



THROUGH THE PEEPHOLE
For the "Keyhole" spot for the Honda Civic, A52 wanted to develop a collage style. Every shot was re-created with up to 500 stills of the environment, mixing and matching live-action, 3D and 2D elements. "It was really free-form; ideas would just come up," says Pat Murphy of A52. "We'd ask ourselves, 'Does this apply, is it interesting, does it still stay within the realms of rebirth and include different visual language?'"

DISCIPLINES

DESIGNERS, START YOUR ENGINES!

Automakers typically play it safe, hiring global mega agencies to create their advertising. But three new campaigns put small design firms right in the driver's seat.

Stepping into the Los Angeles Auto Show, one becomes overwhelmed with an odd sensation: blindness. The accumulated glare from acres of gleaming autos makes it very difficult to see, let alone focus on specific car company logos, each of which is ringed with additional sparkling lights. But buried in the bling of this indoor parking lot are dozens of new cars people have never driven, never read about and, in many cases, never seen. You have to wonder, as you fumble for your sunglasses, how will these cars ever find their way into the right driver's garage?

Car marketing has to work hard these days. High gas prices and environmental concerns, coupled with a wait-and-see economy, stir up a need for brand loy-

alty more than ever. Consumers are looking to relate to their cars in emotional ways—they want the cars to offer a style, spirit and philosophy they can buy into. The success stories from years past are immediately apparent at the show: Clean, quirky Volkswagen suffers no identity crises after the Beetle's brilliant rebirth, and Mini Cooper shines from the corner after single-handedly wresting every ad and marketing award from the old standbys.

In recent years, a growing group of successful automakers has tapped top design shops to craft their marketing messages. These designers have been especially successful at reaching audiences through approaches that differ widely from the traditional ad-based cam-

HIT THE ROAD

A dream came true for Harry Sze when he first saw his design for the Honda S2012 at the Los Angeles Auto Show. Although this car won't actually be in production for another six years, Sze's prototype was chosen as one of four featured in the Honda exhibit. The carmaker collaborated with students from auto design programs at Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, CA, and the College for Creative Studies in Detroit.

Honda asked the students to reimagine its current S2000 roadster for 2012. For Sze, an Art Center student, that meant capturing the spirit of speed but with a green philosophy. His concept, called Blue Sky, aims to bring some personality to the hybrid market. "Clean does not equal fun right now," Sze says. "I wanted it to be environmentally friendly without being goofy."

Sze's prototype is the antithesis of goofy: a sleek two-seater with a fighter-plane console and no roof. "It's open to the wind and sky to create a reconnection to nature," he says, in an effort to get drivers to experience the environment they're protecting. The car also converts to a one-seater for a solo drive, something Sze wanted to emphasize after witnessing the personal relationship that roadster enthusiasts have with their vehicles. Art Center students talked to a Honda driving club to see what current S2000 fans would want. "The sound of the engine was very important to them," says Sze, who was at first concerned about placing a nearly-silent engine in a roadster. But he found a redeeming characteristic in gas efficiency: "You do get a boost off the line from hybrid technology."

The 13-week project is like a senior thesis for the transportation-design program at Art Center, one of only four auto-design tracks in the country. Stewart Reed, chair of the Art Center program, says it originated from a car-crazy Los Angeles when Art Center was founded 75 years ago.

"At that time, there were lots of custom specialty cars being made for studio execs and movie stars," Reed says. "L.A. was a hub of arts, architecture, design and innovation for those early car designers. The first hints of auto design can be tracked back to founder Edward A. 'Tink' Adams' vision to have a school that taught all the art-related disciplines with a commercial edge."

Many of Art Center's first transportation design graduates went on to work on one of the most famous feats of people-moving: Disneyland, home of the first monorail in North America.

The school's geographic proximity to key employers is also a plus for students, says Reed, who counts 15 advanced carmaker studios in the region. "There's really a long relationship with all the design studios and automakers and our college; they love to come back and be involved and teach, and they're also on the hunt for talent that would be appropriate for their studios."

Art Center calls its program transportation design—"wheels, wings or hulls," Reed says—which means students can also study public transit; some have even designed high-speed yachts. But whether it's the SoCal lifestyle or a guarantee of post-graduation employment, the students seem to steer toward their own well-developed relationship with the automobile.

For Sze, who interned at BMW and Audi, it's the intersection of a deep-seated passion and a lifelong journey. "I've been drawing cars since I was three," he says.



MAXIMUM OVERDRIVE
When Hornet inc. created the whimsical spot for Honda's concept of rebirth, Maithy Tran says, "We certainly felt as if we were reversing our thinking. We challenged ourselves."



paigns of the past. Nowhere is this more apparent than in three recent projects for Honda Civic, Toyota Scion and the Hummer H3, where you won't find a single car grooving to a classic rock track while rolling down a desert highway.

CIVIC DUTY

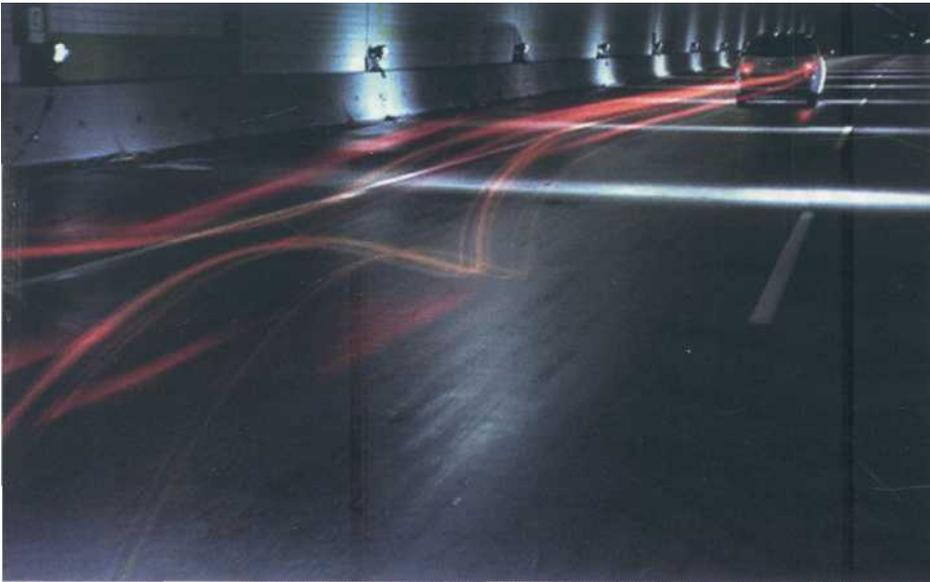
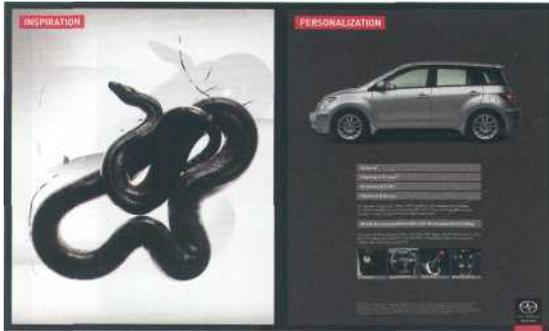
The Hondas are the first cars you see when walking into the L.A. exhibitor hall, and the first thing you notice is that these don't look like Hondas. Along with a redesign of the Civic fleet, Honda mounted a huge campaign to make the seemingly vanilla vehicles appeal to a sophisticated audience. This era of "reverse thinking" starts with a flip of the final 'c' in the Civic logo that creates an arresting visual palindrome. On a flashy dais, a 2006 Civic sits before monitors looping recent ads—and these are not the Richard Dreyfuss-narrated spots you've seen before.

To relaunch the 34-year-old Civic, Honda pitched the idea of "rebirth" to six artist teams, resulting in six stunningly different spots. For JJ Walker and Maithy Tran, directors at bicoastal Hornet Inc., brainstorming their concept required resetting their own opinions about the Civic. "For most people, the Civic is known as what you get for your first car, but it's becoming more than that—more than the cliché," Walker says. "We came up with ideas that would make people look at it differently."

The "Rebirth" commercial that resulted is a surreal journey through vaguely familiar mechanical forms, with whirring abstract animation worthy of Miro. It also barely shows the car. Another Honda spot, "Key-hole," designed by Los Angeles-based A52, is inspired by David Hockney's photographic collage "Pearblossom Highway"—with the Civic briefly zooming through at the end. Both spots represent extreme departures for the carmaker, which the artists say was all in the spirit of reinvention. "They didn't want the spot to be about the car," says Pat Murphy, who makes up the creative team at A52 with Andy Hall. "They wanted it to be about rebirth and show the car—but not until the end.

INSPIRING INSERTS

Dozens of Scion campaigns like these run concurrently, appealing to urban trend leaders like DJs, tattoo and graffiti artists, fashion designers and graphic designers themselves.



SHARING THE VISION

In creating the marketing materials for Scion, including the Phantom TV spot, ATTIK's Simon Needham says, "Specifically in relation to Scion, their streamlined marketing approach allows us to be more creative and get work done quickly."

It was about the feeling of, 'Look how much we've changed this car, look how fun it is.'

Honda's website includes a section featuring the artists' bios and quotes about their inspiration. Although the project complements traditional branding work by L.A.-based ad agency RPA, it's a practice that Walker thinks shows a huge step forward for Honda's image with consumers. "Honda has been very progressive, and their launch of the Civic proves that," Walker says. "For them to proactively approach artists, give them a voice along with a face, and let them share the spotlight alongside the Civic, is worthy of notice." The attention helped it win one award important to consumers: Civic was named the 2006 Motor Trend car of the year.

CUSTOMIZATION IS KINQ

The Toyota Scion, launched in 2003, has always prominently featured design. The cars themselves consist of several base models that are extremely customizable, a veritable blank canvas attractive to creative types who are psyched to style their on-road persona. At the L.A. Auto Show, Scion exuded its usual hip-hop attitude: A faux chain-link fence was lit with blue and red lights

while the bass throbbed below the platform. Scion targets a group that forecasters call "urban trend leaders" (those same creatives who are attracted to its features) and has penetrated the covetable twentysomething audience better than any other manufacturer.

So if a car is built upon the fact that it never looks the same twice, with a constant flurry of new options, how do you market it? Simon Needham, group creative director and founder of ATTIK in San Francisco, says you stick to the theme of customization. "The whole proposition of customization and personalization means producing something different all the time," he says. "It enables us to produce work that's allowed to be different and stand out. It helps to support good work."

A dizzying number of recent campaigns for the Scion offer as many executions as the car offers options. This overwhelming saturation is also part of the strategy. "What is key for our target is giving them cool stuff and plenty of it," Needham says. "Young people are able to absorb a lot of information quickly. We make new stuff very quickly, almost disposable." For example, tricked-out autos in neon colors are featured in two different print campaigns: One shows the edgy inspiration behind the customization decisions, another set of inserts holds cards that fold over to reveal the different options—it's cool car origami.

Through this hot-and-hip marketing, ATTIK hooks young drivers on the Scion but is also building long-term Toyota fans by cementing their relationship with the manufacturer itself. "The 20- to 30-year-olds don't usually have strong loyalties to a specific car brand," Needham says. "There are cars that young people like, but there are not many brands that young people buy into. We're trying to develop a brand that people have a loyalty to. The positive experience the customer has with Scion as a brand should encourage buyers to stay with Toyota as they get older."

LIKE NOTHING ELSE

Hummers are the beautiful behemoths of the road. And despite recent SUV backlash, the brand has remained successful, thanks to Boston shop Modernista!, which focuses on pinpointing a spirited lifestyle



ANY SMALLER AND IT WOULD BE "EUROPEAN!"

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SIZING IT UP

"Hummer is a great piece of industrial design, and the communications reflect that," Lance Jensen of Modernista! says. "It's easier to do great work when the product has a real visual and technical point of difference. It's still hard, but it's easier." This insert differentiates the different models with clothing tags: The H3 is M, H2 is L and the H1 is XL.

AND THEY'RE OFF

"The H3 launch was tricky," Jensen says. "A lot was riding on it. Hummer has a very small media buy compared to other vehicles, so we chose to focus."



ORANGE CRUSH

"We liked the look of a silver truck on a bright orange background," Jensen says. "It felt high-tech and modern and athletic—(like a snowboarding coat or some outdoor gear. The launch feels bigger to the public; orange is hard to miss."

for the Hummer brand. And in 2005, Modernista! got the chance to help launch the first mass-market Hummer, the smaller (but not by much) H3 model.

The H3 presented a slightly different approach. The H1 and H2 are the hulking Hummer models made specifically for extreme off-roading (the H1 can literally climb walls) and they target a very small, very specific audience. "Hummer buyers are an interesting bunch. They are very entrepreneurial. A large percent own their own businesses, and they are quite successful at it," says Lance Jensen, executive creative director at Modernista! "With Hummer, it's not about blue collar or white collar, it's an independent, confident state of mind." Jensen notes that the Hummer is typically the third vehicle in an owner's garage, not to be driven every day. "People use them as they use boats," he says.

Because of the H3's reasonable size and good gas mileage, many potential consumers who had already bought into the Hummer mentality could have a Hummer for everyday use. The launch needed to reach a wide audience but through very specific channels. Bright orange print ads and funny TV spots highlight the H3's core values: It's smaller and cheaper, but it's still a Hummer. Even with mass-market appeal, the H3 launch still addressed the individualistic spirit that Modernista! focuses on. "While it seems that they are

everywhere, they really aren't," Jensen says. "Hummer is a very small niche brand. It will never be for everyone, and in a way, that makes it easier to market."

THE ROAD AHEAD

Staring at Hummer's we-know-we're-different signage, Honda's eye-popping ads or Scion's oasis of hip, it's apparent that these brands know who they're talking to. These cars sell well. For many of the creatives, the success of design-based marketing represents a shift in how car companies are spending their money.

"The whole ad world is changing," says Mark Tobin, executive producer on A52's "Keyhole" spot for the Civic. "They're more open to coming to a company like us or a little design company and handing over the whole thing. There's no purpose in running a car commercial if it can't draw attention to itself. A commercial has to get people off their seats and get them excited about the cars."

Alissa Walker was the only person at the L.A. Auto Show looking at the design of the exhibits instead of the cars, alissa@gelatobahy.com

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