

STROKES OF GENIUS

Details are fine with virtuoso screen printer Kyle Baker

By Michael Hurley
AWT World Trade, Inc.

Kyle Baker had a bad feeling.

One of the top concert-poster printers in the country, he was overseeing an exacting six-screen job for the band Wilco, announcing a show on their upcoming tour. The image was coming together nicely, but as his crew readied the final screen, which included the information on the venue, date, and time, Baker told them to wait.

It was early last Spring and COVID-19 was starting to impact many areas of daily life, with the live music industry looking particularly susceptible to the virus. Baker's studio had already been hit with postponements and cancellations, and now he had a vague sense of foreboding, something of a hunch.

Call it an impression.

An independent screen printer specializing in high-quality graphics, the 38-year-old Baker has learned to balance intuition and ingenuity as he toggles between running a successful business and producing dazzling, critically-acclaimed works of art.

Meticulous attention to detail is essential, not only for each print, but for client relationships, and for understanding fluctuating market conditions.

Almost a year later, the Wilco job is still on pause, like a band frozen in the middle of a song. But by holding back the final screen, Baker protected his business, ensuring that his team's efforts weren't wasted, and that the work remains viable and ready to go when America finally presses *play*.

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"I started my career as a freelance designer. I didn't set out to run a print shop."

Baker is standing in his studio in a vintage loft building on Chicago's North Side. Sunlight pours through tall windows as workers move back and forth, checking colors, mixing inks, and making adjustments to the presses.



Kyle Baker speaks fervently of blending artistry with the pure physics of printing.

"But when I learned how to screen print, I fell in love with it. The whole process."

The walls are plastered with vibrant examples of the studio's output: exquisite concert posters and album art featuring intricate design, flamboyant color, and fastidious hand lettering. They represent a who's who of international touring acts, including Dead and Company,

Bruce Springsteen, Counting Crows, Phil Lesh and Friends, Little Feat, Umphrey's McGee, The String Cheese Incident, and The Avett Brothers.

"I find it tremendously challenging and rewarding. I often refer to 'the art and science of screen printing' because I see those as twin dimensions."

Baker points out numerous pieces of equipment in his shop that he designed and custom-built himself: a print catch box, screen coating jig,

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squeegee sharpening station, a removable steel skirt for his exposing table and an impressive film registration and screen tension template system.

Wearing an open flannel shirt over an ink-splattered t-shirt, he speaks fervently of blending artistry with the pure physics of printing, and devising unique solutions to improve his processes.

“And there is a complex matrix of discretion, technique, taste, voodoo, and hardcore empiricism involved in every job.”

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Creating and screen printing visually arresting graphics for the music industry, and specifically the performance-intensive jam-band genre, is itself a venerable artistic tradition with its roots in the psychedelic counterculture of the late 1960s and early 1970s.



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Posters and album covers by the best-known artists from this period, such as Rick Griffin, Victor Moscoso, Wes Wilson, Alton Kelley, Stanley Mouse, and Bonnie MacLean reached a worldwide audience through mass distribution and established a set of design parameters and stylistic conventions that continue to be

essentially definitive.

Original works and limited-edition serigraphs by these artists have become highly collectible and command formidable prices when they appear on the open market.

Baker's concert-poster work acknowledges and builds on this tradition, and he explicitly cites both Wilson and MacLean as important early influences. He says that he does not feel constrained by the familiar visual argot of concert posters or by poster art in general.

“I see poster art as the quintessential design challenge. All the fundamental elements of graphic design in one rectangle.”

Similarly, with regard to screen printing, Baker is inspired by the physical parameters of the process: “Paradoxically, I find the boundaries imposed by screen printing to be very liberating when it comes to making art. It gave me a paradigm in which to create.”

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Although Baker says that he is “tremendously lucky to have wandered into my calling,” it is perhaps not totally surprising that he ended up in the applied visual arts.

His grandfather was an illustrator at prominent Chicago advertising firm Leo Burnett. His father became a creative director, also at Burnett, and his uncle was a successful storyboard artist.

“I used to think a ‘studio’ was a room in everyone's house, like the den.”

Fresh out of college and working as a graphic designer for a promotional electronics startup, Baker branched out into freelance design work for local musicians and promoters.

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He volunteered for his first gig, designing a poster for a show by former Black Crowes guitarist Marc Ford, at the legendary Double Door in Wicker Park. Baker printed the poster on 11" x 17" paper at Kinko's. He wasn't paid for the job but years later he was amused to glimpse his work still on display at the club before it ultimately closed in 2017.

Targeting small clubs in Chicago's indie music scene, Baker established himself as a talented soloist, printing unique posters for some of his favorite bands. "I pounded the pavement and made an effort to solicit artists I wanted to work for," he says.

Eventually, "as I got better both at designing for screen printing and the printmaking itself, the jobs were getting bigger and printing by hand was taking a physical toll, not to mention some deadlines were impossible." Baker bought a press, and soon he was producing prints for other artists as well.

Baker expanded judiciously, determined to remain involved in every aspect of the business even as he assembled a first-rate backing band. Now he is playing on a national stage.

"For the most part, my clients have found me. For the lion's share of my career it's been reputation and portfolio."

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Baker Prints occupies a narrow but lucrative niche in the screen printing world, turning out top-quality, finely-detailed



PREPRESS PRIORITIES

Registering the screens accurately for some of the highly complex images Kyle Baker's studio produces can be a daunting task, and Baker himself says he could "write a whole chapter on the subject."

Here is his eight-point rundown:

1. Make sure films are identical size; this is an insidious problem especially with large films and it can't be taken for granted.
2. Acclimate paper for at least 24 hours on drying rack if printing waterbase.
3. Pre-register films to screen dead-center using our custom jig.
4. Use retensionable frames of identical size and meticulously re-tension them frequently. Harden at high uniform tension across the screen and from screen to screen, documenting values in detail.
5. Use magnification on register marks (you'd be shocked at far off that yellow is when it looks bang-on to your naked eye).
6. Use sharp squeegees of uniform length.
7. Maintain and service your presses.
8. Get your presses dialed-in just right and don't monkey around with anything unless you have to; even then only change one thing at a time and always change it back or establish a new default.

graphics using semi-automatic equipment.

"For the vast majority of our work we print semi-auto on clamshells. Occasionally we'll print by hand, sometimes for split-fountains on smaller runs and also random odd jobs such as printing on irregular substrates."

Most artisan screen printers working in graphics are hand printing short runs. And of course Baker himself started out that way, earning his stripes with his hands on a squeegee.

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“MY AWT WAS MY FIRST PRESS AND WILL ALWAYS BE MY FAVORITE”

Baker’s first screen printing press was an AWT Accu-Print High-Tech Micro, and it is still his mainstay, having recorded millions of impressions.

“I’m so glad I bought it; I easily could have bought a lesser press because I didn’t know what I was doing.”

He walks over to the Micro, which is positioned in the center of his studio.

“The thing I love best is that it’s intuitive. I taught myself how to use it quickly. I love the controls; they became second nature overnight.”

Baker watches briefly as his trusted colleague Sam Wagner cycles the press, printing photo-quality portraits of Baker’s grandfather and placing them on a drying rack.

“In particular going with pneumatic squeegee/floodbar pressure over simpler mechanical presses was crucial. The movable masterframe is great too, something you miss when you use one that’s fixed in front. The extra-large, super-flat vacuum bed is great too. And the vacuum itself is super quiet, that’s a nice feature for quality of life in a busy shop.”

He has even had a subsequent press modified to include a useful feature found on the Micro. “I think an independent air regulator for the squeegee/floodbar should be a standard feature on all presses.”



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“But for most of our work printing manually doesn’t make a lick of sense. We can produce a much better product much faster on press, though of course some art would look exactly the same either way.”

Today, with major production companies and Fortune 500 companies among his clients, he relishes the precision and consistency that technology allows him to bring to his craft.

“For example, we print most halftones at 80 LPI. Doing CMYK work at 24”x 36” at that frequency would be pretty much impossible for a human to do repeatedly. We need mechanical control over angle, pressure, register, dot gain... a stiff breeze will change solid density when you’re printing 80-line on 380 mesh with a razor sharp 40” squeegee.”

Baker stresses that in order to take full advantage of the benefits of automatic screen printing equipment, old-school discipline and attention to detail remain paramount.

He and his crew work together to solve issues that may arise in the course of a job in an empirical, methodical manner, what he describes as their “heuristic” approach.

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An accidental entrepreneur who has had his own shop since he was 25, Baker has had little time



to rest over the years as he scrambled to keep up with orders, maintain his signature quality, and run the business itself.

Then suddenly the pandemic put concerts into quarantine, and much of the industry remains in need of intensive care.

Baker's studio weathered a precipitous decline in activity, and although there has been some recovery, with album promotions, drive-in shows, and live streaming events, it will be months or even years before that aspect of his business resembles its pre-Covid health.

The uncertain situation has prodded Baker Prints to devote greater attention to a different market sector; ultra-high quality limited-edition fine art prints. The standards can be intimidatingly rigorous—Baker says “I would print in a clean room if I could”—but the revenues per job are significantly greater as well.

He is confident about the capabilities of his equipment and his team.

“We're very much pushing the envelope in terms of what can be achieved in high-end, high-reso-

lution screen printing for shops of comparable size. For example, the 4-color process work we do is head and shoulders above any work I've seen from competitors. It's actually become essential to our survival in the virus-shutdown era, since 90% of our work was concert posters.”

The fine art prints are visually ambitious in different ways than poster art, often featuring what Baker calls “a far less common complexity” involving naturalistic shapes and layered designs. The work is challenging and profitable; does he view it as a new direction?

“Ideally, both sides of the business would be thriving simultaneously,” although he acknowledges realizing that ideal would require some logistical upheaval, and a new focus.

Even in the face of unprecedented adversity, Baker is optimistic about the future and his ability to adapt and succeed. Maybe it is just intuition, but he's got a good feeling.

Call it an inkling.

