

*Letter Arts Review*

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The Acid Test...Historically, vitriol was a symbolic formula of the alchemists, often used to describe the process of transmutation, the transformation of base metals into precious metals, especially gold. The word VITRIOL is an acronym for the Latin phrase *Visita Inferiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem*, Seek out the lower realms of the earth, perfect them, and you will find the hidden stone, i.e. the Philosopher's Stone. In contemporary times vitriol has come to be synonymous with sulfuric acid and other caustic substances, or as an adjective (vitriolic) to mean caustic, biting and painful.

As designers and artists, exposing our work to public view and comment is the acid test by which we are judged. For the less secure, criticism may stop us from creating at all. For the more experienced, it can be a positive process by which we grow. Criticism that may at first feel caustic can help us to discover the "gold", by leading us to refine and begin to analyze our work.

— Margo Chase



## An Interview with Margo Chase

By Karyn Lynn Gilman

**S**HE'S thirty-something years old, energetic, and has a heightened sense of the macabre. When we first met she was wearing torn blue jeans and a turtleneck sweater. To my surprise and delight she was down-to-earth, a regular sort of person who enjoyed shopping for antique objects that could be used as props in her photographic images, and eating the local Mexican fare. Her name is Margo Chase, and she has made an impressive mark on the graphic design field during the past few years.

The following is the result of a recent opportunity I had to speak with Margo about her background and her work.



**KG:** Ten years ago, what did you think you would be doing today?

**MC:** Ten years ago I was doing free-lance work for a book company. I wanted to be doing what I'm doing now, but I didn't imagine I would be. When first starting out I had great expectations about being a graphic designer. I was so ignorant – I thought I could get out of school, get a great job, and do really cool work. I didn't realize there was a lot of competition. At that point, I had had two years of struggling to pay the rent and I was starting to realize it wasn't going to be that easy.

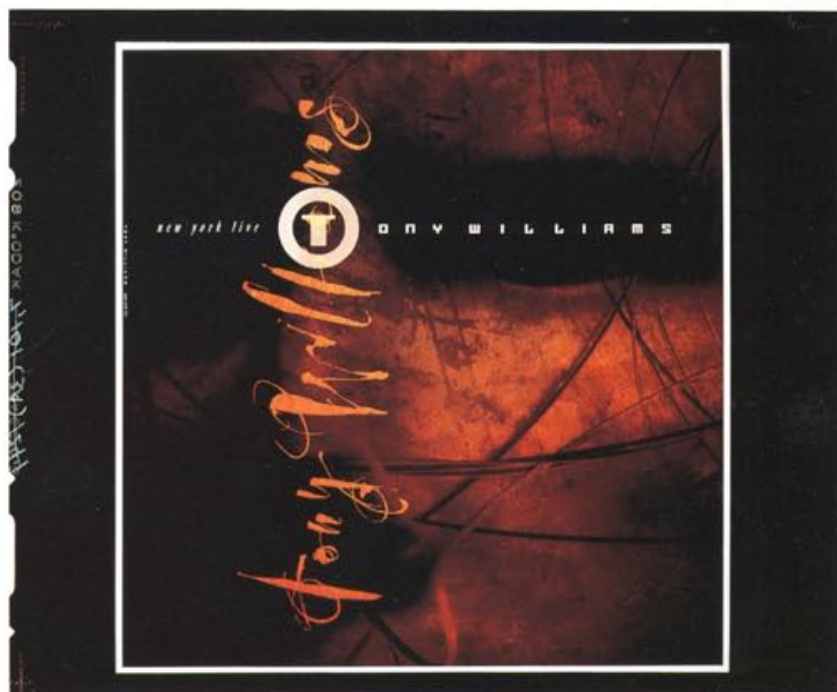
**KG:** When you were in school you weren't an art major were you?

**MC:** No, as an undergraduate I was a pre-veterinary biology major at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo. They had a pretty good graphics department and a small design department that was just starting. I took some art electives, by accident, because I planned to go to graduate school and I needed some easy As to keep my grade point up. I had taken almost all the art classes offered and I was running out of choices, but there was one illustration class that I thought sounded good. At that time there was no computer registration system to indicate the necessary prerequisites for a course, and I found myself in a senior year design class with people who had a lot more background in design and art than I had. The first assignment was called "the illustrated word." I had to choose a word, and then illustrate each letter with some sort of drawing or rendering. I thought I could do something biological with it so I chose the words *feline anatomy* – a nice short project. I made pencil drawings

of the different bones of cat skeletons with each letter. I came to the critique and tacked my solution on the wall when somebody in the class asked what typeface I had used. When I answered with, "What's a typeface?" the teacher looked at his roll and realized that I didn't have the proper prerequisites. He told me I could draw and tried to encourage me to stay in the curriculum. He suggested I go back and take the basics. I didn't – I had seen some of those projects, and they didn't interest me that much. By then I thought I would like to be a medical illustrator. I finished the next two terms in graphic design and took a type class and other courses I felt I could use in medical illustration. It was a peculiar graphic-design education.

**KG:** Do you feel you have any weak points in your training?

**MC:** I never took art history, but I've tried very hard to make up for it. I do a lot of reading, but it's pretty hodgepodge. I can remember dates, but I get chronology confused. I particularly notice it when preparing for a lecture and I find myself going back in order to study up on some of the historical information.

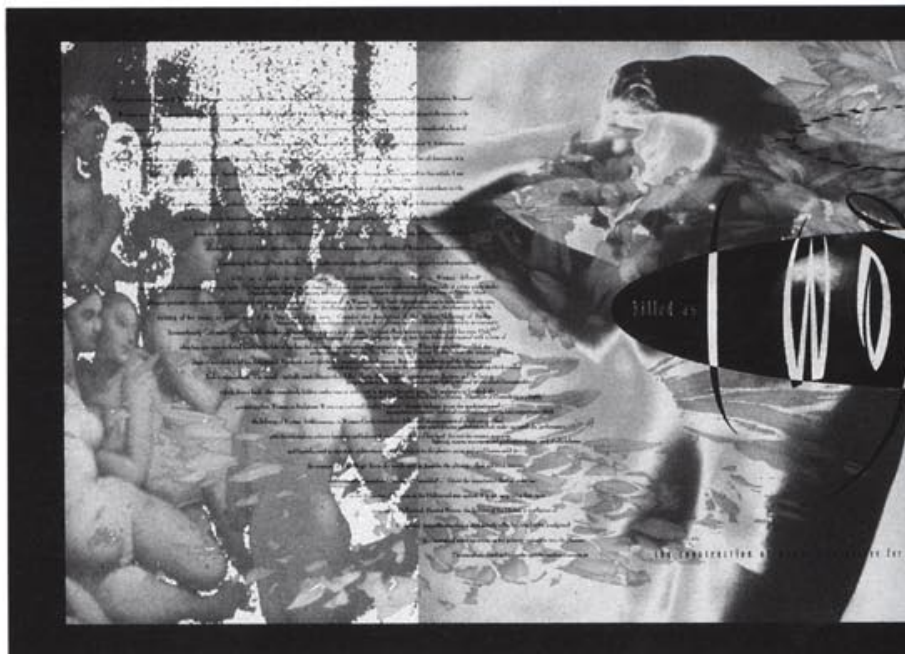


**KG:** What was your first really big break?

**MC:** I don't know if there was one really big break. I went to graduate school in medical illustration at the University of California at San Francisco. I stuck it

out for one year, but it was boring. They had made it sound a lot more design oriented than it actually was – it was illustration oriented and very traditional. We were doing anatomical field studies in carbon dust – an antique way of rendering things, beautiful, but time consuming. There was talk about getting computers and other equipment, but they never materialized. By the end of my year at UCSF I had a number of friends who had gone through the graphic design department in the proper way, had graduated, and were getting jobs in design. Their prospects sounded a lot better than what lay ahead of me in the medical design field, so I quit and tried to find a design job. But I had a portfolio filled with bones and stuff and it didn't go over well. I actually had an interview with Michael Manwaring, one of the San Francisco Michaels whose design I admired. He is also an illustrator and puts a lot of his own drawings in his work, which is something not many designers do. From looking at my portfolio he could tell I could draw, and not wanting to discourage me said he thought maybe I should become an illustrator. He actually took the time to talk to me. He was helpful and his advice was very constructive – usually the big art directors just look through your work and don't have much to say. As a result, I moved to Los Angeles where I had some friends in agencies that I hoped could get me into production. Manwaring told me that if I wanted to do design I had to learn the basics of production – to set type, and acquire the basic skills that I had never learned. I ended up working in an agency with a friend who had begged his boss to hire me. I started doing paste-ups. From there I went to a book company where I learned book-layout design. I didn't know anything about that either, but I went to the library and read a lot of books.

Editorial spread designs  
for Semiotext(e) Magazine



*KG: You really are responsible for a lot of your own education and research.*

*MC: It was trial by fire – I'd get a job and I'd figure out how to do it. The book thing was a great opportunity because I had a lot of freedom; they didn't care very much, I guess is what it boiled down to. I was left to my own devices, to do pretty much what I wanted. I learned to spec type; I learned about page layouts; sequencing of imagery, how to make*



there was Tim Girvin, and Peter Greco who did logos in Los Angeles at that time, and Michael Manoogian. I had done some lettering for book covers – and was foolish enough to think that I could just sort of jump right in and do it...

*KG: Is that when you started to do these wacky letterforms?*

*MC: Laura LaPuma, an art director in a different area of the book company, had left and gone to work for Warner Bros. Records. She knew I was freelancing – trying to do logos and lettering – and she hired me to do*

*that for Warner's. That led to my very first album cover job. She is now head of the Warner Bros. Nashville Art Department. She was instrumental in getting my toes in the record business door, and since then it has snowballed.*

*My mom is a calligrapher also. She cares about art and letters. She has many books and attends workshops occasionally, and it was through her that I first became aware of Sheila Waters and the others that we all admire. Her interest in calligraphy was a source of inspiration for me. The idea that one can do something by hand without fixing it afterwards is antithetical to the design approach where you constantly touch it up and fix it. It's a completely different philosophy about how to create and I think it was a*

*great influence. I still don't do it very well, but at least I know I am supposed to be able to do it.*

*KG: Just having an understanding and appreciation for it is important in itself.*

*MC: I found that letterforms – particularly historically – were used as an illustrative device. Conventional graphic design teaches one to focus on legibility rather than emotion. It is about serving the client, making*

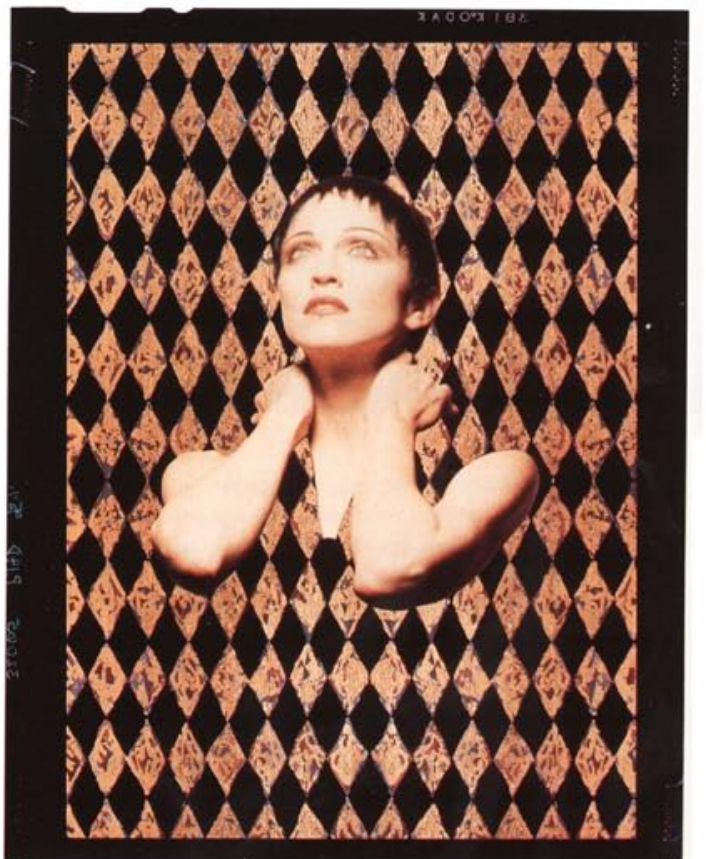
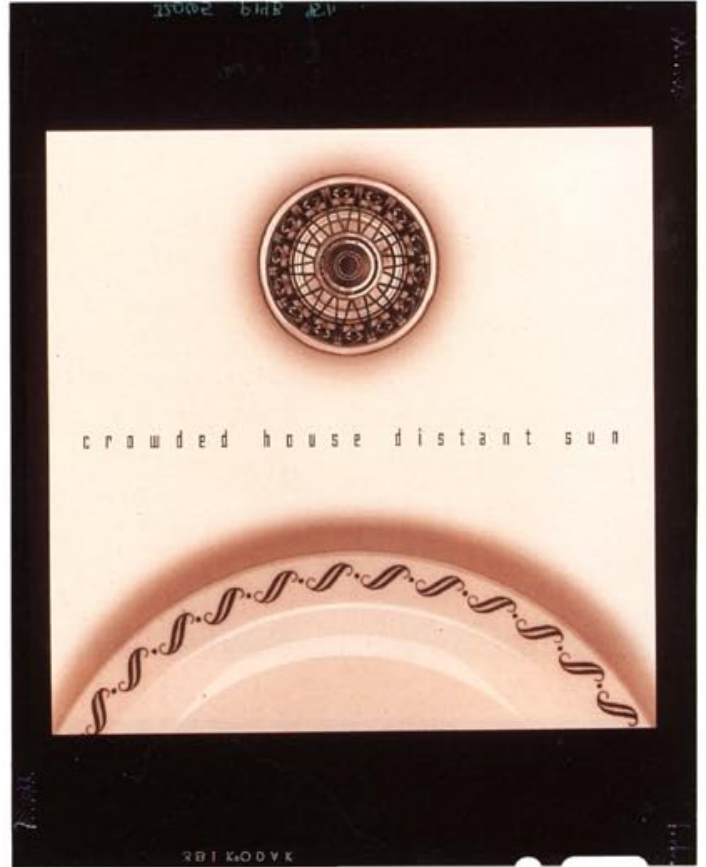
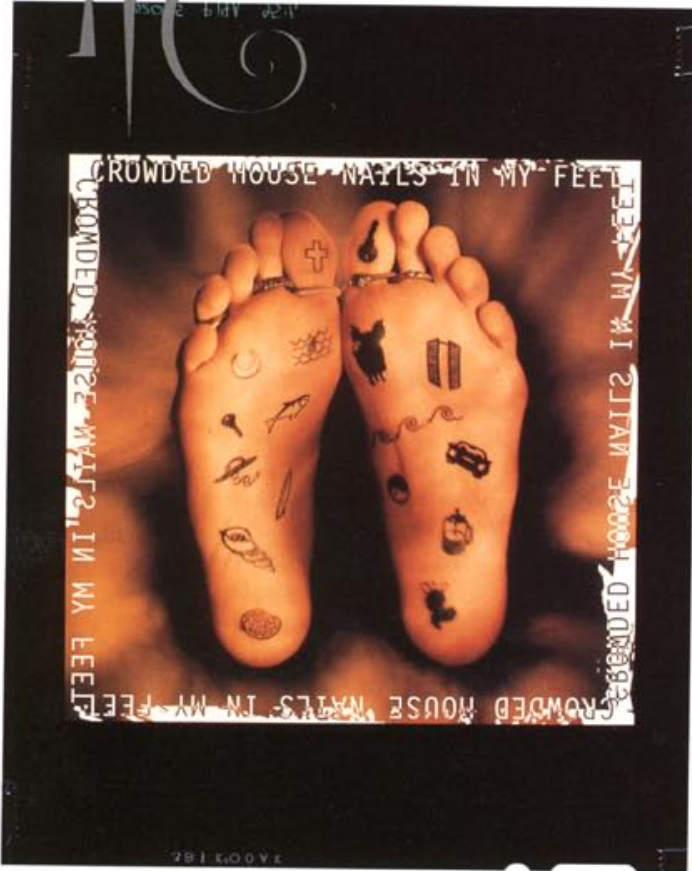


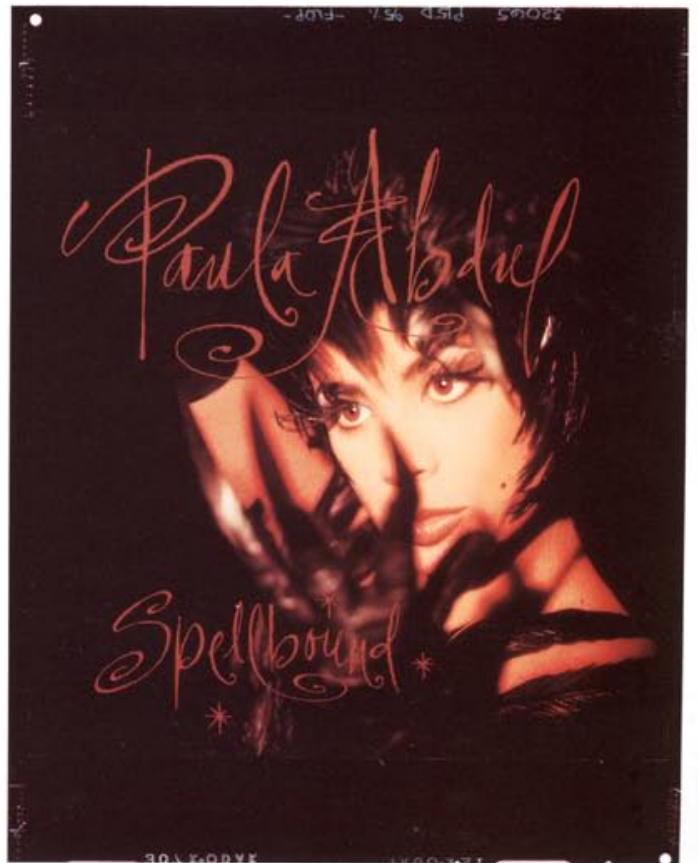
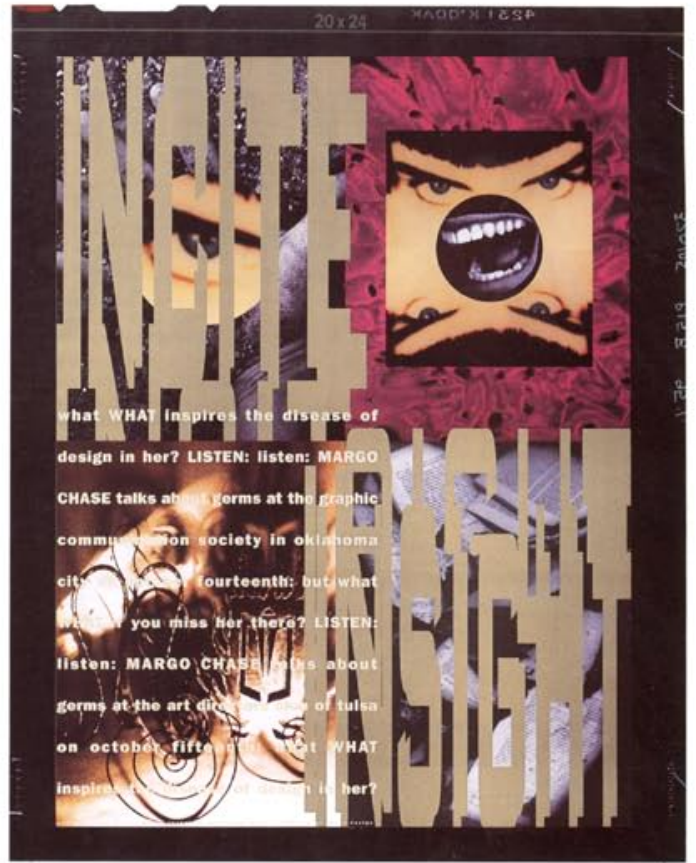
the whole thing feel like it flows together – it was great experience. That job lasted for about a year.

Actually that was how I got started in lettering. When the book job was over I needed to find something else I could do, some way to represent myself as a freelancer. Design is so vague that independents have a hard time selling themselves. You can't really put an ad in any of the workbooks because there's not even a category for it, especially not back then. But I had seen some people who had done some really beautiful lettering;



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things easy to read. It's communication over aesthetics. Calligraphy is almost the opposite. It's about emotion and gesture. I try to put that emotion and gesture into my design work.

*KG: Though it might be difficult to believe, many of our readers might not be familiar with your name. What are some of the jobs that you have done that might be recognizable?*

MC: Probably one of our most visible jobs was the Madonna logo for "Like A Prayer." On that job I never met her, I just worked through the Warner Bros. Art Department. More recently we also worked on "Madonna The Girlie Show Tour" which is her latest tour. (I did actually work with her on that.) We did the tour book, the logo for the tour, and all the signage that goes over the stage, including the marquee.

*KG: Is she fun?*

MC: She's not stern; she's really interested, but she doesn't have much time; she's incredibly busy. It's hard because I had to catch her between rehearsals. She would walk in and say, 'okay, I have ten minutes.' I would only have time to say, 'well look at this, and this quick, and what do you think about that, then there's this and OK, bye.'

*KG: I'm sorry I didn't mean to take you away from your list. Aside from Madonna, who is there?*

MC: Some other projects have been Cher's "Love Hurts," the newest release by Crowded House – I don't know if a lot of people know them, they're big in Europe – Prince's "Graffiti Bridge," Melissa Etheridge's newest album, Wilson Phillips, Paula Abdul, and the movie campaign for "Dracula." We've also been working on an Elvis project but he hasn't been able to make it to any of the presentations.

*KG: What aspects of your job do most enjoy? What is the interesting and challenging part when someone calls?*

MC: The challenge is to come up with a new solution each time, so I don't feel like I am rehashing what has already been done. Sometimes it's as simple as creating a new style by combining images and graphics in an unusual way. Sometimes it's more difficult and I have to struggle to arrive at a good solution. But the best part is the rush that I get afterward, when I can say 'this looks great, I did it. I got over that hurdle, I solved that problem.' There's always that fear when someone calls up with a new job, and I wonder if I'll be able to do it again.

*KG: Where do you draw your inspiration from?*

MC: Everywhere. It's a daily struggle to keep my work from looking derivative of somebody else's design. I look at calligraphy, architecture, underground clubs, graphics – I look around for just about anything that could become a letterform, or a texture, or an element.

*KG: What tools are you using these days, and are they different from those you were using five or eight years ago?*

MC: The computer. Even "Dracula," which was initially hand done with a crow quill pen, was scanned into the computer and then incorporated into the rest of the design. The same with Paula Abdul which began with a crow quill. It's a kind of mixture; we've had the computer now for three years, and it has become part of all of our projects. I can't think of anything we've done lately where the computer wasn't involved at some stage of production.

*KG: How do you feel about that?*

MC: I'm ambivalent about it. The computer has given me the chance to fix things, I can noodle things more than I used to. When I used to work on vellum with a rapidograph I was pretty much stuck once it was finished. I'd look at it and think, 'oh, I should have fixed that letter spacing there, or that part should have been a little bit longer, or a little thinner.' Changing things was an ordeal. Designs would go out that weren't



quite perfect and I would just have to live with it. With the computer I can alter things much more easily. If I need to scale a design to fit a different space it's no problem. I can experiment more easily and I love that. And, there is the additional benefit of being able to drop things in and incorporate them with imagery, like the textural layering or ghosting of letterforms into images. I can do that myself now. I don't have to pay for an expensive photo lab to do it. The computer has given me a lot of freedom.

I don't like how it has separated me from the mess – the ink and the pens, the scratching, the cleaning up – it's the tactile experience of drawing that I miss. I keep trying not to let myself get sucked into the computer entirely, but it's hard. I could do almost everything on the Mac. But I always begin with hand-drawn letterforms and layouts. The process of drawing things first seems to make the ideas and forms flow together more naturally.

*KG: Do you see your work taking you in any different directions in the next five years?*

MC: We are getting into motion graphics which I think is exciting. We are also doing packaging outside the music business, and that is fun too. Motion graphics are where I think digital is going – that's what the computer can do for me that I can't do otherwise. The way the world is changing there will be a computer in everyone's house, and an interactive television network where everything can be ordered. All the stations, all 500 or so, will need identities, and graphics, and designs. It interests me, and I'm enthusiastic about getting into it. It gives me another dimension for lettering – I like the idea of taking a design that I've been doing and making it move.

*KG: Can you tell us about one of your more challenging jobs during the last year?*

MC: Working with Kitaro Shimogori, a designer of a line of very beautiful glass tables – modular, circular disks that move. They rotate so you can arrange the table in many different configurations. He asked us to design a marketing brochure for him, but he didn't have a lot of money.

As usual I bit off almost more than I could chew. I knew I could make something happen on the computer, but I wanted to try something that I hadn't done before, that I hadn't seen done. I wanted to take a four-color image, the photography of the product we had shot, scan it in, integrate the type in the image, and then separate pieces of the image as a fifth color metallic plate. The final job would be printed in five

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four  
Weddings  
and a funeral

colors; but, the metallic wouldn't be a flat tint, it would be part of the photograph. This changes the way the photo reads because some of the areas become metallic and change color. I could picture how it would work, but I had never actually done it. As it turned out the computer programs don't really accommodate this process. So we ended up having to do a lot of extra work. We had to run film, and run it again, because it didn't trap right, or the moiré pattern was a problem because we couldn't get the screen angle right. It was a nightmare. By the time we were done the film budget was about five times what it would have been had we used a conventional color separator. I had told the client it would be cheaper than normal color separations because we were doing it on the Mac. Big mistake! In the end the client didn't have to pay for the extra film – I worked it out with the service bureau – and I'm currently designing some press kits for them. I'm glad I did the job. It was a good learning experience in managing low budget projects.

*KG: I guess it would be better to experiment on high budget jobs.*

MC: It's hard on high budget jobs too – they usually don't give you any room for errors. They're spending a lot of money and they expect things to go smoothly and quickly – very direct and straight forward design. There are too many people involved and not very much room for messing around. Smaller clients have the time to experiment but not the money to spend. But the clients who have money often don't have time to allow for experimentation.

*KG: If you could think of a dream project what would it be?*

MC: Probably some of the things I've been doing in my free time. A photographer friend, Merlyn Rosenberg, and I have been doing some photo images that are a combination of type with photography. I have yet to find a good venue for them, and they are going to be expensive to print. So, a dream job would be for somebody to hire me to produce a line of posters using these images.

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Karyn Lynn Gilman is Editor of Letter Arts Review magazine

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