

Geoff Cook

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Geoff's works are bold, dramatic and, well - simply amazing. With over 35 year's experience he has worked for clients including Australia Post, Qantas, Time Australia, BRW, Nike, Bendigo Bank, ANL, Cadbury, Nestle and Penguin Books. Oh, and he designed our famous IA logo!

Outline: With a long history in the Australian illustration industry, it would be fantastic if we could have an overview of your career path. Could you tell us about the early days of "All Australian Graffiti" and the some of your career highlights?

Geoff: After finishing in 1970 the Diploma of Graphic Design at Prahran College (later absorbed into Swinburne uni), I drifted from one design job to another and earned a crust without much enthusiasm. What I came to realise after about three years was that illustration was my real interest. But I had never considered it as a career option until then. It just wasn't on the radar.

I took a plunge and quit my job to spend some time at home working on building up a folio to hawk around town, hoping to get enough freelance work to keep me going. By a serendipitous coincidence at the same time two of my mates from college, Mimmo Cozzolino and Con Aslanis started an illustration studio, which they called All Australian Graffiti, and asked me to join them along with Isi Marmur and Neil Curtis, and later Tony Ward and Meg Williams.

We started in a small old-style office suite in St Kilda road (no longer there) and later bought a shopfront up the hill from St Kilda Junction.

AAG had a different take on illustration from the conventional practice of the time. Mimmo and Con saw Aussie culture with the eyes of Italian/Greek immigrants and the work we produced was an affectionate satire of it (before 'Australiana' had become fashionable). We were a group of young guys (and girl) who were having a lot of fun - and making a meagre living out of it. Not that it was all fun and games - we had to do the bread and butter stuff too, just to survive. Mimmo was the studio manager and guiding light and had some creative ideas about promoting the studio, like the Aussie tea towel suit he wore when seeing clients, and the carved wooden kangaroo folio case he carried.

There was a lot of energy in the place - and a lot of sparks.

While I was with AAG my highlight job was undoubtedly the Centenary Cricket poster. It was our own studio project and was intended to hook into the Centenary Match being played that year at the MCG. The poster was an artistic





success but a commercial flop.

I followed up with another poster for the Hang Ten sports-wear company, in the same style of a multitude of little figures forming a pattern (but this time on a tennis theme). Again, it got attention, and this was the start of a thread in my illustration career of being the guy who does the 'thousands of little people' pictures. A good earner but I finally had to close it down or go loopy.

AAG ran its course and broke up in 1978. At the time I was representing AAG in Sydney so I had an easy transition from working in a partnership to going solo. Simple as not sending the cheques back to Melbourne.

Outline: With a long backlist of clients, we'd love to hear about some of your favourite projects and the resulting work you created.

Geoff: I wish I could line up a long list of work I could say are my favourites, but the highlights over the years are sparse. Most of my work has been fairly mundane.

There were a few good moments, especially in the early years: the cricket and tennis posters, illustrations for Mimmo Cozzolino's 'Symbols of Australia' calendars and book, the 'All Creatures Great and Small' RSPCA poster, and the Australian Zoos stamp series for Australia Post.

More recently I illustrated a kids' book, '*D is for Down Under*', which I really enjoyed doing.

Opportunities for creative work in the industry seem to have dried up long ago, for me at least.

Outline: Over this time, what are the big shifts you have seen in the illustration industry? What skills do you think an illustration graduate (or someone early in their career) needs to learn to be successful?

Geoff: There are a lot more illustrators in the industry, for starters.

And of course the internet has transformed the business. It has opened up far more opportunity to promote and communicate, and has made the world market available for everyone.

Digital art has certainly changed the way we work, for good and bad. The good side is it has cut out a lot of the drudgery and is so portable, but on the other hand it is dangerously easy to be slick and facile.

I haven't got a lot of advice for the graduates, except I think drawing skills are still important and probably self-marketing has become more important with the increasing competition. Just keep at it.



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Outline: You mention on your website that you create primarily digitally, but I find that a lot of your work still maintains a painterly quality - something I can imagine is quite hard to do. What process do you use in your digital work, and are there any tips you can share in ensuring digital work still keeps a "hand made" quality?

Geoff: I use mainly Corel Painter, and sometimes Photoshop and Illustrator. My painting technique hasn't changed a lot, except I'm pushing around pixels instead of paint. The Painter program makes it quite easy to keep the 'hand made' quality in my work. It's primarily a 'natural media' application so it's just a matter of choosing a brush and away you go. I seldom use filters or other special effects, but I do use a lot of layers - for the flexibility.

My process is to work digitally from the very first rough sketches. A lot of artists seem to pencil their roughs and then scan them, but I can't see the point. From there I block out the main shapes, with pencil outline and fill, in a dark or medium tone, often on separate layers, and then work up from there - basically working from dark to light the same as traditional technique. Chalk or oil pastel is my usual choice of media, and I've avoided brushes that I think push the digital simulation too far - such as impasto oils or watercolour. The only time I go back to paper is when I'm working on ideas and scribble pages of thumbnails.

Outline: In making the transition from traditional media to digital, what skills did you need to learn - and how did you learn them? (Self-taught, or did you return to study?).

Geoff: In 2003 I made the shift from the drawing board to the computer. I taught myself, with the help of program manuals and a book or two, and found the transition fairly easy and natural. But I have to admit that my methods were very clumsy at first. I haven't regretted it, although as with most things there is a compromise. The subtleties and 'unexpectedness' of natural media aren't there, but, on the

other hand, no more laborious cutting of airbrush stencils.

Outline: What sort of art do you create for yourself now? Do you exhibit?

Geoff: I'm pretty much retired from commercial illustration but still continue to paint and draw (and always have done between commercial jobs). Lately I have become very interested in using an iPad as a portable mini studio. It's great to be able to take it anywhere and draw on the spot, and it opens up possibilities you don't get with a sketchbook. It's made me aware of how stale you can get working in front of a desktop monitor year after year. I've been using Sketchbook Pro and a great program from a team in Hobart, called Procreate.

I've got ideas of producing a line of limited edition prints.

Outline: We'd love to hear of the fellow illustrators that inspire/impress you!

Geoff: In my early years as an illustrator I pored over the work in the English and American illustration annuals and I was inspired by the work of illustrators like Wilson Mclean, Jack Unruh, Guy Billout and James McMullan, among many others. Pushpin Studio and Hipgnosis were doing exciting work.

Now I feel like it is a visual overload. There are so many outstanding illustrators I'm reluctant to pick anyone in particular. But out of the Australian bunch I'll pick a couple anyway: Nigel Buchanan and Shaun Tan. 🍷

{▶️CLICK!} Geoff Cook

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