

BlackoutBook

Progressive Culture

FALL 2003

PROTESTERS: THE BLACK BOOK 13: LEE ROTH, GEORGE LOIS, CURTIS SLIWA, **FEATURES:** SCARLETT JOHANSSON, JIHAD, CHUCK PALAHNIUK, DREA DE MATTEO, REBECCA GODFREY LITTLE BLACK BOOK LIST



YOKO ONO, KINSEY, TRACEY EMIN, PINK, DAVID ROOF, GEORGE PLIMPTON, RUSSELL SIMMONS, RYAN MCGINNESS, HEIL MADONNA, THE COLA **FICTION:** PAUL BEATTY, DENNIS COOPER, **VEGAS 50-PAGE FASHION PROTEST**

P

unk Soul Brother

story Carl Swenson

By subverting corporate iconography, former skater punk Ryan McGinness has built a reputation as a Warhol for the 21st century.

Ryan McGinness is a pretty orderly guy for an artist. He married his high school sweetheart and his closet is stuffed with 10 copies of the same off-key white dress shirt he wears most days. He makes you feel at your worst when you walk into his loft, where there's a selection of fuzzy slippers by the door. The front part of the loft is his studio, with three work tables equipped with Macintoshes and a large whiteboard with post-it-it-to-its. The black-ink list on the left is his professional design work—running a company called Egg (I'll describe that soon, bearing Camp Identity, Penguin soon?)—and the list on the right, in blue ink, is his personal work, which includes an upcoming solo show at the buzzy, blue-strip New York gallery Dash Projects, best known for its promoter of Flashpaper and its art-directive resume.

McGinness's pieces are shown about in real places. Bags with his very designer commercial come printed on them, just back from a show in Japan. The skateboards he designed for Supreme with Patience origin printed on their decks. A rack full of T-shirts screen-printed with his new set of more delicate, Edward Goyesque, less roostered, iconography (dresses, hats, an octopus with a knife). They're being sold at Barney's. He calls out one he designed for the Toilet Project: covers. Yeah, he's hands

studiously with the appropriate surf-shop brands. "It was all about the 11th Street Surf Shop logo and the NYV logo," he says, speaking of the two most powerful and distinguishable icons of the local high school's status culture. "They were cool fonts and they sponsored cool events so much. That's why I'm so interested in T-shirts. I can remember starting at the NYV logo (a aerated wave form composed of overlapping, jumping dolphins) and trying to figure it out."

Virginia Beach is a relatively middle-class town. The only encouragement McGinness got in art was from a teacher at the local grid and talented students center. That teacher was later arrested for child pornography, which annoys McGinness endlessly. "The one teacher dude who cared," he says. "And it was all a legend. Just like Virginia Beach."

After majoring in graphic design at Carnegie Mellon, McGinness moved to New York in 1994 to work at Postagram, a very corporate design firm, where he helped craft the brand images of such clients as Sony, Sega, and MTV, all of which needed to close their corporate corporate activities in the graphics of the new McGinness has always been fascinated with the strange power of corporate iconography. "That goes back to early childhood when I'd have book covers and logos."

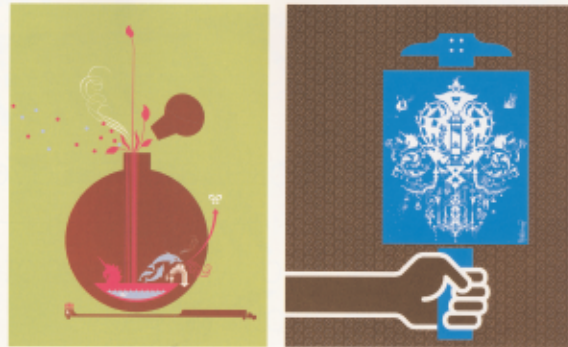
In high school, McGinness marked himself

with the Beanie Babies.

But McGinness's power comes largely from leading off his graphic-design talents, and borrowing them by being in the art world. Jeffrey Deitch, whose gallery is also home to Vanessa Beecroft and the much-hating artist, is taking on McGinness because he searches as part of the current "convergence, a kind of period that comes around every 20 years or so where the borders between art, music, graphic design and fashion are blurred." Deitch saw that with the punk scene in New York in the 1970s, and feels that it's popping up again. "Someone emerging from graphic design can turn out to be one of the most interesting artists. And Ryan is a very good example of this—interesting innovations in painting and drawing coming out of a graphic design background." In addition, "The whole thing that comes out of the internet—is it's interesting in these times—also relates to Ryan really well."

McGinness grew up in Virginia Beach, a suburban community that sprawled inland from a beach, outdoor motorcycle sessions nearby. Much of the economy is funded by the various local military bases, though the side spent most of their time passing they actually live in a much cooler beach town, like in, say, Southern California.

In high school, McGinness marked himself



His zen-side sticker art—'I Love My Attention Deficit Disorder'—perfectly captured what the dot-com age was about.

A lot of the tension—the satire, parody and catchiness of McGinness's work—comes from his fluency in the vocabulary of power and his attempts to turn it to his own uses. The blue video distended images—appropriated, clipped, very basic fonts, images that are of our world, secretly communicating subtle meanings—only work from one obscurity.

"It's very ironic. It's taking what already exists in the world and making it," says Tony Kerenek, a partner of 4th—a street-illustration gallery on Orchard Street in New York—also a player in the downtown street-art scene. "So a lot of times you're looking at his work and you think you've seen it before, but it's his twist on it. That's why it's easy for a lot of people to love. They can relate to it, they feel close to it already."

Even so, he was achieving success doing whatever corporate work, a good portion of McGinness's personal art was the product of an ambitious resourcer arriving in the big city and being up to the pressures of managing the art world. Since he'd been clearing out his storage room, a lot of his was on display in his studio, like a piece that included an older billie screen-printed with an owl-like piece. One reads: "Usher Schmidt / Sometimes I just don't get it / Man he sure is rich."

Of course, it didn't take long for McGinness to look the art world code. First, he quit Postagram and started his own business, designing things for brands. His big break, weirdly, came when his studio started the offices of men-fighting new-media

design firm Raccorff, which later came to represent much of what was gloriously satirical about the dot-com economy. He's an avid collector of "A Lot of Art's Boring," "I Love My Attention Deficit Disorder"—perfectly captured much of what that age was about.

"His studio was right next to our first office," says Craig Kerenek, one of Raccorff's founders. "There was a window between the two offices, and he had the bottom of it with Joy cereal bottles. The window was way up high, so we could only see the bottles, nothing else in the room. One day, I just had to find out who was the man behind the bottles." This began a collaboration, which included McGinness decorating some of the massive Raccorff parties the once-strung-up-a-huge-plastic-sign-announcing "Raccorff-Sucker!" Again, remember the late 1990s. "He made a bunch of logos for me. I am a collector of his art—in fact, my company was actually his patron for a long time," adds Kerenek. "We paid him to make art." They also published his first of nine art books, *Raccorffology*, which was printed throughout the office as if to show how efficient and creative Raccorff really was. His stickers were everywhere, too. Inevitably, a sticker printed with the legend "This is What You Value" kept ending up on the table.

In late 2000, McGinness convinced Able to let him work the entire store. He placed hundreds of plastic army men on plywood to make a complex sculpture he called *Saving Ryan's Phobias*. Show them, he's done shows in Manhattan, Brooklyn, Germany, and Japan, as well as a collaboration last year for Deitch, for whom

he also co-edited a show of skateboarders-themed art to go with a swimming pool-the-dubstep that the gallery had installed last winter.

"Right now there's the whole area of explosive creativity in the skateboard scene and new-media scene, and this revival of downtown culture," says Deitch. "And Ryan is very much a part of that. And so somehow, the aesthetics of the skateboard culture—the logos, fashion and attitude—are going right into the new imagery and attitude in art."

Abundance of 4th begs to offer, and offers up Deitch's interest in the art world's search for new energy no matter where it comes from. "All the people who look up to us in the art world used to be young artists," he says. "I just think they're trying to get to the next step. Drawing is just what the young people do."

That's why McGinness's style works equally well for corporate clients and the most wondrously absurd and self-proclaimed hipsters, and why he can come to represent the urban edge of skinny-boy DJ skate culture that has lately reemerged. The art world, even though he's already ridden a skateboard since he was in high school. He's too busy and too tired to do it in the city. But that's what people want him to do, and he can't help that.

"Ryan McGinness" 202 Gallery 202 New York, Philadelphia, 215.673.6750, October 3-November 28, "White White Words" Dash Projects, 30 Grand Street, NYC, 212.343.1330, October 4-November 7.

Ryan McGinness: Photo: Jonathan S. Miller; Sticker Art: Ryan McGinness