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Obituary - Vale: Michael Callaghan – Artist – Raconteur – Reader – Collector – Pleasure Seeker – Holder of Hearts

Nick Southall
University of Wollongong, nicks@uow.edu.au

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Obituary - Vale: Michael Callaghan – Artist – Raconteur – Reader – Collector – Pleasure Seeker – Holder of Hearts

Abstract

On 19 May 2012 after many courageous years of struggle against illness and pain, managed with stoicism and panache, Michael Callaghan died at home, as he wanted, in the country – peacefully and in his sleep. The following weekend he was farewelled by many of his family, friends and comrades. They remembered an intelligent, vibrant, witty, cool, and charismatic man. At times a man of few words and at others a great story teller and conversationalist, Michael made an art of cutting through the bullshit and telling it as it is. He did not suffer fools gladly; in fact he couldn't see why anyone would suffer anything gladly. Michael's art was an outlet for his anger and affection; a weapon to expose and denounce oppression and a tool to help sustain and build the communities struggling for a better world. He drew to him many talented and dedicated friends, with whom he shared his many gifts and achievements. During his final difficult years Michael was greatly supported by his devoted wife Bronwyn. While constantly struggling with his deteriorating health he continued working and planning future exhibitions right to the end.



**Vale: Michael Callaghan – Artist –
Raconteur – Reader – Collector –
Pleasure Seeker – Holder of Hearts**

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Most famous for the posters he produced at Redback Graphix, Michael's work is of global importance. His posters, prints, sculptures and paintings have documented and altered the cultural and political landscape for over 40 years with characteristic biting humour and strong imagery. As one of his admirers explained; "His work is so ubiquitous that it can be a shock to realise how much he defined political poster art in the late twentieth century." A deft visual communicator with a penchant for satire, his recent work was a culmination of his artistic and political concerns for the past forty years, crystallising its themes and demonstrating his continued relevance to the Australian cultural landscape.

Michael was born in November 1952 and grew up in Wollongong. His father nicknamed him Michelangelo and his mother nicknamed him Machiavelli. Anyone who knew Michael will appreciate how apt and prescient these names were. Michael attended West Wollongong Primary School and Keira Boys High School. His experiences with the viciousness of corporal punishments at these schools drove a desire to rebel, and a year spent in Italy and England with his family in 1964 fuelled his appetite for artistic expression, historical and cultural knowledge and awakened his interest in politics. Returning to Wollongong he unleashed his creativity and became intrigued with Dada. Alongside his school mate Phillip Batty, Michael organised performance art in Wollongong and Sydney and began publishing a poetry magazine called 'Box'. A recent exhibition of Michael's work included a selection of these poems, made on typewriters, which were distributed via a roneo machine. Some of the poems address the war in Vietnam and

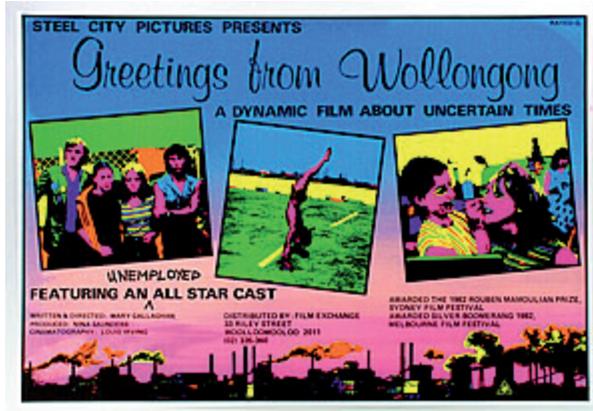
are typed as pictures in the shapes of B52 bombers and aerial bombs using the military language of the War – rolling thunder, hearts and minds, domino theory, defoliate, annihilate. On leaving school Michael attended the National Art School in Sydney, graduating in 1974. In 1977, during his time as a tutor of Post Object Art at the University of Sydney’s Tin Sheds, he became involved in printmaking through the Earthworks Poster Collective. Post Object Art was a shift away from art objects as precious commodities that sought to emphasise the society where the art object was produced. Compelled by a spirit of collectivism, Earthworks produced some of the most iconic images of political activism in the 1970s, including the famous ‘Give Fraser the Razor’ poster protesting the sacking of the Whitlam government. Rather than producing posters for sale or to display in galleries, the posters created at Earthworks, and later at Redback Graphix, were often distributed for free and pasted up on the street.

In 1979 Michael launched Redback Graphix during a residency at Griffith University in Brisbane, creating an ‘alternative design and advertising agency for the Left’, aimed at supporting collective political activism while enabling artists to earn a living. The artwork Michael produced to launch Redback is possibly the most recognisable poster image in contemporary Australia – *If the Unemployed Are Dole Bludgers, What the Fuck are the Idle Rich?* Michael returned to Wollongong in 1980 to work as producer and art director on the feature film *Greetings from Wollongong*, written and directed by his sister Mary. The film exposed the growing economic and social crisis of rising unemployment and the emergence of a ‘no future’ generation of young people. While winning a number of awards, *Greetings from Wollongong* was criticised by many of the city’s political and business elite and the Wollongong City Council refused to allow the screening of the film in any council building.

During the upsurge of militant class struggle in the early 1980s, Michael decided to stay in his home town and joined with local artist Gregor Cullen to design and build the Redback workshop in a vacant kiosk near the beach in Wollongong’s Stewart Park. The workshop soon became a magnet for many of Australia’s great silkscreen printers and over the next few years Michael and Gregor gradually expanded the number of artists

involved to include Alison Alder, Leonie Lane and Ray Young, along with a couple of local young apprentices, Sharon Pusell and myself. In 1982 Redback received a government grant and both Michael and Gregor were appointed artist-in-residence to the South Coast Labour Council. At this time Redback was one of the artworker groups at the forefront of the Artworkers' Union and Art and Working Life, a movement established through various organisations operating with trade unions. From the Wollongong workshop Michael mixed art production with graphic design work for clients including government departments, trade unions, community groups and Indigenous organisations. Redback also subsidised less well-off groups and movements, spreading grant and 'commercial' money to those who otherwise couldn't afford to produce posters, postcards and t-shirts.

Redback created a wide variety of brightly coloured posters for political and social struggles which were regularly plastered all around town. In the Australian National Gallery's book on Redback, Anna Zagala explains how their posters "with their emphatic slogans, arresting images and vivid colours, confront the viewer with a terrible urgency. They say to us: life matters, action counts." Using their signature bold florescent graphics and biting humour, the Redback workshop supported progressive and radical campaigns, movements and organisations throughout the 80s and 90s that tackled issues ranging from unemployment, workplace issues, AIDS awareness to indigenous health. They also produced banners and other art works in support of a wide variety of struggles. Outside the 'workers' embassy' which guarded the Kemira coal mine during the famous sixteen day underground sit-in strike of 1982, a Redback poster declaring 'The Big Australian Destroys Jobs. Save Our Region. No Stand Downs. Defend Your Jobs!' held pride of place. When thousands of Wollongong workers stormed Federal Parliament, smashing open the front doors chanting 'we want jobs', many were carrying a rare run of black and white Redback posters that depicted a couple of BHP bosses looking down at sacked workers. The poster's headline read 'Unemployment capitalism's finest product' and beneath the image was a swinging axe with the bold slogan Strike back! And when unemployed workers marched all the way from Wollongong



to Sydney those at the front carried a colourful Redback banner demanding action to create jobs not unemployment.

Although it is sometimes difficult to separate Michael's work from the collaborative enterprise of Redback, his artwork tended to express his anarchic philosophy combined with his bizarre and anti-authoritarian sense of humour. For example, there is the black humour of the *Greetings From Wollongong* series of postcards. In the early 1980s Wollongong was the 'unemployment capital of Australia', wracked by poverty and severe social crises. In the absence of concrete measures to address these issues the local elite attempted to rebrand the region as an attractive tourist destination – The Leisure Coast. So, beneath the classic postcard caption 'Greetings from Wollongong' one of Michael's postcards reads 'Born Free: on the dole, your consolation prize \$40 per week', another features the image of a young woman doing the ironing bordered by a list of the day's TV shows, interspersed with 'Dad's breakfast', 'Washing', 'Ironing', 'Feed Baby', 'Etc. Etc. Etc.' Visually many of Michael's works of this period owe much to Maoist propaganda art of the 1970s. As well, he was influenced by the work of Andy Warhol (Michael owned an original Warhol Mao Zedong poster which used to sit on his bedroom floor) and the growing punk culture of the time. In 1984 Michael and Gregor represented Australia as part of the Olympic Arts Festival in Los

Angeles. Here they worked with the local Chicano community producing two posters with the United Farmworkers Union and the Chicano Cultural Coalition. In 1985 they both visited Japan to attend a peace conference in Nagasaki. On returning Michael produced a number of Japanese influenced posters, including one of my favourites the 'Raise the Dole Dance' poster, using patterned multi-coloured Japanese paper cut blocks and meticulously printed by Michael and Sharon Pusell.

Forced out of their Wollongong workshop by a downturn in state support and an antagonistic and corrupted City Council, Redback moved to Sydney in 1985. Throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s Michael moved towards undertaking more official commissions from Commonwealth government departments. He is the creator of Condoman the Phantom-like figure who advocates the use of condoms for young Indigenous men, one of the most successful anti-AIDS health campaigns in the Northern Territory. He also made a series of narrative images on alcohol abuse, again aimed at convincing the Aboriginal community to change their behaviour. The Redback printing workshop closed in the early 1990s as Michael's health began to deteriorate. However, through Redback he continued to produce websites, offset publications and posters.

Prompted by his long-term illness, Michael chose death as a major theme in many of his more recent works. These are seen, in part, as self-portraits of a person facing up to, examining and laughing at, or with, death. However, Michael was never self-absorbed and this work is also a critique of approaches to life as an expendable commodity. 'Thumbing his nose' at the unyielding authority figure of death, his work has explored the way that varied societies in other parts of the world deal with death by celebrating life. His recent work also addressed issues that concerned him since he began working as an artist. Following his tenure as the H. C. Coombs Creative Arts Fellow at the ANU School of Art, Michael created new prints and sculptures which concentrated on the war in Iraq. Deeply aware of the power of the repetitious slogan and doublespeak, he deployed the language of the War against itself. Here the catchphrases of war, - 'Operation Iraqi Freedom', 'Shock and Awe', 'Weapons of Mass Destruction' 'Regime Change'- form a pattern in the backdrop to war's true brutality - the fighter

bomber, the bullet, the cruise missile, which dominate these works. The pattern of slogans, written in both English and Arabic, is interwoven with phrases which describe the daily activities Iraqi civilians conduct in a warzone – ‘going shopping’, ‘going to work’, ‘meeting with friends’ – a stark contrast between everyday humanity and brutal militarism. From the Vietnam war to the ‘global war on terror’ Michael’s work has highlighted the horrors of war. Considered “our finest unofficial war artist” he has “commemorated the victims, named the perpetrators, and shamed the hypocrites.”

A few years ago, on one of his many expeditions to interesting parts of the world, Michael visited Arnhem Land staying in the camp of local elder, Sambo Ashley, a specialist in bone paintings. A description of some of Michael’s resulting sculptures explains; “The imagery here is based on death or rather those dry bones that remain after flesh has rotted away. In the end, when life is over, bones are also a part of the stories that become myths – exemplary tales from the dead, told to guide the living.” And so it is with Michael’s many legacies. Today much of his work is held in numerous public and private collections in Australia and overseas including the National Gallery of Australia, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, the Wollongong Art Gallery, Wollongong University, and in many other State and regional galleries and library and university collections across Australia, and in museum collections in the U.S.A., Mexico, Japan and France. He will, it goes without saying, be sorely missed, but every day he will live on in our hearts, our minds and through his body of work.