

## RYAN MCGINNESS

Form...comes about when a structural theme, invented by nature or the human mind, is given its optimal appearance by the controlling law of equilibrium. This cooperation makes form become complete. It lets it do its work, become understandable and beautiful.

Rudolf Arnheim<sup>i</sup>

These words by perceptual psychologist Rudolf Arnheim encapsulate the general arc of Ryan McGinness's practice. Over the past fifteen years, the artist has amassed a library of thousands of stylized glyphs of his own creation with the purpose of "finding the truth in the forms."<sup>ii</sup> His process involves taking a structural theme (anything from a tool to a skull) and redrawing the image as many times as necessary in order to reveal its inherent geometries. He then scans it into a computer for further refinements, subjecting the form to principles of vector line drawing: every shape must derive from a mathematical expression and conform to geometric tenets—a transformation that is the visual equivalent of the scientific law of equilibrium. Indeed, McGinness often compares his practice to that of a mathematician or scientist, and feels that art carries the same burden of proof.<sup>iii</sup>

McGinness's process is driven by his interest in universal sign symbols: "If I can understand the subject as a symbol, then I can carry that understanding with me...That's the premise for language, of course. You make a symbol for a thought, idea, or concept, then transmit and share it, and hopefully have a shared understanding."<sup>iv</sup> Early on, his forms were drawn from a wide spectrum of sources, both real and imagined. But his 2009 project *Art History is Not Linear*—inspired by works in the collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen—sparked a new and more focused approach—an encyclopedic body of work based on art historical precedents. The themes in this project include the Seven Deadly Sins, Mother & Child, *Guernica* and the Twelve Labors of Hercules, among many others. His ideas behind each theme are developed in a series of binders that include notes, source materials, and digital prints of his working sketches, which are also contained in flat files and as digital scans/files.

The prints McGinness created during his Publishing Residency at the Lower East Side Printshop are part of the *Women* series, which he began in 2010. His goal for this series is to create a library of 500 symbols or what he calls "ingredients." There are currently 350, and he anticipates he will need another year to complete the library. Yet, he has already created a number of works with the existing forms in all manner of media, including neon light-

ing, cyanotypes, screened canvases, baked porcelain and mirror-polished etched steel. The work has been shown at Quint Contemporary Art, La Jolla ("Ryan McGinness – Women: New (Re)Presentations," September 15–November 2, 2012) and Pace Prints Chelsea ("Ryan McGinness – Figure Drawing," May 3–June 14, 2014).

*Untitled (Fluorescent Women Parts) 1-3* was shown at the Pace Prints Chelsea exhibition alongside works from the *Women* series in other formats. Each part is composed of three screens and includes elements that extend slightly beyond the picture plane—a trope McGinness calls "fiddling with the edges of representation"<sup>v</sup>—which ties into his interest in the phenomenology of art display (an idea he is currently exploring in another body of work he calls the *Metadata* series). While most of the works in the *Women* series to date include only one to three forms, these screenprints feature a riot of images, amplified by vibrant fluorescent tones and overlapping layers. Only three inks are used for each of the prints but the eye perceives a wider range of color due to the artist's manipulation of transparency, allowing the layers to combine to create new hues. McGinness has long favored fluorescent inks for their ability to transform under black light, a viewing condition that cannot be replicated in photographs. He feels it's important to encourage analog viewing in the digital era. In ambient light, the cool tone of the paper McGinness selected interacts with printed hues to generate retinal effects, a phenomenon that must be experienced in person. Likewise, photographic representations flatten these images into nearly complete abstraction. In person, the female forms advance and recede, and the optical effects of the vibrant pigments generate a sense of movement and life.

As evidenced by his choice of subject, McGinness is not intimidated by the giants who walked before him and does not shy away from difficult or problematic material. The female nude is perhaps the most charged of art historical genres, but he has approached his *Women* project with disarming insouciance and straightforwardness. When asked why he chose the subject, McGinness responds, "Because it's classic,"<sup>vi</sup> later adding that no one else is doing it. Indeed, few mainstream contemporary artists would tackle this recently maligned tradition without irony. Yet there seems to be room in contemporary society for McGinness's revised vision of the female body. After all, the power dynamics between men and women have changed vastly since Matisse and Picasso depicted the female form.

This shift in dynamics is apparent in a series of interviews between McGinness and a few of his models published in *Maker Magazine*.<sup>vii</sup> These are not the powerless prostitutes or exploited ingénues of the Modern era. Dancers, production managers, artists—whatever their true professions—

these women have elected to participate for their own reasons, without compensation or emotional attachment. Many have a platonic relationship with McGinness, and an investment in the project, seeing themselves as contributors. The women choose their poses: generally directed at the viewer, many are powerful, confrontational, or contortionist. In the interviews, the sitters describe intangible rewards from their participation. These range from an interest in the artistic goal to erotic pleasure in expressing their sexuality on their own terms.

McGinness concedes that his very aim is objectification of these women, but adds that the end product is not particularly erotic. Through McGinness's transformation process, the sexual implications of the image are softened. Commenting on his *Blacklight Nudie Cards* (2011),<sup>viii</sup> he explains, "The idea with these cards is that you'd be very disappointed if you were expecting a deck of real nudie cards."<sup>ix</sup> "Fluorescent Women Parts"—the subtitle of this suite of prints, carries an even stronger, almost repellent implication. Likewise, the identity of the sitter is lost in McGinness's final product. Some may find this objectionable, but the women themselves are empowered by the idea that their bodies serve to represent an archetype. Still, McGinness has titled some of the works after the name of the sitter to emphasize the fact that his forms were gleaned from individuals. "I don't know where within the search for universal forms that the essence of the original models comes through," he says, "but in some cases it does."<sup>x</sup>

In his introduction for a catalogue on the *Women* series, McGinness writes, "I think women are beautiful, and in using figure drawings as my point of departure for developing beautiful forms, I find myself getting closer to an aesthetic experience I can believe in—the truth."<sup>xi</sup> His use of the terms "truth" and "beauty"—words that have been widely accepted by historians and critics as too mushy for serious art discussions—is again plucky, but careful reading of the entire body of criticism on the *Women* series reveals that he means something specific.

Turning again to Rudolf Arnheim provides a key to understanding McGinness's intention here. Truth, as defined by Arnheim, travels across disciplines and can be understood as an attempt to understand the underlying structure of experiences or phenomena. Beauty, on the other hand, provides a "clear, unambiguous means of giving form to a purpose."<sup>xii</sup> If McGinness's purpose was to reimagine the female form in the post-feminist era, then his forms indeed embody both truth and beauty.

<sup>i</sup> "Form as Creation," from *The Split and the Structure: Twenty-Eight Essays* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 155.

<sup>ii</sup> In Alessandra Codina "The Male Gaze under a Blacklight," *Maker Magazine* 2, no. 1 (Winter 2013), 61; accessed online at [www.ryanmcginness.com/research-resources](http://www.ryanmcginness.com/research-resources).

<sup>iii</sup> See Robert Pincus, Brett Littman, and Hugh Davis, *Women: New (Re)Presentations* (La Jolla: Quint Gallery, 2013), 158; and Codina, 61. Arnheim also frequently draws parallels between math and art; see "The Way of the Crafts" in *The Split and the Structure*, 40-41.

<sup>iv</sup> Codina, 77.

<sup>v</sup> Author's interview with the artist, February 21, 2015.

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> Codina, 59-77.

<sup>viii</sup> McGinness often creates affordable multiples in traditional commercial formats – anything from soccer balls to T-shirts; see [www.rmstore.com](http://www.rmstore.com).

<sup>ix</sup> Codina, 71.

<sup>x</sup> In Ryan McGinness on his show "Figure Drawings" Pace Gallery, New York, online content, June 6, 2014, <http://www.paceprints.com/video/ryan-mcginness-his-show-figure-drawings>.

<sup>xi</sup> Pincus, 8.

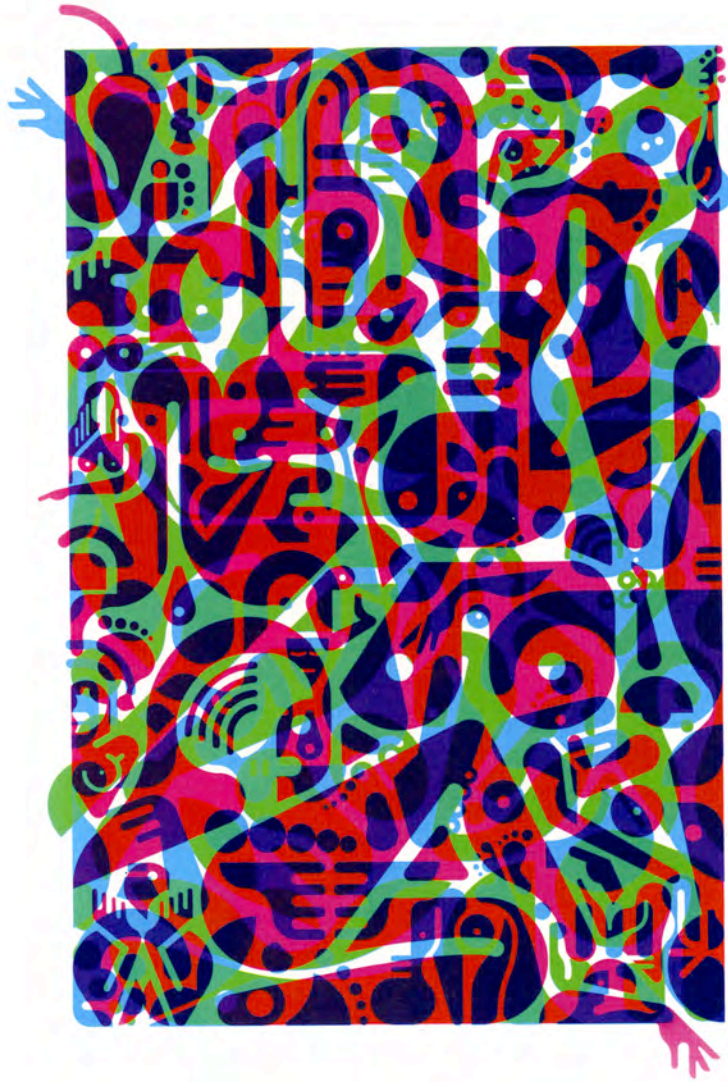
<sup>xii</sup> Rudolf Arnheim, "The Way of the Crafts" in *The Split and the Structure*, 41.

Ryan McGinness

*Untitled (Fluorescent Women Parts) 1-3, 2014*

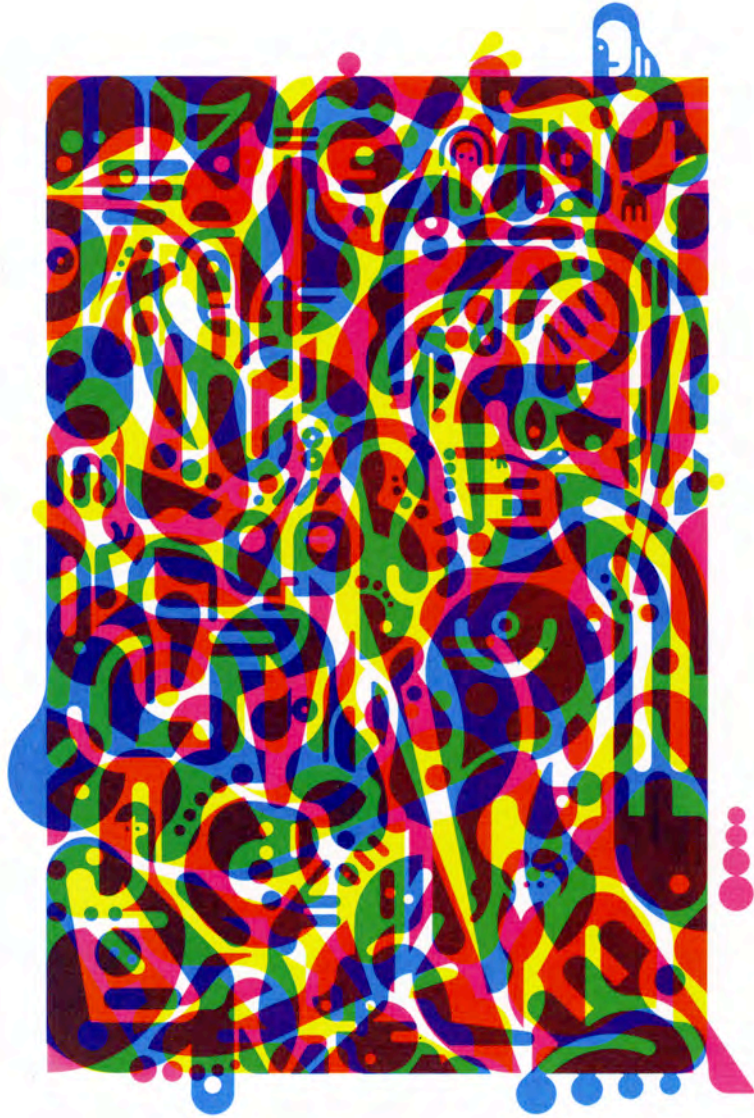
Screenprints on Magnani Incisioni Italia bright white,  
310 gsm  
20 x 13.5 image (variable), 27 x 20 inches each sheet  
Edition of 10, with 2 HCs, 2 Artist's Proofs, 2 Printer's  
Proofs, 1 Display Proof, and 1 Archive Proof  
Master Printer: Erik Hougen  
Assisting Printer: Keigo Takahashi





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