

Artist as Conduit

by Antonia Aitken, an artist currently based in Hobart, Tasmania



left
Wendy Murray.
Behind this Smile (Laverton Community Hub installation), 2015, large format solvent print on clear vinyl, 320 x 460 cm.

right
Wendy Murray.
Behind this Smile (Altona North Community Library installation), 2015, large format solvent print on clear vinyl, 81 cm (diameter).

Printer: Industrial Art Sign Co.



*Our need to be constantly busy, to always be making more, is endemic to the activist compulsion to keep a movement alive.*¹

I met artist Wendy Murray in 2010 whilst she was undertaking a residency at Megalo Print Studio in Canberra. My immediate impression was of an artist with an infectious energy and activist compulsion; an artist deeply embedded in the tradition of printmaking as a socially engaged practice and with a sharp awareness of the power of image and text in conversation with public space.

Beginning her making life as a graphic designer has contributed to Murray's ability to compete with and effectively remix the bombardment of mass media images that infiltrate our public domains. She reads and interprets these spaces, finding visual solutions that play, subvert and attempt to deal with the social, economic and environmental issues that face the community inhabiting them.

Murray's practice, which is now based in Melbourne's west, employs her core values of social engagement and approaches to making that allow her to have an immediate and critical interaction with her environment. With an understanding of the democratic nature of printmaking, whereby the printed image can simultaneously operate in multiple spaces, Murray uses stencil, screen-print, letterpress and digital printing techniques to spread her messages.

The dialogue with site is at the core of Murray's practice. This collaborative approach is evident in her recent community engagement project *Behind this Smile*, which Murray undertook in 2015 in conjunction with the Hobsons Bay Council in Melbourne.

Behind this Smile was developed by the council to support the Australian Human Rights Commission's campaign, *Racism It Stops with Me*. This ongoing campaign aims to empower individuals and organisations to

respond to racism – a highly relevant moment for such a project, considering the ugly 'Reclaim Australia' pro-nationalist protests we have witnessed this year. The project employed a community engagement model facilitated by Murray, Alice Reed, Cultural Community Development Facilitator, and the council. The project aimed to make an artwork that would reflect the diverse cultural histories of the area and encourage dialogue about racism. It provided Murray 'with an intimate insight into the lives and histories of the fourteen community members,'² some of whose faces and personal statements now fill the windows of several community hubs in the area.

Initially I wondered how Murray would deal with a project so mediated by a government council when her practice has so often been in conflict with, or resistance to, such bodies. Interestingly, the council wanted a guerrilla-style campaign that would filter through the city, but that was still endorsed by the council. Murray saw the contradictions and challenges in this idea for herself and the aims of the project. She proposed a project that would talk more broadly to the suburban community by allowing for a conversation to emerge in inclusive spaces such as the libraries. As Murray puts it 'safe spaces, where people feel less threatened and are more likely to engage with something that otherwise might intimidate or scare them'.³

Contemporary media images are often presented to us as series of minute dots. Artists have long experimented with ways of deconstructing and manipulating the dot to create images that reference and disrupt our understanding of the mass media. In this recent project, Murray has continued her ongoing research into the role of the 'dot' and has used the dot-screen to make large-scale printed portraits of community members. Installed on the library windows, the images can be viewed from both inside and outside the buildings. The glass surface brings

luminosity and transparency to the work, and the nature of the dot allows the viewer to see through the in-between spaces and connect with the environment beyond – linking the images with the community they represent.

By acting 'as a conduit for the information and ideas to flow through,'⁴ Murray's practice is always being challenged as she navigates the most effective ways of raising her critical questions, whilst broadening debate beyond the walls of the gallery and sometimes even the street. •

References

1. Josh McPhee, *Paper Politics: Socially Engaged Printmaking Today*. Oakland, CA: PM Press. 2009.
2. Artist statement for *Behind this Smile*, 2015.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.

Wendy Murray, *Behind this Smile* (artist and work, Altona Meadows Library and Learning Centre), 2015, large format solvent print on clear vinyl, 82 cm diameter. Printer: Industrial Art Sign Co.



Wendy Murray's work will be exhibited in the following Melbourne venues until 30 June: Altona Library; Altona Meadows Library and Learning Centre; Altona North Community Library; Williamstown Library; Laverton Community Hub.

http://www.hobsonsbay.vic.gov.au/Community/Multicultural/Behind_This_Smile