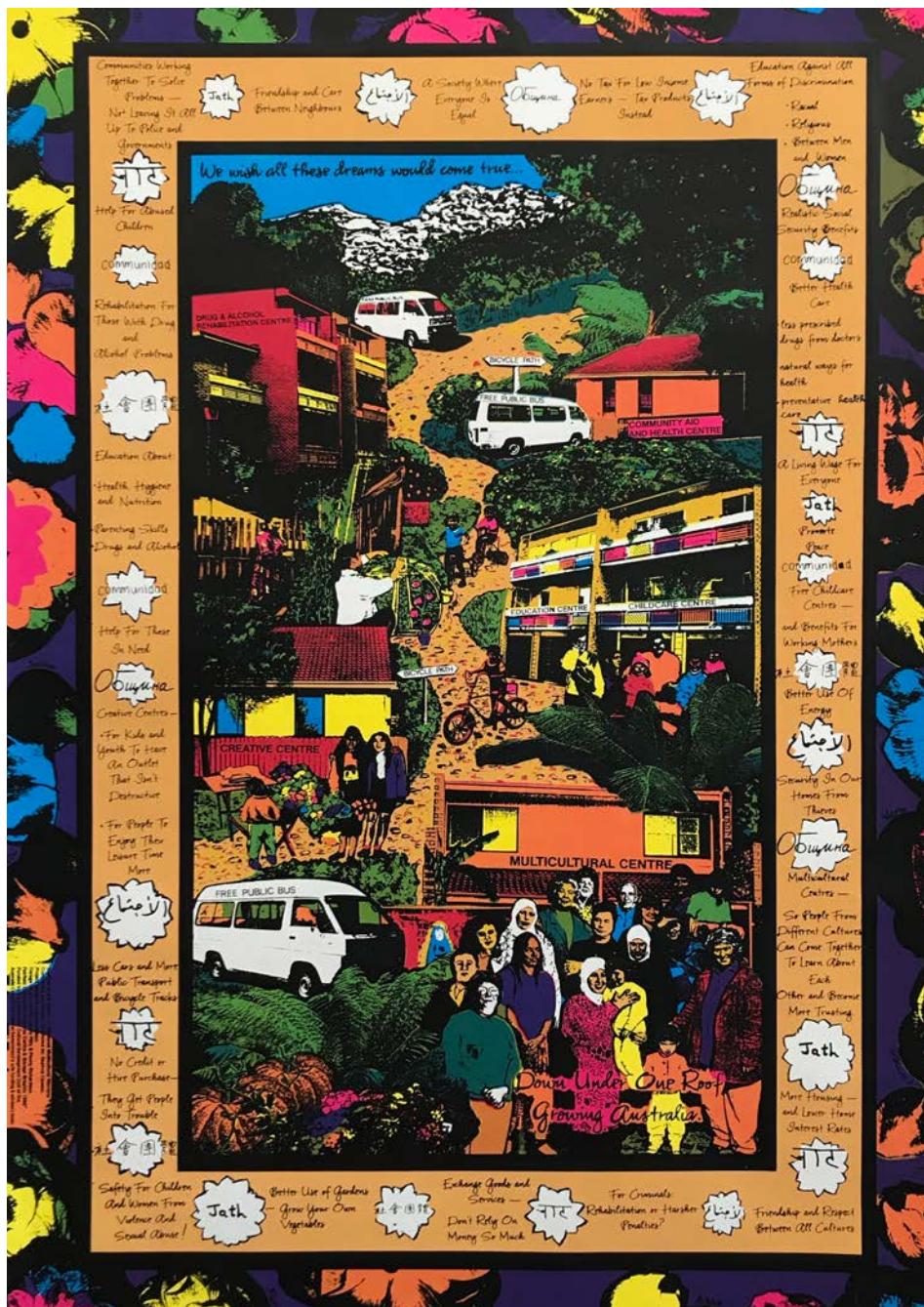
Political poster workshops of the 1970s were almost all inner city based. In the early 1980s this began to shift. Rapid urban growth in Sydney's west created low-income communities at a time when the community arts movement was responding to new urban demographics in the outer suburbs: public housing estates, large populations of single-parent families grouped together, suburbs with very high youth populations.<sup>1</sup> The need for a suburban discourse was increasingly apparent. Equally apparent was the need for active engagement of communities in such a discourse.

In response to new urban scenarios Garage Graphix, a print workshop operating in western Sydney through the 1980s and 90s, developed innovative techniques in community-centred design and production. The pre-digital process of both design and print production facilitated community expression of the socio-political landscape in a period of urban rapid change. Further to this, a distinctive workshop practice enabled the training and employment of local residents, in particular First Nation residents as print-makers.



The work was different to the posters produced in city-based workshops in both subject and form. Ultimately the community process affected the look and feel of the work even where the political intent was global. Further, the form was linked to the technologies of the

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Jan Mackay with Parramatta Regional Public Tenants Council, *Houses and Gardens*, 1989, screenprinted fabric, Garage Graphix. National Gallery of Australia Collection. Reproduced with permission of Jan Mackay.



time. The 1980s represented the last decade before digital photography gained ascendancy.<sup>2</sup> The use of SLR photography was central to Garage Graphix practice enabling representation of people and place.

Prior to digital technology and the use of social media access to both documentation and easy dissemination of social issues by low-income or marginalised communities was restricted. Cameras were expensive and not yet linked to mobile phones. Computers were not part of domestic life. While local and regional print and television reported community issues the capacity for micro-reporting and documentation was limited. In new urban areas this in turn limited the

ability to depict, reflect, name and comment on the new landscapes of everyday life. The community development-inspired arts process of resourcing communities to document their lives was, at the time, linked to providing the skills and equipment to enable this: video cameras, editing equipment, SLR cameras, darkroom facilities and print workshops. Teaching people the skills required was seen as a critical part of community development and self-empowerment. This environment has been changed completely by digital technology, a platform which, unlike the methodologies of the past, is endlessly self-teaching.

The formation of print workshops at this time with strong community

Jenny Pitty and Penny Richardson with women from Villawood Housing Estate, *Together in this Place*, 1990, screenprint, 73 x 50 cm, Garage Graphix with Fairfield Community Resource Centre. Blacktown City Council Collection. Reproduced with permission of Jenny Pitty.

agendas was linked to the medium of print and the accessibility of the craft form itself. Print offered easy entry points for social agendas. Slogans, graphic images could be hand-cut, applied and printed in numbers with minimal instruction. T-shirts and simple posters could be produced to address community issues and this activity was embraced by community groups and activists. The use of SLR photography and the emergence of the photo stencil in a community context was more powerful in that it bridged the gaps between the depiction of new populations and suburbs and the dissemination of commentary about the lived experience.

The imagery of the new suburbia was unformed at this time. The now common process of aggressively marketing 'place identity' in new areas had not yet begun. It was unusual to see images of the new suburbs. The commercial place-marketing which now characterises outer urban areas was still largely absent in the 1980s. Press releases were descriptive of intent not of lifestyle aspirations. It was common for residents to be surprised to see the name of their suburb in print. Community arts projects often focused on the pleasure and power of simple identification or naming.

There was also a disjuncture between the place name and the highly value laden meaning ascribed to place – a meaning enforcing negative connotations especially in public housing areas, low-income suburbs, places with high Aboriginal or new migrant populations. The possibility of new perspectives or alternative narratives was not available. Equally unavailable was the possibility of alternative narratives about community and individual experience: the pressures of parenting, living in a public housing area, Indigenous connections to family and country, being gay in the suburbs and other storylines.<sup>3</sup>

The underlying belief in the power of self-description, in the capacity of people to articulate the issues affecting their everyday lives



was central to Garage Graphix text and imagery. Community identity, women's health, gender politics, gay and lesbian rights, Indigenous recognition, youth issues, family violence and public housing design were some of the many subjects addressed by community and artworkers. The visual language was distinctive, engaging directly with the culture of suburban life. The use of screen printing, in particular the use of photo stencils, enabled creative expression which, at that time, was not easily available in other media. Many participants had no access to cameras and would have only accessed formal photography in a local studio or shopping mall. The capacity to photograph the suburbs of western Sydney, the domestic environments of working-class life and the people who lived in this developing part of Sydney had great agency.

This process is illustrated in pages from *Mt Druitt 365 Days; A community calendar project*. In the January and December pages street scenes from the suburb were photographed by participants.<sup>4</sup> The urban landscapes are depicted

in a literal manner, non-distinctive, familiar only to those who know the neighbourhood. What distinguishes the work from concurrent urban photography is the animating presence of local people. The presence of Aboriginal children playing cricket argues an insider's understanding of suburban life and in fact the summer experience of the urbanised Aboriginal families who took the photos and designed the page. The use of a hand cut collage of photographic images in the December page depicts residents flying above one of Mt Druitt's streets. This was a technique we used prior to photoshop and enabled a witty insertion of people into their suburban streetscape.

Prior to digital photography informal images of people in the new urban contexts of the outer suburbs were rare. It might be argued that positive images of residents of suburbia were rarer still. Photography was experienced differently and by extension the printmaking process, with its capacity for colour, text and craft around images of local scenes, led to a valued creative product.

As the planning failures of the

Radburn public housing estates became increasingly apparent the commentary enabled by the use of text and photography created a powerful vehicle for both dissent and imagining. Resident action became focused on the links between design and poor social outcomes at a time when Garage Graphix provided an avenue for issues-based poster-making. Work with residents of public housing was a significant creative focus during my years as artist in community. Detailed discussions about the built environment and its impact on everyday life initiated many of my design processes with public tenants.

The image of the ubiquitous townhouse in both *We Won in Toongabbie* and *Together in this Place* symbolised a housing environment increasingly connected to design failures.<sup>5</sup> The poster developed with Toongabbie residents is confrontational. Public housing tenants chose to be

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Marla Guppy with Toongabbie Residents Participation Group, *We Won in Toongabbie*, 1986, screenprint, 50 x 73 cm, Garage Graphix.

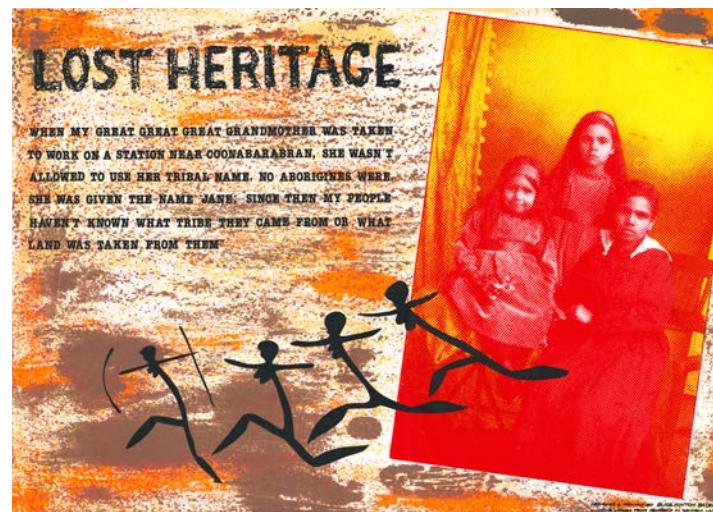


photographed formally in front of the townhouses and share-ways, which made everyday life difficult. While the work celebrates resident action in forcing the Department of Housing to address design issues it is also depicts a community largely absent from the dominant, inner urban understanding of life in Sydney.

A more interactive process was used in Villawood, another notorious townhouse estate, slated for demolition by the Department of Housing in the 1990s. Here artists Jenny Pitty and Penny Richardson engaged women in a social documentation of their neighbourhood using disposable cameras, an accessible predigital technology.<sup>6</sup> The community process enabled residents to position themselves and their families in the poster. Interestingly, it also facilitated a reworking of a contentious built environment into an imaginary neighbourhood of social possibilities. The collaborative technique of photo collage allowed

a visual depiction of a different and more interactive urban form peopled by residents who enjoyed many aspects of community life despite the challenges of a badly designed neighbourhood. There is a warmth to the work with resident's photos of gardening, meeting neighbours, playing and riding bikes, encircled by commentary in the many languages of the ethnically diverse suburb. The style is intimate rather than didactic. The viewer is invited into the detail and diversity of women's lives in Villawood, a self-curation of personal imagery in the period before social media platforms.

Design techniques using community generated suburban imagery were employed by artist in residence Jan Mackay in her fabric project, *Houses and Gardens*. The project, which I curated with public housing groups in Western Sydney, depicted the creativity and enthusiasm with which residents changed domestic landscapes. We worked with community



#### **top left**

Printing at Garage Graphix 1980s Legible technologies, the energy of collaboration and the potential for sharing 'the message' with a wider audience made print making a powerful medium for radical community arts practice. Photo: Marla Guppy

#### **top right**

Alice Hinton Bateup, *Lost Heritage*, 1987, screenprint, 50 x 73 cm, Garage Graphix. Marla Guppy Collection. Reproduced with permission of Alice Hinton Bateup.

#### **bottom left**

Marla Guppy, *Now I'm the Dreamer*, 1985, screenprint, 51 x 76cm, Garage Graphix.

#### **bottom right**

Youth Design Workshop 1990s Prior to digital photography the capacity of residents to photograph the suburbs of western Sydney had great agency. Photo: Marla Guppy



members to map 'creative houses' which Jan photographed and developed into a fabric design.<sup>7</sup> Participants then came to Garage Graphix to print lengths of fabric. Again, the process of working with photographic imagery to generate a cultural interpretation of suburban life allowed a distinctly local interpretation of the possibility that suburbia might be enjoyed and that everyday life might have a richness of experience.

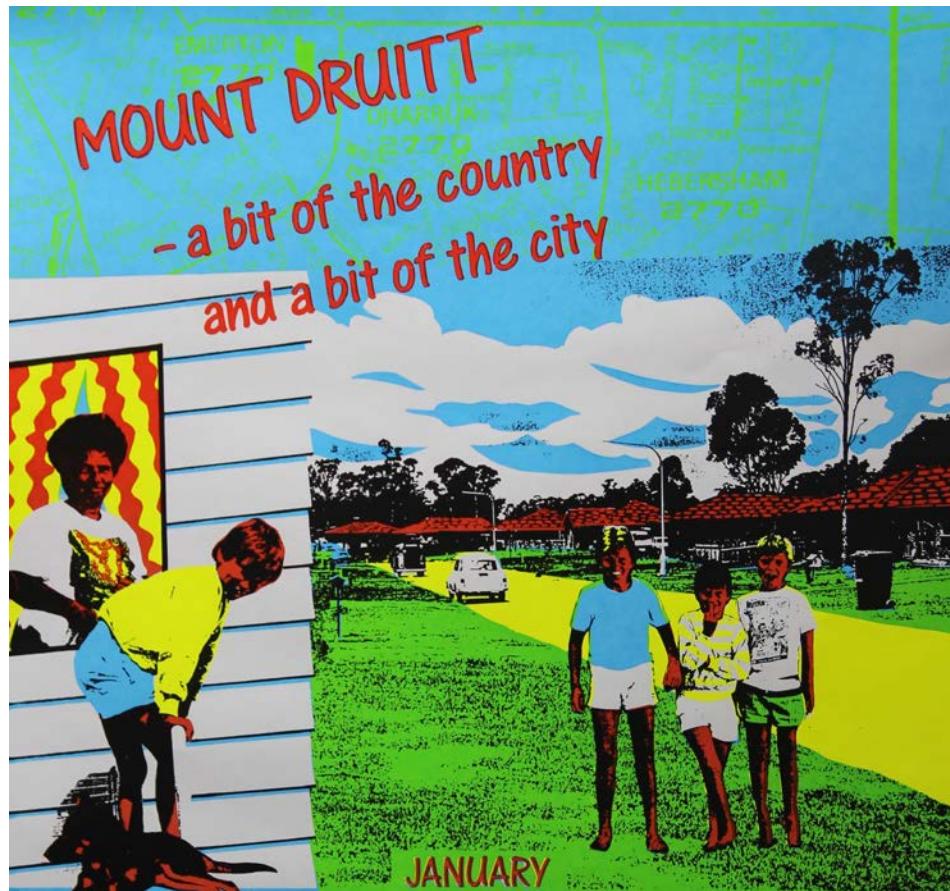
Garage Graphix also enabled a more nuanced view of the landscapes of Western Sydney as place where the emotional life of communities might find expression. *Now I'm the Dreamer* was my response as a young artist to the work with survivors of child sexual abuse which formed an important thread of the Garage's work. During my years as Artist in Community I worked with individual women as well as health and women's services on posters describing children's rights, survivor experience and intervention services. Too often the process of working creatively together also led other workshop participants to describe their experience of sexual violence both at home and in the public domain. I found their sense of place and the

implied or real threats within the urban landscape disturbing as an artist and as a young woman. Huge empty carparks, dark pedestrian underpasses, the loneliness of public space became a collective iconography of suburbs not only poorly planned but dangerous for women.

Training and employment in printmaking at Garage Graphix resulted in a body of prints by First Nations artists from western Sydney. Print-production enabled employment and training opportunities which other artforms might not have realised. Equally significant was the capacity for discourse about Aboriginal experience at a time of urbanisation of Aboriginal people from across NSW. During the 1970s large numbers of Aboriginal people moved from rural areas and inner-city suburbs such as Redfern to new urban release areas including Mt Druitt. The print medium allowed a level of detail in the depiction of contemporary Aboriginal life. During the life of the Garage, Aboriginal artists made posters about the issues and experiences which were shaping Aboriginal Australia. Links to Country, the experience of moving to the suburbs and the cultural

implications of such a demographic shift are expressed in posters as were the huge social and cultural issues First Nations people were dealing with in the suburbs as well as on Country.

Alice Hinton Bateup was a leading Aboriginal artworker who trained and was employed at Garage Graphix in the 1980s. Her works *Lost Heritage* and *Dispossessed* are deeply personal expressions of the movement, both forced and circumstantial, of Aboriginal people from Country to mission, to city-based employment and ultimately to the suburbs. Both works combine family photos, text and graphics to express a sense of profound loss and dislocation.<sup>8</sup> Choosing to depict either themselves or a family member to tell a story was an engaging technique in a time before selfies and Facebook. The screen-printed face commands attention alerting us to a personal story. In *Ruth's Story* Alice worked with participant Ruth Whitbourne, a member of the stolen generation, to tell her story of removal from her family to Bomaderry Children's Home. The works have a quiet power, different from other political posters in that they describe the lived experience of the maker.



Maxine Conaty, 1987 *Mt Druitt; 365 Days. A community calendar project*, (January page detail), 1986, screenprint, 50.5 x 38cm, Garage Graphix. Reproduced with permission of James Conaty.



**Mount Druitt wasn't planned for people but people are changing that.**

Joanna and Janine Lord, 1987 *Mt Druitt; 365 Days. A community calendar project*, (December page detail), 1986, screenprint, 50.5 x 38cm, Garage Graphix. Reproduced with permission of Janine Lord.

Workshop participant Todd Fernando also uses a family photo of his cousin Eddy Murray to depict the savage injustice of deaths in custody in *Death Sentence?* At the time the poster was designed and printed the family's loss was recent. Using a photo was unusual especially for Aboriginal families but the depiction of Eddy's young face personifies the injustice.

Printmaking also enabled depiction of the new suburban contexts for Aboriginal family life; the easy pleasures of summer, backyard cricket, children playing in the street, a view of both Mt Druitt and Aboriginal life largely absent from the media. Such works would not have been possible without Aboriginal artworkers at Garage Graphix. As political works they are also the product of a creative process, which 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.

Printmaking was a highly effective medium in a period prior to social media discourse about 'community' and digital production of image and content around 'community issues'. The durability of the print

medium and the capacity of print to be disseminated enabled dialogues about the then undocumented social issues which were part of new urban communities.

Garage Graphix developed an interactive design process resulting in complex artworks often created directly with community participants. The use of photography, hand lettering, hand cut stencils and other 'craft techniques' created a cadence of engagement in message and design. The physicality of the actual printing process, which community members experienced, also affected their response to the finished product. The notion of 'ownership' of the artwork, an aspiration of the community arts movement, was a documented outcome of this methodology.

Garage Graphix used the platform of socially engaged printmaking in new and innovative ways. A rigorous application of engaged design and production enabled highly creative community interactions in printmaking. Suburban location, collaborative practice and a culturally diverse group of printmakers allowed new subjects to be interrogated. The resulting body of work positions Garage Graphix as a distinctive urban entity in the broader context of Australian political printmaking.

#### Notes

1. Powell, D. (1993) *Out West: Perceptions of Sydney's Western Suburbs*. (Sydney, Allen & Unwin).
2. Art Sets. The photograph and Australia: timeline. [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au)
3. Guppy, M. (2006) Cultural identity in post suburbia. *Post Suburban Sydney: The City in Transformation Conference*. University of Western Sydney.
4. Garage Graphix Annual Report 1986.
5. Guppy, M (2019) Art, Communities, and Housing Form. In Bishop and Marshall (ed) *The Routledge Handbook of People and Place in the 21st Century*. (New York, NY, Routledge) pp. 53-64
6. Jenny Pitty, interview with Marla Guppy 18 October 2019
7. Jan Mackay, interview with Marla Guppy 22 October 2019
8. Alice Hinton Bateup, Gallery talk, *Printed Matters Now and Then* exhibition. Leo Kelly Blacktown Arts Centre, Sydney 24 August 2019