

Arts & Entertainment



These untitled pieces are 42 by 152 inches. McGinness is a product of Virginia Beach's skateboarding and surfing culture.



An info-age Warhol

Interest in pop culture inspires creativity of artwork by Ryan McGinness

BY ROY PROCTOR
Special correspondent

You can't miss art superstar Ryan McGinness' "Art History Is Not Linear" at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

It's the first thing you see. The Virginia Beach native's huge multipart painting commands attention

above your left shoulder as you proceed through the entry concourse to the atrium that links the expansion that opened last year to the older museum building.

The neck-craning concourse view offers a riot of vibrant color and rococo form that demands closer inspection. This can be achieved one floor up, where two bridges flank the painting at eye level.

McGinness' largest and most time-consuming work, which was commissioned by VMFA



P. KEVIN MORLEY/TIMES-DISPATCH

Ryan McGinness' acrylic painting on wood panels, "Art History Is Not Linear," hangs at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts entrance. The piece is done on 16 panels that are each 48 inches square.

ing work, which was commissioned by VMFA and took three years to complete, is equally impressive in detail and size.

It's 32 feet wide and 8 feet high. It consists of 16 4-foot-square acrylic paintings, a combination of silk-screening and brushwork, on birch-plywood panels that are separately framed and hung to form a rectangular grid.

The imagery is based on about 200 iconographic images that McGinness derived from artworks in many areas of the museum's collection.

"We wanted a big, colorful, gateway piece that would reference the diversity of our collection, and Ryan delivered," said VMFA modern and contemporary art curator John Ravenal, who is planning a fall 2012 exhibition that will demonstrate how the painting came about.

"I took complex images and reduced them to their most simple forms, then used them to make complex images, which I call meta-images," McGinness, 39, said in a chat at the museum during a recent visit to Richmond to make speeches and attend the opening of his first Richmond one-man show at the Page Bond Gallery.

He confessed to "the sin of pride" when he contemplates what he has wrought.

McGinness, who shows and is collected globally, is often compared to Andy Warhol — the journal *Afterimage* termed him "a Warhol for the information age" — and he acknowledged that Warhol is one of his heroes.

He also attracts Warhol-sized adulation. His Page Bond Gallery opening attracted the largest crowd in the gallery's history, "maybe 300 to 500," owner Page Bond estimated, and people lined up to get McGinness' autograph on a VMFA poster.

Not only that, but attendees were in a buying mood as they contemplated the array of acrylic paintings and prints based on "Art History Is Not Linear."

"We started selling before the exhibition opened," Bond said. "We sold at least one in every category, but I won't tell you how many."

That number would include at least one of the two large acrylic paintings on canvas with \$87,000 price tags.

"There are superficial influences of Warhol in my work," McGinness said. "They have something to do with the process of silk-screening and the variety of our output. But I think the comparison stops there."

In spirit, the two artists' styles are very different. McGinness, in effect, translates Warhol's matter-of-fact approach to popular culture into grandly baroque designs.



RYAN MCGINNESS

"Ryan plays with the dividing line between high culture and low culture."

John Ravenal, VMFA modern and contemporary art curator

Pieces in the Page Bond Gallery exhibition are based on the VMFA collection.

If you go

What: "Ryan McGinness: Art History Is Not Linear"

When: Through May 7

Where: Page Bond Gallery, 1625 W. Main St.

Price range: \$6,000 to \$87,000

Info: (804) 359-3633; www.pagebondgallery.com

So how did a Virginia Beach boy, a product of that city's skateboarding and surfing culture, develop into a darling of today's art scene?

"It wasn't the skating and surfing that were important, but the culture surrounding them," he said in a soft voice. "It was all about those obsessions — logos and brand names — among young people."

Soon, McGinness was designing everything from T-shirts to soccer balls, and that same preoccupation with the symbols and design of pop culture have transformed him into an industry that extends far beyond his painting.

"Ryan plays with the dividing line between high culture and low culture," Ravenal said.

"His work is colorful, bold and very contemporary. His specialness is a combination of being visually dynamic and conceptually rich."

McGinness, a standout at the public school for the gifted at Virginia Beach's Old Donation Center, left Virginia Beach for Pittsburgh to earn a bachelor's degree in art and design at Carnegie-Mellon University.

While a student, he became a curatorial assistant at Pittsburgh's Andy Warhol Museum.

After graduation, he moved to New York, where he maintains a sixth-floor walk-up studio in Chinatown. He lives with his wife, Trish, his Virginia Beach high school sweetheart, in an apartment in the nearby meatpacking district.

McGinness is working on a commission to create a painting even more time-consuming than "Art History Is Not Linear" for a European museum, but is not at liberty to identify the museum.

How does life look as he approaches 40?

"I'm nowhere near where I want to be," McGinness said. "There's still a lot of me that needs to come out."

Roy Proctor, a freelance writer and theater director, retired in 2004 as the art and theater writer for *The Times-Dispatch*. He can be reached at royproctor@aol.com.