**Mambo: 30 Years of Shelf-Indulgence**

Since its inception in 1984, Mambo has grown to become one of Australia’s most distinctive design labels. This exhibition marks an important milestone for Mambo and reflects on its contribution both as a fashion label and a somewhat eccentric Australian institution. With its irreverent sense of humour and perverse sense of national pride, Mambo has played a significant role in the graphic depiction of Australian life over the past thirty years. The National Gallery of Victoria is very pleased to mark this major anniversary with the exhibition Mambo: 30 Years of Shelf-Indulgence.

The exhibition was developed by guest curators Eddie Zammit, a contemporary streetwear commentator and obsessive T-shirt collector, and Wayne Golding, a former copywriter and original Mambo ‘ideas man’. Together, they consulted widely and delved deeply. They mined the archives and sifted through their own collections and those of others. They also borrowed a significant quantity of original material from artists and gathered many stories and anecdotes about Mambo. The outcome is a comprehensive review of Mambo’s contribution to Australian culture.

Mambo: 30 Years of Shelf-Indulgence looks at some of the many artists who have made Mambo a national household name and presents the ideas and idiosyncrasies that have come to characterise this unconventional brand.

**Storageman sculptures**

For brands to grab the attention of a retail shopper is never easy, especially when selling out of a multi-brand store. Advertising takes a back seat to filling shelves and wall space with a maximum amount of product. If space can be found for an advertisement, it will often be one pointing customers in the direction of the store’s in-house brands.

In an effort to be seen amid the chaos of generally overstocked retail stores, Mambo commissioned model builders Hugh Ramage and Peter King to build two large sculptures based on original artwork by Mambo artists Reg Mombassa and Jeff Raglus. Mambo’s only instruction to the pair was, ‘Make them big’. The finished sculptures, made of steel, chicken wire, plaster and medium-density fibreboard, fulfilled that brief, requiring a small team and a large truck to move them from one location to another.

**Mambo surfboards**

Surfing is one of the four pillars on which Mambo is built, with art, music and beer sponsorship propping up the other three corners. Mambo artist Reg Mombassa loves telling the story about how he tried surfing once and hated it. The fact that he couldn’t swim at the time would have done little to enhance the experience. On the other hand, fellow Mambo artist Gerry Wedd was a six-time state surfing champion. In between these two extremes sit the rest of the Mambo family.

Surfing is one of Mambo’s shared passions, an activity enjoyed by the majority of those who have worked there. It is also a popular means of team building, being one that doesn’t involve binge drinking or chasing a greased pig around the studio in a pair of high heels. It is part of company folklore that Mambo was created in the belief that almost any idiot can sell a printed T-shirt for more than its wholesale value. It is also true that Mambo was created in part to give surfers an opportunity to find a standard of employment that would not be available to them in the ‘real’ world.

**Mambo posters**

In a world full of overwrought and often self-conscious advertising, Mambo retains a sometimes crude, often self-deprecating but always ironic attitude to the way the company promotes itself. Nowhere is this attitude more evident than in the posters it has produced since 1984.

Since its first poster, Real wrestlers/real wrestling by Richard Allan, Mambo has viewed these items as not so much promotional tools but pieces of affordable art designed to present the company’s unique and humour-driven style to an audience that is more used to being hit over the head with a sackful of logos swung by a vaguely recognisable brand ‘ambassador’.

Many of Mambo’s posters have attracted controversy. In 1989 Spiritual adventurewear, depicting a mouse nailed to a cross and imploring God to ‘forgive them (for) they know not what to wear’, caught the attention of the Advertising Standards Board. Another, by Paul Worstead, used a three-legged dog vomiting on a condom-littered beach to promote a wave-sailing event being hosted by the New South Wales coastal town of Merimbula.

Nowadays, a Mambo poster attracts more interest from collectors than it does the ire of a statutory body, having become the equivalent of a limited-edition print that one would expect to find in a gallery.

**Mambo catalogues**

Early Mambo catalogues were a collection of A4 photocopied pages stapled together and distributed to surf retailers, who refused to place orders because the black-and-white images presented in the catalogue bore little resemblance to the garments they were being asked to purchase.

Eventually, Mambo was able to afford a camera and a print broker, who produced the company’s first full-colour catalogue. This new format set a precedent for the style and content that was to follow, with the space given to sales limited to fifty per cent, while the rest of the catalogue featured art and the sort of humour that occasionally provoked angry phone calls from rival brands. Mambo catalogues included content such as tips for finding weapons of mass destruction, Mambo Loudshirt buybacks and, in the summer 1998 catalogue, a full-page attack on the federal government following its decision to cut ABC funding.

For the summer 1996 edition, Mambo commissioned a cartoon featuring American playboy surfer Bunker Spreckels, which so offended one reader that she complained to her local member of parliament. The company’s response was to take a photo of its art director burning one of the catalogues, staple it to a $15 gift certificate and send it to the politician.

**Mambo: original art**

Mambo’s most recognisable feature is its artwork. Described as a ‘movement’ as often as it is a surf brand, Mambo has always wrapped its product in a standard of artwork not normally seen beyond the walls of an art gallery. Over the years, the company’s art collection has been exhibited in local and international galleries including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Melbourne Museum; and the Queen’s Gallery, London.

In 1984, when Mambo was launched, only a handful of surf and streetwear brands were prepared to extend their graphic catalogues beyond the safe and commercially reliable brand logo. It was within this context that Mambo began recruiting a group of artists whose passion and humour were to fit the personality and culture of a brand that was derived from and connected with the Australian experience.

Over the years, Mambo has worked with more than 250 visual and graphic artists, many with reputations extending to countries they have yet to visit. They include Richard Allan, Stephen Bliss, Reg Mombassa, Paul McNeil, Jim Mitchell, Maria Kozic, Rockin’ Jelly Bean and Robert Williams. Recent arrivals include Ben Brown, Lee McConnell and Blair Sayer.

Real wrestlers/real wrestling was a parody of ‘Real Surfers, Real Surfing’, a widely used tagline that had already started appearing in surf magazine advertisements by the time Mambo was launched in 1984. Coined by industry rivals Quiksilver, the line was meant to remind the market that they were not only involved in the business of surfing, they were surfing. To Mambo, a company whose motto is ‘Any idiot can print a T-shirt and sell it for seventy-five per cent above wholesale’, this presented an opportunity to create an advertising style that satirised not only its rivals but also itself.

While Mambo received many complaints in the three years following its launch, from members of the public, and conservative Christian groups in particular, the release of this poster generated more than a thousand angry phone calls and letters, a number that still stands as an in-house record. At the height of this barrage, three particularly aggrieved members of the public visited Mambo’s Paddington store in Sydney and threatened to bomb the premises if this poster was not removed from the front window. After speaking to police, the shop’s staff decided to leave the poster where it was.

The Battle of the Surfbands was a concept event that ran over four years and featured well-known Sydney-based bands such as Mental As Anything and The Celibate Rifles performing under a variety of surf-style pseudonyms, including The Death Barrels and Sandy Pile & The Beach Bums. The first battlewas staged at Sydney’s Coogee Bay Hotel in 1986. Each band would finish by performing its version of a classic surf tune such as ‘Wipeout’ or ‘Bombora’. The shows are fondly remembered for their homage to a much-loved musical genre, audience participation (read: rioting, during the fourth and final battle), band nudity and record bar receipts.

The Mambo Surf Showdown was a surf contest rated by the Association of Surfing Professionals, which was held in conjunction with the (Mambo) Battle of the Surfbands. The contest, which ran from 1986 to 1989, pitted surfers from Sydney’s northern beaches against those based on the southern side of Sydney Harbour. At the conclusion of each contest, surfers and spectators would adjourn to the nearest hotel, usually the Coogee Bay or the Bondi Hotel, for the presentation and, following that, the Battle of the Surfbands.

Shortly after the release of this poster, the Victorian Department of Main Roads sought, and was given permission by Mambo, to use it in a campaign to encourage children to wear bicycle helmets. At around the same time, the Californian Traffic Authority in the United States was demanding the poster’s withdrawal from stores, accusing Mambo of using ‘violent and inappropriate themes to sell an unrelated product’.

While Mambo’s flatulent mascot was once seen as provocative, and even ‘obscene’, by a number of people – who complained not only to the company but also to newspapers and, on several occasions, to local politicians – this image has become an icon. In 2007 Superbrands, an publication compiled by retail industry analysts, reported that total profits from the sale of Mambo’s Farting dog T-shirt during 2005 and 2006 eclipsed the gross domestic product (GDP) of the former Russian state of Azerbaijan.

In 1989, Mambo was approached to sponsor an Australasian tour by US punk band The Ramones. Having already developed a strong association with music through its related independent record label Phantom, Mambo agreed. The sponsorship generated a poster, T-shirts and, somewhat at odds with the band’s lack of enthusiasm for moving water and strong sunlight, two pairs of board shorts designed by Mambo studio artist, as he was at the time, Paul McNeil.

Prior to the 1994 federal election, Mambo launched a political party with the intention of contesting the local seat of Wentworth. Mambo storeman Gerry Mander (John Bochat) was elected party leader, and a wide range of campaign material was produced and distributed from Mambo headquarters. On the morning of 8 August, twenty supporters were present at the annual City to Surf to collect the 5000 signatures required by the Australian Electoral Commission to run a candidate in a federal election. The party was subsequently registered but did not participate in the election, because Mambo’s production manager decided that several urgent deadlines needed to take precedence over party business.

In January 1989, a resident of the Cleveland town of Stockton in the United States entered a local schoolyard with a semiautomatic rifle and shot and killed five children, wounding thirty others. In a press conference the following day, a spokesperson for the National Rifle Association condemned the gunman but, typically, not America’s easy access to guns. In wrapping up his address, he stated that not only was support for his organisation at an all-time high but that ‘God was on their side’. This gratuitous and patently stupid claim seemed like a good starting point for a Mambo T-shirt.

This is an ironic tribute to a surfing subclass, the ‘Leisure Master’, who lived around Sydney’s northern beachside suburbs in the early 1970s. He had a tan in winter and a friend in customs, and he lived comfortably with no visible means of support. When not flying stand-by to the playgrounds of the rich and famous, he was helping police with their enquiries, usually drug-related.

In 1994, inspired by the wit and graphic charm of the Hawaiian ‘Aloha’ shirt, Mambo set about designing its own version of this iconic print. While the original model celebrated the Hawaii’s exotic island culture, the Mambo Loudshirt featured aspects of Australia’s cultural identity, including beer trees, recreational drugs, alien fauna and a constellation of biscuits that hovers in the sky above the southern hemisphere.

Prior to work commencing on a new season’s range, artist Reg Mombassa would arrive at Mambo with drawing books full of ideas. The rest of the day was spent with Mambo boss Dare Jennings, trying to find up to eight images that would not lead to prosecution. One such image was I’ve got the horn, a reference to a routine by British comedians Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. Whether due to Reg’s gentle rendering of the image or the fact that the skit was not widely known in Australia, the poster received only a handful of complaints.

Inspiration comes from many different sources at Mambo. On one occasion, Reg Mombassa borrowed a copy of Mao Tse Tung’s Little Red Book and used the former Chinese leader’s rhetoric to inspire a comic caption for a mock-Fascist image that he would later produce.

Rachel hatred was one of two images – the other being Rednecks – commissioned by Mambo in response to the arrival on the Australian political scene of Pauline Hanson and her ultra-conservative One Nation Party. Many, including Mambo, saw her policies as racist and lacking not only vision but also empathy. Mambo sent a copy of this poster to Hanson’s electoral office prior to the 1998 federal election but received no response from the then member for Oxley.

The ‘Australian Jesus’, a character created by artist Reg Mombassa, was based on a self-ordained minister who lived on a farm in the southern highlands of New South Wales and who, during the mid 1980s, led a small flock of parishioners into exile from the Commonwealth of Australia. The group was eventually closed down by the Australian Tax Office. Reg produced a series of Australian Jesus posters and T-shirts, including this one, adapted from a painting, Christ carrying the cross, by the fifteenth-century Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch.

This ironically titled image features several aspects of the surfing life. Anyone who has ever surfed knows the relationships that exist among surfing’s various subgroups are fractious at best and based on a traditional contempt by one group for the equipment ridden by the others. For example, longboard, or Malibu, riders generally hate shortboard riders, and both hate boogie board riders – or ‘speed humps’. Ski riders, or ‘goat boaters’, have been known to use their paddle as a weapon and are hated by everyone else. As for women … that ‘glass ceiling’ doesn’t stop at the water’s edge.

Inspired by the Bayeux tapestry (a twelfth-century French tapestry depicting events leading up to the Norman conquest of England), the Mambo tapestries represent a collection of surfing milestones that celebrate not only the rich history of professional surfing but also the more mundane, though no less surf-saturated, history of the artist and several of his mates, some of it criminal and most of it in contravention of accepted standards of good taste.

This is one of twenty surfboard ‘sprays’ commissioned by Mambo from Paul McNeil and offered for sale in the various Mambo stores throughout Australia and the United Kingdom. This board was on display at the Mambo store in Paddington, Sydney, from 1994 to 1996.

This sculpture is based on a short story, ‘The emperor’s new clothes’, by Hans Christian Andersen. In the story, the emperor believes that he is wearing a specially designed suit that can be seen only by people of great intelligence and style. Mambo adapted this tale to satirise the vanity of the surf-clothing industry.

The Endless sofa was commissioned by Australian retailer David Jones for a Mambo in-store display. It was conceived by David McKay and built by Atelier Upholstery.

This soft sculpture was commissioned by Australian retailer David Jones for a Mambo in-store display.

This is one of ten flags created by Mambo artists to mark the 100th anniversary of the unveiling of the Australian flag on 3September 1901. The design was inspired by the success of the ‘no’ vote in the 1999 referendum to decide whether or not Australia would become a republic. The Mambo Flags project was curated by Melbourne-based artist Stewart Russell.

This is one of ten flags created by Mambo artists to mark the 100th anniversary of the unveiling of the Australian flag on 3 September 1901. The design was inspired by the flags of the Asafo, the warrior group of the Fante people of Ghana. The design represents the conflict that existed between the Australian electorate and the federal government in 2001. The Mambo Flags project was curated by Melbourne-based artist Stewart Russell.

This surfboard was commissioned by Mambo for display in the company’s various stores throughout Australia and the United Kingdom. It is one of six identical boards that were designed and painted by the artist.

In 2000, Mambo was invited by GM Holden Ltd to collaborate on an homage to an automotive icon of the 1970s, the Sandman panel van. Mambo designed the Bushfire custom finish, the retro Sandman lettering on the tailgate and the vehicle’s interior fabrics. Mambo project art director David McKay also updated versions of the classic panel-van mural with beach and bush goddess themes on either side of the canopy. The vehicle debuted at the 2000 Sydney Motor Show. In 2001, it appeared at the Detroit Motor Show in the United States.

In 1999, Mambo artist Reg Mombassa was invited to assist in the design of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games closing ceremony. In addition to the ten four-metre-tall inflatables that he designed, the ceremony also featured fifty actors wearing Australian Jesus outfits. The ‘Australian Jesus’ was a character that Mombassa had originally created for Mambo and would have been familiar to anyone with knowledge of the brand. For months after the closing ceremony, Mambo kept receiving photos of the actors, still dressed in their Australian Jesus suits, making their way home on public transport.

These badges are part of a collection of campaign material that was produced by Mambo after deciding to create a party that would run a mock contest for the local seat of Wentworth during the 2004 federal election. The party’s policies included closing down off-shore detention centres and expanding the Australian national anthem to include references to pig shooting, dwarf throwing and jelly wrestling. Mambo collected the 5000 signatures required to register a party for an Australian election. While the party was subsequently registered, ‘commercial imperatives’ (several production deadlines) prevented it from participating in the election.

In 1995, when the French navy arrived in the South Pacific to resume nuclear weapons testing at Mururoa Atoll, Barton Lynch, a member of the Australian Professional Surfing Association, approached Mambo and asked it to design a T-shirt that the world’s top men and women surfers could wear to protest the actions of the French government during the French leg of the international surfing tour. Mambo was later presented with a Chirac T-shirt bearing the signatures of all the surfers who had participated in the protest.

Prior to the 1994 federal election, Mambo launched a political party with the intention of contesting the local seat of Wentworth. In addition to collecting the 5000 signatures required by the Australian Electoral Commission to run a candidate in a federal election, Mambo produced a wide range of campaign material that was designed by and distributed from the Mambo studio at Rushcutters Bay, Sydney. This in-store counter display was one of the items produced.

The Domestic teapot was commissioned by Mambo for a national exhibition of original Mambo artwork, in 1984. The exhibition, titled The Emperor’s New Clothes (and subtitled Art Irritates Life), was launched in Darwin at the Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. The exhibition also appeared in the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; Melbourne’s Westpac Gallery; Sydney’s Manly Art Gallery; and the Gold Coast City Art Gallery.

In 1999, Mambo was commissioned by the Woolmark Company to design the Australian athletes’ uniforms for the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games. The uniform included a jacket lining, designed by Mambo artist Reg Mombassa, called Bush suburb. When officials discovered that members of the team intended to wear their jackets inside out during the closing ceremony, Mambo was asked to create a shirt using the same artwork that could be worn by the athletes on the closing night.

The Mambo Flags project was created to mark the 100th anniversary of the unveiling of the Australian flag on 3 September 1901. Measuring 3.6 metres high by five metres wide, each of the ten flags was designed by a different Mambo artist. They were sewn by members of the Country Women’s Association, the Australian Quilters Association, the Daylesford Spa Quilters and the Castlemaine Goldfields Quilters. The flags were flown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, in October 2001; the Melbourne Museum, in December 2001; and along London’s Carnaby Street, in 2002.

In 2002, Mambo was asked by Greenpeace to collaborate on a campaign to stop the building of a second nuclear reactor in the Sydney suburb of Lucas Heights. Mambo artist Reg Mombassa was commissioned to design a T-shirt graphic to help raise money for the campaign. Following the announcement of Mambo’s involvement in the project, the company was attacked in federal parliament by then minister for science Peter McGauran.

The Chaser is Australia’s foremost team of political satirists. In 2007, they achieved worldwide notoriety when they drove a fake motorcade, carrying one of their members dressed as Osama bin Laden, into a restricted area during the APEC summit in Sydney. The summit was attended by several world leaders including US president George W. Bush. In 2009, Mambo joined The Chaser in a collaboration designed to ‘ruin an unspecified number of perfectly good T-shirts’, as stated in the contract.

The Grateful Dead board was commissioned by Mambo for display at a surf industry trade show in Long Beach, California. Upon its return to Australia, it was placed on display in the Mambo Friendship Store, in Paddington, Sydney.

The Madonna reef board was commissioned by Mambo for an exhibition of original artwork at the Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, in January 1990. It was designed and painted by Mambo artist David McKay.

The Point blank board was purchased by Mambo for an in-store display in the company’s Friendship Store, in Paddington, Sydney. The board was stolen from the store in 2001 but returned shortly after being discovered on eBay. Given the choice of returning the board to Mambo or the Kings Cross police station, the seller chose the former.

The Dirty money board was commissioned by Mambo for an exhibition of original Mambo artwork at the Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, in January 1990. The image was conceived and designed by Richard Allan, and painted by Gary Howell.

The Pigmanboard was commissioned by Mambo for an exhibition of original Mambo artwork at the Ray Hughes Gallery, Sydney, in January 1990. The image was designed and painted by Matthew Martin.

From the artist: Pigman was the ‘pig saver’ at Bondi Beach. He was employed by the Woollahra Council to rescue pigs that found themselves in difficulty in Bondi’s often treacherous surf. The fact that no pigs drowned during his period of service is often cited as proof of his extraordinary ability.

The Australian Jesus doll was made for a music video for Sydney band Dog Trumpet. The video, titled ‘Jesus Song’, was later included in Golden Sandals,a documentary on the band’s guitarist and songwriter, Reg Mombassa. The ‘Australian Jesus’ was a character that Mombassa had originally designed for Mambo, and it had appeared on several T-shirts and posters.