



This page: "Bob" (2005) by Jim Stoten. Typeface, pen on paper.
Opposite: Typeface by A.J. Purdy & Luke Ramsey.

Rad Letter Office

Hand Job, a collection of handcrafted fonts, elevates the alphabet from pure functionality to aesthetic reverie. Not since *Sesame Street* have letters given us so much to think about.

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"My mom called me and said, 'I read your book!'" recalls design impresario Mike Perry. "I was like, 'That's funny, there are only five pages of text in it.'" True and untrue: the symbiosis of medium and message in *Hand Job*, the anthology of hand-drawn lettering and type Perry curated for Princeton Architectural Press, doesn't make for a traditional sit-down, straight-through read. But then again, give or take some charming cartoon characters and photos of cluttered workstations, the book is nothing *but* text.

Trying to determine just what *Hand Job* is—a picture book that happens to gloss semantically? a Sears catalog for colophon lovers? a graphic novel about the industrious denizens of alphabet town?—is only the beginning of the enchantments it offers.

If the 55 artists and designers represented all have indie cred under their fingernails, the book's sole unifying aesthetic principle is a devotion to the basic elements of language, a curiosity as to what letters can communicate besides, well, text. "For a lot of the people in here I think it's about portraying the poetry of the word, those special little word moments," says Perry.

Sure enough, alchemistic as it may sound, *Hand Job* demonstrates the magic that happens when the alphabet transcends its pragmatic use—when it turns into a cavalcade of friendly ghosts, or when the letter B is allowed to show off its myriad personalities. Leave legibility and speed to the desktop publishers—this is about

craft. "Today's logic says I'm being totally inefficient, maybe even painfully slow," writes designer Sparky Hardisty in the book's introduction, "but I get to reflect on the subject in the same way a painter does. The work is happening letter by letter."

Hand-drawn type is expressive, versatile, and harder to take for granted than its machined counterparts, and advertisers and publishers have caught on. The medium is enjoying a popularity and a respect it hasn't known since long before the 'blog replaced the 'zine, thanks to tastemakers such as Stones Throw and Morr Music, as well as perennially hated-on retail chain Urban Outfitters, whose place at the forefront of the hipster aesthetic owes a great deal to the designers represented in *Hand Job*.

Happily, Perry, who is commissioned to doodle for record and clothing labels as well as the *New York Times Magazine* and the *Wall Street Journal*, isn't here to proselytize or philosophize, just to pay tribute.

"When everyone you know is doing this kind of work, and you think it's phenomenal and want to celebrate it, that's why a book like this happens," he says.

In a way, that spirit of devotion, the joy and warmth visible on nearly every page, is what makes the book a small treasure. *Hand Job* isn't a catalog of lettering so much as a declaration of community: community between the Mississippi assistant art professor who copies her credit card bills by hand and the shadowy European consortium that numbers Umbro jerseys in day-glo tape, and community between the artist and the reader. "Let the baseline drift and wobble, and let the viewer know that a person made this," suggests Hardisty. "It can't be perfect, which is so much the beauty of it." That way of thinking, decidedly nonconformist in a Times New Roman world, is a welcome reminder that humanity can still thrive in the places we least realize we're looking. DANIEL LEVIN BECKER

