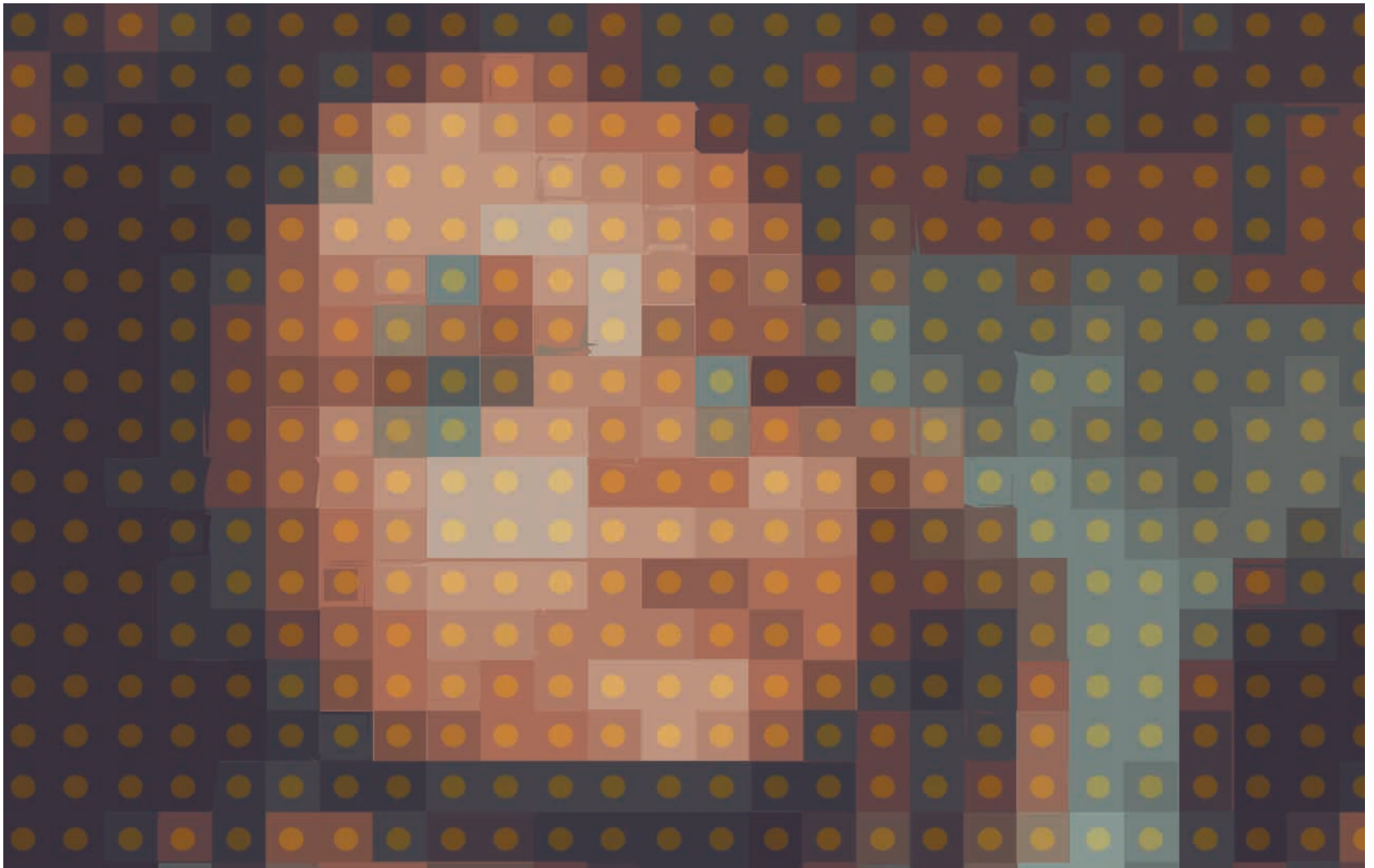


<Interview by Din Heagney>



Simon Alderson

The enterprising founder of online art company **PIXELbros** is dangerous by design.





above:
Escalator art and **Girl beer**
 Both based on photographs
 by Jun Tagami.
 <www.etisoppo.com>

facing page:
Stone dots

Beginnings. In primary school I got a scholarship with the Queensland Art Gallery for children's art tuition. At high school I also studied at night at the Australian Flying Art School in Brisbane. The school was set up by Mervyn Moriarty, who travelled around the outback giving art lessons. I was learning painting and sculpture from some well-known Brisbane artists. At that time I intended to be a fine artist. I guess I still thought I was hot shit until I got to the QCA (Queensland College of Art) and realised I was just one of many.

Process. In addition to the BA in Illustration, I had already done a certificate in commercial art, which was all about the old school way of doing art for reproduction (this was before they actually had any computers at the QCA – I guess that carbon dates me a bit...). So I learnt all about using technical pens to draw straight lines and using gouache to paint the corners nice and sharp; all this really anal stuff that really went against my nature. What that taught me was what the process was all about and thankfully this has stayed with me.

Illustration. So, the technical background taught me a bit of discipline and the Illustration course was a chance to have a play for a few years. We were told right from the start that the course would definitely not land us a job, but to me it was important to play around with a variety of mediums and study art history and movements. I know successful artists that have never been to art school, but if I hadn't done this I wouldn't have been

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afforded the luxury and time to be able to experiment on non-commercial projects. Should be more of it!

Media. I like to sketch stuff in pencil and then scan it in. These days I draw straight on the computer using a mouse. I like painting in either oils or acrylics. Oils because you can push it as far as you like and it takes ages to dry so you can rework areas until you are happy. Acrylics for exactly the opposite reason: they dry fast and are really flat.

Concepts. I think I really benefited from not learning computer skills for another five or six years. Sometimes I go and speak to students studying graphic design and tell them about the industry and, from what I see, most of them really lack an understanding of the creative process. You don't just sit down in front of Photoshop and push a few buttons and art comes out the other end.

→ What I emphasise is that the computer is merely a tool, like a technical pen. If you don't have a concept to start with you are just wasting your time, or worse still creating visual pollution if it actually makes it to the printer.

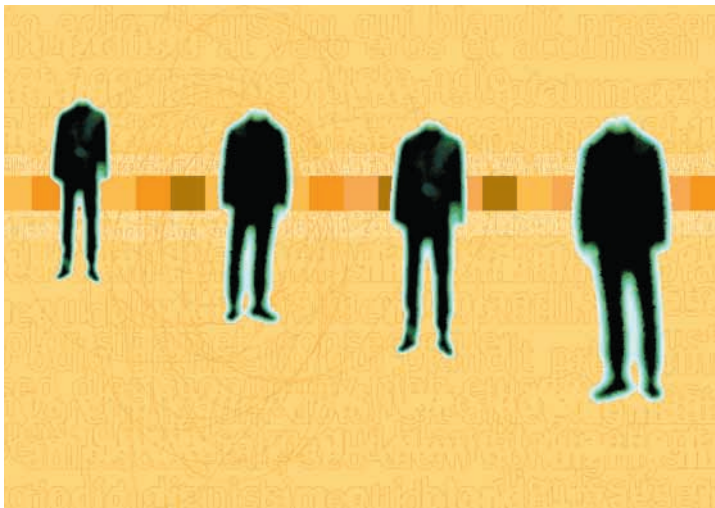
Agencies. When I first finished art school and went out looking for a job, I was surprised at all the ad agency people I went to see about work, because they all quickly try to pigeonhole you. They would look at my work and say, "Are you an illustrator, designer or art director?" I tried to tell them I could do all three, but this wasn't possible for some reason – you

had to choose. I'm still not sure why. It's probably all part of a CIA globalisation plot to water down originality and creative thought and keep us all separate and powerless, unthinkingly glued to our TV screens.

If I were working in an agency, I would boil the water. If in doubt, deny them your precious bodily fluids.

Lessons. The biggest lesson I've learned is don't just do it for the money. Even if you have no alternative at the time, I don't think it's worth sacrificing your health and sanity for a job you hate or don't believe in. I'd rather rake up leaves for the council. The second lesson that I was taught in smaller companies is: you may have to work a few late nights but don't get sucked into doing it every week to make somebody else rich. If they aren't making it up to you in days off or monetary incentives, I'd be walking out the door at 5.30.

Style. Personally I have never tried to develop a style. I was concerned for a good many years that I had no style. I now think this is to my advantage, kind of a revenge of the nerds. If you don't have a nice comfortable mattress to fall back on in a tight spot, you may actually have to see each new situation as a unique and fresh encounter. I suppose I am trying to achieve the designer's equivalent of living for the moment. I'd like to qualify this lofty



statement by adding that a good deal of my income comes from formulaic 'Trash for Cash' and I'm not pretending otherwise, but that stuff isn't in my folio.

this page
top to bottom:
Yellow power pylon
Letter neg
Sandstone funky

Approach. What I have is an approach. That is, I treat each project as a design problem. It is visual problem solving, so to come up with some arbitrary house style that can somehow fit every scenario is nonsense. I think the thing that many designers forget is that the number one objective is to make the client, or band, happy with the end result instead of trying to achieve their own stylistic objectives. For example, much as I love Reg Mombassa's work, as soon as you see his style you instantly think Mambo, which sort of spoils it for any other client he may work with.

Film. Paramount Pictures was where I really developed my counterfeiting skills. We were called on to replicate all manner of things including CIA IDs from actual photocopied badges, Russian passports and air tickets and number plates from every country of the world. It is also fun making something nice like a street poster and then sticking it on the wall and spraying it with brown paint and ripping it to make it look aged. I'd love to do more film work like that, but at the moment I have taken a different path.

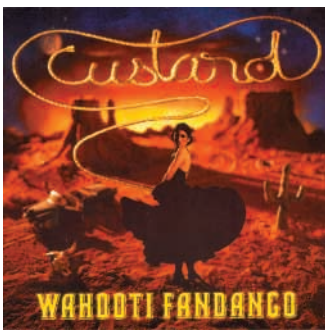
Web. The rise of the vector on the web has crossed back over to film and TV, I have noticed as well. I guess all the edgy design on the web is being mimicked in formats that don't have size limitations, which is really interesting. For me it has changed graphic design from my background in print to having to think of it as a time-based medium, which is more akin to filmmaking.



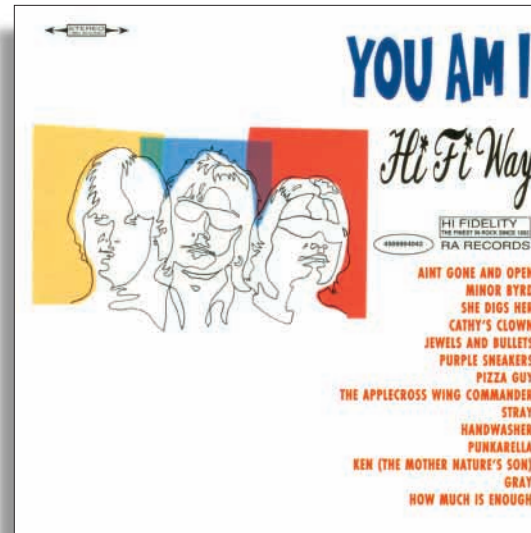
Sampling. I think visual sampling is a fairly new area, and I base a lot of my work on photographs, mostly my own if possible. As in the music industry we see new issues and a precedent being set. Some of us are like visual DJs sampling and reinterpreting, there is no way around it really and the skill and creativity comes from how you interpret it and the integrity of the end result.

Change. I think of design more as expanding than fragmenting. When the web came along a lot of designers were in total fear and denial. I try to embrace new media, or a variety of media. For a start it makes you much more employable, especially if you freelance. I think young designers now should think about what they really enjoy doing and apply their design skills to build that, whatever it is. That is my idea behind PIXELbros – the way the economy is at the moment, if there aren't any jobs around, create your own business.

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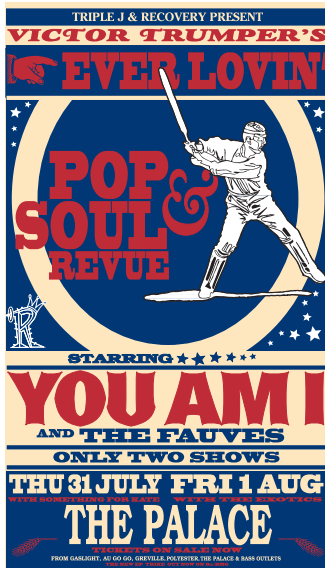


this page
left
top to bottom:
Custard Cover Art:
Wahooti Fandango
Wiseneimer
Flanelette
below:
You Am I Cover Art:
Hi Fi Way



The biggest lesson I've learnt is don't just do it for the money.

below:
You Am I Poster



Music design:

Image. I've always worked very closely with the bands, at least in the initial stages. Email has changed a lot of that. The funny thing is, at least in this country, it seems to be all left up to the band to make decisions on their cover art and their image, apart from a few obvious record company product acts. Sometimes you'd get new bands coming to you for cover art and they were so suspicious that they thought we were going to package them. It was quite funny. I felt like saying: "Hey man I'm just out of art school, I'm not going to let the suits get to you!"

Hits. I suppose my all time favourites are You Am I's *Hi Fi Way* and Custard's *Wahooti Fandango* and *Wiseneimer*. The first two were nominated for ARIA awards for best cover art, but somehow I think that depends on how popular the band is at the time. I never scooped the big one but I have a collection of the half size ARIAs you used to get for being nominated. I think these days you just get a certificate.

rooArt. I'd listen to the music and try to get into the ballpark, but really the music almost has nothing to do with it. All you need to know is the style of music so you can design something that fits. The best way to approach it is to meet the musicians and observe things about them such as the way they dress, the expression on their faces when you mention a certain band, that sort of thing. I was the third art director to come along to rooArt so I guess the groundwork had been laid. The thing that I discovered is that in advertising everyone wants you to do something the same as something else, but in music the challenge is to make every band try to stand out in some way.

Appropriation. The You Am I album very discreetly ripped off an advertisement for the Beatles' *White Album* in an old *Billboard* magazine. It was just a white page with a small line drawing of the Fab Four consisting of one continuous line. Genius. Of course I'm always the first one to point out my sources – I didn't study post modernism for nothing. I probably should be calling it "appropriation". Anyway the band loved it and after this and the previous album they seemed relaxed enough to let me come up with suggestions, which luckily always seemed to hit the spot.

Brisbanites. Custard was the best band in the universe to work with. They shared my ridiculous parochial Brisbane sense of humour and we set new heights in tastelessness. I thought the little set I constructed for *Wahooti Fandango* was OK, but when we shot it through a long lens I was amazed at the depth of field. I still can't believe how well that one turned out. Lucky. The photo shoot of the band at a riding ranch is one of my fond memories.

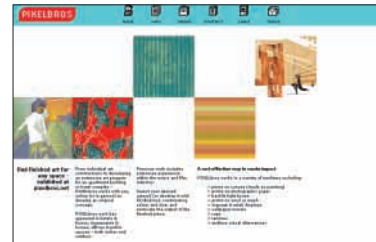
120mm. Each cover really represents a narrative tension between the recording artist, designer and record company. One thing is that only a select few A&R managers in this world fully appreciate and understand that meeting of music with print. When a punter walks into a record store, they are not in any way aware of the efforts the record company has spent finding and signing the act; nor how much money has been spent on promotion (or how far they have put the band in debt). All they have is a song in their head that they have heard on the radio, and all the designer has is 120mm of printed paper and about 4.3 seconds to grab their attention. When it gets down to it bands are about sound and vision, and so to record companies: up the budgets!



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top to bottom:
Real Kung Fu



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PIXELbros:

Origin. I had the idea around the time Jeremy Andrew and I finally realised we were never going to have the painting exhibition we had been discussing for about two years because we were both so busy. I paint canvases in between my graphic work, but a large one can take me three months, so to get enough together for a show would take a long time. And then I wouldn't want to sell them. So we came up with the idea of producing completely digital art and then selling it from the web site, pixelbros.net. Since it is digital I can keep a copy for myself and sell as many as I like, but we have limited it to 50 prints. It amazes me that some of the canvases actually look like they have been painted, and painted exactly as I would have done it with a brush.

Concept. The whole idea behind PIXELbros is to get a network of designers and photographers to join our online gallery. We are actively targeting architects and interior designers on big projects. An example is Andrew Parr from SJB Interior Design who has specified our art packages for a multi-storey residential development. Online it is very easy to choose the art, nominate the required size and specify required colours and amendments and be given an idea of the price. Art directors and ad agencies can also use it to source stock art or illustration. We are developing a hard copy catalogue that will be distributed so people can keep it in their product library.



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Development. The idea is starting to take off and we have a bit of a list of photographers and designers that are ready to join. I decided the site wasn't scaleable enough as it was. It was entirely built in Flash and even though I was always trying to persuade more clients to build Flash web sites, I realised after a couple of years that Flash actually pisses me off when I am browsing the web. I just want to get information quickly and instead I am held to ransom by some designer with his own agenda trying to rob me of valuable seconds of my life while I wait for his Academy Award contender to download, which invariably disappoints me anyway. So I decided to use a lot more HTML even though Flash has snuck in again.

Copyright. Perhaps the most valuable member of the PIXELbros team is a lawyer who specialises in intellectual property and copyright and represents a host of people such as photographers, artists and film directors. Our terms and conditions are pretty tight.

Exhibition. We had the first PIXELbros

exhibition in April 2001 at Spence & Lyda in Sydney, which is actually a showroom of mid-century American furniture such as Eames, Knoll and Herman Miller. We were specifically targeting this type of space as opposed to a gallery space because we wanted people to see what the art actually looks like with furniture. I know a lot of artists would gasp in horror at such a suggestion but I'm not the starving artist type. I want to turn my art into commerce and I don't have any ideological problems with that.

Sales. I approached Spence & Lyda and they welcomed the idea because for them to take care of the artwork is just a headache. So we had a fantastic agreement and I think they are true patrons of the arts because they didn't take any cut from our sales. The whole idea behind the exhibition was to promote the web site. I was actually amazed because most of my sales were to people that weren't at the exhibition opening but were just in the showroom looking at furniture, picked up one of our flyers and went online and picked out artwork that wasn't even in the show. The whole ordering process was done using email so I never even met the people who bought my art. In a way it's sad to lose that human interaction, but I like to work from home in my underpants so I guess it's just as well (joke).

Output. We can output art to many different surfaces such as canvases,

photographic paper, light boxes and rugs. We have even done projections. The idea of ready to hang exhibitions is very appealing to a wide range of showrooms that see it as a drawcard for their customer base.

Involvement. PIXELbros is also a great way for artists to potentially commercialise a lot of stuff they may have sitting around in back rooms or filing cabinets, or art that is left unsold after an exhibition. We welcome people to contact us to show us their work. It doesn't even need to be strictly digital – we are currently talking to an embroidery artist and a ceramicist. I think as the idea develops it has a lot of potential for merchandising and also as a general information site for designers where you can download fonts and screensavers as well. I'd love to get some font designers involved. ●

<<http://www.pixelbros.net>>