

interview by Jaklyn Babington



MINI

GRAFF





Mini Graff is sitting here in an outfit that disguises her real identity. I will describe it: black glasses, a long knitted scarf and a black wig with red highlights and fashionable flicks.

Yep, it is my interview wig! I actually have two wigs; I have one that is really scruffy that has paint in it.

The street wig.

Yep. This is my special occasion wig and my little hat holds it all together!

Well then, this is very secret interview with a very secret female Sydney street artist! So, Mini, your new series of work is called the *Suburban roadhouse* series.

Can you speak a little about your initial inspiration for the series and how the works have come about?

Unfortunately, I had some work of mine stolen from my website—a large US company used it as a repeat pattern in a fashion textile. It opened my eyes to what could happen. I am now exploring the same issues of trademark through the *Suburban roadhouse* series. Roadhouses are a vehicle for me to explore trademark issues and this work adds to my continued learning, understanding and response to how trademarks, ownership and branding infiltrate our lives on a daily basis. This situation is reminiscent of an episode that I saw of *The twilight zone* when I was younger, where a family was locked in their house, where everything was branded. They tried to escape by pulling the floorboards up and their house was branded! They eventually discovered that they were actually living in this metal house that was branded with the corporation logotype, that the company owned everything including them. They were also a commodity.

We should talk more about your interest in the adabust. You are approaching subvertising in quite a unique way with your stickers and your *Suburban roadhouse* screenprints and stencils.

Yes, I do. I have parodied Obey/eBay. That particular parody evolved from the Shepard Fairey business model of selling his prints. He would have his online shop open only for a few hours each week, and people were buying his prints in bulk and then immediately selling them on eBay at exorbitant prices. There was a great demand for prints, the middleman profited through the eBay system, so that is where that Obey/eBay connection comes from. Also, you'd be interested to know eBay owns PayPal

and PayPal and eBay are in bed with the government in terms of tax and opening up all of their records to the government.

So, the government knows what people are buying on eBay, when they are buying it and how much they are spending. Wow, that is terrifying.

Yes, this is very scary.

I am fascinated by your stickers. Many of them are complex hand-screenprinted and hand-cut stickers. What is it about the sticker that appeals to you as a means of image communication?

What I like about the stickers is that they are small enough to not be noticed by the graffiti removal contractors, but do get noticed by the intended audience: other street artists. I love the conversation that happens on the street, in secret spots, behind the road signs, where street artists place their stickers and sometimes take others. The back of the signs almost act as a visitors' book. If people really love my stickers, I'm happy for them to remove them from the street. I see them as a little gift they can take away and cherish.

How do you think the Sydney street art scene might be different to the scene in Melbourne? Who are the main Sydney artists who have influenced you and where do you think the street art scene in Sydney might be heading?

Sydney is a little bit tougher than Melbourne because of the Sydney City Council zero-tolerance policy regarding street art and graffiti. For example, when I first moved to Sydney there was a terrific artwork by Casino, a Brisbane-based artist. It was really great—a texta landscape with a stylised character in it, right by the Jewish Museum. Also, when Banksy came through in 2003, there were artists hard at work creating in the Sydney City area, but just after that everything was removed. There was a zero-tolerance, 24-hour hot-spot clean-up! I think for a while the local street artists really struggled to get up, knowing removal was just hours away. Many tried and they tried and they really got nowhere with that. What is happening now is that they still have zero tolerance but it seems like the graffiti removal budget has been decreased or something has happened as of the last eight months. It's evident in the fact paste-ups, like the one by Jumbo and Zap on Bourke Street, has been there for around three or four months now.

Wow, so quite a long time in comparison.

Yeah. Because everything usually gets removed within days, sometimes hours. So, I suspect these contractors get paid per removal. They photograph everything before and after they remove it.

So, it is on commission. How infuriating!

Yes, it seems that way. On the other hand, there are areas in Sydney where street art and graffiti are appreciated. The Marrickville City Council are supportive and the MAY'S Lane Project is an example of a successful graffiti space and archiving project. Much of the graffiti installed over time is still up in the Marrickville area. It is amazing! They are also beginning to see the importance of that type of project to the community. So, I think the street and graffiti artists in the Sydney City Council find it a bit of a struggle. However, I do still see work out there in the Sydney area by street artists: Numbskull, Zap, Jumbo, Max Berry's stickers. Yeah, there tends to be a lot more stickering actually. It seems to all have got a lot smaller. You know, like little hand-drawn stickers, hand-printed stickers.

What about being a female street artist? There are not that many of you—and you would probably know most of the other female street artists in the country. Do you ever collaborate?

Yes. I have worked with Vexta. We have done a couple of collaborations in Sydney and Melbourne, and I think she likes calling me to help her go out and do paste-ups in Sydney because I'm tall. She is like, 'Mini, what are you doing tomorrow night? I have a couple of high spots that I have to get!'.
Mini and her extender arms for hire. That is really funny.

Yep, and my extender legs! During my *Common ground* series, I was casting tiny ducks and painting them. I call them 'the sitting ducks', a little metaphor about how I feel street artists and works can be sitting ducks. It seems commercial folk like to use our public works on the streets for their campaigns, products and so on. So, I went through a phase of gluing little ducks around the streets beside certain street art pieces I felt might be prime candidates for commercial use and abuse, and I came across one of Miso's amazing past-ups in Melbourne.

Oh yes, her gorgeous, detailed cut-paper paste-ups. We are lucky to have two of them in the collection.

Yes, the cut-paper one with the two female figures and the billowing skirts. They were facing each other. I happened to have 50 ducks in my pocket, and glue, so I sat there and glued on all of these ducks into the triangular gaps in Miso's cut-skirt piece—a duck within each of the little cut triangle spaces. I thought that they looked really beautiful. I haven't told her that I did that but I felt it was a nice addition to the work.

So, it was a secret collaboration, without even meeting the other artist! Very exciting. I'm sure Miso would love to know about that—well, she does now!

Yes, and I love a good intervention! Also, the dialogue that sometimes happens between street artists, I have put work out there and enjoy it when people respond. Sometimes, people add speech bubbles to my running couple. Even, sometimes, the tagging or stickering beside my work is an interesting intervention. Just this past week I put up a cardboard *Suburban roadhouse* just off Crown Street. I stuck it up and walked away. About an hour later, I called back to take a photo and someone had already put a little sticker beside the work. I like that someone who I don't know would be thinking, 'Ah, these cardboard houses are appearing and I want my stickers beside them!'.
When the secrecy of the street name is eroded some artists are developing other names to use. Do you think you would ever work as anyone other than Mini Graff on the street?

Yes, and I do. I have been experimenting with a tag, 'G2S', which stands for 'Goodie Two-Shoes'. That was Vexta who coined that ['G2S'].

Because, in comparison to the very lovely and articulate Mini Graff, G2S is so naughty and always on the look out for a bit of street chaos.

Ha ha. Yes! When I'm in the mood for trouble, I am G2S!