

Elegant Feedback Hybrid: Full Circle at the Creative Summit by Michael Cronan

Now in its 24th year, the Creative Summit continues to be a one-of-a-kind design conference. The ingredients of the conference make it unique. Each year there is a large regional student design competition. Judged by a flotilla of accomplished design pros, most are former or current speakers, and recent conferences have included design pros that are also former student winners. The culmination of the Creative Summit takes place with judges awarding cash prizes and scholarships to the winners. To date, over one quarter of a million dollars have been awarded to students, and each winner receives a small figurine trophy of a pig (long story), known as the coveted Memorial Ralph Award, or Ralph, for short. At the request of Chris Hill, the Summit's founder and continuing guiding light, I had the pleasure of e-interviewing a number of past Ralph winners who have each been Creative Summit presenters, speakers and jurors as well. They represent the full circle that the Summit offers. Now successful professionals in the early part of their careers, their insights, like a message from the future, are gold to any design student looking for the keys to a successful career. Brian Flynn and Dora Drimalas, brilliant design partners and new parents, are founders of San Francisco's Hybrid Design. Their work is both smartly contemporary and at times nostalgic of perfect fifties modernism. It comes from wicked talent and knowing design history like the backs of their hands. I was able to catch up with Brian for the interview. Heather Amuny-Dey is Creative Director at Nike. Her career demonstrates that with the right combination of uncompromising design talent, communication and organization skills, a young designer need not over-pay their dues and can, relatively quickly, go to where the action is for world-class lifestyle branding. Christian Helms actually moved to Texas as a result of the Summit experience, and founded Austin-based The Decoder Ring. One trip to thedecoderring.com will not only get you laughing, but longing to export some of that Texas attitude to your hometown.

What do you wish you would have known as a student that you now understand as a professional?

Brian Flynn focused on the portfolio, "No one cares what school you went to, or if the work is for a real client, school or yourself. It only matters if the work is good or bad. Show me your best work, the work that you wish that you were doing, not what you think I should see." He pressed the point further, "If you had to make crappy projects in school to make your professors happy, then by all means, make new projects to replace those. The portfolio is not sacred, it is supposed to be a direct reflection of you as a designer, and not a mixed bag of half-baked ideas you don't believe in. If you don't show the work you want to be doing, you will end up doing the work you are showing. No one can read your mind that you can do something better than what you are showing. You need to show them that you can, and if that means staying up late to make fictional projects of your own, then do it. I would rather see five amazing pieces for someone's personal satisfaction than 15 finished, mediocre pieces for real clients. If you don't believe in the work you do, why should anyone else?"

Heather Amuny-Dey says that the most valuable thing she has learned as a professional is, "how to work as a team and how to manage client expectations. It is very easy, and somewhat expected of you as a student, to work in isolation and focus solely on your own creative ideas. As a professional, I find that collaborations and team projects are some of the most rewarding. It is inspiring to work with others and to be able to come to the best solution, together." Another deeply insightful lesson: "The ability to distance personal emotion from client presentation and critique allows me to take client feedback and manage their expectations." Many firms separate the junior from the senior designers based on that criteria alone.

Christian Helms considers writing and having a vision as essential. "Being creative is only part of the job," he says. "Writing and communication skills will get you a long way as a designer."

"One of the most important things to understand is that after school, there is no longer a defined checklist for



achievement. YOU set your own criteria for success. If you don't have a strong vision of that in your head and heart, it's much less likely that you're going to end up in a place where you're happy, creative and healthy."

I couldn't resist asking a question intended to send a message back to their teachers. If you could change design education in any way, what one thing would you change or new rule would you institute?

Again, Brian focused on the portfolio. "Most schools seem to approach them as checklists to accomplish. 'Here is one book cover, one annual report, two magazines, one packaging concept, one poster and three logos. Congratulations, you graduate.' Every student's portfolio looks the same, and they think they have to show all of it, as they have had that concept beaten into their head... You begin to wonder if it is the influence of the teacher. Does the student know the difference between good and bad?"

"The schools should have a better understanding of their individual students, and help them tailor their books to their strengths as designers, not a lowest common denominator that works for the group."

Heather would change the pace in school to better prepare students for the real world. "It is difficult to go from doing a couple of projects a semester to doing that in a week." She continues, "There are so many things to balance in a design education, but it could be helpful for students to have some experience in a faster-paced environment. Professional internships definitely help this agenda."

And Christian agrees with the need for more professional contact while still in school. "I would institute some sort of mentoring program. It's been talked about a lot recently, but that's because it really is important." He adds, "I've been fortunate enough to have a number of really amazing folks who've shared their advice, suggestions and even failures with me, and that's been an education in itself. It's helped me a lot in The Decoder Ring."

What do you perceive is the primary difference between the design world that your design heroes inhabited and the one you work in today?

Brian got down to the brass tacks after mentioning some of his older design heroes, like Otl Aicher, Saul Bass, Paul

"If you don't believe in the work you do, why should anyone else?"

Brian Flynn, Hybrid Design founder and former Ralph winner

2008 Winners



Nathan Trafford/Texas State University



Nathan Trafford/Texas State University



Herlinda Reyna / Texas A&M University



Brian Wood/Texas State University



Aline Forastieri/Texas State University



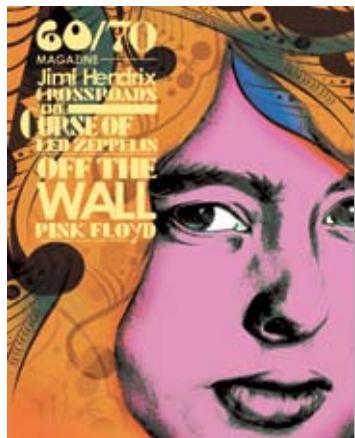
Katy McCauley/Texas State University



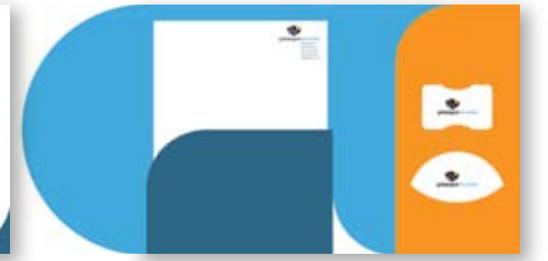
Brandon L. McCain/The Art Institute of Houston



Christopher King/The University of North Texas



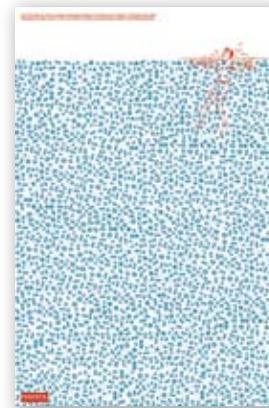
Ashley Ayres/The Art Institute of Houston



Cody Matheson/Texas State University



Jared Chadwick/Texas State University



Chris Jones / Texas State University



Lauri Johnston/ Texas State University



Shaun Fox/Texas State University



Ryan Bailey/The University of North Texas



Britta Fuller/Texas State University

“The portfolio is supposed to be a direct reflection of you as a designer, not a mixed bag of half-baked ideas you don’t believe in.”

Brian Flynn, *Hybrid Design founder and former Ralph winner*

Rand, and Milton Glaser, and younger design stars, like Mark Farrow, Tomato and Designer’s Republic. “Now, you can have a studio in your garage, finishing work for clients around the world, and have 20 projects under your belt in a year after graduating from school. The barrier of opportunity has been almost completely eliminated; so young, hungry designers can go straight to actively working without having to toil in the dungeon of an ad agency for years before getting their first shot.”

That lack of hierarchy is a double-edged sword, he cautions. “We have more crap to wade through now, but we have so many more unique ideas now, which I think is far more valuable.” A big shift in pre-press will mean that the heroes of yesterday may not be heroes tomorrow, as “the pre-press revolution has made it so that anyone can make a book, and there are design monographs everywhere. Even the most obscure designers can get the word out. So when you ask students who their heroes are, it is usually someone close to being a peer, someone they can relate directly to, and usually much less about the pantheon of design history.”

Heather grew up in the design world. She has some of the same design heroes, but with one very important extra. “My design heroes were, and still are, Saul Bass, Paul Rand, Josef Müller-Brockmann and my father, Jack Amuny. Growing up as the child of a designer, I was raised

Michael Patrick Cronan: Imaginative perception and innovation are the hallmarks of Mr. Cronan’s accomplished design career. For over 30 years, Cronan created game-changing corporate communications, identities, graphics, packaging, and product development for clients including Apple, Estée Lauder, Levi Strauss & Co, and SFMOMA. Cronan and partner Karin Hibma focus on creating names and brands, to name a few: TiVo, GoodBelly, and Amazon’s Kindle, and help companies create, transform and reinvent themselves. Awarded by national and international design organizations and publications, Cronan’s work is represented in the collections

Creative Summit Facts:
 Started in 1985 by Chris Hill while teaching on weekends at Texas State University.
 The Creative Summit is a 501c3 non-profit organization and is not affiliated with any organization or university.
 Location: Texas State University, San Marcos (30 min South of Austin)
 Attendees: 500 students, professors, professionals and past speakers
 Students: From 20 universities of 6 different states
 Auction: Speaker & past speaker silent auction of art, photographs, posters, books, etc.
 Presentations: 12 guest speakers

Awards:
 Coveted Memorial Ralph Award
 The Singing Cow Scholarship Award
 The Honorary Hoffman Award

Certificates of Excellence
 Cash Awards
Speakers:
 Heather Amuny-Dey

2008 Judges
 Heather Amuny-Dey
 Jimm Lasser
 Brian Flynn
 Dora Drimalas
 Michael O'Brien
 John Sabel
 Brian Singer
 Murray Tinkelman
 Sharon Werner
 Michael Cronan
 Karin Hibma
 Michael Doret
 Laura Smith
 Gary Faye
 Christian Helms
 Mike Hicks
 Rex Peteet
 Chris Hill
 Phil Hollenbeck
 Myers Raymer
 Sandro
 Jack Unruh

to have an appreciation of design.” As a parent of an industrial designer and a sculptor, I can attest to the advantage. Heather points to a fundamental shift from the design world of yesterday. “Today, consumers have a different relationship with design. Design used to be something that a very few did. Now, consumers are asked to be their own designers through many avenues of customization and self-expression. I think good design is good design, in the past or today. And the constant is the enjoyment that people get out of a beautifully designed piece.”

Christian’s point of view is more basic and has its own solid logic. “The world we work in has better coffee, a worse president and a hell of a lot more to distract us from doing our jobs. I’ve started turning the computer off for one hour a workday, and it’s amazing how productive I am in that hour.” This is an unassailably useful idea that the entire design planet would benefit by.

Over the years, Chris and the designers who have stayed connected to this Spring ritual have seen the fruit from Creative Summit ripen and return to seed a fresh crop of students. It has become a kind of a recursive design dance, an elegant feedback loop that affirms something magical and yet natural about design and the people who engage in its process. Ever changing, design is a human response to human needs, and a life in design is a terrific thing.

Michael Cronan portrait by Terry Lorant

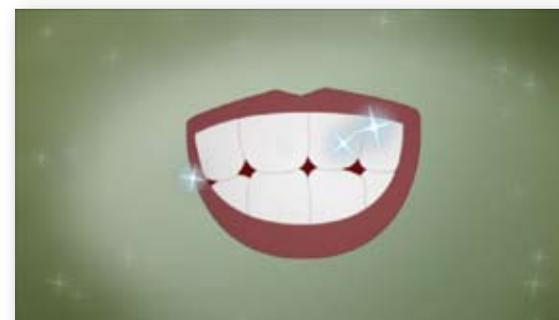
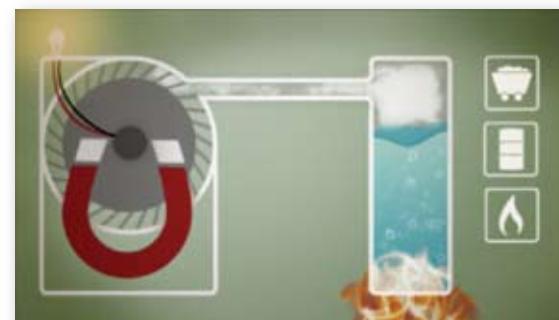
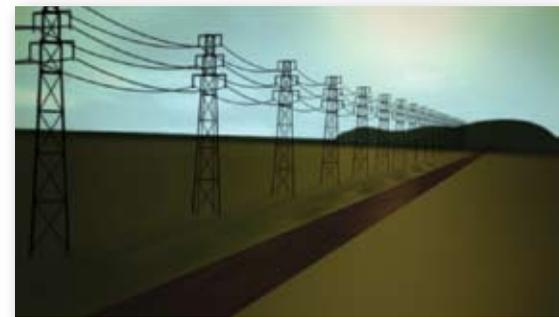
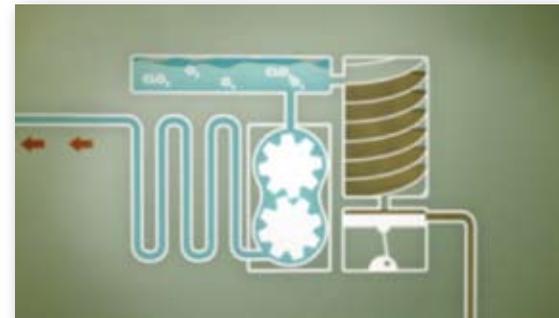
of the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institute, London’s Victoria & Albert Museum and the permanent Design Collection of San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and was featured in the Venice, Italy, Museo Fortuny exhibition “Pacific Wave,” the first graphic design exhibition at SFMOMA “In the Public Eye,” and the Denver Art Museum’s “American Graphic Design.” Born in San Francisco, he studied Fine Arts at CCA and CSU, served as an adjunct professor of graphic design at the CCA from 1982-1999, is a founding member and former president of the AIGA San Francisco and served on the national AIGA board. He is an artist and writes occasionally on design.

Creative Summit Student Show:
 Entries: Over 250 portfolios with a total of over 2,000 entered each year
 The Judging: 12 to 20 speakers and past speakers jury the show.
 Show: Approximately 110 entries are selected into the show.
 Best in Show awards: 25 coveted Memorial Ralph Awards
 Student Cash Scholarships: All entries selected for the show receive a cash award as well as the Best in Show awards up to \$3,000.
 History: This is the Summit’s 23rd year. Over the last 4 years, cash prizes have totaled \$110,000.

Awards:
 Coveted Memorial Ralph Award
 The Singing Cow Scholarship Award
 The Honorary Hoffman Award

Certificates of Excellence
 Cash Awards
Speakers:
 Heather Amuny-Dey

2008 Judges
 Heather Amuny-Dey
 Jimm Lasser
 Brian Flynn
 Dora Drimalas
 Michael O'Brien
 John Sabel
 Brian Singer
 Murray Tinkelman
 Sharon Werner
 Michael Cronan
 Karin Hibma
 Michael Doret
 Laura Smith
 Gary Faye
 Christian Helms
 Mike Hicks
 Rex Peteet
 Chris Hill
 Phil Hollenbeck
 Myers Raymer
 Sandro
 Jack Unruh



Libby Morris/Texas State University



Justin Young/The University of Oklahoma