David Carson: A designer of renown

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GD-305: Graphic Design Studio I
October 3, 2014
David Carson hasn’t always been the superstar of graphic design that he is today. Lacking any formal design education, Carson is “self-taught” but considers himself to be guided by his intuition. Letting elements fall where they may on a page is Carson’s technique, resulting in his highly recognizable and oft-imitated style.

David Carson got his start as a sociology major, high school teacher, and professional surfer in southern California in the early 1980’s.¹ His affair with graphic design began as a three-week crash course in Switzerland² that then prompted him to head to Oregon for some formal training.³ None of this took hold; he dropped out after six months and took a job.

His first design work was for the likes of Transworld Skateboarding and Surfer magazines.⁴ They were freelance positions but ultimately led him to create the publication that would ultimately bring him the most recognition: Ray Gun. First published in 1992, Ray Gun was experimental and ahead of its time. It would routinely spotlight emerging musical artists who were pushing boundaries.

This take also reflected the nature of Ray Gun itself; experimental typographic layouts, pushing the boundaries of design, and even breaking the rules in what some consider to be “grunge typography.” It was the pushing of these boundaries that ultimately brought Ray Gun the most success and made David Carson a well-known


name in the design world. Owing to his surfing roots, his designs have been prominent in shops such as PacSun and Quiksilver. Since the early days and with the prominence brought by the success of Ray Gun, Carson can now call big names such as Levi Strauss, Nike, Ray Ban, and Jaguar clients.

Carson is a big believer in the emotion of a design and the emotional response that is felt before the viewer begins to read. This helps to make the designs interactive; they require input from the viewer and each one is subjective based upon the viewer. This informs Carson’s design choices and one of his most-quoted sayings, “don’t mistake legibility for communication.” “Communication implies engagement,” just because a design has words and possibly a picture doesn’t mean that it’s actually communicating. There needs to be something to bring the reader in, elicit an emotional response, and set the tone. Only then can the entire piece be taken in and understood to be communication.

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The laid-back beach culture and bohemian lifestyle of southern California has been translated into Carson’s designs through their appearance, often described as “grunge,” disorganized, or even chaotic. He employs the use of overlapping text, scattered headlines, inconsistent kerning, overlapping photos, and really all design mechanisms any formally trained designer would consider a faux pas.

These unique layouts and design elements that Carson uses has influenced the field of graphic design primarily by making popular the idea of “intuitive typography.” There’s a looseness to his compositions that has influenced many since the 90’s and made the grunge look possible and even popular. GD USA has called him the “most influential of an era” and Ellen Lupton, a design educator and historian, has praised him as the “world’s most distinctive typographic voices—much imitated, but never matched.” So admired is his work that AIGA, the professional

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12 David Carson and Philip B. Meggs, Fotografiks: an equilibrium between photography and design through graphic expression that evolves from content, Corte Madera: Gingko Press, 1999.


organization for design, has awarded Carson a highly-revered AIGA medal in 2014 and called him their “biggest star.”\textsuperscript{15}

That’s not to say Carson doesn’t have his detractors. He was actually fired from his position at Ray Gun—a publication he founded—by the publisher. Rudy VanderLans, co-owner of the infamous Émigré Graphics, has dismissed Carson as “a ferocious promoter…[with]…a gigantic ego.” Even the head of the graphic design program at Cranbrook calls his designs “crude,” and uninteresting.\textsuperscript{16}

Of course, David Carson is nothing if not unwavering in his trailblazing. He’s not about to let a few detractors deter him from continuing to pursue his passion of visual communication. With such a storied past, time will only tell what the future has in store from the greatest typographic innovator of our time.


Bibliography


Carson, David, and Meggs, Philip B. *Fotografiks: an equilibrium between photography and design through graphic expression that evolves from content.* Corte Madera: Gingko Press, 1999.


