

Greetings from Aggaw Aggaw, Links Gallery, Wagga Wagga

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THE WAY LIFE SHOULD BE

Margaret Woodward

I have long harboured a fascination for souvenirs, pestering my parents to buy me cloth badges and rulers on family holidays. This fixation was transferred to my growing collection of snow domes boosted by friends and family returning from visits overseas. And while these items were often regarded as tacky or kitsch by my family, the passion for them did not diminish. Much later, I found myself analysing souvenirs and tourist ephemera as an aspect of my PhD research into the communication of natural and cultural heritage through design.

This exhibition, *Greetings from Aggaw Aggaw* employs souvenir tea towels as the foundation to make a body of creative work which tests ideas relating to place, tourism and national identity. The work highlights the role of codes, symbols and icons that develop into what sociologist, Dean MacCannell calls 'tourist markers'¹ and questions their contribution to ideas of place, national identity and the tourist experience, inviting audiences to look beyond the surface to a deeper, more complex understanding of where we live.

WHERE IS IT?

Works in this exhibition combine to create a fictitious place called 'Aggaw Aggaw'— what Roland Barthes would call a 'fictive nation'²— a place with an invented name made up of tourist sights and sites, slogans and images. Barthes contends that tourists focus on 'flashes', that is topics, sites and activities of significance, rather than attempting to offer a coherent picture of the place they are visiting³. Likewise this exhibition offers 'flashes' of a constructed destination; an island with a souvenir kiosk, a living room cabinet atop a castaway's raft, a suite of dining chairs that become pedestals for holiday trophies and a set of enamel mugs that reflect European interpretations of indigenous places.

This exhibition culminates in the installation of a project which has been exhibited a number of times since 2009, each time occupying a larger footprint and growing in scale. The work was inspired by a Hobart City Council marketing campaign to brand the city in the new millennium, with the marketing slogan 'The way life should be'. This campaign hinged on promoting Hobart for its lifestyle rather than through previous familiar themes of wilderness, treasure islands and convict heritage. The idea that life **should** be different, and this could be found in Hobart, resembled the way souvenirs depict a romanticised, idealised view of a place through the coded language of stereotypes.

Through the lens of tourism, *Greetings from Aggaw Aggaw* invites the viewer to reconsider the way life actually is. The project seeks to challenge the universally promoted, nostalgic vision of place as depicted in the tea towels, and proposes that life in Australia is a multi-layered, situated experience, whose cultural geography also includes local stories, indigenous heritage and memories. While city councils, tourism boards and clever marketing may want to airbrush and 'brand' the local away, it's impossible to distil only the palatable essence of a place without indeed taking in the whole view. The fictive world of *Aggaw Aggaw* is a mash up, created from artefacts which celebrate destination— a familiar yet twisted world of memory— 'flashes' of experience and desire. Here 1970's domestic kitsch meets desert island fantasy, framed by memories of summer, sea and sun from inland Australia. Well known icons are fragmented and sit together with lesser known places, combining Sydney and the bush, city and country, holiday and work, industry with domesticity.

I WANT A SOUVENIR

Souvenirs, along with posters and brochures belong to the category of designed artefacts known as tourist ephemera, generated by the travel and tourism industry to promote and sell Australia as a destination for migrants and holiday makers. During the 1950s–60s the work of prominent Australian modernist designers Percy Trompf, Gert Selheim and Douglas Annand featured in travel poster design. The humble tea towel, however, renders anonymous the designers behind the brand name of souvenir companies— the most well known of the 1960s and 70s being Souvenirs Australia, Neil, Lamont, Rodriguez and Summit

Souvenir. Souvenirs Australia, a premier souvenir company in the sixties which still operates today, had a fleet of caravans as mobile showrooms that traversed the country selling souvenirs. These were later replaced with trucks when five caravans were 'rolled' in one year⁵.

The tea towels also use what Denise Whitehouse calls the key trope of the 'panoramic narrative to construct an all-encompassing vision of an instantly recognizable and reassuringly familiar Australia'⁶. Meanings and associations that cluster around particular places reveal what Jay Arthur refers to as 'word maps' of European settler culture expressed in place names, slogans and nomenclature⁷. Books on meanings of place names, such as the one presented in the exhibition, subtitled '*The Romance of Nomenclature*' revealed European interpretations of indigenous place names and their meanings, some of which, such as Wagga Wagga, have endured.

Individual symbols comprise shorthand for meanings associated with place, such as the Sturt Desert Pea flower which symbolises the delineation between coastal and inland landscapes, along with the associated human qualities of resilience, flourishing in harsh environments. Visually the Sturt Desert Pea is used widely by many tea towel designers as a striking decorative and repeat motif.

Research into the project has taken place in local and national collections and private homes. The National Library of Australia, and the Tasmaniana Library hold large collections of tourist ephemera and provided information about place names from slogans, jingles and tourism marketing campaigns. Tea towels were found in opportunity shops, garage sales, friends and relative's hall cupboards and most recently the highly competitive world of eBay.

WHEN ARE WE GOING HOME?

These artefacts are widely travelled. Linen, the raw material in most of these collected tea towels comes from the northern hemisphere countries of Poland, Ireland, and Czechoslovakia. Design and production took place largely in Australia, with customisation for individual towns and places. Mobile shops and a network of travelling merchandisers, saw them distributed to their final destinations. Purchasing, collecting and gift-giving along with associated memories and stories continues the cycle of travelling for souvenirs as they are taken home and sent abroad, and finally this exhibition has drawn them to the destination of *Aggaw Aggaw*.

The project has generated a range of limited edition souvenir wares which have been released for sale as part of the exhibition. For 'tourists' to *Aggaw Aggaw*, just as bower birds to the linen cupboard, a new generation of contemporary souvenir wares await liberation, as the restless pattern of travel, settling and memories continues.

NOTES

- ¹ MacCannell, D. 1976. *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*. New York: Schocken.
- ² Barthes, R. 1982 *Empire of Signs*. New York: Hill and Wang, p3.
- ³ Berger, A. 2011. Tourism as a postmodern semiotic activity. *Semiotica* 183, 105-119.
- ⁴ A term first coined by John Dryden in *The Conquest of Granada*, (1672).
- ⁵ History of Souvenirs Australia Pty. Ltd. <http://www.souvenirsaustralia.com.au/history.php>
- ⁶ Whitehouse, D. 2007. This is Australia: The panoramic narrative, graphic design and spatial consciousness. In *Extroverts and Exhibitionists: typotastic 3*, 52-56. Hobart: University of Tasmania. p 52.
- ⁷ Arthur, J. 2003. *The Default Country: A lexical cartography of twentieth-century Australia*. Sydney: UNSW Press.