

Design Ranch

Gettin' Some Grit

BY ANNE TELFORD

W hoopee Ti-Yi-Yo Git Along Little Dogies..." Heading west from San Antonio, into the famed lush rolling hill country of Texas, you leave the city behind and encounter barbecue joints with their names painted on the roofs, cattle grazing in pastures and Boerne, with its quaint town square with white gazebo, gurgling fountain and all. Evidence of an America that seems to be vanishing. Already the shoulders start to relax from too much time behind a computer.

As soon as you pull into the gate that announces you've arrived at the Guadalupe River Ranch, you know the next couple of days will be completely unlike your normal life.

Driving down the road, the sight of Texas longhorn cattle, emu and sheep, gives more evidence that this will be a different "conference" experience. No big chain hotels with over-air conditioned ballrooms and crystal chandeliers invoking thoughts of *Phantom of the Opera*. No podiums. No PowerPoint presentations. No ponderous design-speak. No thin coffee and semi-stale muffins. This is one place you get to be hands-on, working side-by-side with noted designers, illustrators and photographers. There's art, playtime and naptime (hammocks beckon in the increasingly warm Texas afternoons). If you're doing it right, you can't help getting your hands dirty, and your spirit refreshed. Long views across the rolling green hills, dotted with oak trees, encourage exploration. The Guadalupe River is perfect for tubing. There are horses to ride and a spa where you can receive massage or aromatherapy, if you need a break from artistic endeavors.

April 18–21, around 100 people gathered for the fourth annual Design Ranch, which started off with a welcome from conference founder/master of ceremonies Marc English of Austin-based Marc English Design. Dressed in cowboy regalia, he stood between two monitors showing, what else, but *True Grit*. As John Wayne endured a gun battle, English set the stage for the relaxed proceedings of the next two-and-a-half days. Many in the crowd were repeat attendees. Joel Nakamura, who has attended every year, brought his posse from Santa Fe, and others from Nashville, California, New York and parts between, came for some design R&R. Many sponsors also repeated their

support, and seemed to enjoy the event as much as the attendees. Stephenie Theriot and Tania Gardère-MacLeod from Potlatch; Stora Enso's Patty Jenkins and Brian Woodard; Shirley Richardson of Williamson Printing; Heather Boyd from Fox River Paper and Donna Scoggins of Neenah Paper have been onboard all four years—an impressive record for sponsorship. Mark Fake of Sappi, came back for the second year and Padgett Printing was a new sponsor this year.

A stellar cast of characters—Anita Kunz, Eric Madsen, Steve Sandstrom, James Victore, the Amazing Hancock Brothers, Woody Welch and Judy Schulz—was on hand to teach workshops on everything from illustrated journals and handmade books to stenciled prints, photographs made without cameras or film and 3-D cardboard chairs. Achieving a rare synergy, each workshop seemed to lead effortlessly into the next, in organic fashion so that you could see how different techniques and approaches could influence every aspect of your work.

Steve Sandstrom fashioned innovative color workshops where attendees created their own versions of green, trendy green, orange and trendy orange, then assembled the chips into a personal color fan-guide. The synchronicity in colors between the four workshops was amazing. While we painted, Steve discoursed about color and its application and attendees shared their own reflections on color.

Eric Madsen spoke of drawing on experience to create a visual diary, showing examples from his personal diaries, then provided the tools for attendees to create their first entries and share with others.

Cathie Bleck, absent due to a sudden death in the family, was represented by friends, Austin illustrator Marc Burkhardt and head cowgirl Andrea Bond (Design Ranch chair) who ably stepped in to lead her mask making and marbled paper workshops. (Of course in true fashion, Cathie had sent ahead detailed instructions, while in the midst of everything else.)

James Victore's competitive cardboard workshops produced a variety of chairs sturdy enough to sit on including an electric chair, a toilet and a chair resembling a large bull's head.





San Francisco Bay Area illustrators Nicholas Wilton and Jennie Oppenheimer painted striking bird portraits of each other in Anita Kunz's anthropomorphic portraits workshops, which produced a variety of amazing works. The workshops ended with a cow patty toss—which allowed Steve Sandstrom to demonstrate his impressive throwing arm—and a closing roundup Saturday evening provided the opportunity for everyone to display their creations.

Nights were given over to delicious meals shared in the Ranch's dining room with its expansive views and relaxed ambiance; extended cocktail hours, thanks to Padgett Printing's Becky Spillane who generously hosted the Hospitality Suite (in snakeskin pants no less); dancing under the stars to live music—highlights were Joel Nakamura and Andrea Bond's polished and nuanced two-stepping and San Antonio-based band Two Tons of Steel's rousing performance.

Remember summer camp? (I only got to go once. There was a bat in my cabin, I made an agate necklace and obviously didn't write home often enough, because I never got to go again.) Design Ranch is a grown-up version. Instead of counselors you get instructors who are principals of top design shops and award-winning illustrators and photographers.

English, an AIGA national board member, explained: "I've been going to conferences for seventeen years, from the Design Management Institutes shindig on Martha's Vineyard, to ICOGRADA's Montréal gig, to Tijuana's first international affair, and Guatemala's first national design conference. I have found that intimacy, locale and quality make for memorable experiences. Design Ranch is a private party, if you will, and everyone is invited." Conferences are often political, fraught with different factions of philosophy, approach and aesthetics.

At Design Ranch, everyone mingled and appeared to have an equally good time. Groups of people danced and talked until early morning, sharing stories and making friends. The smaller regional AIGA conferences—in Austin, Minneapolis, Seattle, San Diego and other cities—offer a counterpoint to an emotionally and intellectually challenging conference like the AIGA National Design Conference in Washington, DC [look for a conference review in the November 2002 *Design Annual*]. Unfortunately, as a result of continuing difficult business conditions, attendance was down by around one-third this year. As Bond wrote in the conference program, "The past year has been one helluva ride."

Yes, it has, but as Bond explained, "Design Ranch is about reconnecting to our work and to each other in very fundamental ways. It's about uncovering the passion that long ago propelled us into creative careers. It's about testing our artistic mettle and rediscovering our grit."

Grit indeed. It just goes to show that a combination of hand-based craft, toe-tapping music, great food and a gorgeous outdoor setting, can provide a much-needed respite from bottom-line analysis and deadlines—not to mention hotel ballrooms. It's also a good catalyst for reflection and change. My Stetson's off to AIGA Austin. The calendar is marked for Design Ranch 2003 (April 10–13) and my check's in the mail. ■

One day at Design Ranch: James Victore rests on one of his workshop attendees' cardboard chairs and illustrators Joel Nakamura and Jennie Oppenheimer two-step under the stars. Photographs by Anne Telford.

Design Ranch poster. Laura Smith, illustrator; HeadGear: Creative, art direction/design; Jay Suhr/Andrea Bond, T3, writers.