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Issue 4.5

“Ritual”

Winter 2012

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No matter what your religion, philosophy or circumstance, you have a ritual. Some routine, habit or addiction that has become a part of your life. Some choose their path and schedule as steps in reaching a goal or to accomplish something. Others are controlled by subconscious forces to repeat a behavior, attitude or perspective. Our rituals may not define us, but they shape our lives in a powerful way. In this issue we look at a few San Joseans who have developed a practice, craft, or discipline that creates that interwoven mysterious space between who we are and what we do.

#### IN THIS ISSUE

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# Joe Miller

Joe Miller has always had a thing for words. As owner and principal designer of graphic design firm, Joe Miller's Company, he specializes in "identity and brand development through graphic, typographic, and environmental design." Miller has worked with companies like Atari, HP, and The New York Times, as well as several local organizations. As Lecturer in Graphic Design at San Jose State University, he shares his love of graphic design and typography with students three times a week. Miller is also the president of the Board of Directors for Works/San José, an art and performance center located downtown. If all that wasn't enough on his plate, Miller is also a spoken word performer and poet.

# Miller



Written by FLORA MORENO DE THOMPSON

Interview and photography by DANIEL GARCIA



# “IT ALL COMES DOWN TO THE SPACE THAT THE TYPOGRAPHY OCCUPIES.”

## *How did you come to San Jose?*

I grew up in the East Bay, in Richmond, and went to high school there. At the urging of an art teacher, I went to San Jose State. I was into words and I thought maybe I'd be a journalism or art major and then I saw this graphic design program. At the time there were only two in the state. I graduated in '83 from San Jose State. I was the first person in my family to go to a four year university. My mom was always really encouraging about that.

## *How did you get into teaching at SJSU?*

In 1988 I got a call, “Sam Smidt said you'd be great at teaching, would you like to come in and talk?” Teaching always sounded like a great thing.

I had no idea if I could teach. I interviewed my old teachers. I went out talking to them and I went out talking to alumni that I knew. Teaching started to work out right away. The student response was great to my thoughts and it was really fun to see that activity. I think for me, it balanced out my office. Now I have three really full days of teaching. The other days I run my office.



## *As you're working with students, how do you help someone who is young and wants to be a graphic artist? How do you teach them that you have to do hard work?*

First, you gotta do your hard work. No matter what's going on in the economy, people are going to notice you if you're doing hard work. During the dot com bubble, we were getting people recruited away from us, eager to leave school or sign a contract when they graduated to go work on websites. You go from that to times like in the '90s when it's super competitive and all those people who didn't finish college are going back to college.

## *And then the “sexiness” of graphic design as a major really boomed, too. Don't you think?*

Now it's part of the national lexicon. Everyone has an idea of what design is. When I went to school, my brothers were supportive, but later they would tell me, “We couldn't imagine what you were going to do, we couldn't imagine what graphic design was.”

*Joe Miller's Company came out of the ashes, rising out of other companies' misfortune. Are students right now kind of nervous?*

Graphic design is a pretty impacted industry, but I'm amazed at the number of places that are hiring. There's a lot of business spending. They're not spending tons, but they've got more to spend. Basically, something's going to happen for students who do the work and have the goods.

*For you, what's it like managing the creative and business sides of your own company?*

I've been super lucky with having clients follow me mostly. That's pretty unusual. I'm trying to think about that more, lately. On the business side, typically a design firm has to spend 20 percent of their resources going after the next thing. That's generally standard. I've been really lucky that projects have rolled into other things. It's all about the people you meet.

On the business side of things, I'm just pathetic. My clients email me three times to invoice them. I'm trying to take care of the next thing, and I always want to get the creative work out.

*You started Makeshift Design School at SJSU. Was it your idea?*

Yeah. The students had a portfolio class, and an exhibit. It was a one night thing put together called the design mixer. Students would put up their work for one night and everyone would come. People from the field of design would come, too. It was just to show the work, a portfolio show. When I was offered the class, I said I'd love to do it, but I want to turn it into a real exhibition that stands on its own. It would be a design exhibition that would show their work, but the thing itself would be the thing they produce. Now that's become the standard. This is more of a production.

*Do you think that helps students be prepare for the real world since it is more collaborative than just showing your own work?*

Yes, and also to be less isolated about it. I really wanted to get them to do some sort of storytelling—to be dispassionate about

showing their own work. It's so painful to take something out, but you've got to learn [how] to not show something.

*In terms of your work, what's your favorite thing?*

Typography is my favorite thing. I like dealing with things in type that are not like destroying the type. Not necessarily always deconstructing it, but doing things that are new to me. You can work it into signage



or an exhibit. Some of those things look simple and you're mocking it up for the client.

*Works/San José* has been this place that has been very open to anything even when I wasn't on their board of directors. They were always pretty much encouraging. Those adventures where I don't know what's going to happen necessarily are really fun. At the same time, I like very straightforward type, very grid-oriented. I like bouncing back and forth between those things, deconstructed and readability.

*Do you find that as an artist you have this pull towards a safe zone in a way that you go back to? Do you find yourself going down a similar path all the time?*

There is a starting point like that where I start in my safe zone, and then I go, 'Well, that is too safe, I've gotta try to get out of that.' Not just for the adventure, personally, but for whatever the utility of the thing is. You've got to make it more tailored to the situation.

That's maybe the hardest thing about the business aspect of things: getting a client to buy into the thought that the uniqueness of something is for their benefit. You don't

want to look like these four other places look because that's not gonna help you. Uniqueness isn't a bad thing.

*Talk about the design scene here in San Jose...*

San Francisco has always been the design and cultural focus of the Bay Area. The sports focus, too. There's a lot less going on here, in those realms. There's the in-house world that's really huge in the South Bay.

The San Jose scene is a lot of these things that are in-house. Here it's a much more corporate scene than in SF, as far as design goes.

*When it comes to typography, what rule would you never break?*

It's tough to define, but it has to be of quality. It all comes down to the space that the typography occupies. There is this conscientious use of space in typography that is what I would always shoot for.

What's that right balance between where meaning sits and where elegance sits? Maybe there's a time where meaning pushes it away from elegance, but you still try to stay very conscientious. I would say to students, 'Have I attended to the details?' If it's supposed to be 'effed-up looking,' is it 'effed-up looking' down to the last detail? And if not, why is that? It comes down to that attention to detail and space. If you can master that, then it's going to be a great piece.

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