

The University of San Francisco
**USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library |
Geschke Center**

International Studies Faculty Publications

International Studies

2012

Barry McGee

John Zarobell

University of San Francisco, jzarobell@usfca.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.usfca.edu/international_fac



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zarobell, J. "Barry McGee", *Art Practical* 4.3 (October 2012). http://www.artpractical.com/review/barry_mcgee/

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the International Studies at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Studies Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

4.3 / Review

Barry McGee

By John Zarobell

October 23, 2012

The San Francisco artist Barry McGee used a summer residency at the UC Berkeley Art Museum (BAMPFA) to transform the building into an urban spectacle. The view inside these galleries possesses striking similarities to a world we already know from wandering in the city. Never have viewers encountered it quite like this, though, and definitely never at the Berkeley Art Museum. This exhibition invades this high modernist building with a vivid imagination and transforms the space almost completely.

In McGee's exhibition, the milieu is the message. Harnessing McGee's creative output, one most clearly associated with San Francisco's street culture, into the space of the museum must have been a unique challenge for the exhibition's co-curators, Lawrence Rinder and Dena Beard. To the credit of the artist and curators, the exhibition honestly engages the urban environment by reconstituting it in the museum. The viewer is meant to be shocked (or, at the very least, awed) by the transformation of the gallery space, even though McGee's exhibition is hardly the first time that street art has made its way into the institution. Since the 1980s, many galleries and museums have exhibited street art, as sanctified by curators and critics. Even though the territory explored by BAMPFA's exhibition may be well trod, there is still an undercurrent of resistance present within this exhibition. Following in the tradition of the avant-garde, McGee's exhibition merges a resistance to the authorities and to the establishment while showing signs of integration with the art world. After all, this is a mid-career retrospective. The coolness that emanates from this show is a blend of youthful degeneracy and a cultivated artistic version as embodied in figures like Andy Warhol and Keith Haring.

There is no denying McGee's incredible originality and enormous creativity. After honing his drawing skills as a student at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), McGee developed a street practice alongside a studio one. His early drawings, made on paper and metal trays, demonstrate a highly innovative style that would become his signature. Through his drawings, McGee allows space for awkwardness; distortions are legion and portraits (of what I assume are imaginary characters) are not flattering. Emerging from street art, McGee's work still speaks to graffiti and the grittiness of the city. His early work is the visual equivalent of a throw-down: part machismo, part secret code, and part brilliant humor.

The collection of framed drawings, photos, and street refuse assembled into a corner installation (untitled, 1998) offers a glimpse of how the artist brings some of the kinetic energy of his street practice into a gallery. In a similar installation in the main space, the wall itself becomes part of the work as McGee concocts a bulge constructed of repurposed wood veneer. On top of this mound emerging from the wall hangs a multitude of mixed images and text. The invasion and metamorphosis of the architecture enhances the dynamism of the work and demonstrates McGee's sensitivity to the built environment and the psychological implications it confers. For a street artist assembling an exhibit inside a museum, messing with the architecture allows the pieces to retain some of the urban grit normally obscured in the white cube. In this presentation, McGee has taken this idea to the extreme.



Barry McGee, 2012; installation view at the Berkeley Art Museum. Courtesy of the Berkeley Art Museum. Photo: Sibila Savage.



Barry McGee, 2012; installation view, the Berkeley Art Museum. Courtesy of the Berkeley Art Museum. Photo: Sibila Savage.

Though the artist began working on the street, the exhibition traces McGee's evolution as his practice moved predominately indoors. The impact of street art is still visible here, presented through graffiti displayed on the outside of the building. The exhibition presents the breadth of McGee's works, from murals to installations, highlighting the artist's flexibility, growth, and innovation throughout his career. The entire exhibition plays out as one installation. By transforming the museum into an ersatz street scene, McGee recreates the context that he is closely associated with and enables an appreciation of the absurd and transitory nature of the art works. Retired surfboards are strewn about, among a variety of other manner of urban junk, but the boards become canvases for McGee's abstract designs. These intricate abstract images are seen in their original intimate scale here, but panels installed around the entire museum enlarge and broadcast this visual vocabulary throughout the space. R. Fong's bodega dominates the panorama, and automatons dressed in street duds spray paint around the large, open central space of the museum. The cacophonous effect integrates three main strains of work in the show: figurative drawings and paintings, abstract design, and scatter art/installation. There is a feeling of a *gesamtkunstwerk*, or total work of art, an attempt to weave together the various strains of the artist's practice; the accumulation is greater than the sum of its parts. Yet what I came away with was a powerful sensation transmitted by a handful of the works on view.

The assemblage of empty liquor bottles (untitled, 2006) painted with McGee's signature portrait heads in various colors transmits many of the ideas and imaginative characters that make his work so rich. The bottles themselves speak to accumulated inebriation and hint at the underworld. The effect is beautiful and subtle: the lines of the paintings come to life in the transparent bottles that, when lit, create their own halos. Another piece that stands out is the unlikely tower of video works shown on tube televisions that McGee produced in collaboration with Josh Lazcano (untitled, 2004/2012). In this work, iconic McGee images and figures are transformed into virtual characters whose presence is sometimes clearly animated and, at other times, obscured by static. The television sets themselves (collected curbside and from thrift stores, no doubt) were rescued from the dustbin of history. The TVs were once modern, desirable products, but they have since been abandoned as obsolete. The dynamic of consumer capitalism, the constant validation of the new, is both affirmed by the use of digital images and questioned by showing them on out-of-date technology. These forgotten and forlorn objects serve as supports for innovative images.

The choice of where to create is now one of the foundations of the artistic enterprise. It determines both the nature of the work and its audience, and for this reason, it is of central concern to artists and curators everywhere. If you make art on the street, the audience comes to you, whereas galleries and museums mainly serve a different, self-selecting audience. Contemporary artists have to choose how to negotiate these poles and all of the exhibition opportunities that fall in between. Making art for the street in a museum could domesticate it and render its implicit critique null. McGee has long been working to bridge this gap, and his efforts for this exhibition demonstrate that his work continues to be a source of endless surprises.

Barry McGee is on view at the [UC Berkeley Art Museum](#) through December 9, 2012.

[Comments Show](#)
