

**Robynne Raye**

— Specialising in poster and identity projects, Robynne's had work exhibited in 12 countries and regularly lectures around the world. She also teaches design at Seattle's Cornish College of the Arts.

**Michael Strassburger**

— What Michael describes as his 'eighth-grade humour' has led to Modern Dog's lasting relationship with Blue Q and its range of products. He's received hundreds of awards for his work.

# Modern Dog

Seattle's Modern Dog is a small design studio with a big personality. **Ed Ricketts** discovers how they've brilliantly combined lunacy and creativity for 20 years

**"If you showed this to a therapist they would probably say, 'Yeah, they're making fun of designers,'" says Modern Dog's co-founder Robynne Raye.** "The layout looks serious but there's a lot of hidden jokes in there. We act real serious about it. We don't let on."

She's referring to *Modern Dog: 20 Years of Poster Art*, the Seattle design studio's long-awaited book showcasing their tangiest work from 1987 onwards. Created over the last eight months, it features hundreds of posters for bands, events, the theatre, self-promotion and more, many of them described with a withering self-deprecation.

"The approach was to keep the design held-back, because the posters are what we wanted to feature," continues Raye. "That's what most people know us for, after all. My business partner Michael did most of the writing, it's really funny. We kind of poked fun at the profession."

Yet if it wasn't for this evidence and the company's reputation, it would be difficult to guess that Modern Dog has been around for a couple of decades. Their punk design sensibilities could easily come from a couple of feisty 22-year-olds. As well as the posters, there's the logo work, packaging, T-shirts, advertising,

brochures and branding for clients as huge as Adobe and Coca-Cola and as (relatively) small as the Seattle & King County Public Health Department.

Through it all runs a dry sense of humour and a refusal to take themselves too seriously. Raye mentions one of the book's in-jokes: a picture of an old, tacky-looking shack in the middle of nowhere, which the pair would have you believe was their first office. "We added Photoshop signs such as 'Drive-through logos while you wait,'" she chuckles.

"There are a lot of poster books that you look at and they all look like that person's style. Ours isn't like that," adds co-founder Michael Strassburger. "It seems like the posters have come from different places, but they're all by one company."

Posters and other rock 'n' roll design work is only a small part of Modern Dog's output. As Raye says, "Most people want to hear about things like the HandzOff Anti-Masturbatory Cream for Blue Q – they don't want to hear about outdoor signage for the Seattle Aquarium. I'm not going to fight the stereotype."

The aquarium is one of the studio's biggest current clients. The work is largely handled by Strassburger, who also produces motion graphics for its interactive kiosks and even composes the music. Meanwhile, packaging and ideas work for Blue Q – best described as a novelty products company – provides a steady income, with Modern Dog receiving both a design fee and a commission on all accepted ideas.

Another recent client is Olive, an eco-friendly company that produces dog treats. Olive found Modern Dog accidentally through a Google search, but despite the initial misunderstanding →

01-02 Designed with deliberate simplicity, **20 Years of Poster Art** collects the studio's work in its best-known medium. Modern Dog turned down the first two offers from publishers and signed

with Chronicle because of its ability to create books that are desirable objects

03 A hand-designed poster for the Jimi Hendrix stage at 1994's **Bumbershoot** music festival, which includes a hidden love note from Mike to his wife

04 'I'm Not Gay, I Just Really Love Rainbows' – magnets designed for **Blue Q**



01

02



03



04

The layout looks serious but there's a lot of hidden jokes in there. We don't let on

Robynne Raye

05 The **Ass Kisser Breath Spray** for Blue Q, another example of what Mike calls his juvenile humour. Such one-off designs bring in regular royalties

06 Promo poster for a **Mika** gig at the Paramount Theatre, designed by recent Modern Dog employee Robert Zwiebel. The portrait is composed of hundreds of smaller illustrations

07 The infamous **HandzOff Anti-Masturbatory Cream** designed for Blue Q, promising instant relief

08 A gig poster for the band **Holy Fuck**, playing on the controversial nature of their name

09 Another design by Rob Zwiebel, this shoulder bag for Blue Q features sketches of 'Dogs We Know' on one side and 'Dogs We Don't Know' on the other



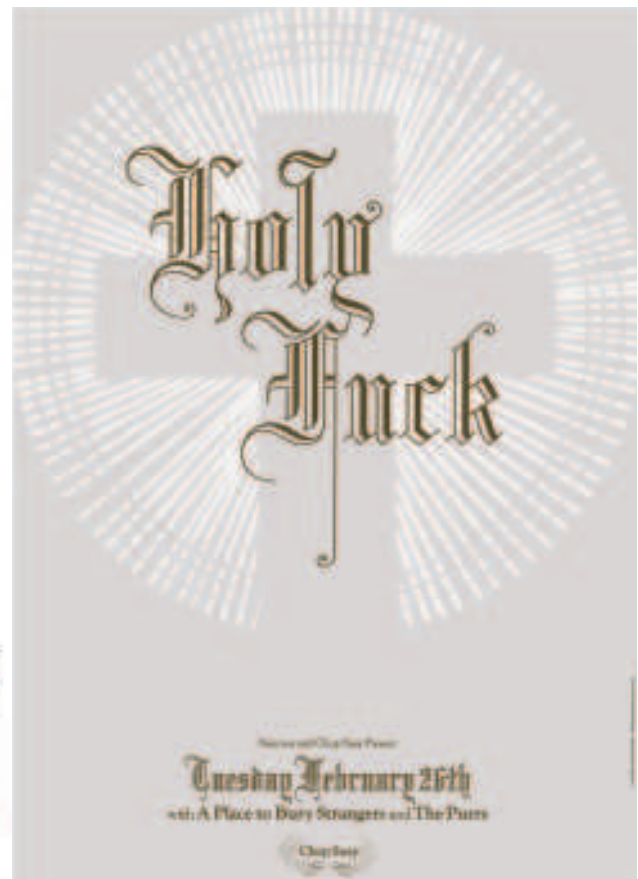
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**10-11** Signage and stationery designs for the **ACT Theatre in Seattle**. Modern Dog has a long history of producing theatrical posters; such signage also showcases their more corporate style

**A day in the life of Michael Strassburger**  
**8-9.30am** Get up with the family, drive to work then walk to the local coffee shop.  
**9.30am** Back in the office – go through emails and get up to speed on a Flash project from yesterday.  
**10am** Once coffee starts working, make three client phone calls and one supplier call.  
**10.28am** Argue with Robynne about font selection on a poster.  
**11am** Meeting at Seattle Aquarium.  
**12pm** Go out to lunch.  
**1pm** Back in the office – hunt down images of stretch marks and a peach for a Blue Q book.  
**1.15pm** Write more ActionScript.  
**1.30pm** Create some thumbnail poster ideas for

Leonard the Goldfish, a promotional campaign for Seattle Aquarium.  
**1.45pm** Hit the coffee shop again.  
**2pm** Make two client phone calls.  
**2.20pm** Research Puget Sound satellite imagery for Seattle Aquarium.  
**2.50pm** Give feedback on a logo job.  
**3pm** Go to dojo and practise Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu.  
**4.30pm** Back in the office – more ActionScript.  
**4.45pm** Start putting together the Leonard poster.  
**5pm** Illustrate figures and do some writing for a different Blue Q book.  
**5.40pm** Leave for home – family time starts.  
**11pm** Work on private projects and watch TV.  
**2am** Last email check, then sleep.



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→ the studio has done a range of work for the company including its website, a product line and email blasts.

These days nearly all of Modern Dog's work arrives through word of mouth and sometimes blind chance. This is possible because of a conscious decision to keep the team small: the studio has just hired a fourth employee for the first time since the 1990s. Reaching the heady heights of five or six people in the mid-90s, they felt as if things were getting out of control: "It just wasn't fun," recalls Raye.

"We went through a phase where we thought we needed to be more corporate and it was so... wrong," adds Strassburger. "You realise you spend most of your waking hours at work, and if you're not happy there, it's no good."

It was another insight gained through hard experience rather than any carefully detailed plan. The pair met in college, and when they couldn't find jobs decided to take out a business licence and start designing until they found a 'proper' career. "We had no business background or training," says Raye. They've spent the intervening 20 years learning on the job. Despite the timespan, Raye says that the only real change is that the two co-founders are more involved in each other's projects: "Now we're more comfortable with art-directing and suggesting things to do. I think early on we weren't comfortable telling anyone how to design because we were just learning ourselves."

With this increase in confidence, they have ended up lecturing regularly all over the world – at the forthcoming HOW

Design Conference in Boston, for instance – as well as teaching regular classes. It's fun and flattering, explains Raye, and good for self-promotion: "Even though we're in our mid-40s now, students like our work a lot, so that's really great and inspiring."

"One of our messages to students is that you choose graphic design because you want to design," adds Strassburger. "Some jobs you get may be horrible and may make you wonder why you ever wanted to do this, but remember it is possible to enjoy the job."

He cites this as an important reason for Modern Dog's enduring success, along with a refusal to follow fashion. In the early years Seattle and MTV visual culture was huge, and somehow the studio got lumped in with the general grunge vibe. When this design trend became more widespread, it inevitably fell out of favour, to be replaced with the kind of staid, ad agency-driven design more reminiscent of the 80s. Throughout these cyclical changes, Modern Dog simply got on with it. "We've come out where we started, just doing our thing, and because we've been doing it for so long, we're really conscientious about it," Strassburger adds. "We do the best for the client."

If he sees any downside to their working practices, it would be their historical reluctance to take wider control of a project, such as suggesting alternatives to a strategy from an ad agency that is clearly flawed. "Because we're so accustomed to not having much control, we tend to let it go until it's too late," he says. "There are a few jobs where I think they would have been a lot better if we'd just said, 'This and this isn't right, we think you should do this. That's probably our biggest flaw that we do over and over.'"

Still working, still learning – it's not a bad way to be, as the book ably testifies. And the future? "We don't really think about that," says Raye. "Twenty years ago, I had no idea there would be a Modern Dog book, and I don't know if there'll be another in 20 years. We're living for now."

To find out more about Modern Dog and their work, see [www.moderndog.com](http://www.moderndog.com).



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