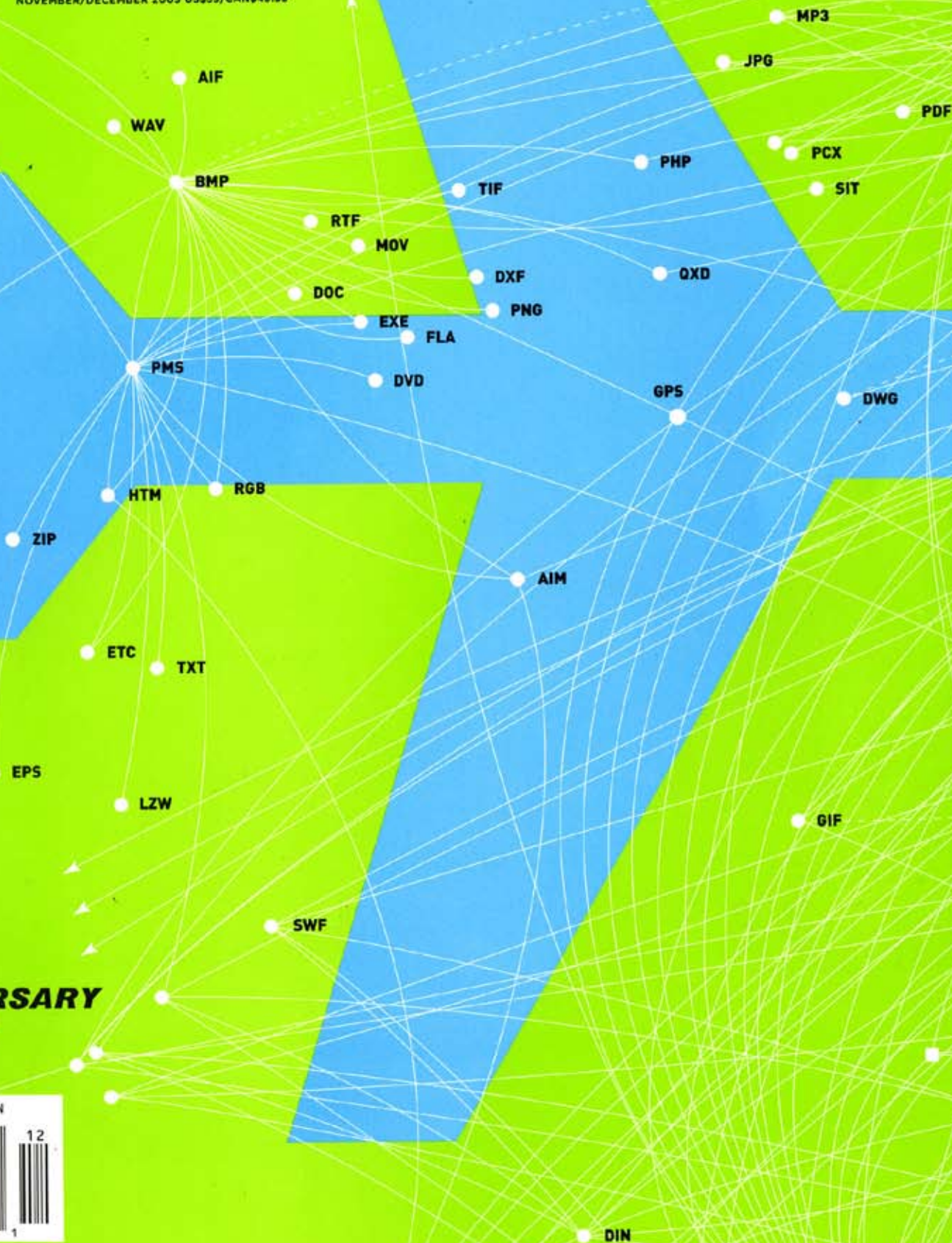


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**2005  
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DESIGN  
ANNUAL**

DESIGN CULTURE PLACE  
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2005 US\$35/CAN\$49.95



**25TH  
ANNIVERSARY  
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# victoria maddocks

CREATIVE DIRECTOR, KIEHL'S PHARMACY

Interview by Steven Heller

In this age when fortunes are spent on branding (and rebranding), the legendary Kiehl's Pharmacy is content to honor the past by staying true to its simple traditions. Few other American businesses have produced a line of products whose packages have acquired a cachet for their "non-designed" utilitarian shapes and typography. The apothecary was founded in 1851 by John Kiehl in a building on Third Avenue and 13th Street in New York City, where it remains today. In 1921, Irving A. Morse, his apprentice, purchased the store and expanded it into a full-service pharmacy selling Kiehl's own brand of homeopathic remedies and over-the-counter drugs. In 1961, Aaron Morse, Irving's son, continued to develop and expand the Kiehl's product range, using expertise gained as a pharmacologist. An inveterate collector, he also filled the store with a dozen of his own vintage motorcycles and photographs of airplanes. The reins were passed to Aaron's only child, Jami Morse Heidegger, who with her husband, Klaus, continued the Kiehl's tradition. In 2000, the family sold the business to L'Oréal to grow the brand further. A key figure in transforming Kiehl's into an international brand is Victoria Maddocks, the company's creative director. This year was a banner year for the company's expansion, as Kiehl's opened a host of new stores and launched a new product line and redesigned Web site, all without losing grasp of its persona. Here, Maddocks discusses the challenges of making a radically underdesigned brand into an unmistakable marketplace presence.

**HELLER:** You are creative director of a company that traditionally prided itself on being underdesigned. Kiehl's original store in Manhattan was filled with quirky collectibles, and Kiehl's package design was always beyond neutral. What kind of challenge did that present when it was decided to position Kiehl's on an international stage? **MADDOCKS:** Early on, it became very clear that we were comfortable with our contradictions, with our serious approach to skin care and our irreverent approach to life. In my view, this is not inconsistent, it is harmonious. Additionally, very few people nationally actually knew Kiehl's through our New York store. Since we don't advertise, many people got to know Kiehl's by its signature packaging and press following. Nationally, we are distributed in luxury retailers like Barneys, Neiman Marcus, and Saks Fifth Avenue, so for many people, their first impression of Kiehl's was in those environments, or via the press, and of course, by word of mouth. **HELLER:** What are the pitfalls of selling a product that comes in such generic-looking packages? As a designer, what license do you have to go beyond the house style? **MADDOCKS:** Our packaging is clearly a hallmark of who we are; it is a statement of confidence about the formulation inside. But since our packaging is all very similar, we have heard that it can create customer confusion. We know that people don't always remember names of products, so when everything looks the same, one has to ask if its design is really a service to the customer. I am empowered to test the elasticity; however, I realize it is a fine line that can break in an instant. Communicating key messages about ingredients and the proper usage of the product (key to our education



Interior of Kiehl's flagship store in New York City. Photograph: Lisa Romerein.

philosophy) also poses a problem since all the body copy is treated with a similar hierarchy. So imagine the implications of all of that among multiple cultures and languages!

**HELLER:** Now that you've gone international, how do you retain the simplicity of the brand and still appeal to new consumers? **MADDOCKS:** In carving out a retail design that would be effective on a national and global level, we decided that our environment needed to embody who we are but should not be a pastiche of the New York store. Since the design must serve the product and the environment in which it is sold, it is truly a modernist approach in that form follows function. In terms of branding and showcasing stories, it's no longer just about the adventures of Mr. Morse, it's about the adventures of Kiehl's past entwined with the present. **HELLER:** I remember Mr. Morse walking around the store in his lab coat, glad-handing customers, providing free samples of new and old products. He made you feel as though you

were in his personal laboratory. Did you have to become steeped in the heritage of Kiehl's before taking on the job as creative director?

**MADDOCKS:** I was a customer prior to joining the company, so I knew some of its history. I was fascinated by the motorcycle collection and admired the company's zest for life. Once on board, I immersed myself in every aspect of its culture and heritage, reading years of customer comment cards and family correspondence. Simultaneously, my desk became a mecca of old relics and letters! I became an archivist of sorts, and I still am today.

**HELLER:** I understand that you are almost ready to launch a new pilot store [in a city yet to be announced] designed by architect Ron Pompei, who, among other things, specializes in spas and health centers. How will this differ from the old? **MADDOCKS:** The future design will make the product more accessible and allow enough flexibility to customize spaces even more, entwining the surrounding community with our passion for product and adventurous zest for life. Our intent is to lighten the store a bit—to focus on product and really express the truly adventurous spirit of the company. We want our customers to walk into our spaces and leave the hectic, message-saturated world outside, to enter a space that is both relaxing and efficient, striking a balance between warmth and intrigue while serving their needs. We think of our customers as family, as members of a shared community. It's more harmonious, I think. **HELLER:** The flagship store in New York is in the original location on 13th Street. Though samples are still generously given out by white-smocked salespersons, there is also an espresso bar and other amenities. How has the ethos changed, yet stayed the



Kiehl's musk-oil bottle with text set in unfancy HelveticaNeue. Photograph: Matthew Llewelyn.

same? **MADDOCKS:** We actually used to have a soda fountain in the store in the 1970s, so a café and other amenities (reading materials, bigger bathroom) is a newer interpretation of the old. Mr. Morse was fascinated with stunt planes, cars, motorcycles, and books, and enjoyed sharing them with his customers. He always said it gave the gentlemen something to do while their wives shopped! Times change, people evolve, and in a world where time has become our greatest commodity, we thought a café—a place to take a moment for yourself, read the paper if you like—was a perfect addition. So we reached out to a local family-owned coffee company called Mud, and they jumped at the chance to open a café inside the store. It is run separately, so our skin-care experts do not have to become coffee experts, too! In addition to Mr. Morse's adventurous photos, we have photos of our friends and employees who climb and run all

corners of the earth in addition to breaking world records. Our signage, whether handwritten or typed, is still quite informational. The signage is there to punctuate the product offerings, to make shopping a more enjoyable experience. **HELLER:** Speaking of signs, "The Mission of Kiehl's," which hangs in a simple gold frame in the New York store, states that "a worthwhile firm must have a purpose for its existence" that improves the quality of the community. In this era of superannuated brand mythologies, how does the company stay true to its ideals? **MADDOCKS:** We chose to funnel our resources into the quality of ingredients, an extensive sampling program, and an intense education curriculum. Our flagship store is a place where people from the community just want to be, because our staff is welcoming and genuinely interested in the people they serve. Additionally, we have been supporting charities, specifically in the areas of AIDS, children, and the environment. We have given countless contributions to worthwhile causes over the years through donations and by designing products that give 100 percent of the profit to the charity (Amfar, Magic Johnson Foundation, YouthAIDS). We have also reached out to local artists to design the labels. The second product to benefit charity was just introduced this fall. We believe that this is still the purpose of our existence today. **HELLER:** But with this international push, has the brand image become glitzier and sexier? Have you gone Hollywood? **MADDOCKS:** If we can service our customer better, or make a better product for that customer, we do. Glitz, at the end of the day, would only detract from the explanation of the product. Glitz does not benefit the customer. **P**