



# *Fringe Benefits*

*Even if Disturbance Design weren't located in a subequatorial African city on the Indian Ocean, it would still be out there.*

BY SEAN O' TOOLE

FROM A DISTANCE, RICHARD HART, the creative force behind the Durban, South Africa, design studio Disturbance, has a dangerous look. Perhaps it's the pointy beard, nowadays flecked with gray, or the penetrating stare, which has been likened to Charles Manson's. Under certain circumstances, Hart can also look benevolent. A woman once approached him in a Scottish nightclub, greeting him warmly as, "Jesus, Jesus!" But to quote a famous *Monty Python* line: "He's not the messiah, he's a very naughty boy!" Not evil, mind you, only someone with a tendency to dawdle off the clearly demarcated path that is corporate design.

Founded in 1835 as a British colonial outpost on South Africa's Indian Ocean seaboard, Durban is crucial to Disturbance's biography. It has been the studio's home since 1996, when brother and sister Richard and Susie Hart, picking up the pieces from a failed surfing magazine, willed their studio into being with nothing but a 7500 Mac Classic and a scanner. (Although both Harts were born in Scotland, they spent their childhood in Zimbabwe and have lived in Durban since their early teens.) "I don't think we had any idea when we started that working from Durban would be such a



The Durban International Film Festival, for which Disturbance has designed posters since 2002, is one of the only local clients that gives the studio the freedom to express its wild side.



The studio plans to design more furniture in the coming years, like this recent bookshelf.

from hand-drawn lettering to skillful Photoshop fakery, is underpinned by "a kind of slacker finesse," to borrow a genre description from *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter.

This oddball virtuosity has endeared them to some equally brave clients, like a local fiction publisher and organizer of Durban's annual indie-film showcase. But the soul of the studio can be seen in its lunatic in-house jobs—the "naughty boy" stuff. *Sheet* is a good example. Launched in 1998, the short-lived publication was delivered to readers as a folded AI-booklet featuring a two-color poster on one side and 12 panels of words and images on the reverse. Equally transitory was the studio's detour six years ago into the hospitality trade: Home, a live music venue and restaurant conceptualized and built by Disturbance, failed to impress food critics, prompting the Harts to sell their stake. Attempting to explain why the studio repeatedly puts its profits into loss-making activities, Richard says: "It's a product of the frustration of working in a town where you're not getting those great briefs, so you make them up for yourself."

After the Home debacle, Disturbance took a more restrained approach to self-funded projects (excluding *These Are a Few of Our Favourite Things*, a lavishly executed book chronicling the studio's first 10 years, which I helped author). While Richard channels some of his creative overflow into personal pursuits like painting—he plans to show a series of pop-surreal canvases for the first time at a gallery in Cape Town next year—the studio is hard at work crafting the visual packaging of Varsity College, a national chain of privately owned colleges that is the studio's anchor client. "I have a bit of a problem with the myth of the designer as rock star," he says, momentarily reconciling his wild side with the realities of running a business. "Fucking hell, we design logos and brochures."

*Sean O'Toole is a Johannesburg-based journalist and editor of the magazine Art South Africa. Richard Hart was one of the few people who read his award-winning collection of short stories.*