

On Target

**Evan Hecox takes his art to the masses,
one superstore at a time.**

By Joel Warner
published: August 17, 2006



photo credit: Mark Manger

Evan Hecox looks a little lost standing in the red-and-white-hued world of the Arvada South SuperTarget, amid aisle after aisle of Jimi Hendrix beach towels, seventeen-piece kitchen sets, Lean Cuisine ice cream flavors, cashmere turtlenecks, HD-ready LCD TVs, iPod Nanos and Captain Morgan board shorts. He's looking for a lamp, a little number he can put in his artist studio, a renovated cinder-block garage behind his Highland bungalow, where he spends his days committing post-modern urbanscapes and minimalist abstractions of contemporary life to paper. No ordinary desk lamp will do -- not that halogen clip-on or that brushed-steel full-spectrum X-base. He'll know he's found the right one when he sees it; after all, his artwork, usually reserved for scratched-up skateboard decks, baggy T-shirts and hipster galleries, is plastered all over the shade. "It's probably sold out; it's in such high demand," Hecox says with self-deprecating sarcasm.

A long, strange road led Hecox to the artistic inspiration behind a high-minded product line at one of the country's largest retailers. There was his childhood spent poring over the black-and-white newsprint of early Thrasher magazines and dragging skate ramps down the dirt roads of Elizabeth, Colorado, to the local elementary school, the only place around with enough blacktop to ride. There were his artist parents, who put a paintbrush in his hand instead of a Little League bat and took him to New York City galleries rather than Disney World. And there was the realization that the swanky modern fashions, paintings and illustrations he was exposed to were no different, no better, than the graphics and decals that decorated the wooden board between his sneakered feet and four urethane wheels.

That epiphany led Hecox to a job with Chocolate Skateboards, where his canvases were long, narrow decks of Canadian maple and his inspiration anything that would jump off the local skate shop's shelves. "It was a realization of something I always wanted to do," says the 36-year-old. His passion shows through in his work, more than 300 decks to date: portraits of team members inspired by U.S.S.R. propaganda posters; the Chocolate logo spelled out in the loops and arcs of an unraveled cassette tape; panoramic views of city streets flowing across a series of decks like puzzle pieces.

These visuals soon leapt off the street and onto gallery walls. Drawings, linoleum prints and gauche paintings signed by Hecox appeared in art venues in Seattle, Los Angeles and Tokyo. Authorities in contemporary art and street culture opened their hearts and wallets to his style: minimalist, high-impact images he borrowed from his graphic-design jobs; muted, elemental color schemes he learned from designing four-color, screen-printed skate decks; darkly appealing scenes of urban decay, from graffiti-scarred buses to seedy cocktail lounges.

"I think he is easily recognized as one of the top young artists working today, as far as contemporary art and street culture," says Hyland Mather, director of Denver's Andenken Gallery and Design, which currently features a Hecox mural of oversized orange bicycles cascading across its outside wall. "You see his style everywhere."

"Everywhere" includes on TV, in magazines and on people's feet. In addition to his continued tenure at Chocolate Skateboards, Hecox has crafted stylized urban landscapes for Pioneer car-audio ads, lent his style to an animated Volkswagen commercial, and designed his own pair of Adidas shoes, bright-orange kicks emblazoned with San Francisco panoramas.

So when a representative of Target phoned a year ago and asked him to design images for a variety of the store's products, Hecox was intrigued -- and hesitant. "I didn't just jump at it immediately," he says. "I had to think about it and how it would be viewed by people." After all, this was Target, the land of expecting more and paying less, a world a million miles away from his skate shops and warehouse galleries, a company far removed from even his VW and Adidas clients, who despite their corporate sheen still have some measure of street cred.

But then Hecox thought about how he'd always appreciated the clean, simplistic elegance with which Target designed its branding, products and stores. He thought about how it-boy artists regularly collaborated with luxury brands, always to widespread acclaim. And he thought about how his prints, even at their cheapest, went for \$100 -- still pricey for a struggling college kid or skate punk who wanted a little Hecox style on his apartment wall. "Just because you are collaborating with somebody in an inexpensive product, does that make that product uncool?" the soft-spoken Hecox asks. "It seems better if you're making something for anybody in any city, for somebody who can go out and spend \$20 on it."

So he signed on the dotted line and became the latest in a succession of celebrated designers who have joined forces with the big red bull's-eye, people like Michael Graves and Isaac Mizrahi, Liz Lange and Sean Conway, unlikely artsy celebrities chosen by the \$52.6 billion merchandiser to fill the corporate spokesmodel roles traditionally held by Hollywood heartthrobs and pro athletes. "Our design partnerships help us accomplish our goal of making design smart, functional, inspirational and affordable," says Target spokesman Joshua Thomas. "We make it a priority to listen to our guests -- to remain relevant and in step with their lives and senses of style."

Of course, when Hecox's depictions of city landscapes and beat-up city buses began appearing on Target's throw pillows, memo boards and wall clocks earlier this summer, there were a few muffled groans from the enlightened hordes of the blogosphere. But for Hecox's peers, at least around Denver, the \$19.99 price tag carried no shame. "Good for him," says Jason Thielke, a Denver artist and graphic designer. "You have to make money to be an artist. You can't starve your whole life. And more important for me, those projects are really good exposure."

It's not a matter of selling out, says Christian Strike, co-curator of the international traveling exhibit Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture, which features Hecox's work. It's about keeping up with your fans -- those who've traded their Birdhouses for Audis, their Volcom for Armani. "Our generation is getting into important positions in corporations and advertising, becoming doctors and lawyers and politicians," says Strike. "And our generation was raised on things like punk rock and skateboarding and rap, and that's showing itself in the products we buy, the way we decorate our homes and the art we buy."

Plus, says Andenken's Mather, how else are artists like Evan going to spread their style to the masses when art institutions such as the Denver Art Museum aren't showing them any love? "He is easily the most famous young artist living in Colorado," Mather says of Hecox. "The DAM needs to have a piece of his, and they don't. First these guys get street cred, then they get commercial cred, and then finally museums get interested in them."

So maybe now that he's a retail icon, Hecox will be getting a call from the DAM. Or maybe his crass commercial dabblings will bar him forever from the highbrow titanium walls of the museum's new contemporary-art wing. But Hecox can't ponder such thoughts right now: He's too busy scouring Target, looking for his lamp.

"I'm striking out so far," he says, meandering past candle sconces and picture frames, plastic spatulas and hot pots. Navigating around a red-clad Target employee, he finds a black shower curtain decorated with an inner-city bus, one of his images. "It's kind of cool," he says of the way the designer used his work. "I probably wouldn't have it in my house. Maybe I would have designed it a bit different. Though if I designed it, it would probably be in the dollar aisle right now."

Finally, tucked among faux-weathered wall clocks and contemporary-cool wall decor, there it is. The lamp. Hecox rushes over to it -- only to pause in surprise once he's taken a closer look at the shade, emblazoned with his fire escapes and streetlights and billboards. Bemused, he picks up the lamp and points at the stylized skyline -- which, for some reason, features cars hanging in the sky and buildings pointing into the ground.

“They put the graphic on upside down.”