

Harald Belker is a force of nature in the area of automotive design with a list of design credits that include the Smart, the Batmobile for the Warner Bros. Batman and Robin Film, and the Futuristic cars of Steven Spielberg's Minority Report including the sporty red Lexus. Other movie credits include vehicle design for Armageddon, Inspector Gadget, Fahrenheit 451 and Battlefield Earth and concept sketches for Spider-Man.

Automotive design

Belker's initial interest in all things automotive started by hanging out with a childhood friend who unwittingly laid the foundation for his design career: "He was car crazy and I liked it, but for different reasons", he explains. "I wanted to change things all the time. Drove him nuts, but he was the one that sent me a magazine about the schools where one can do automotive design and therefore he had a hand in my career and sort of helped me to get me into the right direction."

At 49, Belker has been involved in the design field for roughly 25 years. "I started dreaming about car design pretty late. I was about 26 and finished a degree in engineering before I even heard of the Art Center College of Design", he admits. "But once I saw what they did, I was pretty sure that this would be my future as well."

After graduating from the Art Center College of Design, Belker fell into the dream design job of designing cars for Porsche. "Though my time at Porsche was short", he explains, "I made some long lasting friends". From Porsche, Belker then moved to another iconic automotive company at Mercedes Benz in California where he worked on the Mercedes Smart Car as well as the 'S' and 'M' class models.

Entertainment vs. industrial design

Though Belker's early design work centered on the industrial design of cars, he gained a taste for entertainment design when he was offered the opportunity to design the Batmobile for the Batman and Robin movie. "Since then I have worked on many fun projects", admits Belker. "Some of the projects have been hard to watch movies, but nevertheless they were a blast to work on. My work on Minority Report was an absolute highlight of my career because aside from the manpower behind it, it gave me a chance to show a future sense of vehicle design that we had not seen before."

Belker is well aware of the different dynamics of automotive design for the entertainment industry as opposed to the industrial design that results in a car on the road: "The difference is that for the automotive world, you get a package with hard points, with restrictions, and parts being used from other lines, and then some more restrictions. I don't have a problem with that, but that is the world of car design. In the entertainment or game world, you have none of that. It is up to me to choose what proportions and dimensions will work for the vehicle to fulfill the requirements. The projects go from Comics (Batman), to Future (Minority Report) to Fantasy (Cat in the Hat). Very different goals and very different philosophies."

From real cars, to futuristic cars, Belker enjoys the challenges that each produce. "Right now I am completely submerged in the world of Hot Wheels. Besides the ultimate racer, I have a couple cars that are funny, different and challenging. They're hitting the shelves very soon."

Style

A glance at Harald Belker's body of work shows a great range of styles. He describes his visual style as "graphically bold, with the sensitivity and vision to push new forms". He continues: "I like to design everything and I do. I am working on furniture, sports equipment, bags, toys, cars etc. I don't want to do the same thing over and over."

From thought to movie production

One of the thrills of designing cars for movies is that they are often built. Belker describes the biggest challenge in this type of one-off automotive design is cost: "These things are not cheap and producers don't like to spend money. Once I get the basic design approved, I have a 3D guy model it in the computer. With that information we can output a small model and use that data later to mill a full size model out of foam, make fiberglass molds and start the full size car. In parallel a chassis is built, suspension and power plant located, etc. The movie vehicle is built for the scenes in the script. If it has to go fast it will. The same data can also be used for the postproduction phase. It all has become very streamlined because of computers and the Internet. Thank god!"

Inspiration

Belker credits the strong group of friends that he met during his design studies as an inspiration in his work: "I was lucky to graduate with a great bunch of guys from Art Center. We are still meeting and working together."

"I get my ideas from addressing the issue at hand", he adds. "I don't like to research or look at other cars for instance. I absorb everything from my environment anyway. My goal is to do new things and not redo things. It is difficult, and sometimes when I think I've got something new I see it a day later and realize that it had influenced me subconsciously."

The medium

Belker's design career and studies mean that he has learnt and worked with both traditional and digital tools: "I love digital work, but I have spent years learning the basics, perfecting a way of working with traditional media such as markers and gouache", explains Belker. "With these principles, I have been able to effectively move into the digital world. These tools, especially Photoshop, make it all much easier and are great for presentation purposes."

Making a name for yourself

Not surprisingly, Belker is very upbeat about the discipline of design and its value as a career path. He offers the following advice for those looking to move in this direction: "Make sure that you've got a good understanding of design. Most of the time you have to work for people with a different sense of design than your own. It takes a long time to develop skills that will make you special. If you succeed, it is the best job in the world, because it is always new and constantly changing. Follow your dream!!!"