

Eliza Williams witnesses a major 'Twitslapping' for
Martha Stewart at this year's Design Indaba conference

All that glitters is certainly not design conference gold

What do glitter, Twitter and roast ham have in common? To those attending this year's Design Indaba in Cape Town, the answer to this question is easy: Martha Stewart. The doyen of home furnishings made a surprise appearance at the conference, casting a firmly mainstream shadow over the otherwise eclectic line-up of speakers. Stewart was the talk of the conference before she even appeared ("Will she discuss her home life?"; "Will she mention jail?"; "What's she doing here?"), yet five minutes into her talk it was clear that rather than reveal anything illuminating, she was instead going to commit the most cardinal of speaker sins: the 45-minute-long sales pitch. Yes, instead of giving us an insight into how she built her multi-million dollar business, Martha told us about paint colours. And faux bois. And glitter – lots and lots of glitter. The glitter proved the breaking point for the audience – specifically the point at which Stewart showed a clip from her TV show where she glittered the aforementioned roast ham – and led to them administering a 'Twitslap' (a deluge of critical Tweets occurred both during and after her talk) and leaving in their droves.

Gleeful dissection

It is difficult to really say that Stewart's talk was disappointing, however, as it led to such gleeful dissection and group bonding amongst the crowd afterwards. Yet it shouldn't really be the light in which this year's Indaba is viewed, as alongside the painting tips, some genuinely insightful design ideas were also revealed. Some of these were fun too: graphic designer and illustrator Stefan G Bucher gave a lively talk that introduced the audience to the breadth of his work (which ranges from extremely ordered design for clients to his charmingly wild Daily Monster drawings and films) while also offering up some pithy philosophies for navigating life. 'Be useful, don't be boring, and you will never be hungry or alone' in particular was much appreciated by the crowd.

Thomas Thwaites, a recent graduate from the RCA in London's Design Interactions MA, who spoke as part of the graduate Pecha Kucha at Design Indaba, also took the audience on a humorous journey when he described his final

degree project, where he tried to build a toaster from scratch. As he took us through his seemingly hapless quest (which he did, in fact, complete) he provided an entertaining illustration of just how complex our cheap, throwaway electric goods are and how little we know about their origins.

Questions about how design could better serve the world arose in a number of talks, at times philosophically, other times practically. Bill Drenttel of Winterhouse explained his concerns regarding the over-branding of the world, and expounded the need for designers to instead be more deeply engaged with projects, and use their expertise to "increase social innovation around the world". He mentioned his recent participation with the Aspen Design Summit as an example of this, and particularly his enjoyment of being part of



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a conference that looked at outcomes rather than just showing work (a point that seemed slightly awkward in the context of a design conference talk where Drenttel was showcasing his work, but still valid).

Don't be so darned clever

A possible example of Drenttel's point could be seen in Pentagram partner Michael Bierut's talk that kicked off the conference, where he walked the audience through his experience working on The Library Initiative for the Robin Hood Foundation (shown in CR July 2006). The project saw a number of different architects design libraries for public schools in New York. Bierut was the graphic designer on the project and was amusingly frank about how he initially saw the pro bono work as "something nice but also something easy". "The architects were doing all the work," he said. "I could share in the glory without working too hard." In fact, the project became something Bierut was deeply involved in, but not at all in the way he expected, as he became more attached to the interior design of the libraries than the 'branding' that he initially thought would be required. He went on to explain some of the design philosophies that sprang from his experiences on the project, with "Don't be so darned clever" being his first lesson learnt. Wise words indeed.

Of the more straightforward show-and-tell talks, digital artists Troika, street art group The Wooster Collective, architect Alejandro Aravena, puppeteers The Handspring Puppet Company, and Piyush Pandey, creative director at Ogilvy & Mather Mumbai, all wowed the crowd at Design Indaba. There was much moaning among attendees about speakers who simply stood up and showed their work, yet when that work was great, it was still met with rapturous applause. Which perhaps brings us back to Martha. While her talk was unrestrainedly self-absorbed, it also illuminated the (rather conservative) intolerance that conferences such as Design Indaba have for the mainstream. With their treatment of Stewart, the Twittering delegates sent out a clear message to any other corporate speakers that may be tempted to appear there in the future – if you want to be in our gang, they said, you better have something interesting to say. 📱

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Below left: Martha, no, not the glitter: Ms Stewart addresses the Cape Town audience at this year's Design Indaba (conference hall shown below)



Patrick Burgoyne looks at the retailer's attempts to distance itself from its laddish past with a new ad campaign

The rebirth of French Connection



While French Connection's FCUK campaign of the late 90s cemented Trevor Beattie's reputation and shifted a lot of gear, wise old heads wondered what the long-term impact on the brand might be. The shock tactics and naughty wordplay burned bright, but once the joke wore thin, so did customers' appetite for the retailer. Of course other factors come into play in the success or otherwise of a high street chain but French Connection has endured a period of some decline since.

Though the humour remains, Fallon's new campaign feels like an attempt to scrub away the lingering whiff of Bacardi Breezer about the brand and distance it from its punning past. It leads off with two films - *The Man* and *The Woman*. A French-accented voiceover introduces both characters - he, Hoxton

hirsute and brooding (apparently, rugby player Sebastian Chabal was a reference), she, gamine (think Jean Shrimpton) and a bit distracted. The overall feel has overtones of Jørgen Leth's 1967 short film *The Perfect Human* ("Here is the human, here is the perfect human." It's on YouTube) with a dash of French New Wave. For *The Man* the humour is dialled up with some lovely lines such as "He knows not what sequins is" from creative team Selena MacKenzie and Toby Moore. Men can't be expected to take fashion seriously, you see, at least that's what ad agencies think. The films and the press and in-store work were all shot by Blinkk (a growing trend that we will return to in a later issue of CR).

There's an intriguing comparison here with Diesel. *Anomaly* is supposed to be the cool new model agency and recently took Sony off Fallon for precisely that reason, yet

Above: Print ads featuring *The Woman* and *The Man*, from French Connection's new advertising campaign by Fallon. Both the print and the TV ads were shot by married duo Blinkk

its *Be Stupid* campaign for Diesel is curiously old-fashioned in approach (see last issue). In contrast, Fallon's French Connection work, aimed at very much the same target, feels far more contemporary and sophisticated.

It won't be to everyone's taste but I like the tone of voice and the off-beat feel of it all. There's something reminiscent of Tomato's work about its combination of arthouse reference punctured by silliness - no surprise given that Dirk van Dooren now works with Fallon and drove the initial concept along with ECD Richard Flintham. Will it sell more clothes? Who knows. Will it do for the brand what FCUK did? No, but then that's surely the point. 📺