

Source:

***Ryan McGinness Works.*, Published by Rizzoli, 2009, pp. 9-13
Interview with Peter Halley**

PH: In order to not be too predictable, I thought we could start off by talking about where your vocabulary for making the signs that compose the parts of your work comes from.

RM: This is simply how I learned to draw. I went through a rigorous graphic design program, where I learned a sketch process to develop these iconic forms in order to create images that could be read quickly, and be legible from different distances, and have the same level of visual information, and operate in the same way that logos operate.

PH: Well, all the other people who studied graphic design don't do what you do. So what is your relationship with this particular... do you call it a language of logos?

RM: Yeah, or an iconic language, or graphic language.

PH: This language has a kind of mainstream role in our culture as well.

RM: Sure. That's its primary role, and what I want to do is turn that around. I think my interest in it comes from growing up in Virginia Beach, which has a surf and skate culture obsessed with branding and saturated with a cult of cool. At an early age I recognized that the power of a logo—the right kind of logo, the cool logo—can change the value of an otherwise ordinary object like a surfboard or a t-shirt or a skateboard.

PH: How so?

RM: Well, just by the fact that it's cool. It doesn't change the inherent value, of course; it changes, more accurately, the perceived value. So because I couldn't really afford cool brands, from an early age I was making my own brands, so to speak, or stenciling and screening my own shirts and decorating my own skateboards. Then my peers wanted those things, and that was very empowering. And then I recognized that what I was doing was called design.

PH: The effect of the logo on the object is to create a kind of thought process by which you experience the object?

RM: In general, yes, inasmuch as that thought process brings one to a place of feeling cool or superficially empowered. Or, like I said, the logo kind of creates the object's perceived value in addition to the cool factor, which is a separate variable. But that's not how I'm using this language now.

PH: Before we move forward though, your early experience of it was a kind of DIY application?

RM: Right.

PH: And at the same time your icon-making has a kind of clarity that can be associated more with the main-

stream—I always think of the iconic way-finding signs in the airport; you can't go wrong with them. And it seems to me that you're sort of wending your way between two uses of the iconic images, one subcultural and one mainstream. Is that how you think of it, or... ?

RM: You know, I think you're right, but I don't know where those positions meet—in the mainstream or in the underground, or if that is even an issue for me in the paintings.

PH: When I think of the application of logos to, say, skateboards, it strikes me that that mainstream language has been appropriated to make it more subcultural.

RM: Sure, but I also think that the co-opting of a visual style goes both ways—by subcultures, and especially when I was growing up, by the smaller skateboard companies—the adoption of a corporate-looking logo was a way to create an image that looked mainstream and mocked the mainstream at the same time. An official-looking logo legitimized their business endeavor, and again, created a kind of perceived value.

PH: Is that what was going on when you were a kid?

RM: Well, I think it was because I couldn't have the premium brands from the mainstream, so I wanted to create something for myself. I didn't even look at it as a simulation of the mainstream; I was just trying to make something that could equal it.

PH: You know, it's so funny. I talked to Tom Sachs for *index* [*index magazine*, Issue 29, June 2001] when he started making sculptures of various kinds of consumer objects. He said the exact same thing. He couldn't have what he wanted so he made it.

RM: Yeah, and for me it also comes out of the fact that when I was a child my mom made most of my toys.

PH: Oh, really?

RM: She had numerous jigsaws and band saws in the garage and was always making crafts. I also grew up very thrifty. I didn't have the Star Wars store-bought At-At toy. I had a homemade wood version of it.

PH: Was your mother just thrifty, or was it a kind of counterculture attitude?

RM: Maybe it was a little bit of both. She certainly sold the things that she made, too.

PH: So that's a precedent for your work.

RM: I guess so, yeah. She had a bit of a factory, an assembly line setup.

PH: What did she make?

RM: All sorts of wooden crafts—iconic imagery cut out of wood—angels, cats, hearts...

PH: Was it nature or nurture? [Laughs]

RM: Certainly I think being surrounded by her crafts was an influence. But just as with Tom, I assume, making things for myself was very empowering, especially when I realized, "Hey, other people want the things that I make."

PH: Uh-huh. The fact that your mom was making things that were aesthetic and attractive to people but wouldn't be classified as—the old-fashioned term is fine art, like a painting that's sold in a gallery—is interesting. And my perception of your work has always been that you're—like a variety of artists from Japan—

operating between things that we used to call applied art, like making a sign to be consumed outside an art gallery, and the art gallery paintings and things that are considered fine art.

RM: For me the difference isn't necessarily one of form or even commerce; it's more of a conceptual difference that has to do with authorship. So I'm very careful about whatever I make, making it on my own terms and making sure I'm accountable for it, as opposed to making a t-shirt on behalf of a corporation or someone else's label. And also I want to present an alternative to all the other brands out there. I never understand it when I see people walking around with other people's names or company names on their shirts. I just don't get it. What does "Abercrombie & Fitch" or "Old Navy" mean, you know?

PH: What are the differences between making a painting that's going to be shown in a gallery or museum and making a t-shirt? Do you always make t-shirts?

RM: There is no conceptual difference as long as the approach is the same and as long as the production framework variables are the same. I mean, both can be an expression of the human spirit. Form is almost incidental in that regard. I've always made shirts, but right now I'm making them less frequently and only in editions of 100 so I have control of where they go. I mostly just give them away. They come free with a painting. [Laughter]

PH: And is that perhaps the particular attraction of the fine art setting, that you have that control?

RM: Yes—nothing is more satisfying for me than making a painting—production and distribution-wise. Those variables are in my complete control.

PH: That's just what you said about the t-shirts.

RM: Exactly. So my challenge now is, because I have so much control, I don't have the kind of distribution I'd have with a distributor, for example. So how do I broaden my reach with the more accessible objects while still maintaining control?

PH: I'm wondering if you're working in the direction of consciously trying to integrate other ways of distributing with fine art.

RM: I think it just happens.

PH: I think what you're saying is you want to reach as many people as possible as long as you can maintain your integrity.

RM: Yes, definitely. And, you know, maintain what I think is the right context for the work to be understood, perceived, and appreciated.

PH: So it's not only what you make but where it is.

RM: Of course. Like when my shirts ended up in Urban Outfitters without me knowing about it; I had to shut that down immediately.

PH: It sounds like you also have a kind of anti-corporate outlook; seems like you might have gotten that from your mom?

RM: Yeah, perhaps. I don't know exactly what that's a result of, and I don't know if it's anti-corporate in a general sense, because my studio is set up as a corporation.

PH: Creative people seem to have a more flexible attitude nowadays, but traditionally, both within the art world and without, somebody who embraces the kind of populism that you do would be anti-gallery, uncomfortable with the art world mainstream. I don't hold this view. But, in an art gallery things are being sold for tremendous amounts of money to very wealthy people and it's a very, in one way or another, elitist system.

RM: But you also have to remember that art galleries are free to the public and welcome anyone and everyone.

PH: But why do you embrace the galleries' commodification of the work?

RM: Because I recognize the inherent value of artwork. You go through the process of making a painting, which takes a certain amount of time, and there is only one of those things in the entire universe. There's an inherent value to that—or at least there's a market value to that.

PH: Somebody once said that the art world doesn't matter, the gallery doesn't matter, that art making is like a laboratory. You're creating a prototype, something that really has no justification to exist as a thousand copies, either because it's too strange or because it's so labor intensive or thought intensive. It's like something right out of a lab, except it has a higher value.

RM: That makes a lot of sense, yeah.

PH: [Looking at an image in one of Ryan's paintings.] Here I see a kind of cartoonlike skull with floppy antlers embellished with stylized flowers.

RM: That's exactly what that is. Now what does that mean and where does that image come from? It's a hybrid; it's not a reproduction of something you would ever find. There's a kind of traditional romantic imagery that is certainly found in art, skull and flowers—it's a still life of sorts. Then again, it's its own thing. It's not trying to signal or sign that that thing really exists.

PH: This is from a historical perspective, but in a lot of ways, your approach of combining things in order to make signs and associations strikes me as having something to do with surrealism.

RM: It's definitely a big influence. I think surrealism, theater of the absurd, and those kinds of alternative, more poetic ways of communicating, ironically communicate with more volume than literal language does—that's why I've always steered clear of even using text in my work. So the buttons [*Island Universes* (2007)] are actually something new because they're text-driven. I've studied typography, I love typography, but I've never used it in my work, because I never wanted to use text.

PH: When you went to school you were studying graphic design?

RM: I decided I wanted to study design after I discovered *Émigré* magazine. Do you remember that?

PH: I've never seen it.

RM: *Émigré* was a great design magazine out of Berkeley, California, and it helped me recognize that the thing I was doing in high school—decorating skateboards, making cassette covers and posters for a band I was in—that this activity was called design. So everything kind of clicked. At Carnegie Mellon I was also studying fine art but more in lecture and theory classes. I studied postmodernism and of course art history and language and criticism. But my studio classes were all in design. When I got out of school, I soon realized the design industry has nothing to do with all the things that I loved in design school—how to actually com-

municate visually, how to use semantics, and how to build a picture plane—color theory and tension and dot problems and line studies and things like that.

PH: You're right. They teach us in design school better than in art school. If you go back to the Renaissance, people like Leonardo were called upon to design fortifications, design a party, make a sculpture or a painting, to maybe make costumes for the theater.... But your paintings are a distinctive enterprise. Of course they relate to the other work, but my simple question is are they about—

RM: —What are the paintings about?

PH: Yeah.

RM: The paintings, by default, are about me. They are a reflection of how I see, understand, and organize the world around me.

PH: For the most part, you only use silkscreen painting.

RM: Absolutely, as opposed to hand-painted images.

PH: I'm assuming you quote/unquote "draw" your paintings on the computer.

RM: I don't.

PH: You don't?

RM: No. They all grow intuitively. I've tried to pre-plan, to compose on a computer. Can't do it. It doesn't feel right, and it doesn't allow for the process of making a painting to inform the outcome of the painting, which is important to me.

PH: As a teacher, I always tell students that there are two ways of putting a painting together. One is that you kind of know what it's going to look like beforehand, and a lot of people do that, including myself. And other artists grow the painting without knowing what it's going to look like at the end, for example, Jackson Pollock. It's two distinct approaches.

RM: It's surprising, because I work so much on the computer perfecting the forms, so yeah, I think you would assume that I plan these out, but I simply can't. Like I said, I've tried.

PH: Now if I recall correctly, when we were talking one time, you said you were moving away from doing installations and wanted everything to be in the paintings.

RM: I want to go bigger with the paintings. You're right. I want the paintings to be the environment.

PH: Is there anything you miss about the paintings you were doing around 2000?

RM: No.

PH: Or are you still able to do things like that?

RM: I guess now that my ability has been stretched, that there are different kinds of picture planes that I can build, there's a range there so I can apply an appropriate composition.

PH: So you don't quite see it as going from simplicity to complexity.

RM: Yeah, you know, in a kind of larger, overarching way, yes. But I'll still do very simple pieces and pieces that don't have so many overlapping images.

PH: If I were to try an analysis: as the paintings have become more complex, they seem to become more involved in the process of making them.

RM: Yeah, exactly—

PH: —or even intoxicated with the process of making them.

RM: It's the process of making the paintings that's informing the paintings. And more specifically, it's the process of pushing paint with a squeegee through a screen in all the different ways you can do that and all the different ways that you can reproduce an image. You know, you can almost create an under painting with different colors; you can create the impression that images weave through each other, which is one of my inside jokes—only someone who knows silkscreening is going to recognize what happened there—same with the silkscreen drip marks. I have screens that look like drips, and those drips become signifiers and symbols.

PH: I'm looking at this painting from 2005 [*Under Five Chairs Psychiatrists Wink*]. Throughout your work I sense a kind of interest in a global language and older artistic languages, and this red and brown painting strikes me as almost having an affinity to an image from India or from Asia. It's like a Hindu profusion of shapes. The Black Holes kind of look like they're influenced by those cultures, as well.

RM: Yeah. You know—and I'm not looking at Indian or Asian forms directly, but maybe the fact that I'm not means that there truly is some kind of universal language there that is independently surfacing.

PH: When I started off as a young artist there was a kind of general belief in self-expression, an expression of what you might call an individual emotional state, which is what van Gogh—and perhaps de Kooning, as well—were doing. And now I see a real shift in art-making in which artists don't seem to be talking about the self quite so much; art isn't about emotional expression but something else. Does that make any sense to you in terms of where your art comes from?

RM: The personal expressions in my work can be found in the individual iconic drawings. When I bring those together it's purely about composition and color, and any narratives that result from the random juxtapositions are incidental. I also recognize the fact that I'm not so unique, that I'm actually, at the end of the day, just like everybody else. And so if I'm expressing something very personal, it's going to resonate in a universal way, hopefully, if I'm being true and honest with that self-expression.

PH: I share that belief with you. And I think there has been a kind of shift that has entered art where we're saying, "if I'm saying something about me, it could be you, too."

RM: Yeah, that should be the case, if it's truly about you at your core, because we all come from the same place.

PH: And some of your recent paintings have attained a kind of intensity and have employed forms that are characteristic of a spiritual experience, like the Black Holes are, in a sense, mandalas.

RM: Yeah, but, the *Black Holes* came out of an interest in the fleur de lis and flourishes which, to me, are just symbols like any other symbol. Over time, they evolved into symbols of fanciness or wealth. But actually, they originally came from nature; they're derived from leaves, vines, and ivy. So I really looked at these and thought, "let's repeat the symbol for wealth over and over and over and come up with something super fancy

but also in a radiating composition like an asshole.” And then—it kind of, just like you said, almost takes on this religious symbology, ironically.

PH: Well Roland Barthes said that the nature of the modern work is that it’s open and it lets the viewer or the reader do the work of finishing the story rather than the artist telling the reader what the story was.

RM: Which is a dictatorship.

PH: Yeah, and so that alone might explain its appeal.