

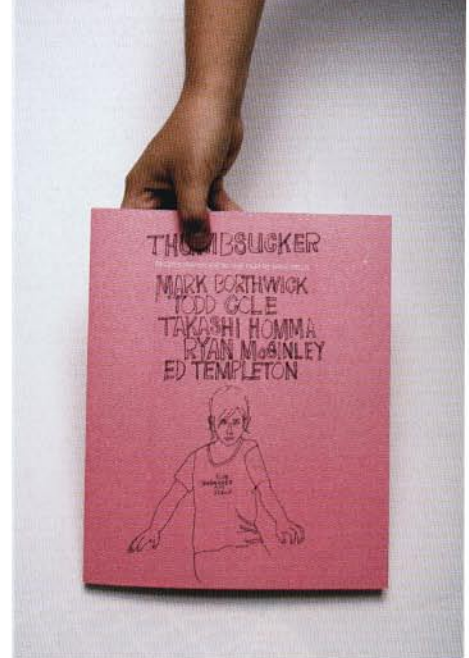
# mike mills

GRAPHIC ARTIST, FILMMAKER

Interview by Steven Heller

Mike Mills's 2005 feature-film directorial debut, *Thumbsucker*, is about Justin Cobb (Lou Pucci), who still sucks his thumb at age 17. Realizing that this habit has an embarrassing impact on his love life and on members of his family, he wants to stop, and yet thumbsucking is a symptom of a deeper fear: that he and his father (Vincent D'Onofrio) aren't good enough for his stunning mother, Audrey (Tilda Swinton). Justin is diagnosed with ADHD and put on Ritalin, which soon becomes a substitute for his opposable friend. Adapted from Walter Kirn's autobiographical novel, *Thumbsucker* is a dark comedy that combines the spirits of Woody Allen, Jim Jarmusch, and Wes Anderson into a sardonic coming-of-age tale. All this from Mills, 40—a graphic designer, design historian, lecturer, and writer, whose witty filmmaking style developed through commercials for Nike, Levi's, and Volkswagen, and in music videos for Moby and Air. Even as he works on a script for his second film, Mills keeps his hand in graphics by maintaining a surreal manifesto out of which a line of products called Humans is derived, including T-shirts, posters, textiles, and bags ([www.humans.jp](http://www.humans.jp)). Recently, a book of photographs shot by Mills and his friends during the filming of *Thumbsucker* was published by Iconoclast, with the cover and book design by Mills, who defines the essence of design authorship and entrepreneurship. In this interview, he explains what inspired him to morph from graphic designer into storyteller working in multiple media.

**HELLER:** During the past 20 years, you've established yourself in a few careers—graphic designer, product design entrepreneur, music video director, and feature film writer and director. How did you make such a leap from graphics to film? Or was it not such a big leap? **MILLS:** The short answer is, it's all the same to me. Also, I'd simplify all the categories—I basically work as a graphic artist and a filmmaker. I've done graphics and my graphics have transformed into an "art" context, but essentially it's the same visual language that I developed doing work for clients such as X-girl, Supreme, and Sonic Youth. Then, I lump all the different categories of film work together: ads, videos, documentaries, and my feature. So either I'm doing 2-D visual work or I'm making films. But really, it's all one category—generating ideas and expressing things that are relevant and personal to me. **HELLER:** I know you are inspired by design history. Who are some of your key inspirations? **MILLS:** Two of the biggest influences have been Charles and Ray Eames and the artist Hans Haacke, with whom I studied at Cooper Union. The careers of these people never acknowledged the barriers between different media and different "professions," and between commercial and personal work. The Eames's D.I.Y. entrepreneurialism dovetails with my punk-rock, skateboarding upbringing. Without these influences I may not have tried to get into graphics with only one typography class under my belt, or start a film "career" without any "official" training. So conceptually, I see no leap between the different media; they are just different formats in which I try to communicate with people. I also think this has a bit to



do with being born in the late '60s and watching a lot of TV while growing up, essentially learning to find fun and some idea of myself in a consumerist, multimedia world. That I find unity in all these media, and a space for very personal expression in very public places, basically reflects the kind of world I grew up in. **HELLER:** Your *Thumbsucker* script is an adaptation of Walter Kirn's quirky autobiographical novel about a troubled teen who, among other issues, was in awe of his mother's sensuality and overwhelmed by his own feelings of sexual inadequacy. Once he takes Ritalin to focus his attention, he becomes a debating star. As a graphic designer who is continually framing, packaging, and interpreting other people's ideas, how did you transform this novel into your voice and vision? Or was a part of you, like a designer, illustrating Kirn's manuscript? **MILLS:** I think there was a lot of reframing or interpreting Walter's scenes or ideas. And yeah, being a designer made me comfortable with the idea of shaping someone else's raw material. I very much identified with Justin's insecurities, and he became a great mask or tool through which I could write and explore all those feelings inside of me. I was not in awe of my mother's sensuality, but I was in awe of her charisma. My mother passed away shortly before I started working on the script, and a lot of my adaptation was a way to keep talking to my mom, to understand our relationship better—in short, to keep her

alive, at least in my head. **HELLER:** Isn't it difficult to migrate from one medium to the next and be taken seriously in these different worlds? **MILLS:** Going from having the world understand and accept you as a graphic designer to having the world accept you as a feature filmmaker is very hard, and required basically starting over several times. I began trying to make videos and short films when I was 27. I started trying to make *Thumbsucker* when I was 34, and it came out last year when I was 39, so it all takes a fair amount of time and it all happens in small steps. On the practical side, going from working alone in my office to working with a crew of 30 or 60, learning how to delegate and keep that many moving parts in my head, was very hard at first. But the one thing that motivated me to go out and collaborate with a lot of people was loneliness. Working at my office late one night, I figured out that the more successful I became at graphics, the more of my life was doomed to stay in that little room looking at that little screen. At a certain point, I yearned for people, and to go outside, and to travel and to be in the world. **HELLER:** There are so many external considerations in making a film. What are they for you? **MILLS:** In my film work, I always think of the physical context, the location, and the inanimate objects as all being equal characters to the people in the frame. The characters are partially defined by their surroundings and objects, and these objects all have stories, ideas, and ideologies embedded in them. That perspective started with the design history and art theory work I read while finishing at Cooper. **HELLER:** You've created graphics for Marc Jacobs and music videos for Air, Sonic Youth, and the Beastie Boys. Did you approach the videos as a graphic designer or a filmmaker, or a hybrid of the two? **MILLS:** I've done film and graphics for Marc and Air, and I was lucky that both these clients understood there is little difference between the two, especially in terms of aesthetics. The only real differences are practical ones—how to get the project made. **HELLER:** Why music?

Was it a vehicle to do the kind of work you wanted to do? **MILLS:** I played in punk bands during high school, and listening to music has always been a big part of how I tried to figure out who I was, what I was feeling, and most important, what I wanted to feel. A lot of my friends and I felt very disinvited by more mainstream entertainment/imagery/ideas. Punk smelled of some unknown freedom; maybe you could be your full messy self after all. I think a lot of people belittle these issues and call it "teen angst." I think it's much more important: It's a moment where you first struggle with believing that the thoughts, feelings, and emotions you have that are not mirrored by the big, legitimate world are okay and not to be squashed. For me, that struggle has been the central theme of my work through all media and stages in my life. **HELLER:** Do you bring your designer self into your films? **MILLS:** I think there is a simplicity and flatness to my film work that I developed in my design work. I am very happy and satiated with a static shot of something—this comes from the same person who gets a lot of pleasure from something as simple as Helvetica, or a nice red square; a clean, centered design. When I film, I use little lighting, simple compositions, a very transparent way of

working. In both my film and my graphics I don't want there to be anything obscure or mysterious about how it was made. It's more about the feeling and the idea than about the complexity or virtuosity of the visuals.

**HELLER:** You have performed on so many stages—with a high level of virtuosity—but is there one that you want to devote yourself to? Or, like the character in *Thumbsucker*, are you basically insecure and must continually move from one genre to another? **MILLS:** I see myself continuing all the media I am currently involved in. I get so much out of working this way—to me, it's not working in a bunch of different stages, it's just working. Insecurity, or struggling with doubt about one's true feelings, is a major theme in everything I do; it's been the source of much of my creativity and curiosity about the world. And showing my insecurity in my work is one of the more freeing, rush-making, empowering things that I have come upon. So, yes, my work is all about my insecurity, but not in a sense of weakness about what I am doing. As I said, I think the genres I work in are all interconnected, and it's only cultural ideas of professions, media, and careers that separate them. Is the breadth of Charles and Ray Eames's work a sign of their insecurity? **P**



Previous page and left: Cover and spread from *Thumbsucker*, a book of stills shot during the filming of the movie. Cover: Mike Mills; photos: Todd Cole.