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“Ryan’s Forest of Signs”

By Jeffrey Deitch

An insight in a surf shop in his boyhood home of Virginia Beach gave Ryan McGinness his first appreciation of the power of art. He noticed that T-shirts with logos silkscreened on them sold for more than plain T-shirts. The pursuit of this insight led the teenaged McGinness to an after-school job in the art department of the local Navy base and continues to inspire his unique artistic vision.

I first became aware of Ryan McGinness in the late 1990s when his work as a graphic designer began to be perceived as some of the freshest art in New York. At first, McGinness separated his commercial design work from his “art.” Another life-changing insight came in 1998 when McGinness decided to stop trying to make “art” that was separate from his innovative expansion of graphic design, but to just instead make whatever he wanted. The two sides of his creative practice were merged into a completely contemporary approach to art, which continues to generate unexpected innovations.

Some artists achieve artistic ingenuity by doggedly pursuing traditional approaches to painting and sculpture, until only after years of diligence, they are able to deconstruct and reinvent artistic conventions. Other artists arrive at innovation by applying the approaches of related disciplines to fine art practice, arriving at hybrid forms that yield imagery different from anything that has been seen before. Ryan McGinness has created a new, seamless, artistic hybrid that is simultaneously painting, design, and mass communication. He is one of the rare artists who is pushing the boundaries of the definition of art and the artist.

McGinness expands his artistic output like a benign computer virus. His work takes the form of paintings, wall murals, sculpture, books, and products, but it is all generated from his personal language of visual icons. His concepts begin with hand-drawn sketches, are developed into more finished drawings, and are then digitally scanned. They are cleaned up on the computer screen, stored, and then regenerated as silkscreens, decals, slick metal signage, and projections to be painted onto wall murals. At its foundation, all of McGinness’ work exists as digital information.

The work is digital in its conceptual structure and in the way it is generated, but it is not digital in its ultimate form. McGinness processes and recombines his visual icons like a deejay cuts and pastes samples of sound. The end result is not ephemeral artwork that is watched on the computer screen, but complex paintings and signage, built up through successive hand application of silk screens and room-sized walk-in installations built up with vinyl decals and hand-painted elements. Computer technology is fused with traditional approaches to painting.

A Forest of Signs, the title of an influential 1989 exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, came to mind when I viewed McGinness’ most recent series of paintings. *A Forest of Signs* was famous for articulating the intersection of art and semiotics in the late 1980s. Rather than just illustrating this relationship like some of the best-known art of an earlier generation,

this intersection is at the very core of McGinness' approach – part of its conceptual DNA. He has integrated his vocabulary of visual icons into a painting process that merges Andy Warhol's off-registered silkscreens with Jackson Pollock's webs of poured paint. The result can accurately be described as a "forest of signs," a compelling integration of mass communications and nature. The digital and the natural are fused in an uneasy balance.

McGinness once declared that "products are the new art." His T-shirts, soccer balls, books, skateboards, and sneakers do not simply feature reproductions of his art. For McGinness, they *are* the art. The visions of Andy Warhol's Factory and Keith Haring's Pop Shop have been articulated into a practical philosophy. As Warhol's background as a commercial illustrator extended itself into a new approach to art, McGinness' early career as a designer of corporate logos opened new possibilities for artistic expression. His products are part of his expansive artistic vision, conceived as rigorously as his paintings and flawlessly executed. Rather than diluting his artistic statement as reproductions might do, they serve to build his vision as an artist.

It is a great achievement to produce distinctive paintings and sculpture. It is an exceptional achievement to be able to create an entire aesthetic universe. Ryan McGinness can be described most accurately not as a painter or as a hybrid artist-designer, but as a creator of an integrated artistic vision. From the moment you step into McGinness' studio you are aware of having entered not just an artist's workshop, but a unique artistic world. It is an orderly laboratory designed for the invention, development, and replication of his images.

McGinness' installations at my gallery have allowed him to share his world with the public. *Dream Garden* (with artist Julia Chiang) was a non-linear, non-narrative surreal environment of wall paintings. The fantastical garden grew from seeded memories of childhood, dreams, and hallucinations. *Worlds within Worlds* featured a walk-in, mirrored labyrinth with his complex decals of mini worlds reproduced infinitely in mirror image. These reproductions of reproductions reflected the concept of McGinness' infinitely reproducible digitally-based visual information. Like his mirror maze, McGinness' confounding universe seems infinitely expandable.