

Source:
Arkitip Magazine, Issue No. 48, 2008, pp. 2-47
“Transgressive Beauty” By Leonie Bradbury

Laced with countless pop culture references, lyrical lines, and colorful graphics, Ryan McGinness' work provides a running commentary on contemporary culture. A master at integrating graphic form with poetic content, the New York-based artist continues to transform gallery spaces and the art world alike. Much has been said about the artist's ability to bridge the gap between graphic design and fine art; McGinness, however, creates art for art's sake and is not actively engaged in the commercial service industry. Most people define graphic design in terms of aesthetics or form, not recognizing the difference between art and design in conceptual terms of artist's intention versus industry. It is important to note that instead of simply appropriating forms available in the public realm, McGinness makes all of his own icons. He takes the authoritative aesthetic of iconic language that has traditionally resided in the world of anonymous design and uses that power for his own work and in the process introduces a new visual language to fine art. Trained and well versed in pictorial communication, his imagery has moved beyond its graphic design beginnings and come into its own with a unique, yet universal, communication system.

McGinness locates his work somewhere between the German school of the Bauhaus and the 16th-century Dutch painter Hieronymus Bosch. Frequently, McGinness comments on the art world itself, referencing and quoting the aesthetic or formal elements of, among others, 1970s Pop and Op Art. The emphasis on surface design, repetition of organic forms and horror vacui also suggest the Pattern and Decoration movement. McGinness' 21st century variety, however, is much more baroque, opulent and possesses a commercial aesthetic rather than the organic and domestic emphasis of the art created in the 1970s. While the Pattern and Decoration movement was a reaction against the stark formalism of Modernism, McGinness' work can be seen as an artistic reaction against the visual austerity of the Conceptual Art movement, the thick surfaces of Neo-Expressionist paintings and provocative political nature of Identity Art of the 1980s and early '90s. McGinness redefines art world expectations and the various media he works in, challenging both professional and personal boundaries. He is not afraid to experiment and, rather than becoming formulaic and stale, takes risks that generate excitement.

Skillfully negotiating a balance between universal symbolism and personal iconography, McGinness incorporates much of the visual language of the everyday. He combines a logo aesthetic, stylized organic patterning and a witty sense of humor into visually layered compositions, installations and objects. His artwork, in turn, has had a tremendous influence on pop culture. An unauthorized version of McGinness' signature icons have made an appearance in a national coffee shop advertising campaign, while the new Sherwin Williams' TV and print ad campaign employs the layering of stylized scrolls and vines. A number of cable television networks, such as MTV, Comedy Central, Sundance Channel and The Learning Channel use McGinness-like overlapping graphics, most noticeably in a number of highly visible programming opening sequence animations. Additionally, the music industry regularly mines his aesthetic for music videos and CD packaging without the artist's permission. The fact that advertising agencies and prominent corporations are looking at, or in the case of McGinness, blatantly copying, what is going on in the art world is not a new phenomenon. However, with the heightened visibility of all visual culture exploits, their connection seems to have become more obvious and shameless.

The big difference between the original and the commercial variants is that McGinness' imagery is not just sweet, decorative and superficial. The artist initially seduces the viewer with a rich color palette, ornate

patterns, and seemingly familiar logos that upon closer inspection reveal a world that includes a certain amount of 'ugliness', such as figures placed in sexually explicit poses and bizarre hybrid creatures. The artist uses aesthetics as a Trojan horse. For example, the arabesque 'black hole' paintings –reminiscent of the interlaced configurations of classical Islamic design– draw you in with their beautiful spiraling geometric patterns. The artist's true intent is subtly revealed in the title of the first work, *An(n)us Mirabilis* (2006). It translates from the Latin as a year notable for disasters or wonders and Guinness uses it to refer to Albert Einstein's Annus Mirabilis Papers, where the scientist laid out some of the founding principles for space, time, and matter, which would give rise to our understanding of black holes. According to Guinness, however, the paintings "are really rainbow colored assholes." As a viewer you can stay on the surface of Guinness' work or delve into the worlds within worlds that he presents. Surreal scale shifts simulate the psychedelic experience and reveal the true fractal-based model of the universe. The pattern, color and shapes are tantalizing enough to hold one's attention. Once satiated you can delve into the layers beneath the surface and discover symbols simultaneously familiar and foreign. You know the language, but you have never seen these words. Visually rich, the surface patterns stand in dramatic tension with the explicit content of many of the symbols. Underneath the populist vocabulary lies a critical message that comments on our consumer-obsessed, media-crazed society.

Although he received no formal training as a printmaker, Guinness primarily works using a printmaker's process, screen-printing. Also known as silk screening, it is a technique that facilitates the creation of a sharp edge and allows for repetition and reuse of the stencil multiple times and across various substrates. It is a low tech, affordable, commercial means to quickly produce large quantities of printed matter. It is commonly associated with various subculture modes of production, such as the skate and surf world and paraphernalia generated by the underground music scene such as t-shirts, posters and album covers. It is an aesthetic and process familiar to Guinness' because of his early exposure to skate and surf culture while growing up in Virginia Beach. In spite of the possible precision of the print medium, Guinness allows for unique elements to remain. Small marks that might be perceived as imperfections or errors, such as a finger smudge or the duplication of an item are intentional and contribute to a handmade appearance. Like Warhol, who similarly left many of his smudges to make his paintings seem more 'arty,' Guinness purposefully reveals his presence. A major difference between the two artists is that Warhol had his assistants make most of his work, never touching the paintings, while Guinness has to be personally involved in the creation of all his work. The artist takes what Warhol did a step further by introducing a multitude of original image variables to make one-of-a kind objects, "I do not want to be a machine, but rather, I want to embrace what it means to be human – primarily by employing my intuition when making the paintings, which is the brain's highest form of functioning." Although Guinness refers to a mechanical mode of reproduction, his interest lies in the production of originals.

Guinness deliberately overlaps his stencils or screens on a nearly, but not exactly, identical site. A phenomenon that is usually considered a printmaker's mistake misregistration is used by Guinness to ensure the singularity of the final result. This parallel layering with contrasting colors creates an optical effect of disjunction and dynamic areas of tension in shape and line. *Duality* (2008) provides an example of this effect. It incorporates a psychedelic palette of bolder, contrasting colors; bright purples clash against fluorescent yellows and greens. Familiar icons such as the winged horse, floral curlicues and outlined figurative profiles blend to form the background for the newly introduced icons of chain links, handcuffs and two hands making a lewd gesture. Most prominent is the blue and green logo of two people engaged in an ambiguous act of sharing speech, liquid or a phallus. In much of the artist's current two-dimensional work the iconographic symbols and their various meanings (or non-meanings) are reduced, repeated and layered to the point where they've become hard to distinguish from one another. The mass of symbols, so dense, is reflective of our current media environment where multiple sources of information are offered concurrently.

A new level of visual noise emerges as pattern is repeated upon pattern, disrupting the previous manifestation with color or shape. Much of what Guinness does is self-referential, quoting his earlier pieces by repeating the same icons and stylistic patterns over and over in a manner similar to the advertising industry's continual recycling of old and new cultural symbols or a corporation's branding strategy of adhering logo and color

guidelines. Although still rewarding the curious viewer for spending time with his work, McGinness now makes it progressively harder to distinguish the various symbols, overlapping them to the point of discord and illegibility, exemplified in two recent works *The Need to Know* and *The Universe Smiles* (2008). The visual symbols in these two pieces layer and loop through and onto one another, 'corrupting' the original drawings. The artist applies layer upon layer of visual information, literally covering the entire surface with rich information but little sense of pictorial depth or receding space. By filling all of the available space with his iconic signifiers rather than dividing the surface into areas of more and lesser significance, every portion of the painting is of equal importance. This systematic employment of ambiguous visual icons undermines the icon's basic purposes to educate, direct, and clarify. The final result is complex, dense imagery that ignores the long-established desire to create a push-pull effect that activates the picture plane. McGinness calls this series his "all-over" paintings. They are reminiscent of Jackson Pollock's drip paintings in that they do not have a meta-composition—no point of entry or exit for the picture plane—just an implied, infinite space. Like Pollock, Ryan McGinness challenges formal conventions, yet entrances us all the same.

After years of studying their possible configurations through maquettes, McGinness' recent daring foray into creating aluminum objects such as *Untitled (Green/Yellow/Green)* and *Untitled (Red/Gold/Pink)* (2008) pushes the layering and multiplicity of his two-dimensional work to an even greater extent. It is as if the artist has taken a detail of one of his paintings and recreated it in three dimensions. In doing so the artist emphasizes the complexity of his already-intricate design systems. Not only is the artist layering signs, symbols and shapes, he is now adding space as a new stratum of visual information. The engagement of negative space is a familiar element in his work, but the introduction of three-dimensionality is a new aspect that is particularly interesting because much of McGinness' two-dimensional work deliberately lacks spatial depth. *Release* (2008), is a mirror-polished stainless steel sculptural installation comprised of many interlocking facets. The attractiveness of the shiny reflective exterior evokes luxury and when combined with the explicit undercurrent of sexual energy, i.e. outlines of female breasts, chains and handcuffs, the piece symbolizes various forms of desire. The artist reminds us that art is a high-end commodity, part of a consumer culture. Conversely, in an effort to ensure democratic accessibility to his work, the artist also designs more affordable works such as limited edition t-shirts, posters and books.

The 2005 exhibit of Keith Haring's sculptures at Deitch Projects, NY inspired McGinness to push his sculptural explorations even further. While Haring's two-dimensional painted aluminum figures were placed on glossy metal bases, McGinness has been experimenting with forms that can stand independently and can be site-specifically assembled. In a recent group of studies, some of the individual sculptural components are bound together, while others lean and are balanced against each other. They are cut from a two-sided acrylic painting applied on a clear plastic substrate (also acrylic) and then re-assembled. In a progression from the welded series mentioned earlier, McGinness wants the sculptures to more closely match what his paintings are doing. A combination of the two, the pieces now twist and turn through space and are not simply extruded two-dimensional shapes arranged in a three-dimensional formation, but rather dynamic compositions of intricately overlapping colors, shapes and linear patterns that appear to defy gravity, in particular when lit from within. They are another example of McGinness' ingenuity and his ability to innovatively translate his multi-faceted imagery in various media and in the process redefine what is possible.

Ryan McGinness has an innate sense of the world around him, including the art world, and is able to create visually sensual (i.e. beautiful) works that provide analytical commentary, yet are critically successful and saleable. His visual self-consciousness and resultant commercial success is not 'selling out' to the art world, but rather a maverick's move to survive and thrive in its often-brutal midst. His decision to embrace aesthetics and beauty in his work was a conscious and considered one. "I have a very strong sense of form, composition, and color. I know what is right and what is wrong. It is not subjective for me," McGinness stated, "And, I decided that Aristotle was right—there is truth in beauty." For much of the 20th century, 'beautiful art,' however, was equated with decorative art, as apposed to intellectual or 'important' art. In 1999, Curator Olga Viso discussed this complex artistic issue, "in the late 20th century, as beauty has come under more severe attack, the connection between beauty and ugliness, between the seductive and the repellent, has been a topic of growing concern for young artists proposing alternative forms of beauty when beauty has been

devaluated.¹ While he offers a very specific, personal adaptation, McGinness is an example of one such artist who has come into the early 21st century art world with a renewed interest in beauty, making it an integral part of his artistic process.

McGinness' aesthetic is not unadulterated and traditional, but rather one informed by the chaos of the everyday, pursuing sensual and visual pleasure. His vision aligns itself with art critic Dave Hickey's definition of transgressive beauty, a form that "encompasses the dual qualities of attraction and repulsion." Hickey further states, "The evocation of pleasure through discomfort is a deliberate form of transgression."² This notion of transgressive beauty is an apposite term for McGinness' oeuvre. Convoluted in both surface and content, he confronts the simplicity and strict formal emphasis of much of the artwork of the 20th century and embraces the complex, multilayered, and multi-meaning. The artist has been at the forefront of a movement that embraces beauty and the ornate as tools to draw the viewer to the work, only to reject or surprise them with slightly disturbing content. It is an aesthetic pursuit that differs from the classical understanding of idealized beauty created with perfect proportions, by integrating imperfection and ugliness rather than excluding it. If acts of beauty are acts of rebellion, a true reaction to the Modernist rejection of the ornamental, Ryan McGinness is indeed a rebel whose method of choice is exquisiteness.

Leonie Bradbury

Curator of Contemporary Art

Notes:

¹ Olga M. Viso, *Regarding Beauty, A View of the Late Twentieth Century* (Washington D.C.: Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1999), 97.

² Dave Hickey, *Enter the Dragon: On Vernacular of Beauty* in *The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993), 16-17.