

By Jessica Carew Kraft

It was a simple packaging design for an artisanal condiment company that recently brought Design is Play into the limelight. Using the visual language of fine wine, the design for March Pantry seasonal jams, oils, vinegar, kosher salt and more is so spare and reserved that the attention it received was surprising. Apart from being featured in Communication Arts, Graphis and the Type Directors Club, the minimalist design yielded more than 600 followers and 27,000 project views just two weeks after it was posted on Behance. "We've subsequently gone into new business meetings where we were referred to as 'the March Pantry designers,'" says Mark Fox.

Fox and partner Angie Wang are the two principals—and the only employees—of Design is Play, a graphic design firm in San Francisco whose long list of clients includes Anson Mills, Extole, California College of the Arts, Credo Mobile, Wired, the University of California Press and several rockclimbing gyms (both are avid climbers). They design identity systems, trademarks, icons and custom typography for print and web. Every other aspect of the business also rests on their shoulders. "We answer the phones, meet with clients, do our books," says Wang. "And we juggle it all with teaching."

Indeed, the classroom drives much of their work and fuels their passion. Both are born educators who strive to make memorable points to the graphic design students at California College of the Arts (cca). Talking about their own work might lead to a discussion of Gustav Stickley's views of Victorian furniture, the radical prints of Sister Mary Corita Kent or a history of the Russian constructivists. Such references spring quickly to their minds, and even more so now because they're working on a book together that traces the history of common symbols through different cultural contexts, due to be published in 2016. Also, as I was

interviewing them, they were finishing up a semester and deep into critique sessions of their students' final projects.

Every cca design student will have encountered Wang and Fox, and most freshmen will take Wang's Intro to Typography in the morning and Fox's Intro to Graphic Design in the afternoon. cca isn't just their shared workplace, it's the couple's locus amoenus. Wang was a student in the 1990s, and Fox joined the faculty in 1993. But only when she sought out a teaching position a decade later did the two realize their extraordinary compatibility.

They merged their families, fused their careers into Design is Play and moved it all into a compact, modernist loft designed by Stanley Saitowitz, in San Francisco's soma district. Wang's daughter and Fox's two sons live part-time in the remarkably tidy and sparely appointed live/work space that enables them to walk to cca and to many client meetings.

Working at play

The "Play" in the firm's name is understood to mean freedom of movement within a defined space. "It's also freedom of thought within the confines of a particular problem," adds Wang. "In our view, design is playful when it succeeds in balancing structure and fluidity, logic and emotion." Their sense of play extends to the methods they use. "Play may be achieved by preserving the presence of the human hand in the design process or by utilizing production methods such as letterpress that are inherently imperfect. It can also be achieved by encouraging idiosyncrasy within a planned system—allowing the unexpected to form, and inform, the work," she says.

Both describe their professional process as "fluid," yet their respective talents determine their roles. Fox creates the marks for their identity projects; Wang's specialties are

Captions were provided by Design is Play. Mark Fox and Angie Wang were the designers on all projects shown.

Right: "Craft Forward was a 2010 symposium at California College of the Arts in San Francisco that explored the boundaries between craft, art, design, architecture and writing. The symposium identity we designed juxtaposes two square glyphs: a vintage typographer's ornament symbolizing 'craft' and a QR code symbolizing 'forward' that directs users to the Craft Forward website when scanned. In this context, the QR code functions as a modern ornament, but one with embedded content." California College of the Arts, client.



DESIGN IS PLAY





typography and applying and extending the identity across different media, acting as both a creative director and a lead designer

Fox honed his distinctively bold, masculine aesthetic under the name BlackDog for more

than two decades prior to working with Wang. He ascended to the heights of the field—a retrospective of his political posters from the permanent collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art was exhibited in 1999. A self-taught designer who trained in photography and printmaking, Fox creates images that integrate cross-cultural influences and draw on his fine arts background. In his abundant collection of trademarks, one can see the influence of the roundel forms of Japanese kamon, the ingenious angularity of Celtic filigrees, and the visual language of punk, parody and agitprop.

"I'm into visual impact. It's hard, it's industrialized. Sometimes it's a slap in the face. But it's also intelligent or clever," he says. "My default is symmetry, but Angie likes asymmetry. I seek perfection, but she wants things to be rougher, so we have a yin-yang dynamic going on."

To ignite his creative process, Fox works by hand, drawing tiny half-inch marks by the dozens in his sketchbook. Then he blows up the best ones with a copy machine and perfects the lines by hand with his trusty Rapidograph pen. If a design requires type, he won't scroll up and down through a dropdown menu. He and Wang will pore over antique typesetting manuals and midcentury design guides, comparing the curve of an R with the crook of a K and choosing their favorite option, regardless of whether they can buy an instantly available digital version. They frequently re-create and rejigger old fonts, going over and over letter joints and points in granular detail—checking options that might not be visible to the naked eye—until the final words have a notable weight, subtlety and originality. "This is time-consuming, and no one really notices except me," says Fox. "But it's something I have to do to get it right."

For a recent project with MetalMark, a Fresno rock-climbing gym, Fox dug up an old version of Rockwell type that had never been mass produced, but that showed just the right rugged edge to combine with a metalwork butterfly icon.

For the logo of an heirloom grain company, Anson Mills, the serifs were deftly manipulated in relationship to the trademark so that a braided chaff floats above the company name, looking like a wind-swept wheat field.

Fox and Wang are not anti-technology, but they are the design equivalent of Slow Food. Admitting that they don't speak the language of "ROI" (return on investment) or "vc" (venture capital), the pair can come across as rebelliously counterculture in present-day San Francisco, where creative directors and graphic teams of a thousand startups live and die by their companies' market success. Like everyone else, Design is Play finalizes its deliverables in Adobe Creative Suite, and much of the work finds a home on the web, but the pair takes a philosophical posture toward the tools of their craft, preferring to work with analog methods and deliberately training their students in twentieth-century techniques. "This is how we learned, and we think that a certain liveliness is lost when you don't know how to design by hand," Wang says.

Wang, who studied Japanese at the University of California at Berkeley, was deeply inspired by the 1933 book-length essay *In Praise of Shadows*, in which Japanese novelist Junichiro Tanizaki wrote about Western technology's encroaching influence on Japanese culture at the turn of the twentieth century. "If the Japanese hadn't adopted the fountain pen, for instance, they probably would have developed a writing instrument on their own time," she explains. "Maybe the tip would have been more like a calligraphy brush—it would have been a tool of their own culture, one that suited their arts."

On a smaller scale, the problem of technology erasing regional specificity manifests in how software programs overly determine students' emerging aesthetics. "If I ask them to draw a line, I will get a black, one-point default stroke if they use Illustrator," Wang says. But when a student has pencils, pens and other media, a line can be any weight, color or texture, and it will have an added element of charm. Requiring that their students master traditional media before moving on to design software yields wonderfully captivating work from even the most newbie designers in their classes, they say.

Students learn to appreciate this old-school training, but it's something that many of Design is Play's clients might not recognize. Fox recasts his hand-drawn icons as vectors, prints them and then reworks images with a pen and cutting tools in a digital-analog mélange. Accidental discoveries abound. When the team presents hand-lettered versions of fonts for assignments on spec, clients sometimes like them so much that they take them as-is, like the flyer Wang

Right: "San Francisco retail store March created its own line of artisanal products under the name March Pantry in 2011. Hearth and home are central to the store's concept, and the shop stocks seasonal jams made especially for March by LouLou's Garden, select spices from Le Sanctuaire and dry-farmed tomatoes from Happy Girl Kitchen. Our hand-inked wordmark is printed and embossed on die cut labels with a laid finish; it is screen printed in metallic gray when applied to glass apothecary jars. The tactility of the embossed lettering—as well as Angie's handwriting—provides a warm contrast to the set type." Angie Wang, art director; Sam Hamilton, creative director; March Pantry, client.









DESIGN IS PLAY

designed for a trunk show by fashion designer Matt Dick. For an icon developed for BO.LT, a defunct startup, Fox manipulated the letters to look like the outline of an electrified elephant. But something was static about the backside. A quick cut to the butt and a shift downward revealed a much better balance for the final design.

Matt Roche, who commissioned the BO.LT design and has since worked with Design is Play on numerous projects for the marketing firm Extole, said that Fox's sense of precision wows him every time. "With a small number of pen strokes, he knows how to communicate, and he cares about each one—not in an arbitrary way. When he makes a decision to add or delete a pixel, he means it, and you can see the difference," he says.

An identity project for Extole enabled Design is Play to harness all of its creative faculties. Extole helps companies get referrals by incentivizing their existing customers, using the "refer a friend, get \$20" offers that are now ubiquitous for tech companies. Its previous brand identity used stock photos and had a generic feel. Fox designed a new trademark that fractured a hexagon into the emanating waves of a broadcast, signaling the sharing ethos of the company.

For the more illustrative content on Extole's website and in its promotional materials, Fox and Wang hired friend and renowned illustrator Greg Clarke to create a comic-

This page: "Our favorite climbing gym, Mission Cliffs in San Francisco, recently asked us to redesign its identity. Housed in a former foundry, the gym has an urban, industrial feel: concrete floors, steel I-beams and a massive crane hook. The sketchbook page demonstrates that Mark works at a small scale: most of his trademark concept sketches are in the three-eighths-inch range. After enlarging the sketch, he tests the idea by inking it with a Rapidograph pen prior to building the art in Illustrator. The second and final inking of the Mc monogram is around five-and-three-quarters inches wide." Mark Fox, illustrator; Mission Cliffs, client.

Right: "Our friend Steven Lyons asked us to develop a series of icons representing political issues for CREDO Mobile, a progressive phone company in San Francisco that helps fund social change. We are proud CREDO customers and felt honored to put our talents to work on behalf of our left-leaning phone carrier. The icon system is used in advertising and on social media to educate and motivate CREDO's customers. The issues include women's rights, universal health care, peace, workers' rights, social justice, renewable energy, economic justice, marriage equality and the environment." Steven Lyons, creative director; Mark Fox, illustrator; CREDO Mobile, client.

"In 2013 we redesigned the identity and online presence for Extole, a San Francisco referral marketing company specializing in new customer acquisition for its clients. We sought to humanize the data-driven aspects of Extole's business by working with inimitable Los Angeles illustrator (and good friend) Greg Clarke to create idiosyncratic depictions of potential new customers as dogs and cats—with the occasional mouse thrown into the mix. Business cards feature pairs of animals 'sharing' by talking, listening to the same music or exchanging information. Greg's illustrations, combined with the black and Day-Glo pink color palette, easily distinguish Extole from its competitors." Angie Wang, creative director; Greg Clarke, illustrator; Extole, client.



MISSION CLIFFS

SAN FRANCISCO



















DESIGN IS PLAY

style series of cats and dogs interacting in pairs to emphasize the social nature of referral marketing. "Even though we are not showing humans, it is a much warmer, human-centered design than stock photos," Wang says. The pets ended up on an eye-catching mural in the company office, and several employees had their likenesses depicted as one of Clarke's creatures.

Yet the whole Extole campaign was a wild card. Speaking about Fox and Wang and the initial idea deck, Roche says, "They always present three versions that are pretty similar and one very different one. For a soft-spoken couple, they usually have a bold reveal."

It's a fitting approach, given that for this firm, all design is play. 🗯

This page: "'Play' can be understood as freedom of movement within a defined space. As a visual exploration of this idea, our studio identity plays with ink and its absence: black fills only a portion of the debossed logotype, and the inked areas vary from piece to piece. In addition, the design maximizes the sculptural potential of paper by combining offset lithography, engraving, and registered and blind debossing: typography appears on, above and below the surface of the page. To announce the launch of our original website, we designed a mailing based on the idea of 'play.' Bicycle playing-card backs are foil stamped with an LCD grid to suggest infinite possibilities within a planned system—an apt analogy for our studio, as well as the web. Card fronts are foil stamped with a 'window' that reframes the view, forcing one to reconsider the familiar schema." Angie Wang, creative director; Design is Play, design firm/client.

Right: "As Milton Glaser and others have noted, 'Drawing is thinking,' and our approach to the design of **trademarks** is grounded in drawing: making small sketches on paper, refining concepts on vellum and then hand-inking the most promising symbols before approaching the computer. Not only do we think the results are visually appealing, but also, we enjoy this way of working and thinking. We similarly like to work with analog type specimens, and we take pleasure in reviving historical faces that aren't readily available commercially. If a central tenet of branding is to establish a distinctive identity, then working with less familiar typefaces will yield less generic wordmarks." Mark Fox, illustrator. First row: architecture and interiors firm Arcsine; climbing gym Studio Climbing. Second row: Dogpatch Boulders climbing gym. Third row: California College of the Arts (CCA); University of California Press. Fourth row: CCA Graphic Design Program. Fifth row: LA Boulders climbing gym; web-hosting service BO.LT. Sixth row: architecture firm Minniti*McMurtrie; One Catering. Seventh row: coffee producers and café chain Fourbarrel; climbing and fitness gym MetalMark.





























