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Andrew Linde

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In Between Seeing and Representing: An Exploration of Visual Expression

ANDREW LINDE



Andrew Linde is a junior majoring in Graphic Design.

This research was undertaken in the

summer of 2010 as an Adrian Tinsley Program Summer Grant project.

These studies were completed under the knowledgeable and encouraging Pr. Donald Tarallo. Andrew plans to pursue his Masters degree in Art and hopes to continue participating in research pertinent to the field of design.

Strong design solutions are rarely arrived at by chance and are often inconceivable without an evolutionary process of ideation. Carefully crafted messages that take into account how a reader interprets an image demand the skills of a designer who is in a sense a translator, visualizing abstract concepts in concrete form. My inquiry revolves around the process of representing a salt shaker through a series of visual studies using diverse methods of expression such as abstraction, reduction, and stylization. The intention was to investigate the question; *What are the limits and possibilities of visual expression in the representation of a simple object?* This project is beneficial to the design community as it reinforces the importance of hand, eye, and critical thinking skills working in unity in a profession taken over by the ease of the computer.

Method

Graphic translation is a specific area of graphic design and is as much design as it is art. The method evolved from the poster tradition of Switzerland and Germany in the early part of the twentieth century and combines attributes of both iconic and symbolic communication. A translation depicts a subject in a literal way like an icon and in non-representational symbolic ways. Graphic translation involves exploring different methods to represent an object using basic elements of point, line, and plain. It is a process of observation and reproduction, and it can result in images of instant recognition with powerful visual impact.

I conducted numerous studies over a ten week period interpreting the salt shaker through different techniques and mediums. I placed the object in different contexts to study its meaning. Each study was linear progressing from a minimal to maximal fashion resulting a wide and varied range of translations. This process helped me see variations comparatively and arrive at conclusions to then make choices for new translations. The work in its entirety is the conclusion and the illustrations are the answers.

17th century German writer and polymath Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe elegantly stated: "The hardest thing to see is what is in front of your eyes". After this experience I have learned to appreciate this truth. The eye constantly is capturing large amounts of complex information. When one attempts to translate onto paper something from the physical reality, there will almost always be details left out, sometimes major and in other circumstances minor

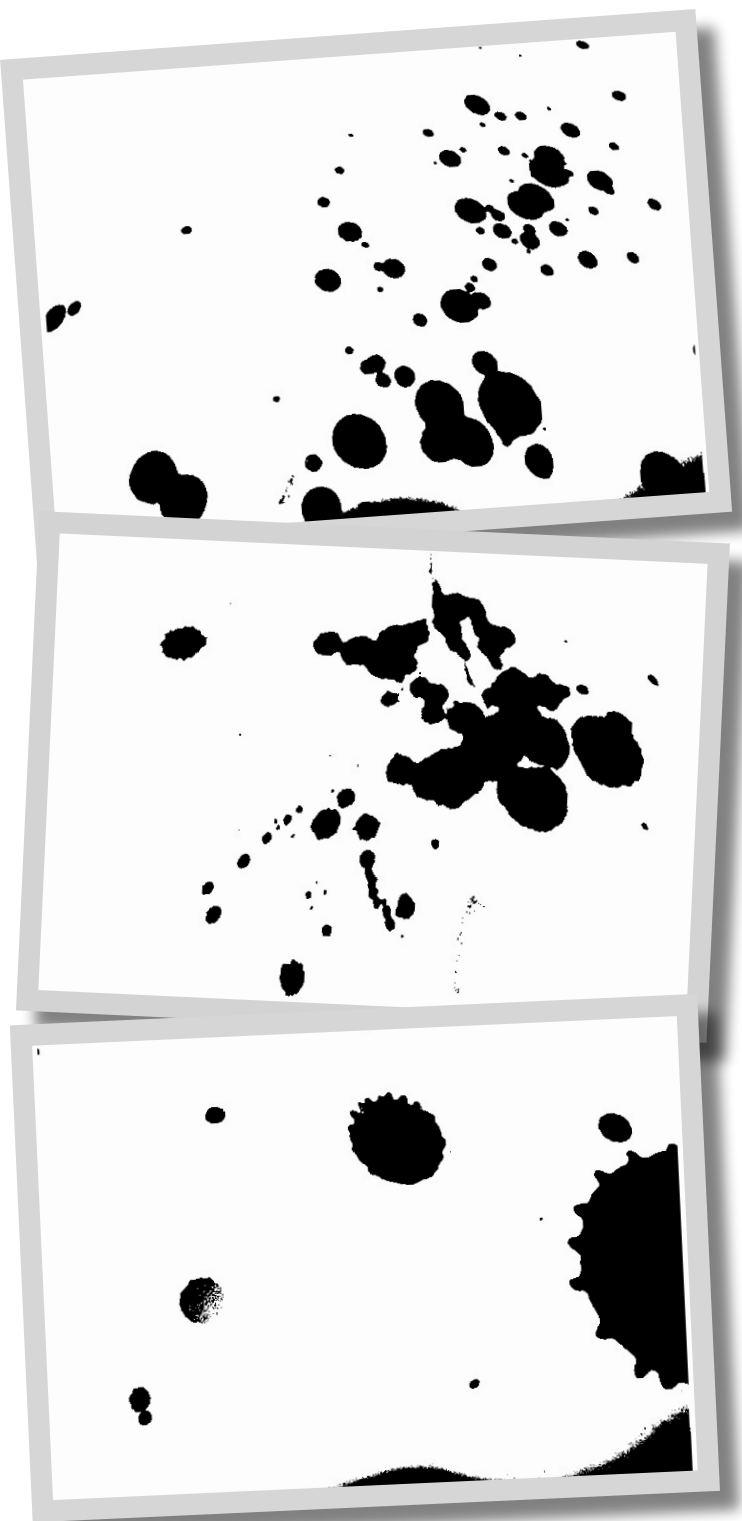
ones. With this in mind it becomes nearly impossible to record everything one sees using traditional mediums and from a designer's approach, this is where decision making comes in. A designer must decide what information should be stressed, left out, simplified, or exaggerated to best translate the three dimensional experience to paper.

Often an objet can be understood using only a few well placed markings extracted from or based on reality. Armin Hoffman (1977) states:

What and how much of things does one want to show? It can never be the goal to convey the most complete or correct replicas of objects since trite realism is boring or banal. The presentation should open itself up to the observer and allow him to turn find his own images and notion within it. He goes on to say "Every drawn design is a reduction or a compression. When he is drawing, the drawer omits, concisely or not, some aspects of the reality he sees. The fact alone that the representation is only two dimensional when compared to the reality he is trying to reproduce, or that color must be left out, shows how definite and decisive simplification can be. It is only in drawing, which occupies an isolated and underprivileged position in the curriculum, that thinking, inventing, representing, transporting and abstracting can be correlated." This quote inspired me to consider more critically what it means to translate and represent something from reality.

Why a salt shaker? The subject of this research could have been many things. I chose this object after much thought and consideration. It is a simple object and is easily identified, ideal for graphic translation. This provides an opportunity to represent beyond what is evident at the surface and discover renderings that can only be found through an extensive process of observing and visualizing it's material and structural qualities. Complex objects can sometimes interrupt the success of graphic translation, hindering effective visual communication and clear design. That is not to say any object is to complex to be simplified into basic forms and represented, but a salt shaker is basic in structure and function.

The salt shaker consists of a duality of material, glass and metal, these surfaces react differently to light. Both materials are reflective and one is transparent, each creating distinct reflections The metal top piece which is detachable has a bulbous head with a star formation of eleven small equally sized ellipses. In working these holes lent themselves to many uses such as the effect of light passing through them, or pattern making. The bottom glass piece is sharp and rectangular with



an inner blown section that is curved. The top of the glass piece opens at the mouth and has a thread running around its half inch neck. These ridges or threads seam up with two lips on the metal top piece. It was these features in addition to the overall form that I visually examined.

The majority of work within my research was created using traditional media such as charcoal, plaka, ink, and washes. Other work was computer generated. Throughout each study I recorded my thoughts, struggles, and conclusions. Analyzing my work involved reviewing each translation and studying the aspects making it visually successful and determining where it could be categorized in the structure of my research. One of the challenges (and at the same time benefits) of creative and artistic research is that each creation can lead to new unplanned ideas resulting in a process that continues to evolve. Early structural drawings and observations of the shaker helped me understand the basic structure of the object. I was able to see the object on deeper level and embark on translations of varying degrees of interpretation.

My research can be broken down into the following studies:

- Structure
- Material
- Simplification
- Stylized/abstracted
- Photography
- Integration of typography
- Indexical representation
- Narrative

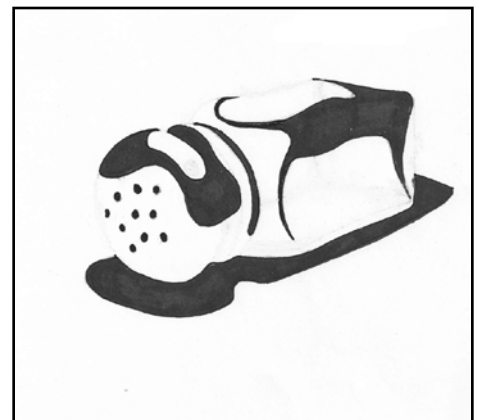
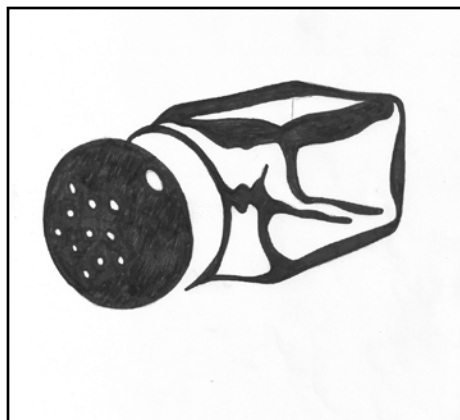
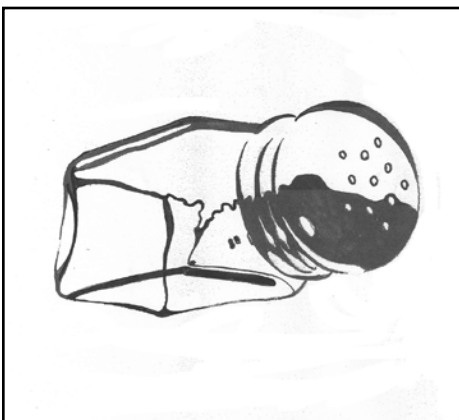
Structural Study

Everything that exists in the physical world has a basic form or is made up of a series of basic forms. Recreating or reproducing something realistically first requires a study of an objects' structure. A proper understanding of the subject aids the designer in his or her ability to produce a successful image using whatever method, style, or material. A good way to gain an architectural understanding is by drawing the subject from different views and in different ways to become familiar with it as a form in space.

The purpose of this first study was to draw the object to better understand its unique structure and shape. Information such as color, detail and lighting were set aside. Observing the individual pieces and proportions provided for an understanding of how the parts relate to each other and make up the whole. There were two general approaches used in structural drawing. The first was to start with a skeleton or understructure and add detail from simple to complex. In this approach basic shapes were identified. The other method required drawing an imaginary rectangle and working from the outside inward creating shapes that reveal the structure, much like a sculptor working to carve away stone to reveal the desired form. Using a combination of these two approaches, I was able to break a salt shaker down into its basic shapes. A structural drawing is intended to communicate physical form with an architectural foundation. The benefits of this method in a creative project are obvious in that the drawings become blueprints of specific angles and perspectives that can be used for later translations.

Material Study

These studies were aimed at gaining a greater understanding of how to create a realistic representation. A piece of wood, a coin, and an organism are all made up of atoms that are incredibly minute and when together they are packed so densely that they form a solid object. The reality we see and sense relies on the constant physical properties of the world (such as, color, light, and gravity. The world we see can be difficult to render in its complexity, depth, and detail. I restricted myself to translating the information using only black, white and gray. I focused on expressing the metal and glass, looking at and expressing how they react to different lighting situations and form distinct shapes that can alone define the object. In reference to the study of glass, Peter Olpe (1997) states, "The appearance of glass is rich with continuously shifting shapes and formal elements. A slight movement of the head is enough to uncover different reflections to inspire new ideas for drawings." This insight



helped me to think less about what I was drawing and focus on reproducing the abstract shapes and formed by the objects material.

Simplification

Simplification is a method of drawing or translating where the aim is to reduce as much information as possible. This approach can create strong images that resemble the object while allowing the viewer to fill in what is not shown. Success lies in eliminating the unnecessary while translating that which is needed for the viewer to understand the illustration. This may seem at first to be an easy method, but typically this is not the case. To simplify something successfully means to communicate generally the same idea but with less information. The challenge is to be so deliberate that in using only a few key elements the same information is conveyed.

Stylized Representation

Abstract art is a large net for many different genres and simplification could also be considered one of these. In general, abstractions are works of art that are often based on an object, concept, or thought from the physical world. But content is rendered loosely, and in unusual ways. It embodies the imagination of the maker. An illustration can have a small degree of abstraction, a large degree, or can be non-representational bearing no reference to reality at all. These studies were approached using basic shapes and forms. The shapes used consisted of ellipses, triangles, dots, lines and crescents. I worked sparingly with these forms and putting them in key places to define the object. The viewer can complete the picture while simultaneously seeing the drawing as an interesting image in it's own right.

Photography

Photography records complex detail, lighting, and a palette of colors making an image that appears similar to what one would with one's eyes. In working with photography I staged the salt

shaker in a context with other objects to create interpretative stories and unusual images. The object was interesting to work with the duality of material under the lighting situations created beautiful imagery.

Integration of typography

When thinking of a new direction for my research I spontaneously came up with the idea to use typography to express the salt shaker. Combining the letters "c" and "n" in varying orientations I used them to express the objects. I also used techniques such as outlining the type to distinguish the glass from metal.

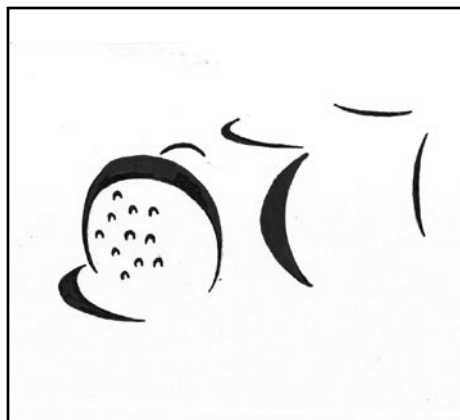
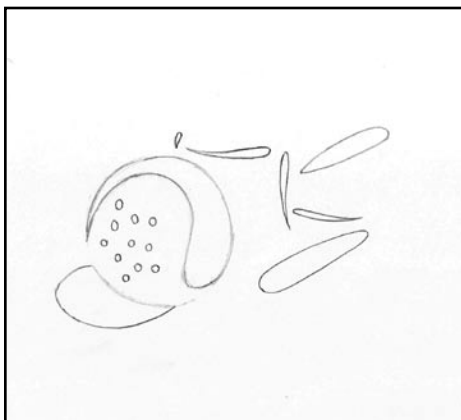
Indexical representation

Indexical representation is a form of expression where one thing refers or points to something else. An example of this would be footprints in the snow, they suggest something beyond what is seen visually - a person was there. Commonly an image in the viewer's mind will be instigated by an indexical design. The images were made by rubbing ink on the object and pressing it onto sheets of paper and by putting ink inside of the salt shaker and projecting it out of the top holes onto paper. These images point to the salt shaker but do not show it.

Many factors influenced the results. The distance between the paper and the shaker when ink exited the holes determined how the droplets made contact with the paper and dispersed. Gravity along with the amount of force applied played a role in the formation of distinct shapes. The results of this study contain some of my favorite images within this research.

Narrative

Working with the salt shaker got me thinking about salt in a bigger picture. Seeing beyond the object itself, a seemingly simple thing. This study is a narrative about the complex world of salt however I discovered that there is much more to salt than what is seen. A salt shaker's contents are a major part of life



from the enhancing of the taste of food to keeping every form of life on this planet alive and balanced. Salt is part of all life. I have decided to use my subject to its own advantage and think beyond visual representation and into the invisible dimensions. A series of panels was constructed that work together as one piece telling the visual story of salt using only imagery. The work is interpretative and visually complex but points back to my realization: salt is a part of all life. The challenge of this step was communicating this through purely visual means.

Conclusion

I experimented with new techniques, methods, and was pushed beyond myself through this project. I have grown on an individual level as a design student by undertaking this project and it has provided me with insight into the technical complexities graphic translation. The research opened my eyes to the variety and depth of communicative potential of a simple object and various media. Through producing a strong catalog of refined work. I have exercised expertise as a designer while developing analytical and organizational skills in visual research. This research is beneficial to the design community as it reinforces the importance of hand, eye, and mind skills

working in unity in a profession taken over by the ease of the computer. It serves as a reminder of the poetic words of Goethe: "The hardest thing to see is what is in front of your eyes".

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