

PRESSBOOK

Barry MCGEE

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by Jonathan Goodman

Some 20 years ago San Francisco artist Barry McGee was part of the art scene's graffiti movement there. Posted on the walls of the city, his images of bums and aboriginal faces were so good that one inevitably felt he would go on to larger, more mainstream recognition—and so he has in this show at Cheim & Read, his first New York gallery exhibition in eight years. McGee's imagery regularly criticizes the extreme postmodern materialism of American culture. But he is more an artist than he is a scold: unafraid of being boldly painterly, McGee sets up brightly attractive patterned paintings, including works done on surfboards, and continues to embrace his imagery of misfits and down-on-their-luck bums that serve as a counterbalance to America's romance with material success. There is an emphasis on surface in the paintings, as well as the random collections of images pulled from the Internet. His sculptural groupings include found objects as well as works he has fashioned himself, sometimes with a comic aura—for example, the mostly bearded group of carved heads is turned away from the viewer and exhibited in a corner of the gallery. Such eclecticism mimics city life and the sheer multiplicity of visual images that constantly morph into moments of real beauty.

Walking into the small entrance room of Cheim & Read's space, the viewer comes up against an untitled (all works are untitled) grouping of 10 painted surfboards propped against a wall. They are mostly covered with the diamond and triangle-shaped patterns that characterize much of McGee's two-dimensional art; ironically, for a hidden moralist like this former street artist, the patterns transform the objects into art works that, now painted, are worth far more than their original prices. This is perhaps the conundrum of work that has been oriented toward outsider status but has received respectful critical attention from the start; in McGee's case, his affinity with outsider art is made more complicated by his education at the San Francisco Art Institute, from which he graduated in 1991. McGee deals with alienation—of both a political and visual kind—but his wry presentations of funk and digital imagery need to be seen as the constructs of an astute practitioner, someone for whom the visual experience is arranged as much as it is improvised. In many ways McGee's paintings, flat as billboards and showing off a fair amount of wordage, continue to discuss, in highly sophisticated fashion, visual tropes and attitudes toward experience: "L. Fong" functions as a stand-in for the artist, while the acronyms "THR" (The Harsh Reality) and "DFW" (Down for Whatever) serve as literary abbreviations acknowledging a reality harsher than one might think upon first seeing his work.

Such combinations of randomly juxtaposed imagery become more or less monumental in a 400-element piece—fit together from 2005 through 2013—that



Barry McGee, UNTITLED 2013. Acrylic on wood panel; 72 elements, 86 1/2 × 120".

bulges outwards some 55 inches toward the bottom of the wall. Composed of photos and painted envelopes, the installation contains, among others, a photograph of a man throwing a girl's pink bike up into the darkness, the signature hapless heads of men outside the mainstream of success, and another photo of a man spraying graffiti in black on a blue wall. We would do well to remember that McGee's first impulses came from the graffiti movement he belonged to a generation ago. Its rebellious lawlessness and improvised anarchy challenged the commercial signs and high art of San Francisco, remaining a major stratagem now, even if the results seem slightly out of place in a New York gallery.

It is clear that McGee is important in the ongoing wave of artists' attempts to present a visual reality that refuses to appease good taste. The problem is that he is so very good: his work can be extremely beautiful, as happens in the painting of a snakelike, circling ribbon made up of brightly colored diamonds and triangles juxtaposed against a red background composed of smallish canvases, all of one color, and placed together like parts of a puzzle in order to construct a single structure. One hesitates to praise the painting for formal reasons alone, primarily because much of McGee's work has been, at the very least, in contradistinction to the usual terrain of collectible art. But it can certainly be done, and it can be done successfully, which is a tribute to the artist's skill and imagination. In one work, quite large at 87 by 125 inches, we see a random collection of abstract styles, along with his signature THR lettering and two elegant vases. Elegance has a way of sneaking into McGee's highly wrought compositions, and gives us a chance to admire as well as moralize.