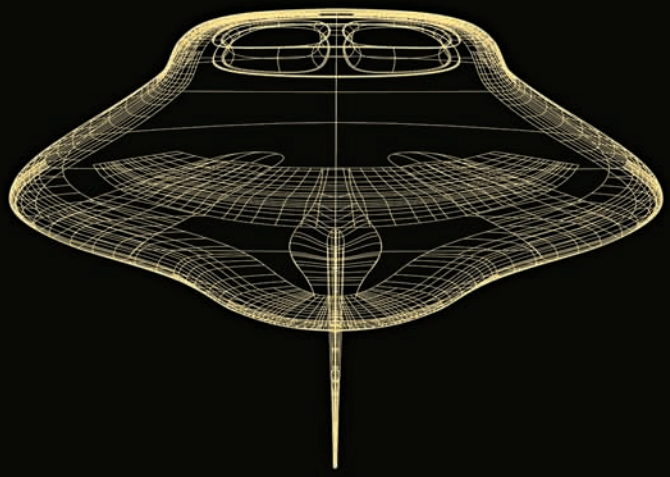
The Surfboards of Thomas Meyerhoffer

And How Does That Make You Feel?

Scott Hulet



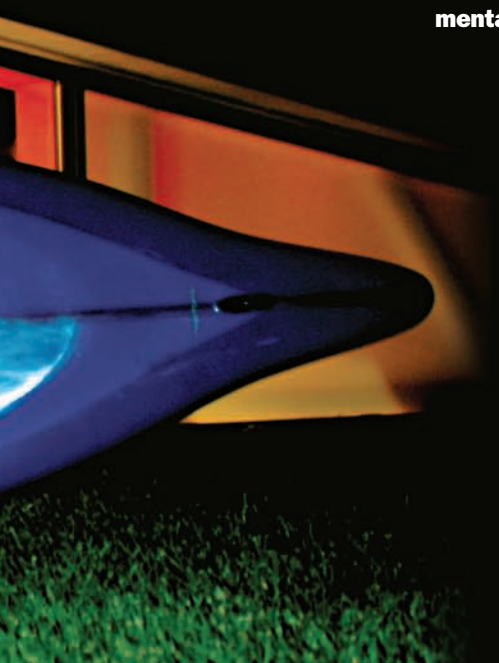
We're used to approaching surfboard design from a performance matrix: Faster. Lighter. Looser. Higher. New materials, sharper edges, inhalations and exhalations of volume, more fins, more concaves, nth-degree refinements immeasurable by the human eye. Yet surfing's greatest rewards tend toward matters of feel, our purest memories passion flashes: Hunger. Elation. Frustration. Calm.

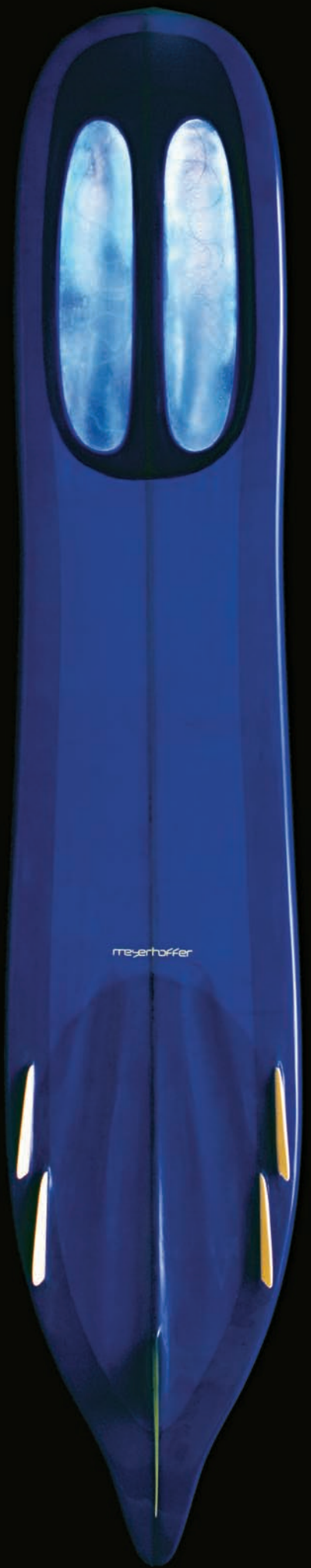
What if we designed boards from that emotional angle? What if we sought out designs that amplified the surfing story unfolding with every ride? What if there were elements in the board itself that augmented the feeling we had during a run down the line? If, when you were in a bowled cup on the face of the wave, your feet were nested in bowls on the deck? Or when the rail was locked in, trimmed to the teats, the stern of the board was a penetrating probe of foam and glass, literally stinging back into the tube like the tail of a kite?

These are the sorts of questions swimming through the fertile mind of Thomas Meyerhoffer. The industrial designer immigrated to California from Sweden in the '90s—just in time to lay his personal curves on the Apple eMate, the precursor to that company's colorful, curvy product rollout of the last decade. Acclaim followed, with his designs lauded from the binary wonks at *Wired* magazine to hand-gesturing furniture critics in Italy. As a surfer, it was simply a matter of time before he applied his rigorous—yet thoroughly organic—approach to the foam and cloth beneath his feet.

"I was really curious about how far you could take the meaning of the performance act on a surfboard into a design that tells that story and (still) be able to ride the board," he says. His interests lie in the classical longboard experience, flowing down the line on a small point wave. Or, in narrative terms, an angle-in take off, a quick acquisition of trim for max hull speed, an artfully-timed stroll to the tip, an eventual back-pedal, then a kickout. A beginning, a middle, an end. Rising action, climax, falling action. A story.

It's nice if a board can weave a tale, but it damn well better trim and turn too. Never a shaper, Meyerhoffer's first explorations came via existing boards with known performance characteristics. "I knew intuitively that the boards with the highest standards would be handmade," he says. "I didn't mind paying extra to get that." Soon enough, he was diddling with the computer-aided tooling of his profession as well as with the more prosaic planer, rasps, and screens. His boards began as sketches, were then fined out on the computer, milled on a CDC machine, finish shaped by Meyerhoffer, then glassed by master laminator Leslie Anderson. Descriptions of the outcome are perhaps best left to the photos. Our usual materials—luminous by nature—take on strange new throbbings. Visual reference points abound: Jules Verne, Dr. Seuss, Gaudi, Kandinsky, Henry Moore. Again, though, practicality rears its head. "Actually," Thomas admits, "I was surprised that they rode as well as they did. I considered them experimental sculptures, and if they rode well,





Young Dylan checks the rail profile on Legozoo 9.6, with father Thomas in the Montara shaping lab.

You never know until you mow. Up close and personal looks at Legozoo 9.6 (green board) and Boosoo 9.6 (inverted view).

BOOSOO
meyerhoffer
meyerhoffer

Various looks at Codrod 9.2; an early sketch from the pre-development days; Thomas Meyerhoffer confirms that the strange creations not only work but are quite fun, thank you.

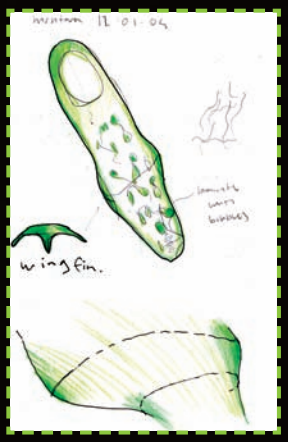
then fine." Despite their visual quirkiness, the various elements of the boards speak more to Thomas' wish list than to novelty. The hourglass shape, for example. "I looked at a longboard, and the surfer in me wanted it to turn better. The designer in me asked, 'What can I remove?'"

The answer was the width in the middle. This negated the parallel and put more curve in the outline. Curves turn better than straights. Also, the center of the board is the closest thing to dead space on a noserider. You're on the tail or on the tip.

"Next, I looked for things that enhanced the narrative act as well as affected the performance. Like the tail of the board I call the *Legozoo*: it works like a fin in the third dimension—it holds the tail in, and you really feel it when you stall." And the translucent panels near the nose? Those are just to evoke the weightlessness of a long noseride. That, and to inspire dialogue between surfers. 'You know,' Thomas says in his sonorous Scandinavian brogue,

‘most surfers are too cool to ask me about them at the beach, but they do stare quite a lot. Sometimes I feel like I’m wearing a pink wetsuit.’

“It’s kind of funny how conservative we surfers can be. I was at Pacifica, and this group of artist surfers from the city paddled out. They letter big words on their boards and have stickers all over their wetsuits. You’d think they would be accepting of different approaches, but they were talking about how my boards were ridiculous and looking at me like I was a kook. Oh, well. I got some long waves that day.”



Considering that Thomas is rather new to surfing (he began in earnest back in 2000), finding feedback from highly skilled surfers is important.

“I’ve had shortboard friends ride them, and they remarked on how well the boards turn from the tail. The best response I’ve had was down in southern Baja. A really good local surfer and fisherman rode one of them, and he was surfing really well on it. All of the better surfers asked to try it. It created a scene. But it will take time to see if any of these ideas are adopted.”

But any adoption of Meyerhoffer’s design details might be beside the point. Perhaps his real contribution is in directing at least some of our process toward less applied, more spatial planes, thereby speaking to the story of our ride.

—Meyerhoffer’s surfboards can be seen at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum Triennial or at www.meyerhoffer.com

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