Plotting the Historical Pipeline of Women in Graphic Design

By Jane Connory

Researcing the contribution of women designers to Australia’s Graphic Design industry, the author of this article PhD candidate Jane Connory discovered that despite women comprising more that 50% of GD graduates since the 1970s, only one woman, Dahl Collings, was included in the AGDA Hall of Fame.

Little is known about women designers in the Australian graphic design industry but this article aims to discover more about their presence. Through exploring the invisibility and visibility of women in graphic design since the 1970s, I have encountered many raised eye brows and stern statements along the lines of “why bother, we already know the answers” and “I don’t care who the designers are, as long as they’re making good design”. However, the absence of empirical and published data has become one of the most revealing parts of this project. Women have consistently comprised over 50 per cent of graphic design graduates since the 1970s and the Australian Graphic Design Association’s (AGDA) hall of fame has, until recently, included only one woman, Dahl Collings (1909-1988), with the inclusion of Alison Forbes (1933-) later in 2016. This, despite women working in different positions within studios and in different areas of the industry ranging from design studios to advertising agencies, publishing houses and freelancing careers and still others establishing successful businesses.

The task of this research is to question and gain insight as to why women in graphic design have been rendered invisible for so long. It defies logic that women simply leave the industry once they have had children, as too is the accompanying inference that men are better suited to undertake this work. This article will break the silence through a process of exploration and discovery – it will create visibility for women who have made significant contributions to Australian graphic design by sharing their voices and historical perspectives. These women were all interviewed by me in 2016 and what they reveal are inspirational stories where ambition has seen them rise through the ranks and defy expectations by directing and owning successful businesses.

Along side this voiced narration, statistical data has been collated to quantify the visibility of women in Australian graphic design – beginning with a gender review of students who have studied graphic design at Monash University between 1970 to 2014. The aim is to shape a historical and gendered pipeline of graduates, in which the experiences of specific woman designers illustrate the issues of each decade and uncover the motivations and hindrances to becoming part of the industry. Overall, the statistics show that the numbers of female students have been consistently higher than men, maintaining a steady increase which forces questions about the social attitudes and gender expectations that saw men take leadership and women fade into the background.
Answers to some questions are found in experiences of women such as Lynda Warner, Lisa Grocott, Rosanna Di Risio, Kat Macleod, Simone Elder, Chloe Quigley, Fiona Leeming, Michaela Webb and Laura Cornhill. The singular voices and personal experiences of these women are added to give depth to the narrative. They have all graduated from differing institutions in Australia and New Zealand during each of the decades from 1970 through to 2010. While they all start from an assumption of gender equality, their voices reveal that a woman’s freedom to pursue a graphic design career has been a struggle against the established social order and its gendered expectations. This has been supported by inquiry into contextualising issues, including feminism and digital technology, which have been revealing about the manner in which the graphic design industry has evolved and been affected by social attitudes.

The historical pipeline discussed here highlights the outstanding feature that since 1970 female students have comprised over 50 per cent of graphic design graduates – with the number still on the increase. In 1970 the Caulfield Institute of Technology (now Monash University) offered a Diploma of Art and Design and by the end of the decade 367 students had graduated with 56 per cent of the newly qualified designers being women. This was a decade of major cultural change – a time when the Australian feminist Germaine Greer published the radical Female Eunuch, pleading for all women to have the “freedom to be a person, with dignity, integrity, nobility, passion, [and] pride that constitute[s] personhood.” The feminist movement in Australia, as elsewhere, was striving not only for equal opportunities but it also led the way for women to enter a changing workforce that included a rapidly expanding demand for designers and professional design education. Cultural changes such as the contraceptive pill and better education opportunities for young women, rising affluence and consumerism and the proliferation of the mass media, became the social context where graduating designers could make their mark. The enrolments at Monash indicate that young women were as keen as men to take up the challenge of design education. Design, it would seem, promised a space where women could embrace the pride that work in the creative industries could provide. But what was the reality of this experience?

Lynda Warner, who graduated from Swinburne in 1973, had a mixed experience of design education. Warner went on to have a sustained and well respected career for over 35 years, still operating a graphic design studio under her name and collaborating with clients such as the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Australia Post and the University of Tasmania. As a sign of the changing times, Warner’s parents were initially perplexed by what the future may hold for a daughter who could draw, given that at that time only 30.8 per cent of women were engaged in full time work, their support was both encouraging and unusual. Armed with friendly advice, her parents decided to send her to technical school rather than high school and then encouraged her onto complete a Commercial Art qualification at Swinburne. Commercial artist was the name given at this time to graphic designers but as Dr Alan Young, Program Leader, Communication Design, Auckland University of Technology, explains this moniker was in a process of constant change. With its origins in ornamental art and surrounded by a discourse filled with anachronistic labels, graphic design has also been historically linked to many male practitioners who had parallel careers in the fine arts.

In our interview, Warner recalled that when she started out as a graphic designer, the industry was viewed more as a male trade, in a time when “a woman’s dream was generally secretarial stuff or dress making.” Encouraged by the fact that her graduating portfolio was singled out by Brian Sadgrove, who had a highly visible reputation and studio of his own, Warner began her career with three years of training under his tutelage before embarking on her own. Sadgrove’s influence of focusing on the crafting and detail are still very evident in her portfolio of logo designs, publications, stamps, packaging and websites.

The unwritten social rules of appropriate pursuits limited options for women such as Linda in very subtle ways – such as the concern that women would become pregnant and unemployable. But in the 1970s, broader political policies and social activism began to push against this and supported their inclusion, especially when the Whitlam government abolished university fees in 1974, making tertiary education more accessible for everyone including women with children. Design education held the promise of being a pathway into a fulfilling career – a promise that Warner acted on, although in her own words she felt “fearful” and “shy”. Overcoming this introversion, Warner networked extensively amongst other designers, including John Nowland from South Australia and Keith Grey, an art director, with whom she spent a year working full time, to learn more about her industry while making
long lasting client connections. This led to her being one of the first graphic designer in Australia to work closely with an architectural practice, namely Clarke Hopkins Clarke, on signage systems. After initially setting up her office in Doncaster but finding it too remote from her printers and typesetters, Warner moved to a shared office in Murray Street, Armadale, with the architect, Keith Streamas. Her next move was to Tasmania in 1983, “the design wilderness”, where she has kept her practice small and maintained her Melbourne client base through the use of her fax machine. One of those clients, Spiral Foods, has remained with her for more than 30 years.

In 1984, the original Macintosh computer was released, redefining the graphic design industry and rendering the traditional tools of a graphic designer, like drawing boards and Letraset, obsolete. It was Rudie Hoess, a businessman with links to new technologies, who is credited for bringing the Apple II personal computer into Australian homes and carving a niche for the technology in the education sector. Design education and industries dramatically entered the digital age and with the new speed of production that it allowed, time became available to make the pursuit a more cerebral and experimental one. Technology ushered in an environment where new ideas about the role of graphic design and its processes could be explored. Beginning in 1980 and running until 1991, Caulfield Institute of Technology introduced the Bachelor of Arts (Graphic Communication) to its offerings, raising the level of qualifications available within graphic design from diploma to degree.

The shift in graphic design from being an analogue and aesthetic pursuit to becoming a process in question, fertile for new thinking, combined with the ascension of graphic design in the academic framework. This evolution also resulted in a further increase of women studying the field. Lisa Grocott, who studied in this pipeline during the 1980s, embraced this change examining the process of design through innovative and participatory practice and has gone on to forge a respected academic career at Parsons in New York and as Head of Art, Design and Architecture at Monash University. Pursuing opportunities to develop her creative and strategic thinking rather than design’s decorative potential, held its own frustrations for Grocott as an undergraduate. She retrospectively realized her professors lagged behind these progressive attitudes, having no way to measure her thinking rather than her craft, leaving them perplexed as to why her work received good grades but did not “look as good as everyone else’s.” Further exploring these processes as a Masters student at RMIT and putting them into practice at a Melbourne based practice, she co-founded Studio Anybody during the 1990s, and went on to receive a doctorate for her research. She continues to push the direction of graphic design saying it needs, “designers who can think in poetic terms alongside the people that can think really strategically.”

At the end of the 1980s, the Hawke Labor government reinstated university fees but offered assistance with the introduction of deferred payment through the Higher Education Contributions Scheme (HECS). This appears to have little effect on the graduate pipeline as evidence in the Monash statistics – with only slightly fewer graduates exiting totaling 347 and the sustained percentage of female graduates remaining at 56 per cent. At the same time women’s engagement in tertiary education was expanding. In 1985, women began outnumbering men as graduates from all Australian universities but the prospect of paying back these loans was recorded as leaving some graduates feeling overwhelmed. Females graduating from graphic design courses at this time also faced entrenched attitudes towards gender in Australian graphic design.

Eager to become a professional entity for the design community, AGDA held its first National Executive meeting in 1989 at the Mildura Design Conference. While many women had graduated during the previous two decades and some were freelancing and running their own businesses, none were present at the Executive meeting, rather AGDA’s initial president, chair and meeting attendees were all men. Rosanna Di Risio, who graduated from Phillip Institute in 1980, recalled in our interviews how intimidating this male dominance could be. While the gender split in the classes at Phillip Institute (later to become the Royal Melbourne institute of Technology (RMIT)) was 50/50, she recalled that, “only one or two women were actually vocal and behaved like there was no gender difference in the space. Most women were happy to take second place and I was never that person.” A brave outlier, Di Risio did not succumb to this silencing and has gone on to be a respected voice as a graphic designer, rising to the ranks of creative director at ERD and judging the Melbourne Art Director’s Club (MADC) awards and AGDA awards multiple times including in 2016. Di Risio’s career has included running her own business for a brief period of time and working part time in the publishing sector for six years while raising her son. Returning to full time work after this time was a
struggle, having to start again at the bottom on a junior salary, Di Risio made her comeback working for another two years with Max Robinson – a designer whose career began in the 1950s and acknowledged in the AGDA Hall of Fame. Her position at ERD has brought together that last 16 years of her career and it is here where she has made the effort to “step out of other people’s the shadows and come out to the front.” Her modus operandi has been to elevate design to a meaningful place by crossing disciplinary boundaries, working directly with clients and ensuring thorough research informs all the projects she directs. The work she has directed includes The Women’s identity for The Royal Women’s Hospital, promotional campaigns for Spicer’s Paper and a book titled Milan – a collaborative project with photographer Robyn Lea – where production values, imagery and layout showcase Di Risio’s lifetime of creative integrity.

In 1990, Caulfield Institute of Technology became Monash University. The statistics show that the number of graduates from graphic design diplomas and degrees increased to 446 and that women graduates kept increasing their visibility to an average of 60 per cent over the next ten years. Entry to courses was highly competitive as the government had capped graduate numbers to directly meet industry needs. Changes in women’s education, work opportunities, gender attitudes and a government rhetoric of equal opportunity saw women respond positively to these competitive pressures. Research in the secondary education system shows that women have a better self-concept of ability in all female learning environments, a factor which indicates why women continue to be attracted to graphic design in increasing numbers8. Kat Macleod, Simone Elder and Chloe Quigley are typical of the women who studied during this decade. They have benefitted from this gendered atmosphere, going on to form their own design studio in 2006 – Ortolan – where they have successfully serviced clients in the fashion industry. Their work together has included taking the creative lead on Country Road and developing strategic campaigns for brands like Kookai and Dotti for over ten years.

Macleod and Elder recall women forming the majority in the graphic design classroom where they began to build supporting networks and a highly refined sense of self-efficacy by the time they graduated from Swinburne University where Macleod commenced in 1999 and Elder earlier in 1993. Quigley graduated from an Interior Design course at RMIT in 1993. Employing many other ambitious female graduates during this time, Macleod, Elder and Quigley have reaped the benefits of the women in the graphic design pipeline by creating a team where the work/life balance is nurtured above internal competition and where client satisfaction is prioritized over the studio’s self-promotion. Extending beyond their studio identity, Macleod has individually pursued an illustration career, publishing and exhibiting widely. In 2013, she created the experiential exhibition ‘A Hidden Place’ with Beci Orpin which was installed in Lamington Drive by her Australian management group Jack Winter. Quigley’s success has also extended into publishing, writing under the now exposed pseudonym Michi Girl on both a blog and several books, including Le Shop Guide and Like I give a Frock, that all indulge her continuing love of fashion.

But for other women, building their careers and gaining recognition in the industry – more specifically the the advertising sector of graphic design – proved difficult during the 1990s. The advertising industry had the potential to be a fertile ground for graphic design graduates but the reality resulted in an environment where women had to deal with the misogynistic legacy of the 1960s Mad Men era. Reports and studies were generated to fuel discourse and action addressing the negative portrayal of women in advertising. These included the largest and longest longitudinal study on the gender in the world’s media, the Global Media Monitoring Project and the Women and Advertising Resource Package, which supplied resources to train marketers in communicating more effectively to women10. With men occupying 90 per cent of art director and copywriter positions within Australia in 1996, the advertising industry’s treatment women in the media could read as symptomatic of two things – a lack of female voices formulating these campaigns and a lack of opportunities for the women graduates including those from graphic design11.

By the mid 1990s, the advertising industry continued to feel pressure to address the extreme gender inequities in its ranks. Fiona Leeming, who graduated in the 1970s from a graphic design degree at Swinburne University, had reached a defining pinnacle in her advertising career. As creative director at the illustrious DDB Worldwide, Leeming was singled out by the industry in a gesture towards change and was awarded the inaugural Veuve Clicquot Advertising Woman of the Year at a gala event in Sydney in the mid 1990s – which promised to be a prestigious annual event. Proud of the
recognition her hard work had received, Leeming was disappointed when the award did not continue after this one-time event. It essentially amounted to a tokenistic effort, ultimately discouraging the advancement of women in the industry and securing the workforce as a place only celebratory of men in creative roles. Two decades later and this brick wall (not glass ceiling) keeping women out of the advertising industry has not changed. A Communications Council salary survey from 2014 identified that only 13.5 per cent of senior creative positions were held by women in the Australian advertising industry12. Leeming has gone on to establish her own agency – Honey HQ – where she continues to produce work, including the 2015 Respect campaign for Porter Davis, which was featured in Times Square, New York.

In the 2000s, the release of the government cap limiting enrolments into tertiary courses saw exiting design graduate numbers almost double the previous decade’s average. A total of 783 graduates successfully exited Monash with 63 per cent being women. While one might expect these developments to be reflected in equitable hiring practices in the graphic design industry, it is difficult to know the reality of the situation with no data existing to make such a comparison. However, what has been proven in other industries is that there are many factors that make the pipeline “leaky” – a phenomenon where women become inhibited from sustaining long term careers. The reasons for these leaks have been identified as socio cultural factors resulting from unconscious gendered biases that often relate to parenthood.

THEY INCLUDE:

- That women are often over looked for promotions when they have children;
- That women are paid less as mothers; and
- That women just aren’t committed to or competent at their jobs as they were before they become a mother 13.

Michaela Webb, co-founder of Studio Round, and Laura Cornhill, co-founder of Studio Binocular, both show incredible tenacity as respected graphic designers. Having graduated in the 1990s, their studios became well respected and firmly established in Melbourne during the 2000s. On top of their leadership and creative roles, Webb and Cornhill’s careers demonstrate how the graphic design industry is not immune to these unconscious bias that adversely affect mothers. In their positions of power, both women had the rare flexibility to return to work on their own terms soon after giving birth. They did this by modifying their work spaces to allow for their babies' routines and by tailoring their working hours to fit their personal needs – challenging the established conventions of rigid workplaces where children do not exist and where clients expect that the candle remains burning at both ends.

Webb conceded that this decision was not easy as a woman, losing clients along the way while witnessing many men become fathers and never missing a beat. She commented that it was only possible to sustain her career as a mum by understanding the systems, at play in the industry, that stereotyped women, and by balancing a complex juggle of work/life responsibilities. Parenthood forced Webb to make decisions quicker and to shift her thinking away from the role of an active maker into a more effective managerial role – changing the business in a disruptive way but continuing its success.

Cornhill found the scheduling of parental leave difficult as her first child arrived prematurely and found motherhood gave her a “more acute appreciation for why there is the disparity ... between men and women in the workforce.” Torn between the need to bond with her child and her love for her design studio, this experience of working as a mother highlighted the advantages of a workplace where men are rewarded yet women suffer retribution for being a parent14. Cornhill commented that the design industry in Australia conforms to these biases saying, “... it does make it hard to run a business and have a career, to compete with people who’ve not had to take that break, and not had to make those other sacrifices.” She felt like men had the upper hand by, “virtue of not having to take the break,” but also felt richer for having had the experience.

Only half way through the graduate pipeline in the decade following 2010, the numbers of female graduates in Australian graphic design are again looking to dramatically increase. From 2010 to 2014, 503 graduates had exited from the pipeline and the percentage of women had increased to 71 per cent. The trend of women’s significant interest in graphic design, from the previous four decades, has
accumulated in the form of role models and mentors for the current generation of women graduates, should they choose to seek it out. With the fourth wave of feminist embracing the internet to call out inequities, it has also provided women designers with an accessible avenue to bypass patriarchal award structures and industry bodies to promote their own work. Social media has made it easy for recent graduates to reach out to the new women heroes of design and to garner insights into their processes, influences, failures and successes. Online dialogues have become a channel for the further self-efficacy for women.

Gemma O’Brien graduated from the College of Fine Art in Sydney in 2011 and has made a rapid rise to fame as a bespoke typographic artist. Her Instagram account as of December 2016 had 127,000 followers, she has won prestigious awards including a 2014 typographic excellence award from the Type Directors Club in New York and she has been named one of Print Magazine’s 30 Visual Artists Under 30, in 2016. Benefitting from exposure to other women’s work like Jessica Hische, Jessica Walsh, Dana Tanamachi and Martina Flor, O’Brien feels “lucky” to be working in the new millennium saying, “I think it’s a great time, just to have other people doing what you want to do – as role models – is really important.” This feeling of luck has been researched by psychologist Richard Wiseman. He writes that an individual can create good fortune in their lives when they “maximize on chance opportunities” and move beyond on “ill fortune” – something the ambitious O’Brien has demonstrated. Networking and meeting new people have clearly benefitted her and driven her to seek out other women of influence consistently in her career. Beginning in 2009, she interviewed and filmed creators and designers at Typo Berlin, one of whom happened to be the aforementioned Webb. O’Brien’s luck has everything to do with the four decades of pipeline preceding her graduation – her drive to seek out women who have established profiles has contributed to her success.

Back in the 1960s, when this pipeline commenced, Greer argued vehemently that the opportunities embraced en masse by women to study the arts at university, stemmed from conditioning to be servile and obedient, and acted as a stop gap in a women’s life before entering marriage or support roles industry. Historically, this is evidenced in Australian graphic design. The only woman permitted entry in the AGDA Hall of Fame prior to 2014, was the inspirational Dahl Collings (1909-1988), where her prolific output was written about only in the context of her husband and male contemporaries. Indeed, the tendency for her worked to be signed as “Dahl and Geoffrey Collings” signifies the importance of pairings for women designers as opposed to independent authorship. Regardless, her legacy of tenacity – to grip onto the importance of a sustained lifetime of creative contribution – has resonated in the voices of females who have graduated from this pipeline ever since.

Warner, Grocott, Di Risio, Macleod, Elder, Quigley, Leeming, Webb, and Cornhill have met with resistance regarding their commencement, progression and inclusion in the graphic design industry. They have had to actively create opportunities opposing societal norms to stake their claim in the workforce. At different times in this short history, they have been denied accolades, begrudged inclusion into the inner circles of industry bodies and have had to juggle the high demands of motherhood to remain in positions of power. This anthology of voices, presented chronologically against a pipeline flush with women graphic designers, shows that a female majority does not necessarily equate to an equitable experience in the workforce. Instead, it demonstrates that an ambition for sustained and self-sufficient careers is currency, spent to prove the significance of their contributions as good designers.

Writing critically about graphic design, Maud Lavin, a professor at School of Art Institute of Chicago, identifies how young girls are “relationship centered” and that identifying with historical figures leads them to play out aspirational lessons in their own lives. Considering the potential that these tendencies mature and transpire similarly in adult women, the pipeline of women graduating from graphic design courses in Australia can benefit from exposure to the role models profiled in this article. The evidence presented of women designers succeeding, after enduring every gendered hurdle placed in front of them, shows a tenacity with the potential to positively infect coming generations. It has accumulated to inspire the success of the new breed of women designers, like O’Brien, who are emancipated by their mentorship and gives weight to the argument that further visibility for women designers and attention from design historians to be more gender inclusive, is non-negotiable.
Reference List


2 All women graphic designers mentioned in this article were interviewed by the author, Jane Connory, in 2016. Ethical clearance was given by all participants.


9 Mad Men was a television series that ran from 2007 to 2015 described by Internet Movie Database (IMDB) as, “A drama about one of New York’s most prestigious ad agencies at the beginning of the 1960s, focusing on one of the firm’s most mysterious but extremely talented ad executives, Donald Draper.” Elisabeth Moss played the character of Peggy Olsen whose experiences as a copywriter showcased the misogynistic attitudes women had to encounter in the advertising agencies of Madison Ave, in New York, at the time. Her creativity, cunning and steadfastness are an inspiration in the world of popular culture and an anomaly in the narrative in the advertising industry.


