

...campus

by Jane Margolies

Riff on the Old Block

A typography project takes letterpress to the cutting edge.

Eyebrows raised when University of Pennsylvania senior Robin McDowell waltzed into her school's fabrication lab and over to the laser cutter: typically the domain of architecture students slicing balsa wood with mathematical precision. A fine-arts major with a concentration in graphic design, McDowell had an unusual mission: to engrave blocks of end-grain hard maple with the names of those helping her with Type-High, her independent study project. For the lab's manager, a wood expert named Dennis, she used all caps with an oversize cartoonish faux-woodgrain "D," while her graphics advisor, David Comberg—who kept reminding her that good design starts with pencil on paper rather than with fancy technology—was memorialized with swirly script that looked hand-drawn.

It was McDowell's attraction to the hand-carved wood type of long ago—and to three presses tucked away in Penn's basement print shop—that inspired the project. "I wanted to figure out a way to make an old craft new again," she says. With Type-High—named for the standard height of typesetting blocks, .9186 inches—she sought to revive ornamental wood-cut type using her own designs and modern tools, even if those tools were more commonly employed for different purposes.

She began by developing nine elaborate typographical illustrations, rendered using Adobe Illustrator. The designs resemble a more sophisticated version of personalization stamps one might custom order from a stationery store, each with a wildly different reference point—one looks vaguely harlequin, one is evocative of Sumi-e brushstrokes. The sample in honor of



Robin McDowell's letterpress blocks began the newfangled way: with computer-based illustration.

McDowell's pal Emilie, with whom she shared many late nights in the print shop, is based on the number 3, from the typeface ITC Kabel, undergoing several 90-degree rotations. "Leslie" is a tribute to the mother of a childhood friend, an artist who served as a mentor to McDowell. It's modeled on the script used for the Campbell's soup logo (the woman's husband worked for the company), and it evolved from a sketchbook doodle of creeping and dancing fiddlehead ferns. None of the typefaces are remotely minimalist. "Everywhere today—windows, clothing, catalogs—you see patterns and lettering that are curvy and feminine and luxurious," McDowell notes. "It's the design vanguard."

Following test after test of laser-power settings (and the occasional conflagration), McDowell's blocks were carved. Then it was on to the physical challenge of hand-cranking the letterpress. Down in the Penn print shop, McDowell acquired an understanding of the 1960s Vandercook No. 4—as well as a few arm muscles—as she made her prints on rag paper. She next collected the pages into 10 folded

archival folios. "When I started the project, I wanted to create these perfectly set-and-bound books, but in the end an unbound folio seemed more appropriate," she says. "Each design was meant to be enjoyed on a full page."

Although McDowell's unique images are more art than design, she gained know-how she recently applied in her senior thesis: a set of movable wood type in a more sober, streamlined font. And her interest in combining mechanical methods of the past with computer-driven technology is very current, according to Comberg: "You can do amazing things on the computer," he says, "but digital technology is also limiting. If you start on the computer, then mess around with a traditional art material, then scan it all in, you're guaranteed to be doing something no one else is doing." As McDowell demonstrates, those with one foot in the old world and one in the new can produce something truly individual.

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