Zuzana Licko

Bio

Zuzana Licko is the cofounder of Emigre, which became world renowned for its self-published magazine and type foundry. In 1984, Licko and cofounder Rudy VanderLans became early adopters of the recently introduced Macintosh computer technology and they used the computer to experiment and create some of the very first digital typeface designs and page layouts. Exposure of the typefaces in Emigre magazine resulted in demand for the fonts which lead to the creation of the Emigre Fonts type foundry.

Statement

Drawing on my experience as a typeface designer and graphic artist, I continue exploring the relationships of abstract forms, and developing them into structural systems.
It all starts with the building elements. A single bit may seem insignificant; a lone pixel on a dipslay screen, a single stitch in fabric. But arranged into bitmaps, groups of pixels convey images through their underlying patterns that convey textures, shapes, shadows, and colors.
A single bit can be represented by a square on grid paper, a halftone dot in a photo, a loop of thread in fabric, a light emitting diode on a computer screen, a ceramic tile in a mosaic, to name a few. Each one carries it's unique abilities to build and blend, but our human perception is required to complete the process. Recognizing a smily face or letterform within an eight by eight grid or perceiving the color yellow, blended from red and green light emitting diodes illuminated side by side, is some sort of magic, scientifically explainable, but not undoable by explanation. How a small adjustment can change our perception. And how an image changes when transferred from one medium to another, revealing insight about its structure. This is what fascinates me about the building blocks of imagery.

Education

· 1984   University of California at Berkeley, College of Environmental Design, Bachelor of Arts in Graphic Communication

Collections

· 2024   Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, acquires Woven Books.
· 2017   The Herb Lubalin Study Center, New York, NY, acquires type specimens.
· 2016   Letterform Archive, San Francisco, CA, acquires archive including type development files and specimens.
· 2015   SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA, acquires "Signs of Type" and "Digital Fonts" catalog.
· 2011   MoMA, New York, NY, acquires Oakland/Lo-Res family of digital typefaces.

Honors and Awards

· 2016   The New York Type Directors Club 29th Medal.
· 2013   Typography Award from the Society of Typographic Aficionados.
· 2010   Society of Typographic Arts, Chicago, Typography award.
· 2005   Rhode Island School of Design, honorary doctorate
· 1998   Charles Nypels Award for excellence in the field of typography.
· 1997   American Institute of Graphic Arts Gold Medal Award.
· 1994   Chrysler Award for Innovation in Design.

Selected Exhibits and Installations

· 2024-25 Digital Witness / Group show: LACMA, Los Angeles, CA
· 2023 Zuzana Licko / Solo show: Gallery 16, San Francisco, CA
· 2022 Sculpture in the Garden / Group show: Ruth Bancroft Botanical Garden, Walnut Creek, CA
· 2021 Nine Jacquard Weavings: Intersecting Figures, Faceted Figures, and Isometric Puzzles / Solo show: Katherine Small Gallery, Somerville, MA
· 2021 Design(H)er: Works by Contemporary Women Graphic Designers / Group show: Eleanor D. Wilson Museum at Hollins University, Roanoke, VA
· 2021 Ten piece jacquard weaving installation at the Hyatt House Denver Aurora, Denver, CO
· 2017 California: Designing Freedom / Group show: Design Museum, London, England
· 2016 Typeface to Interface, Graphic Design from the Collection / Group show: SFMOMA, San Francisco, CA
· 2011-2012 Standard Deviations: Types and Families in Contemporary Design / Group show: MoMA, New York, NY
· 2011 Now in Production / Group show: Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN
· 2011 Typographic Tables / Group show: Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Bolzano, Italy
· 2009-2010 Emigre at Gallery 16 / Group show: Gallery 16, San Francisco, CA
· 2007 Puzzler Prints / Solo show: Berkeley Frame, Berkeley, CA
· 1998 Charles Nypels Award Exhibit featuring the work of Emigre: Jan van Eyck Academy in Maastricht, Holland

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Process, Weavings

My jacquard textiles are woven by a computer driven loom.
I create the master image file as a coarse resolution bitmap, specifying the particular thread configuration for each bit with color coding.

It's always exciting to see the finished pieces, including the surprises that happen when I test new thread combinations. Through some trial and error, each one leads to ideas for the next.

The geometric compositions featured in my weavings play with repetition in an unpredictable way, creating imaginary perspectives and optical illusions that welcome interpretation. These weavings are essentially bitmaps, built from thread, which is a wonderfully gratifying bridge to my early digital bitmap font work.

The scale of my weavings is generally 12" x 12" to 30" x 30", but commissioned work can go up to 42" x 96".
The fabric is a blend of poly, cotton, and rayon.

Process, Ceramics

I hand assemble each piece from a combination of wheel thrown and slump molded elements, employing a variety of clay colors.
Ceramics began for me as a counterbalance to my digital design work. The making of objects is something I enjoy, and miss about the digital medium. Over time, I discovered that pottery and type design are connected in many ways.

Both disciplines rely on the balancing of shapes, abstraction of form, as well as creating illusions. For example, a form may appear either heavy or light, regardless of it's actual weight.
Both disciplines also deal with modularity and the duality of inside and outside form. And both require resolving transitions of curves; when throwing a piece on the potter's wheel, the conceptualization of the shape can be reduced to a single line of curve transitions, which represents one half of the symmetrical cross section. These curve transitions and balance of form have much in common with constructing curves in letter forms.

Woven Book Objects, Weaving Musings

This series of book objects plays with type as abstraction, exploring the boundary between letterforms as pattern versus their legibility, inviting you to contemplate thoughts on design and reading. Each is a four, six, or eight page folio, made with custom woven fabric, featuring lettering that is designed specifically for the thread count of the loom. The fabric is jacquard woven, then sewn with Japanese four-hole binding. The result is soft and tactile, with a plush fringe at the top and bottom edges.

The fonts used in these weavings are based on my earlier bitmap designs, which initiated the Emigre Fonts foundry, as a spin-off from Emigre Magazine, in 1985. Nearly 40 years later, this project has brought me full circle, back to the essence of bitmaps, employing them to weave text into textile. By outlining and subtracting pixels, I came upon the illusion of woven forms, which inspired me to apply them to weaving technology, since weavings are essentially bitmaps, built from thread.

These monospaced letters fill their space entirely, both horizontally and vertically. When set without line spacing, their abstracted letterforms create dense patterns of text, connecting in both directions. Initially, I applied these woven letters onto pillows in four letter words like "NICE" and "WISH" which gave me the idea of the book format. To fit the square grid regimen of the book pages, I first limited the text to using just one, two, and four letter words. After the first book, I expanded this by adding three and five letter words, adjusting the fonts to fit the lettering at the 28 dpi resolution of the weaving threads. The square page format and monospaced font proportions both echo the square nature of the woven grid framework.

At first glance, some pages may read as line patterns, mazes, or diagrams of computer circuitry. But, be sure to take a closer look and discover the words within.

* These folios are issued as numbered open editions:)
www.zuzanalicko.com/WeavingMusings.php

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Gallery Talk Transcript
Excerpt from a talk at Gallery 16 on June 24th, 2023, about the interplay of fonts, ceramics, and weavings that inspired the work in the exhibit.

People often ask me about my ceramic cone sculptures, and how they relate to my work with fonts. I approached the sculptures as I would a typeface. Which is to create a system of elements that can be combined and repeated in various configurations. With an alphabetic font, these combinations create words, but if the elements are abstract, they can form patterns.

The process starts with setting up rules, because defining limits creates guidance to the thought process. As you implement those rules, you soon realize if they need to be adjusted and expanded. For this reason, I like to start with very simple rules, so I began with a single straight line, drawn at specific angles.

The next step was to translate these ideas into ceramic form. Working on a potter's wheel, as it spins around, a diagonal line turns into a cone. And a horizontal line turns into a disk. I arrived at 3 cone shapes: small, medium and large. The angle on the medium one is 45 degrees, so the height is half the width. The small one is the same height, but narrower. And the large one is the same width, but taller.

When I made the ceramic pieces, I intuitively exaggerated the size differences, so the measurements are not exact to my plans. But I did want the shapes to repeat exactly, so I made molds. I made slump molds that I fill with clay slabs, and compress on the wheel, similar to jiggering, but done manually.

These elements are stacked onto a metal stand, with a central pole, so it's like stringing beads. I added small ceramic spacers between the disks, which allows them to float. This creates voids that imply shapes, and I love that these spaces allow you to look through the form, to see it's depth.

As I played with arranging the ceramic pieces on the stands, I risked damaging them with the repeated handling. So I went back to the computer to visualize their arrangement. For this, I created a font, so each element could be typed as a letter, then repeated and edited as a line of text. Since typing happens in a horizontal line, the cone shapes are turned 90 degrees in the font, so they are stacked horizontally.

When Gallery 16 invited me to show alongside Rex Ray, I created three new sculptures to accompany his vibrant collages. I added pops of color and some fluid shapes. These shapes are wheel thrown, and are essentially deconstructed flower vases. These vase shapes embrace the flower elements in the collages.

of instructions to the loom. A range of colors can be created by interweaving just 4 colors of yarn, similar to the blending of colors that happens in 4 color printing, or the 3 led colors on a computer screen. This blending is a "trick if the eye" which happens in our human perception.

I love how these weavings relate to my early bitmap font work, which initiated my journey into typefaces in the first place.

Then, making the font * for the sculptures gave me the idea for a system of connected lines. Each element is square, so it works with any other element, in both horizontal and vertical directions, unlike the cones font. The basic rule I used, was to construct each element with a diagonal line at each corner, making it connect to any other element in the font. I was amazed at the patterns that emerged. I was seeing all sorts of perspectives, with shifting planes. In the same way that combinations of letters take on new meaning when composed into recognizable word shapes, pattern elements morph into new forms when combined. To then capture these constructions as wall artworks, weaving was obvious, as a perfectly suited medium. The lines convert well to bitmaps, and weavings are essentially physical bitmaps.

Once I determine the size of a weaving, I prepare a bitmap image file and send it to a special weaver in North Carolina, that has computer driven looms, called jacquard looms. Through their software, each pixel in my bitmap file sends a specific set of instructions to the loom. A range of colors can be created by interweaving just 4 colors of yarn, similar to the blending of colors that happens in 4 color printing, or the 3 led colors on a computer screen. This blending is a "trick if the eye" which happens in our human perception.

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* (This font is named Crackly, and you can test drive it here:)
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