



Matt Siber, Cheese, 2006, Floating Logos Project.

**Matt Siber** is a Chicago photographer—part of a loose movement teasingly labeled “Chicagraphy”—and professor at Columbia College. I identify with him on many fronts, namely, altering the supposed reality of photographs to push the exploding medium forward, and a preoccupation with visual pollution and advertising. His work imaginatively depicts the very Midwestern landscape I was reared in, and shows it for what it is, not what it was or should be. He’s sharp as a tack, consistently two steps ahead of me, and has the unique talent of condensing big, foggy ideas into intelligible single-clause sentences. We corresponded over a period of weeks and chatted at his studio until I went cross-eyed.

**Alec Quig:** Why, of all things, focus on what I’ll lump together as advertising, visual pollution, and text culture?

**Matt Siber:** I can’t think of anything more relevant to our culture at this moment. Yes, we are dealing with wars overseas, a world economy on the brink of collapse and a historical presidential election to twist a glimmer of hope into an otherwise bleak global outlook. The thing about visual culture is that it has become ingrained in everything that affects us. We have become a population that gleans more information from visual literacy than ever before. Our sophistication in reading visual information has gotten so advanced that we don’t need text to get the message.

**AQ:** “Sophistication” is an interesting way of putting it. Reading visual information doesn’t require literacy in the standard sense, but a matrix of cultural awareness that we grow up accumulating.

**MS:** I remember a huge billboard ad a couple of years ago of a close-up photo of blue athletic shorts with three orange stripes running down the side. Simply and clearly Adidas, but no text or stylized, leafy logo to tell us that. When we take into account the ways in which we get our information – internet, infotainment-based news outlets, tabloid newspapers, etc.—it’s hard to ignore the relevance of visual culture. We are far more likely to get our news through short video clips and photographs than through reading in-depth

literary reporting on major events.

**AQ:** Which are open-ended and we can interpret any way we want.

**MS:** I don't think this is true. I believe that much of the visuals through which we receive our information are heavily biased and leading.

**AQ:** Well, you're right. I was thinking of flicking idly through news image slide shows instead of actually reading the stories, and how personal experience, not the journalist's words, can be left to shape one's interpretation.

**MS:** It's such a malleable form of communication. I would love to see a press corps that presents information in an open-ended way so that we can draw our own conclusions, but apparently we don't want that. We want the conclusions drawn for us. Visuals are usually presented in conjunction with written or spoken word which is used to further sensationalize and spin the story. How does this affect the way we understand our world? What is the responsibility of media outlets who submit to the ever-shortening attention span of the American public by opting for dramatic visuals over probing analysis? Most of my work to this point deals with the consumer side of visual culture, but it is all intertwined these days.

**AQ:** It is, and increasingly—I'd say the consumer side is the noisiest. But is advertising the villain?

**MS:** This is an interesting issue and I have a very definitive stance on it at the moment. In a word, my answer is no. As with gun violence, it is very easy to lay blame on the first thing we think of. I am not a proponent of guns, but I fully understand that guns are objects and it is therefore inappropriate to speak of them in terms of good and evil. The people who use them are a different story. I feel that the same is true for advertising. I don't believe that there is anything inherently wrong with the idea of advertising. In fact, I think it is 100% necessary because it allows businesses to make themselves known and it educates consumers about where to go to get the goods and services they need. We lose sight of this, but we really do need it.



Matt Siber, Untitled #34, 2006, The Untitled Project.

**AQ:** The tone of your project statements strikes me as that of a critical, objective investigation, but the work itself is as deeply subversive and premeditated as any slick ad. I suspect that not only is there something deeper and more visceral that's motivating you to make the work, but that your relationship with this subject matter is invariably more evolved than the rest of us who don't take the time and energy to think about it so critically.

**MS:** I don't necessarily have a broad-sweeping disdain for public signage and advertising, but on the other hand, I resent the fact that our way of life has led us to this point where the right dollar amount allows anyone to erect a giant message board to tell us what to do or how to think. It is more the psychological

pollution than the visual pollution that I object to.

**AQ:** Yes! You said it: “psychological pollution.” I don’t want to be reminded of the world that exists in billboards, commercials, radio ads, to always have that world bumping into my own very different world. But it is everywhere that humans are, inescapable, and that gets to me. But what seems to irk you more is when advertising starts to rub off on journalism. Because journalism, unlike advertising, is a veritable institution that in a perfect world would have enough self-respect to retain its dignity and sanctity.

**MS:** I’m not crazy about the visual impact either, but there is definitely a part of me that is enamored with advertising. When advertising is done well, it is smart, visually stimulating, and deviously clever. They are smarter than us. That is partly why I deal with this subject matter, to try and tip the balance back the other way a little. I don’t think that people will ever become immune to the power of persuasion through corporate marketing, but I think we can become smarter about it through awareness of how it works. My work attempts to deconstruct it so that we can better see what it is doing.

**AQ:** And photography is an effective, anti-pedantic, non-judgmental way of answering that broad, all-inclusive question: What are these signs, these advertisements doing?

**MS:** I certainly wouldn’t call photography non-judgmental. Quite the contrary: no matter how objective we try to convince ourselves photography is, it’s clear that it simply is not. Photography has always placed judgment on things, whether it is elevating common subjects to the level of art in Modernism or leveling heavy criticism on the world around us in Post-Modernism. Every photograph is a judgment simply by the decision to make the photograph in the first place.

I don’t believe photography’s effectiveness lies in its perceived objectivity but rather in its close relationship to a form of visual reality, or even hyperreality, to quote Baudrillard. Photography is indexical. It automatically gets the viewer thinking in different ways than if they were looking at a painting, even if they know the photograph is manipulated or impossible. We are better equipped to talk about the world with photography because it looks a lot like the world in the first place. As a culture, we have also been conditioned to see photography as a way of relating information about world events. It’s a communicative medium with a close visual relationship to the world around us, but don’t confuse this with objectivity.

**AQ:** I grew up driving back and forth under these huge signs. In college I wrote poems about aliens arriving on earth and misinterpreting them as board game-like markers of conquest and dominion. As if McDonald’s and BP were competing for territory and staking their claim with immense, eternally glowing signs.

**MS:** I love that—aliens mistaking signs for a giant strategy board game. Like little flags staking out their claim in a super-capitalist fiefdom. Although there are aspects of the *Floating Logos* project that could allude to extraterrestrials or science fiction, I don’t feel that this phenomenon is alien at all. To me it is distinctly human, and therefore extremely relevant.

**AQ:** It is. In August I interviewed with a local company that’s responsible for negotiating with zoning boards to put up bigger and bolder signs just like these all over the country. A kid my age was talking about the thrill of winning negotiations and the sense of pride he had driving around and seeing signs he had helped to erect. “Hey, that’s pretty cool, I’m responsible for that big sign being there. I did that.”

**MS:** Humans have been using these kinds of public displays since way back. Think about flags and other items that are meant to publicly pronounce ownership or allegiance. Shields and plumage on medieval knights also come to mind. As a species we seem to want to make these public displays in order to communicate with our fellow humans. The advertising is just an extreme extension of that. It plays right into your idea of aliens mistaking signage for symbols of political influence or ownership.



Matt Siber, BP, 2004, Floating Logos Project.

**AQ:** And now you're photographing these signs, restructuring things, and making your own new kind of sign with a very different message to communicate. How did the idea arise in the first place?

**MS:** I started *The Untitled Project* in 2002, in graduate school, as a way of exploring ideas of power relationships between large groups of people. I was reading Foucault and became very interested in his ideas about power. Public signage seemed like the perfect subject matter to target for this idea so I began by simply removing the language from photographs of urban landscapes.

**AQ:** It must be purging to make some sort of meaning from this jungle of text and image that seems so oppressively meaningless.

**MS:** At the time, I truly felt that this would be a relief for people, that I was lifting the burden of this barrage of public messages. As soon as I finished editing the first piece I realized that much of the communication was still happening in visual form.

The text pieces didn't come into play until six months later when I decided to do something with all the text I was removing. I tried a number of methods before deciding to base the text composition directly on the photograph. The solution was to flatten perspective to create more of a map of the existing text than an exact overlay. This method also allowed me to present more textual elements, as some signs were at such extreme angles that they would appear illegible if presented in perspective.

**AQ:** And the *Floating Logos* seem a natural extension.

**MS:** *Floating Logos* was started while I was working on *The Untitled Project*. I was already looking at signage and the Midwest is full of these really tall ones that didn't really exist where I grew up in New England. I started just by photographing them but didn't think the images would get people's attention. I really wanted people to consider these things but they are too commonplace for a simple photograph to make them take notice.

**AQ:** You're right. It's an elegant solution to huge problem, and not only to photographers. Many of the most relevant issues artists could grapple with today are mundane, repetitive, part of everyday life. Even though lots of people are doing it, and getting validated for it, straight photographs of this stuff just don't cut it.

**MS:** Yes—I felt that by floating them by removing the support structure, people would be compelled to look at them, perhaps reconsider them, during the next encounter. It also helped that the idea of a floating sign could take on all kinds of conceptual implications. If we think of the signs as symbols representing the corporations that put them there, disconnecting them from the ground gives them a power higher than us. It's interesting to think of this now while so many of these companies are failing. Would it be too cliché to bring up Icarus?

**AQ:** Removing the text from a cluttered photo and re-contextualizing it...it's another elegant, clear, effective idea. I would say the same of Ben Gest's amazing *Occupation* series. It's incredible that more people aren't doing this kind of work. Or that work like this doesn't come to one's attention as much as you'd think. Did the aesthetic of this project arise partly through an imperative to consciously evolve and distinguish yourself?

**MS:** I'm teaching a seminar at Columbia College called "Digital Media and A New Photographic Document." It deals with the idea that we can make work that has the quality and spirit of a document without using straight, through-the-lens photography. I love the documentary aspects of *The Untitled Project* because I'm not really taking away anything that was there. I'm only presenting it in a way that a straight photograph can't.

You can probably imagine that this idea still makes some people uneasy. I'm not actually trying to challenge the notion of traditional documentary photography—I am interested in expanding this notion of document. For the record, I do make a distinction between "a document" and "documentary." The term documentary comes with a whole set of implications about an age-old photographic tradition that, although problematic at times, is still very important and relevant.



Matt Siber, Mr. + Mrs. Smith Go to Paris, 2006.

**AQ:** Do you still practice much straight, classical photography, or would doing this feel, like, neoclassical to you?

**MS:** I'll admit, my attraction to and interest in straight photography is not what it used to be. Like most people working in the photographic medium, "the decisive moment" was what drew me in in the first place. The more historical work I saw, the more I realized what geniuses these people were. How do we top the work of Bresson, Levitt, Evans, Friedlander, etc.? We don't. We can continue in their tradition and approach new subject matter but that act of making photographs remains mostly unchanged. I realize this comment alone opens me up to a flood of criticism from traditional shooters, much of which is perfectly justified.

**AQ:** And that calls to mind two things: the relative youth of the medium and the unforeseen possibilities, invisible but still lingering, and the turns it has taken since the advent of digital, Photoshop, Flickr, etc. It's the craft and distribution sides, really, that have become democratized, and I think people who aspire to the condition of artists are going to be obligated to broaden their ideas of how to make, use, and propagate photographs.

**MS:** I am more concerned with the ideas being presented than the way the artist chooses to present them. In successful art, the approach will agree with the idea. Sometimes the approach is the straight photograph. When it is, we have this huge wealth of history to draw from. How can you make street photographs without taking a page out of the books of the Modernist mid-century photographers? Of course, we will emulate their strategies, but now the strategy can no longer be the idea.

**AQ:** You said it. Spot-on.

One thing I can't get away from, though, is giving equal consideration to form ("the way the artist chooses

to present”) and function (“the idea”). You said you’re more interested in the ideas being presented. I think a good third of stuff out there concerns itself with a relevant idea, but is visually uninspired. Another third is beautiful but vapid. The stuff I like and find interesting, I guess, falls in the area of overlap. If I put it this way, do you still give precedence to the function side of the equation?

**MS:** Of course, you’re absolutely right. I didn’t mean to imply that the technique or presentation isn’t important. It’s more important than ever. To me, the best art is a combination of conception and execution. It is the idea in conjunction with the way it reveals itself to us. The great thing about visual art is that it can say things that words cannot. By this token, the appropriate technique and presentation is paramount to communicating an idea in an interesting and provocative way. I guess what I am less enamored with these days is photography for the sake of photography. We already know how to do this and what it looks like. Now, how are you going to show me something new?

*For more from Alec Quig, visit his website: <http://www.alecquig.com/>*