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Zamora discusses secrets of graphic designers

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Regional

Zamora discusses secrets of graphic designers

Graphic design is a part of so many everyday items – from posters and billboards to Web sites and even food packaging – that it is easy to forget about the skilled artists behind their creation. These artists put their creativity to work generating new ideas for designs that “connect” with society.

One of these artists is Carlos Zamora, a Cuban designer and illustrator trained at the Advanced Institute of Industrial Design in Havana, Cuba. Despite his youth, he has a long list of accomplishments and has received numerous prizes and awards for his work. Today he is resident of St. Louis. He recently gave a presentation about his work to the department of art and design at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. For Zamora, graphic design is a profession that combines the beauty of art with the functionality of communication.

“It is about listening to your audience,” said Zamora. “The difference between art and design is that art is more of a monologue, so you express yourself. But design is a dialogue, in which there is a need for a client or an entity that demands a solution for something.” Because they work for clients, graphic designers don’t have the freedom that most artists have.

“We do have constraints, but we want them,” he said. “We need to set up limitations. It is not that you just get inspired and you say, ‘I am going to do this label for this water bottle.’ No, you have to ask yourself what the audience is expecting, how my art is serving the purpose of the audience versus the approach that it is only my expression towards something, which is what art does.”

Zamora explained that graphic designers develop important relationships with their clients. Together they discuss the needs for the design, the audience they are trying to reach and what message they want to get across.

“I try to come out with a graphic metaphor that represents what needs to be communicated,” he said. “Let’s say someone is doing this amazing jazz



Photo by Daniel Martinez

Carlos Zamora (right) talking to the author of this article.

tropical festival. Well maybe the design will be a saxophone coming out of a banana. That attracts cultural attention. You are creating an icon that takes all the meaning for the event that needs to be represented. People will remember that.”

As a Cuban-born and educated artist, Zamora said that he finds many differences in how his trade is practiced in Cuba and the United States. “Graphic design in Cuba, like a lot of things in

Cuba, has been kept isolated on an island,” he said. “We have cars from the 50s running in the streets. You would expect a graphic aesthetic that somehow is still kind of stuck. Not in a bad way because it is its own language, but you can see a lot of designers that do not have the diversity and variety of aesthetics that comes from exposure to a bigger scale. In the United States, there are so many schools of graphic design, so many tendencies, so much access to

information.” But he added that he has seen changes in the way graphic design is being done in his native country.

“In the 60s and 70s we had amazing posters with a lot of propaganda, a lot of civic information, like how to be a good pedestrian and a lot of cultural events,” Zamora said. “Nowadays, at least in the last 20 years, there is this song of silence on political posters, so there are no political posters anymore. You get a lot of posters about music festivals and

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theater.”

For Zamora, computer technology has provided many more possibilities for graphic designers. “Illustrators can have layers and explore them before printing,” he said. “These tools allow you to do things more efficiently, but the level of creativity is the same. You can see that when you see a contemporary poster that is exactly replicating the same method that was used 40 years ago. They are talking about the creative process that we always have had, such as flat figures, enticing metaphors and vibrant colors. But yes, computers help.”

Graphic designers, Zamora said, have to be in touch with current culture and know what symbols are going to be understood by what audiences. “There was this famous American Illustrator, Jim Flora, who said, ‘I just want to create a piece of excitement, I just want people to look at things for a minute and smile or make people happy.’ He was an illustrator, not exactly a graphic designer, although he did some posters too. What I am trying to do with my posters is to put my best effort to create a piece of graphic memory,” said Zamora.

When asked how he would design a poster to tell Americans about Cuba, he was very thoughtful. “If I had a poster, it would be against embargo or something like that because those will come,” he said. “Those posters are being thought about in a lot of minds. I would probably do something with a Marlin. Cuba represented as a Marlin that is rising and it has to be moving. Otherwise it sinks.”

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, “Segue,” can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.