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A U S W E I S K O N T R O L L E

More than one judge wished to own this **GOLD MEDAL**-winning, type-driven poster for a Frank Popp Ensemble Concert. Its rich colors practically explode off the poster's black background. "It's just a pleasure to the eye," says CIPB judge Luba Lukova, while jury president John Massey calls it "uplifting." In part, that's because designer Remo Caminada of Switzerland handles the composition architecturally, says judge Martin Venzky. Its strong vertical forms relate to the buildings or walls on which the poster would hang. "But they also relate to the body," Venzky says, "with those letters that look like torsos and heads. You almost can't resist walking up to it." This poster went on display, along with the other winning entries, in late September 2008. The exhibition, sponsored by SMART Papers, will remain outdoors, along Chicago's lakefront in Daley Bicentennial Plaza, until the end of October (weather permitting).

IF YOU BUILD IT

Like a lot of great projects, this one began with a designer feeling left out. Last June Legendre and Rutter attended an event in which the keynote speaker, Paul O’Conner, then the executive director of Chicago nonprofit economic development organization World Business Chicago, touted the city’s architecture, its public art and landscaping ... and pretty much every design discipline but graphics. When Rutter approached O’Conner, the civic leader said he’d welcome any ideas to publicly showcase graphic design.

The next day, Legendre tossed out a suggestion: Why not do a poster biennial? Unbeknownst to the two partners, it would drive the course of their work for the next year and a half. Although Warsaw and Chaumont in France—see the September/October 2007 issue of STEP for coverage of the latter—hold two of the world’s most respected poster biennials, there are none of the same caliber in the U.S. There’s a well-regarded biennial in Fort Collins, Colo.—the Colorado International Invitational Poster Exhibition—but that’s by invite only. This event would be free to enter—and open to anyone in the world.

“The more we talked about it, the more it seemed like a natural fit and opportunity,” says Rutter. “Chicago has such a strong

“When we walked into the judging space, where hundreds of posters were laid out on the floor, it was almost like the room was vibrating. There was a lot of optical excitement. People were using color, pattern and rhythm. They were paying attention to creating something that made you want to walk up to it purely for the joy of looking at it.”

—Martin Venezky

design heritage, but one thing that’s missing is a public presence for graphic design, particularly design that informs people about cultural and arts events and institutions.”

So a biennial was born. At every subsequent turn, the partners looked at the challenge as a kind of *Field of Dreams* scenario. “You know the line, ‘If you build it, they will come?’” Rutter says. “When we realized we were going to jump into this pot of boiling water, our purpose was to collect the entries and select the finalists. Once we had this collection of amazing work, we could show people exactly what we were talking about.” The rest, they reasoned, would follow.

And it has. World Business Chicago connected the partners with the right civic organizations, including the office of Chicago mayor Richard M. Daley. From the design community, ICOGRADA and Chicago’s Society of Typographic Arts (STA) endorsed the biennial enthusiastically and early, offering resources and volunteers.

THE DRIVE FOR BACKERS

Still, financial backing was hard to come by. The partners nearly called it quits when, after several rounds of presentations, key organizations declined to offer funding. That’s when Denney

Essex stepped in, imploring Legendre and Rutter not to let the idea die. In a last-ditch effort, the team e-mailed 100 individual design professionals, 46 of whom responded with donations. Over the course of two days, the partners brought in \$33,000 from these donors.

Like their fundraising activities, the CIPB board’s efforts to promote the competition and drum up quality submissions were similarly green with grass roots. They got online again, reaching out to their networks, as well as members of ICOGRADA and Rene Wanner’s poster site (www.posterpage.ch), an influential Swiss site covering information and news about poster design.

CRITICAL ELEMENT: POLISH POSTER DESIGNERS

The organizers also knew their venture would never be a world-class poster competition unless they had participation from Polish designers, who produce famously exquisite posters but don’t exactly publish their contact information in the Yellow Pages. So Rutter called the Polish consulate, where someone (as these things go) had a friend. That friend was planning a trip from Warsaw to Chicago: She delivered about 50 Polish posters straight from the airport.

Meanwhile, the organizers learned that designers of some of the most exciting American posters also happen to view competitions with skepticism. The partners enlisted the help of Chicago poster design star Jay Ryan, a jury member. His outreach via message boards to designers of indie-music posters was the equivalent of a celebrity endorsement. “Generally, the community of rock poster makers isn’t very extroverted as far as getting into competitions or publications,” says Ryan. “They look for a little peer approval and some kind words from the band, but international poster competitions haven’t really been the norm.”

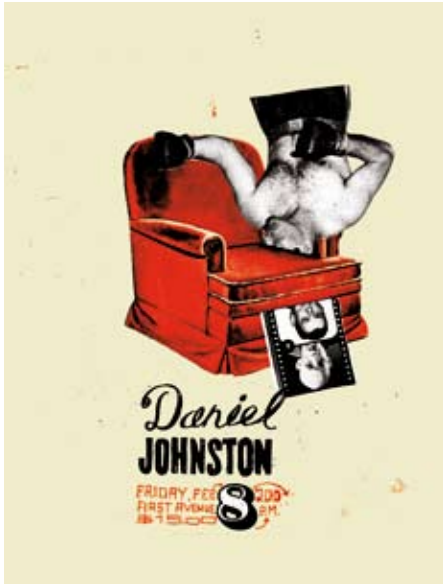
The sweat equity paid off. Designers from the so-called underground responded to Ryan’s call to action. They’re well represented within a globally diverse collection of entries from 43 countries. In fact, CIPB received so many great entries from the music design community that Legendre and Rutter curated a separate show, featuring 100 American screen-printed gig posters, which will travel to Paris in the coming year.

HAULING OUT THE SUPERLATIVES

But the measure of the Chicago Biennial’s success is not just a matter of numbers. Jury members seem almost taken aback by the quality of the work. “It was tremendous,” says jury member Martin Venezky, principal of Appetite Engineers, San Francisco. “I wasn’t expecting that.”

Rather, he assumed that this brand-new competition—like most other competitions, even the most esteemed ones—would present at least some percentage of simply posters with pretty pictures and centered type at the bottom. “We saw almost none of that,” he says. “When we walked into the judging space, where hundreds of posters were laid out on the floor, it was almost like the room was vibrating. There was a lot of optical excitement.

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The inspiration for a wide-ranging discussion during the judging, this poster by Dan Ibarra and Michael Byzewski of Aesthetic Apparatus for singer/song-writer/artist Daniel Johnston took a **SILVER MEDAL**. Venezky—who could have done without the cliché of the film strip—nonetheless appreciated the “mesmerizing” juxtaposition of the easy chair and boxer. “I liked the idea of comfort and violence fitting together,” he says, “Or of posture versus being upside down, repose versus aggression, and all of the other things that these objects calls to mind.” Venezky agrees with Massey’s “incomplete circle” concept. In fact, it’s what he’s called “the poetic gap” in the past. It’s at work here: Viewers instantly recognize these objects—an easy chair, a film strip, a boxer. “But it’s up to the viewer to determine how those things add up,” says Venezky. “I don’t think Daniel Johnston sings about boxers and easy chairs. But the ‘poetic gap’ is the space between a literal presentation of what he sings or who he is and an interpretation of that. It’s more exciting when a designer trusts that the viewer will be willing to fill in that gap.”



People walk up to posters. They approach them, head on—in the same way one person approaches another. So when a poster depicts some part of the body, the experience is visceral, says Venezky. In this **SILVER-MEDAL** poster by Pazu Lee Ka Ling of China, the mostly blank, distorted face invites viewers to see their own faces within a featureless one. “My imagination runs wild when I look at this poster,” says Massey. “I was captivated by it during the judging, and months later, I still have the image in my head.”



This poster by Iranian designer Farad Fozouni won **THE SOCIETY OF TYPOGRAPHIC ARTS PRIZE** for Typographic Excellence. Judges admired the tension created between the typography—fluid and lyrical—and the surrounding, highly structured grid. “In poster design, we have to be very selective about the words we use because we have only a few seconds to engage a viewer,” says Massey. “Because of their importance, those words should be given dignity. This poster has a dignity and elegance. And as a symbol of the respect we should give to typography, it’s an inspiration.”



THE OSMOSIS PRIZE for a poster designed around a social theme went to Michal Batory, a Polish designer living in France. Project Osmosis, a Chicago nonprofit, engages design professionals from various disciplines to ignite Chicago kids’ and teenagers’ interest in careers in design. “The purpose of this poster was to announce a piano competition,” says Lukova. “But the image speaks for far more than just a piano competition. Its underlying message is that art erases superficial differences among people. It speaks to the fact that art is universal.”





LEFT: "Sacred Traces," Pierre Bernard, France

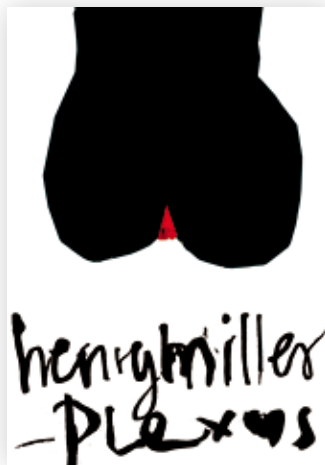
CENTER: "Visiting Artist Program With Ivan Chermayeff," Rocco Piscatello, USA

RIGHT: "The Flying Dutchman," Pierre Mendell, Germany

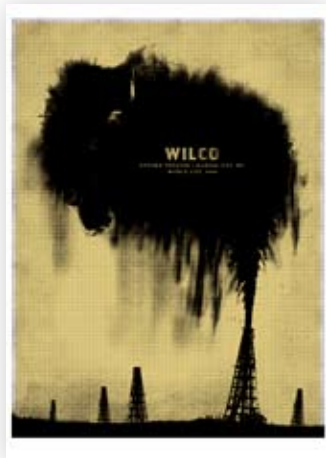


LEFT: "Mesatex Collection 2008," Gaku Ohsugi & Yuriko Matsumura, Japan

RIGHT: "Maestro Yanka Kupala, National Academic Theater," Toreev Jouri, Belarus



SERIES: "Plexus, Nexus, Sexus," Kasia Rogowiec, Poland.



LEFT: "The Decembrists in Amsterdam," Emek, USA
 CENTER: "Wilco Concert, Kansas City," Mike Burton/Little Jacket, USA
 RIGHT: "La Filature," Annette Lenz & Vincent Perrottet, France



LEFT: "Titus Andronicus by Shakespeare," Tomasz Boguslawski, Poland



LEFT: "Vivo in Typo," Philippe Apeloig, France
 CENTER: "New York Shakespeare Festival," Paula Scher/Pentagram, USA
 RIGHT, TOP: "The New Symbol of Peace," Mehdi Saeedi, Iran
 RIGHT, BELOW: "Emili," Peyman Pourhosein, Iran



LEFT: "19th Macao Art Festival," Hong Chong, China



CENTER: "Vestis," Michal Batory, France



RIGHT: "Mother's Courage," Stephan Bindi, Switzerland

LEFT: "The Painting Exhibition of Mohammad Reza Shahrokhi," Iman Safaei, Iran

CENTER: "30th Festival of Clermont-Ferrand," Ronald Curchod, France

RIGHT: "Lilla Weneda," Franciszek Starowieyski, Poland



LEFT: "The Trolls," Gotz Gramlich, Germany



CENTER: "Leids Cabaret Festival," Edwin Vollebergh, Netherlands



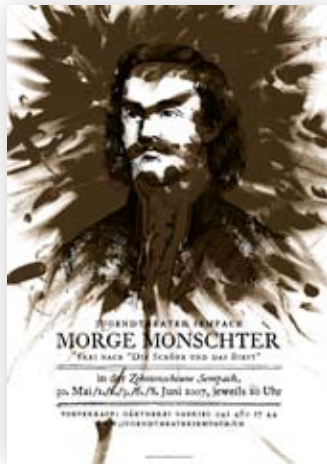
RIGHT: "Elephant Man," Richard Ardagh, UK



LEFT: "Loop-Troop," Remo Caminada, Switzerland

CENTER: "Modest Mouse/The Good Times are Killing Me," Christian Helms/The Decoder Ring Design Concern, USA

RIGHT: "Che 1967-2007," Jorge Matias-Garnica, Mexico



LEFT: "Jazz Festival 2008," Finn Nygaard, Denmark

CENTER: "Hi, Monster," Erich Brechbuhl, Switzerland

RIGHT: "Louise/The Bears," Francois Caspar + Violette, France



LEFT: "No Protection?" Jheng-Chang Chen, Taiwan

CENTER: "Stop Climate Change," Hilppa Hyrkas, Finland

RIGHT: "Message Illustration Poster," Takashi Akiyama, Japan

“When people see this exhibition of posters from 21 countries, selected by a global jury and sponsored by an international design organization, they’ll understand not just the power of posters but the universality of graphic language.”

—Lance Rutter

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People were using color, pattern and rhythm. They were paying attention to creating something that made you want to walk up to it purely for the joy of looking at it.”

Design luminary John Massey, chair of the jury, had a similarly powerful response. Arranged in tidy rows on the floor of the judging space, the body of work, taken as a whole, seemed to encompass what it means to be a sentient human being. “You could see hope, inspiration, despair, concern,” he says. “You could see order and chaos. You could see what almost amounted to hate. There were political, environmental, social and antiwar posters. There were theater posters and music posters. And if, in an abstract way, you could add up all those characteristics, you would have the human condition.”

THEY’RE JUST JEALOUS

Wouldn’t you know it? Just as the first open-call, free-to-enter poster biennial in America establishes itself, people are sounding the death knell for this particular form of expression. In part, that’s because U.S. cities don’t have the infrastructure for posters that Europe has. There, enormous kiosks display posters to announce cultural and arts events. The city of Chicago, for example, works with outdoor advertising corporation JCDecaux to manage its bus-stop advertising systems. But bus shelters are costly platforms for advertising products and services, and poorly suited to arts institutions whose budgets are often too tight for such media buys.

Some argue the internet has replaced the poster, which is sometimes seen as an antiquated form of expression in a digital age. That argument loses traction, however, when you consider U.S. indie-music posters. Even without a city-sanctioned platform for posters, one could argue, American designers refuse to let the genre die. They’ve invented a totally modern, quintessentially American category to keep the poster kicking.

“I cannot accept it when I hear people say posters are dead,” says Luba Lukova, celebrated designer/illustrator and CIPB juror (and designer of this issue’s cover). If the medium is dead, she wonders, why would Legendre and Rutter have received a massive number of entries from around the world? And if the poster is dead, why would normally law-abiding citizens so frequently steal them, tearing them greedily from the walls of theaters and clubs?

“I sometimes feel that people who don’t design posters are a little bit jealous,” she says mischievously, “because posters live longer than other graphic design products. Beautiful logos are redesigned after 10 or 15 years, when trends and styles change. Websites—even well-designed websites—are frequently changed. But a beautiful

poster can live for hundreds of years.”

For Lukova, posters reflect a human need to socialize, a need that hasn’t diminished as new media take hold. “Posters live where things happen,” she says. “So much culture comes to us through a screen—whether it’s movies, the internet or video games. But posters live in theaters and clubs and political rallies, places where real people meet other real people. And I believe our need to do so is even stronger now that we’re in such a virtual world.”

SQUARING THE CIRCLE

In the Innovation Center on the Chicago campus of the University of Illinois, 11 judges fix their blurry eyes on a poster in question. Designed by Dan Ibarra and Michael Byzewski of Aesthetic Apparatus for indie singer/songwriter/artist Daniel Johnston, the imagery—a collage of an upside-down boxer whose head is kind of stuffed into an easy chair—isn’t exactly comfortable to view. About a quarter of the size of other entries, it’s also rough around the edges, particularly in comparison to some of the other entries’ lush production values.

After two days of intense judging, the panel has made it to the point of determining medalists. Lukova asks Massey, who seems to like this poster more than she does, if he knows what it means.

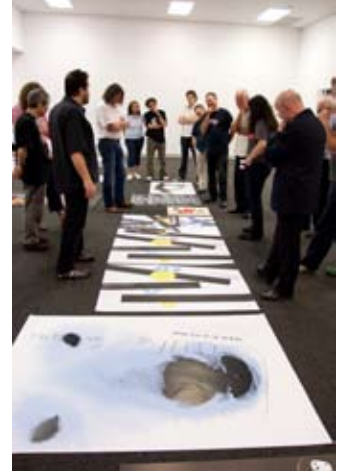
No, Massey responds. Not fully. But that’s precisely why he likes it.

As Lukova sees it, a well-done poster provokes thought with a clear, strong concept. She’s not sure this poster is doing that.

Ryan offers his input. He can’t pinpoint the designer, but the poster clearly comes from the gig poster community, which explains a lot. “America doesn’t have the same poster culture as that of Europe or other parts of the world,” he says. “There has been a resurgence of U.S. poster-making from the music scene, which I’m happy to be a part of, but these posters are made with different priorities.”

Designed to hang in clubs or bars, coffee houses and store windows, they’re smaller in scale by necessity. Like many gig posters, this one appears to have been printed in someone’s garage or on a kitchen table, after the kids have gone to bed. “It’s not the result of a professional photo shoot or a litho studio that’s been around for 100 years,” he says. “A lot of gig posters are made by 25-year-olds or by a band member, but that doesn’t make them any less exciting.”

A more cordial jury would be hard to find, so this discussion is nothing if not amicable. But famed Japanese designer and juror Shigeo Fukuda concurs with Lukova. Through gesticulation and his interpreter, he puts forth his view: Designers will be watching this first-ever Chicago biennial closely. Shouldn’t they take advan-



BEAN COUNTING: To commence the judging, each jury member received just over a pound of jelly beans. Joseph Michael Essex decided on the candies not just for their high-tech capabilities, but for their practicality. “Jelly beans are inexpensive,” says Essex, who—with his wife and business partner Nancy Denney Essex—managed the judging process. “And there are more than 11 distinct colors, so we were able to give each judge his or her own color. They carried them around in coffee cups, and we warned them not to get distracted and eat them.”

For several rounds, white-gloved volunteers laid out posters, covering the floor of the Innovation Center at University of Illinois’ Chicago campus. The jury placed beans on entries they felt deserved to move to the next level. By the end of the first day, after nearly 11 hours of judging, about 130 posters moved forward.

Volunteers—including the Essex’ 13-year-old son—collected, sorted and redistributed the beans for day two, when each judge got 25 beans to place on their top picks. The next round was weighted. Armed with seven jelly beans each, the judges were allowed to place all their beans on one poster or distribute them across several. For the last round: No candy. Instead, discussion and debate—and a final show of hands—whittled the finalists down to the winners.

The 2008 Chicago Poster Biennial jury: John Massey (jury president, USA), Michel Bouvet (France), Shigeo Fukuda (Japan), Alfred Halasa (Canada), Yann Legendre (France/USA), Yossi Lemel (Israel), Luba Lukova (USA), German Montalvo (Mexico), Jay Ryan (USA), Lanny Sommese (USA), Martin Venezky (USA)

tage of that opportunity by rewarding the most sophisticated conceptual thinking?

Here, Massey takes the opportunity to extend the conversation beyond this specific poster. He says a good piece of communication should be like an incomplete circle. And it should give viewers the opportunity to step in and close that circle—on their own terms. When a poster is done well, in other words, the image and the viewer collaborate in a two-way exchange. If it gives away the whole story, viewers will tend to register their comprehension—“Oh, OK, I understand that”—and then forget it, because they haven’t been involved in filling in the gaps. The Daniel Johnston poster leaves that circle open, he says, and it’s more memorable because of it.

Point taken. The jury votes.

ROLL CALL

The poster in question takes one of two silver medals, placing its U.S. designers on a winner’s list that reads like roll call for the Olympics or a United Nations meeting. Additional medals went to designers from Switzerland (gold) and China (silver). An Iranian designer won the STA-sponsored prize for typography, and Michal Batory, a Polish designer living in France, won the prize for a poster promoting a social cause. (The latter award was sponsored

by Project Osmosis, a Chicago nonprofit that introduces Chicago youth to design.)

Such geopolitical diversity makes the eventual public exhibition in Daley Bicentennial Plaza, sponsored by SMART Papers, all the more important. “The thing to remember is that we’re not talking about posters here,” says Massey. “We’re talking about the transfer of information and ideas from one culture to another. This is about broadening international understanding among all people, and that fosters the betterment of society at large.”

During the judging process, political ideologies didn’t enter the room. Yes, the backdrop was a wider world marked by war, xenophobia, terrorism and ignorance, but this work won on the basis of its capacity to connect. Rutter himself was amazed by the diversity among winning entries. “When people see this exhibition of posters from 21 countries, selected by a global jury and sponsored by an international design organization, they’ll understand not just the power of posters but the universality of graphic language.”⁸

Although SMART Papers stepped up to sponsor the public exhibition, CIPB still seeks funding partnerships to cover its many expenses. Individuals or corporations interested in contributing to the effort can contact Legendre + Rutter, ph. 312.494.5250, www.chicagobiennial.org.