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BGSU Monitor

DECEMBER 20, 2011

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Top Stories

In typography, the medium enhances the message

When the images and typography in graphic design are working seamlessly together, the viewer is unconsciously pulled in and the message is subliminally enhanced, according to Lori Young, graphic design. She and fellow School of Art faculty member Todd Childers are fascinated with how the world of fonts has evolved since the early days of calligraphy to today's new possibilities with computer art.

"We're always looking at how type works best with the message. Should it be functional and invisible or expressive and ornamental?" Young said.

Childers recently showed his three-dimensional typography at the BGSU Faculty Art Exhibit and has a typographic installation in downtown Toledo as part of the AIGA "Downtown Windows" project.

Some typefaces are strongly identified with specific eras — though, as Childers recently has shown, styles are not often born from thin air but can be traced to earlier influences. A design historian, his "art detective" research has helped trace connections across national lines and time periods and demonstrated that interpretation can be biased by the chronological lens through which one is looking.

He presented his theory of 1960s graphic design at the 2011 Typo Berlin Conference at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt (House of World Culture). Under the conference theme of "Shift," Childers focused on the changing perspective on modernism and popular culture of the 1960s.

He began this investigation when he came across an artist using traditional, international style, or structured fonts, in a nontraditional or altered way.

"I wrote everybody I knew that I considered to be an expert on design history and nobody could explain it," Childers said. "That started my paper. From that, I started finding crazy things."

He discovered the psychedelic art typically found in the 1960s showing up in earlier cases, and pieces from the 1950s and earlier that also used nonmodernist artistic values. Childers also found a piece from the 1940s that used optical art, which was not popular until later in the century (as Op Art).

"Some of the things just didn't make sense for the time," he said. "It totally breaks the mold for what you would think of for this type of work."

He has broken political boundaries by sharing his interest in graphic design and typography with fellow artists in such places as Cuba, where he attended the 2008 American Institute of Graphic Arts Cross Cultural Design X-Change called "Sharing Dreams 5."

In addition to his historical interest in typography, he also produces new designs and has shown his work widely, at a three-dimensional typography conference in Dublin, Ireland, last year and the TypeCon conference last July in New Orleans, among others.

Young has also shared her passion for typography beyond BGSU, speaking about her students' and her award-winning work at conferences in Europe and Hawaii. She was invited to Watkins College of Art, Design and Film in Tennessee to teach typography, and created work recently featured in Megg's History of Graphic Design, generally acknowledged as the bible of that field.

Today, typography is finding new forms, she said. BGSU art students created signage for Snooks Dream Cars vintage auto museum in Bowling Green using typefaces associated with

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bygone days, and for her thesis exhibit, alumna Elaine Korenich, a “graduate student who fell in love with glass,” fashioned an alphabet in glass using letter forms she designed.

But it is animated type that is behind the biggest surge in typography development today, Young said.

“The entertainment industry is screaming for designers who understand the importance of typography, motion graphics and design. Computer art has created an arena to showcase typography and to make it dynamic.”