

THE SUNDAY AGE

preview

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Plenty ought to be enough

**Barbara
Kruger
talks to
Preview**

The artist as brand

For 25 years, the American artist Barbara Kruger has made art that is instantly recognisable as hers. But has she become a victim of her own success? She spoke with **Gina McColl** on the eve of a major new show in Melbourne.

A giant hand delicately holds a calling card emblazoned with the legend: "I shop therefore I am." Made in 1987, this work instantly achieved the kind of "Why didn't I think of that?" self-evidence once reserved for phrases such as "The meek shall inherit the Earth" or "Survival of the fittest". The mantra for our age, it has been reproduced on a million coffee mugs, mouse pads and shopping bags.

Its creator, American artist Barbara Kruger, has made a career — some would even say a brand — out of art that wears its political heart on its sleeve. Her most famous works take a pre-existing image and superimpose on it text that combines the wit and jingle of advertising with the punch of propaganda.

"When I hear the word culture, I take out my chequebook."

Her works take the colours of fascism, newspapers and Coca-Cola — black, white and red — and combine them with slightly sinister images redolent of McCarthyist America and the seductive techniques of Madison Avenue. Both countercultural icon and runaway commercial success, Kruger is the grande dame of the Mike Moore and Naomi Klein-style refuseniks, with her three-decade critique of power and capitalism.

"We won't play nature to your culture." Much of her work exposes, through irony and juxtaposition, our stereotypes about gender, race and class. So at first, it seems something of a paradox that she declines to talk about her private life in interviews, and has a long-standing opposition to being photographed. Whatever happened to "the personal is political"? Is this just a way of cultivating mystery? Hypocritical, even?

Back in 1996, there was a minor rumpus about Kruger's refusal to be photographed while she was in Melbourne for a show of her work at the Heide Museum of Art. There was a suspicion that Kruger was striking a Garbo-like pose and that her refusal was just a strategy to ramp up further interest in her work. Not at all, according to the artist, who will renew her skirmishes with local photographers in December when she comes to Melbourne for the opening of a show of new work at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA). "You only need one picture for the obituary, and you've already got that," Kruger says wearily over the phone from her home in Los Angeles.

Instead, she argues, her refusal of the limelight is partly a strategy to keep the focus on her work, and partly an extension of the work — a way of highlighting the media's dependence on "image" in the celebrity and lifestyle sense.

"You know, I'm really not into the personality stuff," Kruger says. "We live in such a celebrity-oriented culture based on the person and the body, and I really happily decline being a player in that. I try and make my work about that mania. I don't sign stuff either. I just tell people, 'Sign and say I did it, nobody will know it's not me'. I mean, the whole fetish thing, the whole celebrity thing, I just decline that sort of specialness."

Declining specialness must make her something of a rarity in starstruck Los Angeles, where she lives for about nine months of the year, getting away from her increasingly gentrified New York

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PICTURE: TIMOTHY GREENFIELD-SANDERS

neighbourhood and, she says, enjoying some "botany in my life". But Kruger's reticence is not just a pose. Her background and upbringing were nothing if not modest, and this has contributed both to her eschewing of the fame game and her political sensibilities.

Kruger, who turns 59 this year, was born in the poor, predominantly black city of Newark, New Jersey. An only child, her mother was a legal secretary and her father a chemical technician who worked for Shell and died at the age of 50. "Shell used to tell everybody at the plant to drink lots of milk to coat the stomach, and no one knew why," Kruger says. "A huge percentage of the people who worked at his plant died of cancer at very early ages."

Kruger describes her family as "working class or slightly below. I'm the first person in my family that's ever owned any property. Neither of my parents had college degrees and neither do I."

She enrolled in degrees at Syracuse University and the Parsons School of Design, but quit each after only a year. At Syracuse, the emphasis was on social success, and "I was one of the few people on my floor who didn't have facial surgery", Kruger recalls drily. And while she enjoyed studying with photographer Diane Arbus at Parsons, she felt what she was learning was limited. But more fundamentally, she had to find work to support herself.

Aged 19, Kruger worked in a series of what would now be called McJobs — phone operator, billing clerk — before joining magazine publisher Conde Nast. From laying out the unpresti-

gious back pages of magazines, she was quickly promoted to picture editor of *Mademoiselle*, later moving on to *House and Garden*. Conde Nast was a big employer of young women, Kruger says, but her promotion there in the late '60s and early '70s was no sign of its progressive tendencies. Instead, the publishing house was notorious for employing large numbers of young, highly educated women because it had a high staff turnover and could pay them — because they mostly came from wealthy families and worked because they wanted to rather than needed to — a pittance. Even so, says Kruger, "It was a place that women could actually become editors. Elsewhere they either couldn't get a job, or they still ended up making coffee for some male boss".

Poverty, her father's work-related death, discrimination, exploitation — that's quite a menu. But Kruger denies these experiences radicalised her. She refuses labels like "political" or "radical", saying repeatedly, "I don't even know what the word means". She similarly refuses to be tagged as a feminist artist, saying she doesn't want to be marginalised. But she does concede that while there was no political epiphany, she was always attuned to issues of social justice. "My upbringing very much defined to some degree the kind of work I made and the way I live my life," she admits.

The decade spent working as a graphic designer also had a legacy. Kruger loved poring through slides and transparencies in a darkroom and picking the right one. "When I first started at the magazine, I wanted to be art director of the world," she says. But the restrictions of working to the clients' and publisher's specifications chafed, and she started to make works to please herself. "My work as a designer morphed — with a great deal of change — into my job as an artist."

Kruger experimented with craft and photography before devising her agit-prop style, combining found images with text that directly addressed the viewer. The use of "I" and "you" is fundamental to the seductiveness of her work. You can't help identifying with them, but this often works to manipulate you into confronting some unsettling truths.

"Your fictions become history," reads the text over a shattered, vaguely classical face. That's not just an accusation about grand narratives; that's a horrible moment of self-recognition about the lies we tell ourselves and others. Kruger's image-text works are least successful when the words and the image are too illustrative. ("It's a small world, but not if you have to clean it" is emblazoned over a '50s-ish housewife holding a giant magnifying glass to one eye.) And they work best when the text and images take on a kind of Gertrude Stein-ish quali-



Right: *Untitled (I shop therefore I am)* 1990. Photolithograph on paper shopping bag.

ty, the subject positions becoming ironic and the metaphors estranged. ("I am your slice of life" is the caption to three dancing razors.)

Curator and academic Chris McAuliffe argues that Kruger's artistic significance lies in her use of art as polemic. "Encountering work like Barbara Kruger's is an important moment in the realisation that art can be about politics or be about gender, that art can argue," he says. "It's a big win for a new audience to realise that art can kick butt occasionally."

Once she developed her agit-prop style, Kruger's kicks were felt by butts around the world. First exhibiting image-texts in 1980, she was included in the *Nineteen emerging artists* show at the Guggenheim the following year, and represented the US at the Venice Biennale in 1982. She was picked up by New York's prestigious Mary Boone Gallery and exhibited in all the hottest contemporary art spots: Documenta in Germany, London's Institute of Contemporary Art, the Whitney's biennials.

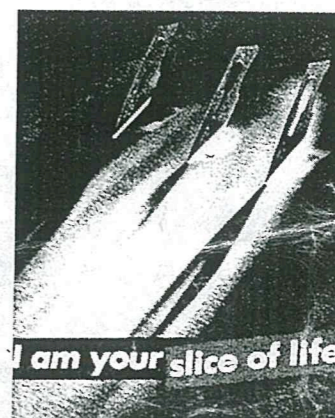
She also returned Pop art to the people. Her public projects reached out from galleries to adorn bus shelters and billboards and the covers of magazines including *Esquire*, *Newsweek* and now *Preview*. She lent her name and her trademark typeface (Futura Bold Italic) to causes ranging from AIDS to racism, from pro-choice to anti-domestic violence campaigns. She was honoured with a retrospective at the Whitney in 2000.

But there has been a downside to her '80s superstardom. Kruger's work continued to evolve: rather than relying on found images, she started to make her own film and video works in 1993. She showed one of these early large-scale audiovisual installations in Melbourne in 1996. In the past decade, she has also produced what she calls "statues" — white fibreglass sculptures of famous people in scandalous and ironic tableaux: Marilyn Monroe and John and Robert Kennedy in a work called *Family*; Roy Cohen and J. Edgar Hoover in a work called *Justice*. At ACCA, in December, she

will open her recent 12-channel video work *Twelve*, in which her methods of direct address have become scenes scripted by her but performed by actors, talking at us, but also at each other as they are screened simultaneously on four walls. Yet the public continues to see Kruger as the poster-girl for, well, posters.

This year, Kruger was invited to show work at the Venice Biennale. "I originally wanted to do *Twelve*, but there was no room, and they wanted me to do the facade of the pavilion," Kruger says. And while she proposed various video installations for the facade, the curators preferred her to wrap the building in her characteristic text slogans. "God is on my side, he told me so," read one. "You make history when you do business."

She did, in fact, make history: Venice honoured her with a Lifetime Achievement award. But despite the accolade, Kruger says she was dissatisfied. "I'm the first person to be critical of my work, and this is not a successful work. And the irony is I was given this award there. I was very happy to



Above: Barbara Kruger, *Twelve*, 2004, which opens at ACCA this month.

Below left: *Untitled (It's a small world but not if you have to clean it)* 1990, photographic silkscreen on vinyl.

Below right: *Untitled, (I am your slice of life)* 1981.

even be invited, because I never thought I'd have a career with any resonance, so I'm very appreciative of that. But if I was happy with that work, I wouldn't have gotten the award."

This is not the first time Kruger has come up against an audience's preference for the old, recognisable work. Chris McAuliffe, the artistic director of the Ian Potter Museum of Art, recalls: "A few years ago, I saw a big set of her sculptures in a commercial gallery in New York. She had a retrospective on at the Whitney at the same time, and everybody was looking at the new sculpture saying, 'Whaaaat?'"

This problem is not unique to Kruger. "It's a fate a lot of artists suffer," McAuliffe says. "They make a really strong, distinctive statement at a certain point in their career, and that becomes the style everyone wants to see. That's more to do with audiences than artists: it's the audience who still wants Neil Diamond to sing *Crackling Rosie* over and over again."

Maybe Kruger is being skewered by the very thing that she has been troubling us with all these years: our determination to be seduced by stereotypes and trademarks. "We have received orders not to move," says a famous work from 1982 depicting a woman imprisoned, beetle-like, by ranks of pins. It could be a prophesy about her career, about how we as audiences prefer to stick to the recognisable Kruger "brand". How ironic is that?

Kruger may valiantly try to refuse her celebrity status, but she is philosophical about the recuperation of her art as a commodity. "I make my work about that to some degree, but it's not like I do work and I'm outside of it," she says. "When I say, 'I shop, therefore I am', it's not like I'm a shopping fiend, but it's not like I'm saying, 'Well, you all shop and I'm too good for that', I mean, I'm in my work, I'm in that everyday life. I don't indict people and say, 'I'm better'. That's not what I'm into at all."

Barbara Kruger's *Twelve* is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Southbank, December 20 to February 26, 2006. Tel: 9697 9999