



THE ART OF BEER

The craft beer label has emerged as a platform for painters, illustrators and designers, liberating art from the gallery and putting it into the hands of millions of thirsty Australians. Story by **Julian Tompkin**

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On Christmas Eve 2001 Ireland-based Australian artist John Kelly took receipt of a hand-delivered letter while in Nice. With a successful exhibition on Paris’s most famed boulevard, the Champs-Élysées, behind him and sculptures from his notorious Cow Up a Tree and Three Cows series commanding tens — and more increasingly hundreds — of thousands of dollars internationally he had fair reason to be optimistic that his future as a practising artist was secure, if not assured.

Kelly had since been invited to bring his famous cows to Monte Carlo’s renowned International Sculpture Festival and was plotting exhibitions of his paintings in Basel and London. He tore open the envelope. It was in French but by page 14, with its brusque formatting, generous use of bold typeface and its ledger of neatly caballed numbers, he had deciphered the rough gist: he was being sued for more than €400,000.

The architect of the legal stoush was Stéphane Jacob, a well-connected Parisian art dealer who had built a successful business negotiating exclusively in Australian art, having sold works

by Emily Kame Kngwarreye, Kathleen Petyarre and Kelly through his private gallery, Arts d’Australie, in Paris. Jacob had been instrumental in executing Kelly’s blockbuster debut in Paris.

Despite Jacob and Kelly having no formal written contract as to long-term representation of the artist’s career in Europe, Jacob’s remonstrations over this point would land the two in court for four protracted years. The case was dismissed in 2003 only to be dredged up once more with Kelly eventually being found to have committed acts of “commercial denigration and parasitism” against the dealer and ordered to pay him €20,000.

It was no small change for a young artist — newly married with a child, and the ink still wet on a mortgage — who had seen no financial recompense as his sculptures traded hands for staggering figures on the resale market.

“It shook me deeply,” Kelly says via teleconference from his farm in West Cork, still clearly troubled by the incident, which he estimates left him \$70,000 out of pocket after legal costs. “I wondered if I’d ever be able to work again, the stress it created was existential.”

Nonetheless, further controversy would not elude Kelly and his laconic works too long and soon he would find himself in a public stoush with the nation’s cultural funding body, the Australia Council, over what he saw as its imperious

attempts to homogenise Australian art under one discernible “brand” in response to Saatchi & Saatchi’s Australians and the Arts report, commissioned by the Howard government.

The advertising agency that engineered Margaret Thatcher’s rise in Britain, London-based Saatchi & Saatchi made several recommendations on how to acculturate and harness Australia’s creative output: among them, to better connect the arts with “the average Australian”, “make every effort to demystify the arts” and synthesise Australian arts and culture into a discernible and marketable brand.

Kelly was further incited by having just thumbed through Naomi Klein’s anti-corporate manifesto No Logo, and his response was as incendiary as it was typically laconic: a pastiche of the distinctive Australia Council logo, with its kangaroo and sun motif, reconfigured in several works collectively entitled Incorrect Usage and exhibited at London’s Piccadilly Gallery. The show was a barbed rebuke to the Australia Council’s strict stipulations as to the application of its logo to grant recipients, encouraging one British reviewer to declare: “the Australia Council’s kangaroo graphics, liberated and released back into the wild”.

Clearly realising a kindred iconoclastic spirit, in 2005 professional gambler and art collector David Walsh (yet to be known as the founder of

Hobart's Museum of Old and New Art and Dark Mofo) invited Kelly to Hobart to create some works for his new craft brewery, Moo Brew. With Kelly all but ruined by the Jacob affair, Walsh's arrival was nothing short of transcendental.

"David was outside the realm of what you might call 'government art', where art is overtly controlled," Kelly explains, with a partially completed kangaroo and sun artwork on canvas clearly visible behind him in his studio. "I am really conscious of the connection between government support for the arts and having artists on a leash that they can rein in at any time.

"Being Moo Brew he of course was resolved on using the Three Cows in a Pile painting," Kelly says of his recurring cow motifs, cheekily named Dobell's cows after an improbable anecdote concerning Australian artist William Dobell and his camouflaging of air force bases with papier-mache cows during World War II, apparently hoodwinking many a Japanese reconnaissance pilot. "Then I started explaining my anti-branding project from Piccadilly Gallery — what you'd call a 'culture jam' — and he immediately got it. So that was that: we took on the establishment with a beer bottle."

While Walsh and Kelly's audacious act may have been one of cultural subterfuge — employing the derisive maxim, "it's art, not craft" — today the craft beer label has emerged as its own autonomous artistic medium: an unlikely platform for contemporary painters, illustrators and designers that has seemingly liberated art from the gallery walls and put it directly into the hands of millions of Australians.

Rewind two short decades and the landscape was radically different, where omnipotent brands such as Fosters, Victoria Bitter, Tooheys and Swan — all with their brutalist and decisively masculine leitmotifs — spoke of a no-bulldust nation where, as the memorable VB advertisement proclaimed, "a hard-earned thirst needs a big cold beer". While today those brands are suffused with nostalgia — for some an exemplar of a much simpler Australia, ever-irradiated in a golden summer hue and sound-tracked to the din of the cricket on the wireless — there was little intersection between these titans of tinned lager and the nation's cultural practitioners.

"Beer in Australia, at least until the 2000s, had a direct relationship with sport culture," says James Smith, founder of Australian beer bible the Crafty Pint. "But beyond the purists, where it's all about what's in the can, craft definitely has cultivated a relationship with music and the arts. It's all about expressing yourself and your individuality. It would be fair to argue that most people buying craft beer today shop with their eyes first. It first needs to capture the imagination and then the palate."

Emerging as a modest counterculture in Australia with the dawn of the new millennium, and pioneered by breweries such as Mountain Goat in Melbourne and Little Creatures in Fremantle — where mainstream insipid lagers were an anathema to the hop-harried styles emerging from the US, such as the pale ale and India pale ale — within two decades domestic craft beer has become a \$600m industry and continues to grow, with more than 700 breweries nationally.

While "craft" may be a contentious genre today, as big beer snaps up independent players and supermarket chains moonlight with contract-brewed custom labels, the sector is generally defined by its focus on premium ingredients as well as its insatiable appetite for unorthodox experimentation, often more alchemy than gastronomy. What also defines craft beer, at least in Australia, is its innate relationship with the creative industries — whether it be a bespoke beer fashioned for an art gallery or a collaboration between a contemporary musician and a brewer.

More recently beer cans have emerged as exclusive works of art unto themselves, as breweries increasingly commission visual artists to dream up evocations that capture the seemingly radical zeitgeist of the craft movement itself, limited only by the dimensions of the can. Labels such as Kaiju! and Sailors Grave arguably have become defined more by their artwork today than by the beer itself, Sailors Grave having engaged British children's book illustrator Melissa Castrillon to create its intricate and often playful etchings.

Melbourne artist and illustrator Beci Orpin considered herself an unorthodox choice when

approached to create the artwork for Coles' new in-house craft beer label, Tinnies. Despite reservations, Orpin recognised the unique opportunity to exhibit in an unconventional medium outside the usual strictures of Australian art and design, and also the potential to engage with a new audience.

"I think you could safely define my work as quite feminine, so I was perhaps an unusual fit," she says, laughing, from lockdown in Melbourne's Brunswick West. "But it's exciting to see how this sector has evolved. It's a whole industry now and you see some really amazing artworks both in Australia and internationally. I definitely feel it is an opportunity for artists ... it is certainly a new canvas and presents new opportunities."

An otherwise innocuous historical footnote, it was the return of the humble aluminium can that has proved the decisive harbinger for the emergence of the medium of beer label art. Much cheaper to produce and print than bottles (and, according to some, better at protecting unpasteurised beers from light

taint), the can also offered a larger format for artists and designers to exploit, enabling more intricate and detailed works that also would withstand damp storage.

As the scene has matured, creative agencies have become possessed with decoding the formula to capturing eyeballs amid a kaleidoscopic gallery of art and design, where hundreds of creations holler for attention in cluttered beer fridges. What makes a brand such as Western Australia's Feral Brewing, with its rough and unvarnished aesthetic — and which in 2017 was bought by Coca-Cola for an undisclosed sum — cut through while other equally eye-catching brands languish unsold in the back of the bottle shop?

Block Branding founder and artistic director Mark Braddock, who captained Feral's rebranding and has created labels for other craft breweries, says the holy grail lies in embracing difference without alienating more conservative consumers new to the scene.

"The labels that work best for me are those that have strong shelf presence in an ever-more-crowded retail environment while also engaging in more detail and in a more intimate way when they are in the drinker's hand," he says.

Can art's acceptance as a compelling new creative medium was further augured last year by the publication by Penguin books of handsome coffee-table tome *The Art of Beer*. Dedicated to the multifarious can art creations from New Zealand's most progressive craft brewery, Garage Project, the book documents the evolution of a business that cites Lewis Carroll as an inspiration

Opposite page: Designs by Keith Shore for Mikkeller; this page: John Kelly at his home in West Cork, above; Kelly's design for Moo Brew, left; Shore designs for Mikkeller, far left and top right



John Minihan

'So that was that: we took on the establishment with a beer bottle'

John Kelly



and that ultimately would go on to enjoy an unlikely collaboration with the Royal New Zealand Ballet.

"Great beer art only elevates the experience of drinking beer," Pete Gillespie prefaces in the book. "I'm a strong believer that every beer should tell a story. When you engage with a beer, the experience begins well before you open the can or bottle. The art draws you in, you want to look at it more closely."

While the US may have pioneered the craft beer industry and its emergence as a vibrant new creative canvas, few breweries have achieved such cult global veneration as Denmark's Mikkeller, a brewery whose renegade labels fashioned by US-based artist and illustrator Keith Shore have become certified collector's items, available in limited edition screenprints and risographs that habitually sell out.

"Making art for a bottle or can is unique because the drinker gets to engage with the art," Shore says from his home in Philadelphia. He cites the likes of Raymond Pettibon, Philip Guston and Misaki Kawai as cardinal inspirations. "They are forced to be close to the art longer than they would take in a piece at a museum or gallery. Love or hate the artwork, that beer label will stare back at them until the last sip is poured."

Kelly, who grew up in the working-class suburb of Sunshine in Melbourne, takes the conversation into his evergreen Irish garden, where he recently has created a monument to commemorate the Great Famine that has garnered praise from the likes of Bob Geldof and Jeremy Irons. Internationally his works have hung in concert with Lucian Freud, Sidney Nolan and Pablo Picasso but they have received little serious curatorial recognition from Australia's major galleries and institutions.

Paradoxically, while his pieces feature in eminent global museums from the Yale Centre for British Art in Connecticut to the Guangdong Museum of Art in China — and have been exhibited in front of crowds of 200,000 revellers at the Glastonbury Festival — his beer labels remain his only real dialogue with Australian audiences.

"In my career I've taken serious risks of which some have paid off but others have also created some health issues," Kelly says, referring to a bout of the flu in 2017 that took an ominous turn and put him in a coma that nearly ended his life.

"I think any form of expression that has a freedom about it, that can be critical while being accessible, is vital," he says, moving the camera towards a large-scale sculpture of the contentious "kangaroo and sun" motif that takes centre stage in his garden.

"It's no good when you listen to, even in the art world, critics who use a language so obscure that you need to have a philosophy degree to be able to understand it. But it's a really fine line and I've navigated that fine line, I hope, successfully. A beer label may have been an unlikely form of artistic dissonance but it did its job."