





Underground inspirations

Illustration: ILK

Lawrence Zeegen meets the studios soaking up their cultural surroundings to create fresh styles of apparel

There's a burgeoning global subculture for designers and illustrators to break from commercial conformity, and delve into the underground world of street fashion.

Non-fashion-trained designers can utilise their own raw talent, spot a gap in the zeitgeist and design for one-off, bespoke fashion pieces, limited-edition tees, buttons, badges and hats – and then rapidly, through a network of online and offline retailers, have their wares hit the big time almost overnight.

With so many players in the game, no longer can fashion or textile designers remain ahead of the curve without investigating and instigating new modes of self-expression through apparel design. Design it, print it, upload it, flog it and post it – simple as that.

The humble T-shirt has become the canvas of choice for a new wave of designers, and unsurprisingly this brave new world of undercover urban street fashion has gone global. Across Europe, North and South America, and Asia, inspired by their own cultural surroundings and creative peers, designers are creating works that reflect their unique corner of the planet.

Forging their own visual signatures and styles, these are the studios with one finger on the pulse and another finger in the pie. Over the next few pages we introduce the movers and shakers of the underground apparel elite, who are prepared to break rank and break free. →

Singapore – Mojoko

Singapore is distinctly and irresistibly Asian – a mismatch of the shockingly modern and truly historical, where skyscrapers and huge shopping malls jostle for space with hawker food stalls and traditional temples. To term it multicultural is an understatement. Where else can one experience slices of India, China, Malaysia and the Arabic world all within a 10-minute radius?

And surprisingly for a place with a strict global reputation, infamous for cracking down hard on street graffiti and a zero tolerance policy to chewing gum, Singapore has an amazingly diverse street scene. It is perhaps this inspirational clash of cultures – Chinese, Tamil, Bahasa and English – that provides such a rich mixing pot of visual languages. Whatever the cause, against the tide of bland commercial corporate design, there is genuine evidence of an emerging underground design scene being showcased within the independent boutiques, galleries and pop-up stores now beginning to populate Singapore.

The urban backdrop of Little India, probably the most chaotic part of Singapore and a cultural counterpart to the harsh concrete and steel of the business district, is home to Steve Lawler, aka Mojoko. Lawler doesn't fit into any neat stereotype. With a past that spans studying and working at Fabrica, the Benetton-sponsored research and communications centre in Italy, and design and art direction for OgilvyOne Interactive in Singapore, he now divides

his time working at Kult on big brand projects, and editing and publishing *Kult* magazine, which was launched "to combat the very commercial scene here". All this while also running his own project, Mojoko – a small compact studio "covered in spray-paint and silk-screens with enough room for myself and an assistant".

The move into apparel design has been a gradual one – Lawler, looking for outlets for his work and recognising an ever-increasing interest in Mojoko illustrations, prints and paintings, shifted production methods in a very hands-on way to creating a clothing brand. Currently just a couple of boutiques, Loft in the hyper-trendy Haji Lane area and the newly opened 8Q Museum, stock Mojoko.

"This is really because I prefer to operate via live silk-screening," Lawler explains. "I'll turn up at parties and flea markets and screenprint in situ, customising people's jeans and T-shirts." This very manual approach to his work is a reaction against Lawler's previous incarnations as an art director and digital designer: "After working in front of the computer for so many years, I guess I just yearned for canvas and silk-screen as a way of exercising my body, as well as my mind," he reasons.

Mojoko's images and designs are inspired and informed by the clash of cultures that surround him. "It's the crazy packaging, the neon typography, the B-movie posters, the extraordinary juxtapositions – I'm just trying to make sense of it all, trying to create a sense of order and harmony."

Skyscrapers and malls jostle for space with traditional temples and food stalls

01 The **Mojoko mantra** – "documenting universal ideas, in a way that can be understood universally" – directs the design aesthetics

of the studio's graphic cut-and-paste digital collages for print, screen and apparel

02 Immersed in the rich culture of **Singapore's Little India** district, Mojoko combines comic art, kitsch packaging and B-movie melodrama



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Netherlands – MAKI

The Dutch are a laid-back people; chilled-out and open-minded is their default setting. Across the land there's an appreciation for art, architecture, music, literature and general culture. Mix this with a unique, slightly surreal, sense of humour and irrepressible lust for life, and the country's burgeoning underground subculture of apparel designers might well be expected.

The common meeting of minds in the Netherlands, where artists work with musicians and alongside writers, could easily have been the catalyst for the formation of design studio MAKI. Yet it was actually the Art Academy in Groningen that brought Maathijis Maat, graphic designer, and Kim Smits, illustrator, together in their final year of study.

Mixing, matching and merging styles, influences and self-expression is the backbone of MAKI's output. "We're mostly inspired by other artists," admits Maat. "We've a pretty diverse client list – from banks and newspapers to snowboard brands and online T-shirt shops." And it was online, through Threadless, that MAKI's move into apparel design first occurred: "Threadless is fantastic. We try to keep submitting new stuff even now. It's fun, and we sort of started our career there."

Now, much of its apparel output is sold online and the duo has a deal with David&Thomas, a cool Dutch online store, to create several T-shirt designs each month. "They're mostly funny, based on bad puns – not necessarily the best designs, but fun to make," they explain. "We also work for Poketo, Funkrush and Weezer too." The MAKI portfolio continues to expand across different media despite its home-grown counter-culture aesthetic, creative approach and philosophy. Skateboards, snowboards, sneakers, buttons, wallets, kid's books, shop exteriors, clocks, underwear, posters, record sleeves, ad campaigns, packaging and even tattoos have all been touched by MAKI since its formation in 2003.

Is it possible to work for mainstream clients, keep an underground sensibility, dabble with apparel design

There's a unique, slightly surreal sense of humour and a real lust for life

and remain in the loop creatively? "We work from home – a 1970s tower block on the outskirts of the city – and we move constantly from desk to sofa. This works for us – we live where we work and we work where we live," admits Maat.

"We don't chase being cool, though we are out and about at openings, gigs and expositions, and we mix with other artists, designers, illustrators and photographers. There is a scene of course, but for us, designing for apparel is just an extension of what we do."

MAKI beautifully typifies the contemporary Dutch approach to design – understated, cool, calm, sophisticated, and all executed with a knowing smile.

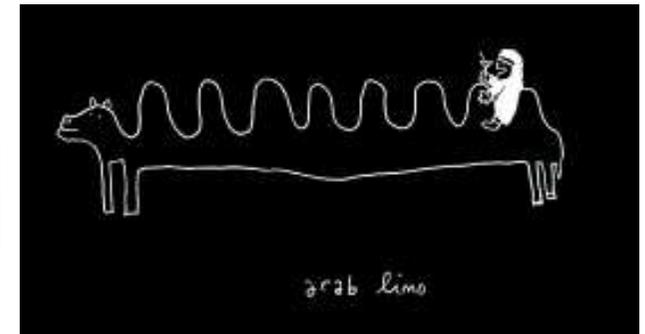


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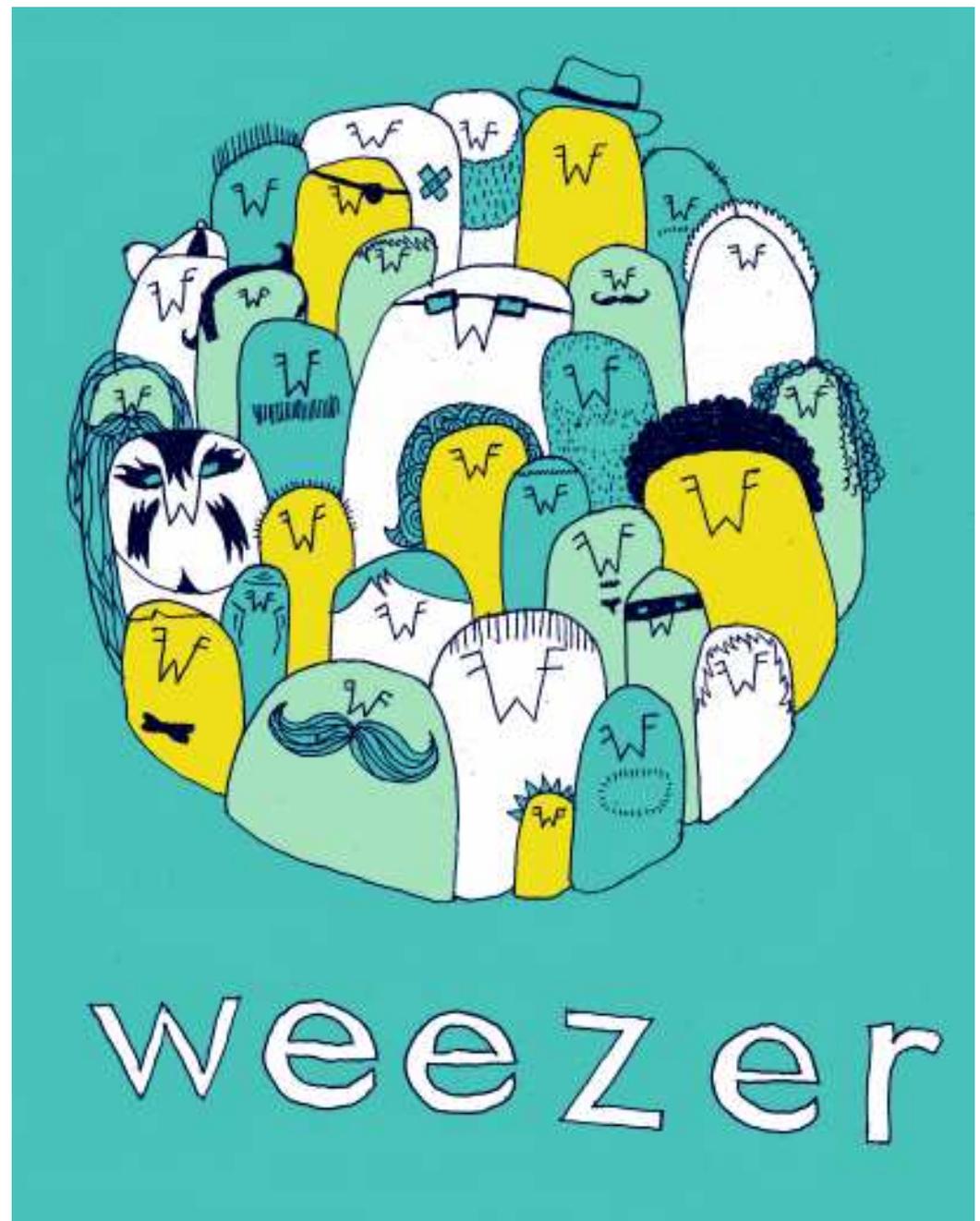
03 MAKI's studio in Groningen, Holland is housed in a **1970s concrete tower** and acts as a base for the team's creativity

04 Arab Limo: a neatly executed illustration for a David&Thomas tee – a regular creative outlet for MAKI's **graphic wit and illustrative humour**

05 A tee for US band Weezer. The duo's **whimsical approach** helps MAKI stay underground whilst working for mainstream clients



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East Coast US – Gluekit

Gluekit may exude East Coast cool, but tapping into a zeitgeist isn't the motivation behind this studio's output: "Our name, Gluekit, references the cut and paste mechanics of historical graphic design processes," explains Christopher Sleboda, one half of the team. "We're interested in the juxtaposition and re-composition of elements, and how these can transform, challenge and subvert expectations and messages, revealing the unanticipated." It's more a complete philosophy, than a fashion/fad-led fixation, which dominates the Gluekit rationale.

Not that Gluekit takes itself too seriously – the studio catchphrase, indeed motto for life, is 'Get Sticky With It.' This from a partnership that met while studying at Yale University. Perhaps it's exactly this mix of a carefully considered design philosophy and approach with the humour of the throwaway one-liner, that gives the studio its fashionable edge.

Influenced by their urban surroundings in Guilford Connecticut, midway between NYC and Boston, their love for creating designs for a wide range of apparel comes in contrast to their regular client briefs and projects.

"We love brick motifs, graffiti, spraypaint blotches, scrawled type, neon colours, white type on black tees, computer graphics," enthuses Kathleen Sleboda, the other half of this husband-wife combo. That's right, after meeting as students at Yale and then working together in partnership since 2006, the two brains behind Gluekit cemented their lifelong partnership earlier this year.

Gluekit is just one of numerous East Coast outfits that span graphics, illustration, photography and fashion – the look is urban, cool, with a hint of irony, a dash of abstract, and a vintage twist. And there's a national and international market for the wares these studios produce. "We like to keep it local," explains Chris, "but we've shipped to nearly every state in the US, and now we have a network of customers across Russia, Scandinavia, Australia, Greece, Japan and Saudi Arabia." There's a definite thirst for East Coast cool, it would seem.

Gluekit is aware that it's ahead of its game. The demand to keep moving forward in terms of their creative output is a constant pressure, but the studio isn't letting the stress to remain a part of the current vibe dictate its next move. "We'd like to design some sweatshirts, since it's getting kinda chilly here. Creating something to wear, whether a shirt, or a button or a bag, is always a way of creating a graphic conversation though," explains Kathleen.

And what does the future hold for Gluekit? "We'd like to be a B-Boy dance crew, moonlighting in the summer as a Japanese noise band," says Chris. Watch this space.



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The look is urban, abstract and cool, with a hint of irony and a vintage twist



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Familiar Gluekit graphic motifs run across this messenger bag design for Timbuktu, entitled True Love, and the related T-shirt design

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For its own online store Gluekit designed and produced the Fragments Bag, a single-colour print on a cloth bag – simple, graphic and edgy

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For Japanese online store Graniph, Gluekit's Money T-shirt shows the duo's classic East Coast approach to bold graphical statements

East London – FL@33

Outside of Berlin, so urban myth would have us believe, East London has the highest proportion of artists living and working within a concentrated urban area. They once flocked to the area because of the promise of cheap rents; now they arrive to become part of a rapidly growing scene. Galleries, pop-up stores and independent boutiques have multiplied year after year and Clerkenwell, EC1 – once home to the left-field fashion elite – has almost been vacated as the continued push further east has gathered more and more momentum.

But Clerkenwell, despite having lost its crown to the younger and altogether hipper Hoxton, can still punch above its weight. Here, a slightly more mature design scene – think ageing heavyweight rather than upstart bantamweight – has been going from strength to strength. And it's here that you'll find FL@33, a multi-disciplinary visual communication studio, founded in 2001 by Agathe Jacquillat from Paris and Tomi Vollauchek from Frankfurt.

More importantly, FL@33 is home to its sub-brand (or sister company) Stereohype – a graphic art and fashion boutique, which opened its virtual gates in 2004. Since then it's gone about disturbing the peace by acting as a platform for a global list of designers and illustrators, enabling them to promote their work and have their artworks and apparel produced, featured and marketed. Vollauchek explains the philosophy behind the brand: "We are constantly

featuring new and emerging designers and ensuring that we make frequent updates. Thus we can guarantee that the Stereohype range remains appealing to its critical and demanding customers."

Stereohype's annual button badge competition and design initiative, mysteriously named B.I.O., invites participants to create 'mobile mini-canvases' and, to date, has resulted in over 500 different designs. Available to purchase online or through a network of tip-top stockists that include Tate Modern, the Design Museum and ICA in London, plus Colette and the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the company has clearly opted for cool outlets to get products to their customers.

Stereohype products are a creative outlet for a studio intent on working to the guiding principle of the 'power of three.' "It's a theory that we learnt about while we were both studying at the Royal College of Art," explains Jacquillat. "It is simply the balance of intellect, skill and emotion and underpins our design approach."

Equally inspired by both their immediate environment – "Clerkenwell is certainly an inspirational and enjoyable place to live and work in" – and their regular travels abroad to Switzerland, Italy, France and Germany, for both business and pleasure, the FL@33 founders maintain an enviable life/work balance. Neither leading a scene, nor following one: it is clear that Jacquillat and Vollauchek will continue to forge a distinctive creative direction of their own.

Artists are flocking to the area to become part of a rapidly growing scene

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FL@33's own Stereohype label recently created a range of T-shirt and shirt designs based on animals, including squirrels, rabbits, dogs

(pictured), roosters and ducks. Screenprinted on 100% organic cotton, the range **caters to all the family**, with baby, child and adult sizes

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Some of Stereohype's 500-odd badge designs. An **open call for entries** helps source emerging talent as well as more established names



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Mexico City – Masa

It's an interesting time for Miguel Vásquez, aka Masa. Born in Caracas, Venezuela and educated in his hometown at PRO Diseño Visual Communication School, now Masa is on the move – currently setting up his new studio in Mexico City, a distance of over 2,200 miles from Caracas.

"I began in Caracas as a self-taught designer. I was designing posters and flyers, and was very influenced by my late father, always himself involved in painting, drawing and design," explains Vásquez. "But Mexico is a great place for new opportunities, for a good quality of life and awesome people. There is a huge amount of local talent and new ventures going on," he enthuses.

In Masa, what was initially a "playground for creative ideas" has grown to become a truly vibrant studio. Its high-standing industry status is reflected by its global client list of impressive companies, for whom the studio creates visual solutions with a strong emphasis on Latin American pop and contemporary street culture. "I work to blend forms and ideas, and produce crossovers between urban and folklore references," explains Vásquez, and it is from the South American streets that many of these references emerge.

Mexico has street culture positively rising up from its dusty streets, no more so than in the capital itself – the economic, industrial and cultural centre of the entire nation. Mexico City is home to almost 19 million people, making it the second largest metropolitan area in the Americas, and the third largest agglomeration on the planet. More than any of that, it is one big, bustling centre of culture – home to more museums and theatres than any other city in the Spanish-speaking world. What better place for a designer to set up home?

Masa's ability to seamlessly work on self-generated underground apparel projects, which are influenced by his surroundings, and then resurface to produce graphics for Adidas, Burton, Nike or any other high profile brand, is certainly paying dividends creatively. Whether it be his intense colour

Mexico has street culture positively rising up from its dusty streets

treatments, the use of radical and vibrant patterns, or simply Vásquez's unique drawing ability, there is a vibe within the studio's output that is impossible to pin down to a 'house' style, yet the work exudes Latin style, passion and ethos.

"Work in the things you like the most and love," enthuses Vásquez. "Be the best, and be happy with it. By doing the best, everything else will follow as a

consequence." It's this lust for life that provides the lifeblood and inspiration for the Masa brand. Through Miguel Vásquez self-expression meets self-determination to create an outlet that's fast taking Mexico City by storm.



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Mixing up his own brand of **explosive, Latin-influenced visuals** from his country of origin – Venezuela – with his adopted home

in Mexico City gives Masa's output a distinct quality. These snowboard gloves for Burton combine streetwise cool with contemporary patterns

Computer Arts Projects _December 2009



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Masa's snowboards for Rome SDS have a distinctly 60s flavour, and the **Aztec-inspired details** add a touch of sophistication

www.computerarts.co.uk