

ART PAPERS

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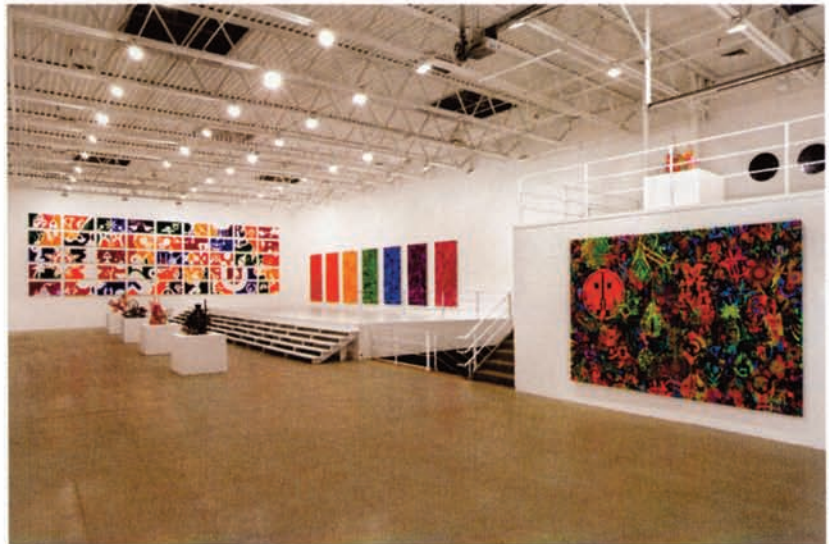
RYAN MCGINNESS NEW YORK

Ryan McGinness Works, the exhibition at Deitch Projects' Wooster Street space, packs two floors full of the artist's uniquely layered and dizzying paintings and sculptures [March 7—April 18, 2009]. The paintings convey an almost hyperbolic sense of density, while somehow remaining orderly and sharp. McGinness' canvases call to mind Andy Warhol's Factory in the 1960s—much has been said to connect the two—and McGinness fully owns his inspiration in Warhol's mechanical screenprinting technique. It's true, too, that McGinness' and Warhol's colors engage the viewer in a similar way. In some sense, then, critics' constant cry that McGinness is the new Warhol has some validity. McGinness uses the whole canvas, like Jackson Pollock, and sometimes his swirls nod in the general direction of Abstract Expressionism. But Pop and Pollock have been done to death, and what McGinness shows here is something entirely new—something that has more to do with Leonardo and van Eyck than anything of the past century.

McGinness plays with a cryptic symbolism. No deadpan smirk sticks to these canvases; rather, he takes what seems like recognizable imagery—street signs, arrows, figures—and transforms them into new, impotent symbols, symbolizing nothing. As such, the paintings take on Guy Debord's notion of the spectacle, not simply pop references. Or, to put it more directly, it's pop culture out of control. McGinness builds up iconic images, screenprinting one on top of the other, adding delicate swirls and shapes to tantalize and confuse the eye. The result is a symbol so high, so caught up in itself and the icons around it, that it loses its meaning.

McGinness' paintings have been described as betraying the "cacophony of communication," which in our contemporary world is the incessant beeping of BlackBerries and the latest iPhone apps, torrents of emails, the frantic pace of blogs, the ubiquity of advertising, the latest Twitter and Facebook fads, and media at large. With all of this noise coming at us from all angles all the time, no individual message can truly get through. McGinness plays with this concept, making sure that the symbols we once understood—that arrow will point me where I need to go—have turned in on themselves. Arrows point nowhere. You think you recognize a figure there? Look a bit more closely.

The basement level at Deitch Projects takes the idea even further. Here, the site-specific paintings glow in a black-lighted darkness. No coincidence that McGinness calls these untitled paintings *Black Holes*—circular wood panels in shades of black, gray, and white glow and pop into the visitor's physical space with such voracity that they trigger a fear of falling in. There are also fluorescent paintings in vivid color, which convey the same terror and desire to fall though the illusionary space.



Ryan McGinness, installation view of *Ryan McGinness Works*, 2009
[courtesy of the artist and Deitch Projects, New York]

The space is fake. So are the symbols. But when McGinness puts the two together, they produce an ignis fatuus that is our reality—the spectacle, in which symbols have nothing to symbolize. This is the truth of our contemporary culture, McGinness seems to say.

Imagine what it felt like for Renaissance viewers to see a painting so realistic that they took it as a window to the world they knew. McGinness does the same thing here—he creates a new kind of window. Our perception of the world is not a vista; it's inorganic. It's the cacophony of communication. It's a jumble of gorgeous images, none of which are tangible.

—Laura Leffler



Ryan McGinness, *Only A Thief Thinks Everybody Steals*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 96 x 144 inches
[courtesy of the artist and Deitch Projects, New York]