

PRESSBOOK

Barry MCGEE

Square Cylinder

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RATIO 3

BARRY MCGEE AT RATIO 3
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MARIA PORGES

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What is a signature style when your signature consists of a dozen different names? When you operate across and through different cultures and worlds with apparent ease, navigating the sharp rocks of art-stardom by refusing to play by the rules set for those elevated to the highest levels of the art world? Slipping back and forth between 'high' and 'lowbrow' as easily as he has slipped through barriers to tag innumerable sites, Barry McGee—aka Ray Fong, Lydia Fong, Bernon Vernon, P.Kin, Ray Virgil, Twist, Twister, Twisty, and Twisto—still manages, for the most part, to determine his own fate, despite having become something of a Cultural Icon, with museum shows and important collections to his credit and a career supported by multiple galleries. That he remains committed to bringing his friends along for the ride as often as possible is not only admirable, but enjoyable as well.

Walking into Ratio 3's expansive space, it is immediately apparent that China Boo both expands on and reprises McGee's familiar motifs and themes. There is the meticulously rendered sad-faced loser, present since the artist's days as an undergraduate at SFAI. Most of the paintings on view feature the intense geometric patterns in optically dizzying color combinations now associated with his work, possibly all descended from a decorative motif on some sheet music McGee found dumpster-diving near his studio one day, many years ago. There are allusions to surf/ skater/graffiti culture, most prominently in the form of actual surfboards; a giant weathered stack of them towers over visitors in the side gallery, while a familial-looking cluster in various sizes and shapes, embellished with patterns and cartoony figures, leans against the wall in the main room. Other works include elements like the 'Western' lettering style also favored by the late artist Margaret Kilgallen and bursts of spray paint, or the letters DFW (Down For Whatever).

Staged, arranged and presented with an extraordinary design sense and a palette that succeeds in being simultaneously prescient and endearingly vintage, this is — for the most part — an exhibition of the kind of polished, handsome, sellable work demanded by today's art market. A deep red is present in almost every work, suggesting, perhaps, that China Boo alludes in some way to "Red" China, or maybe even Chinese lacquerware. Or not. McGee, who has caught flak in the past for the stereotypically Asian appearance of some of his stylized figures, is half Chinese.

Whatever the show's mysterious title actually signifies, in the middle of this highly desirable assortment of paintings, sculpture, arrangements of painted tchotchkes and strange little furniture, there's a giant, disintegrating concrete — blob, for lack of a better word. It doesn't really seem wrong that it's in the room; installations of McGee's work have always included such surprises, balancing his sharply rendered image and text with worn bits of reality. This one, though, turns out to be an immense concrete baby head made by an artist named Dave Hardy and installed guerilla-style at SF's Warm Water Cove, a site of DIY punk music shows and graffiti art, in 2000. McGee liked it and rescued it from the site as the cove was cleaned up over the last decade or so.

Rather than being an outlier, the head's presence here is the tip of an iceberg—that being the wunderkammer/ thrift store/ salon-style gallery of art by literally dozens of artists that can be accessed through a low opening in the wall in the side gallery, a doorway that suggests a trip down Wonderland's rabbit hole or, maybe, the act of sneaking into somewhere to tag. It leads into a back room of the adjacent (former) check-cashing center, still furnished with a counter and bulletproof glass barrier. As with McGee's 2012 show at the Berkeley Art Museum—which included work by several other artists, despite the fact that it was billed as a monographic presentation of his work — the artist's adamant membership

2831A MISSION STREET SAN FRANCISCO CA 94110 USA
+1 415.821.3371 gallery@ratio3.org www.ratio3.org

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in a broad community of makers/surfers/skaters is evident in his insistence on presenting this jam-packed curated exhibition as a show within/alongside his solo presentation.

Back in the gallery's church-like, white-walled space, McGee's vivid, complex patterns seem almost restful. Examined carefully, they reveal some subtle innovations—interesting combinations of earlier motifs and approaches. In one untitled work (let it be said here that every work here is untitled, which must be a really big headache for anyone charged with keeping track of it), 22 panels painted with different patterns are fitted together into a single larger work.

McGee has developed this method for developing larger compositions to a level of exquisite refinement. Here, a neatly fitted crazy quilt of squares and rectangles has been punctuated, here and there, with three roundish squirts of spray paint and six sad-sack faces, all applied after the panels were assembled together. Ghostlike, each of these slightly transparent additions crosses seams or straddles corners of adjacent panels. Their range in size suggests a kind of recession into space that the patterns beneath them flatly deny, making a joke about abstraction without revealing what the punch line might be.

Similarly, in a couple of other works, decisions about color and areas of pattern were made in a way that seems new to McGee's approach to composition. In one, a single, larger panel has been subdivided into areas filled with pattern, reversing the process of accumulation that characterizes McGee's usual compositional strategy of moving the smaller pieces around until they fit together in a way that works. While this reversal may not seem momentous, it's a very different kind of commitment, suggesting receptiveness to incremental change and risk that leads to speculation about what might possibly come next. In 2016, McGee will be fifty: old, for a surfer, but for an artist, right in the sweet spot of midcareer and, well — DFW.