

PAINT MAN



A SIGN PAINTER'S TYPE CATALOG IS IN HIS HEAD, HIS KEYBOARD IS A PAINTBRUSH AND HIS BASELINE IS A YARDSTICK. BUT HIS WORK IS SURPRISINGLY LIKE YOURS. MEET A MASTER OF THIS UNCONVENTIONAL YET UBIQUITOUS DESIGN DISCIPLINE.

BY JASON TSELENTIS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MIKE CARROLL

Steve Wilson wants to paint typography across the country—literally. He'd start in his hometown of Charlotte, NC, and drive toward California, stopping in as many states as possible to paint car dealers' windshields and storefronts. He doesn't need a laptop or a high-speed internet connection like most freelance designers. Wilson doesn't have a website; he rarely checks his e-mail. With a Jeep Grand Cherokee as his toolbox, he'd stock it full of paint, brushes, plenty of jazz, a yardstick and a china marker—and he'd spread typography from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific.

But Wilson's dream project will have to wait. Right now, he has too much work.

Auto dealerships from the East Coast to the West Coast blast high-decibel typography touting the latest models and deals on their windows and windshields. And when customers in the Southeast spot the vibrant typography popping into the foreground and calling them to action with its exuberant styling, chances are it's Wilson's work.

Wilson hasn't heard of type designers like Matthew Carter, who created some of the world's most-used typefaces, including Verdana and Bell Centennial. But Wilson bridges form and content in much the same manner as a master type designer, and he's equally sensitive to the function of our alphabet in written language and marketing messages. Kids who watch Wilson work call him Paint Man, but if you ask him what professional title he prefers—artist, designer, typographer—he hedges: "I just do lettering. I'm a nobody, really."

It's more about what Wilson does rather than who he is, and his business card says it all: Windshield & Storefront Graphics.



BACK TO BASICS

With jazz oozing from his headphones, sign painter Steve Wilson translates his thumbnail drawings from small to large scale using a ruler, china marker and yardstick. Who knew that the most fundamental lessons of art school would still come in handy?



PICKING UP THE BRUSH

Before amassing a portfolio that outweighs most designers—nearly 25,000 windshields painted in 2004 and 2005—Wilson took classes at the Art Institute of Pittsburgh. He decided to do something more challenging with his life after one year at the Institute and opted for the U.S. Marine Corps. He enlisted at the height of the Vietnam War and completed a 16-month tour in the country's morass of jungles and firefights. After fulfilling his duty, Wilson worked in sales for a steel company. But by 1991, he'd grown tired of the sales gig's travel demands.

Wilson chanced to meet a sign painter, who suggested it would make a good living, so he bought his first can of paint for \$35 and went into business for himself. He started out labeling car windshields by practicing in junkyards, of all places. Wilson had to prove himself during the early days by approaching dealers, asking them which cars they needed to sell and offering to work pro-bono. He'd paint price tags and slogans on windshields, and in time those cars attracted the most attention, often selling before other models did. Those results drew repeat business; today, Wilson is the sign painter of choice for most car dealers in the Charlotte area and in neighboring states.

Although the skillsets are vastly different, Wilson still draws on those earlier career steps as he manages the demanding clients and fast turnarounds of his entrepreneurial business. The sales job taught him how to read people in order to sell them ideas and products; the Marine Corps taught him how to adapt, overcome and face hardships with a high level of confidence.

These days, when clients call, Wilson delivers a quote almost immediately and gets the work done in three to five hours, collecting a paycheck at the end of each



LAYER EFFECTS

And no, *these* aren't Photoshop layers: For the neon pain! to pop off the glass (instead of looking like a colored transparency), Wilson uses a two-coat white base. This gives the sign a reflective ground on which he can build color, in much the same way that white paper reflects printed color.

project. For this one-man operation, there are no bad clients and no bad days at the office. "I had bad days in Vietnam," Wilson says, putting things in perspective. "As a painter, I don't have bad anything."

KEEPING THE ART ALIVE

Both the contribution and impact of Wilson's work—and that of artists like him—are still relevant in our consumer culture. During a time when oil costs more than \$60 per barrel and cars sit dormant on lots waiting for owners, Wilson's typography improves communication between dealers and the customers shopping for their dream automobile. Constantly observing the signs, messages and advertising surrounding him, Wilson understands how typography works—he makes his livelihood by producing localized letterforms for clients who must compete for attention in a noisy landscape. The colorful typography shouts at not only lot-browsers, but also the dealers themselves. "Salesmen get so pumped up when they see the big letters and bold color," Wilson says. "I make things fun and easy to read, and in turn, they want to sell more cars."

Wilson's signs break through the clutter, thanks to their fluorescent colors and muscular letterforms. And while Wilson's type has its own style, the question he always tries to answer isn't, "what will it look like?" but rather, "what will it do?" Whether for car dealerships or clients like Blockbuster Video, KFC or Wendy's, the type must transform a reader into a consumer by persuading him to pay attention, come closer and buy. The type has to sell, and it does just that by stimulating our visual senses by differentiation alone. We're accustomed to so many logos and corporate identities, but the shapes and colors of these hand-painted letters grab our attention. One of Wilson's clients, an executive with the Charlotte-area Wendy's



THE PERFECT COLOR

With his Jeep Grand Cherokee stocked full of paint buckets, Wilson can choose whatever color he wants on the fly. For Labor Day, how 'bout some patriotic red, white and blue? Autumn? Go with warm reds and yellow. No matter the season, the color must be functional. "I go with bright reds and yellows so they can be read from a distance," Wilson says.



franchise, told Wilson his signs were the restaurant's most effective advertising ever. So much for "Where's the beef?"

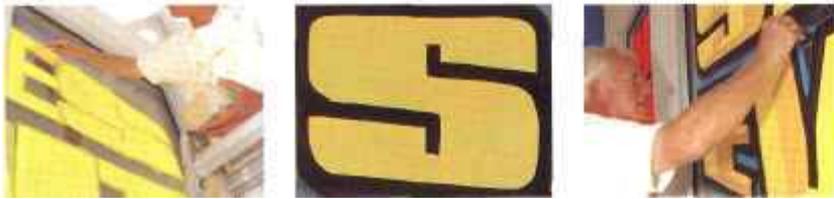
With such positive feedback from a client like Wendy's, you'd expect this artisan to keep his work a secret, to guard the practices and supplies he employs with the utmost care. Not so. "Anyone can do what I do," Wilson says. "The stores are out there selling paint, I'll tell people where to buy the exact same supplies, and they can approach dealers just like I do."

Wilson invites other talent to compete with him because he feels it will keep him fresh, and the 60-year-old painter doesn't show any signs of slowing down. Wilson's signature style is his competitive advantage.

One would-be competitor found out how Wilson worked and produced his own type portfolio that he shopped to area retailers. Time and time again, the man was turned down, and for good reason—he had copied Wilson's distinctive look. People knew Wilson and his letters, and they recognized this poser as a copycat. Wilson's work has become so ubiquitous and successful that every auto dealer wants to have him—not some up-and-comer trying to impersonate him—cover their glass with monolithic letters.

A PPEALING TO CLIENTS AND CUSTOMERS

Like every graphic designer working at a computer, Wilson strives to guide clients who bring ineffective ideas to a project or request unappealing creative concepts. Most of his clients want the work to look structured like a newspaper ad, set in a grid with either black or white lettering. Wilson looks at everything for inspiration—even the newspaper—but he rarely produces anything as plain as black-and-white typography.



IN THE DETAILS

Toward the end of a project, Wilson "cuts" the letters with a black border to finish the typography and give it a sharp, clean edge. To add dimension to an otherwise 2D medium, he bevels the letters using a slightly darker shade and basic artistic principles of perspective and shadow. Finally, he uses soapy water or glass cleaner to wipe away the outlines and grid. The entire process takes from three to five hours.

Wilson's typography covers a majority of North and South Carolina retailers' windows—yet it all looks very similar in form and style. Nearly identical typography graces both a Toyota dealership and a neighboring Honda dealership on Charlotte's Highway 74—Wilson created both signs. Granted, the slogans and colors look different, but the typeface is of the same family. Wilson doesn't mind this replication—and neither do the dealers—because the work does its job: It lures people into the showrooms. "Most of these dealers and salesman work from the inside out, but I work from the outside in," Wilson says. "I use the type and its bold color to make it easy for people to read. And [the dealers] want to see what's happening once that message gets to [their customers]."

Customers flock to watch Wilson work, and often linger at the dealership just to see how the letters take shape. This is unlike most typographers, who toil away in their studios alone for hours on end. Wilson is OK with being labeled a performance artist, but he takes exception when other sign makers—those who use the computer to render letterforms in wood and vinyl—call his work a dying trade.

From Wilson's perspective, the sign painter has everything going for him today, and it's the techno-savvy designer that needs to learn a thing or two. "Designers buying \$6,000 in tools, computers and big printers think they have a license to sit in their office and wait for work to come through the door," he says, "As a painter, I can create situations and business on the go. I can go to retailers, my Jeep's the office and I have everything I need to produce work right there, when they want it, Edits are easy, too. I deliver the ultimate in customer service." **HOW**

Jason Tselentis is a Charlotte, NC-based writer and designer, jason@morsa.com

STEVE WILSON CHARLOTTE, NC swilson703@aol.com