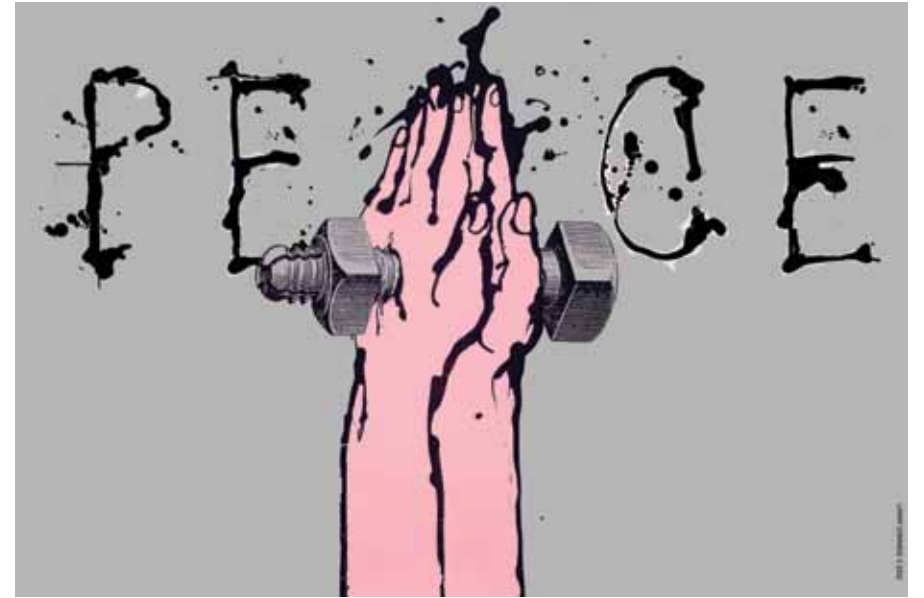


IN THE WORDS OF

LANNY SOMMESE



Born in 1943, East Moline, Illinois
Resides in Port Matilda, Pennsylvania

QUESTION: You have taught at Penn State for some time. Who has more seniority, you or Joe Paterno? He's got me by a year or two!

QUESTION: Many great designers have taught at some point in their careers, but you are one of a very few who have established an international reputation while teaching full time. How has your academic experience influenced your work as a designer? Issue and cause related debate...agitation...activism...maybe even anarchy are wired directly into the fiber of a college campus. Social? Political? Environmental? You pick. Unlike their practitioner kinfolk, design educators are supported by teaching and insulated by tenure, which allows them to leap headlong into the frays. They should! And they should urge their students to jump in as well. It's an essential lesson for them, an introduction to their obligation to use their skills in areas outside of the commercial marketplace. They should understand that design's flip - side is about more than making money. Designers should be idealistic. Designers should use their skills to change things, make them better and introduce them to the tremendous sense of satisfaction that comes from doing something that is in line with your belief systems even though they're not commercially viable.

QUESTION: There is no doubt that working with students for so many years has been a great source of energy for me. Your work is nearly always provocative, in your face, and at the same time frequently playful. How do you achieve that combination of outrage and satire? Many years ago, feeling that the primary function of poster was to

demand attention on the street, one of my teachers jokingly told me how to create an effective poster image. "When in doubt make it BIG or RED," he said. "Or, better still, make it BIG and RED...and maybe mix in a little SEX." With that in mind I always strive for my imagery to be confrontational (I want it to snap at you like a rabid dog). I've also found that humor can be an attention getter - it's disarming - inviting the onlooker to move closer. Language is crucial to my posters as well, because of the context the words provide for the images. Ideally, the viewer will use the text to grasp the meaning of the image. And my imagery is often filled with chuckles, metaphors, visual puns and illusions to entice the passerby to interact emotionally AND intellectually with the posters. Lastly my images always contain a dash (sometimes more) of my idiosyncratic way of looking at things.

QUESTION: As we become more established in our careers we often tend to become more risk averse. Clearly that's not true in your case. Do you think that teaching allows you to take certain risks that a strictly commercial designer would avoid? Yes! Out of necessity full-time design practitioners have to limit their pro-bono work so as not to impede their day-to-day commercial activities. It's different for design educator types. Except for the time they spend in the classroom their schedules are more flexible and their salaries as educators release them to take on the pro-bono jobs with no worries about how they'll pay the bills. Additionally, since university faculty members are expected to do research as part of their job, adventurous design teachers can turn the pro-bono work into creative expeditions – forays into uncharted regions of their personal

creative zones... ideally, running in the face of prevailing protocol and fashion, experimenting and mapping out previously untrodden ground. I've always made that a big part of my job description.

QUESTION: On many of your posters you share credit with your wife, Kristin Sommese, who is also a professor of design. How does this process work? Do you brainstorm together (Yes) or does each contribute ideas individually? Do you collaborate in the execution?
As a married couple that, in addition to designing together, teach together and are raising two kids and four cats together, our lives are full of events that offer myriad design opportunities. We also have clients. I have my own clients, Kristin has her own clients, and sometimes we work together. Yes! Sparks fly. Not a bad thing! Especially when that tension spills over into the work, giving it an edge, which is not there otherwise. Besides, making up is fun.

QUESTION: These days, many people seem ready to write the obituary for print design, especially for poster design. Do you feel that venues such as the *Katrina Project* and *Green Iran* have reinvigorated the medium? What is your opinion on the health of print design, and of poster design in particular?
The poster remains alive and I believe it will continue to thrive! That's not to say that the medium remains the same as before, or that it will not continue to metamorphose in the future. Posters will continue to find their way into the living spaces of the world where they are more than decoration or collectibles or graphic ephemera - they are emblems of the values, aspirations and dreams of the persons whose walls they adorn and cultural artifacts that mirror the societies in which they are created. (One boost for the poster has recently been provided by technology. In particular the large format computer ink-jet plotter printer. No longer is it necessary to print unnecessarily large editions of a poster in order to be cost effective. The new plotter enables the designer to replicate any poster design in different sizes and numbers as needed.)

QUESTION: Drawing is essential to your posters. What advice would you give students about the need to draw?
I try to instill in them that poster design begins with a relevant idea. That's what drives the image making process. Since I like to draw I tend to come up with ideas that require drawing. However, I encourage my students to create images that are appropriate to their idea no matter what the medium or style. For me it's about image making, not necessarily drawing.

QUESTION: How can graphic design encourage social change?
The same way I always have...pick a cause and make a poster. It can be effective. For instance the Iranian website bothered the Iranian government so much they shut it down and the hurricane project raised 50 grand or so.

QUESTION: How do you choose which causes you support?
Whichever ones are getting under my skin the most.

QUESTION: Do you ever feel nostalgia for the days of paste-ups, press type, and marker comps? NO! Except... maybe, the sweet scent of rubber cement wafting through the studio. I used to love that, which might explain the large green lumpy mass that has recently appeared over my left eye (Just kidding!).

QUESTION: What is your next project? I'm working on a logo for one of my corporate clients. Which reminds me that I never want to hear the word "branding" again.

