

“The Safe Cigarette”;

Visual strategies of reassurance in American advertisements for cigarettes: 1945-1964.

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Abstract

This thesis is in two sections, the written element presented as a sequence of eight Volumes, and the practical element presented as an inter-related set of Artist’s Books and Multiples.

This thesis presents a series of Artist’s Books and Multiples of graphic expressions of anxiety, each informed by a comparative study presented as a sequence of Volumes of the visual strategies used to advertise cigarettes in America in mass-circulation magazines between 1945 and 1964. The thesis is presented as a boxed object containing the eight Volumes, with Gatefolds and the 9 Artists’s books and Multiples.

The thesis identifies specific design and illustration solutions in cigarette advertising such as considerations of artwork, photography, layout, typography, characterisation, and diagrammatic representation of process. The conclusions are then used as the basis for 9 books and multiples in which I explore, within my own artwork, the dynamics of visual instruction, and the devices for reassuring the anxious consumer using irony and humour throughout.

Each Volume has a Gatefold visual montage with juxtaposed imagery central to the theme. The thesis combines visual analysis and the making of imagery in equal measure.

The vast proportion of original visual examples used in the Volumes are reproduced for the first time in colour from a wide range of contemporary magazines. Particular emphasis is placed on the professional manuals generated by the advertising profession itself.

A brief study of the cigarette market in the pre-1945 period identifies early anxieties about the product and how the tobacco industry and the advertising industry sought to address them. The thesis identifies the industries’ invention of the “Safe Cigarette” and then explores the anxieties implicit in that concept, presenting visual means by which anxiety is depicted. Visual strategies of reassurance in the form of personifiers are compared - ranging from people in socially esteemed professions through to the use of animals (dogs) and visual fictions (Santa Claus).

Two factors in particular have been identified to distract consumers from the gathering sense of unease in the safety of the product that culminated in the report of the American Surgeon General in 1964 - the appeal to the consumption of the cigarette in the outdoors and the corresponding success of menthol cigarettes, and the appeal to the reassurance that technology can impart - in the success of the Filter-Tip market. The twin polarities are reflected in the Artist’s books, “Which Filter Works?” and “Menthol Daze”.

In the last Volume the techniques of persuasion after 1945 are compared with those used by the American Huckster of the early twentieth century and the thesis concludes with an assertion of the role that visual humour can play in exposing fallacious marketing.