

ESSENTIAL FORMS

There is a consistent aesthetic found in everything that Dave King does. It can be seen here in this book, running through every page. His work distills the world into a series of essential forms: silhouettes, monochromatic objects, frame grabs from films, photographs of shadows, repurposed logos. Inspiration taken from art, advertising and comic books is boiled down into only what is necessary. While there is always humor, there is nothing baroque. It is a world reduced to the least amount of information needed to describe itself.

I met King in San Francisco in the early 1980s when he was part of the band Sleeping Dogs. Back then I was very interested in his artwork, especially the Sleeping Dogs posters that had appropriated images of Mickey Mouse and the Batman logo. In San Francisco at that time the typical punk flyer utilized a rough shredded and torn graphic approach. The Sleeping Dogs flyers were so different—they felt cartoony, clean and tight. Later I realized that he had designed the Crass symbol, which was becoming more and more conspicuous in the Bay Area, tattooed on bodies, and stenciled on walls and studded leather jackets.

In a way the Crass symbol, for which King is best known, is an outlier amongst the rest of his work. He is typically focused on a singular easily readable form, but the Crass symbol integrates multiple loaded images—cross, serpent, circle-backslash—into its final design. And its subversive quality stems from this juxtaposition of well-known images that morph into something wholly new. It is both enigmatic and familiar.

The stencil, in general and as seen here in this book, is a primal and effective tool. The positive space of the stencil itself is cut away, but then magically reappears as paint is blown through it onto the intended surface. Think of prehistoric cave paintings of hands, achieved simply by holding the positive hand on the cave wall, filling a mouth with pigment and spitting onto the "stencil." The result is the image of the hand, but also an image of negative space.

The stenciled pieces presented here are a lot like the work that King has made in other mediums—high contrast, graphic and readily visible from a distance. He is obsessed with the shapes and outlines of certain forms, and their contours

and volumes repeat themselves again and again throughout his investigations. In this book we can see both process and result, a working and reworking of the same forms to create subtle repetitions and variations on a theme.

King attended art school in South East Essex outside London in the 1960s. He later went on to work in advertising in London, first as an art director and designer and then as an illustrator from 1967 to 1977. His work always reflects this professional graphic design history, and the specter of advertising is apparent in everything he has done since. In fact, according to King, the design of the snake's head found in the Crass symbol reflects a promotional design piece he had done for a client, Yorkshire Television, for a series of TV plays called *The Seven Deadly Sins*. In this piece the snakes grew more twisted with every sin.

Like many British artists of his generation, King has an obsession with a certain type of American visual culture—much of it relating to the post-war period. There are many examples of this impulse in others: J. G. Ballard, Eduardo Paolozzi and Richard Hamilton of the Independent Group, to name a few. At the same time there is something undeniably British about King's aesthetic. After living in America for the last 40 years, it's as if he sees British visual culture the way that he once viewed American visual culture. Whereas once it was Mickey Mouse, now it's the teapot creeping into the Crass symbol...

In the late 1970s King dropped out of the London advertising world and went to live with some former art school friends in a communal living experiment in the countryside. This project would take the shape of what we now know as Crass. It is not a stretch to compare King's journey from advertising to punk, to that of the fictional character Don Draper from *Mad Men*—exiting Madison Avenue for the West Coast and Big Sur's Esalen Institute. As utopian dreams fade and new nightmares emerge, symbols and images of earlier promise remain as potent reminders. The Crass symbol is one of these. It combines powerful elements into a simple form meant to express something expansive. It is the distillation of a feeling—the promise of freedom, and the rejection of a system that never cared about you anyway.

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