

# ARTEFORUM

JANUARY 2006

INTERNATIONAL

## Ryan McGinness

DANZIGER PROJECTS / DEITCH PROJECTS

The marginalia inscribed by Albrecht Dürer in the Prayer Book he illustrated for the Emperor Maximilian, which are full of witty grotesquerie and tendril-like, hyperexpressive arabesques, constitute perhaps the last grand statements of the genre. Ryan McGinness, as evidenced by recent concurrent shows at Danziger Projects and Deitch Projects, revives the practice by making typographical flourishes and stylized shapes of the kind traditionally confined to the edges of a page into his work's central feature. In so doing, he suggests that there is no difference in either aesthetic value or emotional depth between supposedly peripheral doodling and grand central statement.

However, McGinness's manner is rather more quixotic than Dürer's: He dispenses with text altogether in favor of baroque decoration, excited lines and rich colors converging in spontaneous pseudologos with a legibility all their own. Looking carefully into the tangle of shapes, one finds figures and scenes that suggest a narrative, an idea that's confirmed by titles such as *Tools Celebrate Their Usefulness* and *Lucky Cows Drink Milk* from the show at Deitch (all works 2005). McGinness is not just making ornamental abstractions; he wants to make a statement. Unfortunately, though, the statements sometimes seem lost in the prettiness.

McGinness claims that he wants "to communicate complex and poetic concepts with a cold, graphic, and authoritative visual vocabulary," yet while he can certainly boast a degree of technical expertise, his works are hardly cold. In the installation at Deitch, the radiant colors of the numerous tondos painted on and projecting from the walls made this abundantly clear. They give off a kind of dry heat—not exactly comforting but hardly examples of the clinical detachment to which the artist's statement indicates he aspires. In fact, a love of nature and a not so reluctant romanticism are detectable in many works, however street-smart their titles. McGinness uses titles as tongue-in-cheek disclaimers to defend his work against accusations of aestheticism or sentimentality, but he *is* an aesthete and a sentimentalist, as witness the beautiful *Alia Iacta Est*, which suggests a rich fantasy life and a romantic sensibility.

*Lavender Mist Number 1*, may represent an attempt to turn the famous Jackson Pollock work from which it adapts its title into an abstract cartoon, but the subtle coloration and the efflorescing lines, each apparently a clone of the one before it, suggest a deep appreciation of Pollock's achievement. McGinness's painting is more systematically harmonious, suggesting a reduction in subjective engagement with the paint, but he is no mechanical copyist; he has his own recognizably flamboyant touch, however much of an impersonal designer he would like to appear.

McGinness ransacks both art history and popular culture. I could do without some of the cute schematic figures and faces in the "Universals" series, but it's impossible to deny their currency as global signifiers. McGinness has mastered and integrated a seemingly infinite variety of visual languages, producing works that inhabit the ever-blurred border between high art and popular illustration. The installation at Deitch in particular was dazzling and confrontational, indicating that McGinness is an artist who also knows a thing or two about spectacle.

—Donald Kuspit



View of "Ryan McGinness," at Deitch Projects, 2005.