

Playing Around with
Seeing—Highlights
from Anh and Hoang
Nguyen: Creative
Session

By Jose Rolando
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For the last of the Spring 2023 CCA Design Lecture Series, CCA hosted Anh and Hoang Nguyen—artists, graphic designers, and more importantly, brothers. During the work day, the brothers are design directors at technology venture capital firm Playground Global. On the weekends, as design collective Creative Session, they also host “Design Under the Influence,” a video series where seasoned professionals share industry knowledge. Both brothers are alumni of CCA’s MFA program and trace their work as far back as their time on campus. “It’s a way to bring back the... talent that we’ve grown to learn from,” says Hoang.

Anh describes both himself and his brother as jacks-of-all-trades—“it’s good to be adaptable ... and the worst enemy is being stagnant”—and their work with web, product, and of course industrial design underscores their desire to be flexible. The common thread that ties their work, however, is what Hoang calls bringing “this clever storytelling” to their work “[and to] have fun while doing it.” This desire to push the boundaries of industrial design through narrative has led them to work with such clients as Microsoft, Amazon, Versace, and Oculus.

The two are driven not only to tell stories in design but also change cultures, and more deeply, how people think. “We partner up with mad scientists to build the future,” says Hoang. One such scientist was Andy Rubin, the creator of Android OS, who partnered with the brothers to create Playground Global, in which both brothers create collateral and messaging to help brands and products reach wider markets.

“We help build brand, we help build product, we help do storytelling,” Anh says, summarizing the ‘tedious’ processes that go into their work for other companies. This starts with the question, “how do we redefine your story?” which Hoang uses to describe how they helped Velo3D reach clients through rebranding, turning their 3D-printed products from hobby to creative tool. With this narrative shift, Velo3D now manufactures spacecraft parts for SpaceX that are described by Hoang as “integral to their production”.



Anh and Hoang Nguyen
Photo by Jose Rolando Rojas

The Nguyen brothers continued their storied success in helping brands create an impact and reach others through narrative in the total brand redesign of Universal Hydrogen, where they would “play around with sustainability” and help bring it to scale. The resulting Playground rebrand led to Universal Hydrogen’s first carbon-free flight just two days before the brothers delivered their talk at CCA. This “sustainability storytelling” is continued with the Nguyen brothers’ branding and narrative work for Farmwise, a company that uses machine learning, robotics, and AI to scan fields for weeds in order to help mitigate pesticide use in large-scale farming.



Photo by Jose Rolando Rojas

However, their success in the space would not be possible without their shared enjoyment of collaboration. The Nguyen brothers opened a new studio space for their YouTube show, “Design Under the Influence,” a platform where veteran designers discuss their history, design process, and their personal histories as artists and creative workers.

The artists break down their philosophy in three stages—the first of which they call, “It Is Impossible Until It Is Not.” Anh uses Johannes Vermeer’s painting *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (c. 1665) to discuss the use of the camera obscura—a machine made of a lens and mirror that projects images on surfaces, making it easier to accurately render subjects in artistic media like paper or canvas. Though Anh would “push myself away from technology because ... I’m a hardcore pen-and-paper person,” he says that the power of technology to help artists observe is necessary to make ideas tangible.

The next stage they call “Paralysis by Analysis,” where Hoang begins, “things will [only] happen when it needs to happen,” and ideas won’t reach people until someone steps in and makes them tangible. As such, “if an idea begs you to produce it, please produce it ... from your own perspective ... before someone else does.” “This has happened to me many times in my career,” says Hoang, and to avoid this pain time and again, Hoang says that designers must “allow that creative energy to ... enable you,” lest inhibitions swallow up ways their creativity can make an impact.

The brothers’ extensive work with rebranding highlights the third stage of their creative philosophy, called “It’s OK To Tell The Same

Story Differently.” The artists pitched a rebrand for Ultima, a genome sequencing machine produced by Helix, to look more “friendly, playful” and like a “status symbol,” as Anh would describe, to give the machine relevance and desirability in the highly technical and serious field of genetic research. This rebrand transformed Ultima into a tall metallic box resembling the top-end Xbox Series X game console from Microsoft, separating Ultima from the white and colorless machines often used in genetic research.

The artists’ bottom line is that “Art/Design is not learning to draw but instead learning how to see.” Anh adds, “we aren’t just people who use materials and choose aesthetics,” instead defining designers as agents at the intersection of the art, science, and business behind every project they work on.

Upon being asked how they use what they learned at CCA in the industry during the Q&A portion of their lecture, Hoang answers, “Be humble, be honest with yourself. ... [Feeling] okay with saying ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about’ oftentimes yields the best results for us,” and everything we develop at CCA becomes a part of the artist’s toolbox. “It’s a series of f*ck-ups, but you get better after a while,” Anh adds, chuckling, and so constant iteration and practice forms the core of their success and development as creative workers.

This desire to iterate and learn from iteration pushes both artists into “the deep end with every project that we’re working on.” Anh and his brother are “making things palatable” and creating digestible surface-level information from “piles of data” with the work they do. From there, the Nguyen brothers use text and images to flesh out how companies operate and create change in their respective industries, creating a clear visual narrative. Onlookers are then able to understand and, more importantly, develop interest in a brand, product, or idea thanks to the narrative the Nguyen brothers create for it.

Whether their work is in-house or corporate, knowing that they are simply a smaller fragment of the larger whole of a project helps the brothers start their creative process. One can only begin the design process by understanding how they can help solve a problem, if not be a part of the greater solution they want to create. As such, there is no ‘most challenging’ project for either brother—all are equally “intimidating,” says Anh, in their own ways, but being “willing and excited to jump in” helps them tackle broad and complex concepts like space travel, ore mining, agriculture, and sustainability.

Still, the industry's reign under white, cis, heterosexual men has compelled Hoang to say "representation matters ... and that's honestly the main reason why we wanted to do *Designers Under the Influence*," the third episode of which features Taiwanese-American co-artist, photographer, and editor-in-chief Henry Wu of *Timid* magazine, centered around Asian lives. Despite the systematic isolation of design, "so many people [are] doing something extraordinary" both here in the US, and abroad. "We like to troll people ... have fun," begins Hoang, and Anh adds that connecting with professionals hailing from and based in Vietnam is "most exciting" for both brothers.



"Criticism really hurts," begins Anh, but he welcomes it with open arms. It may be a valid reaction to the work you make, and Hoang adds that in the end "it doesn't matter what people think," and so designers—especially those new to the industry—must "execute, execute, execute." Staying true to and following through on this desire sustains the designers' energy used to make things happen. Combined with their shared playful spirit, this energy is transformed into excitement—the fuel that makes the Nguyen brothers creatives that are very much in session.

**Anh and Hoang Nguyen with
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