

Alison Alder

Artist statement:

In 1984 I was engaged to work at Redback Graphix in Wollongong as 'Trainee Artist in the Community', for a year, funded by the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council – probably from the 'Art and Working Life fund. I moved to Wollongong from Melbourne. The Kembla Coal and Coke Miners' Women's Auxiliary was, I think, the first organisation I worked with in Wollongong. I remember being very anxious and worried about the commission. My memories are pretty hazy but I do remember meeting a small group of 3 or 4 women, and discussing how they wanted to be represented. They were pretty intimidating – I don't recall there being much idle chit chat! They were a lot older than me and I probably looked pretty raw and naive – which I was! We must have decided to undertake a photo shoot as I met the woman, in the poster, at the mine head (I think it is Scarborough) where I took black and white photos of her holding up a blank piece of cardboard. The group must have decided on the text of the poster which I added into the artwork later. My recollection is that there were several mine closures slated for that time and BHP was undertaking massive lay offs of workers at the steel works. I am not sure now exactly what was happening but do recall that unemployment was extremely high, especially in the Illawarra.

I am not sure what the women thought of the poster – I recall seeing images of the poster being used in protests etc published in the press – probably the Illawarra Mercury. I deduced that because the poster was used they must have been reasonably happy. I wanted to make my own mark working at Redback and I was very conscious of trying to make a work that did not use fluorescent colours or have the bands of text that had become known as the Redback Graphix 'look'. I wanted the woman to look strong and in control and to be a part of her landscape.

The cause was important to me in many ways. I supported the rights of working people and unions. I was a member of the PKIU (Printers and Kindred Industries Union) and the Artworkers Union (that may have been a bit later). In Melbourne, prior to arriving in Wollongong, I worked with men at the Williamstown Naval Dockyard as part of an Art and Working Life project developing posters about Work Health and Safety issues. I am still a union member.

I was recently invited to participate in the Future Feminist Archive, a project developed by Contemporary Arts and Feminism, and engaged to go back and look at archives in Wollongong. I spent the majority of my time poring through the archives held at the University of Wollongong, primarily looking at the records of the Miners' Women's Auxiliary that I worked with all those decades ago. The Auxiliary have an amazing history of activism and activity that I found completely inspiring. If only I had known then what I know now! Prior to delving into the archives I couldn't recall, to my shame, who was the subject of the poster. However, the archives revealed that the Honorary Secretary of the Auxiliary at the time I made the poster was Mrs Dolly Potter and Mrs Potter is the subject in the poster and a truly remarkable person. She sadly passed away in 2013 at the grand age of 90. I would have liked to have met her again, as perhaps with maybe a little more knowledge and life experience under my belt, I may have found out more about this amazing social justice campaigner who worked on so many issues which have defined our society.

Alison Alder, 2015