

Waxing Chromatic: An Interview with S. Neil Fujita

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At a recent talk, Michael Bierut cited the 1968 vocational book *Aim for a Job in Graphic Design/Art*—which he discovered in the Parma High School library in his Ohio hometown—as a major influence on his future career. The author, S. Neil Fujita, was the art director for CBS Records and designer of such iconic graphics as the *Godfather* logo and book jacket for *In Cold Blood*. For decades his name was synonymous with a kind of eclectic modernism—not Swiss or Bauhaus, but jazz-inspired with an American flair. No wonder his work would tickle the fancy of anyone considering graphic design as an art with many facets. Born in 1921 in Waimea, Hawaii, Fujita remains active, though no longer as an art director in the record or publishing industries, nor as a communication design instructor at Parsons, where he taught in the early 1960s and '70s. He is currently writing and illustrating the book *Botanical Mischief*, an ongoing personal project. And in April 2008, Ruder Finn Press will publish his autobiography, *Mouth of Reddish Water: A Japanese American Story*. Recently, this visually eloquent designer agreed to speak about his past and present, and the state of design as he views it.

Heller: Neil, I've long admired your work. You've had an extensive career, and much of it was involved with the record industry. To start, how did you become a graphic designer?

Fujita: I went to an art school in Los Angeles, Chouinard. I had studied painting, design, illustration, color theory, all the phases of art, but I concentrated on drawing and painting—the basics. While I was still in school I got married, then after I graduated my wife and I moved to New York City. I wanted to look for a job in graphic art because I knew that I had to make a living and that painting wasn't going to do it. After spending a couple of months in New York I met Bill Golden, the art director of CBS. He looked at my portfolio and he asked me, "Neil, what do you want to do?" I said that I didn't know yet but that I was looking for a job at N.W. Ayer because one of my teachers had put a word in to Charles Coiner.

I went down to Philadelphia, and Coiner looked at my portfolio and offered me a job, but it wasn't because of my commercial work—it was because of my paintings! I worked at Ayer for around three years, and while I was there I got a gold medal from the Art Directors Club for designing an ad for the Container Corporation of America. That

must have gotten people talking because, shortly after I left Ayer, I got a call from Bill Golden who says he is recommending me to run the art department at Columbia Records. He said that I would be starting from the ground up by building an internal graphic design staff. He also said, “Neil, if do this, you’ll be taking work and income away from the two studios that have been working with us for many years, so you’re going to meet up with a lot of crap. First of all, you’re Japanese and you’re going to be called all sorts of names, from Nip to Jap and everything else. Do you still want to do it?”

Heller: It’s a good thing that you did. After Alex Steinweiss established the “idea” of album cover art, you certainly took the “art” to the next level. Did you go into Columbia with an esthetic goal or plan on how to make this genre modern?

Fujita: When I got to Columbia, there was the beginning of some idea of album cover art but it was still just type and maybe a photo of the artist and some shapes arranged in an interesting way. That was the first concept of album cover art. Actually the first examples of album art that I can remember were on children’s records, because they might have included a painting or something else to illustrate the idea. But I think that I was the first to use painters, photographers and illustrators to do artwork on album covers. As for the second part of the question, no, in fact I didn’t go right into designing jackets. In fact, when I got to Columbia, I actually spent the first couple of months visiting the record factory in Connecticut because I wanted to learn how records were made, the whole process.

Heller: Just to clarify, Alex Steinweiss was indeed designing record albums starting in 1939...

Fujita: When I got to Columbia, Alex was at RCA, I believe. We met for lunch several times and would speak. The relationship was a friendly one, but I don’t think we talked a lot about design. There were a lot of changes going on in the business and we were both searching for our own answers. I would travel across the country speaking to record sellers. I would ask them how they sold records because I felt that we needed a new approach. In those days, clerks would spend a lot more time actually selling records to customers. We thought about how we could use images or pictures in a more creative way. We thought about what the picture was saying about the music and how we could use that to sell the record. And abstract art was getting popular so we used a lot more abstraction in the designs—with jazz records especially but also with classical when there was a way for it to fit, like with the more modern composers.

Heller: Many of your covers were done for jazz albums. Was there a difference in your approach from jazz to other forms of music?

Fujita: Jazz called for abstraction, a certain kind of stylization, using modern painters. Classical was different; we might have used more photography for those records. I would hire a photographer like Dan Weiner and send him to a Glenn Gould recording session because it was in the sessions that you could really catch the raw spirit of the performance. I’d look at the contact sheet, and if I saw one that really clicked with what I knew about the musician

or conductor, I'd say, "That's it!" Leonard Bernstein was going to do a jazz recording and I told him, since we're doing a jazz album, don't be afraid to dress casually, even in a T-shirt. His reply was, "I'm not afraid of anything!" It wasn't modern painting, but it was a modern approach.

Heller: Your work is decidedly modern, so who were your influences? Did you look to the generation before (i.e., Rand), or were the "monumental" modernist painters your guide?

Fujita: When I was going to art school I liked the work of Paul Rand, but also Tomayo, Klee, Picasso, Braque.

Heller: I recently saw a large amount of work by Jim Flora, and currently I'm working on a biography of Alvin Lustig—both contemporaries—and I noticed there seems to be a link between your paintings and theirs: abstract, glyph-like images, very improvisational. Do you feel you conformed to a moment in design, or were you trying to blaze your own trails?

Fujita: I didn't intend to blaze any trails but the things that were in the air influenced me. Before I did Dave Brubeck's [*Time Out*, featuring] "Take Five," somebody said that the group was returning from a tour of Asia. I had recently returned from the service with armed forces intelligence in the Western Pacific and I had been through East Asia, the Philippines and Calcutta, so I borrowed some colors and shapes that seemed to go with the mood.

Heller: You left Columbia in 1957—why? Steinweiss once told me that he just couldn't keep up with the changes in the industry. Did you feel rock and roll changed the ground rules of design?

Fujita: I left in '57 because I wanted to be something other than just a record designer and that's what I told Goddard Lieberman. I said that if I could sing or play the piano or any instrument I might consider staying but I couldn't do any of those things, so I left to go on my own. The New York designer's clique at the time spread the rumor that I had been canned, but that wasn't true. After leaving I had my own studio with a partner who came with me from Columbia. I was on my own for less than a year when I got a call from Lieberman, wanting me to return. The guy who replaced me wasn't working out, so I went back to Columbia for another couple of years but I told them that it would just be temporary.

This time the New York designers' clique took a different approach: they spread the rumor that I was responsible for canning the guy that replaced me, which again wasn't true. The simple fact is that I just didn't want to be known as someone that designed record covers. I wanted to do other things, like learn how to write.

Heller: What were the covers that are to this day most important to you? And why?

Fujita: I liked the cover for the *Threepenny Opera* that had a painting by Ben Shahn; I also liked the cover for Jimmy Rushing's record that had a painting of Rushing by Tom Allen on the cover; I'm also really proud of the *Time Out* cover.

Heller: You also did your fair share of book covers and jackets. What was it like when you did them? Did you have to navigate through a lot of marketing interference, or did you have a free reign?

Fujita: I didn't have marketing people making suggestions but I did do a lot of reading. And there may have been more direct contact with the authors than there is today, but I'm not sure about that. I liked working with authors because it's usually the author that sells the book. That's why I always wanted to have the author's name as big as the title. I did Updike's *Pigeon Feathers* for Random House and I got a call from [art director] Bob Scudellari—Updike had sent him a note that said, "Why don't you get that Japanese designer and try him out again?" I did three or four covers for him after that. I showed Truman Capote my ideas for *In Cold Blood*. I thought of a red hat pin that I stuck into the title of the book to suggest death or something like that, but he didn't like the color. "It can't be red, because it wasn't a new death, it didn't just happen," so I changed the color to purple and added a black border to suggest something more funereal. Capote loved that.

Heller: Once you started your own studio, did your approach change?

Fujita: I wanted to learn more about words—I wanted to learn how to write, so I went to Columbia University at night to study English literature and writing. After I left Columbia Records, I had my own studio across from MoMA. I had a couple of big corporate clients, but I was also doing a lot of work for book publishers. One day I got a call from David Finn of Ruder and Finn. He was interested in the concept of merging graphic design with public relations, and Joyce Morrow of AIGA had recommended me. The idea was to form my own company that would be a subsidiary of Ruder and Finn. That was when I started Ruder, Finn and Fujita. One of the first assignments that I found myself involved in was working with a group of designers in Israel to conceptualize, package and distribute Israeli products for export. This was the kind of total synthesis of commerce, communication and design that I was really interested in learning about and developing. I did this kind of work for clients like the FAA [Federal Aviation Administration], Norton Simon, Bristol-Myers, General Mills, General Foods—a lot of annual reports. I did this for about 10 years before changing the company to Fujita Design. I kept the same office but I had my own clients.

Heller: Didn't you design the logo for The Godfather films?

Fujita: Yes, I did the logo—I [originally] designed the book jacket for Putnam in 1969. By taking the "G" and extending it to the "D," I created a house for "God." The way the word was designed was part of the logo and so was the type design. So when Paramount Pictures does a film version or Random House, which bought out the book from Putnam, does another *Godfather* book, I still get a design credit. In fact, before the first *Godfather* film opened in New York I saw a huge billboard going up in Times Square with my design on it. I actually got them to stop work on it until we were able to come to an agreement.

Heller: How do you feel about the evolution of design practice since when you started and today?

Fujita: My father was a blacksmith. He had his anvil and hammer. One morning he went to his shop and someone had replaced his anvil and hammer with a welder's torch. I am fortunate to have worked in that period before the computer when we had to search for solutions with our own hands. When I did Updike's covers, the computer as a graphic art tool was not even in existence. I didn't just design the type for those book jackets; I drew it with my quill pen, using india inks and dyes. It's tough for designers today that have to use the computer. The first thing I saw when I returned to Parsons after having taught there for 11 years was the students' computers on their desks. The students weren't there, just their computers!

Heller: What about design did you enjoy the most? And hate the most?

Fujita: It started back with the work I did at Ayer for the Container Corporation of America. It was there that I really began to get a sense of what was possible with art and design: communicating the corporation's identity and message into something visual. I really enjoyed that.

What did I hate? There wasn't anything about actual designing that I hated.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).