

Source:

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“Art and Entertainment”**

By Randy Gladman

A small TV in a corner of the gallery projects a video of your worst nightmare. Office hell: A shallow space with white walls and whiter lighting, a nondescript table, and a generic clock, hung low on the wall so it appears in the tight camera angle view. The time is apparently twenty-one minutes past the hour, and a skinny dude in a white business shirt sits at the table in obvious discomfort. He looks bad. Hurting pretty badly. He rubs his hand across his clean-shaven head, a six-pack of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer on the table and a shot glass in his hand. With the passing of every minute, he downs a shot of beer and then pours himself another. In a perverse funk, this character attempts to drink a shot of beer every minute for an hour. The first highlight of the video occurs just after the twenty-third shot, when the drinker pukes all over the table. Without cleaning it up, he pours himself another ounce and waits for the next minute to arrive. He vomits two more times before the hour concludes.

The actor/guinea pig is Ryan McGinness. He is also the producer, director, writer, and cameraman. Relying heavily on a dose of influence from his Pop-art predecessors but injecting it with sensibilities based in hip-hop hype, skater style, and graffiti guerilla warfare, McGinness has pioneered a new territory in the realm of contemporary art. He inhabits the thin layer of skin that separates design from art, armed with an aesthetic philosophy now known as *Flatnessisgod*, a sense of worship of the importance of surface and the pervasive coolness present in all forms of contemporary pop culture.

Sometime in 2000 a schism split McGinness' body of work into a new direction. His work popped into a mature style, one that embraced his background and training in graphic design. Though still planted firmly in the rich soil of Pop, this new body of imagery boldly speaks a fresh language and brought McGinness sustained international attention and solo exhibitions in Paris, Munich, Tokyo, Vancouver, and Madrid. To explore McGinness' work thoughtfully is to take two separate journeys: one through the early work before 2000, filled with direct allusions to the original authors/auteurs of Pop imagery, and one along an original and cunning visual linguist's trail of icons, wordplay, and narrativeless storytelling.

Throughout his early work, McGinness extracts ideas, shared experiences, and materials from pop culture and elevates them in an attempt to delineate what brings us together as consumers and producers. Such works as *Conspiracy Theory* (1994) blatantly betray the artist's exploration of Andy Warhol's silkscreening techniques and use of silvered canvas. *Nurse Alien* (1994) and *Mr. Magoo* (1994) admire David Salle's layering and use of painted line drawing. The wickedly self-congratulatory *Trophy Series* (1999) practically bows to the kitsch ready-made genius of Jeff Koons. In the sixty-minute video discussed above, *Hour of Power* (2001), he employs beer and a college tradition to comment on corporate exploitation of the workforce and the role of ritualized substance abuse. Although the artist often uses traditional media such as paint on canvas, he continues to exploit less precious materials culled from daily existence. The intent is to democratize art in order to make it more accessible. Like a modern Robin Hood, he perverts expected

capitalist infrastructures with a cunning slight of hand. In 1999, McGinness first caught art press attention by screwing with gift shops in major New York City museums. He fabricated postcards identical to those sold by museum shops, complete with the same fonts, bar codes, and logos of the institutions, but he replaced the images of, say, van Gogh's *Starry Night* with depictions of his own art works. After infiltrating the postcard racks with his own cards, he arranged for friends and sympathizers to attempt to purchase the moles. Although the postcards remained as the residue of the installation/performance, the real artistic object of the work was the commotion it caused at the checkout counter of the shop when the computerized cash registers refused to recognize the product.

In 2000, McGinness first ventured into the skate world with a series of hand-painted skateboards. Although painting on wood panels has been a tradition in art for centuries, the pill-shaped oval of the skateboard deck afforded a new format, and McGinness was attracted to the medium for its fresh formal qualities and its value as a symbol of youth culture. At the time McGinness was first creating these paintings, he was invited by the owner of Supreme to design a series of skateboards for the company. Now years later, he finds himself sometimes inserted into the skate tradition of great companies sponsoring spectacular riders.

The year 2000 ended with McGinness' solo gallery show in Seattle with a mandate focusing on young, urban art. The exhibition, a symphony of variations on a skateboard theme, was titled *Shrick*, referring to both the slang term for a skateboard (stick) and the gimmick-like approach of much of McGinness' work of this early period. Alongside skateboard paintings and sculptural ramps made from cardboard and glue was hung a series of grip-tape paintings. Formally referencing twentieth-century abstract paintings by artists such as Ellsworth Kelly in their flat fields of color and subtly curving lines, these pieces are amplified by their 1980s nostalgia-inducing fluorescent hues. The curves they depict evoke those of transition ramps so familiar to McGinness from the skate parks of his youth. Their surfaces are not painted but rather carefully cut and applied grip tape. These works offer flat imagery reduced from pop culture and reuse common non-art materials in non-traditional manners, a method adopted from previous generations that becomes very important for McGinness in his later Language Period.

Early in 2001, the trajectory of McGinness' work shifted dramatically, resulting in what has effectively turned out to be an entirely new chapter in the artist's career. Although McGinness had previously flirted with clip-art and played with the iconography of the universal language of signage, these visual devices took on a new importance in his work. The resulting studio output defines the artist's Language Period.

The *Denim Product Paintings I-V* of 2001 provide the pivot point from the early work into the mature movement. This series of acrylic and enamel paintings on stretched Levi's denim presents the first time McGinness uses flat, highly recognizable silhouetted forms on flat backgrounds as the dominant element on the picture plane. Using a simple combination of images such as a cowboy and a cowgirl pulling on opposite sides of a rope under a crown (*Denim Product Painting III*, 2001), the artist creates a simple and ambiguous idea, in essence a visual word. He playfully manipulated highly recognizable iconographic elements taken from the public domain, such as the universal image of a seated person, and played with them using a designer's sense of composition and hard-edged line. The artist first exhibited these nearly indestructible works in a Brooklyn gallery. In hindsight, it can be seen that this exhibition was McGinness' first solo effort as an artist with a mature style of his own.

An untitled skateboard deck applied with custom vinyl stickers from this same period shows the artist speaking a more comprehensible visual statement. Silhouettes of tanks, riflemen, military

choppers, and fighter jets are juxtaposed with wound up businessmen in suits making a deal above gasoline fuel pumps. A similar skateboard deck speaks of the opposite side of American culture. White vinyl icons of trailers, a picnic table with a television on top, a man in a wife-beater tank top and a woman with curlers in her hair, empty moonshine bottles, chickens, pigs, and plastic flamingos speak of white trash aspects of the American identity. McGinness reduces these complex ideas down to their barest essentials with highly simplified yet delicately applied silhouette icons, and though it is impossible to tell if he is critical of these aspects of culture, they are clearly inspired by his upbringing in Virginia and the time he spent during high school working on a Navy base where he designed flyers, posters, and mess-hall menus.

In 2002, these ideas evolved further, from sentences into full paragraphs and even stories. By layering solid color sentences onto different color sentences, the works progress into much more complex structures. The picture planes are loaded with elements, many of which refer directly to art history, politics, science, big business, and even the division between church and state. As 2003 rolled around, signifiers of wealth and pageantry, such as chandelier forms, signature crests, fleurons, troubadours and baroque arabesques start to proliferate across the surfaces of the works, as do organic plant forms, laurel wreaths, tree roots, abstracted genitalia and modified animals like unicorns. The stories become dense and irregular, open to wide interpretation like mysterious modern hieroglyphs. Nonsense comfortably infects the images, not unlike the cut-up works of William Burroughs or the Dada ramblings of Tristan Tzara, with whom McGinness shares the desire to denigrate and reform the structures of language.

McGinness paints with icons in all of his work now. Using tools such as software vector drawing, silk-screening, and industrial fabrication, McGinness updates a Warholian strategy of mass production to inject his body of work and mainstream culture at large with thoughtful content, innovative design, and intricate storytelling in a previously un-heard voice.

Gorging on the icons and symbols of mass communication, McGinness digests chips of visual pop culture and regurgitates a rehydrated paste of common experience. Whether it cameos in his artist videos, appears partially concealed in layers of vinyl icons, or gets widely dispersed around Manhattan by randomly applied stickers carrying his sarcastic criticisms of art itself, his work forces a second consideration of our consumerist habits and afflictions. By resuscitating the leftovers created by the American culture machine and marrying them to a keen concept of art and value, McGinness has stepped into a space where gallery-style contemporary art meets popular entertainment and enjoyment.