

AIR NEW ZEALAND INFLIGHT MAGAZINE

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STUDIO



Straight **TALKING**

Graphic artist Greg Straight is one of our brightest design talents, with clients ranging from streetwear labels to big corporates. Recently he jumped into the fine art world with his pop art-style kiwiana prints.

He doesn't want to be pigeonholed as "Mr T-shirt", but graphic artist Greg Straight really has got the whole 'walking canvas' thing down to a fine art. Straight's guest-range of T-shirt designs for Huffer a few years ago were some of the best the kiwi streetwear brand has put out – crisply modern, quirky and just bold enough to catch the eye without making the wearer feel like a strolling billboard.

The thing about T-shirts, though, is that the artist never gets to sign them, and the same thing could be said of most graphic design work. It's essentially an anonymous endeavour. For those in the know, however, Straight, based on Auckland's North Shore, is fast developing a reputation as one of our brightest and most versatile design talents. The evidence is in a client list that ranges from Huffer and the skatewear fringe to corporate beasts such as Microsoft, for whom he's designed a series of New Zealand-themed desktops that have since gone global, with 830,000 downloaded. What's more, the Elam graduate has recently jumped the fence into the world of fine art, showing his pop art-style kiwiana prints in galleries such as Momentum in Herne Bay.

So what is he? An illustrator? Designer? Artist? "I dunno," he laughs. "For me, it's all mixed together."

With two children under five and a mortgage to pay, it's definitely the commercial graphic work that takes precedence. As a day job, Straight heads a small design team working for the likes of Hallensteins. But while it's great to have a regular gig, you get the sense that his creative heart lives further out towards the fringes.

"I've got so many ideas; the problem is time," says Straight, on the phone from home in Birkenhead, where his studio is now occupied by his eight-month-old son Leo, relegating Straight to a table in the lounge. "As soon as the kids have gone to bed the computer goes on. I have to keep pushing it along."

The impulse to create has always been there. Straight's father was also a graphic designer. "Growing up there were pens and paper and lettraset and drawing tables in the house, and I was just crazy about it. As a kid I'd sit in front of the TV and draw and draw."

At Elam he soon fell into the orbit of tutors Paul Hartigan and Dick Frizzell. "There was a real kiwi pop art feel to some of their work that I liked. I majored in painting, but I did a lot of screen printing and in my third year I started to look at kiwiana, using screen prints of block colour, quite abstract stuff, with iconic images printed over the top."





Greg Straight has drifted back to drawing on paper, where “all the creative stuff happens”, before fleshing out his ideas on-screen.



He recently jumped the fence into the fine art world. For a show last year, he produced a series of prints featuring tiki motifs (below).



Art school did many things, but it didn't lay down a great foundation for thriving in the real world. After a less-than-successful foray running his own design label confirmed his suspicion that he had no real head for business, Straight did a computer graphics course then took off for his birth country, England.

There, he quickly picked up work for major UK labels Bench, Fenchurch and the legendary Duffer of St George, whose subversion of vintage sportswear styles instantly appealed. “When you get work for a brand you really like, who make the kind of stuff you would wear yourself, there's a real buzz to doing their art,” he remarks.

Straight returned home with English wife Hannah five years ago. His initial homecoming trepidation that it might not be possible to sustain a challenging design career from New Zealand was soon set to rest. First he got the Huffer gig and work for fellow Auckland streetwear label Federation. Then Microsoft came calling. The company loved his downloadable desktops so much they released them in the US.

Most recently, Fuji Film saw some little monster characters Straight had created and asked him to come up with a range of customised protective skins for laptops and cellphones – it's a burgeoning new outlet for graphic designers, he notes. Those have gone into Australia and the UK and may be released in Asia.

Along the way, he's found himself drifting back to that first love of drawing, getting ideas down on paper before fleshing them out on the Mac. “In England I spent a lot of time on computers and just stopped drawing, which I regret. Paper is where all the creative stuff happens. You can get sucked into the computer too much and it makes things too tight and rigid. I love having that slightly wonky hand-drawn quality in my work.”

The other big development has been exhibiting. “Art and design used to be very clearly distinct but these days there's far more of a crossover,” says Straight. “I think my generation is more open to that. But fine art takes itself too seriously sometimes, which is why I like pop art. I love the idea of taking objects from everyday life and putting them in a gallery.”

For his show at Momentum gallery last September, he produced a series of prints playing around with tiki motifs. You might think that was treading familiar ground, but by artful repetition and use of bold, almost dayglo colouring Straight managed to say something fresh.

“It's a real challenge with kiwiana though, because everyone has had a stab at it,” he concedes. “You have to find ways to put a new twist on it and keep it contemporary. That might mean breaking the thing down into geometric shapes and using bold colours. Recently I've been mixing urban images with images from New Zealand nature. Things like a pair of the old Chuck Taylors with a weta crawling out.”

Straight has ambitions to get into more galleries but he also fancies trying his hand at a range for children and some homewear. So many ideas, so many drawings – you can just bet that the computer in the corner of the lounge will be running hot into the small hours. “I'm really building some momentum now,” he says. ☞

BY **MATT PHILP**

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