

Sticker shock: Artists' Stickers
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Art Papers v. 23 no. 3 May/June '99

Long a staple of popular culture, the "sticker" has steadily gained prominence as an art form and *Sticker Shock: Artists' Stickers*, at the Institute for Contemporary Art (Philadelphia, January 16 – March 7), provides a thorough survey of this developing field. Participating artists employed a variety of approaches on a range of paper, vinyl, and Mylar self-adhesive supports that incorporate painting, drawing, photography, and various printmaking techniques (from traditional silk-screening to newer technologies like laser printing) to render a final image. Some participating artists parody well-known sticker formats—one of Stuart Netsky's bumper stickers pokes fun at pop wisdom: "INSIDE EVERY POST-MODERNIST IS A MODERNIST TRYING TO COME OUT."

Others incorporate found stickers into their work—Forrest Myers' uses automotive decals in *Hot Rod*, his sticker adorned sculpture celebrating car culture. Still others, like Jean-Phillippe Antoine, explore more traditional media—including gouache and pencil—in works that lean towards formalism. The presentation of two films and collections of commercial stickers in the exhibition effectively traces and contextualizes the cultural roots of this late 20th century phenomenon.

Although some pieces seem intended for traditional art settings, the core of the exhibition descends from graffiti. The pieces are produced by young artists who usually display their stickers in public areas where viewers encounter them by chance. Beyond leaving a graffiti mark, the stickers provoke an open-ended interpretation process and a desire to scour the urban landscape searching for more. In the gallery, however, the work runs the risk of losing its sense of random discovery. Fortunately, the inclusion of films by Helen Stickler (*obey giant Has a Posse*) and Rick Charnoski (*Stickers*) somewhat recreate the street experience. The link to graffiti is most obvious in the work of Barry McGee through the presentation of a group of his "tags"—stylized versions of the word "Twist" written in black magic marker on assorted mailing labels. The show also includes a group of his small drawings of cartoon faces on a variety of found stickers. The juxtaposition of dejected facial expressions with the stickers' messages, such as "Hello My Name Is," call to mind images of bored salesmen attending trade conferences in purgatory.

Advertising also has a strong influence on this art form. The curator, Alex Baker, chose to display collections of commercially produced stickers including bumper stickers like "JESUS LOVES YOU...EVERYBODY ELSE THINKS YOU'RE AN ASSHOLE," and the collectible series, "Wacky Packages," that satirized advertising and consumer products (e.g. "Play Dough" is lampooned as "Play Dumb"). These themes—the use of cartoon imagery, a cynical view of popular culture, and absurdist humor—recur throughout the exhibition. Shepard Fairey is perhaps the best-known sticker artist in the show. His images of the late professional wrestler, *obey giant*, accompanied by the word "obey," have become ubiquitous in the urban streetscape. Later permutations of this work resemble slick product labels simply reading "Giant" or "Obey." Other works by Fairey incorporate images of politicians such as Che Guevara, a Black Panther, Mao Tse-tung, and Joseph Stalin, thus equating romanticized figures with figures who are reviled, pointing to the overarching dangers of being an ideologue. The subversion of advertising through absurdism in several artists' work also becomes somewhat political. Jeff Morris has created a series of text-based stickers around a fictional character, Bob Licky. Reminiscent of political campaign slogans, cryptic messages humorously read, "ENEMY OF LABOR BOB LICKY," "LUCKY FOR YOU IT'S BOB LICKY," and "YE OLDE SHOPPE OF BOB LICKY." Jenny Carchman incorporates diagrams of sexual positions into appropriated product labels like Milk Bone Dog Biscuits. Carchman then stealthily displays these labels in supermarkets among actual products. Clare Rojas and Andrew Jeffrey Wright collaborate on "The Manipulators," a series of actual ad-vertisements that have been altered (e.g., a waifish supermodel is attached to an intravenous blood supply). The series reminds us that the photographs in many advertisements have been digitally altered to present a preposterously perfect human specimen. Some of the less didactic work creates the greatest sense of intrigue. Robert Randolph often leaves blank cartoon "thought" bubbles in public places. In this show, his work portrays early depictions of man thinking about other life forms. "Stickers are used as grassroots, guerrilla marketing tools," says Doug Anson, who scrawls enigmatic messages such as "ANTI-UFO LEAGUE" onto photographs of abandoned buildings and other forgotten corners of the urban environment. With these works, viewers likely wonder, "What is that?" and then are left with the perplexing question, "What does it mean?" Whenever an arts organization exhibits art forms not intended for traditional galleries, there is the potential that the institution will overwhelm the work—which can be rendered instantly impotent. Hopefully, "Sticker Shock" will have the opposite effect and these stickers will invigorate the often flaccid academy of contemporary art.



Sticker Shock, installation view, ICA Philadelphia, 1999



Sticker Shock catalog cover, 1999



Jeff Morris: rubber stamp ink on paper adhesive name badge, 1998