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**“McGinness is God”**

**By Criswell Lappin**

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For those inclined to debate the line that separates graphic design from fine art, there is no better case study than Ryan McGinness. Before publishing *Flatnessisgod* in 1999—the first of nine books—the 33-year-old artist received formal graphic-design training at Carnegie Mellon University and participated in a curatorial internship at the Andy Warhol Museum, followed by a six-month stint with Michael Bierut, at Pentagram. It was a tidy beginning to what would be considered a successful design career by most standards.

But with *Flatnessisgod*, McGinness began his definitive passage out of the service industry (design) into the “self-service” industry (art). He makes no apologies for the reason he left the design profession: he doesn’t like to collaborate. While that attitude is probably shared by more than a few graphic designers, not many are brazen enough to admit or act on it. One reason McGinness is noteworthy to designers is that his highly stylistic approach consists mostly of vector-based flat shapes that reflect his graphic-design experience. That, in large part, is why McGinness has been a catalyst for the design/art argument: his art looks like graphic design. The fact that his work usually appears in traditional graphic media like books, installations and products only reinforces that perception.

*Metropolis* creative director Criswell Lappin spoke to McGinness about the evolution of his work, his book *Installationview* (Rizzoli)—released this month in conjunction with solo exhibitions at Danziger Projects and Deitch Projects—the difference between design and art, and his thoughts about the software company Adobe.

**How has your work evolved from *Flatnessisgod* to *Installationview*?**

*Installationview* is a cross between an exhibition catalog and an artist’s book. In *Flatnessisgod* I took advantage of the book format to make work specifically for the pages, but there were also reproductions of things that came from outside the book. This new book is the same idea, except in full color and using recent work—paintings from the last five years.

**Is most of your work still silkscreened?**

Yeah, layered silkscreens, and I’m also showing a lot of installations. The other component is the process. I’ve been frustrated with art books that show the final project but don’t provide any insight about how the piece materialized. I’m interested in revealing the process as well—sketches, notes, storyboards. It’s going to be a thick and juicy book.

**An interesting conundrum you must come across in your work, since it’s so flat and vector-based, is transferring it into three dimensions and then converting 3-D installations back into the flat medium.**

I actually think of books as 3-D environments. But we did include shots of installations to give a sense of space, perspective, and environment as opposed to shooting walls straight on, which would be pointless in some respects.

**Because you use symbols that are linked to the graphic-design profession, many people assume your work has an agenda. Does it?**

There is nothing beyond the content of the paintings. One analogy I use is to liken the content to language. Each little drawing represents a word, a concept, or a simple idea, but when you combine them they make sentences, paragraphs, and larger narratives. What I've done recently is to chop up those elements in the silkscreening process and use fragmented words and sentences. The result is a nonlinear narrative where the images meander around.

**Do you think there are problems with the design education system in America?**

In my education I actually gravitated toward the graphic-design department, because it seemed like a lot of the dumber kids studied art. I can't say it any more plainly than that, but a lot of the flakier kids took that route. I was looking for something more solid. What's missing in a lot of art programs is teaching students how to communicate visually. In design programs you learn about semantics, color theory, even simple things like composition and tension, plain old dot problems, and line studies. You're taught how picture planes work. You don't get that in these free-form art programs.

**Do you keep in touch with Michael Bierut?**

No, I can't imagine he would remember who I am. We were supposed to present at an Adobe awards program a couple of years ago. I didn't go—I sent an imposter instead. Michael hadn't seen me in years, and the imposter told me that they reunited and all. It's just more efficient to be in more than one place at one time. And furthermore, I don't care about Adobe. They're not my friends. They only contacted me because someone recommended me.

**You have an interesting perspective on corporate sponsorship. Are you a NASCAR fan?**

No, but some of those cars with the logos wrapped around them are beautiful. You're right though: I did a book titled Sponsorship based on my exhibition in Los Angeles. I got corporate sponsors for the exhibition, but I didn't have any art—I just put up their logos. Many invites for shows nowadays include a huge grid of sponsor logos at the bottom. It seems like that's what the shows are all about.

**How do you decide where your work appears?**

I don't have a snazzy answer other than I do whatever I want. I play soccer, so I made a soccer ball. I used to skateboard, and I painted my own decks growing up, so it makes sense to make skateboards. I made my own shirts, so I make shirts now. But production can be a struggle. I didn't want to do a soccer ball for Adidas or Nike. But I also didn't want to front the money and take on the risk on production costs. So I worked with Cerealart, which makes artists' products like Laurie Simmons's dessert plate set and Yoshitomo Nara's ashtray. They approached me about doing something, and I proposed a soccer ball.

**Is there anyone you would like to collaborate with?**

Um, no. I don't think I'm a good collaborator, and I don't want anyone diluting my work.

**Is that why you moved from design to art?**

I don't think I'm any good at business. I don't have a head for managing people. Even when I was doing that kind of work, I focused on what I felt good about and let the client pick whatever they wanted. It didn't matter to me if they picked the shitty design: I still had the good one. I focused on corporate identities and logos, because they play with the formal principles of design: shape, color, form—these are the things I'm primarily interested in. I'd explore on my own and make tons of variations and offshoots.

**Would you use them on other projects?**

Yeah, I'd always keep work and recycle. That's what excites me about design. I just like drawing.

**You've said that your work is like a Rorschach test. Do you think of yourself as a design psychologist?**

Not necessarily. If I were, I would be more interested in feedback and interpretation.

**Have you ever asked for that?**

No. People offer up their interpretations freely, but I don't care, you know. I think the work lends itself to interpretation. A lot of it is surreal imagery that makes sense to me but not to someone else.