

CLIMARTE POSTER PROJECT

Thursday 5-28 May 2016

Lab-14 Gallery at the
Carlton Connect Initiative
The University of Melbourne
700 Swanston St, Carlton

CLIMARTE has commissioned eleven leading Australian artists to design posters that engage the community on climate change action and convey the strength, optimism and urgency we need to move to a clean renewable energy future. During May hundreds of posters will be displayed on poster sites around Melbourne.

Symptoms of the Future: Ten climate posters by Dr Peter Christoff, Associate Professor, School of Geography, The University of Melbourne

We all have a poster we remember. Mine was taped to a bookshop window in Prahran. A stark black and white image of a boy as young as I was then, about 13, stared out at me. He was naked from the chest up. He looked at me with sad eyes. The skin on the lower part of his face and neck had flowed into his chest. The scarring was horrific. The poster had two words on it. Above the boy, 'Vietnam', and below, 'Napalm'. For me, it was a poster with consequences.

Modern posters were invented at the end of the 19th Century. New lithographic printing technologies had just enabled the mass-production of colourful images on vast sheets of paper. These posters immediately became startling confrontations for the spectator and the flaneur and, eventually, commodities in their own right.

From advertising to propaganda, the best posters had a capacity to arrest attention, to disrupt and surprise and seduce. Even in our image-saturated social media-dominated age, they still have the power to shock. This comes from three elements working together.

There is the poster's design - at its best, art. In Paris at the close of the Belle Époque, voluptuous images of leg-lifting women by Toulouse-Lautrec advertised the dance hall of the Moulin Rouge while Cheret's and Mucha's ornate tendril-haired beauties lured passers-by to drink, to smoke, to the theatre. During the two world wars, posters recruited the young and innocent to self-sacrifice and slaughter. After the wars they recruited everyone to consume - movies, cars, clothes, cosmetics.

In style and content, posters tend to capture the feel of the times when they were made. Some of the starkest and most powerful are political posters, such as those produced in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and then in the satellite states of the Soviet Bloc - especially Poland - after the Second World War, using bold blocks of colour and photographs to defend the Revolution and the homeland, inspire devotion to the Cause, mobilise against political foes, and to support One Party.

Then there is the poster's expected and unexpected message, visual and also often verbal. The sauciness of the high-flung skirt, drawing you into the voyeuristic world of cabaret, the declamatory visual thump of recruiting posters in the First World War (Uncle Sam and 'I Want You'), the charm of the travel poster drawing you to exotic places, the romance of classic cinema posters.

Over time, culturally, we have learnt to read the visual rhetoric of posters, their short-hand symbolic language, almost automatically. So when Andy Warhol produced his iconic Campbell's soup tin art-posters, he exploited and exploded the uncritical consumption of such image-messages. He parodied and ironized simple advertising, cynically and humorously turning a simple design-image into an uber-commodity that made nothing and everything 'art'.

And finally the third element, the disruptive effect of placement. The unexpected encounter which engages you, forces you to look again at something that, unpredicted in its location, competes successfully for your awareness. The inescapable stocking, the can of food, the face with longing eyes and huge lips, at the tram stop or on the billboard.

These ten posters about and against global warming are unpredictable images about an uncertain future. They are not straightforward 'messages' selling you a concept or a product. Indirect, nuanced and occasionally obscure in ways that advertising and propaganda rarely are, they force you to stop and puzzle. None of this is surprising given the extraordinary challenge of making visible those changes and processes in some sense hidden from us all. All we see and experience are the symptoms. Wherever they are placed, these posters are dissonant. They are as strikingly out-of-place as wild weather.

For instance, in Siri Hayes' *The Southern skies all a swirl* gives us the lyricism of the landscape at Toora in Victoria, laden with wind farms and hope. Yet it is literally and metaphorically over-written by gyres reminiscent of and quoting Van Gogh's turbulent spirals. The visible world struggles against the menacing meteorological prospect of the cyclonic force of climate change lurking offshore.

By contrast, some of the other posters seem unusually heavy with words. Nature is, in a sense, always beyond us - an unknowable material reality lurking just beyond our capacities to apprehend it, beyond the cultural fringe. And so the fading letters in Jon Campbell's *Great Barrier Reef* are as good a representation, in one sense, as any other image. The words' erasure reminds us that even the little we think we know will vanish before we have seen enough of it to understand or depict it better. (It is an added bitter irony that the poster was in production as extreme ocean warming was bleaching corals along 1000 kilometres of the Reef.)

The caustically funny *HazelShould* seems straight-forward but is equally slippery. The incremental upward creep of a graph showing CO₂ accumulating invisibly in the atmosphere, the distant and unfathomable actions of those making the goods we consume while using electricity made from coal burnt out of sight and out of mind - these are abstractions which make the consequences of our actions harder to understand and mitigation in an everyday sense so hard to achieve. Gabrielle de Vietri & Will Foster put a name and a face to the problem. By personalising the worst polluting power station in the developed world they also personalise the moral choices of politicians and others who keeping 'her' - this lethal antique - going. Abstract no longer.

Meanwhile, Angela Brennan's *The future is Not What It Used To Be* - again, all words - literally refuses to depict the future. It is a poster that nostalgically looks both ways. Its graphic style, quoting 'cooler times' in the 50s and 60s (as well as Mondrian), is reminiscent of a past when the future didn't include climate change's particular option for planetary catastrophe. Its subtly stated provocation is for us to return the planet to a safer climate.

Even given their considerable individuality, the ten posters all embody a similar artistic intent - a common dual message in the face of darkening, warming times. They are all simultaneously incitements to contemplation and action. Even in the art of warning about warming, we tend to find or recover something fragile, meditative, subtle, even beautiful... Which then also reminds us that to preserve this fragility and beauty we must act.

Artists & Posters:

Angela Brennan *The future is Not What it Used To Be*

Chris Bond *Yield*

Jon Campbell *Great Barrier Reef*

Kate Daw *one good day*

Katherine Hattam *Renewable*

Siri Hayes *The Southern skies all a swirl*

Martin King *whatever way the wind blows*

Gabrielle de Vietri & Will Foster *HazelShould*

Thornton Walker (words by Polly Walker) *Seed flower*

Miles Howard-Wilks *The Good & Bad of the Reef*

Support us: CLIMARTE

CLIMARTE started with a big question; could we harness the power of the arts to engage more people in the most important conversation in human history? Countless public presentations and an internationally acclaimed festival later, we're more than ecstatic to report the answer: a resounding Yes! Having grown our audience from three to more than 75,000 people, we now seek your help to support our forthcoming festival ART+CLIMATE=CHANGE 2017 to inspire many more people to call for effective solutions to the worsening climate threat. If you'd like to support ART+CLIMATE=CHANGE 2017 please go to climarte.org/donate

All donations made through the Australian Cultural Fund are fully tax-deductible. Your support is very much appreciated.

Thank you!
www.climarte.org

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CLIMARTE is proudly supported by **David Leece**, Director, Billard Leece Partnership



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