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Vault49

Words: Mark Penfold

“Experimentation and collaboration sound good to us, along with vanity, excess and as many vices as possible.” Vault49 gives us the recipe for success...

Jonathan Kenyon and John Glasgow set up Vault49 in May 2002 and now, less than two years later, they've completed work for the likes of Miss Selfridge, EMI, Greenpeace and Orange. Now, boasting the kind of client list which would make established studios blush, the two founders are on the cusp of a dramatic relocation to New York and the launch of their first clothing range. Jonathan Kenyon explains the Vault49 approach: “We consider ourselves designers who have a talent for image-making. We don't distinguish between typography, illustration, moving image or anything else we turn our hands to.”

Kenyon and Glasgow met in the screenprinting room at London College of Printing. Thanks to a mutual love of the print process, their collaboration began: “It's something we're still heavily involved with now; it keeps us excited about design.” Kenyon and Glasgow set up the Vault49 studio straight out of college in 2002 with the intention of sticking close to their obvious love of the production process. They say: “The craft and quality of our work is probably what's most important to us. We've developed a way of working that we think is executed with unparalleled quality, beauty and detail.”

The finesse which goes into every piece of work the studio produces has quickly won Vault49 an international reputation, but it started small, as co-founder Jonathan Kenyon recalls: “We first gained fame/notoriety for our screenprinting and the fly-postering campaigns we undertook around the streets of London.” The street work led to two exhibitions in London, one at the Notting Hill Arts Club, and another at the Dazed & Confused gallery. “From this point on, everything seems to blur,” marvels Kenyon, “and it's

difficult to differentiate quite what happened to bring us to where we are today.

“As designers, we feel it's important to be involved in the craft of our work after the point at which it leaves the computer. We're fascinated by the effects and finishes that can be achieved through the print process alone,” explains Kenyon. These flourishes can be seen at work throughout the Vault49 portfolio: “It's fantastic to experiment with lithographic printing, screenprinting, letterpress, photography and so on, playing with varnishes, specials, die-cuts...”

To maintain a direct connection with the creative wellspring, Vault49 also runs a not-for-profit screenprinting studio: “When we inevitably have to spend time sat behind a computer screen, it's possible to become disengaged from our work. It's extremely satisfying to get covered in paint and to actually apply the image to a surface ourselves.”

This studio produced the fantastic Greenpeace ‘Save or Delete’ poster: “There was a UK-based timber company that was a particularly large culprit when it came to importing illegally forested Indonesian rainforests. We took apart their corporate logo and used it to create a typeface for the project to emphasise their involvement in the crime.”

First contact

The first major client to approach Vault49 was Express Fashion of the US: “We're still not entirely sure how they found us. At the time, we were so happy to get the commission that we didn't want to ask.” Express presented what has to be the dream commission: “They came to us and said, ‘We're going to give you a proper budget and we don't want to see anything till >

1, 2 & 3. Hangtags (also known as labels) designed for the US company Express Fashion. Express gave Vault49 the dream commission, insisting that it didn't want to see anything till the work was completed. “We produce our best work under these conditions,” says Jonathan Kenyon.

4. “We don't let anything leave the studio till it's finished in our eyes.” This album cover for US artist Katy Rose is a good example of Vault49's exacting standards.

5. Print design for FATAIM, a Japanese clothing company. Following the success of its clothing designs for other companies, Vault49 is about to launch its own fashion label.

6. One of a series of posters for the 2003 Isle of MTV events.

7. Another image created for Express Fashion, over which Vault49 had total creative freedom.

8. A poster commissioned by event management company Late Supper.



1. Vault49 didn't release this piece to Orange until it was perfectly happy with the result.

2. Designs for the spring/summer collection of Roule, Vault49's newly named clothing range. The project is currently V49's most consuming passion.

3. The cover from Vault49's beautifully produced promotional book, *Target Practice*.



Roule Fashion

Vault49 launches its own clothing range...

"It is such a joy to hold in our hands and wear something that we've created," say the founders of Vault49. Top of the roster at the company is the launch of the Roule clothing range. A natural result of the work that Vault49 has been doing for other labels, the project is also a labour of love for the two founders: "The only real guiding idea behind the images we're designing at present is to produce clothing we want to see on people and wear ourselves."

The plan is to gradually become self-sufficient, relying less and less on the vicissitudes of the design market: "We want to stop waiting for clients to come to us, and make ourselves the client wherever possible." Right now, that means there isn't a spare moment: "With these plans, we can always be as busy as we want to be in promoting and designing for new collections."

The first limited range of spring/summer women's clothing designs has recently been launched and can be viewed online at [w] www.roulefashion.com. The launch of the Website will be followed by the main launch in February at the To Be Confirmed trade fair in London. Keep an eye on the Website for more details.

it's finished'. It's this freedom which Kenyon and Glasgow feel brings out their best work.

The selection of 'hangtags' that Express received in return more than rewarded its faith in Vault49. "We enjoy creating pieces of work which communicate on many different levels: images which are arresting to look at, but through which you get lost in the detail long after your first impressions are gone," says Kenyon.

Working as a loose collective with Kenyon and Glasgow at its core, Vault49 values the freedom to collaborate: "For us, the most exciting designs are not produced in isolation, but in the middle of the buzz created by many minds and opinions working together." This means projects have great variety while maintaining the feeling of quality which is rapidly becoming a hallmark.

"We can spend a great deal of time working on the minutiae of a design, purely for the self-satisfaction of knowing we have crafted a design which is the best we could achieve," explains Kenyon. That doesn't necessarily translate into spending masses of time on

every piece: "It's possible to spend just a day producing a high-profile piece of work which couldn't be improved upon whether we spent a week or a month on it." By the same token, they say: "It's also been the case that we might spend weeks labouring over the detail in an album cover for a small independent artist."

This insistence on quality requires that "nothing leaves the studio till it's 'finished' in our eyes." A perfect example of this comes in the shape of Vault49's piece for Orange's current ad campaign. The '24 in their '24 hours to dispatch a replacement phone' ad, rides along on a cloud something like the one on which Buddha probably arrived in heaven.

Location location location

"It's a lifestyle choice as much as anything," says Kenyon, explaining why Vault49 is relocating to New York. He adds: "There's going to be a lot of wonderful new inspiration for us out there. Also, we've found that our overseas clients have been more ambitious in the projects and control they allow us with a brief, and we believe we repay that trust in abundance, producing our best work under those conditions."

The UK design industry is in the process of picking itself up from a pretty rough episode. While the recovery is under way, clients are still behaving as if the sky is about to cave in. Jonathan echoes a sentiment common among designers itching to make the most of a creative revival: "There's enough work for us, but the work available is often not nearly as adventurous as the designers who are commissioned to do it." **cap**



To see more examples of Vault49's work, visit [w] www.vault49.com and [w] www.roulefashion.com