

## Public works: Royal Nuclear Show

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12:00AM DECEMBER 8, 2018

When Midnight Oil released its *Red Sails in the Sunset* album in 1984, it certainly garnered lots of attention. Not only did the music emphasise the band's concerns with the threat of global nuclear war but these concerns also were strikingly presented on the LP's cover.

The cover design depicts a nightmarish scenario: Sydney after a hypothetical nuclear attack. The harbour is completely empty of water and instead there are massive craters. The northern side of the Harbour Bridge is destroyed and where Circular Quay should be is a giant red blob of plasma.



To create this image, Midnight Oil commissioned a Japanese photomontage artist, Tsunehisa Kimura, who produced one of the most arresting pop culture images of the decade, according to cultural media analyst Mick Broderick in his essay, *Atomic Pop*.

The 1980s undoubtedly were the most prolific Cold War decade for Australian anti-nuclear visual culture, writes Broderick. The apprehension about the nuclear arms race, French nuclear testing in the South Pacific and uranium exports was evident when thousands of Australians took to the streets in protest marches.

Echoing this public activism were eye-catching screen-print posters. The posters were characterised by colourful, bold designs that were used as a political tool effectively to highlight issues such as nuclear proliferation as well as the feminist and land rights movements. The posters helped politicise a generation, making it abundantly clear that art could affect social change and include political comment.

The Royal Nuclear Show - 3 1981 screen print on paper 77 x 51 cm courtesy of Flinders University Art Museum Collection

Screen-printing workshops across the country, such as Redback Graphix, Earthworks Poster Collective and the Tin Sheds, created posters that adorned cafes, telephone poles, university campuses, libraries and virtually any public space. They had slogans such as No Nukes No Tests, No More Hiroshimas, and End Uranium Mining. At the time, perception of a nuclear future was seen as progressive and positive, with governments and industry trying to promote nuclear experimentation as necessary to the nation's security and beneficial to humanity.

One artist who emphasised these issues in her poster prints was Toni Robertson, whose work, *The Royal Nuclear Show — 3*, is on show at the Burrinja Dandenong Ranges Cultural Centre in Upwey, Victoria. Produced while Robertson was an artist-in-residence at the Experimental Art Foundation in Adelaide in 1981, it depicts a dystopian post-nuclear carnival where crowds wander past a billboard with a baby sleeping and sucking a bottle. On the baby's pillow is written Bomblet. The billboard reads: "Meet the nuclear family, Bomblet the baby nuke. He's so like his dad! This little

boy was conceived as a low yield, tactical weapon for use in limited theatre war.” “Little boy” was the name given to the bomb dropped on Hiroshima.

Gallery and exhibition curator JD Mittmann says *The Royal Nuclear Show — 3* and other works in the series were produced when anxiety about the nuclear threat was at its highest.

“It was only a few years before Chernobyl, and interestingly, in some ways, Toni Robertson pre-empted this with the criticism and satire in this work,” Mittmann says.

“I also think it is very interesting that it is a little humorous and that really underlines that element of how art can address these rather complex issues quite nicely.”

Mittmann says this work “really resonates quite strongly with me. It is really a statement of the time, but I think not much has changed in some ways. We are still sold nuclear technology, especially as a solution to climate change problems. Certainly, it is important to remember how dangerous these things are, and so I think this print might have been from 1981 but if you had 2011 underneath it, it would work in just the same way.”

Toni Robertson, *The Royal Nuclear Show — 3* (1981). Collection Flinders University Art Museum Collection, Adelaide.

On display in *Black Mist, Burnt Country*, Burrinja Dandenong Ranges Cultural Centre, Upwey, Victoria, until February 10.