

Signal Density

David Hunt

Warhol bugs me. It's not just the aggressive vacuity of his fortune cookie wisdom dressed up with deadpan irony: "You take some chocolate and you take two pieces of bread. You put the candy in the middle and you make a sandwich of it. And that would be cake." Or even the androgynous powdered wig and blank-faced gaze disguising the contemptuous posturing: the Buddha from Olympus dispensing sage advice on all things pop star to a cult of adoring sycophants. No, I've grown immune to sullen expressions and vacant, thousand-yard stares offered up as tokens of reflexive virtue, simply by thumbing through lifestyle magazines. All the gauzy, soft-focus spreads of lissome young beauties shot with vaseline smeared diffusion lenses. No, what really gets me is Andy's snake-oil salesman's charm; the calculated insincerity of the would-be sophisticate lured by the tabloid dreams of the big city, who learns Madison Avenue's masonic codes only to end up starring in them. Warhol was a broadband trickster who always flashed the cheek for the check, transforming his soundbites into neat zen koans. He once said, "I'm sure I'm going to look into the mirror and see nothing. People are always calling me a mirror, and if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see?"

The artist Ryan McGinness looks into the mirror and instead of getting trapped in a narcissistic feedback loop, he sees a ripple effect of multiple

identities, multiple disguises. Where Warhol became a human printing press, cranking out Lizes and Marylins that bore his own singular expression of detached bemusement, McGinness is a shape-shifting doppelganger, a quick-change artist gliding seamlessly between his roles as image-maker, fabricator, designer, performance artist, and event coordinator. Instead of toppling into a void of his own cult of personality, or succumbing to our current fascination with spectacles of dissolute glamour, he uses the mirror as a refractive weapon, riffing off images from high culture and low—images born of the street, the screen, and the page—tweaked and reanimated on canvas, C-print, or video still. A cartoon bunny, pumped-up Michelin Man, and New Yorker style comic strip of two gossiping socialites are all rendered with the same bold graphic line, reduced to affectless silhouettes, yet rendered on tactile velvet or fine matte linen with all the brushy hesitations and dripping evidence of the painterly stroke.

Warhol may have cast the zeitgeist in his own self-image declaring our sensibilities "bored and hyper," but McGinness uses hypergraphics and short attention span as a starting point for a leveling of all expressive acts into a unique autographic mark. A forensic mug shot of the artist's dour face becomes a grid of thumbnail sketches, which then morphs into a series of

SUPREME COLOR FORMULA GUIDE, 2000
SILKSCREEN ON SKATEBOARDS
32 X 8 IN. EACH

HOT GIRL ON GIRL ACTION, 2001
PORCELAIN BAKED ENAMEL ON STEEL
48 X 48 X 3 IN.



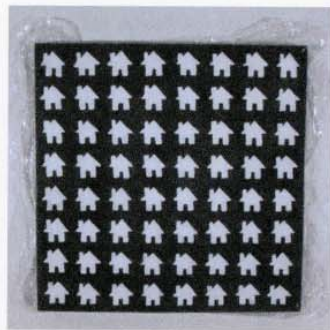
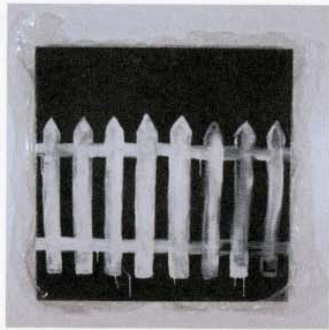
Cindy Sherman-like film stills of the artist dressed in a preppy varsity sweater, flanked by gaudy chrome-plated trophies, which in turn are transformed into a photo of the artist's closet filled with a row of the same crisp white oxford dress shirt. All of a piece, each image suggests McGinness' protean identity percolating just beneath the surface of every icon. But here's the twist. Drawing becomes a negative, which is scanned into a digital file, which becomes an applet, which then doubles as a clip art tutorial, which finally becomes a collage of cascading imagery mounted on plexi. Content never takes precedence over medium. The two collapse into an equation showcasing the rise of cross-platform distribution networks as a new artform.

McGinness scrambles the old refrain "what's so new about new media art?" by soft-pedaling our fetishistic gadget love and zeroing in on the oceanic spectrum of mediums. What's it about? He cryptically describes it as a meditation on "accessibility and availability." A privileging of rapid delivery systems where McLuhan's "medium is the message" still holds sway, but with McGinness lighting up the marquee as the crafty alchemist stirring, and stirring up, the data substrate.

While we're drowning in a 24-hour video feed of voyeuristic frenzy, McGinness is calmly short-

circuiting the system with time-release static and tactical glitches. Forget Renaissance perspective's infinite regress of space through a slowly retreating horizon line. McGinness has a 3D lattice structure of pop-up windows and nested browsers. Why storyboard a cartoon with a linear sequence of animated cells when you can bend narrative structure into a Möbius strip of superimposed imagery from an encyclopedic, 100-gig brain? Where the click of the shutter becomes the click of the mouse, which ultimately become discarded templates for a wine-dark painting of a ponytailed girl with ribbons in her hair, face as blank and anonymous as the average homepage.

They say McGinness is the bastard progeny of Koons, Prince, and Levine, with all of their facility for clever "appropriation," "recontextualization," and "displacement," but without the defeatist cynicism that pop will eat itself. Unlike Prince's "re-photographed" Marlboro Man offered as anti-commodity utopian gesture, he's not cannibalizing the media landscape for dusty tropes that he can trick out in Photoshop, in turn applying a soft-marxist spin, but recombining familiar icons so that the strangely familiar becomes palpably strange. The artist in a clown mask posed with a smiling waitress from Hooters does more to deflate the society of the spectacle than Koons' sparkling porcelain souvenir of Michael Jackson posed affectionately with his pet monkey Bubbles.



DENIM PRODUCTS, 2001
ACRYLIC AND ENAMEL ON LEVI'S
DENIM IN HEAT SHRINK PLASTIC
24 X 24 IN. EACH

True, he's got a jones for the elegant one-liner. One show was dubbed "Clever Title Goes Here," while a seemingly half-baked painting under construction is emblazoned with the words "Painting in Progress." And even in conversation he says he's striving for "surface innocence," attempting to "give the gift of insight." Call it the post-ironic new sincerity. For me the titles are more caustic critique than Catskills rimshot. Witness "Saving Ryan's Privates," a tight arrangement of 10,000 green plastic army men glued shoulder to shoulder on a 6' x 6' slab of plywood. While it seems a punning inversion of the movie's title (and a glacially obsessive way of making a finely nuanced point), "Saving Ryan's Privates" is a trenchant capsule summary commenting on Spielberg's Wagnerian orgy of violence. Hollywood bombast gussied up in Joseph Campbell's mythological hero quests; ritalin-stoked 8-year-olds playing with die-cast figurines, eventually graduating to the big-budget sandbox. "Privates" resonates with this kind of pointed indictment.

A final note on beauty. No doubt, the cheesy atomized whiff of those spectral perfume ads with their body-branding aesthetic and doe-like nymphs have obsessed, if not poisoned, McGinness. In a series of head-shot paintings of Lolita-esque adolescents, the artist uses doubling, erasure, and distortion to create weirdly disembodied portraits floating in fields of designer

turquoise and lavender—like implacable gargoyles. And don't all those winsome wraiths littering magazine spreads take on this same bloodless expression, when they too, become undead?

David Hunt writes on art and culture for *Flash Art*, *frieze*, *art/text*, and *BOMB* magazines. He is the author of *Airstream: The History of the Land Yacht* (Chronicle Books, 2000). Currently, Mr. Hunt is curating "Superimposition" at Caren Golden Fine Art and "Ursa Major" at Team Gallery in New York.

"Signal Density" originally appeared in *Honcho Magazine*.