

# STEPHEN DOYLE, HANDMADE



Stephen Doyle, the recipient of the 2010 National Design Award for Communication, is at the top of his form as a designer, teacher, and sculptor. The magazine art director-turned studio proprietor has given visual life to many things, not the least of which are the soothing pastels of Martha Stewart's packaging. Doyle is an eloquent thinker, speaker, and maker—bypassing the computer, he continues to make conceptual art by hand. He's now making typographic animations using paper and scissors and a stop-action animation program. Doyle stopped long enough from cutting hundreds of white letterforms to speak about his award, the craft of design, and Michelle Obama.



**Stephen Doyle**, principal and creative director of Doyle Partners, has created the identity for mega-brands such as Martha Stewart Omnimedia. Here, he carves the new logo into plaster.

**Congratulations, Stephen. How does it feel to be the winner of the Communication Design category of the National Design Awards?**

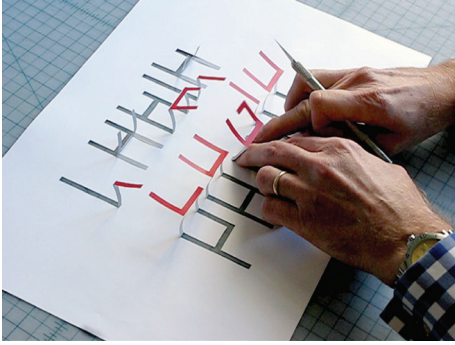
Honestly, I was taken by surprise, both receiving the award, which I didn't expect, and then by my emotional reaction—delight mixed with a feeling of accomplishment—which I never could have foreseen. I was blown away to think that work as diverse as what we have created over the years actually added up into a kind of cohesive whole.

I was moved by two adjectives they bestowed on my work: "intelligent" and

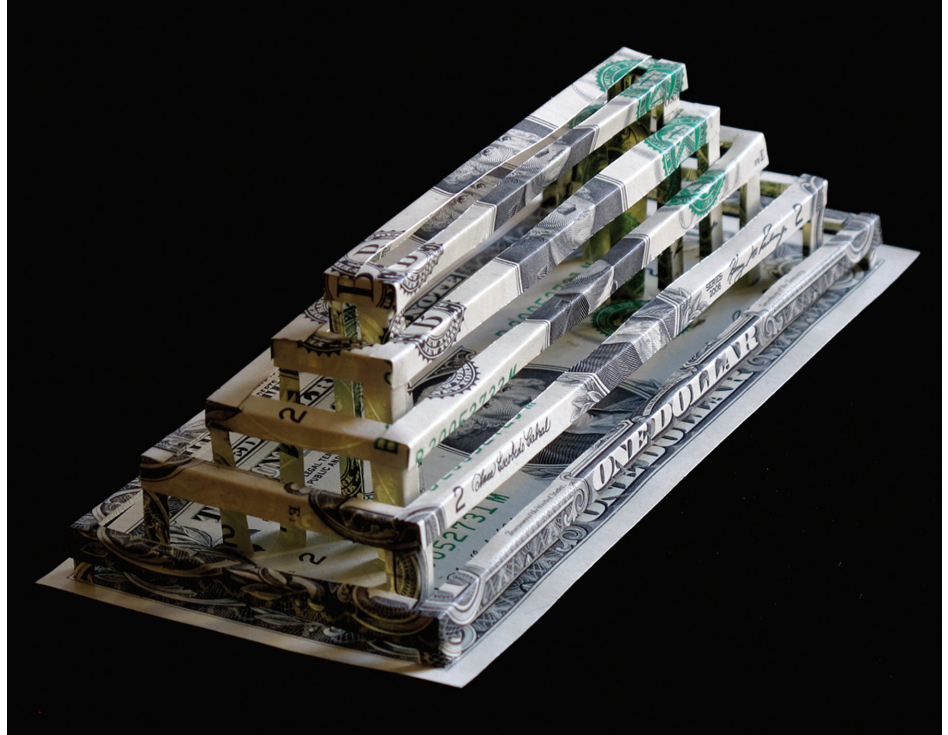
"provocative." Earning those words is a proud accomplishment for me, and now I can die happy. Just not yet.

**Let's hope. When you heard the news did you say to yourself, "My time has come?"**

The only time I ever have the feeling of "my time" is when I get a particularly difficult assignment that I'm not sure I know how to solve. That's when it's "my time has come." Solve or die. This, of course, is a very different feeling from those moments months later, of, you know, "The check has come!" But, seriously, a difficult opportunity is more ownable to me than



Doyle illustrates the value of things made by hand in the film *Thinking with My Fingers* (above); this structure made of money was commissioned for a *More* magazine article about refinancing your home (right).



receiving an award, even a cool one like this. When students or visitors to our studio ask me what is the most interesting project we've worked on, it's inevitably the one I haven't solved yet. That's part of the fun.

#### So, what does this award mean to you?

It is a keen validation that it is okay to do commercial work and at the same time explore personal avenues of communication. It's okay to solve problems and at the same time create some. It's okay—fruitful, even—to be pulled toward the mass market and individual musings on the same day, and steer away from logic in order to create things that have appeal because of their humanism, their mystery, their humor, and their craft. But maybe I'm reading too much into this award business.

#### There was some controversy a few years back about going to the White House. Are you going to accept the invitation?

"Mrs. Michelle Obama requests the pleasure of your company at a luncheon..." begins the engraved invitation. Who am I to disappoint her? It is astonishing to be a guest in the White House, and to walk around and examine the portraits and to reflect about how much thought in the world has started from that building. Plus, I'm really into color, so I want to

have a good look at the red room, the blue room, the green room, the yellow room. Mrs. Obama, I was thinking chartreuse...

#### There has long been debate over whether awards in the design field have much relevance outside of the field. Do you take issue with design awards?

Design is, make no mistake, one of the most self-congratulatory fields, and it does seem that many awards have lost their significance. This one, however, with the National Design Museum behind it, and the First Lady in front of it, does seem like it is a chance for Americans to catch up with much of the civilized world in acknowledging the difference that design can make in someone's life, in someone's business, and in the intellectual output of a culture. Architecture, Fashion, Landscape Design, Communication Design and the other categories all deal with how we interact with each other physically, socially, and intellectually. These arts, among others, are part of the visual expression of our American spirit. And if that is not something that deserves a moment of recognition, well, then we're in big trouble.

**As a recipient of a National Design Award, you will doubtless be called upon to vote on**

#### future nominees. What will be your criteria for winning?

One of the websites reporting on these awards referred to me as a "design veteran," and I guess I'll take that as a compliment. I think that in our design terrain with its excess of awards, I would hope that this particular award is not for flame-ups and flame-outs. I like the long and steady approach, insatiable curiosity, and the willingness to take a little risk along the way. And, of course, the evidence of an inextinguishable passion to invent, to question, and to craft.

#### Nominations for the NDA are fairly democratic. Nominees who have been selected by the "public" are asked to submit their work for review. Do you think this is the best procedure for such an important award?

It makes the submission into a kind of "people's choice" but then the work is turned over to a committee of judges. That the judges jury all categories is a refreshing change, so I imagine it must be much less "clubby" than designers judging other designers' works, or architects, architects'. I don't know the best way to judge such a competition. I do know that it's easier to be a designer than an Olympic snowboarder, because they get just two chances to perform their art perfectly, while I get to try for years. ■