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The prolific design hero can't stop creating. By **Jennifer Krasinski**

ED FELLA



Excerpts from Fella's sketchbooks.



“WHY AM I EVEN IN THIS MAGAZINE?” Ed Fella asks without a trace of irony, “I’m really kind of out of it now.” On an unseasonably warm afternoon in Valencia, California, he and I are clicking through JPEGs, leafing through notebooks, and talking about the scope and evolution of his work. We are sitting amid the neatly stacked (though filled-to-spilling) file cabinets, boxes, bookshelves and work tables that crowd his bottom-floor studio at the California Institute of the Arts, where the profoundly prolific Fella has taught in the graduate program for graphic design since 1987. As might be expected of a master and innovator of graphic design, typography and illustration, Fella is a powerful communicator and raconteur, who deftly weaves the story of his life and work—from a high school student who declined a full scholarship to art college, through his 30-plus-year career as a successful commercial artist in his hometown of Detroit, to his retirement from client-based industry at the age of 42 for an MFA program at the Cranbrook Academy of Art where he could focus completely on his personal projects. “As a commercial artist, I was pretty much anonymous,” he says, “on the other hand, I was always well-known for my experimental work.”

Now 73 years old, Fella seems hard-pressed to grasp how far-reaching his influ-

ence and his presence have been on legions of designers and artists for whom his dazzlingly

inventive typefaces, posters, fliers, sketches and collages have been objects of inspiration, devotion and imitation. “You know what’s ironic about that, or interesting,” he tells me, “is that I actually don’t know that that’s true.” No matter that he is the recipient of a bevy of awards or that his work is in the collections of the National Design Museum and the Museum of Modern Art. All this is history to Fella, who shows me some of his most recent works, including a lettering project for a young photographer’s book; pages upon pages of spare and haunting collages constructed from his vast ephemera collection, as well as random bits of detritus he finds and saves; and some of the thousands of densely



colored and intensely vibrant drawings that fill his hundreds of small sketchbooks. Fella chuckles as we read aloud from the sharply resonant lines of type at the center of his work—WHAT GOES AROUND DOESN'T COME BACK ROUND, JUST AS FOR ALL WELL KEPT and JOY SEEN MEANS OF CLAY—wordplays inspired by everything from puns to proverbs to poetry. “I was always good at a clever one-liner,” he jokes, “but I could never write a second sentence.” It is the convergence of so many disparate influences—including the history of design, avant-garde literature, comic books and post-modern theory—that blur the classification of Fella’s work, which hovers between

the worlds of commercial art and so-called fine art. “So far nobody’s been able to theorize the work or categorize it,” he explains matter-of-factly, “because there is no such category that encompasses art, poetry and graphic design, or typography and lettering all as a single practice.”

One of the slipperiest and most compelling of Fella’s present works is a series titled “A Counterfactual History Project (2011-1957),” comprising hundreds of sketches and drawings for paintings that Fella imagines he would have made, had he accepted the scholarship to art school and become a painter. The series is as conceptually complex as it is poignant, especially

coming from a man who refers to himself as an “exit level designer,” one who made a conscious decision years ago to make room for the next wave. “I’m not going to compete with this generation,” he shrugs, “but I’m going to continue inspiring them, working with them and enabling them.” As we continue to look through his sketchbooks, we stop to inspect a drawing or collage more closely, and to talk about how and what each might mean. I ask Fella if he can see a day in the future when he will stop making his work. “No, actually,” he answers, “I can’t,” and turns to the next page.

Jennifer Krasinski is a Los Angeles-based writer and critic, as well as the author of *Prop Tragedies* (Wrath of Dynasty, 2010).