Rian HUGHES' 500 Faces

By Steven Heller

1 Hughes draws inspiration from the comics of old yet has created a streamline, erotic style for today.

2 Hughes' Devious Fonts typefaces all have roots in the vernacular of the 60s and 70s. Clockwise from top are Absinthe (2004), Amorpheus (1995), Cantaloupe (2003), and Rouge sans (2004) past or present that included various type designers' faces.

Absinthe

Amorpheus

Cantaloupe

Rouge sans

One of the most frequently asked questions among type designers is, 'How many typefaces are too many?' Even if the answer were just 'five' – as Massimo Vignelli would decree, were he type commissar – there are so many thousands of passé and current faces available, that the question is moot. Most designers believe there will never be too many – the more the merrier means greater is the chance for unique expression. Rian Hughes is a principal proponent of this gospel, and a fervent typographic expressionist. This London-based comics artist, illustrator and proprietor of Device fonts has created over five hundred individual typefaces (and counting), with names like Absinthe, Amorpheus, Bingo, Bordello, Cantaloupe, Cordite, Cravel, Interceptor, Jemima, Quagmire, Rouge and Space Cadet among them. He started making type professionally in 1993, when AltSys Fontographer was fresh out of the box,

and has produced almost nonstop until now. Device Fonts, founded in 1995, which exclusively features his own designs, includes more alphabets than even the most prodigious foundries of the past or present that included various type designers' faces, not just one. So a more apt (yet nonetheless clichéd) question is, 'Where does he get the time, energy and inclination?'

Hughes began designing letters at age 12, after discovering his Dad's Letraset catalogue. Usually at that age, a young boy's interest turns to other kinds of reading matter. But Hughes, who was also smitten by the lure of comics, says he had 'an abiding interest in letterforms and a seemingly bottomless well of new ideas.' In fact, he said in an interview, 'I have many, many more sketches for typefaces than will ever see print.' He calls his compulsion for type 'a calling, a passion, and an obsession.' It was certainly a pathological impulse.
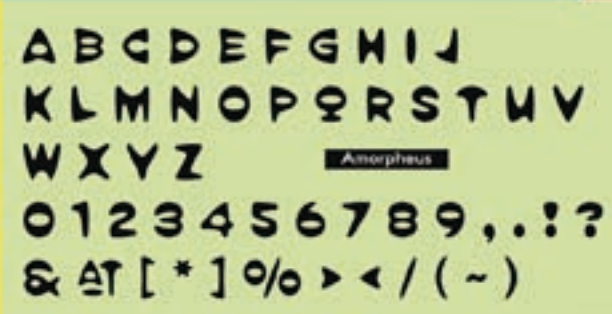
Comics loom large in his overarching world-view of design. 'I think my take on cartooning is not the same as many others'; I approach the comic's form in a stylised and graphic manner,' he explains. 'So I think there's a deeper, unifying principle that unites much of what I do.' He studied for a time at Birkbeck (a London university), majoring in physics. He insists that type design is 'a fascination with subatomic structure – looking for pattern, symmetry, form – and how that is repeated and explored over a series of images, designs and letters. And the expressive possibilities thereof.'

In the Device Fonts 'Ten Year Itch' tenth anniversary catalogue, patterns abound. The comforting monotony of repeating letters and diacritical mark geometries combined with the varie-gated visual blips of typographic style make for distinct modulations. From Roman to Gothic, from scripts to stencil, the Device catalogue contains an ersatz narrative, a sequential abstract tale writ with type – vessels of literal meaning. All Hughes' type is rooted in the idiom of cheesy pop commercial culture that the modernists fanatically tried to eradicate but today holds such aesthetic fascination for the young – and some old.

I asked Hughes to tell me about his most challenging design. 'Probably Paralucent,' he replied, 'just because of the number of weights.' Indeed, the variations of this no-nonsense sans serif display face come in condensed, ultra condensed, and light, medium and bold stencil versions. In the catalogue, it is situated just before DF Pic Format, one of a series of witty graphic icons Hughes has produced with incredible precision. When I asked him what the most successful typeface he's designed was, the answer surprised me. 'Roadkill just sells and sells,' he said, 'and I almost

didn't release it because I thought it was a novelty face with limited appeal. It derives from a photograph I took in Hong Kong and sat on my hard drive for five years before being released.' In fact, unlike most of Hughes' multiple weight faces, Roadkill comes only in caps, in only a single weight. It is reminiscent of that huge white painted lettering on the avenues and highways, announcing that an oncoming stop sign or school zone is but yards away. Still, the face is surprisingly versatile.

Out of five hundred plus designs, there must be some dogs. Scan-ning through the catalogue, for example, I stumbled on a few that fit that bill. One is Reasonist, a much too heavy brush face; another is Novak Spring and Winter, a seventies disco-inspired monstrosity; then there is Metropol Noir, a novelty that tries too hard to be a novelty. Hughes clearly had his reasons for designing them, so I asked what was the least successful face in his oeuvre? 'There are fonts that have sold just a handful of copies in ten years – but, as I say, sometimes the ones you imagine selling well don't, and the ones you think will top the charts fall leaden at the foundry gates. It's like releasing records!'

Okay, well, judging from that answer, Hughes loves them all. Yet is there a singular favourite? 'Blackcurrant is still one of my favourites. It's a very "me" face, and has also been hugely popular.' Well, that choice is also surprising. I, for one, prefer English Grotesque, a quirky variant of Gill, and Cottingley, one of the finest 40s/50s era scripts I have seen in a while, and Radiogram, which is reminiscent of a 30s/40s era radio or telegraph logo. But Blackcurrant, like Novak, is an overly decorative comic/ cartoon, game-show-logo face that feels like it's been done before.

Quibbles aside, Hughes admirably leaves no typographic stone unturned. The range of functional, sublime and even seemingly impractical faces is extraordinary. His retro aesthetic cer-tainly fills a need among contemporary designers to play with cross-cultural and hybrid-style typefaces. This derives from his early exposure to 60s and 70s headline faces 'that got me interested in the first place, so I'm producing the modern equivalent – not copying or resurrecting styles, but channelling that experimental attitude, that willingness to push the boundaries of style. I'm not a traditionalist – you'll not find me reinterpreting a Caslon or Jenson any time soon. I'm an experi-mental modernist.' As an experimental modernist, he has eclectic tastes. Hughes notes he greatly admires the work of Roger Excoffon, Ed Benguiat and Colin Brignal.

With this critical typographic mass, it would be safe to say Hughes was a devoted entrepreneur. Yet to the contrary: 'I would be if I was as focused on the selling and promotion of the fonts as I was on drawing them. It's more an unscratchable itch.' It's a pretty severe itch, judging by the size of his catalogue. Because he's been doing illustration work (most recently illustrating children's books with Geri Halliwell, as well as a book on 60s life-style illustration) and has just signed with DC Comics to draw comics again for the first time in 13 years, 'I've not had time to produce any new fonts for around 8 months, and I'm getting itchy.' Then what is next? 'There's a huge family, a condensed sans based on early American photo-type models – but I'll probably never finish it.' Given his track record, I'm sure he will.

How many faces are enough? Just ask Hughes.

Roadkill

ABCDEFGHIJ
KLMNOPQRS
TUVWXYZ
0123456789
.,!?&@*

Paralucent

Aa Bb Cc
0123456789
Aa Bb Cc
0123456789
Aa Bb Cc
0123456789
Aa Bb Cc
0123456789
Aa Bb Cc
0123456789
Aa Bb Cc
0123456789

Novak Spring

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee
Ff Gg Hh Ii Jj
Kk Ll Mm Nn Oo
Pp Qq Rr Ss Tt
Uu Vv Ww Xx
Yy Zz
0123456789
.,?&@()*

Novak Winter

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee
Ff Gg Hh Ii
Jj Kk Ll Mm ...

Radiogram

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg
Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm Nn
Oo Pp Qg Rr Ss Tt Uu
Vv Ww Xx Yy Zz
0123456789
.,!?&@*

Radiogram Tall

Aa Bb Cc Dd Ee Ff Gg
Hh Ii Jj Kk Ll Mm ...