



Perfect Match: Leah Hartley & Dale Harris, Studio Ink.

By Megan Spencer (c) 2013

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Graphic design; it's all around us everywhere we look in this contemporary world. But what is it?

Art or commerce?

Advertising or communication?

Business or recreation? Or all of the above?!

Images from The Quircus by Dale Harris & Leah Hartley

I ask Bendigo graphic designers and business partners Leah Hartley and Dale Harris to 'please explain' when I interview them at their Bendigo business, [Studio Ink](#), which they started in 2009. They too struggle to answer, even though they spend hours coming up with concepts, designs and the best way to communicate a client's business through the medium.

It's not that they don't know. Practically speaking, putting graphic design into words - a visual medium - is paradoxical. It's a complex 'melange' that combines a particular set of elements and structures.

"It's somewhere in the middle!" laughs Dale after he and Leah look at each other, searching for a succinct answer. "It depends on the type of project you're working on."

"On some projects we get to do full-on illustration -" starts Leah.

"- CD covers are good for that," nods Dale.

"It really depends on the brief from the client... But we don't call ourselves artists," Leah finishes.

While graphic design might be elusive to define - and the 'coolest' way to earn a buck these days - for 'small-A' artists like Dale and Leah, it's not hard to 'do'. Self-effacing yet 100% serious about design, anyone who's ever spent time with them - be they clients, friends or those in the Bendigo arts community - know they're not self-conscious about their vocation. (Not like their 'way cool' cousins in, say, the Melbourne industry.) While very good at what they do and eye-catching logo designs a speciality, this talented pair is *humble*.

"It's primary function is to communicate messages in an instant," decides Leah.

"We don't really work on advertising jobs," adds Dale. "We don't persuade people to 'buy stuff'. Our work more communicates the 'benefit' of something... We create a shorthand to the product, using the visual medium."

"We help build brands, so what we do is part of an overall package. We try and make an image that will hold a place in your mind." Now we're getting somewhere!

To underline the point, Studio Ink logos keep getting picked up for prestigious design publications. At the time of writing, a “record” 33 of their logos were included in ‘Logo Design 3’ (Zeixs, Germany). That makes a baker’s dozen so far.

While Bendigo-bred and based – the business partners met in 2001, completing BA’s in Visual Arts at La Trobe University - Studio Ink has blipped the radar of a number of overseas clients even as far afield as Estonia.

“When we first started we had more international clients than locals,” Dale remembers. “We were asked to design the artwork for a guy’s tradeshow stall in Estonia. That was pretty crazy!” adds Leah.

“We also did the artwork for ‘Jock Talk’, a sports social media network in San Diego,” says Dale.



Image by Leah Hartley, Studio Ink

“The guy found us on the net. He liked our previous work and got in touch!”

He saves the best story for last. “The weirdest business meeting we had was on stage at Rod Laver Arena with Green Day’s guitar ‘tech’, about his guitar amp business, after the concert.”

“We didn’t get to meet the band but the concert was great!” laughs Dale. And yes, they got the gig.

Studio Ink has worked with many notable local clients, including The Public Inn/Re-public, Brewhouse Coffee Roasters, The Woodhouse, Bendigo Bank, Bendigo Sustainability Group and Bendigo Blues & Roots Music Festival, of which it’s a sponsor.

“We work with a lot of people starting businesses. We like to come in early and establish all aspects of the brand,” says Dale. “The logo, the look and feel – to deliverables like stationery, brochures, websites,” he says, relishing the developmental side of their work.

Having worked together before they started Studio Ink, Leah says they really enjoy “creative control” and “one-on-one contact with clients.”

“Sometimes that can be missing in other businesses, but we see it as really important.”

Both are inspired by “pop and lowbrow art” says Leah, who boasts a borderline-obsessive collection of

vinyl toys, while Dale's thing for fonts keeps his mind, um, "busy". Having designed 36 in a previous role, it's not uncommon for him to go to a music festival ("or into Target"), and see t-shirts with words written in his fonts emblazoned upon them.

When work allows - or "with a push from Dale!" laughs Leah - they reach into the 'art world'.

Both have exhibited their distinctive, exotic digital designs and illustrations in Bendigo at venues Bob's Boutique, Hudson's Hub and El Gordo (the art space of which I was curator and co-owner), and online.

But the demands of running a full-time business can take its toll on artistic aspirations. "Sometimes it's hard to keep working at night when you've been on a computer all day," Leah says, "But it's good to have a show and be committed to it".



Leah & Dale, at 'The Quircus' #1, El Gordo. Photo: Megan Spencer

Their biggest goals? "To produce work we're really happy with - " starts Leah.

"- and to be self-employed!" finishes Dale. "To not have 20 staff," Leah pings back, "and, to be able to do work we're passionate about". Tick and tick.

Visit Studio Ink's [website](#) and [Facebook](#) page

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