

Alternative Typestyles

BY BOB SKIPPER

MATT TULLIS' OFFICE IS FULL OF CONTRAST. IN ONE CORNER IS AN OLD MANUAL TYPEWRITER, NEXT TO IT, A STATE-OF-THE-ART MACINTOSH COMPUTER. "HAVING SOMETHING ANTIQUE NEXT TO SOMETHING HIGH-TECH IS A NEAT JUXTAPOSITION," SAID TULLIS, AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ART AT WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY. "I LIKE COMBINING NEW TECHNOLOGY WITH TRADITIONAL FORMS OF COMMUNICATION." BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN UNEXPECTED SOURCES OF INSPIRATION IS AN UNDERLYING OBJECTIVE IN MUCH OF THE ART THAT MATT CREATES. TULLIS HAS NAMED HIS CURRENT BODY OF WORK, *ALTERNATIVE TYPESTYLES*—AN EXHIBITION OF DISPARATE LETTERFORMS.

Tullis began developing his unique interest in letterforms early in his career at WKU. "*Alternative Typestyles* is the most recent focus of my artistic endeavors. Initially, the project came about through a WKU Faculty Scholarship grant that I was awarded during my second year here," he said. "I was given the opportunity to further explore and document my fascination with antique and dilapidated letterforms."

He and his family loaded a truck and spent a good portion of that summer driving across the U.S. "I took hundreds of photographs of typographic specimens, including letterforms from sources such as storefronts, road signs, and brick walls — all with an eye toward the documentation of a resource that had a limited shelf life," Tullis said. "I was looking for typography that was disappearing because of time, weather, changing corporate needs, or a combination of all of the above."

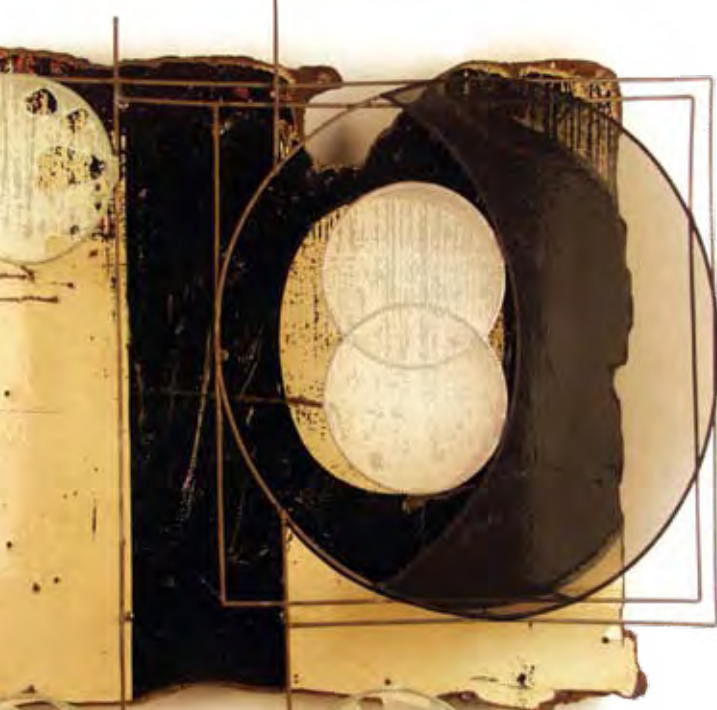
Those photographs ultimately resulted in a digital font that was named "Blue Highway." The name was

inspired by the blue lines on road maps that designate the lesser-traveled roads. "My wife, Kym, was my co-pilot that summer. She helped me quickly realize that it was the little roads and highways off the main thoroughfares that were the most fruitful for gathering imagery, so for the majority of the trip, we stuck to the blue highways."

Upon his return, Tullis began working with his research and quickly began to realize the value in his close relationship with the other Art Department faculty. He explained, "My background was graphic design and from a commercial standpoint, I was initially doing what I had been trained to do — documentation, organization, and manipulation of digital images." He went on to say, "Members of the Art Department faculty started giving me feedback on my work and the faculty as a whole deserves a lot of credit for my early attempts at building this body of work."

"For instance, Brent Oglesbee volunteered his expertise and tools in the development of one of my favorite pieces,





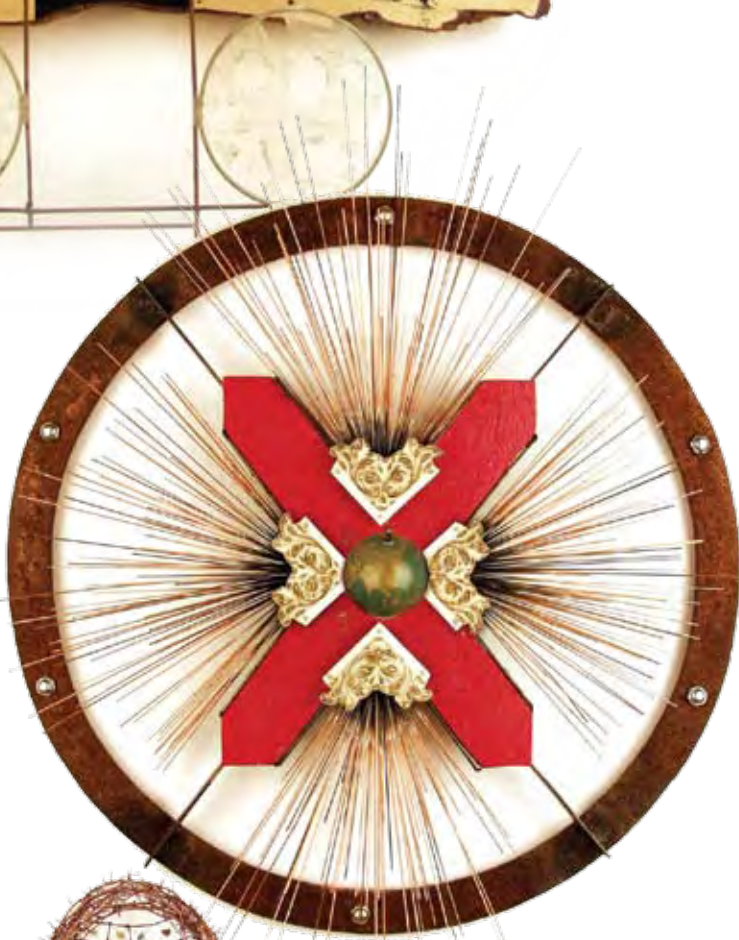
the X sculpture. I hadn't used welding equipment since high school, but with Brent's encouragement and guidance I have revisited a technique that has really solved some construction challenges."

Another example of faculty support came last fall when Tullis team-taught a Printmaking & Graphic Design course with Professor Laurin Notheisen. "Laurin taught me to silkscreen and suggested that I introduce a silkscreen element to my images. I'm still working on translating my photographs into handmade art prints, but I'm really excited about the possibilities for a better show," Tullis said.

Reflecting on the development of his work, Tullis said, "Over the last couple of years, I realized that the A to Z alphabet is a really accessible concept, one that people can easily relate to. It was at this point that I started looking for actual, physical artifacts that I could use to bring a new three-dimensional component to my work." That meant more road trips and a growing collection of artifacts in his studio. "If I discovered an old building falling in on itself and I spied an old part of a sign or a letterform, I'd crawl into the wreckage and see if there was anything I could salvage. The sculptural possibilities began to multiply. I've always been a bit of a scavenger, so these new sculptural resources felt right at home with the piles of so-called artifacts that I had in my studio anyway."

On the wall of his studio is a sculptural piece that is created around an old letter *I* that is a cast bronze artifact from a bulldozed train station in Arizona. A crumpled piece of metal serves as the sculptural backdrop, while the red-orange strip that floats behind the *I* is a torn strip of rusty rain gutter. On a more delicate note, wallpaper scraps from the same abandoned train station are used as accents. "What I bring to the sculpture is an interest in blending these various elements while trying to stay true to the original context of the found letterform," Tullis said.

The resulting piece, titled "Instinct," is part of the exhibit, *Alternative Typestyles*. About a third of the exhibit consists of sculptures that are accompanied by heavily manipulated digital photographs of individual letters. The result is a combination of sculpture and photography that completes the alphabet, from A to Z.



“Not every sculpture is as true to the original location as the letter *I*. Sometimes it’s a matter of trying things and simply seeing if they look good together,” Tullis said. “I stay true to the original letterforms by giving my art a sense of antiquity. I enjoy the challenge of using authentic artifacts in combination with newer, unexpected materials.”

The sculptures are a synthesis of discoveries. “Using reclaimed letterforms as the dominant thematic element, I combine various found objects to create compositions that recall the mystique of old signs,” he said. “My sculptures are informed by three factors: the decay of the original typographic specimen, the contextual history of the letterform, and my own typographic and design sensibilities.”

“Because of the structure of the alphabet, I’m constantly thinking of new A to Z applications. It’s difficult at times, to self-edit the new ideas, and focus on giving my body of work continuity,” he said. “What is evolving is an exhibition of constantly changing combinations of sculpture and photography. My goal is to someday arrive

at a body of work that is entirely sculptural. That goal, of course, is contingent on serendipity bringing to me the opportunity to discover the materials to use in new work.”



The exhibit also includes a series of word sculptures that originated in his artistic statement. Tullis states, “The words accentuate the exhibit in a punctual way. Since a majority of the show consists of individual letterforms, these words help stop viewers and allow them to focus on a specific concept.” The words are constructed of various artifacts discovered during his expeditions. For example, the word GESTALT is communicated, in part, by an old clamp that looks like a G. Seeing the artifacts individually, one might not necessarily recognize them as letterforms. But when the pieces come together, as they did in GESTALT, the sum becomes greater than its parts.

Typography, the quintessential element of visual communication, bridges both the fine art and graphic design disciplines, and is the subject of ‘Alternative Typestyles.’ My objective is to assemble typographic artifacts in an alphabetic gestalt, where the whole is more fluent than any individual piece.

—EXCERPT FROM ARTIST’S STATEMENT BY MATT TULLIS



"My exhibit has a built-in nostalgia that is easy to relate to," Tullis said. "I have a real fondness for artifacts that bring a certain history with them. I think part of the voice of my art is the history that the materials have."

He also has a fondness for audience reaction. "I am delighted at the different ways an audience will respond to the show," Tullis said. "People look at the work and they relate to the fact that my art is all about letterforms. Kids and adults alike understand my work on different levels. For instance, in the same group of people I've heard a child state, 'Hey! That's my letter!' right before the kid's parent says, 'I like this kind of stuff, too. I'm going to try something like this.' It's comments like these that mean my art is accessible. Light bulbs start going on above people's heads; people can relate to my work, and as an artist, that satisfies me the most."

Tullis, who holds an MFA in graphic design from the Tyler School of Art at Temple University, has exhibited his work on a national and international level. He says he especially enjoys exhibits at other universities where he can share his concepts with students.

"I'm a teacher," Tullis explained. "These exhibitions give me the opportunity to encourage students to explore possibilities outside their areas of expertise. I help my audience understand that the possibilities are infinite when boundaries are broken."

Tullis brings his passion for synthesis to his classes at WKU. "I talk with my students about the connection between the fine and graphic arts. I assign them projects in the classroom that are related to this cross-curricular ideal." In one class, students designed posters for a local literacy program. The students collected letterforms from around Bowling Green using digital and disposable cameras. They brought all of the photographs together and created a resource they then used in their individual designs. "Those projects turned out amazing, really beautiful," Tullis said. "By bringing my experiences into the classroom, I am able to design projects that help students develop their own appreciation of the value of original research. I bring typography into the room of every class that I teach."

Because he has several letterforms that are "still becoming sculptures," Tullis is reluctant to offer a finish date for his exhibition. "I would like to see *Alternative Typestyles* wrap up in the next few years," he said, "but I want to feel that each piece is complete." Tullis also stated, with more certainty, "I believe that, when it comes to visual communication, the alphabet is the most powerful tool at my disposal. So, alternative or not, typography will always be a part of my artistic life." ■

