

Killing Time

S.B.'s Bob Roan and His Unconventional Clocks

by Elizabeth Schwyzer

It's just after 10 a.m. on a Thursday morning—at least, I think it is. I'm standing in the spacious home office of a tract house in Hidden Valley, trying to tell time from the most unusual clock face I've ever seen.

For some people, time is a serious matter not to be trifled with. For Bob Roan, it's more of a game. Roan is a longtime Santa Barbara resident, a computer programmer, and physicist with a metaphysical bent. Three years ago, he completed a master's degree in mythological studies at Pacifica Graduate Institute. "I planned to do a PhD, but I got kind of consumed with this," he explained, gesturing to the circuit boards, computer monitors, cables, and cardboard boxes that fill his office. By "this," he means his growing fascination with the concept of time, and the creation of a series of digital clocks that toy with the viewer by obscuring the actual time as well as raise questions about our dependence on it.

Roan considers himself primarily an ideas man—an intellectual rather than an artist—but he's also selling four models of his clocks at a number of venues in Los Angeles as well as at Santa Barbara's seasonal Yes Store, this year located at the old site of Morninglory Music on State Street. Although the clocks themselves are Roan's original work, down to the hand-soldered circuits, he commissioned three of the four cases they are housed in: the sleek, brushed steel frame was designed by Caruso Woods; the traditional alder wood one is the work of Kestas Urbaitas; and Blaine Taylor crafted the chic zebra wood version. The fourth design is the most lighthearted. It's made of green circuit boards with a briefcase handle set at an angle on top, and Roan designed it himself.

"I think they're great conversation pieces," Roan explained, swiveling one of the clocks around to show me its inner workings, including a small screen, a couple of buttons, and a series of program settings where the user can determine just how confusing to let things

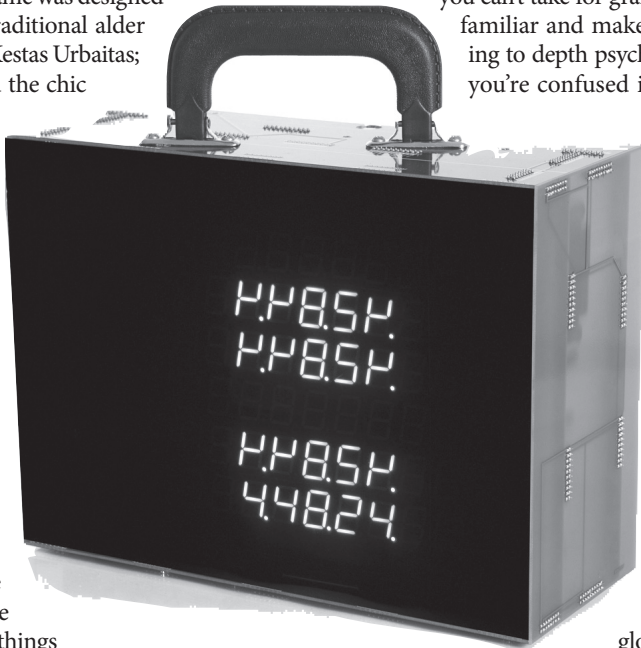
become. "They are clocks for people who like puzzles, new technology, and new ideas," Roan continued. He laughed as he recalled one customer at the Yes Store who complained that the clocks made him "think too hard." "They're for people who actually *like* to think," Roan said, giggling.

Unlike the average digital readout on your bedside alarm clock, Roan's creations can be set to read out the time in a vertical orientation, upside down, or diagonally. You can specify how long you want it to remain in each display mode, and whether you want the transitions to dissolve or switch immediately. For every programming decision, there are three settings to choose from: sometimes, always, and never. And Roan's clocks even give you the option of seeing the "regular" time once in a while, just to keep you clued in to the little game.



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ABOVE: Bob Roan's unique digital clocks or "chronoclasts" break the rules of time. BELOW: The chronoclast in Roan's own circuit-board suitcase design.



"The clock face is sort of the Esperanto of the world," Roan said. "I've tried to take that thing that is so universal and shake it up." His studies at Pacifica, where depth psychology and mythology are the primary models for understanding the world, have obviously influenced his thinking. "I think we really need to disrupt the way we're so synchronized, the way we're so dependent on the clock," he explained, "so I've dissolved the clock face into something you can't take for granted. My clocks take the familiar and make it unfamiliar. According to depth psychology, that place where you're confused is where the good stuff happens."

Yes, it's a game, but for Roan, the implications of such a disruption to our thinking go beyond mere play; he calls his clocks "metaphysically green." "We're so diminished by schedules," he said. "We're so locked into what seems immediate, but we zip through it; we have too much time, and not enough timelessness." Roan cites large-scale issues like global warming as a function of our inability to see our impact on the world in deep time rather than in the short term. He acknowledges that the problem is bigger than he can take on alone, but he'd like to think his clocks might contribute to our ability to slow down and consider the grip time has on us. "I call my clocks 'Chronoclasts'; I'm breaking the rules with time," he said. "Hopefully they can bring people into the moment."

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Bob Roan's clocks are on view at the Yes Store (1014 State St.) now through Christmas.

For more information, call 624-6356 or visit spacetimeartworks.com.