

MINI GRAFF

art up for grabs

by Jo Holder, Director, The Cross Art Projects, Sydney

In remnant public spaces

Mini Graff's stickers, stencils and posters fleetingly call our post 9/11 selves to account for conforming, accepting and consenting to a shamelessly capitalist culture. These pasted or painted fragments peel, fade or disappear (often as souvenirs) as mysteriously as they appear. They are rebellious citizens like her signature stencil — the fleeing silhouettes of Joe and Josephine. Working in public since 2005, Mini Graff has won respect as one of a sub-set of street artists who aim to shift everyday acceptance and as an artist unwilling to hide behind careful platitudes about 'critical discourse'. She deftly parodies the advertising industry and the brand names that invade public spaces, streetscapes, parks and schools to plant the banners of consumerism and imprint insecurity. She cautions that the limits on our rights to speak out or exhibit critical work in public spaces are severe.

An arresting example of border patrolling was an installation component of the exhibition *Real Estate: Mini Graff / Jason Wing* at The Cross Art Projects (March 2011), a space in a former TV repair shop in a Kings Cross back lane. The work comprised a silkscreen poster repeat pasted on a temporary hoarding, blocking viewing and light into the gallery space. Mini Graff's image comprised the word 'Grab', a red star logo and a grasping hand that, when repeat pasted, transformed the obstruction into a giant auto-teller. Council required the gallery to make a costly development application. A planner said 'no' as Grab might be confused with NAB (National Australia Bank). Another planner confided: 'there is an unofficial policy of approving only decorative art or art that doesn't have

words'. The re-submitted design drawing was pixilated, obscuring the offending G-word. Needless to say, the work was up during this illuminating exchange on municipal censorship. Whose land grab?

Not long before, and a short walk from Kings Cross, a disused shop billboard served to screen *Country Shoppers* (2011), a Mini Graff and Antonia Aitken collaboration on the global refugee crisis. In this five-part poster mini-series each grainy black and white image is identified by a large fluorescent central logo that wittily plays off the western tourist's *Lonely Planet Guide*. The episodes run from Cook's ship appearing on the horizon to claiming *terra nullius*. Finally refugees 'select' a country from tempting piles of country guides. Was the artists' bright anger at the tragic drowning of over 50 Tamil and Hazara refugees off Christmas Island (in December 2010) too apt a play with its context? The same council soon seized the site, obliterating the artisanal posters with a giant digital advertisement for new concrete cycle lanes hailing its own work assisting the gentrification of former working class suburbs, a process that brutally displaces invisible low-income types — including artists.

Critique of capital is confronting. *No Logo*, Naomi Klein's description of corporate culture taking over governments, was published a decade ago yet remains front-page news: mining, genetically modified food and the addiction triumvirate of alcohol, tobacco and pokies. 'Imagine a life without packaging' says Big Tobacco, calling in aid its so-called rights to advertise. Governments and police censor to make political capital: the new NSW Premier's first words were

about action to criminalise street art. Hence Mini Graff's glorious self-portrait hails all the unnamed *Super Heroes* (2011) and you can almost hear the chorus anthem from the imaginary musical as the comrades fight for the ideals of civic space and civil society. My fondness for George Orwell and civil libertarian heroism has revived. In this twisted world the criminal is the artist, not the politician taking corporate donations. The recent success of Cockatoo Island as a de facto biennale of street art in *Outpost: Project Art from the Streets* (Sydney, 2011) will hopefully prompt a rethink.

Mini Graff's love of silkscreen images relates to wonky comic strips and anachronistic commercial art as much as to pop art. As a technique to fuse cutting politics and satire, the low-key Ben Day dot is unmatched for forty years of street briefings on anti-capitalism and unequal consumption, feminism and land rights. An inspired wave of communicators, from Guerilla Girls and Jenny Holzer to Australian-based artists like Deborah Kelly and Mini Graff, extend this classy conceptual language as easily as the dot morphs into the pixel. It's exciting but when pitted against the corporate state and its relentless obliteration of memory and difference, a very real struggle. In addition to petty but punitive regimes, there is a morass of self-serving blather about 'activating' public space for commerce, such as oxymoronic art bars and banal advert banners termed 'art' — standardised and neutral.

Of course, not all councils are rolling out the corporate village or festivals faking conviviality. Mini Graff is often commissioned for local projects such as Renwick Lane's sublime *Community Creeper* (for Leichhardt Council in the inner-west). Mini Graff's work is more than negation and critique: she imagines what our lives would be like without commodification, a life without advertising and profit. If you happen across such an installation, it is likely your dusty street will transform momentarily into a paradise for butterfly catching and other idylls. Such democratic and local works sit in the visionary tradition handed from William Blake via William Morris to Keith Haring and the many children's story illustrators that Mini Graff has devoured since her days as a design student at

Massey University in Wellington.

Privacy, her first solo exhibition at Megalo Print Workshop Gallery in Canberra (2011), showed the fruits of her residency and feasted on deep psychic stuff about childhood memory. Mini Graff premiered two new series of hand-drawn screenprints. The first was an iteration of her highway *Roadhouse series*, each print depicting a small cottage or caravan in clashing colours, sitting on verdant green grass under a brilliant blue sky and overpowered by a huge scaffold-style sign. These minimal geometric shelters — New Zealand 'bachs' (short for bachelor pads) — were enjoyed by generations of economical holidaymakers like Mini Graff's farming family. In Mini Graff's prints the naïve are colonised by corporations like Cadbury or Nestlé until finally 'gobble' (Google) takes away what remains of such innocent dreams. Mini Graff vividly recalls her first billboard sighting and her utter misrecognition of its purpose. Perhaps this heralded her fondness for surrealist fantasy as a tool for philosophical speculation — because it can describe with the limits that surround us each day.

Mini Graff's work relies on such a double-take: it is painstakingly crafted by pen drawing, scissors and layers of colour screens to look like 'real' advertising, but it isn't. It advertises something radically different. The new series on genetically modified food is drawn in the style of a secret garden style fairytale, showing a bounteous harvest marred by the hidden corporate worm.

Some called our times the end of dissent, when we marched in our millions against the invasion of Iraq with no impact. Like other artists whose primary work is outside mainstream galleries, museums and festivals, Mini Graff's experimental public art shows the need to extend affirmative protest and occupy the streets. •

References

For the less fleet of foot or eye, Mini Graff's civic conversations are viewed as a visual diary on flickr.com or in hard copy in Jaklyn Babington's excellent exhibition document *Space Invaders: Australian Street Art* (National Gallery of Australia, 2010) and podcast at Jaklyn Babington interviews Mini Graff and Jason Wing, 9 March 2011: <http://www.myspace.com/crossartprojects>



above
**Mini Graff, Roadhouse
No. 15** (in situ), 2011,
acrylic screen print on
litho (poster edition),
102 x 76 cm

top right
**Mini Graff, Roadhouse
No. 8** (installation view on
Cockatoo Island), 2011,
acrylic screen print on
Snowdon 300gsm
(20 sheets), edition: 10,
253 x 450 cm.
Photography: Luke
Thomas

above right
**Mini Graff, The Great
Australian Land Grab**,
2011, acrylic screen
print on litho,
dimensions variable

right
**Mini Graff, Roadhouse
No. 14**, 2011,
acrylic screen print on
245gsm Stonehenge,
102 x 76 cm.
Photography: Garth Knight

left
**Mini Graff,
Super Heroes**, 2011,
screen print on card,
190 x 86.5 cm

