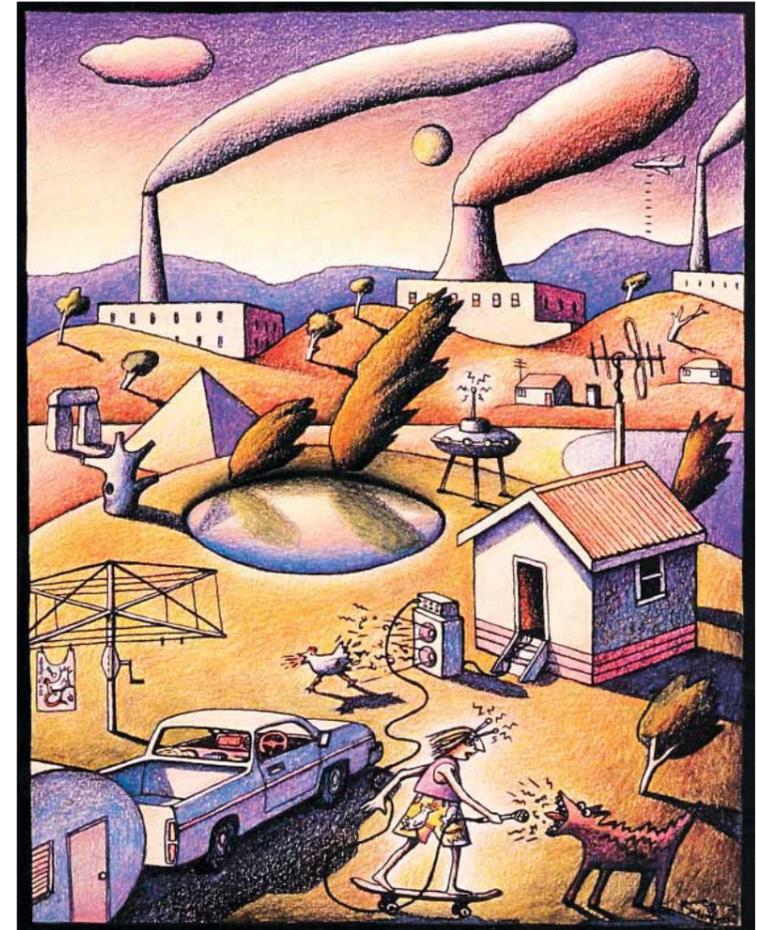


Spirit
OF AUSTRALIA



SHOUT IT OUT
LOUD



100% Mambo/More A Part Of The Landscape Than A Pair Of Trousers (1988, detail) by Reg Mombassa; Batmobile (2014) by Mike Eleven (opposite)

WORDS ALEXANDRA SPRING

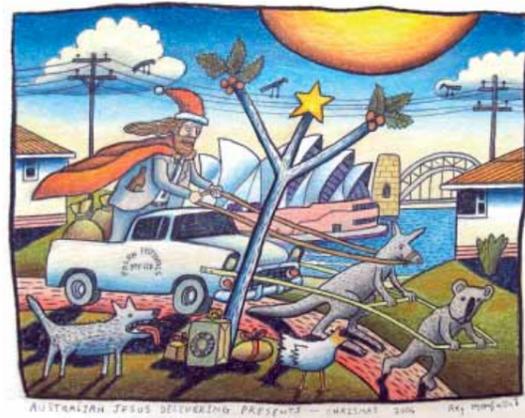
From farting dog to scowling politician to a giant inflatable kangaroo – the humour, satire and subversion of Mambo is writ large in a new exhibition celebrating three decades of the surf'n'street wear that became an artist's canvas.

“THERE WAS ALWAYS SOMETHING different to look at, to laugh at, to get excited about.” Former Mambo art director turned streetwear historian Wayne Golding is reflecting on three decades of crazy, kooky but instantly recognisable Mambo heroes, as the unlikely cavalcade of characters takes over Melbourne’s National Gallery of Victoria for a new exhibition entitled *Mambo: 30 Years Of Shelf-indulgence*, opening this month.

Lofty gallery atriums are a world away from the Sydney industrial design studio where Mambo began life as Phantom Textile Printers. The screenprinting company produced prints for surf and streetwear brands, but in 1984, Phantom owner Dare Jennings decided to have a go himself. He christened his new label “Mambo” because, as he told the ABC in 2003: “Mambo had many great connotations – black magic, voodoo, jazz, beatniks – the things that I liked.”

His approach was novel. While fashion designers have long looked to art for inspiration – witness Yves Saint Laurent’s appropriation of Piet Mondrian’s grid-based compositions in 1965 – Jennings wanted to make the artist king. Richard Allan, designer of the inimitable farting dog logo, was joined by local

Tested On Animals (1998) by Jim Mitchell (right); *Australian Jesus Delivering Presents* (2004) by Reg Mombassa (below); *Farting Dog* (1987) by Richard Allan (inset)



and international artists such as Reg Mombassa, Bruce Goold, Robert Moore and Rockin' Jelly Bean.

"We loved art and we had a lot of people who knew how to do art very nicely, so we invited them to put graphics on T-shirts," says Golding, who started with Phantom as a graphics separator, ending up as studio manager. The artistic inventiveness kept the momentum going. "If it had been just a couple of studio artists, maybe there wouldn't have been the same sort of enthusiasm or reaction to the brand. But the fact there was such a variety of interesting, hugely talented people who we were working with [meant] it was a great thing to be around."

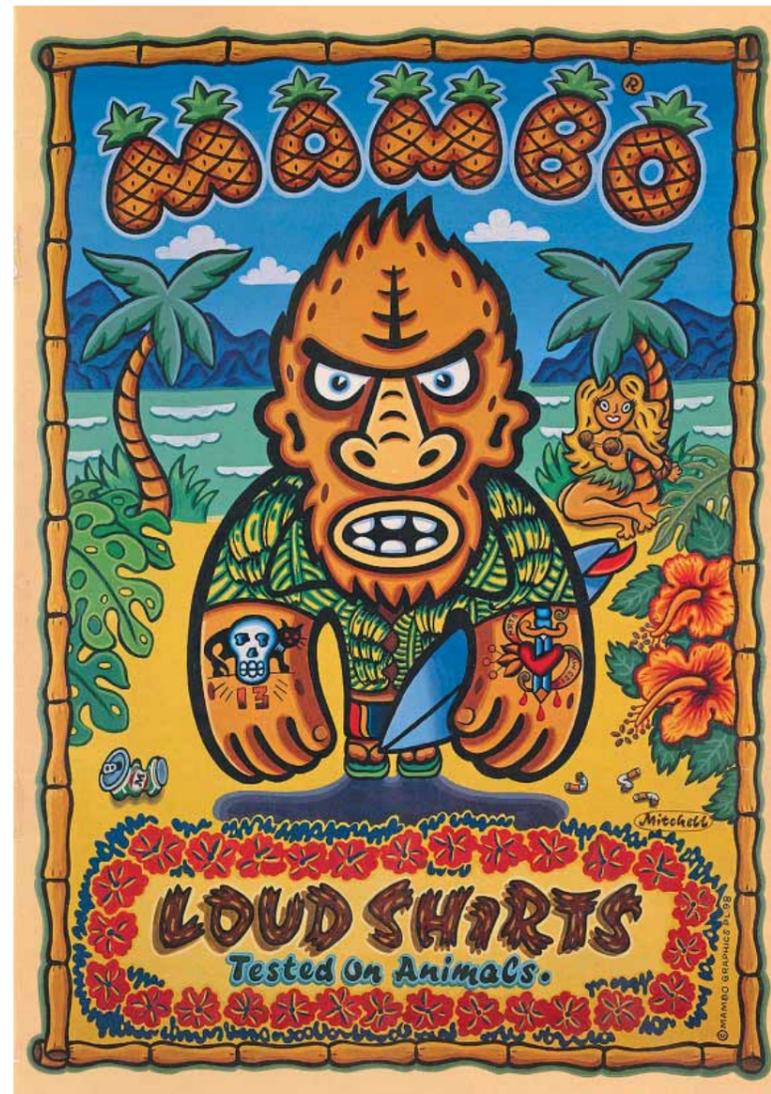
The idea of creating everyman street art set the brand apart, says Sydney's Powerhouse Museum curator Anne-Marie Van der Ven. "Mambo was committed from the beginning to providing a platform for unfettered art expression as part of a genuine, authentically independent brand." More than 250 artists have worked with Mambo over the years.

Artist and musician Reg Mombassa likens Jennings to a benevolent Renaissance pope. "He was like our patron because he gave us work, but he also let us have complete freedom."

Mombassa joined Mambo in 1986, seeing it as an opportunity to get his artwork to an audience without any restrictions. "Some of the things I did were quite unpleasant," he says, "but if [Jennings] liked it, he would put it out."

The market responded to the subversiveness.

"It did reflect on Australian popular culture, the landscape and the icons [even though they] were all messed about with, often quite insultingly," Mombassa says. "People seemed to enjoy that."



Less subversive yet more iconic, Bruce Goold produced linocut designs based on tropical plants and Australian wildflowers for Mambo fabrics and their signature rayon "Loud Shirts" in the 1990s. Golding remembers Goold having free rein. "We just said, 'Go for your life Bruce, whatever you want' and then it was up to us to find the best way of using what he gave us. Some of the fabrics that we produced using Bruce's woodcut art were gobsmackingly beautiful."

For the artist, whose work has appeared on everything from exhibition prints through to Australia Post stamps, working with Mambo was an opportunity to see his designs turned into high-quality clothing. "Everything about them was beautifully made—the pockets always matched up with the design, the embroidered label was absolutely traditional." Although the Mambo approach was irreverent, Goold says the products were always desirable. "It wasn't punk grunge. There was a certain glamour to them, even though it was often curious subject matter."

Artist Maria Kozic was approached by then art director Bruce Slorach in the late '90s to create designs for the Mambo "Goddess" women's range. She relished the challenge of coming up with edgy ideas, adding, "I liked the idea that I didn't know who [was] wearing the designs, that it was just out there in stores all over the place." >



*Jade Goddess (2005) by Bruce Goold (above);
Surf Pig (1998) by Matthew Martin (above right)*

Similarly, Japanese artist Rockin' Jelly Bean became a regular Mambo collaborator after Jennings discovered his poster art on a Tokyo trip. Once he joined the team, his cartoonish buxom babes and monsters, plastered on T-shirts, became Mambo classics.

Jennings also saw the designs as an opportunity for social commentary and never shied away from controversy – from protesting about the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor to supporting Sydney's safe injecting room. One of the brand's proudest moments was donating \$110,000 to the National Aboriginal and Islander Skills Development Association in 1998 from the proceeds of the popular "Rednecks" T-shirt depicting former politician Pauline Hanson in full scowl.

Their fearlessness made the brand unique. "Not only did we have a range of T-shirts and boardshorts, but we also had opinions that we weren't shy about expressing," says Golding. Yet it was always done with a wink. "Nobody wants to be preached at. If you can do it in a clever, humorous, satirical way, the result is more successful than somebody haranguing you."

For a while, Mambo was everywhere, sported by everyone from Jack Nicholson to John Lydon. The current "Mambassador", 21-year-old actor Sean Keenan, remembers the brand as being so popular that five of his parents' Mambo Loud shirts disappeared from the family's Busselton washing line. These days, Keenan and his Bondi friends collect vintage Mambo clothing.

In 1993, the Art Gallery of NSW mounted *Dadarama*, a surrealism art exhibition, and invited Mambo to take part. Golding remembers

MAMBO



SURF PIG

NOT ONLY DID WE HAVE A RANGE OF T-SHIRTS AND BOARDSHORTS, BUT WE ALSO HAD OPINIONS THAT WE WEREN'T SHY ABOUT EXPRESSING

the team scratching their heads: "What is it we're doing that is in any way similar to what Salvador Dali and those wacky surrealist artists in the early 20th century were doing?" he wondered.

Curator Suhanya Raffel knew they [the gallery team] were right. "They are iconoclastic, they think outside the box. They were interested in the great subconscious of Australia – whatever that is – and they played with it. Whether it was Paul Worstead, Reg Mombassa or Jeff Raglus, their image-making drew on a surrealist vocabulary but [was] vernacular and local."

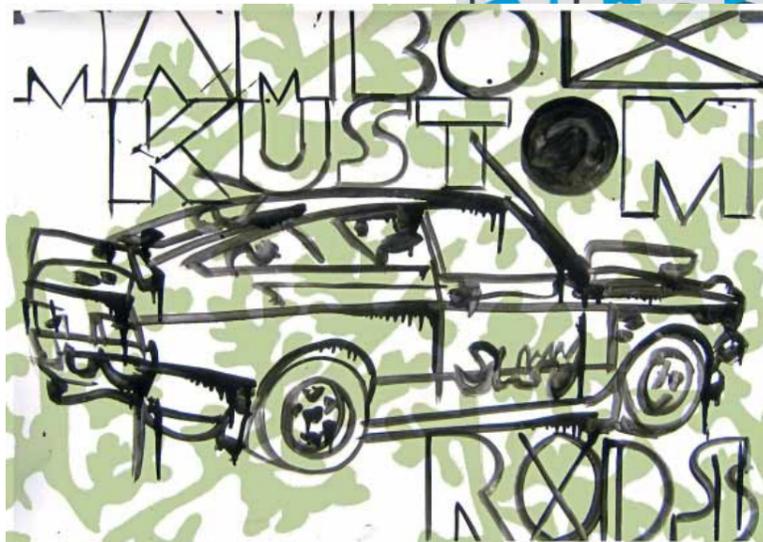
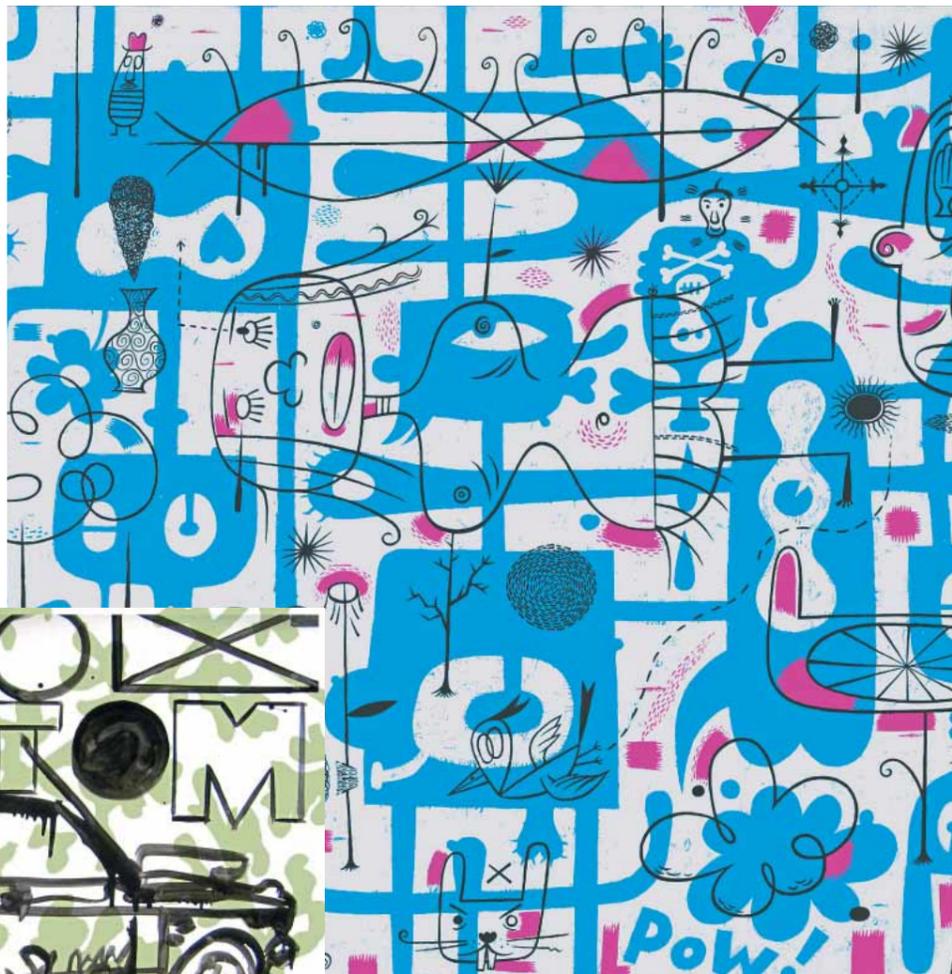
The art community agreed. Mambo's work was exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney as well as in London and Bologna. The Powerhouse Museum owns more than 100 Mambo objects including posters, clothing and ephemera, while dog-eared copies of the retrospectives *Art Irritates Life (1994)* and *Still Life With A Franchise (1998)* can still be found in most design studios.

The crowning moment came when Mambo was invited to design the Australian athletes' uniforms for the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games closing ceremony. Their colourful designs and Mombassa's inflatable kangaroos were splashed across global television screens.

But when it came, the crash was sudden and harsh. Those cool kids saw their favourite label sported by tourists, politicians and, even worse, their fathers and uncles, and they deserted it in droves.

Buoyed by the Olympic success, Jennings had decided to sell the company to clothing distributors Gazal for a rumoured \$20m in 2000. He stayed on for two years as creative director before leaving to start the motorcycle lifestyle brand Deus Ex Machina. The Mambo brand floundered. Cut out of retail stores by international surf brands, it struggled for distribution. Big-name artists came and went, and sales plummeted. By 2008, it was down to about 80 outlets. However, like all good Aussie battlers, Mambo was down but not out. Enter the >

JADE GODDESS PHOTOGRAPHY: COURTESY AUSTRALIAN GALLERIES PTY LTD



Clockwise from left:
Kustom Rods (2005) by
 Robert Moore; *Girt
 By Seams (2006)* by Dave
 Bowers; *Untitled (2006)*
 by Jeff Raglus

Nervous Investor group, a consortium of friends including surf retailer and entrepreneur Angus Kingsmill. When the brand came up for sale, they could see its potential. “What we were buying was a great Australian brand, and with a bit of love and care, we knew we could make something of it,” says now managing director Kingsmill. In 2008, they reportedly acquired Mambo for less than half the sum Gazal had paid for it.

It was a rocky rebirth with plenty of financial, manufacturing and retailing hurdles to be overcome. Kingsmill now sells “family friendly” clothing in Big W, “youth-focused” apparel in Myer and “edgy, irreverent stuff” through SurfStitch.com.au and their own online stores. Inspired by successful female swimwear brands such as Tigerlily and Seafolly, they also relaunched the Mambo “Goddess” range of bikinis and beachwear, fronted by curvaceous models such as Erin McNaught, Jessica and Ashley Hart, and Jessica Gomes. Childrenswear was similarly expanded.

But top of Kingsmill’s to-do list was conquering the international market because he knew tourists adored it.

“We had a Matthew Martin [T-shirt] depicting the Queen eating a pie at the footy. Prince Andrew bought it from the Beach Culture store in The Rocks, Sydney, and then went berserk on Mambo T-shirts. So international was always going to be our expansion play.”

Now the label is in 12 countries including the US and UK, all in the early stages but growing, says Kingsmill. It’s a tough market, but Mambo isn’t short of ideas.

A new collaboration with US comic book publishers DC Comics sees street artists

Ben Brown, James Jirat Patradoon, Numskull and Meggs give Batman, Wonderwoman, Flash and the Joker the Mambo treatment. Even Superman may meet his match when Mombassa gives him the once-over. Other potential collaborations include *The Simpsons*, *Family Guy* and *Spongebob Squarepants*, which Kingsmill hopes will help Mambo break into lucrative Asian markets.

And there’s the NGV exhibition. “The idea of the exhibition is to show how ahead of the game they actually were,” says curator Eddie Zammit. The show will include Mombassa’s alien-esque cyclops statues, upholstered surfboards, madcap sofas – and countless T-shirts. Zammit hopes to introduce the brand to a new audience. “I’m interested to see what people between the ages of 15 to 30 think, because it does show how cool Mambo is.”

★ For airfares and holiday packages to Melbourne call Qantas Holidays on 1300 339 543 or visit qantas.com/holidaysaustralianway

✦ Mambo: 30 Years Of Shelf-indulgence, Ian Potter Centre NGV Australia, Melbourne, December 6-February 22. ngv.vic.gov.au