

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

ASIAN POP CULTURE AND BEYOND DISPLAY THRU SUMMER 4.95/US 6.95/CDN

# Giant Robot

ISSUE 36  
ICONOCLASH

# RYAN MCGINNESS

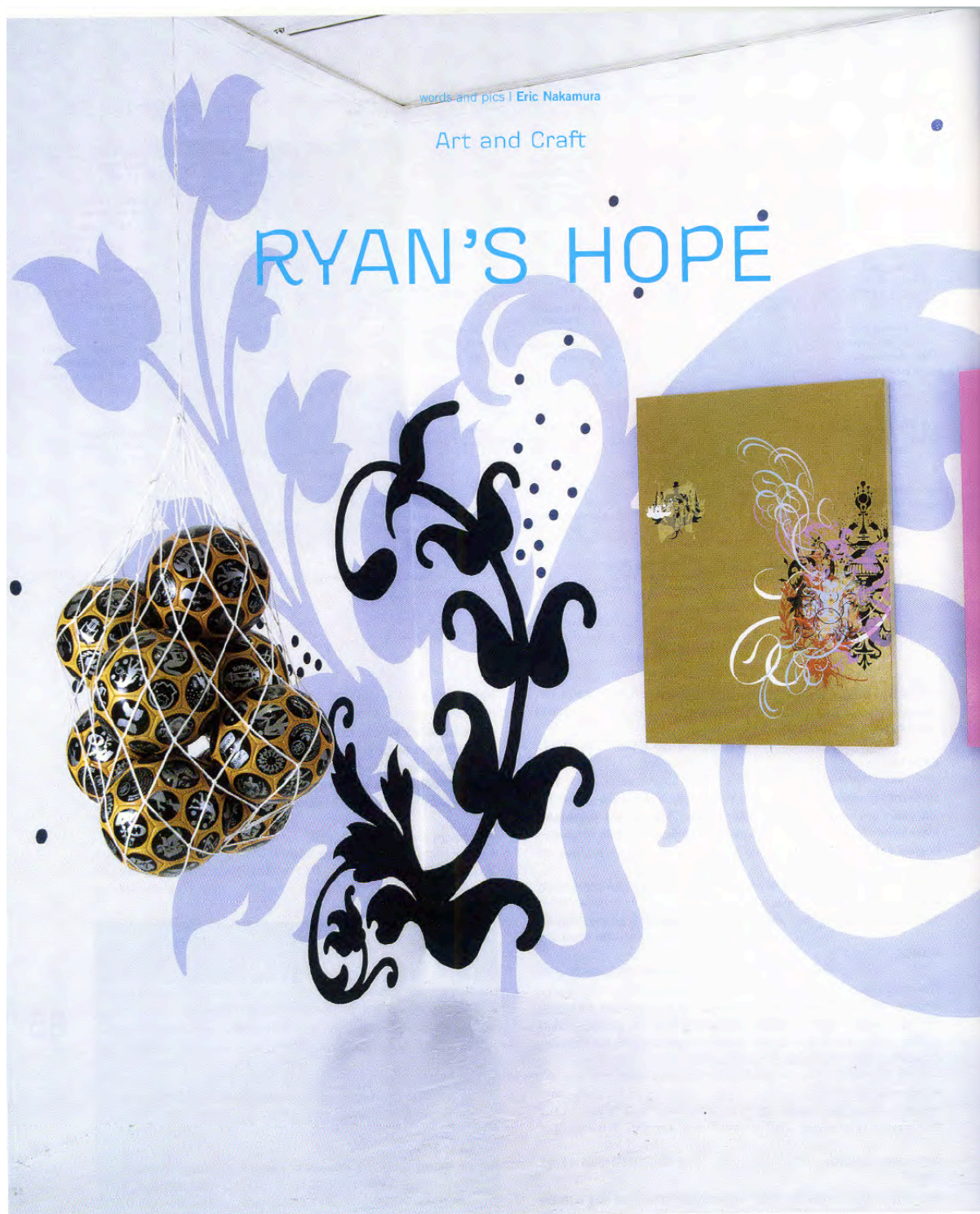


GUERRILLA GARDENER / WHEELS OF FORTUNE  
MUAY THAI TWIST / INNER SENSES  
FERAL CHILDREN / THE LIZARD KING

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Multiverse, 2004  
Installation at Galerie du Jour, Paris

I don't really make the kind of work where I stand in front of a blank canvas and it just comes out.

**W**hen I first met Ryan McGinness in L.A. years ago, he extended an invitation to visit his studio in Manhattan. Now I find myself in a rickety freight elevator that takes me to the front door of his floor in a Chinatown factory building. An intern serves as a receptionist while McGinness is far in the back, probably sketching away.

In his loft, I see paintings in progress, a spray booth, silkscreens, a Ms. Pac-Man arcade game, and a kitchen. Amid the multitude of folks who regard themselves as artists, the shaggy-haired 33-year-old is refreshing and inspiring since he can explain precisely what he's doing and how he hopes to affect the future of art. He's focused on his work, but pleasant and hospitable.

**GR:** When did you start making art? Were you the kid who always drew?

**RM:** I always drew. There were always arts-and-crafts materials around the house. In elementary school, I went to an art program for gifted and talented children in Virginia Beach. At an early age, my pursuit of art was taken seriously, and in that program the students' work was also taken seriously. Our creations were critiqued by our teachers and our peers. So, while this was a great opportunity and experience for me at such an early age, the program also instilled in me a very serious, almost intimidating attitude towards art. For better or for worse, this is something that has always stayed with me. I continued to pursue art in high school, and actually worked for the Navy as an "artist/illustrator" after school and on weekends. I got to work with Kroy lettering machines, copiers, wax machines, etc., doing paste-up layouts and making drawings. This was before computers, so everything was done by hand. I made posters and menus for the Navy base mess halls and flyers for recreational activities. I also had the best-looking school report covers and visual aids for my class presentations as well as campaign propaganda for student government elections. I made band flyers and cassette covers and everything that needed "designing." I think it was



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*Multiverse*, 2004  
Installation at Galerie du Jour, Paris

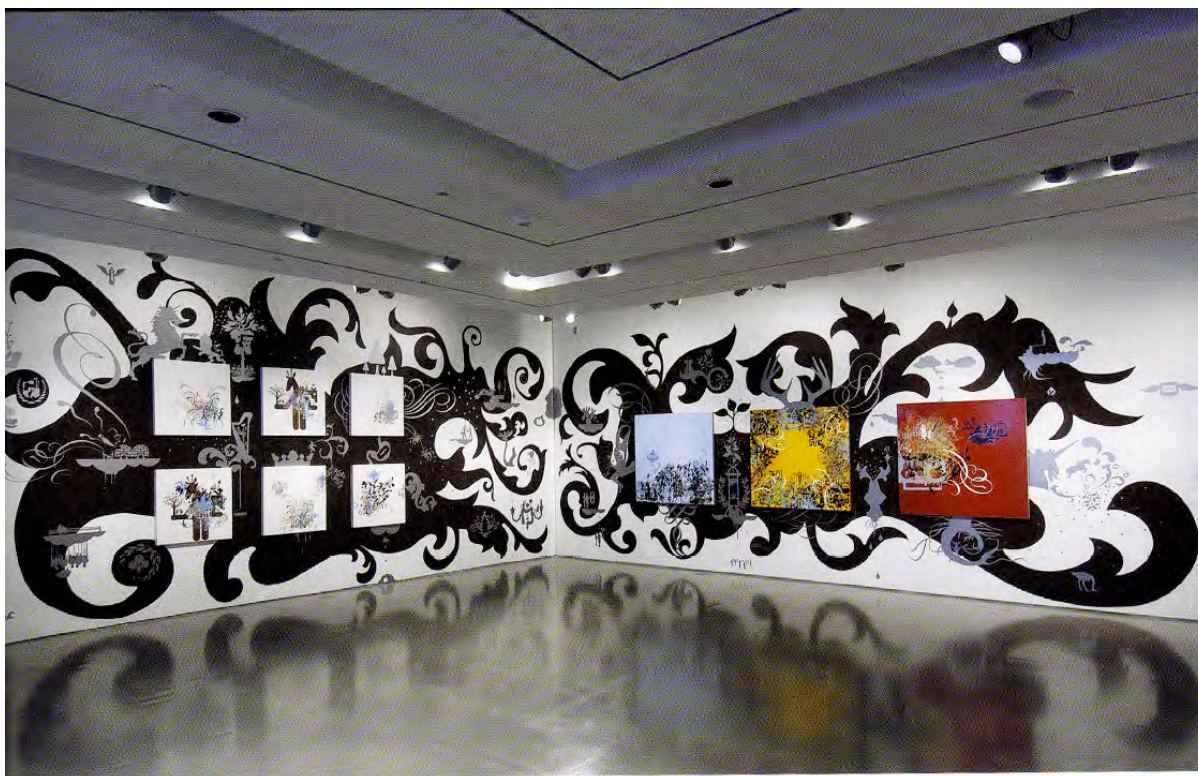
I like products, because they're accessible,  
and I like paintings, because they're not.

*Love Singularity*, 2004  
Acrylic on canvas  
60 x 72 inches



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*Flocci non Facio, 2004*  
Installation in *Beautiful Losers* exhibition,  
Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati

Characters communicate specific personalities. I'm really more interested in anonymous, universal forms.

this kind of unbridled enthusiasm for art and design that helped get me into Carnegie Mellon University.

**GR: Where does that schooling come into your work?**

RM: The program I went through at Carnegie Mellon was process-driven: the professors placed less emphasis on the final piece, and concentrated on the journey it took to get there. This is definitely something that has stuck with me. My work now involves numerous revision sketches. I don't really make the kind of work where I stand in front of a blank canvas and it just comes out. My process isn't as romantic or magical as that. It's actually quite boring and laborious.

**GR: Exactly how calculated are your pieces? Do you know what they're going to look like in the end?**

RM: The work is actually getting looser and looser. The new pieces are elaborate and layered, and allow for a more intuitive approach to building the picture plane. I don't know how it's going to turn out until it's done. I sketch out compositions. I'll start with a general layout, but the paintings now tend to grow on their own. The best I can do is guide them. The process of revising the individual drawings is still there before painting them onto the grounds, but the layering and building happens more organically.

**GR: Can you make mistakes?**

RM: I can, and I do. Some mistakes I go with, and others I correct. There's a whole editing process. Sometimes I have to sand the paintings down and start over. There are some paintings where more of the

process shows through—more mistakes, more ghost images and ghost pulls, and image fragments from the screen.

**GR: You've been working with icon graphics for a while now. How did you start?**

RM: It started when I had that job in high school with the Navy. That was the first time I came across this thing called "clip art." I was always struggling to make deadlines, and then I came across these volumes of black-and-white stock illustrations that I could use instead. I remember very clearly discovering not only these clip art books, but also this concept of copyright-free work. I didn't have to spend so much time making my own drawings anymore. It was like finding the holy grail.

The other thing is that there were old clip art books from the '50s along with contemporary illustrations from the '80s. I had found all these disconnected sources that I immediately started using in earnest. My use of these images didn't take an ironic turn until I was in college. I took copies of all these clip art pages with me, and I started to recognize them as contemporary kitsch. I started painting these line-art images on all sorts of different materials and continued until after I moved to New York.

Just as I had finished *Flatnessisgod* at the end of the '90s, I started concentrating on shape and form as opposed to line and line-art drawings. This transition (which is more clearly evidenced in the book, *Luxurygood*) emerged as I began to recognize that the forms I was pursuing in a design context were more honest than the use of appropriated public



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domain drawings. I became more comfortable recontextualizing my own drawings into the artworks. For me this was a radical shift, because I had always confined this aesthetic to the world of design, not art. While artists such as Richard Prince had already given clip art images permission to be in paintings, no one had used original clean-edge iconic drawings like the kind I loved making. One may immediately point to Matt Mullican, but he was playing the appropriation game as well and did not design his own icons. This is where I felt I could make an honest and significant contribution to the history of art.

**GR: So are the graphics you use your own?**

RM: I rarely find something I like as-is, so I do have to create a lot, but this is the visual language I'm most comfortable with. This is what I was taught in school and have been developing since. It is what flows out of me naturally. A lot of the signage systems I find in public domain aren't well designed or don't communicate what I want, so I have to tweak them. If there is a curve I like in an existing icon, I will use it.

**GR: Contemporary art is heavy on characters, but you don't have any. Any plans?**

RM: No plans. Characters communicate specific personalities. I'm really more interested in anonymous, universal forms.

**GR: You make a lot of products. How do you choose?**

RM: I just make things that make sense for me to make. I used to paint my own skateboards growing up, so it would make sense that I make skateboards now. Same with T-shirts: Growing up, my friends and I would always make our own with paint, silkscreening, or bleach. I play soccer, and I needed a new soccer ball, so I made one. I enjoy making things that I need or really like—things that are natural extensions of what I do or who I am.



*Showcase Showdown, 2004*  
Acrylic on canvas  
72 x 60 inches

*Destiny vs. Ambition, 2004*  
Acrylic on canvas  
72 x 60 inches



**GR: Do you look at those things as art objects as well?**

RM: I don't take the word "art" very lightly. To give equal weight to a soccer ball and a painting isn't something I'm interested in. I once did an exhibition at Printed Matter titled, *Products Are the New Art*, and while I think it's interesting to ponder and challenge back and forth the importance of the mass produced versus the unique object, I don't think they're equal. I like products, because they're accessible, and I like paintings, because they're not. I like making things throughout that range. I grew up in a consumer culture, I am a part of consumer culture, and I enjoy taking back and assuming the power of contributing to consumer culture.

**GR: If you don't take art lightly, what does it mean to you?**

RM: A definition of art? Art only exists in the mind.

**GR: In the past three years or so, a lot of people have begun to call themselves artists. As a result, the definition of an artist has changed. Does your definition collide with that?**

RM: I like the fact that one can call him or herself anything he or she wants. There is certainly no certification or board exam for being an artist, and this is a good thing. However, there are socially agreed-upon criteria, but even these are different from subculture to subculture and generation to generation, so I'm not even sure it's worth examining. I guess your question is, does it bother me? No. This is actually a trend in quite a few creative industries: Everyone has a word processor and can cut and paste, so that has created more "writers." With digital video you have more "filmmakers." We have "musicians" who can't even read music. Ultimately, when you broaden any field, the whole of the output becomes diluted, and it's more and more difficult to separate the extraordinary from the average. This is why the role of the curator or DJ is becoming more and more important. Now, the next step is to mistake curators for creators. I'm going off on a tangent.



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Anyway, I'm sure you could find this self-proclaiming "I'm a (whatever)" trend in other industries outside the creative fields: It costs less now to open up your own cloning lab, so now everyone's a mad scientist; sophisticated mountain climbing gear is affordable so everyone's an explorer; eBay allows everyone to be in the customer-service industry, etc. Also, remember that there is still a huge divide between the "official" art world and the Giant Robot art world. This goes back to the idea of colliding subcultures' definitions of art. Official values and definitions change from the bottom up. As our redefinition of art groundswell grows (especially with such exhibitions as the *Beautiful Losers* show) we're going to see a shift in the official definition. Perhaps it will take a lot of poseurs to make that happen.

**GR: You make a lot of books. Why?**

RM: I love the medium. I just finished a book titled, *Multiverse* published by Galerie du Jour in Paris, and *Installationview* will be published by Rizzoli in the fall.

**GR: Is the idea for more people to see your works or just to make a book?**

RM: In the case of many of my books, the book is the work, not a vehicle for reproductions of works that exist elsewhere. So, yes, it is just to make a book, and the sharing is a nice result of working in that medium.

**GR: You get categorized with the graffiti world even though you don't make graffiti. Why is that?**

RM: I think because it's just easier to categorize and clump artists together based on criteria that best suits a particular magazine article, book, or exhibition. You're right, as much as I admire that work and have graffiti artist friends, I've never been involved in any of that or any of that thing called "street art." Perhaps there is a shared aesthetic or

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sensibility. In the next few years, subgroups will be put together more accurately; however, in the early years of a new generation of artists, the categories are going to be coarse.

**GR: Can you tell me about your design background?**

RM: I used to do a lot of design work, and, when *Flatnessgod* came out in 1999, I stopped. That book was a way of encapsulating and shelving the work so I could concentrate on paintings and exhibitions. But I kept getting bothered to do stuff, so I eventually incorporated a firm called EGO that would allow me to accept opportunities, art direct, and have others do the work. However, I have realized that I still don't have time for it. Now the plan is to just continue with the EGO book series.

**GR: Why do you paint?**

RM: Like with books, I love the medium. However, unlike with books, I like the human scale of the work. Maybe my paintings are just big pages, and I create works in a series as if all the pages fit together in a book. The installations are just sprawling pages that allow you to walk inside the book. But then again, maybe not.

**GR: Are you putting brush to canvas?**

RM: No. Sometimes I'll put brush to wall for the installations, but the paintings are all done with layered silkscreens. I use the screen as my brush and the pull of the squeegee is a stroke. The actual mark-making is quick, but the strokes are numerous and layered.

**GR: Do you want to move toward telling a cohesive story?**

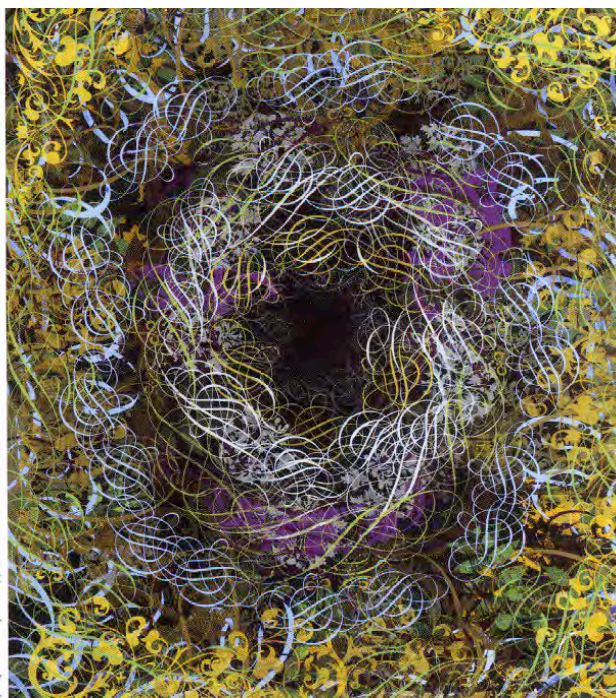
RM: No, not at all. I'm not interested in creating a narrative; I'm primarily interested in nonlinear interpretations.

**GR: Are you always painting?**

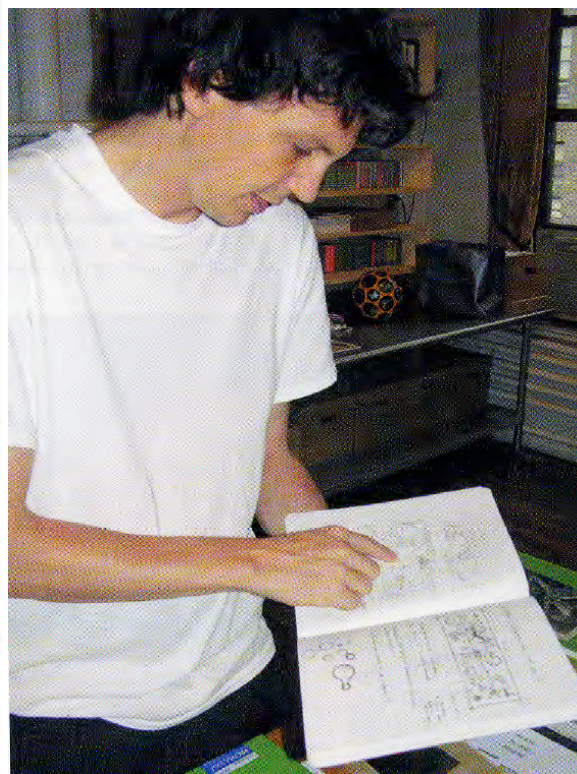
RM: I'm not always physically painting, but I am constantly making preparations for the paintings. For instance, making new drawings that get turned into screens.

**GR: Do other works excite you?**

RM: These things excite me right now: *The Book of Nothing* by John Barrow; the band Smoosh; WPS1 Art Radio. 🎧



*Otaku Suicide*, 2004  
Acrylic on canvas  
72 x 60 inches



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