

*Some People Can't Surf: The Graphic Design of Art Chantry*, by Julie Lasky. Introduction by Karrie Jacobs. Chronicle Books, San Francisco. 160 pages.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

For more than twenty years, beginning in the late 1970's, Art Chantry's graphics characterized the Seattle arts scene just as Jules Chéret's posters portrayed the "belle époque" of Paris in the 1890s. Although the social milieus that the two artists represented are vastly different – Chantry worked largely with small music clubs, independent record labels, fringe theaters, and alternative publications, while Chéret depicted the activities of more upscale Parisians who frequented the city's dance halls, theaters, and social galas – each conveyed a sense of cultural élan that was identified with a particular place and time.

Unlike Chéret who aspired to the status of a fine artist, following the examples of Watteau and Tiepolo, Chantry has drawn his sustenance from the flotsam and jetsam of popular culture – hardened sheets of press type, comics, old advertisements, '50s album graphics, and much more. He is most comfortable working outside the mainstream although as he has become successful, companies like Urban Outfitters have occasionally hired him to create an off-kilter look for their youthful consumers.

According to author Julie Lasky, former managing editor of *Print* and now editor of *Interiors*, Chantry had a difficult upbringing. He cobbled together an education at several colleges and junior colleges in the Northwest and managed to end up with a degree in painting. His first big break as a designer came from a student organization at the University of Washington, which hired him to create posters for campus lectures, concerts, and films. Working on a limited budget for these early commissions, he developed a "wily thriftiness," which has enabled him throughout his career to deliver high-end content with low-end means.

By the early 1980s he was working for a range of clients in Seattle including the Bathhouse Theater, whose innovative productions he depicted with gritty collaged images. Chantry has, in fact, always seen himself as a collagist and his ability to recontextualize and combine photo fragments, bits of press type, and commercial illustrations from the '30s and '40s is the foundation of his design sensibility. He is steeped in this material and uses it with an expertise that Reyner Banham celebrated in his seminal essay of 1956, "Who is This 'Pop'?", WHERE HE DEFINED A "POP ART CONNOISSEUR, AS OPPOSED TO A FINE ART CONNOISSEUR."

Before the commercial success of "grunge typography" a few years ago, Chantry was manipulating type with rough edges and gashes that always exposed the presence of the

designer. In fact, he is one of the few graphic designers working today who does not use a computer. His resourceful improvisational technique was well-suited for his growing list of punk and rock band clients, as well as music clubs, small theaters, and exhibition organizers that sought his services. His use of found art is exemplified in his poster for the Seattle music club, Moe, where he enlarged the image from an old National Safety Council poster that included the text "End of a Perfect Day" and then added a copy line below it with the names of several bands that were playing at the club and the dates of their performance. His inventive talent is also evident in a 1984 poster for SEATTLE'S New City Theater where he created a tower of image fragments that illustrated the theater's entire season of plays.

Lasky probes the private and public meanings of Chantry's work in her text, which weaves pertinent biographical information, gleaned from many hours of conversation with the designer, together with insightful and critical analyses of individual works. The author devotes considerable attention to Chantry's several stints over a decade as art director of *The Rocket*, a monthly alternative music and culture magazine. Starting as a free-lance page designer in 1983, he became art director a year later. Working on *The Rocket*, which might be compared to British designers Terry Jones art directing *i-D* or Neville Brody designing *The Face*, gave Chantry an opportunity to experiment with fast-paced low-cost production. Collaborating with a wide assortment of photographers and illustrators, he created over seventy-five covers for the magazine and designed many spreads as well. As his art direction for *The Rocket* indicates, Chantry is much more than a collage artist despite his disclaimer.

After Chantry's marriage broke up in 1991, he moved into an artist's cooperative known as the Subterranean Cooperative of Urban Dreamers or SCUD. Here for two years he faced the full force of Seattle's underground. As Lasky writes, "He designed for and with them and felt electrified without imitating their self-annihilating impulses." It is this contact with energies and artifacts on the margins of American urban culture that keeps Chantry's work vital. However, by engaging so consistently with the popular culture of the past, his own work occasionally lapses into pastiche. One can see it in his appropriation of colors and motifs from Saul Bass's *Man with the Golden Arm* film graphics or his adoption of the lettering and blotted line illustration techniques of David Stone Martin from 50s jazz albums. The challenge for Chantry, who draws as widely on mass media and popular culture images and ephemera as his avant-garde predecessors of the 1920s and 1930s, Kurt Schwitters and John Heartfield, is to retain his own voice amidst the revived resonances of the past that fill his projects. For the most part, he does this with great skill and his occasional misses can be forgiven simply by dint of the enormous volume of work he produces.

Chantry has long been legendary among designers and this book will make his work known to a wider audience. Lasky is one of our most perceptive graphic design critics and her text makes clear to designers and lay people alike why Chantry's work is culturally significant. The book, whose illustrations are entirely in color, is beautifully produced and is thoughtfully designed by Chantry and his partner Jamie Sheehan. Amidst the neatly organized spreads of posters, magazine covers, and record sleeves, the designers intersperse numerous pages of black and white logos that Chantry created for record companies, restaurants, and even clothing manufacturers. However, two slick photographs of a brochure promoting an architectural firm look out of place amidst so much work that eschews beauty for provocation. But no one can fault Chantry for making a living.

A substantial monograph can easily undermine a designer's ability to stay on the cultural edge. In her epilogue, Lasky informs us that Chantry became disillusioned with Seattle just after the manuscript for this book was completed and moved to St. Louis where he now occupies an old Victorian house with six bedrooms. Let us hope that he doesn't settle in too comfortably. There are too few designers like him who are willing to push the envelope of cultural values and norms.

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