

Grafik 126

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Special Report
Art

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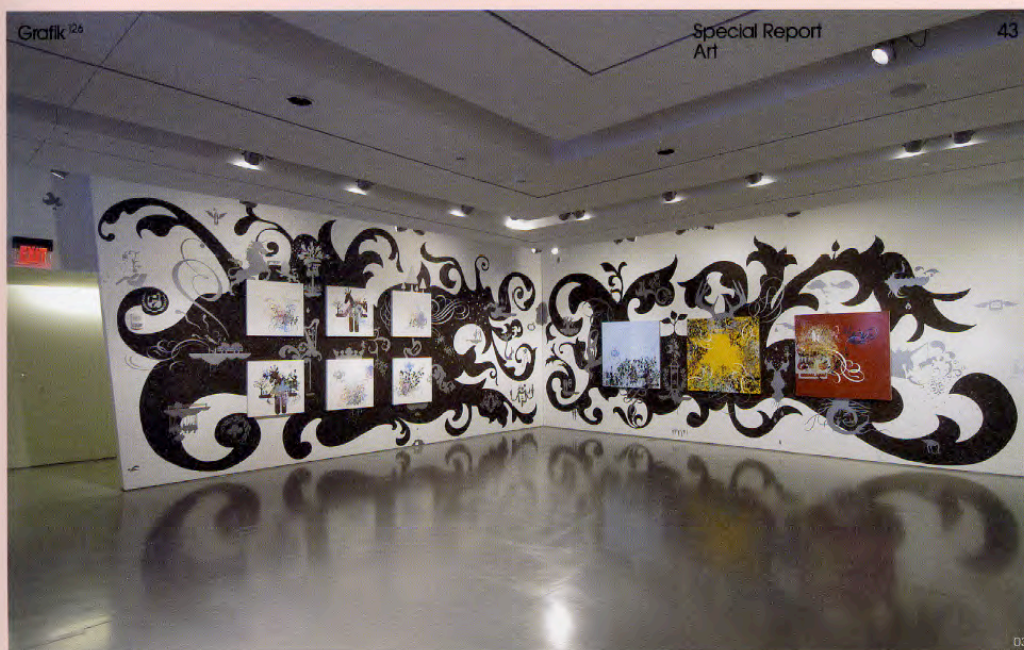
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You're just as likely to see his work hanging in an art gallery as splashed across the pages of a book—but one place you'll never see it is emblazoned across a bottle of Coca-Cola. Here, Ryan McGinness talks to Alice Twernlow about art, design and why he decided to ditch his clients.

Well Hung.

02





Ryan McGinness's Chinatown loft studio feels empty the day I visit. His most recent work is in a traveling show "Beautiful Losers" (now at the Orange County Museum of Art), and in his solo exhibition titled Multiverse at Agnès B.'s Galerie du Jour in Paris. The studio is large, white, and meticulously neat, yet still raw in the sense that the heating pipes clank loudly and in the sweatshop downstairs rows of women sit bent over sewing machines. A long trestle table bears fresh white canvases and the room McGinness uses to spray metallic automotive paint is empty except for rainbow traces in frame shapes on the walls. The sparseness of the space is interrupted here and there with considered flourishes such as a collection of trophies McGinness has reconstructed like wolverinders from parts of other trophies he found in nearby stores, a large cube made up of small Budweiser cans, and an old Pacman arcade game. When McGinness emerges from behind a couple of computer screens at the far end of the loft, it turns out he is also neat and his appearance well considered: white shirt, striped tie, pinstripe trousers, blue-tinted contact lenses, and his hair of just the right length to be simultaneously tousled and under control.

McGinness came to the attention of both the art and design worlds with the publication of his book titled Flatnessgod in 1999. McGinness describes the book as having "no real focus or direction," and as "an honest book, a statement of where I was right then and a culmination of the projects I had done until then." McGinness, who has since published six further books and is working on at least two more this year, has a special affinity for the book format: "One of the psychological reasons why I love books is because they demarcate periods of time, a project or a body of work," he says. "Even growing up, I kept albums and notebooks."

With the cult Japanese publication Gasbook having devoted an issue to his work, galleries such as Deitch Projects in New York and Colette in Paris regularly requesting his participation in exhibitions, companies like Sega and musicians like Beck asking him to design their logos, and the skateboard store Supreme commissioning limited edition deck designs, this thirty-two-year old artist holds cult-like status in the intersecting realms of art, design, illustration, and street culture.

McGinness' predilection for art was obvious from an early age. He was in a garage band during high school and what he enjoyed most was not the music so much as making the cassette covers, the posters and the fliers. One of his first after-school jobs was working as a designer at a Navy base where he lived in Virginia Beach. "I was working with copiers and those Kroy lettering machines with the big dials, and just doing paste-up. I loved that." The young McGinness was also a skateboarder who understood from an early age that there was a premium value placed on certain graphics, logos, and brands. "A lot of times I couldn't afford the right shirt," he recalls, "so I began to make those things myself. I made silkscreen T-shirts, drew on decks, and so on, and thereby began to assume some of the power the corporation holds over youth culture."



- 01 Multiverse, installation view, Galerie du Jour, Paris, 2004
- 02 Worlds within Worlds, mirror maze installation, Deitch Projects, New York, 2003
- 03 Flocci non Fazio, installation view, Beautiful Losers exhibition, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, 2004
- 04 Multiverse, installation view, Galerie du Jour, Paris, 2004
- 05 Worlds within Worlds, mirror maze installation, Deitch Projects, New York, 2003

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McGinness studied art and design at Carnegie Mellon (it allowed him to study philosophy and language and subjects outside fine arts) and then, upon his arrival in New York, he worked for six months at Pentagram. He quickly realized he wanted to work for himself and set up a studio where he practiced both art and design. "The two never really came together for me until end of the 1990s when I realized I should stop making 'art' and just make whatever I want," says McGinness. "When I would have dealers, curators and friends over, people responded more to the things I was doing in graphics. That work was a more honest expression of myself than the art. I was really good at working with shape and form and color. And so I decided to merge the two worlds." Most of his paintings incorporate the vocabulary of graphic design: icons and symbols, hard-edged simplified imagery and drawings. He explains how: "I use what already exists and twist it, or I draw in that style, or I develop my own symbols, or a combination of these."

The visual language he uses has become increasingly decorative of late, more complicated, dense and layered. "I'm finding that my role is more and more to just guide the paintings," he says. The paintings begin life in a notebook, as a sketch of a composition. Next he prepares the canvases with gesso that is then sanded down. He builds up the layers with automotive paint, metallics and varnishes uses off-register silk screens to build compositions in layers. McGinness describes the improvisational way in which he uses silk screens as "sloppy" and takes care to warn his helpers that "This is not how you silk screen. I don't have hinges and things aren't registered; I use the process for something more like painting."

McGinness is moving further and further away from design. "It sounds awful," he says, "but I hate being bothered with calls and clients. I just want to get on with my work." In 2000 he created a formal corporation called EGO through which he handled requests for design work, such as record covers and corporate logos. "What I learnt by trying to accommodate all these requests is that I'm not a good manager or an art director," he says. "What I love about design is shape and color and form, not the client silliness that goes along with it. I've come to terms with what I'm good at." So he took down the website, and evolved the company into a book of case studies, also called EGO, published by Ginko Press in 2003 and is currently developing a series of design books under the EGO moniker.



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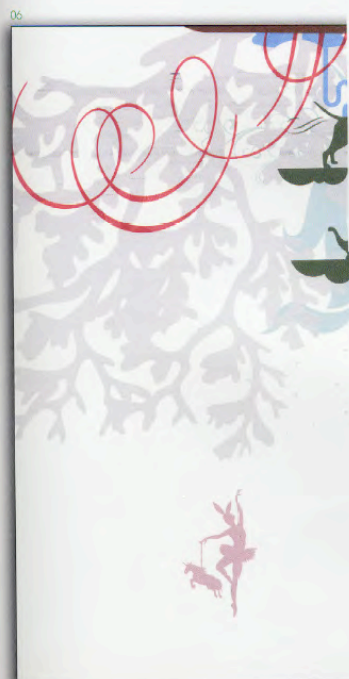


The requests continue, and McGinness is often incredulous at their unsuitability: "Just today someone called me from Tylenol to ask me to design a tattoo that would convey the idea of pain. What does that have to do with my work? Why would I want to do that? It's so sickening how these corporations want to be down with youth culture, and what's cool. Coca-Cola called a few weeks ago and wanted me to design a limited edition bottle for use promotional in 'cool' clubs. I had to say no to that for a number of reasons, including the fact that I don't really care about Coke. If you let the world define you, you're at a loss, like a puppet."

A more successful recent commission came from the art distribution company Serial Cerebralart. "They had no agenda," says McGinness. "I happened to want to make a mass-produced affordable soccer ball. I didn't want to make a toy or a symbolic object. I wanted to make the real thing. So it was a good match."

When I ask him about the sources of his inspiration, he responds by showing me one of his sketchbooks—a black and white marbled composition book—in which he has been trying to work out an idea. Sketches that run over several pages demonstrate his attempts to communicate by means of a symbol the concept of what he calls, "perception versus projection—the idea that what you have in your mind's eye informs what you see." He's not happy with any of the sketches just yet but thinks one where a boomerang-shaped piece of "mind" is erased from a character's head and hangs before its eyes on its way back into the brain space—like a kind of recycling symbol for inspiration—maybe has something. McGinness believes that "with efficient use of form you can communicate such complex ideas directly."

Despite the fluidity with which McGinness moves between disciplines, he sees a very clear and defined difference between art and design. "It's not about aesthetics, it's about whose agenda is behind it. The real difference is between a commodities industry and a service industry. It's as simple as that. I'm not opposed to the service industry, but I'm not very good at it. For the most part I love making paintings."



- 01 Multiverse, installation view, Galerie du Jour, Paris, 2004
- 02 Destiny vs. Ambition, acrylic on canvas, 2004
- 03 Blisterbergen Bones, Bitgrade, oil enamel and silkscreen ink on linen, 2004
- 04-06 Project Rainbow, offset print hardcover book, edition, 2,500; signed and numbered, version with silkscreened cover, edition 300, 2003

Ryan McGinness
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