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Design Pioneers

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April Greiman: Design Pioneer

Do not call her a graphic designer. Call her a thinker. April Greiman continues to challenge the meaning of artist and designer through her experimental use of technology. Through her work, Greiman continues to question the line between art and design. Where does fine art end and design begin? What role does technology play with art and design? Greiman's experiences throughout her childhood, education, and philosophical readings influenced her work as an artist and designer. Credited with being an early adopter of designers using Macintosh computer and innovator of the "New Wave" aesthetic in the 1980's, April Greiman continues to experiment with media and meaning, designating her as a design pioneer.

Greiman's Early Life

Born on September 10, 1948, April Greiman grew up in the New York City. Greiman had excellent role models in her father, mother, and her great aunt Kitty, a strong and independent woman who had danced with the Ziegfeld Follies (a Broadway show that ran from 1907-1931); and who made excellence in her career a top priority. Greiman recalls her mother as a calm, grounding influence. Her father was a curious, wandering explorer who was easily distracted by whatever interesting thing crossed his path; affectionately, they called him "the original astronaut" because he was perpetually lost in the space of his own imagination. (AIGA) During the late 1950s and early 1960s, Greiman's father was a computer scientist and analyst; he worked as the VP of Data Processing for the lighting company Lightolier where he set up their mainframe computer. During the late 1970s at Lightolier, Greiman's father was also a consultant to Technicolor in Los Angeles, responsible for setting up the first minicomputers for film processing and writing the code to do so.

As a family, the Greiman's developed a reputation as a creative group of people. Neighbors called her family "The Flying Greimans" because they were always looking up, searching for interesting phenomena, and

traveling by air. As a professional dancer with the Fred Astaire Dance School in New York City, Renee Greiman (her mother) performed on television and taught classes, often enlisting the young April as a dance partner. But perhaps Greiman's most important lesson from her mother came from her often-repeated saying, "April, you can't fake the cha-cha." From an early age, Greiman learned that integrity and immersion were critical undertakings for one's art.

Greiman's Education

Her formal design education began shortly after she settled on the idea of going to art school and applied to Rhode Island School of Design. Although Greiman was rejected from RISD, the Dean of Admissions pointed out that her portfolio was very strong in graphics and suggested that she apply to the graphic design program at Kansas City Art Institute. (AIGA) From 1966–1970, Greiman attended the Kansas City Art Institute and began her undergraduate study in graphic design for the first time. At KCAI, Greiman was introduced to the principles of Modernism by Inge Druckrey, Hans Allemann, and Chris Zelinsky, all of whom had been educated at the Basel School of Design in Switzerland. The program was influenced by the Modernists. Her education was focused on giant logos and collateral systems. Greiman states, "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." During the early 1970's she went to Basel, Switzerland, where she enrolled herself at the Allgemeine Kunstgewerberschule Basel (now the Basel School of Design). Under Armin Hofmann's and Wolfgang Weingart's supervision, Greiman developed interest in the International Style and the style later known as 'New Wave'. International Style is characterized by cleanliness, readability, objectivity, and grid-based design. With architecture as well as graphic design, the International Style promotes clean lines and minimal ornamentation. Greiman continued to explore typographic meaning and began experimenting with ways to alter the two-dimensional space of the page and reimagine it as a more three- and four-dimensional continuum of time and space. Greiman states, "Weingart 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."

Returning from the Basel School of Design, Greiman taught at the former Philadelphia College of Art. After moving from Philadelphia to Connecticut, Greiman took a computer programming class at Yale.

Although she failed her class, Greiman said, “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.” (Miller)

California New Wave Style

In 1976, Greiman moved to Los Angeles and founded a design studio named Made in Space, which implemented a multi-disciplinary approach to creating design work that extends into her current practice (AIGA). Greiman based her design business in Los Angeles to explore new paradigms in communication design, which she continues to do today. Her studio is a combination of media-communication design and architecture that is based on international style-spaces (AIGA). Throughout her work, she continues to explore typographic meaning and began experimenting with ways to alter the two-dimensional space of the page and reimagine it as a more three- and four-dimensional continuum of time and space. She made use of pixelation and other digitization “errors” as integral parts of her digital art. Greiman embraced and built on pixelation while other designers lamented its limitations. What other designers saw as a negative in the new computer technology, Greiman considered beautiful and essential to the new technology.

While in California, Greiman met photographer-artist Jayme Odgers at Cal Arts, and Odgers became an important influence. Jayme Odgers introduced her to the desert (Death Valley) in 1976, a journey that would forever influence her way of thinking and being; and shortly after, they formed a creative partnership that was to last for four years and produce some highly visible work (AIGA).

The desert had a profound influence on Greiman’s work. Moving from the east coast to the west coast, the physical landscape became a visual metaphor for Greiman. The open space as well as the vibrant colors of west coast sunsets, bright oranges and pinks are visible throughout Greiman’s design (Miller). Working together, Odgers and Greiman designed a famous 1977 Cal Arts poster that was adopted as the icon of the California New Wave.

Within the 1977 Cal Arts poster, Greiman experiments with the placement and direction of type as well as bright colors including bright orange and pink. Greiman gives the viewers a sense of space through the use of a collaged polaroid image of the beach sky on a black background with white spots reminiscent of outer space. The base of the image as well as the bottom right side of the poster utilize a gradated dot texture. The word VIEW at the bottom of the poster is constructed of simple shapes rather than a font. Although this poster was

created before the Greiman's use of the Macintosh computer, her interest in collage, texture and pattern through dots of color is present. The poster has an overall sense of the haphazard to its assemblage. Elements of small type appear to be scattered by chance at random angles on the page.

The amount of the poster inspired by Greiman and the amount inspired by Odgers is impossible to know, because they collaborated at this time. "Jayme put the final polish on April's art," said designer Craig Hodgetts. "He gave her the gloss that has made her a celebrity darling." (Whiteson) 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." (Whiteson) *Wet* magazine was created and published by Leonard Koren from 1976 through 1981. The mixture of offbeat art, music, and fashion within an innovative format helped define the New Wave aesthetic. *Wet* was know for carrying articles on a wide array of stories that encompassed a Los Angeles attitude that was emerging at the same time as Punk. Articles were unexpected and absurd including pieces about cooking fish in the dishwasher and how to dress for the apocalypse. *Wet* was geared toward the counterculture of the late 1970s/early 1980s. Its design was influential because Greiman and Odgers seemed to be breaking all the convential editorial design rules at that time.



1977, Calarts Poster



1979, Wet Magazine Cover

Grieman's Design Philosophy

Developing her own philosophy and process for design, Greiman read the work of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Greiman identified with his conclusion: "It makes sense if you give it sense." She says, "I love this notion which exists in physics as well—that the observer is the observed, and the observed is the observer. Focusing mainly on the philosophy of language, mind, mathematics and logic, he tried to tell the world that 'it is what it is, and it will most probably not change.'"

Wittgenstein's philosophical theories tend to solve problems which are not, in fact, problems. He further states that these questions and problems arise because philosophers fail to understand the logic of a language. The aim of Wittgenstein's proposition was that the solution does not lie in solving the problem and gaining wisdom, but rather in eliminating the problem itself by thorough analysis. Additionally, the work of Wittgenstein focuses on communication through both words and visuals. Wittgenstein believed much miscommunication occurred due to different visual perceptions (or images) held by individuals. Communication is essentially describing pictures to each other. According to Wittgenstein, not only do individuals communicate through visuals, they also use games with language. When communicating, individuals need to understand which game they are utilizing in order to communicate clearly.

In 1984, April Greiman attended Alan Kay's TED talk where she was introduced to the Macintosh computer. Following the TED conference, Greiman went to Macy's in Carmel California and purchased her first Macintosh computer. (Miller) Although initially purchased to "have fun", the Macintosh computer would have a significant influence on Greiman's work. Greiman describes her style, which epitomizes the 1980s California New Wave in graphic design, as "an experiment in creating 'hybrid imagery.'" "When computers were just at the cusp of accessibility, she was merging handset type with digital elements in her "hybrid imagery" pieces. While Greiman embraced the idea of new computer technology, many graphic designers still utilized traditional mediums. "At the heart of the concept of hybrid imagery is a recognition that, in inventing new technologies, we reinvent ourselves," Greiman explained. "In the end, we can never be sure of who is creating who," when working with technology; this is her concept that echoes Wittgensteinian thinking.

"Traditional graphic design, whether of the loose, American kind or disciplined, Swiss manner, is more concerned with the nature of the printing process than it is with visual and philosophical ideas. Though I've done every kind of graphic design commission, from billboards to menus, I chafe at the limitations of the designation."

as a designer. Greiman states, “I want everything I do to be somehow a first, so I always try to open things out and rethink the subject from the ground up. Maybe that’s why so many conventional graphic designers object to the way I play fast and loose with all the media, from photography and TV through computers and laser printing technologies.” “I came to Los Angeles in 1976 because I was becoming disenchanted with the rigidities of the East,” the New York-born designer explained. “What I immediately loved about L.A., and still love, is the way the boundaries are never fixed. That’s the advantage of having so little local tradition.” Like her experience at Basel School of Design, Greiman wanted to continue to experiment with space, color, and medium.

While she was creating hybrid imagery, “There was a lot of criticism,” she recalled. “The people--mainly other designers--who were threatened by my innovations were the most bitter. But these criticisms, by forcing me to articulate my ideas, only served to sharpen my style.” Several designers complained about her “reckless mix-up of media,” her “obsession with technology at the expense of design values,” and her “queen bee attitude.” “It all became too exhausting,” Greiman said. “But you can’t help breaking rules, if you want to stay alive.” (Whiteson) In Greiman’s (1990) words, “Mistakes are accidents, and accidents often reveal unexpected possibilities.” Greiman’s working methods are complex. The design of the MOMA poster, for example, involved a series of steps to create the “layering” that she sought to add resonance and relevance to her design.

Step 1: A background is created by entering the video image of a landscape into a computer programmed with high resolution electronic “paint-box” software. Step 2: Greiman “boogies around” with the background images, overlaying sketches and blown-up 35-millimeter photographic slides of interesting textures and fragments of pattern she finds intriguing. Step 3: This “layered” image is laser scanned to magnify the light-point pixels that make up the computer image. Each magnified pixel thus becomes a unique and separate geometry of tones and colors. The final stage in the poster design is the manipulation of the discovered textures and colors into an image that communicates an immediate yet complex message. When complete, it reads both as an art image and as a source of specific information. The process reiterates Wittengenstein’s philosophy by collecting a group of seemingly random images to communicate. By placing the abstracted images and pixelized images together, the viewer is forced to make sense of the image. Literally, “it makes sense, if you give it sense”, by forcing the viewer to develop a conclusion based on the images.



1988, The Modern Poster, ExhibitionPoster, MoMA, New York

“Normally the digital pixels are invisible to the viewer,” Greiman explained. “But when you bring them into focus, you see that each one is different and fascinating in shape and color. This is what I mean when I say that we invent the technology and then it reinvents the way we see.” April Greiman challenges the tradition of grids in graphic design and strives to communicate deeper meaning in her design. “Am I the fine artist of the graphic design industry, or am I the designer of the fine arts world?” asked Greiman rhetorically. “I think of myself as a problem solver first and foremost. From that impulse all the rest follows.” Greiman embraces technology with all of its faults. Unlike her contemporaries, Greiman was not intimidated by the technology presented by the Macintosh computer. Greiman uses technology fails and limitations to improvise within her work. Like a fine artist, she embraces the lack of control within the medium as way to make visual discoveries.

Greiman uses her Mac like a pair of scissors. As a child, in around 4th grade, Greiman started making collages through a project in school, tearing images from books and magazines. (Greiman) When considering type in her present day design, Greiman views type as an image or an object in space. Greiman believes type should be integrated with the image. “Why people didn’t put typography on the diagonal, I could never figure out.” Rather than following a grid, Greiman experiments with her use of type. Essentially, she is asking how different type can look or be arranged while still communicating the message.

Greiman's Career

The California Institute of the Arts appointed her the head of the design department in 1981. In 1984 she lobbied successfully to change the department's name to Visual Communications, feeling that the term "graphic design" would prove too limiting for future designers. Greiman wanted to students to explore and experiment with non-traditional media to create designs. During this time, Greiman was experimenting with the Macintosh computer as well as video imagery within her own work. Also in 1984, Greiman completed a poster for Ron Rezek Lighting & Furniture entitled "Iris Light." This poster was significant for its innovative use of video imagery used for the custom designed standing lamps and the integration of New Wave typography that was very minimal at the bottom of the poster with classical design elements. The effect of the printed poster is that the two standing lamps appear out of focus as if they are printed in two different colors. The essence of the lamp is placed in the center bottom of the poster with a three-dimensional base and a disembodied halo of light in the center of the poster. A light blue trapezoid and a blurred image of a yellow foot with a dropped shadow separates the images of the lamp base and the halo of light. The different elements are placed on a white background as if they are collaged together. On the top of the poster is the image of the underside of a standing lamp with the head of a classical plaster Roman bust. Greiman is utilizing a primary color scheme throughout the poster.



1984, Iris Light, Poster

Her 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games poster of running legs silhouetted against a square of bright blue sky was the most memorable of 16 posters commissioned by the Olympic Organizing Committee. Greiman's poster was drastically different from the other posters commissioned. The image illustrates an individual running towards the viewer by having it step out of a block of sky into a perimeter of white space. Textured pastel strokes are layered behind the block of blue sky, while the foot and leg are stepping onto a teal gradient with a strong dropped shadow. Greiman is attempting to show multiple views simultaneously through her use of perspective and layers with the use of technology. Like the work of Picasso using collage and cubism to show different views at the same time, Greiman plays with the idea of different views within space using collage and technology.



1984, Los Angeles Olympic Games, Poster

In 1986, Greiman saw her invitation to design and display her work in *Design Quarterly #133* as an opportunity not only to present her digital work but to ask a larger question of the work and the medium: Does it make sense? Focusing mainly on the philosophy of language, mind, mathematics and logic, Greiman's piece challenged existing notions of what a magazine should be. After the publication of *Design Quarterly #133*, many designers felt compelled to reconsider the role of the computer in design practice. Greiman asked herself, "What's personal and what's professional design or commercial design?" The poster within the magazine unfolded to be 5ft 4inches. The poster included a nude image of herself where she cut and pasted her left breast over top her right breast. Also included in the poster, are math symbols, space imagery, and dinosaurs. On the black and white side, there are simplified cavelike drawings, hand signals, zodiac symbols, digitized pixelated enlarged letters, and a moon rising photo. There are also typed increments of the metric system at the bottom. The full color back of the poster included type in a variety of sizes, digitally adjusted photos, rversed type, and collaged photos. In October 2014, Greiman was chosen as one of six designers in an international poster design show at New York's Museum of Modern Art where her poster from *Design Quarterly #133* "Does it make sense?" was exhibited.



1986, *Design Quarterly*, #133

Greiman's Legacy

April Greiman was presented with the Gold Medal for lifetime achievement for her invaluable contribution to the American graphic design landscape. She was recognized for her ability to embrace new technology and its limitations and push their boundaries with her creative spirit. Greiman also received four honorary doctorates, awarded to her by different institutes, including Kansas City Art Institute, Art Center College of Design, The Art Institute of Boston and the Academy of Art University. Greiman has won numerous international awards for her graphic design.

In the 1987, her poster, entitled "Pacific Wave" was exhibited in Venice, Italy. Through this poster, Greiman continues to utilize colors influenced by the west coast sunset. The pixelated image of an ocean wave is abstracted and reduced to line and texture. The wave is also colored with vertical blocks of yellow, red and blue. Behind the image of the wave, Greiman challenges the viewers sense of depth and space by layering texture in different colors that seem to melt into each other. The white organic shapes appear both in front of and behind the image of the wave. While some of the white shapes appear solid, others appear cut-out to reveal space behind them showing gradients and brush strokes. The background layer is a repetition of the colors of the wave. Unlike the wave image, the blocks of color in the background are horizontal and larger starting from the top of



1987, Pacific Wave, Poster

the page descending toward the bottom. The type on the page is difficult to read because it is stretched, angled, sheared and distorted. There is also a frame of a gradient of colors that flows behind the white shapes. Through “Pacific Wave”, Greiman continues to experiment with technology and space through the use of pixelization and layered imagery.

To commemorate the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States’ Constitution (Women’s Voting Rights), the U.S. Postal Service commissioned Greiman to design the stamp for the occasion, which was launched in 1995. The postage stamp combines images of women protesting for equal rights from 1920 through 1995 layered over an image of the United States Congress building. While the layering is still present, the lines between the layers are blurred. Greiman’s work through the 1980’s were very clearly layered images with drop shadows, the 1995 postage stamp blurs the foreground through the background. The words “Progress”, “Equality” and “Freedom” are layered in yellow, red, and green over the blue and teal images of congress with a blue sky in the upper left corner of the stamp. Toward the bottom of the stamp are historic images of the original women who fought for the right to vote that melds into a 1970s image of a women’s liberation march overprinted in green. Greiman literally melts these two eras of women’s progress into one image digitally. The word “Equality” is emphasized with the color red on the blue and white background; yet “Equal” stands out clearly in red and the “ity” is faded out. Greiman’s fine art sensibility enables her to create a deeper meaning in her design; it allows her more opportunities for experimentation. Using her literal layers of imagery and type, Greiman ultimately creates metaphorical layers allowing viewers to connect to the imagery on multiple levels.



April Greiman, U.S. postage stamp 19th Amendment 75th anniversary, 1995

In 1984, she was considered one of the first designers to see computers in a different light; she realized their potential as a design tool. She is recognized for introducing the 'New Wave' design style in the US. Greiman herself did not doubt the abilities of digital art: instead of allowing unfamiliarity to restrict her work, she explored digital media to produce memorable and prestigious works, including video footage manipulation to produce oil paint effects on a seven-story building façade mural. Greiman utilized a video still captured from the Koreatown area of Los Angeles and translated it into oil paint. Rice is a symbol of abundance and is the dietary staple for more than half of the world's human population. Additionally, rice also has a diverse DNA. Koreatown is a community with a large population of people of both Korean and Latin American heritage. Greiman uses the bowl of rice as a positive symbol of sustenance in a diverse area of Los Angeles. Not wanting to be restrained by labels, Greiman continues to challenge the limitations of media and the notion of space.



Metro Wilshire Vermont Station, 'hand holding bowl of rice' mural, public art commission.

Conclusion

“Only a spiral galaxy can bring forth new stars perpetually.”, Greiman states as a reference to the spiral galaxy in her famed poster “Does It Make Sense?,” This poster was visual timeline of creativity and creation, starting with the Big Bang and ending with the designer herself. Greiman continues to test the boundaries between fine art and design. Greiman challenged the use of grids, typography, and technology. She views typography as an image and experiments with direction and the viewers’ sense of space. The first to use a Macintosh computer in her designs, she embraced the flaws of technology to create something new. Challenged by contemporary designers, Greiman flourished. Rather than continuing to follow rules of a grid system, Greiman chose to experiment with type and technology. Unlike other designers, Greiman also thinks that design should be personal. By incorporating her personal interest in space exploration and the writings of Ludwig Wittengenstein, Greiman continues to create deeper meaning within her works. Is she the graphic designer of fine arts or the fine artist of design? I believe she is both. She is a problem solver who challenges design industry norms. April Greiman is a true pioneer of design. Not only does she continue to explore the tools utilized to create design like the Macintosh computer, she also truly questions the purpose of design. While solving design problems, she also poses inquiries about possibilities of design. Inspired by the writings of Wittengenstein, she challenges viewers to assemble imagery to understand the deeper meaning; to make it make sense.

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