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The Nordin Brothers, co-founders of the Detroit Design Center, bring a shared passion for the fine arts, stories, and the City of Detroit to their metal and glass sculptures.

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NINE DOLLARS

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DESIGN SPOTLIGHT



Textural minimalists

BY R.J. WEICK



In an industrial-renovated building located along a vibrant business corridor in Ravenswood on the north end of Chicago, the founding partners behind the graphic and branding studio known as Knoed Creative are hard at work translating their clients visions into meaningful brands and tangible experiences. Within the walls of the converted office studio space, complete with concrete floors, high ceilings, and a minimalist-inspired aesthetic, there is an exploration of inspired creativity and thoughtful branding strategy driving the two-member team's purpose to help clients start, create, build, and share the things they're passionate about.

"We are always inspired by what they do and we really enjoy getting to know a new industry," said Kim Knoll, founding partner and designer at Knoed Creative.

"We try to do something that really makes them stand out, but not so much that they are alienating themselves. We try to make people look very modern, push the en-

velope, and add a level of sophistication that is more than what their competitors are doing," Knoll added.

Knoed Creative—a combination of the founding partners' last names phonetically pronounced "node"—was launched in 2011 by Knoll and Kyle Eertmoed, who have more than 26 years of combined experience in the graphic design and branding industry. Knoll, who studied visual communications at Northern Illinois University, specializes in creative strategy, design, and copywriting; while Eertmoed, who has a background in graphic design from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, concentrates on creative strategy, business strategy, and design. The two designers have also partnered with an independent web developer since before launching the studio.

"To this day no one can pronounce it," Eertmoed said. "Over the years we have honed our focus to be more about branding, working with startups and small businesses,

and getting in on the ground level to help them come up with a creative vision, figure out what they are all about, and what is their purpose."

Knoll noted being involved with a company or product from the initial concept through completion is also about building that trust, mutual respect, and relationship with the client.

"I think every designer can appreciate projects where they can create everything," Knoll said. "I feel like connecting with people is just as important to us as the project that they have, because we work with them for months at a time."

While the studio focuses on designing meaningful and engaging brands, Knoed Creative provides a host of design services for clients interested in a complete visual identity strategy, a redesign or re-fresh of an existing brand, or returning for a single digital or print collateral piece, such as websites, retail packaging, business cards, or bro-



chures. Since its establishment nearly seven years ago, Knoll and Eertmoed have worked with clients in the greater Chicago area and beyond, such as: Boss Hair Group, Curiously Cannabis, Echo Vie, Kim Scodro Interiors, The Korte Company, Koval Distillery, Optimo Hats, Outpost General Store, Pagoda Red, Schuler Shook, Seed to Serum, Scorched Earth Brewing, Skyline Furniture, and Tru Studio, among others.

“We have gotten to a point where we are definitely looking for the right fit and something we can feel really excited about and believe in. I feel like there is a theme with the clients we try to work with. It is about more than money, it is about more than a job; it is finding people we can really connect with,” Eertmoed said.

“We feel there is a responsibility to go through that process with them and make them part of the process: go through the discovery, go through the strategy. During that time, is when you are really building that trust, respect and that bond so when we are ready to present the design...the results end

up being better and we are all happier and proud of the work,” Eertmoed said.

Knoed Creative’s branding process begins with discovery and strategy sessions, in which Eertmoed and Knoll identify client needs and goals, and the message they are trying to communicate to their intended audience. The designers then collaboratively create a quick look-and-feel through mood boards before diving into the creative exploration. It is during this period of the process Eertmoed and Knoll independently develop a variety of visuals inspired by the information they have gathered in the last several weeks.

“We collaborate in the beginning on coming up with ideas and talking about maybe where we could take it, but when we are actually designing, I don’t want to see what he is doing and he doesn’t want to see what I am doing, because it starts to affect us; we get too inspired,” Knoll said. “We try not to peek or see what the other is working on and then we will present our ideas to each other.”

While the exploration period is an ad-

mitted favorite part of the process for both designers, Eertmoed also noted his least favorite part immediately follows it during the peer critique.

“She’ll just crush my soul, but we can laugh about it. It’s definitely the hardest thing we do as a couple, but we get through it and it ends up being better as a result,” Eertmoed said.

“What we do is an art form, so there is a part of us that are artists trying to express something that we have in our heads and everything we do is critiqued—for any designer, anything you do is critiqued unless you are an artist and then you are like, ‘this is mine, take it or leave it,’” Eertmoed added.

Once through the critique, Eertmoed and Knoll collaborate once more to refine several design options visually reflective of the specific brand to then present to their client. While each potential concept differs from another, Eertmoed noted they present ideas they are proud of and when a client is drawn to a certain visualization, the two designers are going to be behind it 100 percent.

“I think it comes with the relationship, that trust you build through the process,” Eertmoed said.

Eertmoed said when he thinks about their aesthetic, he immediately recalls a trip the two of them took to Amsterdam when traveling through Europe several years ago. Rather than striving for an unattainable design level, which often results in visuals and graphics appearing over-designed, the two try to strip out as much of the design or graphics as possible to pay homage to typography and printing techniques.

“Amsterdam has a really cool aesthetic and I feel we were really inspired and related to that type of design,” Eertmoed said. “It is almost modern, but it is not slick-modern; it is this minimal-industrial feel. An overriding principle of ours is we almost want an un-designed design aesthetic.”

Knoll added while their own aesthetic tends to be a little more minimal, polished, and sophisticated, which in turn influences their work, they focus more on the details—paper and printing technique options, specific industry needs—to provide clients with a unique look.

“It is the details that matter,” Knoll said. “We want it to have texture, a drawing, and some really beautiful type. I feel that is what we focus a lot on: texture and type.”

In the case of Echo Vie, a natural and nontoxic skincare company created by Makeup Artist Susie Lee, the combination of details and creativity led to a uniquely triangular box design with a simple, elegant graphic with the classic sophistication of a gold foil stamp. Inspired by the V shape in the name, the triangular box packaging—

in various sizes—not only offers additional durability due to its structure, but also provides more width for information and larger graphics and type. With its watercolor paper lending a more tactile texture to the box, Echo Vie’s packaging offers an experience with elements of surprise that stays with the viewer long after catching its distinctive visual on the shelf.

“From a branding perspective, how we define branding is really how somebody feels when they experience your product, your company, or your service. It can come on a lot of different levels: an emotional level down to the words that you are using, what you are seeing, and what you are experiencing,” Eertmoed said. “When we talk about the paper we chose and contrasting it with the foil stamp, it is all part of that experience.”

Paper and printing also played a defining role in another project Knoll and Eertmoed completed for Pagoda Red, which is a curator and retailer of rare artifacts from Asia. The established business approached Knoed Creative for brand strategy, visual identity, print design, digital application design, copywriting, and package design after nearly 17 years in operation when the owner decided it was time for a refreshed brand.

From the app intended for interiors designers to use in-store to curate options for specific room dimensions, to the new logo, business cards, and care instruction package, Knoed Creative built a suite of print and digital collateral inspired by the Chinese philosophy of balanced contrasting opposites through leveraging shiny and matte, dark and light elements.



Textural, timeless, and refined, the Pagoda Red brand reflects the very furniture and 18th century antiques found within its locations in the West Loop and Winnetka. The lines in the logo are an interpretive deconstruction of a pagoda, gold was used as an accent key to symbolize wealth and riches, and a rectangular icon pays homage to luck and the number eight.

For the care instruction package, Knoll and Eertmoed designed three cards of contrasting color and material—a gold sheen with digital printing, a white handwritten note with a letter pressed logo, and a chipboard with letter pressing furniture instructions—that slide into a black sleeve complete with a real key attached using twine. When stacked, the cards show the different colors and the letter pressing in many ways is reminiscent of a time long since passed, such as

the original commissioned furniture.

“It is a very old form of printing where you have a metal mold that is laid in the bed of a letter press and you have ink on top of that. Then you actually physically, sheet-by-sheet, rotate a drum and it presses the metal into the paper,” Eertmoed said. “You have that nice indentation and it creates a really nice texture.”

While the two designers seek to create brands, graphics, and ultimately experiences that stand out from the competition—like the mini portfolio brochure with a built-in pocket, gold foil stamping, geometric-inspired cuts created for Kim Scodro Interiors—both Eertmoed and Knoll agree design bridges art and function.

“It is obviously the way something looks, but I also think it is the way something feels and is the whole experience you are having

with whatever it is that has been designed. It is form and function and they both have to be very well thought through,” Knoll said. “It can’t just look good, it has to function really well and serve a purpose. I think that is part of our aesthetic too, everything we own serves a purpose.”

Eertmoed added the design has a job to do: it has to either communicate, make someone feel a certain way, represent something a certain way, or make a product better or more helpful for people.

“It is bringing together the worlds of art and function, and making something better and as good as it can be,” Eertmoed said. “It is what I really appreciate. Even in life, I look at things that way. I appreciate the artistic qualities of something, but I also really appreciate when something is really thought out.”

