

Plumbing Design

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*Graphic designers are the
blue-collar workers of the art
world. –Alan Fletcher*

*America is known for her bridges
and her plumbing.
–Marcel Duchamp*



This lecture is about a realization I had years ago—an epiphany really, one that forged an analogy between the blue collar trade of plumbing with the white collar profession of graphic design. The metaphor, and this lecture, both continue to evolve for me.

The core idea is how a conscious and deliberate blend of two activities can add to the way you approach your work.

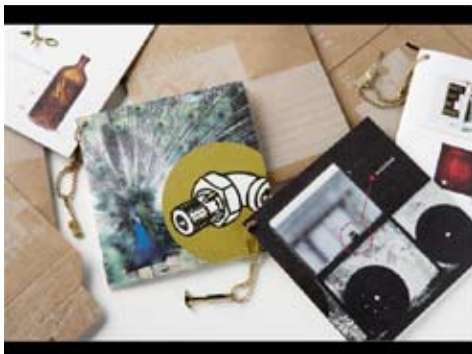


I actually have lots of plumbing in my family. Father, uncles, and cousins...

This text from one of our promotional brochures helps explain.



And this metaphor has led to the naming of the design studio (this is our business card)...



And promotions.....



...bookmarks



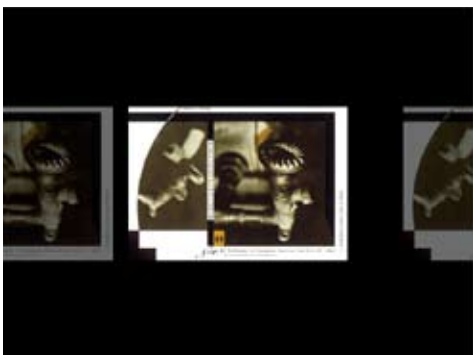
...promotional items like this magnet



...holiday cards, which I've been doing for over 25 years—always the same format 6 by 9 inches.



...and they incorporate some of the imagery from projects of that particular year. I send these cards out to everyone, from fellow designers to family members and my sister-in-law once asked me when I was going to design a “nice” card.



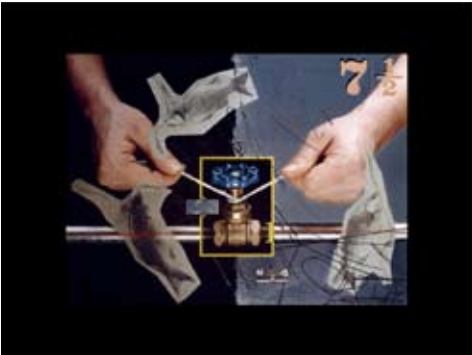
This is a change of address postcard back when we moved into our live-and-work loft on Great Jones Street.



And the metaphor continues on through the website design and advertising.



This is a gift we gave out to clients...the images sandblasted into glass.



and gritty experiments trying to visualize methods and processes.



This is our street and one of two floors. I like to say that we're a mom-and-pop shop, and that we live above the store.

On the floor above us lives the fine artist Cai Guo Qiang and his family...Cai did the opening ceremony fireworks show for the Beijing Olympics.

And on the floor below us lives the American singer Sheryl Crow. And in a way, graphic design lives itself lives between these two worlds. It reaches up toward the fine or free arts, and stomps its feet at the pop world below.

That's my wife Emily in front. Emily studied cultural anthropology, which blends nicely with graphic design.



And this is a view out of our window.

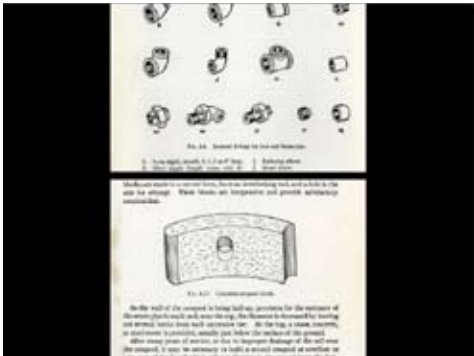


There's a construction supply shop across the street and next door to us is a firehouse. This is a scene I taped, which made me a little worried—you'll...and I fused with it with a quick scene of the fireman practicing with their equipment. This all unfolds on one street, and it has the power to inform the work we do.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vs3f_JCjhhw



Yet, the plumbing thing really began 20 years ago during graduate study when I found this plumbing manual.



It was filled with letters and parts...

Cesspool blocks that looked like books...



and tools and shapes that seemed like a conceptual resource for me.



and it inspired me to dig around the the family's cellar for other things....and I kept finding plumbing-related things like this diary that I kept as a 10 year old.



I grew up in Waterbury, Connecticut, 100 miles Northeast of New York City, and up until 50 years ago it was considered the Brass Capital of the world. The mills made things like brass buttons, pipes, clock mechanisms too, and I actually worked in one of those brass mills one summer between college years. I was part of the night shift and my job was to grind rough parts out of huge brass pipes.



I also found an acceptance letter from the technical high school I applied to where I planned on learning the plumbing trade, but my parents talked me out of it because the school didn't offer enough credit for entry into college, just in case I wanted to go.

About as close as I ever got to the trade was being an occasional grunt for plumbing jobs I tagged along on...helping to carry a bathtub up a flight of stairs, etc.



I attended Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, where I now teach, AND where one of my favorite designers Ladislav Sutnar taught from 1946–49. I have at least 12 design samples of Sutnar's including his Catalog Design Progress and Visual Design in Action books originals, a signed piece of stationery, a poster, and a bunch of booklets. I love the fact that Sutnar just couldn't keep himself out of his work...each piece bleeds him, and yet, he was working under the premise of the being the first information architect.



This is a solidarity poster from my second year at Pratt. The plumbing wasn't really conscious yet. I just used objects that I knew well.



...and other projects that continued on into my first few years of working. I think I enjoyed the jokiness of these ideas, but they also shared a heavy use of montage—bringing two things together to form a third meaning.

One of my teachers at Pratt, Charlie Goslin used to say that “even a monkey could make something look good, but a monkey could never think of the idea.” And these simple ideas relied primarily on these kind of ideas.



So after working a few years I went back to school for another two years at Cranbrook Academy of Art. I wanted to learn at a more accelerated rate than I had been learning at.

And one of the first students I met there was Ed Fella. Ed was the most curious, young-at-heart design student I’d ever met. After working for 30 years in Detroit, Michigan, he actually went to night school to get the college degree he needed to attend Cranbrook.



And it was great to have him as a classmate. He knew all the professional techniques, but was also extremely well read in the area of critical theory—so he was ready to mess around with the rules of design.

The poster on the left was what Ed called a design shenanigan. He and classmate David Frej posted these large blueprints in each of the other fine art departments. After one day they were collected and hung in the design department for a critique. They were graffitied with scribbled rants, one was lit on fire, another crumpled into a ball, even one with the words design and art switched.



And these posters, were part of a large and ongoing visual dialogue that took place between the program's 12 graduate design students. For example, one posters reads "See Everything." But if you read the tiny vertical type as part of the statement, then it read more disturbingly as, "See, they told you, everything." Notice the hands.

And the response is "And you ATE nothing". The words "ate nothing" really meaning that you didn't get anything from it. And there are the hands again, this time waving no. The dialogue continued: "'cause tendencies lead toward disposal." Now the hands just read as words.



And these are some of my posters, all silkscreened, most handed out to other classmates. The "Heads you win, tails I lose" piece on the right was my comment on the nuclear build-up of the Reagan era, and I posted it next to any fallout-shelter signs that I could find around campus.



The FIND poster was designed for a St. Valentine's day party with a water theme (as in buckets of it—everyone was going to get wet they said). It's the first instance where I deliberately incorporated plumbing imagery into my design. Here a sexy valve with Egyptian hieroglyphics (because water was so fundamental to that society), and blunt language that read: FIND IN LOUNGE February 13, 10pm. All very double-coded.

On the right was a poster prepared by a fellow classmate...just the words In Flux, and a blank white area on a yellow sheet. The request was to screen in what our idea of being in a state of flux was. He declared that he wanted to always be in a state of flux (or change), and wanted to know how others felt. Flux is also a mixture to solder pipes with, so mine was easy—here, I'm walking through the door and into a toilet tank mechanism.



This is the cover of an assignment to design a book while a Cranbrook student. It didn't matter what the subject was, and for me, it was either going to be Freud's *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*, which I had been reading, or the plumbing manual that I showed earlier. I couldn't decide, so I combined both into one.

The idea really made sense as I worked on it. Freud's text uncovered systems in the mind, and the plumbing manual revealed systems behind the walls.

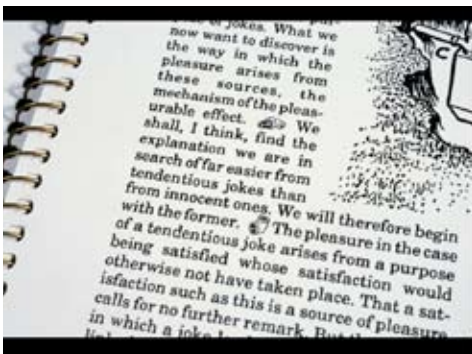
Freud broke his text up into three sections, which I created into steps leading up to cover area, as a kind of floor plan of an interior space.



Here's the table of contents.



I sat the plumbing manual text as a section within the Freud text. And for the binding I chose a Copper spiral made me think of copper pipe running through the paper.



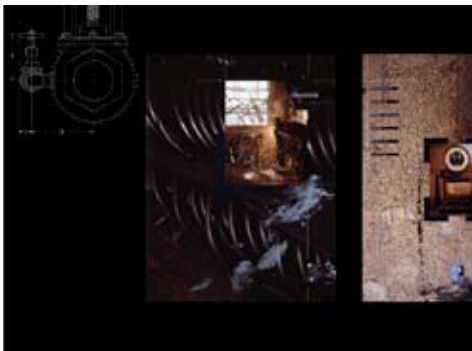
Tiny plumbing parts were used to create paragraph breaks.



And the back cover using that concrete cesspool block I was so inspired by.



This imagery started making sense to me because as a plumber, your job is to manage and direct fluids, and the only difference for a graphic designer is that instead of fluids, it's information. I also realized a new-found toughness in my form.



When I graduated I entered the field ready to bring this design thinking to real projects, but I was completely spoiled and fairly unmarketable as a freelance designer. I had no choice but to start my own studio, and got lucky because a friend recommended me to someone who owned a tubular steel furniture factory, and needed a new visual identity, stationery, brochure, and product binder.

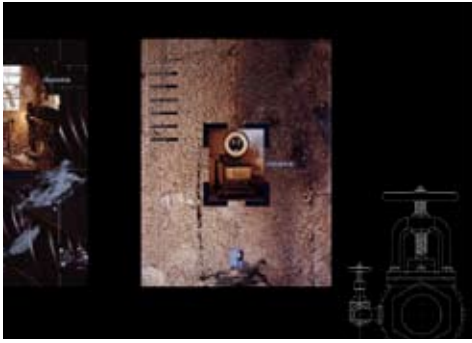


I don't quite know what Bauhausian furniture had to do with their name—Images of America, so I worked around it and simply glorified the manufacturing process just as the early designers of those modernist pieces did.



Nothing was hidden away—just their beautiful furniture in the context of the sweaty, grime-ridden place called a factory. There are 16 pages, with some of the spreads unfolding into a series of multiple panels.

I used polishing rags borrowed from an employee to make smudges with—all part of the factory chic. One especially nice thing that happened for the family was that the owner's son Fabio confessed that he secretly always hated being around the factory, but after our week together he really came to see the beauty of the place.



There's a book about the artist Robert Irwin called "Seeing is Forgetting" which explains his idea of allowing people to perceive their perceptions, or make them aware of their perceptions... to make people conscious of their consciousness. In other words, the experience of someone seeing the Mona Lisa for the first time is just as important as the Mona Lisa itself.



And this is the same thinking brought to this project. Perfect and clean furniture pictures can be part of the binder, but for the brochure, it's more important to layer in something else.



The furniture project was responsible for getting me a series of projects for Gilbert Paper. They had a 100 year old mill that they wanted to document into a paper promotion and asked me to design something for them. Wisconsin gets very cold in the winter months, but inside the mill is a soaking warm and misty place filled with giant hot-tubs of steaming, churning, squishable paper-pulp.



The design began with an object I found—a hook used throughout the Mill to transport paper rolls. To me a fitting metaphor: aesthetic and functional—just like their mill.



It also looked like the silhouette of a duck or swan, but even that formal aspect had significant meaning because the Gilbert factory workers are known in their baseball league as The Gilbert Ducks due to the fact that they have a heated duck pond in front of their main building.



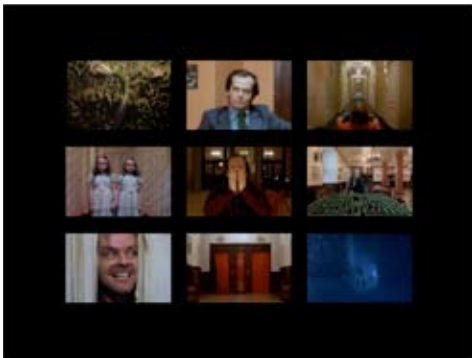
This was the Hans Christian Anderson fable about the *Ugly Duckling* or *beautiful swan*. But instead of Copenhagen it was Menasha, Wisconsin.



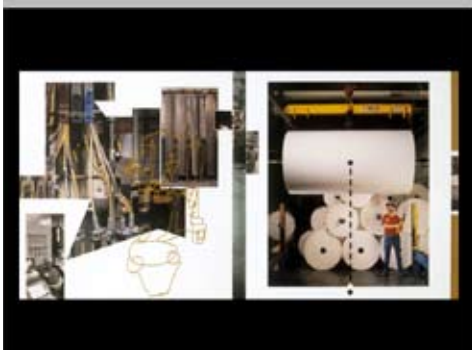
This mill was not an ugly duckling and we shouldn't try to hide its gritty parts, and instead, create an authentic and uncoated presentation printed on their uncoated and beautiful paper. Hence the title *Honest Beauty*.



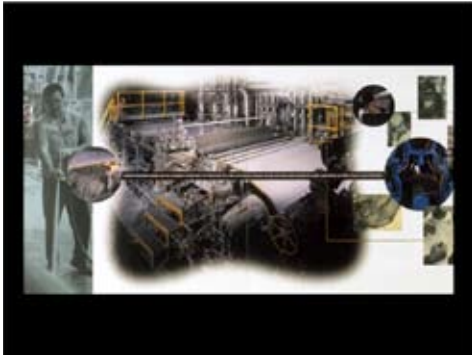
Gilbert understood. They "got it." The tools and objects captured the character of the place. And in this context, the employees seemed to take poetic poses. Here's someone reaching in and squishing that sexy pulp.



While there getting lost in the maze-like chaos of the mill, I asked the photographer Lon Murdick to find a symmetry within each shot. I figured it would give my layouts greater sense of order. The idea was inspired by Stanley Kubrick film, *The Shining*, in which the film's formal centeredness reflects the very rational, centered caretaker Jack who eventually get very uncentered psychologically.



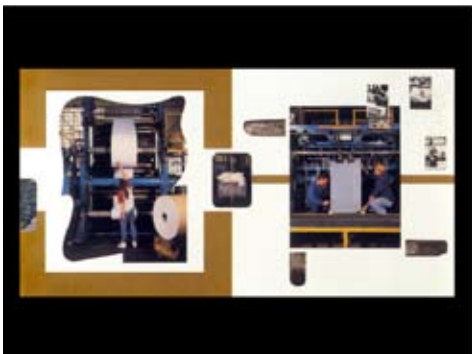
...and this is how it worked out in the photos.



...the main papermaking machine...



...this is a closeup of the page—it show how sheets are counting and boxed, but it also shows a real person, and not a model.



...calendaring and trimming...I'm not showing all the spreads here but you probably get the idea.



...and the back cover with its gate fold extended to the left.

Gilbert wanted us to present the Wisconsin work ethic and there was no better way to say it then to reprint the words of pallet jack operator. Agitated after a request to photograph him, he screamed "Take my picture? We don't have time for this, we've got work to do."

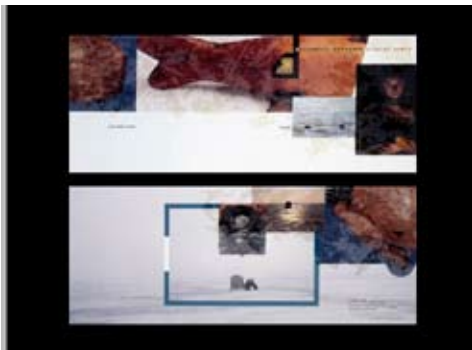


And this is a close-up of the back cover. This sign sat in the cafeteria and had pennies taped, which I was told was to bring luck. Its authentic, and for that reason I find it beautiful.



During my week at Gilbert I noticed an employee being paraded around the mill on the shoulders of his fellow workers. It turns out that he had speared a sturgeon on nearby Lake Winnebago. I say on because the lake was frozen solid and this person sat there for a week hoping for a sturgeon to swim up to his decoy. I proposed it as another subject in a possible series on American subcultures. I figured that printers (who would be receiving the promotion) would be interested since they seem to love outdoor activities. And that designers would be interested in the subject too, just out of pure curiosity.

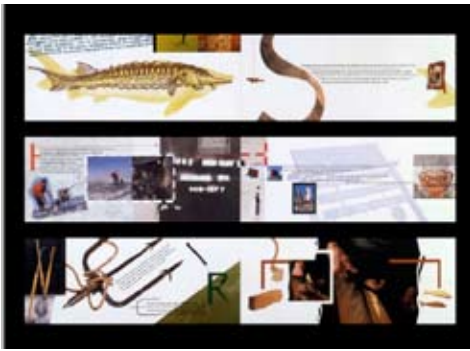
Sturgeon spearing is loaded with tools, decoys, stories, and characters, and it made for an excellent excuse to print something on their textured paper.



The 4-color cover is overprinted with clear thermography-ink that is printed, then heated, causing it to raise. The image itself is of crackled ice turned into line art.



The rubbery thermography and the horizontal format gave the piece a floppy fish-like effect. I hired a guide to show the copywriter, photographer and me around. He had been spearing for 14 years without ever spearing one, but knew practically everyone on the lake. This is a shanty. It's wrapped in spent printing plates as insulation and as you might be able to see, their last impression was for frozen fish packaging. And over them is a spray painted outline of a sturgeon stuck with a spear. And yes, tucked in the window, the casing of Old Milwaukee beer case. The shanty said it all.



It's a big lake and there are roughly 3000 of these shanties that get dragged out during the two week season.

But the big question was why would someone want to sit in dark shanty staring at a glowing hole in the ice for two weeks? Hardly anyone ever sees or spears a sturgeon, and yet, the local grammar school has an annual sturgeon parade; and there's the master spearman named Arno whose photo sits in every bar around the lake; and the woman who lowers her favorite childhood toy to the bottom for luck; and the priest who meditates staring into the hole; and the guy that works at Beamis Products and manufacturer's colored toilet seat that he uses as a decoy; and just endless stories that could barely fit in the 16 pages or so.



And by the end of my stay, I found a concept to fuel the design. I realized that the final act may be the occasional spearing of a fish, but the preparation and the wait seemed to be what it was really all about.



This needed to be a wow piece—a document of the who, what, when and where of the story. But also an AH-HA piece that asked the question “why.”



In between these projects there are some solid plumbing related projects like this poster for a steamfitter running in his union's election...



as well as other influences, like our dog Ozzie's influence on an advertising design...



...and the day to day grind of logos and printed collateral—this piece was design for a textile manufacturer.



...an brochure announcing a new membership at the Museum of Modern Art called the A+D Circle, short for architecture and design.



...identity and capabilities project for the Brooklyn Business Library...



...and this was a book for the architect Philip Johnson. Hard to see the plumbing and pipes, right?

Plumbing can have absolutely everything or absolutely nothing to do with graphic design. It's just a myth, combined with conviction. If it weren't plumbing, then it might be some other activity or interest to bring to the work of graphic design. The process enriches the voice I use to interpret and convey information, and I believe I'm better able to empathize with other activities and professions.



I'll finish with two more tactile, textured subjects that I completed for Gilbert Paper.

Coney Island is about an old and used place that still works. Embossed over the cover is a graphic of a big pointing hand—an extra effect that you might find on an old printed ticket. And this graphic runs on all the pages guiding the reader through.



Here's a closeup of one of the shots showing the layers—the beach, the amusements, and the projects. They call Coney “The United Nations of the United States.”



The piece was titled Searching for Coney Island partly because it felt as if this were documenting an archeological dig. The first morning we were standing in the middle of Surf Avenue reviewing a place seemed partly scary and partly falling apart, and the copywriter and photographer turned and asked, okay, what now. And I told them the truth; that I really didn't know.

I mean the Coney Island of 1906 is long since gone—looted, absorbed, and forgotten by a culture that's moved on. Luckily, I had hired a person named Dick Zigun to be our guide for the week-long excursion. Dick was the director of the Coney Island Freak Show, with an MFA in theater and comedy restoration. He saved this last remaining freak show in the country from extinction. It's now very socially-minded.



The inside front and back flaps are tear-off postcards because Coney was so famous for its postcards; 200,000 mailed in a single day in 1906.

Zigun introduced us to anyone and everyone that knew anything or everything about Coney Island.

...Like the candy maker...the mother-and-son Italian pastry bakers...the president of the Iceberg Winter Bathers Club, not to be confused with, as he put it, that sellout polarbear's club down the street that's always getting attention on New Years day for jumping into the frozen waves. And the philosophical butcher, who, with infectious smile and a gigantic butcher's knife, would explain, without any arguments, that everyone in Coney could get along if they simply respected each other.

This is the last page of 24 or so pages. I put these cast-iron targets at the end of the story as a way to describe Coney Island, because they're scarred and pitted by a century of shots, but they still manage to snap back up.

After spending a solid week there, I realized that under that visual layer of disintegration was an intense spirit that was still very much alive.

There's intense diversity and many charming ironies, for example these cops that seemed to always be hanging around the machine gun shoot.

But the biggest irony of all is that Coney is one of the last real places left in New York.



The final project I want to show and explain is a document about the American West, which I thought would make an excellent addition to the subculture series. I hired a cowgirl writer named Lisa Flood to be our guide, and the town she lived in—Jackson Hole, Wyoming—as our destination as it's considered the epicenter of dude ranching.

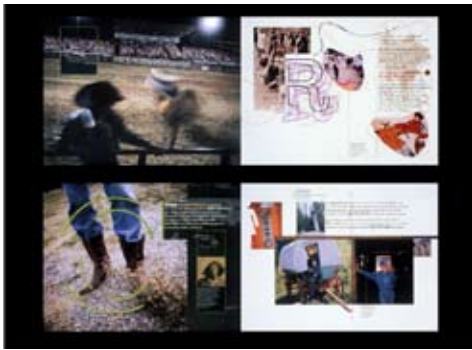
The image on the cover include my hands. I was really just holding white paper behind this branding iron with the hope that it would make the silhouetting of the shape easier, but I liked the idea of the designer being revealed, and decided to include my own little captions throughout the piece as commentary, much like the pointing hand in the Coney piece.



The title—Branding the Great American West, coordinates with corporate branding because in fact, the West is America's biggest brand image, except that instead of being burnt into the flesh, the brand I'm talking about is burnt into the mind. And Jackson Hole is where competing visions of the West are played out because it has the audience. We found lots of ironies here too. The western concept of living close to nature, and not under the dominion of the machine, is exemplified by objects like a moose head used as a decorative hat rack. There's also the simulation of a covered wagon being used as a sign for a museum, and a trailer home in a trailer park that is painted over to simulate a log cabin.



On top is a horse whisperer who is a kind of “new age” guru of the West. After an hour's time we watched an unmanageable horse slotted for the glue factory transform into an obedient lovable animal without any fear attached. There are fake gunfights every night in the town square, and hat makers who wear baseball caps to differentiate themselves from the tourists.



Above is a horse named “Dew Drop” because every time she bucks, we were told, she empties her tank—as in buckets of urine angled diagonally up toward the crowd.

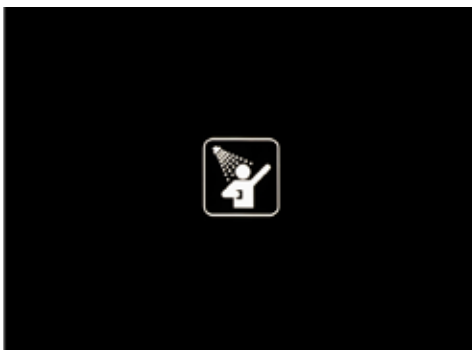
...and surprising facts: for example, during the era of cattle-drives in America, one in six cowboys was African-American.

...and the untold story of the cowgirl. On the left is Doris, a schoolteacher from New Jersey turned dude wrangler who sleeps Saturday nights in her meticulously restored covered wagon...and the tough-talking, no-nonsense Westerner “born to the blue” who goes by the name of Muggs.



I asked one particular question to everyone I met: “What is it about what the West was that it still is?” The answers included, “the freedom to chose your own destiny”, or “being close to nature.” But the most revealing answer was from my British copywriter, Augustine or ‘Gus’ as a rancher renamed him. He said “What it was, and what it still is, is our perception of it.” It’s always been a simulation of itself as early as the 1880’s, when easterners traveled west to go on cattle drives for holiday.

The West really is the perfect brand. It’s a way to identity yourself without any initiation rites or vows—where Victorian style contrasts rugged naturalism. All that’s required is that you buy into it—that you believe.



And on that note, I’d like to show a few student projects where the assignment was as follows: Review your own history—where you’re from, your family trade, a summer job you enjoyed, a weird situation, or an activity you excelled in—and create a myth about how that thing or circumstance can somehow inform how you approach your graphic design work today.



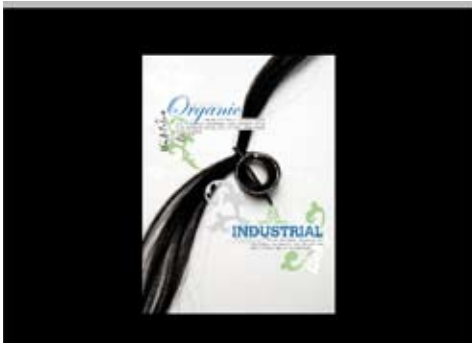
This is by Samantha Tukey who combines the family professions of baker and engineer.



This is Mike Carsten who learned how to be a butcher before he studied design.



and Riva Powers...whose mom is a fellow designer, and whose dad is an accountant...



Jacqueline Tribou...who montages contrasting elements of organic with industrial...



...and James Moffit who acknowledges that his painting background must enter his design process.

I've been giving this project for 10 years now and they just keep getting better.



Thanks for looking and for listening.