

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

lodown

37 summer of three madness

self portrait by galle
illustration by hase

Ryan McGinness

A Conversation with



Ryan McGinness is arguably one of the most prolific artists of his generation. Only in his very early thirties, McGinness has already been described by the *New Yorker* as 'one of New York's most promising bright young artists.' His work, which makes strong social commentary on iconography, language, and historical as well as contemporary symbolism by combining and remixing graphic vocabularies from a range of sources, also impressed the editors of *Vogue* enough to recently recognize him as a 'leading pioneer of the new semiotics.' And if that wasn't enough praise, the yuppie style bible *Wallpaper* wasn't far behind when it declared that McGinness had 'exalted the sign into an iconic art form.'

By Gerhard Stochl

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1 & 2: Untitled ("This Dream is So Life-Like" Series), 2002. Unique silkscreen on wood panel, 12 x 12 in., Courtesy Gas Gallery, Tokyo, Japan



Untitled, 2003. Unique silkscreen on sketchbook cover, 6 x 8 in., Courtesy Christopher Rubino

Yet the obviously wide open arms of the art establishment haven't blurred McGinness's vision or obscured his keen eye for the pitfalls of the modern (art) world. On the contrary, the growing attention he receives has probably only increased the amazing pace at which he keeps producing piece after piece and show after show. But instead of watering down his message, he keeps refining his voice oftentimes even holding up the much needed mirror to the art world he is very much a part of. Currently preparing for solo shows in New York, Philadelphia and Los Angeles while working on two separate book projects, McGinness still finds the time to kick around a soccer ball with a dozen of his peers several times a week which might help explain why he is also one of the most beloved and respected artists of his generation.

GS: After you moved to New York City in the early nineties, you started working at the Pentagram design studio under Michael Bierut. Explain how your time there helped shape your career and why you later decided to go solo at such a young age.

RM: Upon graduation, I moved to New York and worked at Pentagram. I was really only there for about 6 months. Working under Mr. Bierut was an incredible experience for me at such a young age, especially after having studied his work in school. While working under him, I was able to observe his direct and honest approach to design. He was always able to put sophisticated design solutions into plain and simple terms for the client. I've always considered myself more blue-collar in my work ethic, and so I think that's something I really admired about Michael Bierut - there is absolutely no bullshit in what he does. While I was at Pentagram, however, I was also painting, participating in group shows, and designing posters, flyers, and CD packages for friends' bands. Through this kind of work, I felt more of a connection to culture and my generation as opposed to the corporate work I was doing at Pentagram (Delta Airlines, Disney, museums, etc.) Ultimately, my night and weekend projects took over.

GS: During that time, and your initial years in New York, who were some of the artists and/or thinkers who influenced and inspired you and why? Aside from Michael Bierut, of course.

HM: Well, when I first moved to New York, I was reading a lot of Baudrillard, Foucault, and Wittgenstein as a sort of carry-over or extension from Carnegie Mellon [where Ryan received his formal education] where Post-Modernism was already being taught as a part of history. The work I was making mimicked a lot of 80s art, but with more of a concern for 'design' (composition, typography, etc.). I think instead of seeing people or work at that time that I admired, I was more inspired to react against all the boring work I was seeing. There wasn't a sense of fun or humor being shared in art that I can remember. However, later, in 1996, I believe it was, I saw Damien Hirst's show at [the] Gagosian [gallery], and I was very impressed and inspired. I had one of my first solo shows up at the same time where I was trying to create a fun, carnival-like atmosphere. But when I saw Hirst doing what I was trying to do, but 100 times better, I just felt defeated, and that's when I'm usually most inspired.

GS: Your 1999 book 'flatnessisgod' is considered a milestone that introduced the concept behind your design and artistic endeavors to the world. Briefly describe what went into putting that book together and how it is holding up as your work keeps evolving.

RM: That book was actually about 5 years in the making, and since its publication, I've been working on the flatnessisgodREDUX, which should come out this fall or next spring. flatnessisgod is a really mixed-up, confusing and oblique book. flatnessisgodREDUX will be even more so. I love the book format, and I've always made books. Books are a way for me to help me understand myself and compartmentalize my past. Through creating books, I am able to create my own select history with select memories not unlike the way most people keep photo albums or create scrapbooks. So, for me, flatnessisgod was really a scrapbook



"Piggy Back" 2003. Book approach. Book cover and first spread. 8.5 x 11 in. 112 pp. Published by Gering Press

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"Dream Garden," with Julia Ching, 2002. Installation view. Courtesy Dutch Projects, NYC.

that helped me close a chapter of my life up to that point. Unfortunately, in that way, the books I create and share with people always reflect where I was, and not where I am at any particular moment.

GS: You oftentimes use images from clip-art catalogues and pre-existing logos in your work. In that context, a recent essay in a comprehensive Japanese collection of your work states that "It is evident that appropriation and sampling are the foundation of his art." Do you agree with that? Please explain.

RM: I actually wouldn't use the word, 'appropriation' as that connotes an illegal use of protected imagery. I'm certainly not opposed to that strategy, but I've always been more interested in public domain images that are created to belong to anyone and everyone. When I first started making this stuff called 'art,' I was interested in taking images from that clip art world which usually show up in newsletters and sales flyers, and recontextualizing them into an 'art' environment. The images I'm talking about specifically are black and white line-art drawings that have usually been compiled and categorized by Dover publications. I have a strong connection to these clip art compendiums since my days in high school when I worked at a Navy base creating flyers and posters for the Moral, Welfare, and Recreation Department. I was fascinated with these image books with topics like 'Birthdays' and 'Holidays' or 'Work.' Recombining them and bringing them into my work was a way to personalize these über-mood drawings that were created anonymously. And that's another reason why I was so fascinated with them—they were credited to companies and not individual humans. Personalizing them, assuming accountability, and putting a human behind this work felt empowering. Eventually, my interest in the formal aspect of these images shifted from line to shape. For the past few years I've been concentrating on shapes. Yes, I'll take apart corporate logos and recombine the shapes to suit my needs, but this is really out of necessity, and not part of some 'take back the corporate power' agenda. So, I would agree with the 'sampling' claim, but to label the work as having something to do with sampling in the same way a DJ samples or videos self reference in a digitally-based society is passe. We've arrived at a point in culture where this kind of shape-shifting plastic imagery is par for the course.

GS: A few years ago you also designed a series of boards for Supreme that prominently featured Pantone color samples. How did you land that job and what were your thoughts behind such a simple, effective and uncommon design?

RM: James Jebbia, the owner of Supreme, contacted me about doing some boards. The Color Formula Guide concept was one of many ideas I submitted to him. Mr. Jebbia, who has a great eye for these sorts of things, obviously, decided on the Pantone Color Guide concept. I use Pantone books and paint swatches all the time, and they're always around in the studio. So, I guess it was only a matter of time before they showed up in the work. Actually, as I remember, the boards were originally going to be more like paint sample swatches that you get from the hardware store. They must have eventually morphed into the Pantone-style swatches.

GS: You have worked with various types of materials and media—from digital work, porcelain baked enamel on steel, paintings, screen prints, video to clothing design and even plastic toy soldiers which you glued on wood panels. Do you prefer working with certain types of materials over others, and how do you decide what is right for a particular piece?

RM: I have no preference for materials. In fact, I'm always searching for new materials and manufacturing processes. I'd like to state something like, 'My ideas dictate my materials,' but I don't know if that's always the case. I think my stronger



"Dream Garden," with Julia Ching, 2002. Installation view. Courtesy Dutch Projects, NYC.



"Dream Garden," with Julia Ching, 2002. Installation view. Courtesy Dutch Projects, NYC.



"This is where it all begins," with Julia Ching, 2002. Installation view. Courtesy Dutch Projects, NYC.

work is where the integrity of the materials are exploited and inextricably linked to the ideas behind the work.

GS: Earlier this year, you curated a show called 'Sponsorship' at the BLK/MRKT Gallery in Los Angeles. Please briefly explain the show's concept and the point it is trying to make about the intersection of art and commerce.

RM: In the Fall of 2001, Tony Arcabascio of Alife told me about his concept for an empty retail space. The idea was not to sell products but instead to provide the service of distributing information in the form of giveaway products and promotional items for those individuals and companies that paid to have their messages on display. This pay-to-play model would operate on a scale. Large corporations would pay more to display their advertising messages, while individuals would pay less to share their messages with the public in the same space. This advertising-as-content would be curated, not open to just anyone and everyone. Consequently, the public would come to trust that this space was the spot to go to find out about the latest new music, restaurants, clothes, etc. The space would become a brand itself.

The price of this piece (p) shall be determined according to the following equation: $p = d((x-y)/4)$, where x = the price of the most expensive unsold piece in the exhibition rounded to the closest whole U.S. dollar, y = the price of the least expensive unsold piece in the exhibition rounded to the closest whole U.S. dollar, d = the number of full days in the duration of the exhibition that have passed, and f = the number of full days remaining in the duration of the exhibition.

Note that d will equal one less than the total number of days in the exhibition, as the current day is not included in the calculation. When $f=0$ (the last day of an exhibition), use $f=1$. The total number of days of the exhibition are calendar days and shall include days the gallery is closed.

Example 1: On the 6th day of a 30-day exhibition, where the most expensive unsold piece in the exhibition is \$10,000, and the least expensive unsold piece in the exhibition is \$500, the price of this piece is \$1,979.16, because $p = 5((10,000-500)/24)$.

Example 2: On the last day of a 28-day exhibition, where the most expensive unsold piece in the exhibition is \$400, and the least expensive unsold piece in the exhibition is \$30, the price of this piece is \$3,990, because $p = 27((400-30)/1)$.

Example 3: On the 2nd day of a 30-day exhibition, where the most expensive unsold piece in the exhibition is \$600, and the least expensive unsold piece in the exhibition is \$75, the price of this piece is \$18.75, because $p = 1((600-75)/25)$.

It is therefore in the interest of a prospective buyer to purchase this piece as soon as possible. The price of this piece is further reduced as the difference between the most expensive unsold piece in the exhibition and the least expensive unsold piece in the exhibition approaches zero. In the rare instance that all the unsold pieces in the exhibition are the same price, this piece is free regardless of when during the exhibition it is sold ($p = d((0-0)/f)$).

Upon conclusion of the exhibition, this piece is no longer for sale, and the rights to ownership revert to the artist.

symbiotically supported by select sponsors. Since our initial discussion, Tony has evolved this concept with his partners at Alike by substituting the pay to play model with a purely curatorial one. Within their retail environment, they work with select larger corporations (and only with select products) while showcasing the work of emerging companies and artists. Their curatorial approach ensures that both ends of the spectrum co-exist on a level playing field, and the public has come to expect a higher standard from Alike. BLK/MRKT similarly applies the Robin Hood approach to the service industry. Founded by artists who sought commercial applications for their work, BLK/MRKT seeks relationships with large corporations so it can afford to support and showcase fine art through its gallery. Many of the artists exhibiting in spaces like Alike and BLK/MRKT are moving beyond this simple sponsorship model by co-branding themselves with corporations for various projects (with shoes, clothing, figures, etc.). This is a new paradigm: a two-way patronage unique to our generation. Artists are generating financial support for their own work instead of relying on grants from governments, families, or institutions. In return, companies get the street/art/subculture credibility that builds their brands. All of these models are being replicated at a furious pace as more and more corporations strive to be down with youth culture, creative agencies curate and author their own content, and artists seek increasingly broader audiences. As

a reaction to these trends, I did not produce any work for the Sponsorship exhibition. Instead, I set up a sponsorship program whereby any company could contribute any amount it wished in cash, products, or services. The sponsors' logos were on display at different sizes and locations (commensurate with their level of contribution), along with product and promotional giveaways. My hope was that an empty exhibition would create enough pause for us to consider both the fine art of corporate sponsorship and the corporate sponsorship of fine art.

GS: In addition to curating 'Sponsorship' you are also editing a book of essays by various artists about the same subject and by the same name. Tell me who you got to contribute and what your views are on the art world's dependence on corporate sponsorship. Do you believe that corporate sponsorship is inherently detrimental to an artist's career?

RM: The book is a collection of essays and interviews with different artists about this idea of artists and companies working together. It draws no conclusions, but instead provides numerous opinions and examples. The essayists are Shepard Fairey, Adam Glickman, Carlo McCormick, Steve Powers (ESPO), Jacqui Millar, and Rob Walker. I conducted interviews with Tony Arcabascio (SITE), Craig Costello (KR), DALEK, EASE, David Ellis (SKWERM),

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