

# The New York Times

## The Latest Tagger to Be Tagged for Success

By TESSA DeCARLO

Published: July 11, 2004

SAN FRANCISCO



Photograph by Dan Soper

Barry McGee, also known as the graffiti artist Twist, is showing sculptures inside and outside the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University

GRAFFITI has long entranced the art world, but it seldom survives being brought indoors. Seen on clean white walls, tags and throw-ups tend to look diminished rather than elevated, their grit and defiance drained away by institutional approval.

A rare exception is the work of Barry McGee, a notorious tagger who's also a trained artist. By combining exceptional talent and canny contrariness, Mr. McGee manages to bring graffiti into the gallery without undermining its authenticity, or his own.

A San Francisco native who has exhibited in New York, Los Angeles and Milan as well as extensively in his hometown, Mr. McGee recently opened a one-man show at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum in Waltham, Mass., his first solo museum exhibition on

the East Coast. It's an expansive, noisy installation that includes a five-foot tower of 49 chattering television sets; kinetic sculptures; clusters of framed drawings and painted bottles featuring Mr. McGee's signature cartoons of grizzled, sad-eyed men; and a smoking Ford Econoline van dropped upside down in a dumpster outside the museum's front door.

There are festoons of television wires, walls covered in rusted metal and plenty of graffiti, including "Reagan Youth" spray-painted across a large caricature of the current president. More graffiti appears in the artist's book that has been issued as part of the show, which runs through July 25.

The exhibition deftly evokes the grimy context that helps make graffiti so compelling, but its arrangement of objects and images is unabashedly sophisticated. "This show has an incredible rhythm, with some spaces very sparse and others very dense," said Raphaela Platow, the Rose's curator. "There's real artistry to what he does. He pulls it all together in an amazing way."

Mr. McGee, 38, is one of four children of a Chinese-American secretary and an Irish-American car-body repairman. Twenty years ago a friend introduced him to graffiti and he began tagging all over San Francisco with the name Twist. He quickly became famous within the subculture for his innovative combinations of text and image and his artfully shaded spray-paint renderings of down-and-outers and giant screws.

Graffiti appeals to him because it is both transgressive and populist, exhibitionistic and anonymous. "You're all over the place, but no one knows who you are," said Mr. McGee, a tall, slender man who acts and dresses more like an awkward teenager than the successful artist he has become. "Some people are enraged and some people are applauding. If there were a mission statement for graffiti, that would be it."

But tagging is no way to earn a living, so he enrolled in the San Francisco Art Institute, where he earned a bachelor of fine arts in printmaking in 1991. "I wasn't trying to turn graffiti into an art form," he said during a recent interview here. "I just wanted to learn about art. I wanted to learn this game." As for his fellow graffitiists, "I don't think they even knew I was going to art school."

Early on he was championed by San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, where he has shown many times. He will be included in "Beautiful Losers," a show there celebrating skateboard culture that opens on Saturday.

"His work is great, and I'm surprised at how he's been able to keep it vital and unpredictable," said the center's visual arts curator, René de Guzman. "It hasn't softened — in fact, it's getting more edgy."

Mr. de Guzman points to the installation Mr. McGee did with the tagger Josh Lazcano for the center's 10th-anniversary show last fall. They piled VCR's and TV sets inside a graffiti-covered truck arranged to look as if it had crashed near the center's front door.

Despite a sign reading "Don't Call 911 — This Is a Work of Art," the volume of anxious calls led the police to demand the truck's removal.

The incident fits nicely into the arc of Mr. McGee's career, which has been made by breaking the rules. Although he is shown by important dealers, he has taken the unusual step of shunning gallery representation, whereby a gallery owner promotes an artist in exchange for exclusive rights to sell his work. Instead, Mr. McGee calls himself "a free agent" and often sells his work through nonprofit and artist-run galleries. He is also known for doing his installations at the last minute, allowing curators little control.

"He has kept that outlaw — not only sensibility, but also way of relating to a museum, which can be tremendously challenging," Ms. Platow said. "I knew in my heart that I could rely on him. Everyone else went a little crazy. Now we laugh about it."

Mr. McGee said: "I just try to get away with as much as I can. I don't think that's very radical in the art world. It seems pretty tame compared to hanging off a rooftop or a freeway sign."

Now that he's a father — Mr. McGee's wife, the artist Margaret Kilgallen, died of breast cancer in 2001 just a few weeks after giving birth to their daughter, Asha — he no longer takes those kinds of risks for graffiti. But he is not entirely out of the game. "There are a couple of places I like to keep up on," he said, although these days "my graffiti is so anonymous, no one could know who's doing it."

Mr. McGee's continued involvement has kept his street credibility alive. "He's the icon, the godfather," said Shawn Whisenant, 22, an aspiring artist known as AKO who is currently in jail in nearby Napa on felony graffiti charges. "You can still walk around San Francisco and see little 'Twist' things that he does. It's not like he's turned his back on the culture."

Nor does Mr. Whisenant fault his idol for going legit. "It's great that he's expanded into the art world," he said. "Because who really wants to be a 40-year-old guy running around the streets?"

*Tessa DeCarlo is an art writer based in Northern California.*



Photograph by Dan Soper

