Sense & Sensibility

In the 1980s, April Greiman reasoned that the computer would become an integral tool for graphic design, but many didn't want to hear it

Words by
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Nolwen Cifuentes

This is my favorite line ever uttered in one of those flipping-through-the-portfolio presentations that designers love to give: "Only a spiral galaxy can bring forth new stars perpetually." It was said by April Greiman during a 1996 talk at SCI-Arc, the Southern California Institute of Architecture, where she was introduced by three male architects who all claimed to be her boyfriend (including her husband, architect and SCI-Arc co-founder Michael Rotondi). It was a reference to the spiral galaxy in her famed poster "Does It Make Sense?," a five foot, four inch visual timeline of creativity and creation, starting with the Big Bang and ending with the designer herself. Situated among the images of supernovas, ancient symbols, and lunar landings is a life-sized portrait of Greiman, two-headed[1] and completely nude.

Foregoing clean lines and Swiss grids, "Does It Make Sense?" is populated with floating low-res video images and bitmapped type. In response to the piece's titular question, Greiman has been known to paraphrase Wittgenstein: "It makes sense if you give it sense." The Modernists were shook.

It's the kind of image that might have broken the internet if the internet was a thing in 1986. Instead, the giant fold-out poster arrived to *Design Quarterly* subscribers by mail and proceeded to crack the graphic design community wide open. Some critics found it to be thoughtless, self-indulgent, and lewd. Others hailed it as a radical advancement in the then-nascent field of digital design. Greiman used an early Macintosh computer to compose her opus, way before the Mac was the default design tool, and was instead considered by many as a potential assault on the fine craft of graphic design.

By the mid-'80s, Greiman was used to the heated debates and spirited industry chatter that her designs tended to incite. Studying at Kansas City Art Institute and later under Armin Hofmann at Basel School of Design in Switzerland, Greiman possessed the skills of the Modernist tradition, but always had an itch for experimentation. Moving to Los Angeles further inspired her use of bright colors, drop shadow, diagonal type, mixed media, and penchant for DayGlo orange. With designer and photographer Jayme Odgers, she ushered in the California New Wave movement, ran a functional art company called Visual Energy, and designed issues of *Wet*, the infamous late '70s/early '80s "magazine of gourmet bathing." By the time she became the director of the graphic design program at CalArts in 1982, she was already enough of a threat that, by Greiman's account, many of the predominantly male faculty were openly disparaging her work and discouraging students from taking her seriously. She left in 1984 to return to a full-time design practice.

Behind the divisive aesthetics of New Wave typography and postmodern style, the driving force for many of Greiman's best-known works has been a genuine curiosity towards and fervent belief in new technology as a way to push design forward. She moved from photography to video-based imagery, from early computer graphics workstations to the Macintosh. When computers were just at the cusp of accessibility, she was merging handset type with digital elements in her "hybrid imagery" pieces. She got a lot of flack for being an early adopter, but design is undeniably better off for it. It takes a certain amount of fearlessness to stay perpetually ahead of the curve.

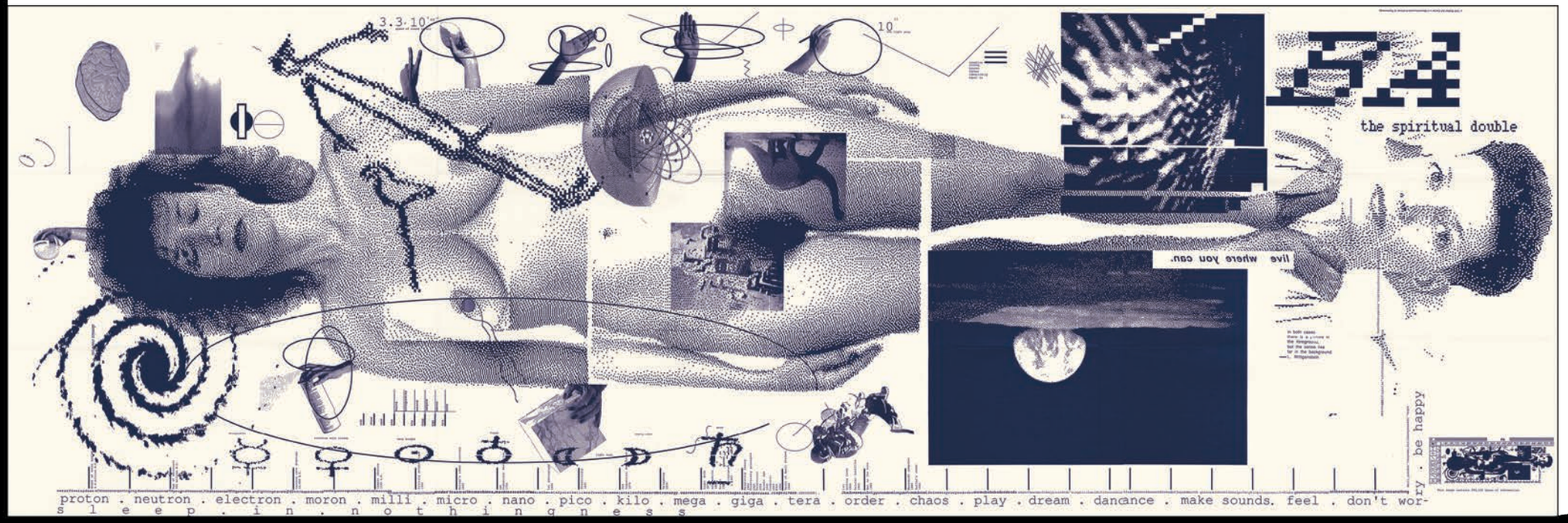


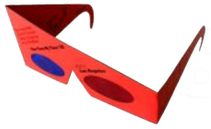
Image left: Greiman, April, 'Does It Make Sense', Design Quarterly #133, 1986. Image courtesy of the artist.

1. In a video interview with AIGA/LA, Greiman explains how the two heads came about: "When I started the process of layering the imagery, I had long hair. When I finished it, just about the time that it was going to go to the printer, I cut my hair. So I had to put that in, too; it's a two-headed dragon."

Image below: Greiman, April, 'Does It Make Sense', Design Quarterly #133, 1986. Image courtesy of the artist.

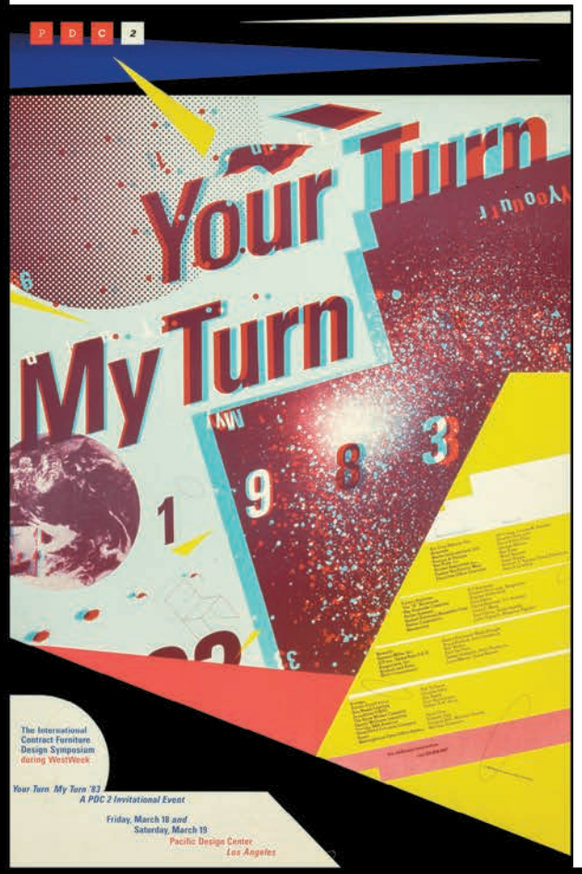
Rumor has it that you attended Alan Kay's 1984 TED Talk, and from there you went immediately to Macy's department store and bought your first Mac.

Yes, that's true. I was the guest of one of the founders of TED, Harry Marks. In my mind, Harry is the inventor of broadcast motion graphics. He and I were video buddies; he showed me a lot about how to use video and we used to go out on shoots together. So I went to the first TED conference with him, and he said, "You gotta go see this computer." I said, "I don't want to see this stupid computer," but he dragged me. I bought my first Mac from Macy's in Carmel, California. I was probably making the line go around the back of the store while I engaged with it. I just couldn't stop looking.



What convinced you that you had to have it?

I didn't really get what it was. I just thought, "Oh, I should get this computer because I can probably have some fun with it." I don't think I realized what it would become.



At some point you started to think that you could use it to design, which was not necessarily a prevailing attitude among graphic designers in the mid-'80s.

Some years into the Macintosh, maybe in the late '80s, I went to a lecture of Milton Glaser's at ArtCenter [College of Design in Pasadena]. There are very few people in the world that give a better talk than Milton Glaser. I have the greatest respect for his work and his mind. But at the end of his presentation, a student in the audience asked what he thought about the Macintosh. He said he was proud to say that the original Mac that Steve Jobs sent him was still sitting in the box, unopened, in his basement. Meanwhile, I won my first color Mac by entering *Macworld's* first art competition—I could never have afforded it otherwise. So I'm there drooling, wondering who puts together that mailing list for Steve Jobs.

One of the funniest thing that's ever been said about it was also in the late '80s, maybe early '90s, at a lecture that Paula Scher gave at the Pacific Design Center in Los Angeles. She is a genius in so many ways. Somebody asked her whether she used the Mac, and she said no. They asked her why, and she said, "Because it doesn't smell good like my other art supplies." I mean that's so Paula, right? That's so brilliant.

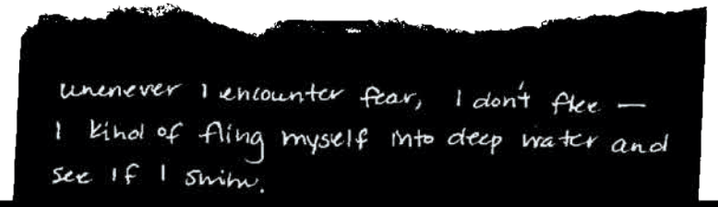
When I was starting to work on the Mac in the early- to mid-'80s, I was head of the design program at CalArts. I was schlepping my little Mac into the classrooms to let people play with it and think about it. The students were not to up for it, I think because the predominantly male faculty that had preceded me in the design department were saying things like, "Greiman's work is like she takes a bunch of typesetting and stands at the top of the stairs and throws it down, and where it lands is her design."

I was also on the national board for AIGA at that time, and this is what got me to resign.[2] I got so tired of some of the famous men who were also on the board saying things like, "This is the end of everything," and that the Mac is crap and they'll just stick with their pencil. I'm sure I'm quoted somewhere as saying, "This is just another pencil." Or I would challenge some of these men by saying, "You know how much crap has been done with a pencil over the last couple of thousand years?"

In fact it wasn't true that the Mac was just another pencil. It was an incredible creativity-enhancement tool, kind of a co-creator, if you will. But those were the kinds of things that people were saying.

Your dad was a computer scientist and analyst. Were you exposed to computing early on?

I was never really privy to seeing him work. When I was growing up in the late '50s and early '60s, he worked as the VP of data processing for the lighting company Lightolier. He set up their mainframe computer, which had the air-conditioned room, the platform enclosed in glass, and all that. When the president of the company moved to California, they imported my dad out here to Los Angeles. He worked as a consultant to Technicolor, setting up the first minicomputers for film processing and writing the code to do so. Then he did the same thing for Warner. I was already out here when my parents got the bug and moved to L.A. for good. My mom actually moved out first; she came out and got a job and a condo, and then my dad joined her. She kind of left my dad in the dust to figure out how to wrap things up back East, which is where we were all born and where we lived until 1980.



2. A decade later, Greiman was awarded the 1998 AIGA Medal, one of the highest honors for graphic designers. In an essay that accompanied the award, she's called "a pioneer of digital communications design."

You grew up in New York and then left to study graphic design at Kansas City Art Institute in Missouri. That must have been quite a change of scenery. What type of design education did you get at KCAI?

The head of the program was a Yale graduate, Rob Roy Kelly, and he was setting it up for all of us to become corporate designers. The program was influenced by the Modernists for sure. We were doing giant logos and collateral systems. Everybody was gaga for grids. The irony was that our school in particular didn't have a type shop, so we were rubbing down body text and headlines and doing all these major things in typography without having access to real equipment. That was one of the seriously motivating factors for me to go to Basel, to really learn how to make typography.

Was it a much different environment at Basel?

When I got to Basel, instead of continuing on the path of doing Swiss gridded typography, I had the Madman of Typography, [Wolfgang] Weingart,[3] as a teacher. He freed us up to experiment and try different things and think about type, not merely as the little column of stuff you put at the bottom of a page or flow into a grid system, but as something that could be expressive. In a sense, it encouraged me to start to see type as image. Type as image fully blossomed when we had the tools to do that, like the Macintosh and other technology.

When I moved from Philly, where I was teaching at the former Philadelphia College of Art, to Connecticut, and I took a course at Yale in computer programming. We were learning Fortran,[4] which was dreadful; I pretty much failed. I thought I needed to learn at least the basics of programming because I wanted to design a calendar using one of the phototypesetting machines that I knew that they had at Yale. My teacher pulled me aside one day and said, "Why didn't you tell me that you're an artist?" He set up a time for me in the computer lab where I could experiment with some help from a computer operator.

Did you retain any of your Fortran knowledge, or end up using that programming experience in your later work?

Not so much on the programming side, but watching somebody operate the computer gave me a glimpse of how computers think. I had a feeling, almost through osmosis, of what was going on. It wasn't until many years later, in the early '80s, when I started working again with video Paintboxes that I had become a little more fearless with technology. Whenever I encounter fear, I don't flee—I kind of fling myself into deep water and see if I swim.

What is a Paintbox?

The first Quantel Paintbox was for making broadcast graphics. When you see little spinning TV logos from that time, those would have been done on the first Quantel Paintbox. It had its own font library, and you could scan things in and animate them for broadcast. Since they were just appearing for two seconds, the output was video quality—it was much lower res than print. I started playing with those because I was working with Esprit and Lifetime Television, doing their motion identifiers.

A few years later, Quantel came out with what is known as the Graphic Paintbox. That was like my toilet training for the release of the Macintosh. The Mac seemed like it mimicked everything those high-end Paintboxes could do. Those tools got me immersed in understanding computers. Not technically, as an operator would, but conceptually. I could understand how they think and how they work.

At that time, I also had my typography typeset by Vernon Simpson, who was the finest typesetter in Los Angeles. That's what made up my "hybrid imagery"[5]—sometimes it was my video images and sometimes it was handset type, traditionally pasted up.

Why did you move out to L.A. in the late '70s?

I was working freelance at MoMA, and had finished up a project, so I started interviewing. In New York at that time you had to be a specialist: You either had to design annual reports or you had to do signage or you had to do corporate design or publication design. I always wanted to do all of it. I just didn't have any particular track I wanted to focus on. I went to the Aspen Design Conference in the summer of '76, and I met some people from Los Angeles and San Francisco. I was going to go to San Francisco anyway to see some relatives, and they said, "If you're going to go to San Francisco, we'll pay for you to just come down to L.A. for a couple days." I think they thought I was good party material. I did that in early summer and I had such a good time here.

I wasn't that long off the boat from Basel, and I liked being free and experimenting and using a lot of color. The influence was Armin Hofmann. I interviewed at Saul Bass's design firm with his partner Herbert Yager. I dropped off my portfolio, and when he called back I was so excited. When I came in, he just said he'd never seen a portfolio like that, he didn't have a single question for me; he couldn't even begin to ask me questions. [My work] was too non-corporate, I guess.

Before that, in New York, I had also applied for a junior designer position at Chermayeff & Geismar. I dropped off my portfolio and after a week they called and said, "You can come pick up your portfolio." When I went to their office, Tom Geismar actually came out into the reception area and said, "Why are you applying to this job as a junior designer?" And I said, "Well, I would like to work here." And he said, "Two things:

3. In 1968, Armin Hofmann invited Weingart, then only 27 years old, to teach the typography class at Basel. Through his students over the decades, Weingart introduced a more experimental and expressive approach to typography that was massively influential throughout the design world.

4. Originally developed by IBM in the 1950s, Fortran is a general-purpose, compiled imperative programming language that is especially suited to scientific and engineering applications. It was a dominant programming language in the early days of computing, and became the basis for many other programming languages, the best known of which is BASIC.

5. Greiman also considers her work with architects on spaces and environments to be an aspect of "hybridizing."

RON REZEK
LIGHTING+ FURNITURE

One, your work is so well-developed and so different than what you'd do here." But he also said, "You're way beyond junior designer level." It didn't matter to me, I just wanted to work in a good office and have the feeling of what it's like. But that's how it went down. I was not hireable. I did get offered a job by a friend who started a corporate design planning firm in Century City. He said he liked me and my work, so he hired me to work for half a year. I said, "Great, I'll move out to L.A." Then he fired me.

Why did he fire you?
Because for one of the projects we did, an ad campaign, I hired Jayme Odgers, who was working as a photographer at the time, and who later became my creative partner. My employer noted that he had a feeling that Jayme and I would become a couple, which we weren't at the time. One morning I was standing there talking to his receptionist and I glanced at what she was typing. It was a resignation letter written from me to my boss. When I asked him about it, he said that he felt like I was developing a stronger personal relationship with this photographer and that I'd rather go into business with him.

I worked for three years with Jayme, and we did end up developing a personal relationship. That body of work is quite famous, like the early CalArts folder poster and *Wet* magazine.

You and Jayme are credited as founding the California New Wave movement. Did you have a sense at the time that what you were doing would end up being so influential?
I kind of always resented later being called "Queen of New Wave" or "Pomo." Those aren't things that I identify with. But then, you know, that's how journalism sometimes goes. I felt like as soon as you've given it a name, it's dead.

Jayme and I were just having fun. His work was spatial and kind of spiritual. I call him the inventor of the drop shadow in graphic design, because anything that he photographed had a shadow, or he would airbrush in a shadow. Everything was always floating. He was Paul Rand's assistant for many years, by the way.

I didn't know that.
Jayme probably still has some of the best hand skills of any designer I know. I learned a lot about pasting things up and cutting things and wrapping things and preparing artwork. But also, his work was, even as a photographer, in alignment with my work. The strong thing about that period creatively was that we were combining word and image. Typography, for us, wasn't just a little column at the bottom of the poster or the ad. It was integral, that combination of word and image. Even at Basel, I was always thinking of things as objects in space. Why people didn't put typography on the diagonal, I could never figure out.

When Jayme and I started collaborating, the only cover of *Wet* we did together was that cover with Ricky Nelson. Prior to that, we started a company called Visual Energy and we made what were known as space mats. Space mats were like placements, only they were our photographic or collage images, offset printed and laminated. We sold them around the world, to Bloomingdale's and Macy's. We had a little run for a couple of years, so we would put our own ads in the *Wet* magazines.

Image on previous page:
Left: Greiman, April, poster for an exhibition of graphic design, 'Pacific Wave, Museo Fortuny' Venice. 1987. Color offset lithograph. Image courtesy of the artist.

Right: Greiman, April, 'Iris Light' poster. 1984. Silkscreen. Image courtesy of the artist.

Image below: Greiman, April and Odgers, Jayme, creative director, admission poster / folder mailer for CalArts, 1978. Image courtesy of the artist.

That sounds like so much fun, which is also how the work you guys made together looked: loud, colorful, irreverent—almost joyous in a way.

That's the reason I stayed in L.A.[6] I was completely knocked out by this natural color here. I remember being mesmerized every day around sunset when this golden light, this pink-gold light, would just drape the whole city. It was spiritual, but it was also something that I felt really affected my physical experience, too. It woke up a sensibility in me that I hadn't really felt in New York, like ever. I ended up doing some early work, even corporate work, in bright colors and DayGlo orange.

A lot of the work from the '80s I've just started thinking about as a strong body of work. You can really follow a technological thread through my work, from high-end photography, to videography, to computer work, to hybridized design, to motion, to doing things that had sound. I also did the piece for *Design Quarterly* in that period.

Right, called "Does It Make Sense?" Can you talk about how it came about?

One of my biggest allies and supporters was Mickey Friedman [the design curator who put Walker Art Center on the map, along with her husband Martin Friedman]. We met at an AIGA Leadership Retreat,[7] because she was on the AIGA national board at the same time I was. When she commissioned me to do an issue of *Design Quarterly,* I could have easily done a magazine that was a full retrospective of work that had already been published, which would have been a completely boring thing for me to do, but good for my ego. Instead I said, "I'm going to tackle something new and learn a new piece of software, use my video equipment, and just try some things."

When I was head of the design program at CalArts, I was suffering from bad criticism in the U.S., being called an airhead, and "let's see if she's in business in five years," that kind of stuff. This was "the end of design." My work was too personal. My "Does It Make Sense?" piece for *Design Quarterly* arose from my own internal chatter and imaginations. I was at a crossroads in my early career. My work in the late '70s and early '80s was both infamous and highly acknowledged, contributing to a sort of early fame. At the same time, there was this backlash from the established New York male graphic design community, who were saying it wasn't graphic design at all, it was fine art. So the chatter—the dialogue, that conversation in my own head—had to do with them saying my work was personal and not real, serious design.

I was going back and forth on what's personal and what's public, or what's a personal agenda versus a client's agenda. The title, "Does It Make Sense?" was me trying to reconcile with my abilities, my thinking, my skill sets. Did things have to make sense along the rigid line that was being drawn by that predominantly East Coast male community of designers who were twice my age? And in fact, was there a line? From there I began to ask, "What is creativity?" Aside from the biblical creation myth, if you go with the sciences and physics, you would say everything was created out of the Big Bang.

6. Up until this year, Greiman owned a Palm Springs resort called Miracle Manor, which was completely designed in her style.

7. Annual meeting for AIGA members and national board.

Image left: Greiman, April, 'Does It Make Sense' back, videography, *Design Quarterly #133*. 1986. Image courtesy of the artist.

That's the idea behind the whole running chronology of dates at the bottom of the piece. I cut ahead quite a few years to when the Macintosh got introduced, then there's landing on the moon and other things that I thought were relevant to my personal timeline. The journey was about, "What's personal and what's professional design or commercial design?" That timeline was to help me give it sense.

The piece is radical in a lot of ways: You were looking at creativity and its origin, and questioning the line between personal and commercial in graphic design. You were challenging the medium by making the magazine a poster. But also, putting your body on the piece like that takes a lot of guts. Did you ever second guess yourself?

As I thought about what's personal and not personal, I said, "What could I use to represent that?" And then I thought, I could use my person. I could literally use a portrait of myself as the canvas for representing the evolution of thinking.

My biggest fear was presenting it to Mickey first. I was fully prepared for her to say "Whoa, I don't know about this," but she was just like, "This is great." I found the printer, but Mickey got the paper donated, so she had to bring them a full-sized comp and present them my idea. They said they were absolutely not donating paper; their only policy was that nothing they sponsor could ever portray nudity. She said to them, "Well, you're setting yourself back pre-Renaissance, then. There's nothing lewd or pornographic that's being displayed here." They ended up saying that we could use the paper if we didn't put their name on it.

Wow. How fortunate to have an advocate like that.

Mickey was a genius. I mean, she just egged me on. When I told her what some of these established male designers were saying about my work, she said, "Well now you know you're a serious threat, if they're acting so badly." She was such an ally, and remained so until the very end of her life.

Image below: Greiman, April, 'Graphic Design in America' poster. 1989. Color offset Lithograph. Image courtesy of the artist.

What do you think you were doing stylistically that made you such a threat?

I don't know. I was using a lot of color. I was putting type on the diagonal. I was designing pieces that you could turn upside down. For a catalog for a big museum show, I literally trimmed off the corner and made it a trapezoid. Some people realized that there was a thought process and there was a concept behind what I was doing. But for other people it was just, "Where are those Swiss grids?"

I read somewhere that Massimo Vignelli made a comment, after seeing the *Design Quarterly* poster, that he wanted to see the back side. I realize it was in jest, but were you getting back a lot of comments like that?

Well, my current husband, Michael [Rotondi], was a subscriber to *Design Quarterly*. He was aware of my work, but after he got that, he said, "I definitely want to have a meeting with her." [Laughs] I think there's also a male design journalist who's fairly well known and who wrote an article about it calling me overly self-indulgent and narcissistic. But nothing too bad. I think people were genuinely embarrassed that I did this, because there was nothing like it.

There were at least a couple of female journalists who wrote about my work in that period and accused me of being kind of brain-dead, and accused my work of being all fluff and no content. They didn't see the thought behind it.

This was the '80s, when feminism was experiencing something of a backlash. Did you consider yourself, or the work you were doing, to be feminist?

I was a quasi-feminist. I wasn't hardcore, and I regret it because I wasn't being thoughtful enough about the long-range plan. A lot of the women I knew personally who were hardcore feminists were really pretty rough to be around. They were too severe for me, too stern, too principled. It didn't allow for any fun or any acknowledgement that there were good things about being a woman.

I got some really good work and appreciation from clients because I was easier to work with. Instead of the handful of male designers they would call for a job, I was the only woman, and I was young, and they enjoyed my being lighter and a little more energetic about collaborating. There was one job for this artificial intelligence company, a very early

Images opposite:
Top left: Greiman, April, Made in Space, branding material for Nicola Restaurant, Los Angeles, CA. 1993. Image courtesy of the artist.

Top right:
Greiman, April, Made in Space, with Ken Smith Landscape Architect, Orange County Great Park color consultant, branding and wayfinding, City of Irvine, CA. 2008. Image courtesy of the artist.

Greiman, April, 'Hand Holding a Bowl of Rice'.public art 8,200 sq. ft. mural, Wilshire Vermont Station, Los Angeles, CA. 2007. Image courtesy of the artist.

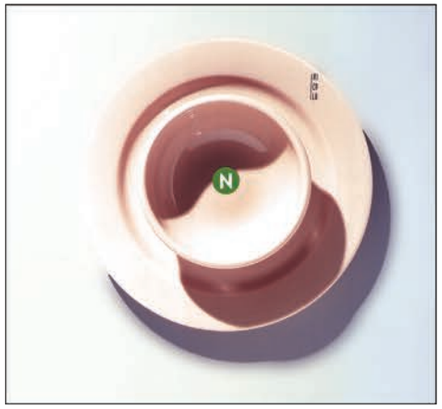
Greiman, April, Made in Space, branding system for Coop Himmelb(l)au Architects, seen on company's construction vests. 1990-2013. Image courtesy of the artist.

one, and one of the main competitors I was bidding against for the project was Saul Bass. When I saw who I was being interviewed against, I couldn't believe it. It emboldened me, and when they asked what kind of fee I would charge, I just came up with something really high. And I got the job.

One of the things I liked reading about with your time at CalArts is that you lobbied to change the department name from Graphic Design to Visual Communications. You also prefer to go by trans-media artist, not graphic designer. I love this pushing up against language that you feel is limiting to what you're actually doing.

I tried to introduce video as an option to students in my program, and made a proposal to the provost to bring in a couple of Macintoshes. The school followed through with that, but then when the equipment arrived, they put it right into the film school. It was impossible to cross creative lines; it's a misnomer, these schools that call themselves multidisciplinary. When Lorraine Wild came in a year or so after I stepped down at CalArts, she immediately turned the name back to Graphic Design.

When I left, I was kind of on a roll with my own design practice. I didn't know where it was going, which is why I liked it so much. It was an undefined aesthetic. Video and the computer—those were things I felt needed to be explored and not judged.



BRUTALIST DESIGN AND THE RAW WEB

The stripped-down style is a rejection of web design that’s too clean and an internet that’s increasingly corporate

Words by
Orit Gat