

HELEN GARNER: KEVIN PAPPAS, ALL-AUSTRALIAN GRAFFITIST

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Today I fell in love with a bloke called Kevin Pappas. With half of him, that is: the other half wasn't in the office. I mean – not the half that's Greek, or the kangaroo half – no, wait! Don't turn over! Look – I saw his name on the cover of a book in a closed bookshop window: it's produced by All-Australian Graffiti Pty Ltd. Having been a postcard buff all my life, I rang their number.

"Ch-allo?" said a male voice with a thick Greek accent. In the background I swear I could hear "somebody playing a bouzouki. This must be the place.

"Can I speak to Kevin Pappas, please?"

"What did you say?" (Was that a snort of laughter?)

"Have you got a Kevin Pappas there?"

"Ha ha!" roared the man. He had the grace to clap his hands over the mouthpiece, but I heard him yell, "She wants to speak to *Kevin Pappas!*"

What *is* this bloke, deaf and dumb or something?

The man composed himself with difficulty, and said, "No, you can't speak to Kevin Pappas because he's in Syd– I mean, because he's a fictitious character."

When the bookshop opened I saw my mistake: not only is Kevin Pappas a Greek, but he's a kangaroo from the waist down. From the neck up he bears a remarkable resemblance to Mimmo Cozzolino, one of the seven graphic artists who make up All-Australian Graffiti.

"They all think I'm Kevin Pappas, and I'm not even Greek," says Mimmo, whom his work-mates describe as a "belligerent Neapolitan," and who claims to have very little sense of humour.

So: Kevin Pappas is a fictitious example of a peculiarly Australian phenomenon: "When a Greek has been in Australia for 20 years and returns to the old country, his accent is so broad, and his tastes so different, the locals have a slang name for him – a kangaroo Greek."

The Kevin Pappas Tear-out Postcard Book, recently published by Penguin (\$4.95), will bring All-Australian Graffiti right out of the vague shadows in which it has lurked since it began five years ago. Though it is well-established in the advertising and design world, its existence on the consciousness of the general public has been little more than rumour, fed by occasional sightings: Geoff Cook's superb cricket and tennis posters, and single postcards originally designed as self-promo for the firm: Meg Williams' kangaroo-Greek family at the dinner table, or Geoff's saveloy sunworshippers (I can't eat a hot dog any more without feeling like a cannibal.)

All-Australian Graffiti now consists of Mimmo Cozzolino (Italian), Con Aslanis (Greek), Izy Marmur (Polish Jew), Neil Curtis (born in England) and three native Australians, Tony Ward (who once taught Con and Mimmo), Meg Williams (who once was taught by Mimmo and Con), and Geoff Cook. They describe their organisation as "an independent graphic design and illustration studio."

"When Con and I started All-Australian Graffiti, we called it that to make laughs for ourselves, because we were two wogs in Australia," says Mimmo. "Being wogs was a big handicap. The ethnic thing only started after Whitlam got in. We see Australia from a slightly different viewpoint."

The postcard book, put together gradually out of two years' spare-time work, is a whimsical, irreverent collection of Australian symbols. "We've taken traditional reasons for sending a card, and extended them," says Con.

But the subject matter goes far beyond occasions like birthdays and Christmas. There's the FX

Holden rusting away on a golden sand-dune ("Bashes to bashes, rust to rust, rot in peace"); two monstrosly overgrown kangaroo tearing Sydney apart; a nativity scene in a caravan park with the baby cradled in an Esky; a portrait of Ned Kelly; the Queen; a kangaroo delivering a human baby in its pouch; a can of 200 live blowies preserved in "eau de poo;" a corner milk bar; a football rampant on a field; a glowing Peters ice-cream sign against a darkening sky; and other icons of the Australian way of life.

"Those sorts of things are part of our culture as far as I'm concerned," says Con. "I like them; I grew up with them so I had to like them."

What makes this collection unique is the tenderness with which the symbols are handled: the work is lovingly exact and detailed, its humour is affectionate, the symbols are presented with respect; but the sharp edge of humour prevents it from deteriorating into nostalgia for its own sake. Look at Meg's Milk Bar, or Con Aslanis' Fur and Twenty Pie; sharpness of perception keeps mere sentimentality at bay, and their larrikin quality makes them worthy of their name graffiti.

Con: "We like those human things, those affectionate things. What we do is already antique. Our identity is fast disappearing. The Eureka flag deserved a postcard. So does Melba, even if she didn't carry a rifle at Gallipoli. The meat pie in Australia is as important in terms of national identity as the Concorde is to Europe. We haven't got the Parthenon, but we've got the brick veneer house. It's a monument."

When I went to the Ocean Grove State School nearly 30 years ago, the backs of the teachers' chairs bore an emu and kangaroo motif which had become so rubbed and worn with use that you deciphered them more by touch than by sight: I keep thinking of those chairs when I look at the postcards, and even more so when I look at Mimmo Cozzolino's great labour of love, the Lest We Forget poster.

Mimmo, bored and disgusted by the trend in symbol design to slick, glossy sterile stuff, took his camera and tripod to the Patents and Trademarks Office. "They have records there back to 1906. I took one look at these and said, stuff modern symbols. No-one's made use of this wonderful material: it's much more subtle than kangaroos and Koalas." He unearthed thousands of forgotten trademarks, of which almost a hundred are reproduced without commentary on this magnificent brown-and-black poster.

"Look at this," says Mimmo, pointing to a drawing of a hammer smashing an alarm clock, with the insignia NOTIX. "It's a brand of *pest-killer*. Imagine – some poor wacka on a farm at Wagga Wagga wakes up one morning with that pun in his head - I love that stuff, that tenuous play on words. It's got such a human element."

"It ain't fine art," says Neil, "but it's fantastic."

Mimmo plans to research this forgotten area much more fully, and to put together a book of symbols. "I've already found 3,000 of them registered," he said, "but I reckon there's probably twice as many that have never been registered at all. I'll have to go through Australian magazines right from the start – The Bulletin, Smith's Weekly. . ."

The posters and the Kevin Pappas Tear-out Postcard Book are only a tiny part of All-Australian Graffiti's work; 90 per cent of their time is spent on bread-and-butter work for advertising agencies. They manifest different degrees of resignation to this fact.

Neil: "In two years I haven't woken up in the morning and not wanted to go to work. I draw

pictures for money – a neat way of making a living.”

Con: “Our studio set-up is unique in Australia. Diversified. Few of us could fit into a big corporation. I've never done graphic work for a wage. You have to have a special attitude to work for an agency.”

Where do they draw the line, in advertising?

Con: “Each of us has a personal morality. But we can't afford to be too scrupulous because then we wouldn't get work. You get black-banned as fast as a wink if you show any conscience at all. Conscience takes the bottom drawer. Personally, I don't do ads for heavy drugs.”

Mimmo: “We've knocked back Liberal Party work. We're all ALP voters, it would be silly to do their stuff. There's no clean advertising, though. If you're in advertising, that's it. You can't only work on nice things. If we say no too many times, they won't ring again.”

Geoff: “Our principles aren't all that rigid, anyway. We like to think we're not *in* advertising!”

The postcard book is taking off faster in Sydney than in Melbourne. All-Australian Graffiti put this down to the ratbag tradition of Sydney. “In Melbourne you've got to be respectable. Advertising is much more cute here – it glitters in the night.”

“We could have been much more political in putting the postcards together,” says Neil Curtis, “but we agreed to keep specifically political things out of it so as to appeal to the widest possible audience. We'll get tem used to us, we'll do it by degrees.

“People have to be taught to enjoy the sort of stuff we do. If you can get a flow going, tastes will change. The thing is not to let up. You do something, people say Wow! – then two years pass, zzzzz – you can't afford to let people go back to sleep.”

Philip Adams, who works with words in the field that All-Australian Graffiti is attacking with visuals, puts their work in his pantheon of rediscoverers of Australia, along with Petty, Leunig and Barry Humphries. Kevin Pappas is more accessible than Petty, less of a solitary dreamer than Leunig, more loving than Humphries. Kevin Pappas turns on its head the old saying, “Beware of Greeks bearing gifts”: the gift he bears is our own neglected past.