



OPPOSITE: OAKSHIRE DESIGNER ERIC KESKEYS WITH NEW DESIGNS

LEFT: PROCESS IMAGES FROM OAKSHIRE'S CAN REDESIGN

ABOVE: FROM SKETCH TO LABEL OF NINKASI'S NEW HELLES BELLES DESIGN

and move really light and quick.”

Regardless of increased efficiency and flexibility, Keskeys is a one-man art department and says he looks forward to 2017, when the majority of new branding will be in place.

“Next year is going to be a lot easier,” he says with a laugh.

THE NINKASI NARRATIVE

In its art department, Ninkasi now employs creative director Nicholas Yarger, graphic designer Wade Long and artist-in-residence Neal Williams. This is unheard of for a brewery that’s below, say, Sierra Nevada’s prominence.

“It’s always been one of our strengths to have an in-house art department,” says Jamie Floyd, Ninkasi co-founder and founding brewer. “Most breweries shop this stuff out. For us, it means we get to tell our story in the most genuine way we can.”

“It’s increasingly hard to come up with creative names [for beers] with so many breweries coming up with so many ideas,” he continues. “People need to look for a more creative way to get a voice out.”

More than getting the voice out, the well-oiled art and branding machine that is Yarger, Long and Williams must dial in the soul of Ninkasi, as they put it. Long says this is possible because the art team is part of the company, interacting with senior management and brewers on a regular basis.

“Where people fall short is where they have to go out for their art and you’re getting an interpretation from a third party,” Long says. “They’re not entrenched in the culture of the company.”

“We’re putting personality, we’re putting soul into our labels,” Yarger adds. “I think that’s what really separates us from what a lot of other brands are doing right now.”

Long has been at Ninkasi for four years, while Yarger and Williams both began in the brewery’s art department in June 2015. When Yarger came on as creative director, he says

his goal was to rebrand Ninkasi’s entire lineup, taking the original branding from former Ninkasi creative director Tony Figoli and pushing it a step further.

Standing in Ninkasi’s bright industrial art department in the administration building in the Whiteaker, Yarger points to a corkboard stretching across one wall. Pinned to it are dozens of marketing materials, including some of the original designs for Oatis Oatmeal Stout, Spring Reign American Pale Ale and Maiden the Shade.

“The art director before me did a good job of branding all of our flagships,” Yarger says. “It had a very distinct look. I’ve kind of just adopted that and just added to it — added more personality, added a little more texture.”

Looking at the redesigns on the corkboard, it’s clear Ninkasi has embraced a more narrative, detailed approach, which has been influenced by Williams, a gig poster illustrator by trade. Now, The Total Domination IPA label features sunny snowcapped peaks, Dawn of the Red IPA has a detailed sign of the horns against a field of red zombies and Tricerahops Double IPA features a teal triceratops.

The design du jour, however, is for Ninkasi’s limited run of the commemorative 22-ounce N10 Imperial Blended Ale to celebrate the brewery’s 10th anniversary, to be released in July. For this project, the art team did decide to collaborate with an outside artist, the Portland-based designer Blaine Fontana.

“We love to support the art industry too, and working with another artist always brings new stuff to our work,” Long says.

The packaging is a trip. The box is wrapped in a holographic foil, as is the bottle label. The colors are bold oranges, yellows and reds marked by teal icons of beer barrels, the brewery, foam “No. 1” fingers and more. Long says he had been unsure if senior management would support the costly holographic foil, but they embraced it immediately.

“To have that trust from them to be creative and really let us do what we’re good at is something really special,” Yarger says. “Doing [design] for 20 years, it’s very rare that you have a senior management team who’s like ‘Yeah, you guys, we trust you. Kill it.’”