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Sign Language

RYAN MCGINNESS

by D'Lynne Plummer

First impressions are meaningful. They are also the backbone of marketing and branding. What you see is what you get; signs and signifiers exist to impart immediate meaning. Ryan McGinness's collection of all things mediated, branded, and iconic is not so immediately straightforward, however. Entering the Montserrat Gallery in Beverly, Massachusetts, I first felt distrust at the walls loaded with perfect propaganda and what might come across as work firmly planted in the realm of graphic design. The gallery was a flatland of signs and an explosion of semiotics that seemed to include a vinyl decal parade.

But first impressions can be junked for the occasional epiphany. Here, distrust was eclipsed with genuine affection for this overmediated world in which we live. McGinness's youth on Virginia Beach saw many a silkscreened T-shirt, and he more than embraced the trend. McGinness took on product and emblem design as a challenge, making his own designs for T-shirts at a tender age, planting a seed that would grow into his immense success as a graphic designer and eventually as a New York artist whose works currently hang in MoMA's rotunda. If his graphic design work of the '90s was seen as some of New York's freshest, his work of the new millennium pushes the definition of the artist outward in all directions. By definition, graphic design is a form of visual communication that aims to clearly convey concepts and ideas. McGinness's work, however, does not clearly convey anything. Decorative aspects of design combine with signs and signifiers to make hilarious and often beautiful collisions of digital dissent. The line between graphic design and fine art is obliterated by the artist's own immense language of mass communication. The distinction is lost beneath a ten-layer silkscreen of perfectly viral shapes that are part of a seemingly endless worldwide web.

McGinness's consumer-culture-inspired motifs have made their way from the corporate office to skateboards and coffee mugs to the image-heavy mandalalike painting and prints currently circulating museums and galleries. Moving from context to context, he has kept the concepts of marketing and branding as a launch pad for endless permutations of a consistent vision—simulacrum of the consumer environment. McGinness speaks volumes without words. He communicates at length through the squeegee and a limitless well of icons—little universes of meaning—serving up a lengthier conversation than most abstract paintings. While McGinness allows us to translate the aggregate of imagery for ourselves, he simultaneously relays that our systems of beliefs not only evolve but accumulate, almost to the point of incoherence. Images stacked upon images speak to this idea literally, while his appropriation of images from the public realm more subtly adds to the various meanings we ascribe to them. The head of a person is a fire symbol; conveniently, the head of the person beside him is the symbol for a fire extinguisher. Simple, and happily replicated on the skin of a soccer ball. Maybe it makes no sense, but it's never confusing. Somehow this visual world is still the world you know, shuffled within an artist's overwrought universe. T-shirts and skateboards and hanging nets of soccer balls printed with silvery decals represent art-as-product. Their three-dimensionality makes them part sculpture, part prêt-à-



Ryan McGinness, *Hopeless Gift to Official Culture*, silkscreen on skateboard, 2003.

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Above at title: View of gallery installation, *Mildly Subversive*; Ryan McGinness, Montserrat College of Art Gallery, Beverly, MA.

porter. The rest of the room is a two-dimensional feast. Icons that range from the familiar iPod to distorted bathroom indicators float in bubbles on the wall among more ridiculous icons entirely by design. A man vacuums a duck of dinosaur proportions. A PBS head swallows a PBS head inside another PBS head, and so on. The walls become *Animal Farm* for clip art as they carry forth the methods of mass communication to their own ends. Gender signs, peace signs, and those perfectly clean shapes we take at face value, by McGinness's hand make nonsensical words and meaningless playful narration. They become something other than themselves, and branding is fun again.

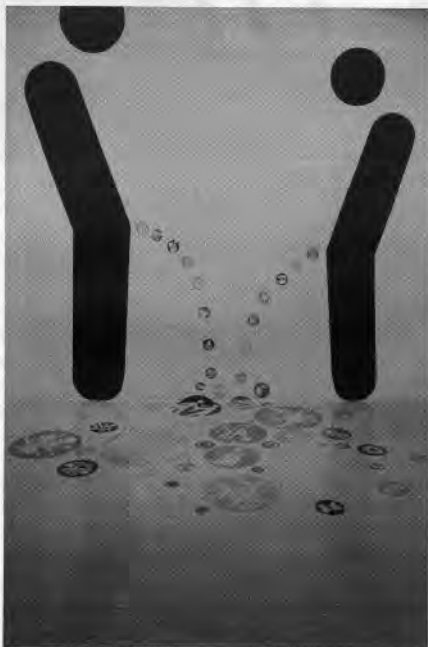
Much of his two-dimensional work consists of tidy bundles of baroque imagery. Heraldic themes overlay fleurs-de-lis, laurel wreaths, and the ubiquitous unicorn—visual nonsequiturs. Elements like paper clips and safety pins add modern motifs to the compact kaleidoscope. Enter a mermaid, an electrical plug, a briefcase, and a few tadpoles. Each layer appears as a new color-coded combination of symmetry, clean graphic design, and ambitious visual poetry. Ribbons extend lyrically into the negative space, leaving the assembled design cluster as lavish splashes on a solid color background. En masse, the works are more moody than meaningful. The permutations are endless, proving the power of creativity over that of pure communication. On the bright linen backgrounds, the design becomes greater than the sum of its parts.

The room at once represents an evolving body of work. Perfect, flawless, almost painfully neat silkscreens hang near newer works that reveal ever so slightly the literal handprint of the maker. His system of production—sketching, drawing, scanning, perfecting, printing—is so finely tuned that you have to remind yourself of the human intervention. Elsewhere in the gallery, in contrast to these slick iconic conjunctions, resides the frenetic, humming coagulation of lines rendered in vinyl decal form that marks the unpredictable beginning of his process, as revealed by his sketchbook photocopies. In the way that the film *The Magic of Picasso* reveals the famous cubist painter's process as he works his highly complex, realistic sketches into compartmentalized, simplified shapes, the magic of McGinness, albeit moving in a different sequence, offers as much surprise and delight. His final silkscreens are symbols of control and cleanliness. His sketches, however, are pure bottled adrenaline, with lines that spin and gather like electrified, magnetized strings. McGinness has canonized them, making them into magnified, bright orange vinyl decals that inject the room with energy. His cyclone doodles have matured into symbols that represent the potential of creative force.

Some Dance to Remember/Some Dance to Forget (2004) is a recent work that also shows a loosening on the grip of painfully precise printing. Smudges so previously uncharacteristic of his work are there for the taking, and the layers of viral imagery spread more organically into a powder blue background. Ornaments fall to the bottom of the frame. The feeling is of a sylvan cocktail party somewhere in Narnia. Unicorns and elk mingle unbeknownst to the barflies and the musicians and the businessmen and the occasional office object. Each work presents the notion that nothing has to do with anything else, yet they all belong in the same place.

Television or the Internet can be summed up in much the same way, and perhaps that's the point. Mass communication is like a department store without departments. For us, McGinness makes it gorgeous. Near the entrance to the gallery, on a plum-colored background, a microscope meets the Eiffel Tower. A bottle and glass of wine balance on a ladder. A giant ink pen thrusts toward a figure at full tilt, and all are suspended over a line from which a city skyline hangs, upside down, dangling in the balance but secured by its exactness. The attraction to this monoprint is perhaps the way it juggles paradox. At once it is senseless, balanced, asymmetrical, and perfect. The free-flowing associations are meaningless to the viewer, but provocative nonetheless. The perfectness of his work engenders the viewer's trust; it is evident that he believes in his associations, and that is enough for us. As he puns on signs, he comments on interpretation. In contrast to the bubble decals on opposite walls that isolate the imagery, his dense screenprints contain relational webs in which no meaning is readily apparent. Interpretations are not absolute but instead subtly guided. The tidy cacophony is a celebration of inundation.

Seen from this gallery vantage point, pictures, like verbal languages, may be construed as different ways in which the real world is conveyed to us. As Lévi-Strauss would describe,



Ryan McGinness, *Mildly Subversive*, vinyl on Montserrat gallery wall, 2006.



Ryan McGinness, *Untitled (Project Rainbow Series)*, oil enamel and silkscreen ink on wood panel, 15 x 15", 2003.



Ryan McGinness, *Some Dance to Remember/Some Dance to Forget*, acrylic on linen, 2004.

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Montserrat College of Art Gallery – <http://www.montserrat.edu/galleries/index.shtml>

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semiotics is concerned with the different procedures for transforming Nature into Culture. As McGinness alludes to in his works, culture can be transformed back to the impulses that made it—to nature or to art—as communication for its own sake. The artist reports back from a hyper-saturated world of iconography with a visual strategy that uncovers the meaning that lives in the crossfire of all things surface and pop: There is a collective unconscious that does not exist solely for the exploits of advertising but as the maker of meaning itself. The ideas and materials he extracts from pop culture are elevated as the collective spring from which both producers and consumers draw. His artistic philosophy of Flatnessisgod (also the name of his 1999 book of graphic design) purports the sense of worship in “surface” and the coolness in pop culture. He recycles and transforms the iconography of our generation. His paintings on the back of skateboards directly incorporate the products of youth culture. The artist has always been turned on by the graphics and styles that define cool, or that cool defines. McGinness does not distinguish between high and low art, and the American culture machine does nothing if not provide artistic fodder. He combines the forces of culture and capitalism and inserts himself deeply in both. On the left wall, enormous, larger-than-life decals take nearly human shape. Mirroring each other as they run the height of the wall, the symbols piss out more decals, their streams of imagery projecting off the wall, merging and spilling onto the floor. It’s silly but, in a word, cool. The decals are colorful bubbles that depict any assortment of ideas, from bubbles of Rorschach tests to corporate insignias.

McGinness’s install method for designed environments is in situ and improvisational. He knows his decals and products so intimately, each rehearsed to such exactitude that its placement grows organically from its design. And yet, as gallery director Leonie Bradbury reminds us, he is extremely focused during these intense installation sessions. It’s easy to picture him there, a mad scientist, intently honing in on the accumulating puddle of decals. There is an element of spontaneity and play in his system of control. It is this perfect paradox of dissension and order, compulsive perfection and play that distinguishes his body of work and is uniquely his own. Among other lasting impressions of his unique oeuvre, his Wild Wild West of icons engenders a hankering for tattoos and Starbucks coffee.

If there is a void in the world of advertising and of contemporary pop culture, it is authenticity. McGinness repairs that depravity by being an artist amid it, creating complex amalgams and beautiful forms from the same tools. Advertising and clip art and logos no longer feel like empty products of our culture. They are the language of human connections. Like an artist shaman, McGinness heals us from the wounds of overstimulation and returns beauty and enjoyment to popular culture. ■