

In Memorium: **Michael Callaghan** (1952 - 2012)

It is with regret that we mourn the passing of the Australian political artist and poster designer, Michael Callaghan. He died on 19 May 2012 at age 59. As shocking as death always is, this is also a time to celebrate extraordinary achievement and valued contribution to the community.

Michael Callaghan's work is so ubiquitous that one might overlook how much he defined political poster art in the late twentieth century. Few would deny that his body of work is certainly of national, even international, importance.

Michael was the man behind the iconic poster: "*If the unemployed are dole bludgers, what the fuck are the idle rich?*"

As an artist, social commentator and political activist Michael used the medium of posters to confront current social issues head on. These posters combine strong, often vibrant, colours and bold iconography with a razor sharp wit. They were designed to immediately grab attention and bring about social change.

The Wollongong-born artist came to prominence during the mid-1970s for his role in the irreverent Earthworks Poster Collective at the University of Sydney's Tin Sheds. This venue/workshop was a hothouse of art, music, ideas and politics and is remembered as one of the most radical and significant "alternative art spaces" in Australia during its heyday. Michael's posters from that era include: "*Mutate Now And Avoid The Rush*", and: "*Give Fraser The Razor! (Cut Back The Ruling Class)*".

Following hard on the heels of the Tin Sheds phenomenon, Michael co-founded Redback Graphix in Brisbane in 1979 while he was working as Artist in Residence at Griffith University (where he also set up a community access print studio). Redback Graphix later moved to Wollongong, and finally Sydney producing a huge body of outstanding work over 30-plus years. Redback Graphix mixed art production with graphic design work for clients including government departments, the Australian Electoral Commission, trade unions, community groups and Indigenous organisations.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s Michael undertook many official commissions from a number of organizations and government departments. For example, Michael is the co-creator of "*Condoman*" the Phantom-like figure who advocates the use of condoms for young Indigenous men, one of the more successful anti-AIDS campaigns in indigenous health. He also made a series of narrative images (story telling using pictures) on alcohol abuse, again aimed at convincing the Aboriginal community to change destructive aspects in their personal lives and wider community.

His political posters for the Earthworks Poster Collective and Redback Graphix are held in the National Gallery of Australia, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, in State and regional galleries and library and university collections across Australia, and in museum collections in California, Mexico, Japan and Paris.

Michael was the recipient of the H.C. Coombs Creative Arts Fellowship in 2009 from the School of Art at the Australian National University.

In recent years, Michael had continued working with combining art and politics in digital prints and had also returned to making paintings and sculptures.

Michael has exhibited consistently throughout his career. Last year, Michael presented an exhibition called: "*The Torture Memo*", in which the theme was a raw exposé of the war in Iraq. It focused on the doublespeak of the "*war on terror*" and in particular the issues it brings to bear on human rights. This exhibition was shown in May 2010 at School of Art Gallery at ANU and the following month at the Damien Minton Gallery in Sydney.

The embedded video, by Sandy Edwards, was recorded at Michael Callaghan's wake (aka Memento Mori) held in the small Southern Highlands town of Exeter, south of Sydney. On 26 May 2012, people gathered on short notice from as far as Darwin, Melbourne, Brisbane and Sydney to honour his remarkable life's achievements.

Michael painted the artwork for his own coffin.

"*Memento Mori*" is a Latin phrase meaning "*Remember that you must die.*" In other words, it is a reminder of death and mortality. It is also a reminder of the judgment that will follow our death.

Memento mori is the name given to paintings or sculptures that illustrate the theme suggested by this phrase. Usually featuring a skull and/or bones, such sculptures were a common feature of tombs in churches in Europe during the late Middle Ages and early modern age. The deceased usually requested that the sculpture be placed on their tomb as a warning to remaining family members (who would frequently visit the tomb) to attend to the good of their souls.



Many will know Michael fought with illness and pain for the last 20 years. He died from complications arising from mouth and throat cancer.

In 1997, Michael told me he blamed the strong chemicals used in the screen-printing process for the permanent damage to his original liver. He was the recipient of a very successful liver transplant.

Dedications to Michael Callaghan can be read (and added to) here:

<http://www.redbackgraphix.com.au/>

(The text above is based on a compilation from various sources found online.)