

Follow-Up

Sam Pitino

Acton, Massachusetts



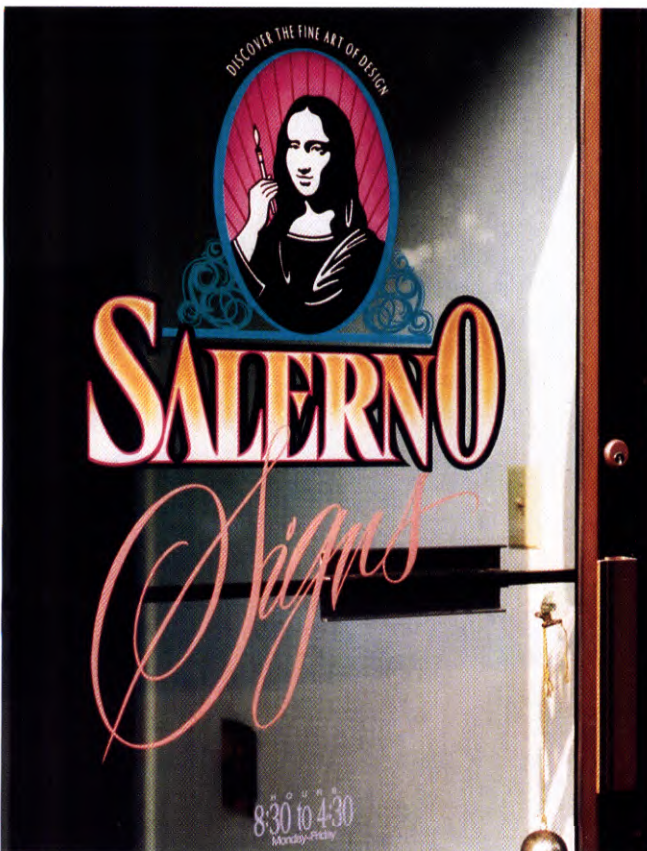
Sam with Terry, his wife, and their daughter Julia

When Sam Pitino was first featured in *SignCraft*, he was 22 and running his one-man shop in Holiday, Florida. In the years since, he has married, moved out of Florida, and into the world of

graphic design. He'll graduate from art school in May of this year and hopes to join a design firm in Boston, where he'll specialize in Internet website design.

But he's still swingin' a brush.

"I work part-time at Salerno Signs in Boston," says Sam. "It's great—Paula is very flexible with my hours. I was in there this week, lettering a truck and knockin' out some posters for the Symphony.



2-ft.-by-3-ft., overlaid plywood

It's crazy, this path that sign painting has turned into for me."

SC: Sam, you've made some big changes since you were first featured in '90.

Sam: Oh, I know. It's hard to believe how much happens in six or seven years. I met Terry, my wife, right after that article ran. She wanted to move back up north and I was ready for a change, so I closed the shop and we moved to Massachusetts. I was born in Pennsylvania, and I like the change of seasons.

SC: Did you open another shop right away?

Sam: No, I worked for Paul Tucker (Nov/Dec '96) for about two years. Then I started my own shop in Westboro, which is about six towns west of where Paul is. Massachusetts is very small-town oriented. Each town has its own little economy. It's not like Florida where everything is spread out and people don't think twice about driving to another county to do business. Here, people like to do business in their own town.

SC: At some point you closed the shop and decided to go back to school, right?

Sam: I closed my shop in '94 and decided to take a different direction. I had become more and more interested in packaging design, which made sense because packaging was such a big influence on my sign work. I looked at the changes in the sign business and thought, "Hey, why can't I make a living in graphic design? Why couldn't my design thinking move into these other areas?" I enrolled at Massachusetts College of Art, a four-year college, and if I'm not mistaken, the only state-run art school in the country. Because of my sign art portfolio, I was able to start out as a sophomore.

SC: I'd think that experience would put you miles ahead of everybody else.

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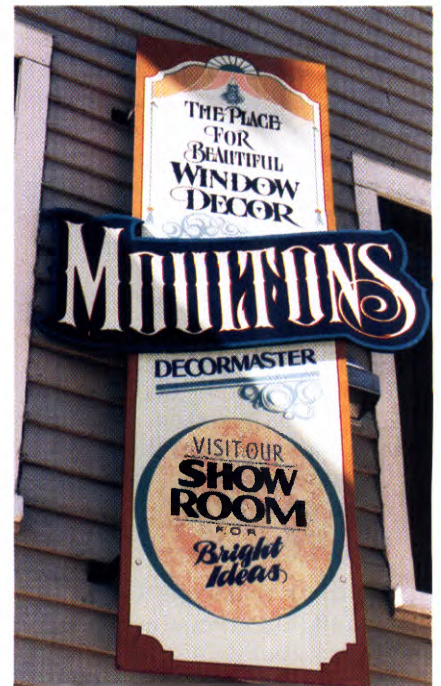
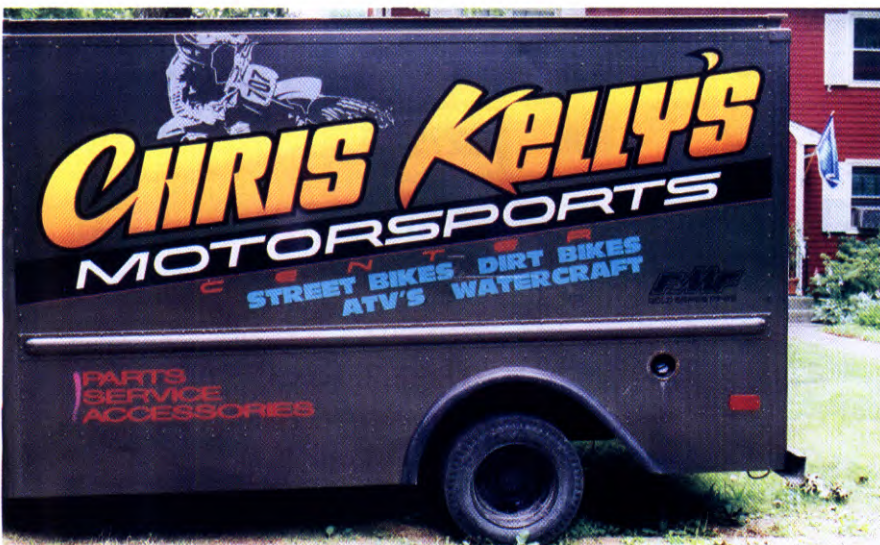
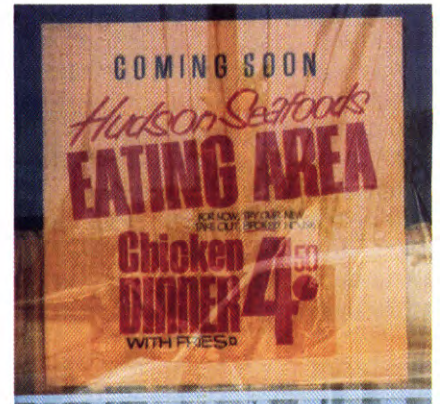
Sam: Well, it did and it didn't. In one sense, it was great because I got in as a sophomore and instructors realized that I had real graphic arts experience. But it kind of hurt me as far as my struggle with my own artwork. I just didn't realize how different graphic design can be from sign design. With sign work, you usually have one or two words that are the main thing, and

you have a couple lines of additional copy. That's it. You apply all your glitz to the main copy. It's not as easy as I'm making it sound, of course, but you're dealing with a limited palette.

I thought that I could use my sign sensibilities—exclusively—for other graphic design processes, but I can't. It works for some things, like logos, because you're dealing

with that single entity. But when you're doing publication design, there are so many more elements to deal with—subheads, display quotes, captions, multiple images, and lots of text.

When I started doing projects in class, I was using my sign design head. I wasn't expanding my capabilities. There's nothing wrong with using these sensibilities if



8-ft. tall, overlaid plywood

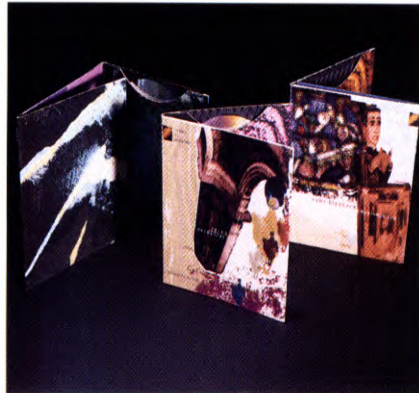
you're doing signs, but these weren't sign projects. I had a teacher named Tom Burke, and he was from the old school of design. He really loved sign art and respected my background. But he saw that I was using my sign design methodology for everything, no matter what it was. He told me, "Sam, put it away for a while. Put it in the corner for the moment and use it here and there—use the design thinking, but not the formula."

It turned out to be great advice. I saw what others were doing, and allowed myself to be influenced by other things around the school, on the shelves in stores, and in art and graphic design magazines.

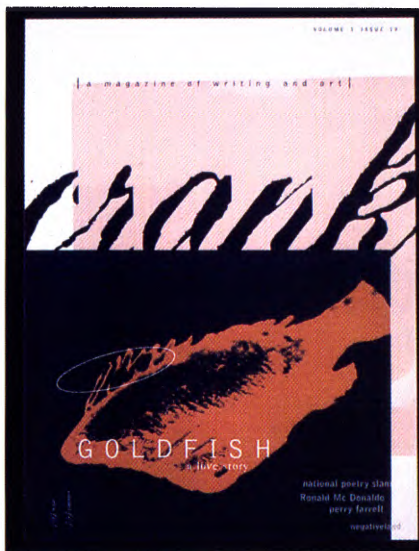
But even though I was phasing out of signs in one sense, I was still painting them every week at Salerno Signs. I learned to switch from one thing to the other and hopefully not get the two mixed up. Sometimes at the shop I'd start doing some funky stuff and I'd have to pull myself back and say, "Sam, what is this?" It was a constant struggle to make sure that what I was doing fit the application.

SC: So is packaging still your primary focus?

Sam: No, that fell by the wayside. I lost interest in it because it wasn't demanding that I stretch my design capabilities. I wasn't creating new problems for myself. Packaging is a lot like sign design. Granted, it's 3-D and you're dealing with more than one side, but you're back to the one- or two-word design challenge again. In sign design, there's a road, and in the grocery store the road would be the aisle; you're designing something that has to call out. You decide what your design is going to do. Should it recede or advance? What sort of image should it portray? European?



Three CD covers for the "Made To Measure" music series



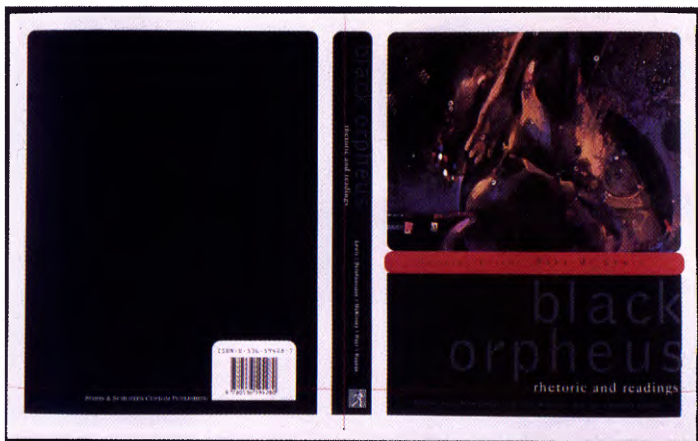
Proposed magazine cover

American? Punchy? Low-key? I enjoyed the 3-D aspect, but it wasn't enough to keep me going.

SC: You mentioned earlier that you had been out interviewing. Does that mean you'd rather work in an agency than freelance?

Sam: There was more to my decision to change careers than just not wanting to be my own boss. Economics figured in there, and with a family on the horizon, I wanted to position myself in a firm with benefits and decent hours so that I could go home at night and be with my family. When I had my sign shop, I discovered that I'm not that great a businessman.

There was another factor, too: the computer. I never had a computer when I had my own sign shop and I really resented them, for obvious reasons. So I told myself that if I was going to design with a computer, I wasn't going to design signs; that isn't why I learned the trade. I learned the sign painting trade because I wanted to do hand lettering. Now that's pretty much out the door—yet it's what I really love to do. If I was going to get a computer, I was



Book cover design for Simon & Schuster

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2½-ft.-by-3-ft., overlaid plywood

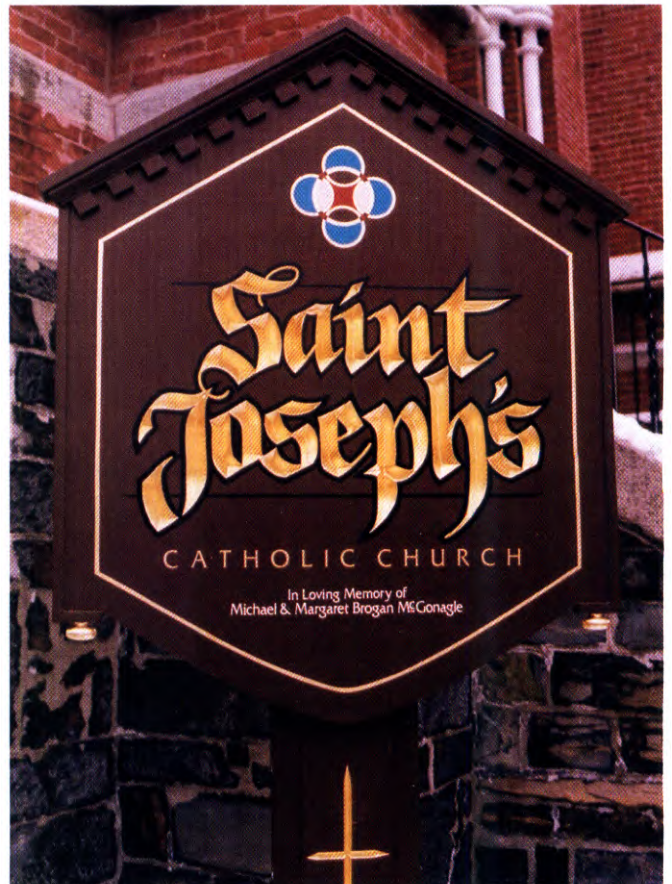
going to do something that I hadn't done before. Moving into graphic arts seemed a pretty natural progression to me.

SC: So the computer was one of the biggest factors influencing your decision to change careers?

Sam: There were several reasons for leaving the sign business, but the computer was certainly one of them. There were times when I felt I was trying to further myself in a trade where people just didn't care about good design. Plus, creating a market where there isn't one takes a long time. People have done it, like Nancy Brooks



2-ft.-by-8-ft., corrugated plastic



Lettering design by Sam, sign design by Paula Salerno, carving by Richard Honan

(Jul/Aug '94) and the guys in Jersey, but it's hard work.

The situation is the same in the graphic design world; there's more bad design than good. Everybody has a computer and they think that if they can find their way around in Quark, Illustrator, and Photoshop, they must be a graphic designer. Here I thought this field would hold more quality design.

SC: Do you think you'll keep lettering?

Sam: Certainly. I'm still at Salerno on a limited basis. I incorporate some brush work into my graphic design, and last summer I did an internship at Simon & Schuster—I was designing book covers, and I did a lot of brush lettering for that. I'll always use my brush capabilities as a fringe benefit of my design capabilities.

SC: What advice would you give to someone in the sign business today?

Sam: I think it all comes down to the quality you can deliver and how good of a business person you are. Set your shop apart from the "run 'em through" vinyl outfits; hone your pricing and strike a good balance of custom work and basic, bread-and-butter stuff. Pay attention to your craft, but remember how important the business end is. As I said before, I'm not a great business man. I came close to sinking myself because I was putting all my efforts into the artistic aspect.

And as far as design, I would advise keeping your eye on magazines like *i*, and *Graphis*. What you see there is all about style, but it's all about clear communication, too. I've had to force myself to open my mind and learn to distinguish between what's real and what's not, what's communicating and what isn't. □