Q+A - Evan Hecox

by Constance Loizos

San Francisco-based artist and designer Evan Hecox is the human embodiment of his work: hip yet plain, unassuming and unambiguous. But whereas Hecox has his parents to thank for his makeup, his illustrations and graphic art have an air of pronounced minimalism by design. They're made to endure.

So far, his work is making a lasting impression. Hecox's illustrations-often precisely reproduced images against comparatively plain backdrops-have been a subculture favorite for years. The Colorado native jumped into graphics and T-shirt design for snowboarding clothier Twist (now in San Francisco) almost immediately after spending four years at Colorado State University in Ft. Collins. But his illustrations of mostly urban landscapes and weathered cars-distinctive for their quiet control and alluringly drab color schemes-have appeared in a variety of mediums, including the skateboard decks of Los Angeles-based Chocolate Skateboards and on CD jackets for the independent (and unrelated) Chicago-based record label Chocolate Industries.

And Hecox's art seems to grow more ubiquitous every year. Nearly a dozen books, including Schizophrenic and Transmission02, have showcased the 31-year-old's illustrations. His work has been exhibited in galleries from Seattle to Tokyo. Hecox's work is even appearing in a series of television ads for Volks-wagen. Collaborating with PSYOP, a New York animation house, to illustrate the ads, Hecox has recently captured the attention of viewers and competitors alike. The first VW ad, which initially aired last January, had fluid scenes of engineers puttering over 40 years of VW cars. A number of automobile-makers have already copied the commercial's graphic elegance in their own ads.

Suddenly faced with more offers from Madison Avenue and beyond, Hecox is in the enviable position of mulling over where to go from here. In the meantime, he remains focused on one clear idea: keeping his designs simple.

What was your first commercial job?

The first real jobs I did were T-shirt graphics for Twist. One of the first was similar to the recycling symbol, but instead of three arrows, there were three elongated heads popping out of the top of one another in a circle. I've met a couple of people who have gotten that as a tattoo.

Why did you get into graphics?

I went into doing commercial work so that I could make enough money to support myself. I also like working with type and I like the problem-solving aspect of commercial work. It's also good having things published and printed; it makes me feel like my work gets seen by people and isn't just hiding away in galleries and private homes. I sell paintings, but I could never imagine trying to make a living only as a fine artist-that'd be very scary.

How much of those VW ads did you conceptualize?

My part of it had mostly to do with aesthetics, color choices, storyboarding, composition and character design. I had some input into the overall idea, but mostly they just wanted it to have my look.

What kind of reaction have you received from the VW ad?

There's just one VW ad that's come out, and although it only aired for a short time, the response was good. I've been contacted by some companies since the ad emerged, but I'm trying to be cautious about doing anything too big. Graphic art is how I make my money, but I want to pick the right projects.

Are you afraid of alienating your sub-culture fans by taking on mainstream projects?

I don't think of myself in that way. I just try to find a balance between doing my own work and doing commercial work that I feel good about. It would be sort of pointless for someone to label me as a sellout, because I've always done commercial work, and it's only more recently that I've gotten into showing in galleries. I don't feel the need to be associated with any specific subculture, but at the same time I would never want to be part of ugly American junk-culture.

What materials do you use?

I paint with gouache and acrylics. I'll paint in color or in black and white, and then add color to the art with a computer, using Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator. It gives it a finisheded, hand-done look. I also like to do simple pencil drawings, ink washes and linoleum prints.

How would you define your style?

It's kind of dull, actually. I try to make my work fairly subtle because I think it will have a longer shelf life that way. It's kind of based more on observations and the way I see the world and less about having a distinct personal style. I think style is better if it just sort of happens and isn't too self-conscious or overbearing. I'm a fairly boring person, so I guess you could say it's an extension of my personality.

Do you have a design philosophy?

I'd say it's more of a gut feeling than a philosophy. I just start into things and go on intuition. I get a certain feeling when something feels finished, and then I stop. A lot of my work takes longer to prepare than people might think. It's a little deceptive, because I obsess over line quality. I'm a bit of a perfectionist.

Has your work evolved much over the years?

I've tried different styles. My work used to be more graphic and cartoonish. Now the work is a refinement of the looser pencil drawings I'd done formerly. I draw things in a realistic, literal way. Art culture has a way of eating up trends and spitting them out. I try not to over-stylize for that reason. I think the more plain-looking the work, the longer it endures.

What do you make of the "anxious" relationship between fine art and illustration?

I think the distinction between fine art and design is becoming less clear all the time. It's all about creating things and expressing ideas. So much of art has to do with placing something in an artistic context. I think art can be anything, so to think of design as non-art is a mistake.

You seem to have a strong preference for muted colors. Why?

It goes back to the boring-style thing. I tend toward muted colors just because I like the mood of them. I do like bright colors, but I tend to use them in small amounts with more drab tones. They really pop out that way. I've always liked those dry, dreary-looking album covers by the Smiths and Belle and Sebastian, and the kind of colors that Chris Ware uses in his Jimmy Corrigan comics. I like old Japanese prints, too.

Who are your design heroes?

I mostly like designers from earlier generations, like Saul Bass, Paul Rand and Paul Davis. I love poster design from Europe in the '50s, '60s and '70s. There's a Japanese poster designer, Tadanori Yokoo, whose work is really fantastic. I especially like his stuff from the late '60s.
I like design work from the era when people still did a lot of it by hand and would work out ideas by sketching on paper. I like Ben Drury's work for Mo' Wax records. I think he has an excellent approach to design because he uses a full range of media, and he mainly just uses the computer to pull it all together. Andy Jenkins at Girl Skateboards is the same way. I think that tends to be what I like: a more organic, hands-on approach. Computers are great tools, but they can also have a chilly, de-humanizing effect on design.

What subjects do you find most intriguing?

I would say I'm more into images than subjects-images that have a certain mood or that can trigger a certain emotion. I like doing things that communicate a feeling without literally telling a story.

Generally, I'll illustrate whatever catches my eye. I'm interested in cities, the organic ways in which they're built, deteriorate then rebuilt. I like old, funny stuff like turntables. I sometimes go to flea markets and repair shops to take photos of out-of-date stereo stuff, like old analog equipment and eight-track players. I recently did an illustration of a speaker system with its wiring pulled out.

What prompts you to take on a project?

I can usually just imagine myself doing something and I know right away if it seems like something I could do well and that I'll feel good about, or if it feels like a bad fit. I get to pick and choose a bit. I can't handle too much work at once, but I try to stay busy and I'm always honored when I'm asked to do something, even if I don't take it.

How do you see your work developing?

I'd like to do more mature work. I'd like the opportunity to express more intelligent ideas than I get to express now. Book covers would be good. I'd also like to design some of my own books with graphic images based on places I travel to. In general, I'd like to focus more on smart ideas and less on just making cool-looking things. I'm confident my work could be more imaginative and emotional, but there's a lot of room for improvement.

What projects are you working on right now?

I'm doing some illustrations for a Nike book that traces its 30-year history in basketball. I'm also doing record covers and more skateboards. And I just had a show with my friend Cody Hudson in Chicago at Gallery 645 in August.

Have you ever designed anything that bombed?

I've done over a hundred skateboard graphics and I can't say that all of them were great. I have a line of T-shirts that are sold only in Japan, and they don't sell many of them. Come to think of it, the Japanese didn't buy much of my work when I had a show there, either. I guess that's my big flop-Japan.

Conatance Loizos is a San Francisco-based freelance writer.