

BY DESIGN

OFFENSIVE 3451: THE JAPANESE MAGAZINE RACK

Friends, I'm about to reveal something that may frighten and scare you: the Japanese are waaay ahead of us. Sacrificing height for a fourteen-hour advantage over NYC, the zippy little people in the east are engaged in a battle for freshness we can't even dream of competing with. Having laid waste to our most degrading pornography, the Japanese are set to completely destroy our magazine racks in a most demoralizing way. It doesn't look good for us, my friends.

One fundamental difference between the Japanese design-magazine rack and ours must be understood if we are to make any headway against this most freshchevious of enemy:

They Don't Suck

According to the design rags at our local magazine store, a hot designer is some silk-shirted geezer holding his latest work of genius: frosted blue candleholders and matching pod lamp. Hot design isn't so much hot as it is effective marketing. Most English design magazines focus on design as a trade, so stock images and design formulas are seen as a great way to save time and maximize profit. Making money is nice, but forgive me if I don't think medieval paintings fashioned to sell life insurance are worthy of a pants-shitting. If you manage to find a magazine that praises experimentation, it's usually limited to some monkey trying to jam as many Photoshop filters into one image as possible.

There are simply more varieties of aesthetics that can fit within the term "mainstream" in Japan, so the fringes are that much more interesting. This is partly due to the influence of manga in everyday media, though Japan has always had a rich graphic tradition. In short, designers and illustrators can develop more experimental styles without too much fear of alienating a mainstream audience.

Let's examine the diagrams, shall we?

Fig. 1) IDEA

If you need an excuse to travel halfway around the world, this is it. How shit-hot is a magazine that puts works by Aubrey Beardsley (the pervie Art Nouveau great), Raymond Pettibon (the illustrator of *Sonic Youth's Goo*) and Kaws in the same series?! Its format is never repetitive and the incredible span of work that appears from issue to issue is similarly impressive. One of the only regular fixtures of the magazine is the "When Pigs Design" column, where they cover a different person who, usually by accident, falls into the realm of being a designer, however twisted the definition. In one issue, this was a man who made

EMAIL →

Your email:

Their email:

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



rubber models of male and female genitalia, in all its frightening variety (Fig. 2).

Each issue usually includes a sweet fold-out poster, charcoal drawing, or even a small book in itself. The publisher spares no expense—between matte laminated covers and custom inks every second page, this thing must cost a fortune to print. Unparalleled. I'd write the subscription info here myself but I don't have room.



Fig. 3) Studio Voice

Another slick design publication. In contrast to *IDEA*, *SV* covers a lot of motion graphics, web and video arts, and is much more of a read. It's also less likely to cover old design trends or artists than *IDEA*. Also, like many other Japanese magazines not aimed at moms, it includes a handy recipe in every issue. The standards for today's designers are escalating, so if your curry rice sucks, don't expect to get the contract.

Fig. 4) Relax

This is a one-third design, one-third fashion, and one-third pop mag covering any and all things cool as hell. They jam a lot of content into this elusively thin thing and, for a magazine with as much fashion and pop content as this, it contains refreshingly little advertising. Again, there are recipes.

Fig. 5) Design Plex: BNN Mook

Mook is a general term for a small book for sale on the magazine rack—it's another thing you see more of on a magazine stand in Japan. This little gem has everything: designer profiles, no-suck comics, Flash site design tips and a how-to on making a remote-controlled Lego car.

Fig. 6) Tomoo Gokita, Lingerie Wrestling

This is a collection of a ton of insane charcoal and ink drawings that are so good you will stop drawing because you suck. If you don't draw, you'll be thankful you never started. Like Gokita's newest book *Oh! Tengoku*, it is next to impossible to find outside of Japan. It's not a magazine, but it bears mentioning because its obscurity is just a painful reminder that there are tons of similar books that would be well received outside their home market. Unfortunately, since marketing a specialty book internationally is not as easy as selling to densely populated consumers interested in this weird shit, we're not likely to see this situation change. But this kind of book tends to fall between the cracks of international distribution for more than just this reason. It's too comic-book for gallery bookstores and it's too fucked up for most large chain bookstores. It's a sad reality that affords only one solution: invasion!

3EIGE

Quick clicks

www.idea-mag.com

www.infas.co.jp/syudio-voice/sv.html

www.relaxmag.com

www.tigermagazine.org (a super-slick Japanese web-based design magazine)

www.raf-dl.com/~dp-web

www.shift.jp.org