

Chuck Close: Painting as Performing Art  
Lana Riggsby: Holding Her Ground  
Maya Lin: One Driving Idea  
Koichi Sato: Mr. Sandman  
St. Luke's: Making the Irrelevant Relevant  
All Over the Map with David Byrne

The International Magazine  
of Design and Communication  
January / February 2008  
ISSN 1075 / CN 52000





*Lana Rigsby: Holding Her Ground* Walking to the reception desk at Compaq's offices outside Houston, Lana Rigsby quickly gathers up badges for her associates from a security guard. Moments later she greets the client, turning on the easy-going charm. There's enough Texas in her voice to betray her polished, big-city appearance. Her ambition is totally camouflaged. Lana's the homegirl now, but she's ready. At the conference table Rigsby is certain of victory. She unfolds her carefully prepared presentation in clear, precise statements. All the details have been stage managed; the problem's been analyzed, picked apart, and carefully reassembled. She's skillful and thoroughly practiced. I couldn't help thinking: if Rigsby was the Los Angeles District Attorney, instead of a designer, O.J. Simpson would now be cooling his heels on death row.

**When it comes to work, those who know her say she's capable of intense concentration, nearly insane energy, and blistering impatience. Watching her wait for an elevator, a former employee says, is both humorous and painful.**

What Rigsby doesn't know is that this big opportunity will eventually fizzle, then evaporate like drizzle on a hot rock. Too bad, but experience has taught Rigsby to move on because there are better things ahead. At 39, she's had enough success, in fact, to seriously question the value of her life's work, and to understand that the game is changing. Success these days hinges on content formation and business strategy much more than aesthetic finesse. Design is different now, and so is Lana Rigsby.

Weeks later in Chicago, Rigsby is sitting in her hotel suite drinking coffee. Her legs are crossed on the coffee table, and I'm looking at the soles of her cowboy boots while she tells me about a press check gone bad. Everything worked out fine, but the war story opens the way to deeper issues. "When I was 32, just starting my business, I never questioned whether my work was meaningful," she says of her firm's early days. "I was in the moment, cranked up all hours of the night, solving problems, creating the best design that I could. By 39 you've either done that, or not. I've done it, and now I'm much more interested in coming to grips with design's potential to fundamentally influence the success or failure of a business venture. And that has everything to do with the role I play in choosing and developing content."

"After so many annual reports," Rigsby goes on, "I'm convinced that P&E ratios are wholly determined by perception. And that perception is shaped by the image and presentation of content. I want to shape and articulate information that really makes a difference."

Born in Lubbock, Texas, when Buddy Holly and the Crickets were playing their first gigs at a roller rink, Rigsby is a child of the oil fields. Her father was a petroleum point man, an explorer who moved the family all over the world in search of oil. She remembers Buenos Aires, during the military coup in 1974. "We had armed bodyguards who took me and my brother and sisters to the zoo," she recalls. "One day after school we packed in a hurry, and those same guards hustled us off to the airport. Just like that we were gone. I didn't have a chance to say good-bye to any of my friends or anything."

Another oil company assignment brought the family to a tiny mountain village high in the Andes near the border between Chile and Argentina. Rigsby arrived at school with just enough Spanish to say, "*Yo soy Americana. Mi nombre*

*es Lana Rigsby.*" She caught on quick. In fact, she looks back on her rootless upbringing as an exciting adventure. She learned more than a second language. Rigsby is masterful at fitting in, sizing up situations at a glance, and ingratiating herself with strangers. It's no wonder she's good with clients. High school was lived out of a suitcase. She attended five different schools in four years, was a prom queen twice, and received her diploma from a joint embassy academy in Jakarta.

Back in Texas, I get a cook's tour of Rigsby Design, a snug little office down the hall from a private investigator named Rolla Long (no kidding). I'm drawn to a framed black-and-white snapshot near her computer. It's an image of three men wearing hats, holding rattlesnakes over their heads like referees signaling a touchdown. "Who is this?" I ask.

Rigsby points to the man in the middle. "That's my dad," she says. So it's a fair question to ask how the daughter of a snake-hunting oil explorer winds up running a design company capable of winning national accounts from Houston, a third-tier market by anybody's estimation. "We should discuss this over tequila and tacos," she says.

First the phone rings and while the designer chats up a client I take in her surroundings. There are a lot of books and music; she's got Octavio Paz sitting next to Peter Drucker, and Miles Davis

surrounded by Patsy Cline and Elvis Costello. One wall is covered with Japanese Manga cartoons, while another is dominated by an eight-foot-tall Cindy Sherman original. There's nothing prissy about the place. It's well used, evident that her team spends long hours digesting and rearranging ideas, tying and untying knots. Rigsby emphasizes what she calls "life literacy," and she expects her employees to read and think and gather material from many sources. When they find something worthwhile, they pin it to a wall near the reception desk. Today it's a loaded collage of photos, snippets of poetry, and news clippings.

At the restaurant, Rigsby chooses a seat at the bar, orders without a menu, and turns full attention to the moment. Her eyes are the color of sea water, and as she rises to a point they open wide, flashing with intensity. "At this point in my life," she says, "I know what I like and what I don't like, and there's no time to waste on the latter."

When it comes to work, those who know her say she's capable of intense concentration, nearly insane energy, and



(THIS PAGE) THE RIGSBY DESIGN TEAM. FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JEROD DAME, THOMAS HULL, LANA RIGSBY, AMY WOLPERT. ■ (OPPOSITE PAGE) THE RIGSBY DESIGN STUDIO IN HOUSTON, TEXAS. ■ (FOLLOWING SPREAD) EARTH TECH 1992 ANNUAL REPORT (LEFT PAGE, TOP AND BOTTOM), 1993 ANNUAL REPORT

**"Her greatest asset is business savvy, her ability to sell solutions, and solve intricate problems," says D.J. Stout. "The central idea is never lost in her work, and she can hold her ground without coming across like some bitchy artist."**

blistering impatience. Watching her wait for an elevator, a former employee says, is both humorous and painful. For Rigsby, seconds of inactivity can seem like days trapped in a cage. One thing is very true: Rigsby's never been trapped by her career. Over the years she's built a solid reputation linking projects and clients on an ever-upward slope. She runs a tight, profitable business, and tries very hard to pair personal passions with professional advancement. "I always try to marry what I love to do with work that pays the bills," she says. "As time goes by, that task gets more difficult. But there's no question that our best work is connected to personal interests." For evidence, Rigsby points to innovative corporate work for such clients as Earth Tech, and a commemorative catalogue she recently did to introduce the work of artist Michael Ray Charles. "Working with Earth Tech has taught me the importance of questioning how design works," she says. "We got an assignment to do a capabilities brochure, and with that project I challenged my team to re-think the whole idea of what brochures do, especially the function and purpose of messaging." The results went far beyond her client's best hopes. Instead

of a promo piece, Earth Tech got a versatile and convincing "workbook." AIGA counted it among the 50 best produced that year.

Michael Ray Charles is another story. He's a political artist challenging fundamental ideas of black identity. He hopes his work sparks more frank discussion about racism and the dark side of American corporate capitalism. Rigsby was drawn to him immediately, especially his use of symbols and stereotypes.

If you ask her what it's like to be a woman designer, she shrugs off the question with polite but obvious disdain, as if the question is too stupid to ask. D.J. Stout, art director of *Texas Monthly*, isn't surprised by that. He and Rigsby were classmates at Texas Tech, a school Stout jokingly refers to as "that renowned institute of artistic learning." Fact is, their class of 1982 had its share of emerging talent, most notably Mark Geer, Alan Colvin and Mathew Dase. But Stout is quick to put Rigsby among the best conceptual designers he's known. "Her greatest asset is business

savvy, her ability to sell solutions, and solve intricate problems," Stout says. "The central idea is never lost in her work, and she can hold her ground without coming across like some bitchy artist."

Rigsby pushes the remaining taco my way while signaling for another round of beers. Conversation with her reminds me of professional Ping-Pong: subjects bounce back and forth with increasing speed, and then fly off the table. One of us picks up the ball and we start again. She talks about chairing Mead Paper's Annual Report Conference last year—why she focused the theme around design and the bottom line. "I think design has value to the extent that it addresses real problems," she says. "That's why the conference featured business executives, academics and journalists. It had to be more than designers

talking amongst themselves, because the best lessons are learned in discussions between designers and the rest of the world."

Next October, Rigsby is co-chairing (with Michael Beirut) the AIGA Business Conference in New York. Her work with Earth Tech led to an assignment with Mohawk Paper, where she focused



on the connection between print and digital communications. That effort caught the attention of Xerox who hired Rigsby to help them shape work being done on digital document-production technology. As it turns out, Spike Lee is a big fan of Michael Ray Charles, and now Rigsby is involved in designing the identity of Lee's film company, Forty Acres and a Mule.

Connections, and the ability to meld her talent with experience, matter most in a career that continues to expand and accelerate. But Rigsby's relentless pursuit is not for the faint of heart. "She's fearless in the sense that she never asks for permission," says her longtime friend and collaborator, JoAnn Stone.

"But I'm getting more careful at picking my shots," Rigsby maintains, "more discerning at finding opportunities that allow me to shape critical issues. That's the only way I know to make my work more relevant in a time when design is increasingly a commodity. Besides, anything less isn't worth doing." ■

(LEFT PAGE, CENTER), AND CAPABILITIES BOOK (RIGHT PAGE). DESIGN DIRECTOR: LANA RIGSBY. DESIGNERS: TROY S. FORD (LEFT PAGE), MICHAEL B. THEDE (LEFT PAGE, CENTER), JEROD DAME (RIGHT PAGE). WRITER: JOANN STONE. PHOTOGRAPHERS: GARY FAYE (LEFT PAGE), CHRIS SHINN (RIGHT PAGE).