

Volume 7, Issue 2

Identify off the Rack
Summer 2009

Ben Rak is completing his honours year in Printmaking. Born in Berkeley in the USA, Ben decided to pursue a degree in art at COFA to formalise his artistic training. During his studies he has won the Blacktown Art Prize, the Newtown NCA Prize and the COFA Art Scene Prize; he was selected as a finalist in the Burnie Print Prize, the Gold Coast Art Prize and Shoot the Chef. Ben is actively involved in the Papunya Tjupi printmaking program at COFA, a building project through which COFA personnel provide support for the artistic visions of the community of Papunya indigenous artists, and assists in developing their printmaking skills.

In affluent post-war America of the 1950s, a society of conformity developed. "Men in grey flannel suits" (Wilson 1955) became the norm, and advertising agencies began mass marketing to the members of a society who wanted to be "one of the Joneses". When the counterculture (hippie) revolution of the 60s began, so did a shift in the thinking behind the advertising industry. This shift has continued to affect the way brands are created to this day, because marketers began to sell youth culture, rebellion, and individualism. The capitalist system co-opted emergent counterculture in order to sell the notion of youthfulness to everybody.

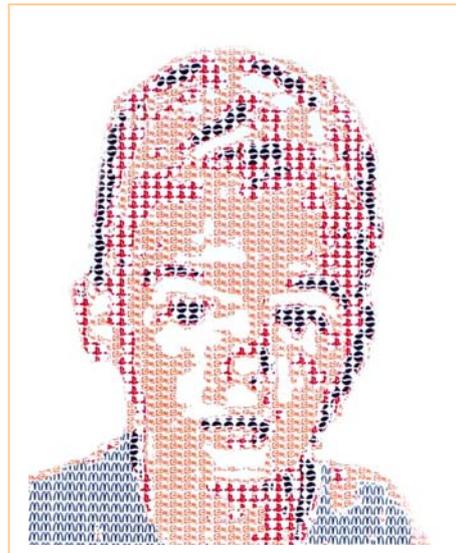


My work explores the relationships that have evolved between clothing, brands, and identity since the co-option of subcultures began. If clothing is understood as a form of identity in which styles and brands associate us with different groups, we must ask what effect the ability to change our identity by buying clothing off the rack has.

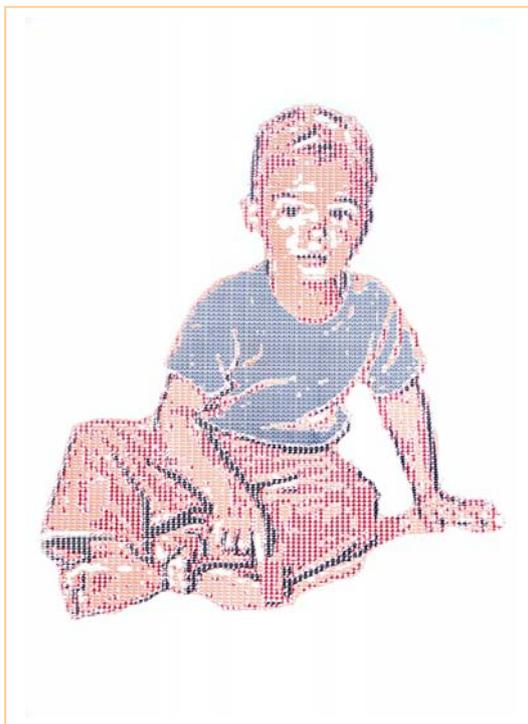
In 1987 Barbara Kruger created a photo print in which she stated "I shop therefore I am", equating her entire existence with her consumer habits; her statement offers evidence that the idea of acquiring an identity through consumption has been around for decades. My works have been looking at this same issue of identity construction through acts of acquisition and have evolved to examine more specifically the effect of clothing and brand consumption on our idea

of identity. Nowhere is this purchasable identity more evident than in a shopping centre. “In the shopping mall multiplex, the shopper-spectator tries on different identities in a space that defers external realities”.¹

Thomas Frank opens his book *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* with an explanation of how, prior to the 1960s, the advertising industry in the United States was controlled by what William H. Whyte Jr. called “organisation man”—a bureaucratic cog in the machine, whether he worked for the government or for private corporations. This was the man described in Sloan Wilson’s 1955 novel *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. Advertising agencies of the twentieth century were very different from their twenty-first century incarnation.



Today, we imagine these agencies as filled with hip individuals with their fingers on the pulse of youth culture’s styles and trends. In the past, advertisers tried to sell products to consumers who wanted to fit in, who wanted to be the same as the people around them. The suburban scene of the 1950s, in



which everybody had the same house, took the train into the city every morning, and mowed the lawn every Sunday afternoon, has been depicted on television and in cinema since then, as exemplified by the television shows *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-63) and *Father Knows Best* (1954-1960) and by movies such as Tim Burton’s *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), all of which reinforce social conformity.

As the hippie counterculture gathered momentum in the 1960s, conformity became practically a dirty word. People no longer aspired to become part of the machine. They wanted to assert their individuality, to express their uniqueness. This development brought with it two major changes that influenced the way in which products are marketed to this

day: advertisers started selling youth culture and individuality, and the men’s fashion industry grew to encompass a wider definition of fashion than just the grey flannel suit. As Frank notes, “virtually anyone who lived through the 1960s in America remembers advertising’s strange and sudden infatuation with countercultural imagery”²

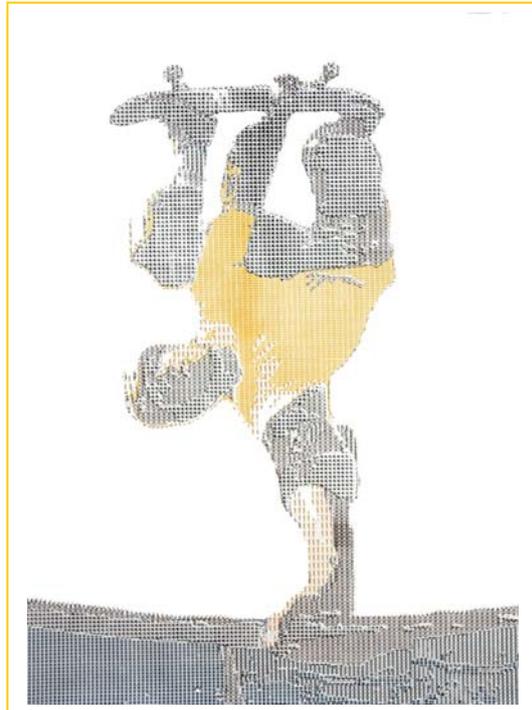
¹ Grunenberg and Hollein 2002, p.64.

² Thomas Frank 1997, p.105

Frank goes on to explain that during the counterculture of the 1960s, men's fashion diverged from the fairly standardised dress code for office workers and instead began to emulate the women's fashion industry. Men started wearing a more diverse range of clothing—suits in a variety of styles (such as mod fashion and Nehru suits), fabrics, and colours. This change in thinking and practice came to be known as the peacock revolution. Suddenly fashion companies and their marketing agencies had to keep up with the fast pace of fashion cycles as well as to be in touch with the “hip/popular” world to be able to predict what the next fad would be.

As a result, advertising developed a relationship with counterculture and subcultures, both of which were perceived as rebellious. Advertisers wanted to bank on the rebellious image of these cultures to make consumers believe that they, too, could be rebels with a cause:

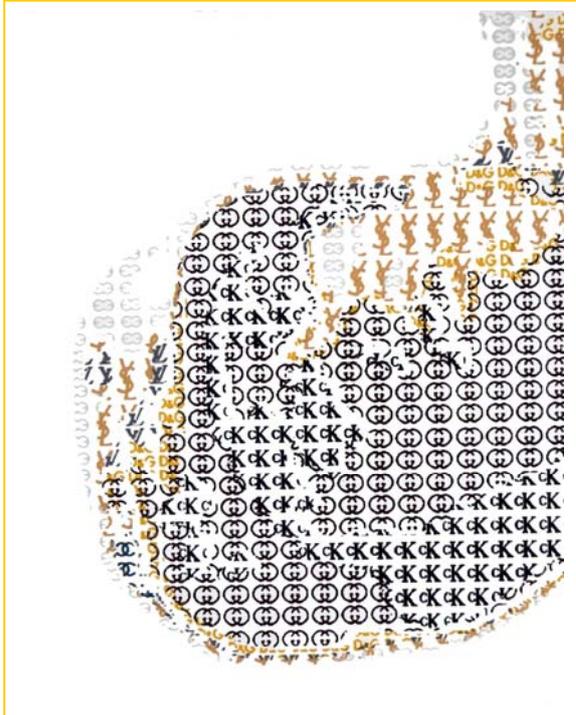
“The counterculture served corporate revolutionaries as a projection of the new ideology of business, a living embodiment of attitudes that reflected their own... Its simultaneous craving for authenticity and suspicion of tradition seemed to make the counterculture an ideal vehicle for a vast sea-change in American consuming habits.”³



In the last fifty years, many changes have occurred in the ways in which marketing functions. Nowhere are these changes more evident than in the clothing industry. Marketers capitalise on the values, symbols, and ideals of different groups, using shallow, clichéd representations. Marketing firms want the consumer to believe in the possibility of buying into these groups, creating a situation in which a person's choice of clothing no longer necessarily reflects the person's social status, geographical location, or cultural affiliations.

I began my research with feelings of anger and resentment towards the marketing world. Eventually I realised that complex forces are at work in modern society and that the marketing industry is not at fault for what I considered a co-opting of sub-cultural identity. In fact, there is a perpetual consumer cycle in operation.

³ ibid.p.27



In my work I explored the links between identity, clothing, and media narratives. My intention was to draw attention to the contradictory and often ironic nature of the relationship between consumer identity and consumables by subverting the iconographic imagery that is used by the marketing industry.

People are increasingly defining themselves according to their possessions. This trend is intensifying because of globalisation and the proliferation of shopping outlets that have made possible an increase in mass clothing production and sales; as a result, consumers are offered the opportunity to construct an instant identity of their choice.

However, it is my belief that one cannot truly create an identity through possessions alone. All that is created is a shallow, clichéd façade.

Works Cited

Frank, Thomas. 1997. *The conquest of cool: business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Grunenberg, Christoph, and Max Hollein, ed. 2002. *Shopping: a century of art and consumer culture*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz.

Images courtesy of the Artist

1. *'Decoded (Allstar)'*. Screenprint on paper. 56cm x 38cm. 2009
2. *'Decoded (Wayfarer)'*. Screenprint on paper. 28cm x 38cm. 2009
3. *'Sub-culture Vulture? (Invert)'*. Screenprint on paper. 106cm x 76cm. 2009
4. *'Sub-culture Vulture? (Invert)'* Detail
5. *'Son'*. Screenprint on paper. 120cm x 80cm. 2008
6. *'Son'* - Detail
7. *'The Best Surfer'*. Screenprint on paper. 106cm x 76cm. 2009

