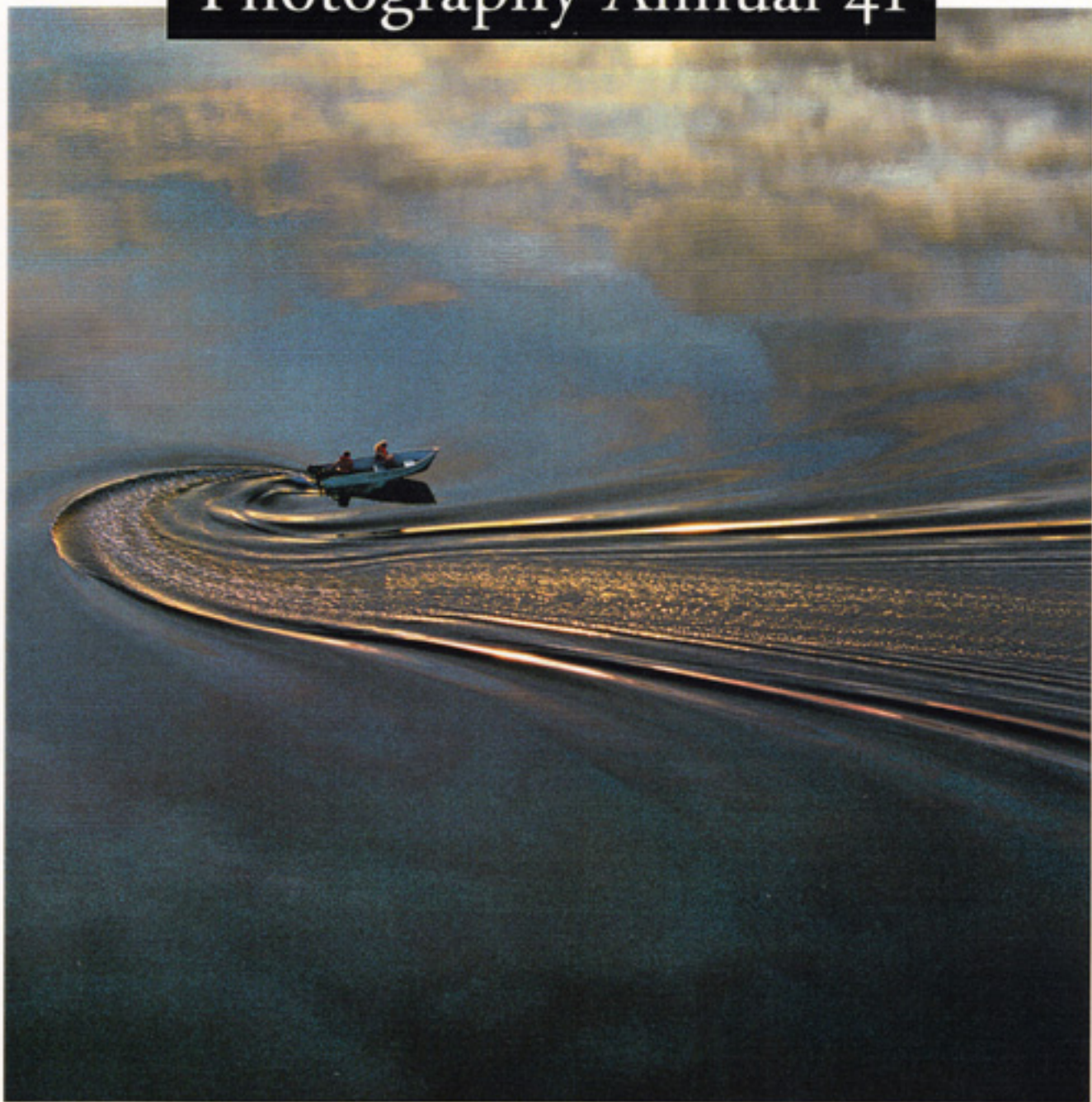


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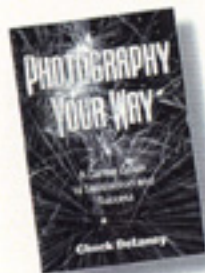


BY MATTHEW PORTER

Attending the AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) Conference in Las Vegas, Joel Nakamura noticed an overwhelmed look on my face. He recommended a large dose of small, available at a design conference organized by AIGA/Austin, Texas. "You'd love it," Nakamura said. "Wonderful speakers with a small number of guests, on a 377-acre working ranch in Texas."

"Sounds like a good plan to me," I thought, forking in a \$10 scoop of mashed potatoes at one of the Venetian Hotel's six overrated restaurants. Besides "small" and "Texas" were two words I never expected to hear in one sentence. Plans were made to send this writer on an adventure in small largeness.

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In Texas, it is said, distances are ten times greater than they seem and truth is ten times scarcer than is claimed. This second installment of AIGA/Austin's Design Ranch, *Gone to Texas*, proved the tenet: there, reality was bigger than perception and the much-promised midnight-naked-table-dancing proved a Texas tall tale.

The setting for this event could not be more conducive to thinking, dreaming or loafing. The Guadalupe River Ranch (a.k.a. "Design Ranch") sprawls on a beautiful ridge in the middle of the Texas hill country north of San Antonio, overlooking the meandering Guadalupe River. There one will find an outrageously fat pig, 100 horses and a nice assortment of ducks, chickens, rabbits and goats. Rooms have names such as Will Rogers, Georgia O'Keeffe and Walt Whitman. Sweet iced tea is available 24-hours a day, next to the water jug. An herb and edible flower garden grows outside the kitchen's screened door. Diversions such as canoe trips, hiking, hot tubs and massage therapy abound.

It is hard to say what the point of this conference is. According to Sean Carnegie, AIGA/Austin chapter president, "Design Ranch is a 'no-tech' eclectic revival that provokes ideas and inspired thinking." It was begun in 1999 by a guitar-playing-harmonica-humming-Texas-newcomer named Marc English who draws from his rich resource of friends and acquaintances from around the U.S. and invites them to show 150 attendees the ropes of their craft. English, a native of Massachusetts with an accent that could take the paint off a boxcar, is the anti-Sheriff of Design Ranch—encouraging lawlessness and disorder. He remains a Ranch focal point, and without his compelling personality Design Ranch might simply be Design Siesta.

Above: Headline designed by Marc English; roping with Gil Stoner.



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This year, illustrator Joel Nakamura, designers Charles (Y'all can call him "Chuck") Spencer Anderson, Woody Pirtle, Laurie DeMartino and photographer Dan Winters led group activities. When I arrived, attendees were handed requisite goodie bags (in thigh-scratching burlap) and ushered into a poorly-lit room surrounded by tables of sponsor exhibits. I initially thought the entire conference might be conducted within the dim and airless confines of this room. My heart stopped.

But, not for long—English got it going again with his atonal version of *Turkey in the Straw* and an irreverent overview of the storied careers of Ranch "speakers." It was apparent that

this conference would be like none I had ever attended. There would be no "dog and pony." No "cult of fame." No "culture of Me with the Microphone." This conference would be, as Woody Pirtle said Lowell Williams described it, "Vacation Bible School." Well, Bible School for the apostate.

There are several AIGA chapters around the U.S. that hold small conferences. AIGA/Minneapolis has Design Camp. AIGA/Seattle has something like Minneapolis's, with fog and rain. AIGA/San Diego has the Y Conference. According to those who have attended these, none offer the hands-on experience of Design Ranch. Then again, ranch work never was for sissies. During two full days of the conference, hands get up in the morning and work 2.5 hours with one old hand and then go 2.5 hours in the afternoon with another—each learning techniques the old hands use in their craft. Late afternoon sessions included the choice of papermaking with Judy Lauber, Styrofoam® sculpting with Blue Genie Art Industries, horse roping with Gil Stoner or poetry and cattle branding with H.C. Carter. That gave attendees 6 opportunities to spend 12 hours with 9 learned men and women, at a cost of around \$25 per hour, including bed and grub. This is, perhaps, a better return on the dollar than spending \$600+ for three full days of trying to locate Chip Kidd through a viewfinder at an AIGA national conference (bed and meals not included).

Anyone would appreciate the opportunity to spread rubber cement on a piece of paper, cover it with paint, rub it with a gum eraser and have Joel Nakamura say, "That's beautiful," to your face. Equally enjoyable is having Woody Pirtle quietly regard your dog's breakfast version of his elegant collages and have him say—to your face—"not bad at all." These are life's precious moments.

There was a lot to learn and do. In Laurie DeMartino's class, people used soap and cereal packaging to make beautiful CD covers. Los Angeles photographer Dan Winters showed

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Left to right: Laurie DeMartino's design workshop (Paloma Nakamura observes from above); listening to cowboy poet H.C. Carter; Joel Nakamura's art workshop.



that a simple pin-hole camera and Polaroid® film could capture incredible images—if you could hold still for 25 seconds. Charles Anderson demonstrated portrait-making using an FBI face identification chart and the essentials of creativity: concept, instinct, intuition and personal experience. As mentioned, Joel Nakamura taught how to use layers of color and rubber cement to recreate the look of his beautiful, primitive imagery. And Woody Pirtle's collage class utilized a 24" paper board square upon which stenciled numbers, letterforms, found objects, packaging and all sorts of "printed ephemera" were layered to create collages of stunning nuance and subtlety.

Ranch hands produced some beautiful work. In fact, instructors came away having felt they learned as much from their pupils as they taught them. "The beauty of this conference is that it is neither cliquish nor about who is the 'hottest at the moment'," said Pirtle. "It is about designers, illustrators, writers and photographers coming together on an even playing field to explore new ideas without the benefit of a computer."

Pirtle said that by watching all these people tackle the same problem with virtually the same set of tools, he discovered many ways to approach his current work in collage. What did he learn? "I learned again to throw out preconceptions and keep an open mind."

Chuck Anderson is a diligent guy. He stopped everything he was doing two days before the conference and frantically began assembling a tool kit that he could pass out to everyone at the beginning of his class. He photocopied the FBI charts, numerous Anderson-esque kooky backgrounds, hat shapes, tickets and brought along thousands of the ugliest floral greeting cards ever seen.

"I realized after I started the first class that I might have over-prepared," Anderson admitted. "I was afraid I'd get there and no one would understand what I was trying to accomplish so I made this do-it-yourself-kit. As soon as we began, people began to discard my template and draw their own



portraits, adding various elements I supplied. Their work was energizing."

For Anderson, it was the students who inspired the master. Over the course of four sessions, he created four portraits, three of which appeared recently in a magazine in Japan and one influenced by the exercise appeared in a May issue of *Time* magazine.

For many "famous" designers, one of the best ways to give back to the community is to teach. While conferences offer them a chance to inspire young audiences by showing their work, few offer the one-on-one, hands-on experience this gathering did. It was the kind of experience that is valuable to college students like "TJ," who spent two full sessions sitting next to Anderson pestering him with questions while on his way to creating a piece Anderson truly admired. And it is the kind of experience that is valuable to veterans who avoid large conferences because they often dissolve into Lick-a-Thons for the Most Recently Fabulous.

In fact, the only complaint heard voiced about the Ranch was this: instructors had no time to take a class or two from each other. Picture this: Pirtle, Winters, DeMartino and Anderson covered head-to-toe with rubber cement and acrylic paint while Joel Nakamura lends an encouraging word: "Use a little less rubber cement so the board won't stick to the table or the paint brush—but you're getting the hang of it."

In Texas, size matters. At Design Ranch, small was more. And more of what creative gatherings should be. Everyone was equally adept, or inept, depending upon how you looked at it. Everyone learned and had fun meeting people and making friends. The size and focus on hands-on experience made this conference unique. As long as they keep it that way (it is currently limited to only 150 people), Design Ranch will be around a long time. ■

Left to right: Woody Pirtle working on a project; photographer Dan Winters choosing final picks for a showing after his workshops.