

BY TIFFANY MEYERS

SHOW OF EMOTION:

IN AN ERA TROUBLED BY ECONOMIC, ENVIRONMENTAL & SOCIAL DISTRESS,
DESIGNERS LEAN TOWARD MESSAGES OF COMPASSION.

In one way or another, each of the five judges of the STEP Design 100 described this collection of winning entries as exquisite. But those who worship at the altar of the avant garde will want to take a seat now: It doesn't happen to be the riskiest body of work these judges have ever encountered in their collective awards-show experience.

"We're at a place in time where relatively simple and conservative but tasteful approaches are more the norm," says judge Kevin Grady, editor-in-chief and creative director of *Lemon* magazine and partner at Grady & Metcalf in Concord, Mass. "And sometimes that's OK. The goal of design isn't to do wacky things just to see what you can get away with. A lot of the winning work wasn't selected because it was necessarily groundbreaking, but it was very beautifully done, very confident work. I'd say that was more a hallmark of the show and its winners than anything else."

The judges offered a few ideas to explain the phenomenon. For his part, Grady wonders if the tenets of branding have created a less-hospitable atmosphere for disruptive solutions. He compares this batch of work to the more expressive design being produced in the early 1990s, when the newly ascendant computer had designers pushing conventions while their clients lapped up the results. But at that point, branding and its concomitant quest for consistency hadn't yet calcified. "There was less continuity in design then," he says. "That's evolved over the years—and probably in a good way. To enhance your brand, you want to simplify it. You want to make it more cohesive, rather than more complex."

FROM HERE TO ... WHERE?

The nature of the winning work—confident, certainly, but also quiet about it—led several of the judges to wonder if the industry

is in a transitional period—"a holding pattern," as Grady puts it—somewhere between what has been and what's to come. New paradigms tend to sweep over the design community every few years in what Design 100 judge Ann Willoughby calls "waves of influence." The founder and president of Willoughby Design Group of Kansas City adds: "And every so often, it sort of goes flat. What you see then is a lot of very appropriate, classic and very nice work."

If we are in a transitional period between what's been and what's about to be, fellow judge Steve Ryan, a designer and partner at VSA, Chicago, thinks this show might offer clues as to where we'll soon end up. He and his clients have been talking a lot lately about consumers' increasing desire for authenticity. "We're finding from a brand vantage point that if branding is formulaic at all, even if it's based on something that's worked in the past, the effectiveness of that formula is wearing thin."

Companies can no longer expect that just because they say it, consumers will believe it, Ryan adds. In fact, if a company shows inauthentic motives by making claims it doesn't support, consumers can skewer that brand online quickly and with ease. Brands, it seems, are getting real in response. "A lot of the communications in this show did seem to be moving away from overly plastic, overly marketed message development and design," he says, "and moving back to things that are more authentic and more thoughtfully done."

MODEST MEANS, BIG MESSAGES

Of course, “waves of influence” in design typically correspond to the vicissitudes of the economy. Amid the nail-biting threat of recession, clients tighten purse strings and reel in risky messaging. This year, most clients’ nails have been bitten to the quick. And beyond the economy, there’s lately been a more general sense of distress in the air—stemming from a calamitous war, an administration that’s often characterized in similar terms and a sinking-in realization that the consequences of centuries of environmental disregard are right here, right now. In such a climate, it’s fair to say that slick, showy gestures—as well as snarky irony and gratuitous risk-taking—would clang discordantly. (In the most literal manifestation of that idea, uncoated papers in this show trumped gloss and varnishes by far.) [1, 2, 3, 4]

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—Steve Ryan, judge

At the same time, there’s a sentiment of possibility in the air, a sense that action, if we take it now, actually might right some of the wrongs. It’s that attitude—and not the distress—that shows up in the work. “In times of economic and socio-cultural conflict,” says judge Bill Grant, president and creative director of Grant Design Collaborative in Canton, Ga., “designers and brands tend to gravitate to things that are more familiar and classic. But they also tend to explore more human messages.”

An example: From Lowercase, an annual report—with hand-drawn type on the cover—narrates the story of the Chicago Volunteer Legal Service, a network of nearly 2000 volunteer lawyers who provide free legal service to low-income clients for whom justice might otherwise be elusive. [5] “Part of the reason we’re seeing more work about social responsibility is because the people who are doing the design have the same concerns as all people,” says Ryan. “In the design community, we don’t lack concern for our fellow people and communities, so it’s consistent with who we are as individuals. We’re always looking for the opportunity to do that kind of work, and to do it well.”

Numerous entries highlight the capacity for design specifically to effect social change. That reflects the increasing acceptance of that possibility in the public and popular press. From Tsang Seymour Design, the catalog for *Design for the Other 90%*, an exhibition at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, features the work of “societal entrepreneurs,” designers whose work helps alleviate suffering and provides basic necessities to those in need. [6]

The students of John Bielenberg’s Project M were recognized for their direct-mail piece, black and white on newsprint, which incites recipients to donate \$425—covering the cost of a water meter—to a community-based organization in Hale County, Ala., where one in four households isn’t connected to a municipal water system. [7] Another example: MendeDesign’s catalog for Public



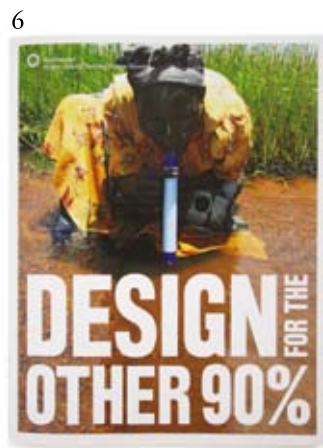
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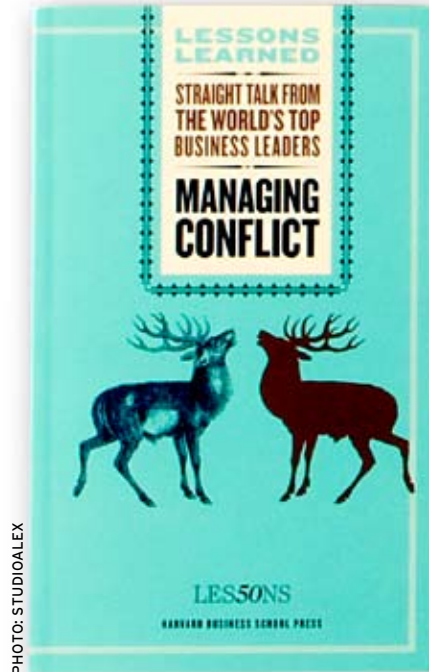


PHOTO: STUDIOALEX

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Architecture, which urges architects and design firms to donate 1 percent of their time to do pro-bono work for clients in the non-profit sector, because, as the piece states, “design fundamentally solves problems.” [8]

“The pieces that stood out for us in this show were understated,” says Willoughby. “The means were modest—restrained both in terms of the use of materials and in the way they were written—but the messages were big. And the messages probably had more impact because of those modest means. Right now, those kinds of communications are meaningful and very appropriate for the world we live in.”

NO REASON FOR WEIRDNESS

In keeping with a general tenor of understatement, classical typography prevailed, with particularly fine examples emerging from the annual report and editorial/book design categories. [9, 10] “There was very little that was in any way cutting-edge with regard to typography,” says Grady, “which isn’t necessarily bad thing. I don’t think there’s any reason to do weird type just for the sake of it.” Only in the poster category did typography break from well-established rules. In a few examples, type is as much an illustration as information, like Thirst’s poster for AIGA Miami, “Happy Gone Lucky.” [11]

As with the messaging, the imagery in this year’s show emphasized human elements. Judge Petrula Vrontikis, creative director of Vrontikis Design Office in L.A. and an educator at Art Center College of Design, notes that portrait photography had a stronger presence than conceptual, snapshot or reportage photography. [5, 7, 12, 13]

On the flip side, commissioned illustration was hard to come by—with only one winner, from Wink in Minneapolis for Target [14], represented in the illustration category. But Vrontikis, while saddened to see illustration apparently on the wane, adds an important caveat: Designers themselves seem to be filling the gap. When illustration did crop up this year, it often came as the result of a designer also acting as artist/illustrator, she says. That was particularly true in the poster category—like the campaign for the Theatre Project in Baltimore [15], designed and illustrated by David Plunkert of Spur Design.

COLORS OF THE TIMES

With some notable exceptions—like the zinging pink cover of *About Face*, a promotional book for photographer Sandro from SamataMason [12]—the show’s colors are understated and, on the whole, autumnal. There’s very little in the way of primary colors, metallic finishes or fluorescents. Instead, a complex, muted orange

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shade [8] is well represented. So is chocolate brown, which envelops everything from the oversized *Communicata & The Book* entry from Graphiculture [16] to, appropriately, packaging for BRIX Chocolate for Wine Lovers by Michael Osborne Design [17].

But the frequency with which the two colors show up together makes Halloween look like a Mondrian. Similar color combinations grace the cover of a Mohawk Paper brochure [4], Planet Propaganda's packaging for Kidrobot [18], The O Group's real estate booklet for client North Development Group [19] and the identity system for Steuben's [20] by Korn Design, to name a few.

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THE YEAR OF THE SQUID

Not surprisingly, the poster category veered off the path of restraint—and not just typographically. Even the overall palette shifts dramatically here, leaving behind the olive greens and mustard yellows (and orange-and-browns). There's a swath of purple from Shine Advertising [21], for instance, and red and black from The Small Stakes [22]. Rendered with palpable energy, the 12 winning posters—often screen printed, which gave the category a more handcrafted quality than any other—played by their own, off-kilter rules [11, 23].

"There were fewer posters printed by conventional means than I've ever seen before," says Willoughby. "People aren't designing these posters and sending them off to conventional printers. They're more handcrafted. In some cases, it seems as though the artist is the printer. If not, these are designers that have a very close association with the printers."

Another counterpoint among poster entries from the show's overall sense of restraint: humor. No one in design has lost the sense of it, even in a world that's been inconvenienced by the truth. Witness the T-shirt (chocolate brown and orange) from Decoder Ring Design Concern [24], an inside joke that leaves all the refinement behind, back with the annual reports. And the packaging on Planet Propaganda's not-quite-three-in.-tall Kidrobot toy, Cheeze Dunny, counsels: "BE CAREFUL! CHEEZE GRATER INSIDE." [18]

Then there are the oddities, "trends" (if you will) that no amount of contextualizing can explain. Like the compulsive need for some firms, none of them winners this year, to couple three words—"Live, Play, Work," for instance, or "Golf, Shop, Eat"—for their luxury real estate clients (no one had the guts to run with "Command, Consume, Hide," however). So, too, was there an inexplicably large number of works that somehow featured squid or octopi. One even made it into the show. [25]

"To get something like 10 entries that have an octopus as a logo or the primary element in the theme—that's just kind of odd," says Ryan. "It's not like we got 10 giraffes."

But then, as they say, there's always next year. **S**

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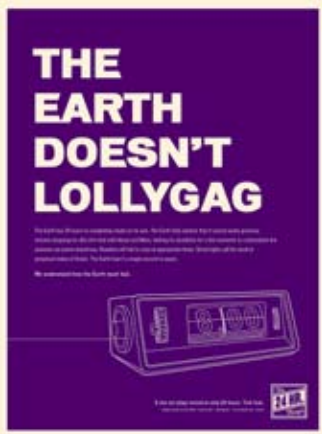
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