

GERING & LÓPEZ GALLERY

# ARTnews

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## The New Abstraction

**Caravaggio: Restoration Mystery**

**Moscow's Master of the Outrageous**

**Jasper Johns ■ Robert Gober ■ Robert Wilson**



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**"I RECOGNIZED EARLY ON THE POWER OF LOGOS—** what differentiated a cool T-shirt from an ordinary one," says Ryan McGinness, recalling his youth in Virginia Beach. "I couldn't really afford the cool surf-shop shirts, so I just made my own and then was surprised that other people wanted what I was making. I guess that kind of power is addictive."

Now 35, McGinness still makes T-shirts. In his sunny loft at the edge of Manhattan's Chinatown, the lanky, dark-haired artist is making all variety of stuff he likes, from soccer balls and skateboards to books and paintings. What ties them together is McGinness's ever-increasing repertoire of icons. Mimicking the hard-edged silhouettes of advertising graphics, these images are of lollipop trees, unicorns, vegetation run amok, and even a human figure sprouting antlers and riding a porpoise. Crisp and legible, 32 such icons are printed in silver inside discreet black circles on the soccer balls. In his paintings, McGinness layers this imagery in kaleidoscopic colors. Individual forms mash up against one another and accumulate into swells and tangles of baroque patterning laced with floral vines. A show of large-scale paintings—up to 8 feet by 24 feet—opens on the 7th of this month at Quint Contemporary Art in La Jolla, California.

"I start out with these drawings that are concrete forms and loaded with disparate meanings," says the artist. "Then when I'm painting them with the silk-screen process, I'm really only interested in esthetics—composition and form and color. The idea is to collapse the icons and juxtapose them so they are almost meaningless. Or they serve as Rorschach tests. You can find nonlinear narratives throughout the picture plane. I'm interested in the absurd and the surreal readings."

As he flips through one of his graph-paper notebooks scrawled with ink drawings, McGinness describes how his individual icons evolve. "Here, I was interested in this idea of

perception and how what you see gets translated to your brain," he says, pointing to a series of mutating faces with protruding eyeballs and things looping out of their brains. He ultimately reduced the design to a

highly abstracted profile built from concentric circles. "I'm trying to find an underlying geometry in each drawing and some kind of visual system that makes sense to me," he says.

Specific images may derive from dreams—as did the horned figure on a porpoise—or odd advertisements McGinness comes across, like a picture of a man carrying a giant fish on his back. Once the artist has distilled an idea into a design, he scans it into his computer and cleans up the alignments and tangent points. He then turns computer-generated film into a silk screen to use in the paintings.

McGinness makes only general compositional sketches for his paintings, mapping out the overall form they will take—haystacks, wreaths, peaks. He pins these to his studio walls to serve as guides when he begins to build shapes out of his huge vocabulary of silk screens.

"You're supposed to silk-screen with registration, but I throw screens all over the place," says McGinness, who describes the paintings as growing and taking on lives of their own.

"I'm making a mark and then intuitively responding to that mark. I'm using a process of mechanical reproduction and trying to do something a little more free-form with it. I'm interested in production, not reproduction."

In McGinness's recent massive "black hole" paintings, the arabesque lines that he often laces throughout his work have become the dominant form. While the title sounds ominous, these multicolored flourishes layered on deep, glossy blue grounds are unabashedly sumptuous. "The black holes are

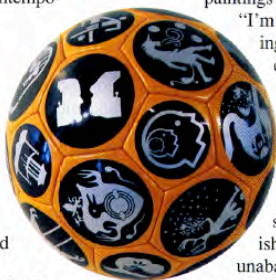
something very dark that I wanted to make beautiful and sexy," he says. "They came out of these fleur-de-lis swirls that for me have always been symbols for fanciness or wealth."

## Ballerinas, Unicorns, and Boom Boxes

**Ryan McGinness's**

graphic icons are turning up on everything from skateboards to wall murals to outdoor sculpture

**BY HILARIE M. SHEETS**



*Hilarie M. Sheets is a contributing editor of ARTnews.*

TOP: TOM POWELL; IMAGING COURTESY DITCH PROJECTS, NEW YORK; BOTTOM: PUBLISHED BY CHELSEAART



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OPPOSITE TOP Printed tableware accompanied McGinness's 2005 installation in the café at P.S. 1 in New York. OPPOSITE BOTTOM The *RM Soccer Ball* was produced by pop-multiple maker CerealArt. ABOVE LEFT One of the 100 monprints that make up the "Fabricated Cultural Belief Systems" series, 2003-4. ABOVE RIGHT Ryan McGinness says his layered paintings are all about "esthetics—composition and form and color." BELOW Installationview, 2005, at Deitch Projects in New York.



TOP RIGHT: DIRK WESTPHAL. OTHER IMAGES: TOM POWELL. IMAGING COURTESY DEITCH PROJECTS, NEW YORK (2)



## McGinness adapts his imagery from graffiti tags, ads, and



Then they started to fold in on themselves, resulting in a whole lot of fancy. That's the idea. I'm making luxury goods out of these luxury forms."

**Growing up, McGinness made toys** with his mother, who sold crafts and ornaments at holidays to country stores. "She would always get a new jigsaw or sander for her birthday," says the artist. In elementary-school art class, he remembers looking through stacks of early *Interview* magazines and seeing "real art" for the first time. "It was pretty progressive for Virginia Beach," he says.

In junior high and high school, he and a friend formed a garage band. McGinness wrote lyrics and sang and did all the artwork. "That's what interested me most about being in the band—making the posters and shirts and covers. I had no musical talent," he says. "At some point I realized that arranging type and images and reproducing them was this thing called design." Even now he constantly listens to music in his studio—recent favorites range from the indie-pop All Girl Summer Fun Band and Tullycraft to the punk-inflected Grand Ole Party—and enjoys finding out about new young bands.

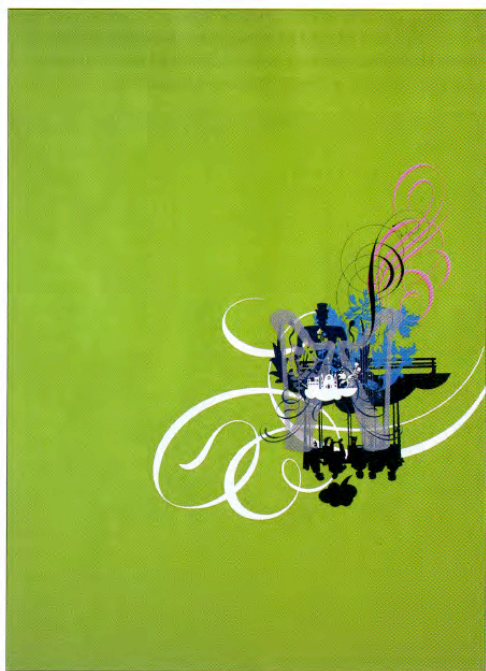
In 1990 he entered the design program at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, where he also took classes in fine art. During this time, McGinness, who cites Warhol as a major influence from early on, also interned at the Andy Warhol Museum as it was being prepared to open to the public. He designed letterhead, signage, and invitations. The museum opened a week after he graduated in 1994, and McGinness moved to New York.

There he worked briefly at the design firm Pentagram while he pursued his painting, which at that time appropriated clip-art graphics. "I was interested in taking that kind of anonymously created imagery from the public domain and then painting it on different materials, like velvet and Astroturf," says McGinness, who was included in group exhibitions at Artists Space in 1996 and Steffany Martz in 1997, among other venues. Looking back on this time, McGinness says he was caught up in "trying to make 'art.' That's a real problem. I had a breakthrough when I said, I'm not going to make art, I'm just going to make what I want."

In 1997 he decided to bring all his design ideas together in a book. For the two years he worked on *Flatnessisgod* (published in 1999 by Soft Skull Press), the artist says, he did "a lot of playing with what it means to represent the world around us on a flat, two-dimensional plane." The book includes graffiti tags that McGinness photographed and transformed into corporate-style logos. "I saw a lot of parallels between what taggers are doing on the street—trying to replicate their mark over and over with consistency and gaining power through that—and what corporations do with their visual identities," he says.

In his subsequent work, McGinness stopped being concerned with distinctions between design and art. A turning point came with his 2000 show at Alife, a crossover boutique and gallery space on the Lower East Side. For the centerpiece, *Part of Everything*, a mural on 360 small canvas-covered boards, he painted rainbows, shooting stars, and generic figures—the kind you might see on an airport bathroom door—engaged in amusing couplings. Since then he has become ever more adept at

**TOP Vinyl was the medium for a series of untitled banners in 2002.**  
**BOTTOM Ambitious Outsiders, 2003.**





## even dreams, reducing the figures to hard-edged silhouettes

transforming the vocabulary of visual sign systems into a more quixotic form of communication.

Deborah Wye, chief curator of prints and illustrated books at New York's Museum of Modern Art, was first struck by the vitality of McGinness's work when she saw "Dream Garden," a 2002 show at Deitch Projects in New York. Because the artist painted and layered vinyl cutouts directly on the walls, there was nothing Wye could consider acquiring for the museum's collection other than a couple of catalogues.

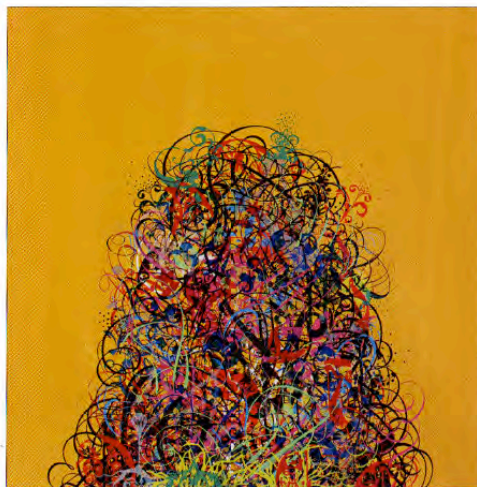
Two years later, however, she saw "Fabricated Cultural Belief Systems," a series of 100 screenprints that were sold through Printed Matter in New York, Galerie du Jour in Paris, and iconoclastusa.com online. "These were very provocative in the way they used printmaking," says Wye. She acquired a group of 20 in which certain motifs, such as a boom box, reappear across different sheets, sometimes upside down, sometimes falling off the page. "He exploits screenprinting for the immediacy and the flatness and the colors and the repetition—really going to its roots and getting everything out of it in a very contemporary context," Wye says. She installed several of the works last year on the second floor of MoMA and points out that she has enough of them to create a whole environment. "He's really captured something about the repetition of what you see in the commercial world and advertisements and how it's subliminal," she says. "In his work there are the elements of logos and things from popular culture that are part of our visual landscape without us even realizing that they're coming in."

For McGinness, the repetition is in part a response to our digital age. His proliferating, overlapping icons also seem to reflect how the generation after his operates in the world—designing their own labels and constructing online identities. "There is this whole generation of microcorporations," says McGinness. "Everyone's creating their own little world, and then these sub-worlds are linking up. That's the true model for the universe."

This concept was an inspiration for his first outdoor sculptures, one of which will be created for the University of South Florida. McGinness's icons will be cut out from two- to three-foot, flamboyantly painted aluminum discs, which will then be welded in cactuslike formations reaching 15 feet in height. The artist is also preparing for his first solo museum show, opening in January of next year at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond. He plans to install a huge tiled painting that will wrap around the atrium, in addition to a more traditional show in the galleries.

**Successfully maneuvering** in the art world, McGinness also thinks about the place of his work in consumer society. "I don't like fabricating value for things that are inherently less valuable—like digital information and mass-produced objects—but I have no problem with a painting being appropriately expensive, because only one exists," says McGinness, whose canvases sell at Deitch for as much as \$90,000. "But I want to make things that are more accessible and are appropriately priced." His soccer balls, for instance, sell for \$150 at Printed Matter, and museum stores across the country carry his T-shirts. Through the Point D'Ironie project, wrapping paper

**The haystack-shaped  
Giverny from 2006.**



he designed was given away free at Agnès B. stores last year.

McGinness, however, is adamant about maintaining his independence. He filed a lawsuit in 2002 against the retailer Urban Outfitters, which was selling bootleg versions of his T-shirts. He prevailed, and the company had to pull all the shirts from its shelves worldwide. And he says he has turned down lucrative offers from such companies as Nike to design soccer balls and from Coca-Cola to create a worldwide marketing campaign. "I don't want my work to be in the service of anything," says McGinness. "My work should have no one else's agenda attached to it. There's absolutely no function to a painting. You can say it transports you or makes you think about this or that—and yes, it can do those things. But it's an absurd object. I just like making these surreal things."

**Sol Lucet Omnibus,  
2006, from the  
"Black Hole" series.**



TOP: TOM POWELL IMAGING; BOTTOM: TOM POWELL IMAGING/COURTESY DEITCH PROJECTS, NEW YORK