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From Los Angeles: In the Good Name of the Company

By Matt Stromberg *March 12, 2013*

Between 1946 and the end of 2012, the family-run Colby Poster Printing Company produced brightly colored letterpress and screen-printed signs that promoted everything from concerts and carnivals to ballot measures and boycotts. Colby's simple but effective designs consisted of bold, sans-serif black typography combined with solid fluorescent backgrounds or its signature tricolor gradient—originally blue, yellow, and pink, it was updated in the 1970s to green, yellow, and red to reflect the growing popularity of reggae. The signs, which were generally no larger than 28 x 22 inches, compensated for their small size with visual punch. The color schemes commanded one's attention amidst the congestion of Los Angeles's visual landscape and from the vantage point of a moving car. Whether advertising tax preparation, a punk rock show, or a rodeo, Colby posters were ubiquitous fixtures on streetlight poles and fences throughout the city for over sixty years. In the process, they became as representative of the city's landscape as its sun-bleached, sprawling boulevards.

ForYourArt, in Los Angeles, pays homage to the Colby Poster Printing Company following its closure with the exhibition *In the Good Name of the Company*. Curators Jan Tumlir, Christopher Michlig, and Brian Roettinger have covered all three walls of the gallery's storefront space with a selection of posters from the company's archive. Interspersed are works the press printed for over two dozen artists that pay such reverent homage to the Colby style it is often difficult to discern between placard and artwork, which is precisely the point.

Starting in the 1970s, artists produced posters with Colby as a way to situate their art beyond institutional boundaries. As Tumlir notes, "[T]he Colby company has enabled artists easily marooned within the space of the studio or the 'white cube' to engage the life of the street. As such, their posters must be considered a form of public art, and one perfectly suited to the Los Angeles context in its inherent transience and disposability."¹ Such posters bridge the realms of vernacular and high art. Whether these works most closely resemble advertisement, ephemera, or artwork, they all stress the social function of the medium.

Many of these artworks play on our familiarity with commercial signs and their role as conveyors of information. Eric Junker juxtaposes marketing copy from conventional ads with cryptic phrases on *Free Your Monkey* (1997), creating a piece of absurdist poetry intended to induce a double take in a viewer. (Junker actually placed the broadsheets on poles around the city.) Similarly, Kevin Lyons's green, yellow,

& No to Seductive Imagery and Colour!”

Other artists reflect on the history of the poster as a protest tool. Cali Thornhill Dewitt's series *Modern American Opinion* (2010–12) features phrases such as “I Say No to Everything,” “This is not for the very rich pigs,” and “Cease 2 Exist” printed in black on Colby's bright backgrounds. They are negations of everything and of nothing in particular. Daniel Joseph Martinez, who gained notoriety when he created a museum visitor badge for the 1993 Whitney Biennial that read “I can't imagine ever wanting to be white,” has created a more nuanced take on contemporary angst with posters that proclaim “We are dogs in love with our own vomit” and “avant-garde mixed with blood” in red on pink. One can almost feel the populist and elitist strains fighting each other in the latter.

Such tensions remind one that these posters are physical objects in the real world. In *City Plan* (2012), Christopher Michlig has fabricated two sculptures using found posters; grids of brightly hued green and yellow blocks resemble anonymous buildings as much as blocks of type, linking the posters' origins in the studio to their life on the street. Emilie Halpern's *Valentine* (2012) is a two-sided print hung perpendicular to the gallery wall. Printed in black on white, the eight letters of the phrase “I Love You” are divided equally between both sides, emphasizing the poster's physical qualities over its legibility. For his *Untitled (Designs for Colby Poster Co.)* (2008), Peter Coffin substitutes Colby's tricolor design for his own colors. Devoid of text and rendered in unfamiliar hues, these works transcend their utilitarian nature and border on the sublime.

Coffin's and Halpern's contributions underscore the medium's dependency on text, which other artists utilize to turn the act of reading into a public performance and disrupt the cohesiveness of the printed form. In her series *A Spectacle and Nothing Strange* (2010), Eve Fowler prints excerpts from Gertrude Stein's experimental verse *Tender Buttons* (1914) on multiple posters, although each phrase takes on an individual meaning when separated from the others. The conceptual artist Allan Ruppertsberg contributes a slideshow of *The Singing Posters* (2003), which renders Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl* (1956) phonetically on two hundred posters, thereby encouraging viewers to read it aloud.

Ruppertsberg's work is arguably the most closely associated with Colby, but the same could be said of the work of Craig Stecyk III, one of the founders of the L.A. surf and skate scene in the '70s. Stecyk began collaborating with Colby in 1974, and his DIY, punk aesthetic found a fitting home there. His poster *Adios* (2012) was Colby's last edition, printed on December 31, 2012, the day it closed its doors. With this simple, unsentimental farewell, a major contributor to L.A.'s art scene and its urban fabric disappeared. Colby's subsequent absence only serves to highlight its importance in the city's visual landscape. Let's hope *In the Good Name of the Company* is only the first effort toward preserving this legacy.

***In the Good Name of the Company* is on view at ForYourArt, in Los Angeles, through March 23, 2013.**

NOTES:

1. Jan Tumlrir, “In the Good Name of the Company,” *X-TRA* vol. 15, no. 4 (Summer, 2013).