

1. The Distant Past

[Image: Grand Saloon Elvis/Gysin poster]

Whenever I drive south these days, which isn't very often, everything turns sepia as I go. I've done this drive a thousand times if not more, since I was about 5 years old when my parents packed up and moved from my hometown, Gore, to the bright lights of the big city — Christchurch. As a child I spent a lot of time with my grandparents, who lived in Gore until they died late last century. Music was a big part of my grandmother's life, and she was, of course, proud to live in Gore — NZ's Country Music Capital. My grandfather was more interested in sports, and was well known throughout Southland as a killer spin-bowler in his youth. They didn't agree on much my grandparents, and seemed to do their best to avoid each other most of the time. The one, and perhaps only, thing they ever saw eye-to-eye on was the status of one Mr Elvis Presley as the undisputed "King of Rock-and-Roll".

[Image: Grand Saloon Elvis/Gysin poster]

Driving down here yesterday I listened to the Elvis almost all the way. He's been popping up in my work a lot over the past couple of years. Of course I've been invited here to speak about design — the past, present, and future of typographic design in New Zealand, more specifically — but before I get any further into this, I feel like I should point out three things . . .

[Image: Elvis, text over top: "NOT A TYPE GEEK"]

1. I am not a type-geek — you can use Comic Sans if you want, I am not going to care.

[Image: Elvis, text over top: "TENDENCY TO RAMBLE"]

2. One of the things I like about Graphic Design as a discipline, and what perhaps drew me to it in the first place, is its ability to pull together different forms, processes, ideas, and references from elsewhere . . . whenever I try talk about design, I often find myself talking around it.

[Image: Elvis, text over top: "NOT A BETTING MAN"]

3. Unlike my grandfather, I am not a betting man . . . and being asked to talk about the future—formally, in a setting such as this—makes me a little uncomfortable . . . I'm palpably aware of the subjectivity of my own speculations.

- 4.

As a child I preferred 'Bonanza' to 'Lost in Space'. And, when speculating about the future I tend to want to begin by delving into the past. A symptom specific to the once-upon-a-time potentially-fatal disease, Nostalgia . . .

2. The Not-so-distant Past

I haven't been back to Gore since my grandparents passed away, but I was in Dunedin only a couple of years ago. I did two important things while I was here then.

I purchased this guitar . . .

[Image: green Italia guitar]

This guitar looks old but it's not. It's a Korean reissue of a guitar originally made by an Italian company in the early 1960s.

I also installed an exhibition at the gallery in the Hocken library . . .

[Image: McCahon installation at Hocken]

[Image: Colin McCahon and Elvis Presley]

Like the King of Rock-and-Roll, Colin McCahon — the undisputed King of New Zealand Art — is often appropriated, sampled, quoted, and covered. Everyone it seems has 'done a McCahon';

[Images: Ronnie's miniature McCahon model]

This is one of my favourites.

In the 1988 documentary on McCahon 'Victory Over Death' it is asked, "How does one **get over** McCahon?" I guess I like the idea that this is Ronnie van Hout's answer to that question, modelling the man in miniature — as Justin Paton suggests, to render the man at a "much more manageable size"¹.

[Images: McCahon font working drawings 1]

As a graphic designer, I don't think my own McCahon was any kind of attempt to **get over** the 'myth' or the 'man'. Having predominantly worked as a graphic designer for artists and art galleries since leaving art school ten years ago now, I've received a kind of incidental education in NZ art history. Many of my friends are artists, and due to the nature of my own interests I've always been relatively engaged by works or projects in which artists have colonised the processes and/or artefacts of design.

¹ Justin Paton, *Ronnie van Hout: I've Abandoned Me*. Dunedin Public Art Gallery 2003, p.26

[Images: McCahon font working drawings 2]

It would be pretentious of me to say that mine was a designed response to a tradition in art, which was fertilised by Picasso's use of a newspaper, carried to term by Duchamp, and shown the light of day by Andy Warhol. I think, more honestly, I can just say that as a designer who hung out with artists, I was naively interested in a project that would allow me to dabble in what I perceived to be the grey area between the "Fine" and "Commercial" arts.

[Image: McCahon "Caltex" image]

The more research I did, scouring books for reproductions of McCahon's texts, the more I realised that Colin was actually kind of **like** Elvis. Much of his stuff—his 'raw material'—his images, themes, and texts came from elsewhere; from the Bible, from other writers, from comic books, from roadside signs, scoreboards, and storefront windows. In a number of his letters to friend John Caselberg, McCahon expressed more than a passing interest in the processes and artefacts of the commercial arts.

Elvis, despite the fact he was almost always attributed with at least co-authorship, only ever covered other people's songs. He was deeply nostalgic, influenced not only by the new Rock'n'Roll craze, but by the older and more familiar sounds of the Blues, of white Country and traditional folk songs, and, perhaps importantly, the ranting religious zeal of travelling evangelists that his mother used to take him to see as a boy.

[Image: Elvis poster in Court]

Despite the familiarity of his points of reference, Elvis, like McCahon, was harshly criticised, vilified, and derided early in his career. The young King's hybridised interpretations, vaguely recognisable monstrosities—dark, sexual, exaggerated, charged with a primal energy—upset, disturbed, and offended middle America. But as with all good monsters, what is disturbing is also intriguing . . .

[Image: McCahon font SOFA show back wall]

In Adam Sweeting's recent book "Cover Versions: Singing Other People's Songs", he states that "depending on coincidence and circumstances, a cover version might present you with a half dozen meanings, or just be an anonymous song in the middle of somebody's set"². Given McCahon's status it was never very likely that this project would be read as an anonymous song in the middle of my set, but the extent to which it actually engaged the audience really did take me by surprise.

[Image: McCahon font SOFA show computer close up]

² Adam Sweeting, *Cover Versions: Singing Other People's Songs*. Pimlico/Random House 2004, p.3

While I'd decided that a PC and printer would be an important part of the installation—I was wanting people to focus on the font as the artefact rather than anything I'd done with it— I hadn't really considered the implications of this . . .

[Image: McCahon font SOFA show response wall]

Sweeting also points out that, "an artist's choice of cover versions can offer intriguing evidence of lack of taste or absence of self knowledge"³.

[Images: McCahon font SOFA show response close ups]

If some of the audience were disturbed by what I had done, I was certainly disturbed by what they had done.

[Image: McCahon font SOFA show response wall]

Being in the gallery made me feel uncomfortable and I found myself wanting to tear this all down. What had I done? I mean this work wasn't exactly meant as homage, but seeing a kind of zombie McCahon speaking such banal rubbish made me feel bad. Funnily enough though, in hindsight, this is my favourite aspect of the exhibition, and I'm pleased that some of my more art-savvy friends convinced me to leave it up.

Reciprocally I regret not letting this be more a part of the later show at the Hocken.

[Image: McCahon installation at Hocken]

The two shows ended up contextualising my project, the typeface, quite differently. The hurdle at the Hocken was to put my bastardised cover version in the same space as the real thing. I couldn't help thinking what it would be like seeing Sid Vicious come on stage and sing 'My Way' at a Frank Sinatra gig?

[Image: McCahon installation at Hocken, back of painting]

Nostalgia, in the cases of Elvis Presley and Colin McCahon, didn't prove to be fatal at all. They survived it somehow—dipping into our collective cultural memories, retrieving the familiar and rendering it unfamiliar, they transform the disease, confirming the cliché, 'what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger'.

³ Adam Sweeting, *Cover Versions: Singing Other People's Songs*. Pimlico/Random House 2004, p.11

3. The More-recent Past

Last Christmas I was visited the United States. I did two important things while I was there.

I purchased this guitar . . .

[Image: Hofner]

This guitar looks old and it is. Relatively.

[Image: Me outside Sun]

I bought it in Memphis, where I also visited Graceland and Sun Records, where Elvis made his earliest and best recordings.

[Image: Hatch Show Print neon sign]

I also worked as an intern at Hatch Show Print in Nashville . . . a few hours drive north of Memphis in the state of Tennessee.

Previous to this I had spent quite a lot of time faking the aesthetics of letterpress — setting type on the computer and then turps transferring the printouts to get the appropriate imperfections.

[Image: Grand Saloon logo turpsed!]

I was generally designing posters for bands with a Country bent, quite often my own, and I had been particularly excited, inspired, and influenced by this book . . .

[Image: Hatch Show Print book cover]

[Image: Hatch Show Print book open to page with the Colonel and Jim]

[Image: Hatch Show Print book open to page with the Elvis Court poster]

In fact I often stole images from it outright . . .

[Image: Hi Aces "Colonel and Jim" poster & "Elvis Court" poster]

These are both posters for my old band “The Hi-Aces”. The old guy in the cowboy hat is Elvis’ manager, the infamous Colonel Tom Parker. He’d commissioned Hatch to produce a number of posters for Elvis in the mid 1950s. This photo of the Colonel with Jim Sherraden, manager and saviour of Hatch, was taken in the 80s when the disgruntled Colonel had gone to see Hatch Show Print about the reruns they’d been doing . . .

[Image: Elvis poster]

of what he thought was **his** poster.

That Hatch Show Print has produced posters not only for Elvis, but other boyhood heroes of mine like Bill Monroe and Johnny Cash obviously played a large part in my attraction to the place and its products.

[Image: Me at Hatch]

How totally stoked would my grandparents have been to see me here? Expecting to arrive in downtown Nashville and be making coffee or running errands for elderly men in dusty labcoats covered in ink, I was shocked—pleasantly surprised—to find the place alive and kicking.

[Image: Hatch interior shot 1: Jill Scott]

With a handful of fulltime staff, and a seemingly endless supply of willing volunteers, Hatch turns out about six hundred jobs a year for clients new and old. Predominantly it is still Nashville’s unashamedly nostalgic music industry that keeps the place going, but a diverse range of musicians from Jill Scott, to Beck, The White Stripes, and even Justin Timberlake have all been recent clients.

[Image: Hatch interior shot 2: proofing]

As an intern at Hatch I was surprised but pleased to learn that I was expected to layout, proof, and print all my own work. In just over a week I produced three posters. Two for clients of Hatch . . .

[Image: Sewanee Rugby poster]

[Image: Doc Stone’s Music School poster]

And, of course, one for myself . . .

[Image: Grand Saloon poster]

“The Hi-aces” had recently dissolved as a couple of members had saddled up and left Christchurch. And, although “The Grand Saloon” didn’t actually exist at this point, I had a new guitar and a pile of genuinely authentic posters that indicated that it would.

[Image: Hatch interior shot ???]

It’s exactly this kind of nostalgia that is key to the survival and revival of Hatch Show Print. Rarity and authenticity . . . the fact that you can’t really get posters like this anymore, is largely what attracts clients, customers, and employees.

[Image: Me at Hatch: Hillbilly Hellfire close up]

Of course there’s nothing inherently more authentic about working with blocks of wood or with a computer. Any use of the term ‘authentic’ begs the question, “as opposed to what?” It’s relative. The sense of authenticity that Hatch locates is very similar to that which William Morris and John Ruskin were concerned with one hundred years ago now—the distance of the **maker** from the **made**.

[Image: Hatch interior shot: Jim’s desk]

The state-of-the-art technology on Manager Jim Sherraden’s desk is perhaps testament to this . . .

[Image: Hatch interior shot: long shot?]

This place is soaked in nostalgia. Rather than merely yearning for the past, here I was actually working in it . . .

[Image: Black blank]

That’s when it hit me. What the hell was I doing!?

Actually that’s not quite true, I think I’d been growing suspicious for a while, but being there, being so engaged by the smell and feel of the unusually tangible work, it occurred to me that I was in very real danger catching a potentially fatal disease.

In fact—I kind of knew, but didn’t let on—I already had it!

4. The Present

[Sound: Grand Saloon first 1/2 of "That's All Right" (fade at lead break): 1 minute 40 seconds]

[Image: Grand Saloon live (with Hofner)]

So I am nostalgic.

Does this mean I am completely out of touch? Doomed to live in the past? Does my practice now solely reside in remaking models of dusty museum pieces? Will this deadly disease consume me or can I somehow turn this talk around, and point it at some kind of future?

[Image: Nostalgia image . . . view out car window?]

The term, nostalgia — from the Greek 'nostos', referring to one's homeland, and 'algos' referring to a pain or longing — was coined by a Swiss physician in the late 17th century to describe a kind of lethal homesickness that affected soldiers who travelled long distances over long periods of time to fight in faraway countries. By the middle of the 19th century however it had lost its status as a physical disease, and was thought of more as a psychological disorder, sometimes a predisposing pathological condition among suicides. During the early 20th century the term's meaning drifted away from a specific notion of homesickness to a more general connotation of strong feelings for and memories of the past.

In a recent conference paper sociologist Krystine Batcho asks "Are those who look to the past wasting their energy or worse yet inhibiting their willingness and ability to seize the moment and to forge into the future eager for new paths and greater accomplishments?"⁴ For creative practitioners nostalgia is a dirty word. It's use, in critical discourse on design, is generally in the negative. It implies a lack of originality or innovation—the appropriation of pre-existing forms and ideas—and worse, a kind of schmaltzy sentimental and emotional attachment to the past.

[Image: Grand Saloon poster]

There's no doubt about it. I'm afflicted. But I guess I'm not happy with the diagnosis.

Nostalgia is simple. It's too easy and too comfortable. Whenever I'm criticised, as I often am, for being nostalgic, I have to admit to feeling some kind of anxiety at the thought that my poster or song is somehow irrelevant. But surely if I was truly nostalgic there would be no problem? No cause for concern on my part? The work's relevance would lie simply in its ability to locate something from the past.

[Image: Black Blank]

⁴ Krystine Batcho, *Nostalgia: Bitter, Sweet or Bittersweet?*. Hawaii International Conference on Social Sciences (sourced from internet: url?)

No. Nostalgia is not enough. For my condition is a slightly more complicated one . . .

As well as being hopelessly nostalgic I believe I suffer from another affliction common in graphic designers, Neomania.

Anne Burdick, appropriating Barthes terminology in her text "Neomania: Feeding The Monster"⁵, describes design as both participant and product in a system that is continuously and simultaneously consuming and regurgitating its own signs and symbols in a maniacal search for the constantly new.

[Image: McCahon alphabet]

In the introduction she states, "Historic forms are up for grabs. As the pace of our culture accelerates, surfaces are stripped away, their skins lifted, reapplied and reassigned meanings with increasing frequency".

Nostalgia is the past imagined. Idealised and romanticised via memory and desire, nostalgia is selective. Memory and desire have a tendency to distort and reorganise their contents and subjects.

[Image: Johnny Cash album cover: When The Man Comes Around]

Adam Sweeting, musing on the ongoing popularity of the cover version in pop music, mentions that "Considering the incalculable number of songs that have been written, and the number of artists who are performing them every night all around the world, it's amazing that the form has managed to retain so much mystique and still hold out the promise of so many possibilities".⁶ He continues to suggest that the "best cover versions can reveal something about a song that not even its author(s) ever knew".⁷

[Image: Cramps 'Elvis' album cover]

I have to admit I'm a fairly superficial person. So I really like Anne Burdick's notion of "descendant mutations", wherein form floats freely only to be tied down to meaning by its application to a given context. Of course this resonates with my attempts to validate my own practice — being stuck in the past, but perpetually searching for novelty and new forms of engagement.

[Image: Grand Saloon posters up on bollard]

⁵ Anne Burdick, 'Neomania: Feeding The Monster' in *Looking Closer: Critical Writings on Graphic Design*, Ed. Bierut, Heller, Drenttel, Holland. Allworth NY 1994, p.135

⁶ Adam Sweeting, *Cover Versions: Singing Other People's Songs*. Pimlico/Random House 2004, p.3

⁷ Sweeting, p.8

Personal anxieties aside, I can at least be sure that these posters engaged an audience. Appropriation is the greatest form of flattery they say, and none of these posters seemed to last more than a day before being appropriated from bollards, fences, walls and shop windows.

[Image: Grand Saloon poster in C1 window]

Of course, at first I was furious. How would people know about the gig when all the posters had been nicked? However on Saturday night the Wunderbar was quite literally packed, and I couldn't help but speculate that everyone there was at least as nostalgic as me.

5. The Future?

Wystan Curnow writes, in the end of his introductory essay to 'I Will Need Words'—catalogue to the 1984 McCahon retrospective at The National Art Gallery in Wellington— "Of course we are here returning to the process with which we have been concerned throughout, that of extracting signs from one context and transferring them into another.

[Image: McCahon trespassers text]

To 'translate' means to **1.** bear away, convey or remove from one person, place or condition to another; to transfer, transport **2.** to turn from one language into another **3.** to interpret, explain, to express one thing in terms of another **4.** to change in form, appearance or substance, to transmute, to transform."⁸

[Image: Grand Saloon manifesto sign – "with our reverb we will raise the dead"]

I like playing covers because I like what happens when you take overly familiar things and apply them to unfamiliar situations. I might be nostalgic in my borrowings but I am seeking unexpected results. I don't always find them, but now and then I surprise myself, and surprise is the name of the game. It's what engages me as a practitioner with my work. "One foot on the platform, the other foot on the train . . ." "⁹

One obvious symptom of nostalgia is a tendency toward appropriation. So in keeping with the rather loose and transient theme of my talk today I'd like to stop the madness by quoting someone else. It's not so nostalgic actually. And it's very 'graphic design' . . .

[Image: MM Paris quote]

"An image never interests us as such. It's relevance lies in the fact that it contains the sum of preceding dialogues, stories, experiences with various interlocutors, and the fact that it induces a questioning of these pre-existing values. This is what makes for us a pertinent image. A good image should be in between two others, a previous one an another to come."¹⁰

[Image: The End]

⁸ Wystan Curnow, *I Will Need Words: Colin McCahon's Word and Number Paintings*. National Art Gallery, New Zealand 1984

⁹ *House of The Rising Sun*. Trad

¹⁰ M/M (Paris), *Graphic Design for The 21st Century*. Or something like that? Get ref.