

SOUND OFF...SOFTLY



FROM THE MAKERS OF GOLD BOND CEILING TILE... RICH MUSIC IN HI-FI FOR YOUR LISTENING PLEASURE
JIM & LARRY BILLYE / BARRY LILLYINGTON / LEE BRIDGES / PERRY FAYE / BOB BOGARDUS / TONY MARTIN / RAYE FORD / BARBARA JOHNSON / BOB CONROY / WENDY WAGGONER / JIMMY HOTTENLOTT

FOUND DESIGN

BY LAUREL SAVILLE

Found Design is shorthand to describe those discovered things that arrest our attention and inspire us with beauty, symmetry or elegance achieved not through formal design processes, but with intuition and innocence or necessity and naïveté. We may catch a glimpse of something that forces us to pause in the midst of our forward motion or causes us to laugh in spite of our seriousness. As a writer, I jot down fragments of conversation, phrases from road signs, scraps of stories told passing in the hallway or over a beer. Designers snap photos, have strange collections of items found and pursued, scan the Internet, spend too much time on Ebay, fill notebooks with scribbles and scratchings, see every object as something designed by either intent or neglect.

We asked a few designers – and one writer – to share with us some of the artifacts that give them inspiration. In each of these items, the designers recognized a revelation of craft and expressed appreciation for the raw mechanics of creation. All the designers echoed a similar theme: in this day and age where the computer makes perfection not only possible, but expected, those things that reveal the hand of their maker resonate with a surprising and refreshing loveliness and grace.



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1 *Richard Boynton, partner at Wink Design, Minneapolis, on old album covers*
 “This stuff runs counter to everything we learn in design school,” according to Boynton. “Designers tend to plan everything instead of allowing intuition to take over. But so many nice tensions are created compositionally when you’re not trying to be so thoughtful all the time.” Of course, in part, it’s this lack of training that makes the bad design choices and exaggerated salesmanship of these album covers not only apparent, but also charming.

Boynton points out: “Seeing something like this when you’re thinking about design, recognizing all the character that’s brought to it by not having it be perfect but flawed and full of mistakes, reminds you that there’s an actual person behind the piece.” For example, the photo on the Sound Off album is oddly skewed to show the acoustic tiles made by the sponsoring company. “But now,” Boynton says, “years later, removed from its original function, it just works compositionally. It’s a great lesson in how to integrate functional pieces with artistic pieces, how to make the necessary information interesting and entertaining rather than hating the fact that you have to include it and then trying to hide it.”

Boynton scans the Internet — where he found these album covers — for personal collections of “scrap” that provide him with inspiration in his work. “I’m generally inspired by concepts,” he says. “It’s difficult to intentionally design something badly, but by re-contextualizing something naïve, you create a distinctive personality and often the result is very sophisticated.”

2 *Michael Hodgson, partner at Ph.D in Los Angeles, on a couple of wacky advertising artifacts*

Hodgson points out that in Southern California, a place that thoroughly celebrates its own bad taste, it is difficult to discover any kitsch that hasn’t already been documented and put on display. But the decorated bicycle and car, dressed as a boot, arrested his attention and, he suspects, have been mostly ignored by others. The bicycle is chained to a lamppost at the top of a freeway off ramp, and Hodgson enjoys the irony of advertising a bike shop on a car-choked roadway in a city that reveres motorized transportation of all kinds. Similarly, the hiking boot is actually a small car, decorated to advertise a shoe repair shop. “What interests me is the physical object,” he admits. “They’re a funny sidebar to the California roadside vernacular architecture of buildings that reflect the nature of their business.” As examples, he refers to Tail o’ the Pup, a hotdog stand that looks like a hotdog, and Randy’s Donuts, which is adorned with an oversized donut.

Even more important than their humor, Hodgson finds inspiration in their inherent innocence. “These things are not designed, they are made in a naive way. The designer is left out of the process. In fact, designers would have messed up both of these projects,” he notes.

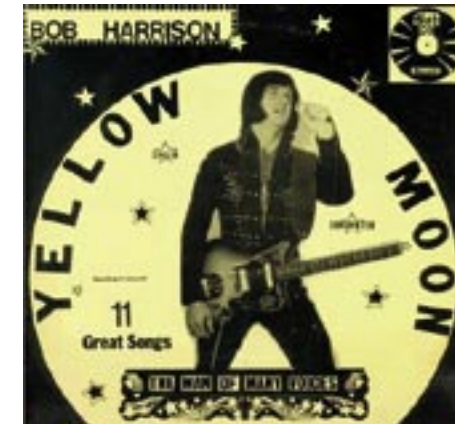
However, Hodgson is a designer and has allowed discoveries such as these to inform his work. For example, while in a small Mexican town with a company that imports items from there, he noticed that all signs had the initial letter of words painted in red, with the following letters in black. He lifted that concept for the product packaging and used letterpress and silk screening to create an imperfect, slightly unkempt feel that tied back to the rough beauty of the original signs.

3 *Joe Garden, staff writer at the satirical online magazine, “The Onion,” on subway advertisements for personal injury lawyers*

Garden wants to know, “What was the meeting where these were developed like? Who ok’d these?” It is hard to imagine the approval process for these illustrations of people smiling while they are suffering horrendous accidents. But one would expect a staff writer at *The Onion* to appreciate just this kind of absurdity: “There are so many elements that make them the most uniquely bizarre and disturbing ads in the world. They use generic human iconography, while simultaneously totally countermanding it. They’re beautiful, bizarre, ridiculous, hilarious, terrifying. Here’s an image of a little girl who’s crippled by lead paint but still strong enough to give a thumbs up! It’s like they’re saying, ‘Hot dog! I’ve been mauled--I just hit pay dirt.’”

These ads appear on the New York City subways where Joe gets many of the inspirations for his satirical writings. “I sit for a few hours on the train and notice things. It may not be the actual content, but something it triggers. I don’t actively think; just free associate.” His thoughts get jotted down in a graph paper notebook modestly titled, “The Holy Bible by Joe Garden and God.” Or, they get recorded between the first and second thumb knuckle of his left hand: “It’s the one place I can write on without having to do contortions and I can pull the skin taut just by bending my thumb,” he explains.

Garden is convinced that these strange ads must work. “After all, the whole point of an ad is to get noticed. And these are so funny because they are the exact opposite of the safety posters they’re trying to emulate.” Asked if he considered mocking them in the pages of *The Onion*, he apparently knows when to leave well enough alone: “I considered it, but you really can’t parody something that’s already so absurd.”



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4 *Laura Latham, senior designer at Gensler 585 in Washington DC, on Marwal dolls*

What began as a joke has now become a minor collecting obsession. Latham found “Naomi” for one dollar at a yard sale in the midst of a “junking” trip with a girlfriend. This 12-inch bust became a mascot and centerpiece at dinner parties they gave or attended. “For awhile, my friend and I actually had joint custody of Naomi,” Latham says. “And then we started seeing different nationalities of them all over.” She found out that the heads were made in the late 50s and early 60s by a company in Indiana called Marwal. Used to decorate store windows, these handcrafted items have now become highly collectible.

“The craftsmanship is amazing,” according to Latham. “The glazing and skin tones are perfect. They are entirely hand painted, with incredible details like highlights in their eyes and extra gloss on their lips and pupils. They are eerily real.” Latham is also intrigued with the multi-cultural aspect of her collection. “Looking at them makes me think about things in a new way, consider other cultures and think about the differences among people.”

Like many designers, Latham also collects other unusual items, like hand painted pistachio nuts and women’s girdle advertising plates from the 50s. While she’s never used these items in a design project, her admiration for their creators does inform her work. “I wonder about who made these things and why? How did they come up with something like this? In my designs, I try to bring some of those same elements of craft and detail and include something that makes people smile.” Does not share her strange collections with her clients? “No, never. They’d think I was crazy! But,” she quickly adds, “I’d love to hear from anyone out there who has more information on these Marwal busts!”

5 *Beth Clawson, a designer at KINETIK in Washington DC, on hand painted signs and other images*

She calls it “typographic scrounging.” It means wandering the streets, snapping photos of “... certain shapes, images reflected on shiny surfaces, bold letters, things that are different, colors, letterforms...” Clawson finds signs that have been affected by time and elements especially compelling, and often uses her camera to give them a savage or unexpected crop.

Clawson also finds inspiration in her highly personal process of seeing and recording. “I appreciate the intrinsic beauty of these things,” she says. “But I also enjoy taking time to see my surroundings in a way that’s all my own.” Plus, “capturing the beautiful on film allows me to assemble collections very space-efficiently. It’s much easier to photograph numbers on the sides of taxicabs than to gather the cabs themselves.” Working with a simple camera and real film allows her the additional déjà vu satisfaction of “having these images developed then re-discovering my experience after three days at the send-away photo lab.”

While some of her photos have found their way into her design work, it’s mostly the simple crudeness of the images that she finds so compelling. “A Mac is the primary tool we use to create polished pieces for a client. I thrive on the adventurous feelings that come to the surface as I notice ‘designed’ objects or situations that have not been labored over in the ways that are so familiar to my 40-hour-per-week routine.”