



tightly kerned

in just two years, Kevin Dresser and Kate Johnson have built a world-class reputation for their studio, thanks to his knack for iconic design and her eye for detail.

What do you do when you drop out of engineering school because you'd rather be an artist, but you need to pay the rent? Kevin Dresser found that working as a security guard at the Guggenheim took care of the bills. Spray-painting stylized calligraphic graffiti all over Brooklyn during his off-hours scratched the art itch. Sort of.

But a chance meeting would turn Dresser's artistic leanings into a career path.

One day in 1994, while on a 15-minute break at the Guggenheim's downtown location, he noticed a small sign for a Pratt Institute admissions office across the street. Impulsively he walked in. The only portfolio samples he had were a few Polaroids of his graffiti stashed in his wallet. That was all it took: The admissions officer accepted him on the spot.

Even after Dresser graduated from Pratt's graphic design program, graffiti continued to be his calling card. Dresser had long admired typographer Jonathan Hoefler, so he jumped at the opportunity to interview at Hoefler Type Foundry in 1997. "I showed up with a skateboard and big, baggy pants that were soaked on a rainy day," Dresser recalls. "I brought some sample layouts, but Jonathan didn't want to see them. He went right to the graffiti. I was shocked when he hired me."

Hoefler recognized the young artist's multidisciplinary skills. "Unlike a lot of designers who think

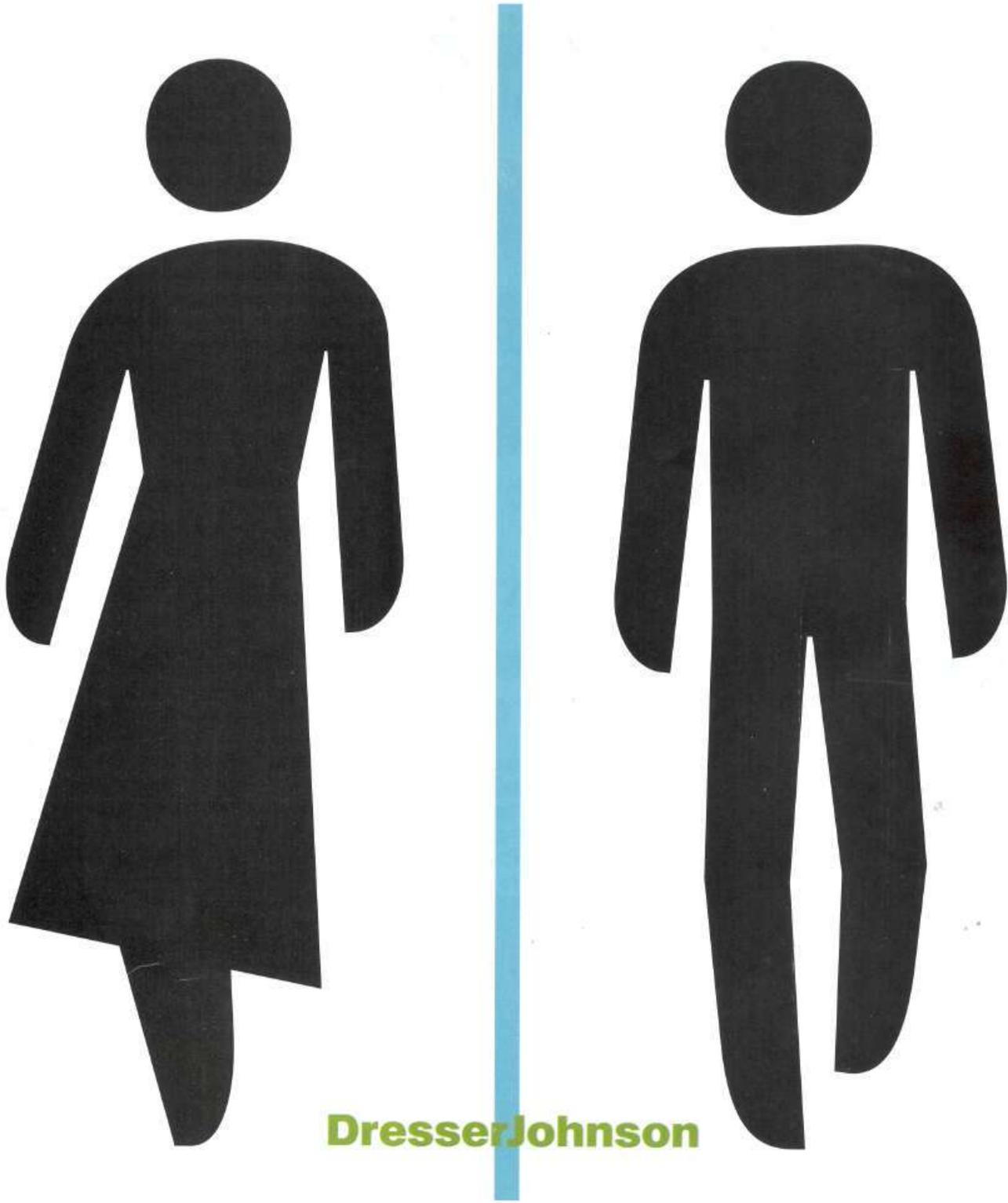
very rigidly about the distinctions between typography calligraphy lettering and graffiti, Kevin doesn't," Hoefler says. "He's equally comfortable in each of these media and equally sincere about all of them. I think his experience as a painter—both graffiti and fine art—gives him a *very* special insight into form, which he's always explored very productively, and never superficially."

Hoefler and Dresser developed an old-fashioned apprenticeship. Which set up yet another chance encounter that would come to shape Dresser's career: A week after he started work at HTF, Dresser delivered a disk with an HTF typeface to Douglas Riccardi of Memo Productions, a design shop down the hall. There, he met the young, talented, RISD-trained designer Kate Johnson. Soon, Johnson and Dresser were socializing when their respective firms went out for drinks together.

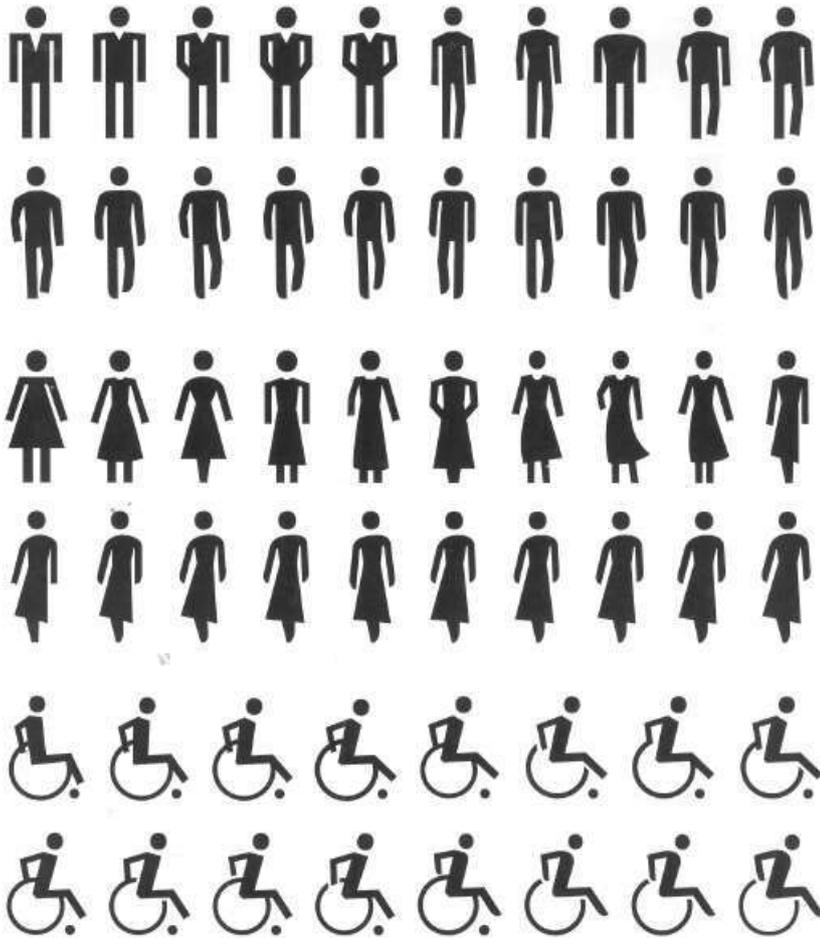
Discovering a common love for creating and designing with type, they became a couple and began working together on occasional projects. Johnson, who'd honed her keen eye for typographic detail at Rhode Island School of Design, began freelancing for the Museum of Modern Art, and she tapped Dresser to create typographic displays to accompany various exhibits.

Then in 2004, the two took their relationship a step further, launching Dresser Johnson, a rising-star

BY SUSAN E. DAVIS



DresserJohnson



MoMA icons

Kevin Dresser spent months fine-tuning these icons for the Museum of Modern Art. "The classic wheelchair icon shows the chair as the person's back so they become one," he says. "I wanted to separate the person from the chair and give the feeling of movement."



design studio specializing in corporate identity, digital font design, print collateral and exhibition graphics. The pair work together as effectively as two well-kerned letters. Their firm's identity is a case in point: While Dresser Johnson is two words, it reads as one because of the way the V fits snugly into the '•'.

"We make a really good team," Johnson says. "Kevin and I work differently. I like to spend time by myself. Kevin moves very quickly. I think about things more; I'm the researcher. We work separately and then show each other and bounce things off each other."

ICONIC DESIGNS

Even though Bushwick, the Brooklyn neighborhood where they now live, is transitioning from manufacturing to residential, the two are comfortably settled into an 800-square-foot live/work loft with their pet rabbit, Roebbling, who for the past year and a half has been the star of his own website—BklynBunny.com. Several large desks with computers line one wall of the huge, bright room with 12-foot ceilings, a sleeping loft and well-defined areas for socializing and watching TV. Marimekko print pillows provide vivid contrast to a large, faded-orange sofa. Jazz plays softly in the background.

In this casual environment, Dresser and Johnson are building a portfolio of identity work for clients like Trish McEvoy cosmetics, Hold Everything and Modern Bride, custom fonts and lettering for Architectural Digest, "The Eminem Show" and Jay-Z, and signage for MoMA. With its lean elegance, gorgeous lines and meticulous attention to detail, Dresser Johnson's work is truly iconic.

In fact, a set of icons Dresser created in 2004 really put the duo on the designers-to-watch list. Dresser's wayfinding pictograms for the newly renovated Museum of Modern Art generated press when the museum reopened in late 2004. "Art director Ed Fuse asked me if Kevin could do some icons," recalls Johnson, who's worked with MoMA as both a staffer and freelancer since 1999. Pusc had admired the display graphics Dresser had previously designed for the museum's exhibitions.

"I'd never done a system of universal pictograms before," Dresser says. "Most pictograms today have become so sterile. But you can't make too many changes because you want people to instantly recognize the images. One of my first thoughts was to make the icons work with all those straight walls and with Matthew Carter's redo of the Franklin Gothic logo."

"The Franklin Gothic M looked like a guy's torso," says Dresser, referring to the men's restroom icon, "but it felt too clunky. Then Ed and I discussed creating some movement to achieve something fresh."

To create that sense of motion in something as static as a restroom sign, Dresser spent months making subtle changes to the man and woman icons, using photos of fashion models strutting the catwalk for reference. "The woman was easier because we can all picture a woman sashaying down a runway in a dress," Dresser says. "There are little tricks that say it all, like her arm moving back. If I moved her arm a little bit or

In the 1990s, Dresser's street-smart skill with graffiti won him admission to Pratt Institute and an apprenticeship with type guru Jonathan Hoefler. Now, he only makes graffiti on assignment, like this project commissioned for TypeCon2005. Dresser likes the "raw emotion" in hand-lettered graffiti.

"TYPECON 2005 ALPHABET CITY"

typecon 2005

pet therapy

An intriguing little link on the Dresser Johnson homepage leads to BklynBunny.com, where a webcam lets visitors look in on Roebing, Dresser and Johnson's white Dwarf Hotot rabbit. The couple inaugurated the site in October 2005. When Roebing (who's named for the designer of the Brooklyn Bridge, John A. Roebing) gained a following, friends suggested they merchandise T-shirts and refrigerator magnets featuring the Bklyn Bunny logo.

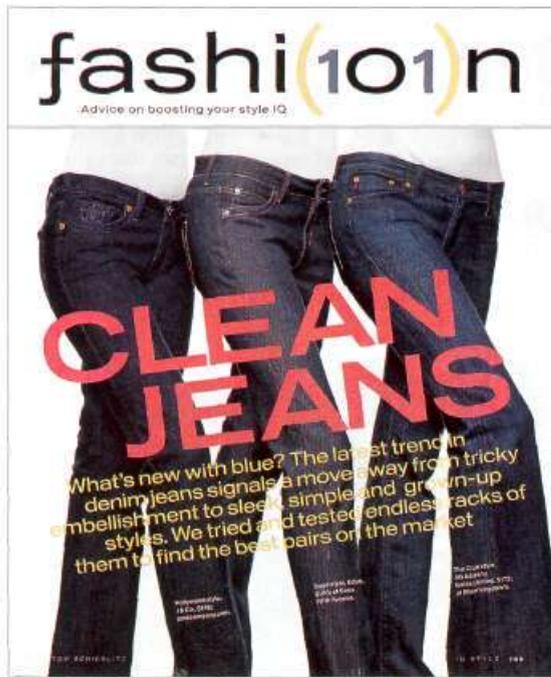
"Out of the blue, Kevin came up with the logo," Johnson says gleefully. "I thought it was the most brilliant thing I'd ever seen." Adds Dresser, "It just hit me to add the dots below the ears. I remember when the magnet manufacturer called and asked if I really wanted the dots. I had to explain them to him."

The couple, who lived when they were younger in adjacent suburbs of Rochester, NY, started the website to help themselves get through a sad and difficult time. In early 2005, they experienced several deaths in both their families. Johnson was working very long hours on a huge MoMA project; the day after she finished the job, her pet rabbit, Bun, died. And they were about to be evicted from their apartment. Thinking about starting a bunny-sitting service, complete with a webcam so owners could check on their pets, lightened their spirits. In July, after a friend offered them a rabbit that had been rescued by a veterinarian, Roebing became the Brooklyn Bunny and the webcam star was born.

"He's like having a comedian in the room," Dresser says. "When you suddenly get frustrated, you look at the bunny and the frustration goes away. He helps you not take things so seriously." Johnson calls the site "pet therapy." "We get lots of e-mails from people who say, 'I'm having a really bad day, so I checked in on Roebing and it made me feel better.' Making people feel good was our intention."

BklynBunny.com has also become a way to promote the design firm. "The best thing that's come out of the website is that people know we're serious designers, but we're not stuffy," Dresser says. "The site broadcasts a love of animals and pure, nice emotion. It's great to promote something happy over the web."





Kate Johnson encouraged Dresser to combine the best qualities of well-known sans serifs into a new typeface. She first used General in printed materials for MoMA; in 2005, InStyle magazine purchased a one-year license to use it in display copy. General's four styles work well in headlines and captions.

general typeface

shrank it 98%, it didn't have that great gesture. The man was harder, but I finally created some subtle knee action, and one leg is thinner than the other. At one point I knew I couldn't touch them anymore."

It wasn't just the design community that took note of Dresser's work; museum-goers did, too. "People who never notice icons notice these," Dresser observes, citing references to his bathroom figures on Flickr.com. "That nonvisual people notice such a sterile thing as an icon is exciting."

Dresser has had to keep a firm hand on the project, since some MoMA departments wanted to create their own symbols. "It's taught me that I'm not just playing the role of a graphic designer," he says. "I'm doing what an architectural firm would do to hold a signage system together." What's more, the project continues as the museum discovers additional needs (Dresser recently added a "no dogs" symbol to the system). "I had no idea it would keep going or how much work it would take, but I did know how important it was," he says. "[The system] will be with MoMA for years—maybe until they hire another designer in 2030."

IMPROVING UPON HELVETICA

MoMA was the testing ground for another project: General, Dresser's sans serif type family to be released in 2007 by Hoefler & Frere-Jones.

Dresser began work on the typeface in 1999 to accompany his "car art." (He painted abandoned cars with wild designs, photographed them, then displayed the photos in art galleries alongside caption placards that he designed.) "I wanted a sans serif that didn't fight with the artwork—that didn't call attention to itself," he says.

But he didn't focus on the font until after September 11, 2001, when clients stopped calling and he had time on his hands. "Kate would say things like 'I wish Helvetica was kerned better,'" Dresser says. "So I said, 'Let's make it.'"

While Dresser worked on the typeface steadily for a year and a half, Johnson began using it in her work for MoMA. "I like it because it has a lot of capability and character," Johnson says. "That's why it's called General—not in the military sense, but because it has elements of many different kinds of sans serifs."

As with the MoMA pictograms, Dresser drew inspiration from couture. "I was thinking [about] fashion while I worked on it," he notes. "In a typical fashion ad, you have simple type because you don't want to spoil a photo of a great dress." Fittingly, InStyle magazine purchased an exclusive, year-long license for General, through September 2006. "I thought that was just the right place for it," Dresser says. "It has so many capabilities because there are so many weights."

It took Dresser more than four years to complete the family. "Every time I design a font I wonder how I do it," he admits with a laugh. "It takes time. As I'm working on it, it just keeps getting better and better so I keep going on that energy. Then I have to put it away. I let it cure by not looking at it for a while. When I go back, I see new things.

"Kate looked at all the kerning," he continues. "Her kerning skills are really, really good. And she would notice that one letter looked bolder than the others. All of General was tested through Kate's graphic designs at MoMA. Kate's input made General what it is today. She really helped turn it into a grand project."

INSPIRATION FOR LETTERS

Now that Dresser Johnson is a go-to design firm, the partnership is attracting varied assignments. Last summer, Bushmills Irish whiskey asked Dresser to design a Celtic ribbon as a background element for a print ad campaign. But because he didn't want to merely copy traditional Celtic symbols, Dresser proposed a lowercase Geltie 'b' filled with symbols. "I drew a Celtic ribbon in the 'b' like it was seen through a kaleidoscope," he says with a laugh. "They loved it and bought worldwide rights." He adds, "Even when I'm doing illustration, I like to stick to letters."

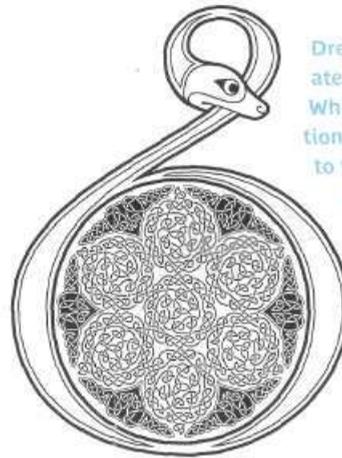
In August, Columbia University called Dresser Johnson with a rush project: The university needed custom typography to introduce its new arts initiative. "The university has a new program to instill arts consciousness in the students," Dresser says. "Since the students are in the arts capital of New York City, the university wants to make them more aware of the arts, and that's the world we want to be in."

Dresser created some custom lettering. But when he was leaving the subway en route to his first meeting, he noticed the beautiful mosaic lettering in the subway. So he ditched his samples and used the subway lettering for inspiration.

Even when the couple go on vacation, they don't take a break from letterforms. One of their favorite pastimes is looking for original signage while driving back roads en route to the Southwest. Sometimes they even cruise around John F. Kennedy International Airport admiring the sans serif signs.

"The most exciting part about working with letterforms is the range of emotions they have," Dresser says. "I love the statements that type makes in each of our projects. A graffiti tag gives off raw emotion with its hand-lettered style. A corporate identity has to emit power and trust, and attract followers. An illustrated, ornamented letter is so heavily detailed that it becomes a work of art." HMW

Susan E. Davis has written about graphic design for a number of magazines during the past 20 years. She's written or co-written four books, including "The Cabin: Inspiration for the Classic American Get-away" (Taunton, 2001). Davis is about to publish her first novel, sednyc@earthlink.net



Dresser worked intensely over four days to create a lowercase Celtic 'b' for Bushmills Irish Whiskey. Although he was asked to design a traditional Celtic ribbon graphic, Dresser was inspired to turn it into a letterform. "I wanted to make an authentic-looking letter," Dresser says. "This is actually similar to a pictogram."

bushmills ribbon

