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“From Low to High and Back Again (Zen and the Art of
Being in Consumer Culture” By AA Bronson**

I first met Ryan McGinness at Printed Matter, the artists' bookstore in New York, in 2003. He was installing his user-friendly cut-vinyl icons on the walls, the furniture, and in unexpected corners throughout the space. I was struck by his open, optimistic presence, his understated generosity, and his appreciation of this opportunity to work in a casual, non-glamorous, but interesting space.

Since then I have come to know Ryan and his work much better. As director of Printed Matter, I have presented an exhibition of Ryan's work, featured his prints, books, and skateboards at the Art Basel Miami Beach art fair, and watched his recent development, especially in the use of silk-screened icons to create dense mandalas of imagery as both paintings and prints.

The aspect of Ryan's work that interests me most is the fluidity with which he moves from medium to medium and context to context. His production of shirts and T-shirts, skateboards, paper cups and plates, and soccer balls, for example, flows effortlessly into his production of wall paintings (that sometimes take the form of retail-store decoration), prints, and paintings. He does not appear to distinguish between high and low culture. Rather, his approach is a process that has its roots in a small-scale artisan's workshop and a very particular mode of distribution. Ryan comes of a generation that has grown up in an environment largely formed by the language of marketing and branding. He understands these concepts implicitly and he accepts them as givens, as part of life and living and working today.

My own generation—and in particular my own work as part of the artists' group General Idea—was dedicated to a sort of analysis and even inhabitation of mass culture and a critique of consumerism. In a sense, we were complicit with consumerism: while our work could be read as a critique of consumer culture it was also a simulacrum of it, and our products—which ran the gamut from publications to cocktail glasses to silk scarves and flags—were at once collectable and critical of that collectibility.

Ryan doesn't question consumer culture; it is the very air he breathes, the current in which he swims. He accepts consumer culture in a way that my generation could not, in a way that strikes me as almost Buddhist. Like a sort of urban planner planting flowering trees on city streets, he infiltrates the consumer environment with his low-run productions of optimistic and attractive products, using corporate-like icons that speak to an easier way of being in the world.

Ryan's method grows primarily out of small-scale silkscreen. He produces iconic images that he builds in groups and layers to create an interconnected vision of the universe: people, plants, lifestyle objects—representing music (a boombox) or sports or even war—join together to form a vast spiraling iconography, a sort of grammar of contemporary urban life, one very conscious of both globalism and the vanishing environment.

The support on which Ryan builds his works is variable—including clothing, objects, canvas, paper, or on the walls themselves. The images are readily applied and layered by hand using small silk screens that allow for infinite variation. Sometimes the images are transposed into cut vinyl, essentially a variant on the silkscreen medium, another form of stencil carrying its own aesthetic and purpose. Most recently, he has been spraying his large-scale canvases with car enamel, a suitable background to his medium: car enamel reminds us of the fusion in his work of the languages of commercial production, design, marketing, and art.

Distribution is another aspect of Ryan's work. I have focused on the subjects of distribution and of audience all my adult life. The distribution system implicit in the art world, with its culture of galleries, art magazines, museums, biennials, and art fairs—not to mention the cultivation of celebrity—is one that has received much attention in the last few years, although there is much room still for investigation.

I want to draw attention to the limited small-scale production of so-called designer fashion. Starting in the early 1980s, fashion designers began focusing on small-scale production of individualized clothing, often employing the techniques and crafts previously reserved for couture that were dying away. Through a system somewhat parallel to the art world's—a network of small boutiques, fashion magazines, fashion television, and celebrity branding—they successfully created a system that penetrates the world of consumer culture globally. In fact, designers now create products for mainstream culture as well: note Todd Oldham's products for the budget chain Target. And Hussein Chalaya, in a remarkable and noteworthy crossover, produced a video installation for the Turkish Pavilion in this year's Venice Biennale.

When I first visited the studio of Ryan McGinness I was struck by its similarities to the working environments of the Belgian designer Martin Margiela: the stripped down aesthetic, white walls, the lack of any artwork other than that being produced here. The studio was clearly a small-production atelier, in which the current family of icons and their corresponding silkscreens could be applied to any number of products: clothing, skateboards, prints, and large-scale paintings all appeared in simultaneous production using one integrated process.

Ryan talked about his forays into licensing and his dissatisfaction with the loss of control it involves. Products were produced that he had not finally approved, in quantities that he could not confirm. He has returned now to the relative safety of the atelier model, which gives him the pleasure of direct contact with his own limited productions while retaining control of what goes out into the world. He works as artists always have—in his studio—but in the context of today's consumer culture: he might produce a line of shirts one day for a company in Japan; a group of skateboards for an American firm in Cincinnati; a line of paintings for a French art gallery in Paris; and so on.

I was speaking today with a younger artist about the ways in which the boundaries between art, design, and culture in general have shifted. This very horizontal way of thinking and working has shifted the notion of how art moves through the culture. Distribution, which used to be so firmly in the hands of commercial galleries, has opened up, and artists are increasingly able to run their studios in a new way. Ryan McGinness spins his web, producing books, objects, clothing, prints or paintings, with an integrated production and a singularly consistent vision. His way of working and of being in the world seems to me absolutely modern; the Zen, if you will, of how an artist can be in the world today.