

PRESSBOOK

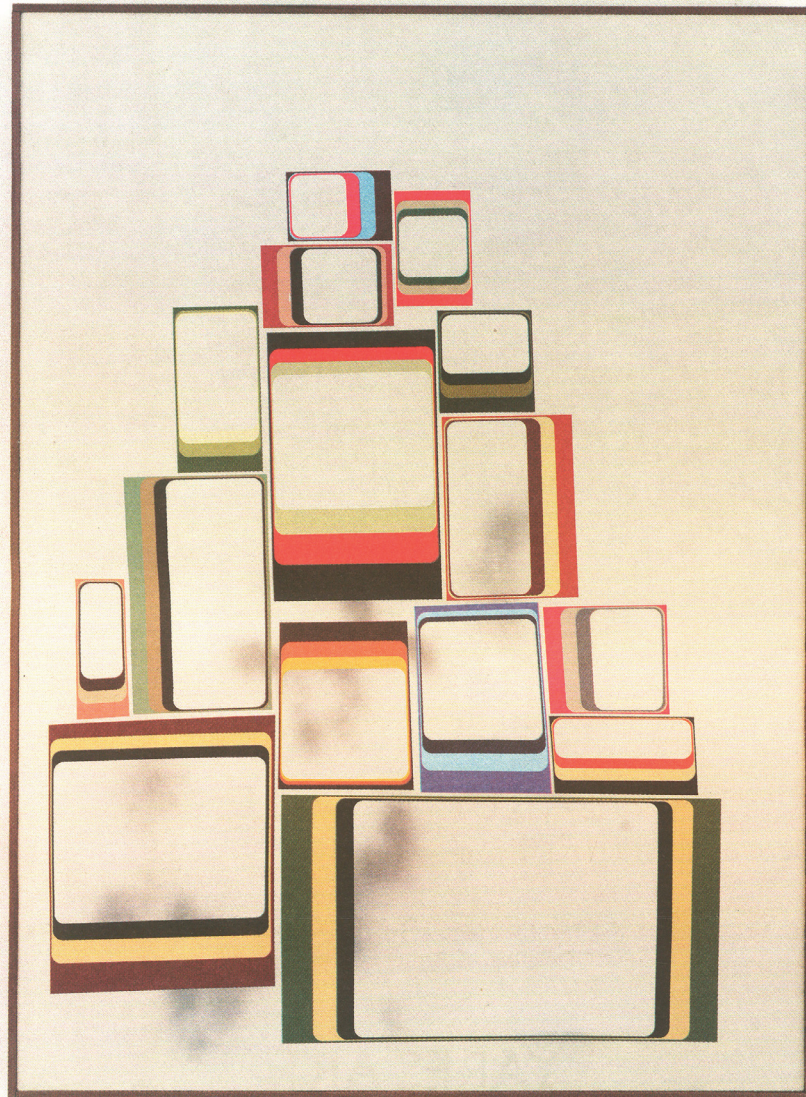
Barry MCGEE

The Brooklyn Rail

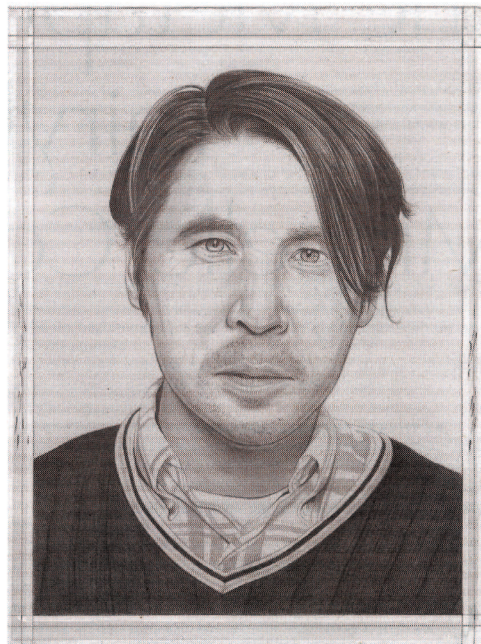
February 2018

BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE FEBRUARY 2018



Barry McGee with Jason Rosenfeld



Portrait of Barry McGee, pencil on paper, by Phong Bui. From a photograph by Zack Garlitos.

McGee's second show at the gallery and first since 2013 reveals the inclusive and adventurous nature of his practice from graffiti to acrylic easel paintings. There is an expansive dialogue between art made inside and outside the walls as represented by repurposed found materials, a ceiling-high stack of over eighty surfboards, a built environment called the "L. Fong Healing Arts Centre" and filled with works by other artists, display cases crammed with zines and the artist's signature painted bottles, and a bulging wall covered with framed drawings that McGee terms a "boil." The multi-media installation blends Northern California bric-a-brac and often crude display tactics, revealing the cluttered, clustering, and hoarding-based nature of McGee's fine art practice. Senior *Rail* writer Jason Rosenfeld met McGee in the gallery to discuss his show.

Jason Rosenfeld (Rail): Thank you for agreeing to interview with the *Brooklyn Rail*.

McGee: No, thank you. I am honored. I was like, where are all the alternative weeklies of New York? Where did they go?

Rail: This is it. We are it; we have tried to always be it.

McGee: That's it! Do they blow away on the street, you know, after they come out?

Rail: If they are really good.

McGee: Do you have boxes?

Rail: We don't have boxes.

McGee: No boxes on the street?

RAIL: You can find us in galleries and colleges and bookstores like McNally Jackson and Printed Matter. Four different covers.

MCGEE: Four different covers for each issue? Oh, I like that.

RAIL: We are trying to make ourselves into the most eminent art review journal. To get as many as forty out a month.

MCGEE: However I can help you, I am interested. That's great. Take over the market!

RAIL: So I'm an art historian, and I teach at Marymount Manhattan College, and I'm a Victorianist, so I work on the Pre-Raphaelites, nineteenth century British painters, all kinds of weird stuff.

MCGEE: Oh man, I love you, I love you [Laughter].

RAIL: But I came to it through comic books as a kid.

MCGEE: I love it—that was your gateway. Love that.

RAIL: So, I was looking at your stuff and the comics connections seem really strong. What were you interested in when you were a kid?

MCGEE: Probably actually similar to you. My brother and I—he is a little bit older—he was born in '61, and I was born in '66—we collected comics. I don't know why we were collecting, but we used to collect dirty beer cans too.

RAIL: Just accumulating things, right?

MCGEE: It's weird, yeah? I think we were trying to fill some void that was happening in our lives [Laughter]. We had DC comics, like crazy, everywhere. He'd keep them in plastic.

RAIL: Was he thinking about them as investments?

MCGEE: Not investments; he just wanted to take care of them. I don't know why; they were just comics. I got all his messed up ones, basically—the ones that weren't mint. I just liked the pictures more than anything else. I liked looking at the moiré pattern for some reason. I'd obsess on weird stuff like that. The way they printed, how the colors were off.

RAIL: That's all gone now. I don't know if you read any comics today—

MCGEE: They're not off?

RAIL: It's all computerized.

ART

MCGEE: There is no way for the moiré pattern to be off?

RAIL: No. The printing is digital. It's so slick-looking and clean.

MCGEE: Is that good?

RAIL: The gruffness has been lost.

MCGEE: I remember going to comic book things with my brother, and there would be all the adult books—the Zap Comix—that stuff was good. Whenever it said adult, you wanted to know what it was about. There's such a looser format than superheroes—oversized, exaggerated, more real—it was all land-based and weed smoking, hippies.

RAIL: Like the Crumb stuff, or Evan Dorkin, which seems to me, as an art historian, similar to your line, and how you draw and paint figuratively.

MCGEE: And *Love and Rockets*. I used to be into that a little bit.

RAIL: The Hernandez brothers.

MCGEE: Daniel Clowes I remember—those are great. Those were getting passed around at art school [San Francisco Art Institute] for sure.

RAIL: And he has done work on art schools and how fundamentally bizarre they are, like *Art School Confidential*.

MCGEE: I wasn't interested in comics for a long time, but that is when there were those kids that had them around school—I thought this is like what a modern comic is.

RAIL: What do you remember growing up in terms of visual culture on television? Did you guys watch cartoons when you were kids?

MCGEE: Yeah, we did, all the Hanna-Barbera stuff for sure.

RAIL: I see some of that in some of the work in the gallery right now.

MCGEE: I had a heavy dose of that, and then I went to community college after high school, and I had a humanities teacher—have you ever read this book—it's called *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* [Jerry Mander, 1978]?

RAIL: It didn't work. [Laughter]

MCGEE: No, it's great. I never really watched television again in a serious way. I was already hanging around with weird, different kids going to art house films. In San Francisco it was the Lumiere. I was starting to know that there were way more interesting things going on. A lot of it made no sense to me, but I just liked the second alternative—everything was going in that direction like music, great college radio stations, etc. It started when I was in high school—tenth, eleventh, twelfth—I was getting into surfing, and all these weird people on the fringe, seeing these dudes midday on a Wednesday, people that I would assume would be working, but they were just out surfing and skateboarding—a California lifestyle. A lot of it was music. I was just eating everything, all the imagery—as much as I could.

RAIL: How does it feel now? It's more limited maybe for kids now, even at the same time that it seems more expanded?

MCGEE: I was thinking about that yesterday. Do you know Lele [Saveri]? He is an Italian from Rome. He has a community space [8ballcommunity.club]. They do pirate radio and podcasts out of there. I was there yesterday. There was a two-hour rap show where people were doing freestyle raps over stuff, and there was a lesbian forum right after that. It was just like real life—a community, a little bit alternative, off the grid. He created a space over by Canal Street underneath a regular store, a boutique, and he's just in a storage room, but he created a space that is nothing more than amazing. There were tons of people. There was one college-age student doing the live podcast, and then it just built more and more. There was someone doing tattoos down there, someone setting up the green screen—on a Sunday. Sixteen, seventeen-year-old kids, twenty-five-year-old kids, old rappers from the Lower East Side were coming in to promote. It was a living example of what maybe might be happening on our phones, in another way.

RAIL: Like a network.

MCGEE: A network, but in a way that still works with all the nuances of you in front of me, or a person coming behind and saying hi and hearing what they are playing, like that way. It just felt good. Of course there were phones and everything around, but the main thing was that it felt like a really good community.

RAIL: So it might be a model for a different way for kids to interact.

MCGEE: Maybe. There are kids young enough there that have probably been on phones their whole lives, so it's probably refreshing to build in another way—relationships and community. It felt more similar to how I grew up, or a way that I'm more comfortable about learning about things.

RAIL: But also the kind of thing where you could develop a passion and pursue it.

MCGEE: Yeah. I just wanted to write checks, as soon as I was there. The best thing I could do is just write them a check to fund the ink for their copy machine. I just need to be part of it. Everything was in the right place. They were doing things in a physical way, making things that would probably end up on something like this [points to cell phone].

RAIL: Does the gallery not have the potential to create that to a degree? Isn't that part of the point of the shows that you are doing here?

MCGEE: Yeah. It's a little bit of an experiment.

RAIL: Because I saw that at the opening. It was a very different crowd.

MCGEE: I loved that crowd. I noticed it right away, too. You just feel it, right? The energy!

RAIL: You had people who said, "We are going out in the blizzard—we don't give a crap."

MCGEE: They were going to cancel the opening. Why would you? You are going to get these people that really worked to get here. I like things that are out of our control, anyway, that throw a wrench into the machine, so I was like, yeah let's do it. And I also found out that Mary Boone was still doing her opening too, so, if Mary is doing it, we've gotta do it.

RAIL: I wish the SRL [Survival Research Laboratories] opening next door had been the same night.

MCGEE: They opened up their space and let out a little thunder which was great. Mark Pauline brought three of their machines out, in the best San Francisco community spirit—"Yeah you got something? We got something going on here."

RAIL: I think it's great that Marlborough Contemporary is doing that show, and that these are right next to each other.

MCGEE: It's *unbelievable*. I tried my hardest to see if we could make a hole through the community space here to go into their space.

RAIL: Ah! That would have been good.

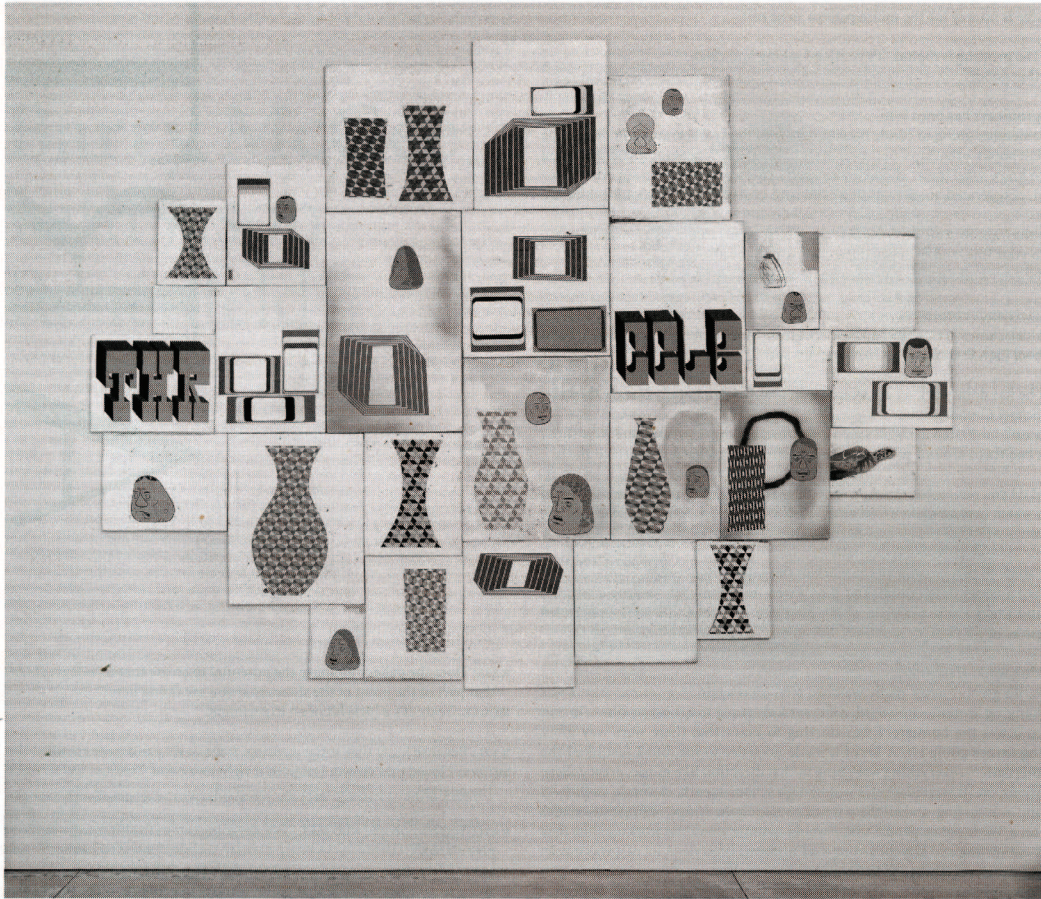
MCGEE: Then someone said "lawyer," and that was that. But Mark was into it—he could have made it happen really fast [laughs]. He is unbelievable, he showed me how to interject yourself into things. I talked to him at the opening. I always thought all his performances were illegal and without permission, and he goes, no, no, I have permission and full letters in case anyone complained. Everything is completely cleared, but it seems the most crazy, illegal, dangerous, off the grid, potentially hundreds of people getting killed situation. They did a show—this is how you learn about it, they pasted posters—

[SIRI interjects from the phone: "OK, I FOUND THIS ON THE WEB FOR—"]

MCGEE: Uh-oh.

RAIL: SIRI!

MCGEE: I like that.



Installation view of *Barry McGee*, 2017, Courtesy of Cheim & Read.

RAIL: What did we say?

MCGEE: What was our keyword? Was it "research"? Was it "survival"? It was "survival"! So they use rhoplex, this stuff that if you put on the wall you can't take it off anymore and stays permanently. It is nasty. So their posters were everywhere. You'd go to the show and it would be capacity, 3,000 people there, and tickets would be oversold and then there was this one, and it looked like no more people could get in, and there were maybe another thousand people trying to get in, and I just see Mark Pauline cutting this fence. He's just out there with his coveralls on, he's just cutting a hole in the fence.

RAIL: To let people in?

MCGEE: Just spreads it apart. It's just like that spirit. I saw that at such an early stage in my life, just like yeah why not? There are things that happen in your life where you just think "that is pivotal."

RAIL: Similarly, I think that what you're doing is more interesting than institutional critique now and that the gallery show, in a place like this, is free, right? Isn't that the paradigmatic element of it, that it's free, anyone can come in, you just have to have the guts to open the door and deal with the environment?

MCGEE: That's a great point, yeah, for sure.

RAIL: And that even when you do a show at the ICA Boston [2013], or at a museum, it's *not* free. There are situations where it might be free for kids to go with their school group—

MCGEE: Yeah, one day a month on a Thursday that's sponsored by Sprint or AT&T or something.

RAIL: Exactly, but here they could come whenever they want, and they showed up for the opening.

MCGEE: Yeah in the blizzard, or a mild blizzard. Yeah, there's a shift, huh?

RAIL: If you think about the way graffiti art is visible from the street and is free and open, at the same time it's not necessarily so easy to get to, right? Not so easy to actually experience, physically. You have to work to find it—perhaps, chase down a train—but a gallery is an interesting place to start a different kind of conversation.

MCGEE: For sure, a different platform.

RAIL: And with a broader public.

MCGEE: You know I have something to say about that because when I first started doing art, or getting more serious about art, the only places that were interested in ever showing were non-profit spaces, and we used to have tons in San Francisco, but it was like the Luggage Store, the Capp Street Project—we had so many non-profit galleries and spaces—Southern Exposure. Those are also free, open, public forums.

RAIL: That used to be more prevalent here. You spent a lot of time in New York. But the New York that you knew in the '90s, and the galleries on Ludlow Street, doesn't really exist anymore. That was kind of a heady period. Is this show related to your period in the city? I was looking through the works in the L. Fong installation.

MCGEE: Ah, the Healing Arts Centre.

RAIL: Yes, and I was there when an artist named Jason Polan said, "Hey I gave him that drawing twelve years ago!"

MCGEE: Oh Jason, yeah. I used to just run into him on the streets here. He'd just be drawing.

RAIL: He's our great roving artist in New York.

MCGEE: Yeah, by diligence, too. He just draws.

RAIL: And then he posts everything on Instagram. His Instagram account is excellent.

MCGEE: I haven't gone to that side, yet. In my head I think he's just drawing, and stuck with it, and I didn't even know about the social media part of it, but he was clearly on that—just stand on a corner and draw a picture and give it to the person standing there, which in this day and age is probably even more punk.

RAIL: Well he'll go to a bookstore like at the Whitney, and he'll do a drawing, and he'll slip it into one of his books, and post it—"I just did this, go get it, go buy it."

MCGEE: You could come and put something in [the Healing Arts Centre], yeah, if you want to bring it to some artwork and try to heal, do a little healing with art. I hope that there's enough art there that you can actually have a positive effect, not in like a hippie-dippie way, but I hope it fills up so that you can't even go in there, how every little crack and everything has a little piece in it. Like a touchstone, almost.

RAIL: Like the shrine of St. Dominic in Bologna—people come and they stick little objects and notes into it.

MCGEE: Yeah, almost like that but with art. Art has a lot of healing properties to it. To me it does.

RAIL: But isn't that part of the reason why we seek it out? We're searching for something.

MCGEE: I think so, I think to make art is really healing, though, just to be in front of something for an amount of time, and that it ultimately either stays in your house, goes into storage, goes in the garbage, or some one magically buys it. It has all these mysterious qualities. Why not let the arts heal a little bit? In a really naïve way, but just as an experiment.

RAIL: How did you pick the things that at least started the ball rolling in the arts centre?

MCGEE: Oh god, just my favorite people, just wanted all of my favorite visuals in one place together. So some of them are things that I've collected, some are from people that helped me install shows that have good artworks. Just level the playing field, let's have a show together. I should have done it the other way around, the more I think about it, I should have just taken the interior space and opened it up. A more generous me would have switched it around. Put me inside, my works in there, the rest [of the gallery] is the community.

RAIL: What other stuff is new in this show? The plates?

MCGEE: Oh, the ceramic plates?

RAIL: Yes, what do you call them?

MCGEE: I just call them ceramic plates.

RAIL: Oh, I thought you said something else.

MCGEE: What did you hear? Maybe it's better.

RAIL: "Starving plates." You can't eat off them. Ones you can't eat off, like the plates my grandmother had on her wall above the couch.

MCGEE: Oh I like that, "starving plates." There's this context when it goes to New York—just art with white walls. We look at it, and we critique it, and we see the New York approach—drawing, painting, sculpture.

RAIL: The big three, the triple crown.

MCGEE: The three pillars of art. So yeah, I wanted drawing, painting, and sculpture.

RAIL: All in one—

MCGEE: Just as some part of the end game thing. Just for New York. I wouldn't normally think about it that way. But just how New York sits, currently on the globe.

RAIL: We're so rigid in the way we think about these things.

MCGEE: It's not a rigid thing. I like the seriousness of it. It's what makes me think about art history as a stacking and stacking, or unstacking, or digging and burying, but to me it's always stacked until like two minutes ago, when whoever just finished a painting—the most contemporary piece, newest, modern piece of art is being finished right now.

RAIL: It seems to me that this relates to the various "Contemporary Art Centre" signs in the show, so that no matter where you go it becomes a contemporary art center.

MCGEE: Yeah, that's true.

RAIL: —and the center, this is where it's happening.

MCGEE: Thank you, that's great. Are you gonna put a piece in? It's as simple as crumpling up a piece of paper and throwing it in the corner. As long as the intent is there.

RAIL: I think those battered signs with their British spelling give them a sense of fanciness, but they are also an accretion of different shows reprised. You have Boston and Berkeley, and now the sign in the front room—it just doesn't say New York yet, but I anticipate that it will in your next exhibit elsewhere... I think they'd work really well.

MCGEE: You do?

RAIL: Yes.

MCGEE: Thank you. Yeah, I tried it in a couple other places, but it's getting better now.

RAIL: Because you keep adding to it.

MCGEE: It comes from graffiti, too—it's always better to have more. There's no limit to seeing your name everywhere, all the time.

RAIL: You never get sick of it.

MCGEE: And nobody knows who you are. You know what I mean? Like there's someone that writes "STAIN" around here in the city that's everywhere. I met him the other night. He actually introduced himself. He's the nicest kid ever. Yeah, it's always about more. For me that's how I want it to work. I don't know if it ever works that way, but—

RAIL: Like covering a bulging wall, a boil, with drawings?

MCGEE: Yeah it's like there's so much of this stuff.

RAIL: And it could just keep going.

MCGEE: Yes, it could, but I didn't have that many drawings this time, or else it would be bigger. This was the best I could do. The wall is just bloated, a little bit. I wanted it to reflect our society a little bit. In a way that is aesthetically pleasing and repulsive, too, at the same time.

RAIL: I think that's part of the thing, that it has to have a balance between the two of them.

MCGEE: I don't know if I'm there yet, I really don't know if I'm there, but it's okay right now. I think I'm gonna be better at it. I've got some ideas that can make that better.

RAIL: I think that even with the animatronic figure who's painting, it strikes me that he's not tagging—he's painting a painting. A "serious painting." I don't know how you would want to call it, a "fine art" painting.

MCGEE: I love you, thank you.

RAIL: [Laughs nervously] What? What have I done?

MCGEE: No, I love that—like more than five or six times already you've exposed something to me.

RAIL: In a good way, I hope.

MCGEE: In a good way, yeah, because I used to do those animatronics—I'd just put like a spray paint blob right by it or something before or some silly illustration of street activity, but yeah, I think you're the only one that's picked up that it is a *painting* that's in front of it now.

RAIL: I think that there's another level to that that. It feels, to me, that it's saying I can make this again and again and again just like I might tag again and again and again everywhere.

MCGEE: Yeah.

RAIL: I look at that painting, and it reminds me of supergraphics—my dad painted the kitchen and the living room of our house with this supergraphic design and—

MCGEE: Ah I love that—I love your dad!

RAIL: He's the best!—in orange and brown, the colors of the '70s. It was a cool circle, and he got a whole kit, and he was not a painter.

MCGEE: He just went for it, though.

RAIL: He just went for it! And I thought it looked awesome, and I was amazed that my mother allowed it. [Laughter] But these graphic designs remind me of that, and that idea that you could paint that pattern over and over and over as you do, on a cinder block, on a piece of ceramic, wherever it is, it's a new kind of tag, in a way. But it's a *fine art* tag. [Laughter] I don't know if you make the distinction between "fine art" and other kinds of expression.

MCGEE: Fine art's indoors, for sure.

RAIL: But then at the same time, you'll hang a pattern painted on battered plywood in the corner, on the ceiling, and the art historian in me thinks about [Kazimir] Malevich. I don't know if you've ever seen Malevich's *0,10* exhibit in St. Petersburg [1915-16] where he hung a Black Square in the top corner of the room where they used to have an icon of the Madonna in a Russian house, and that's the first thing that I thought of when I walked in there.

MCGEE: There's a beautiful ceiling in there that nobody looks at.

RAIL: The dome. They call it the dome.

MCGEE: It's gorgeous. It's a really nice detail.

RAIL: And that banner hanging next to it is in the catalog [*Untitled (DO YOUR PART FOR THE RESISTANCE)*].

MCGEE: That's a real banner.

RAIL: That you made?

MCGEE: No [*Laughter*]. Some like seventy-year-old anarchist in San Francisco made it.

RAIL: But the symbol on the left is the insignia of the Alliance from *Star Wars*.

MCGEE: What? What is that? Why would that be on an anti-fascist banner?

RAIL: Because it's the rebels in the first series of *Star Wars* movies.

MCGEE: What happened to the anarchy sign? Why isn't there just the traditional anarchy sign up there [the Circle-A]?

RAIL: Well there's another one. There's the one with the arrows [ANTIFA three arrow symbol].

MCGEE: I thought it was a seventy-year-old anarchist. You just completely changed my image, it's probably some seventeen-, eighteen-year-old kids. All I know is some shit went down, that was hanging over the freeway overpass. I did some [graffiti] initially when the administration changed. I just went balls to the walls and just got it all out, and that was week one of the administration, and I was like "man, this is gonna be hard to keep this going," like mentally and physically. I'm getting older. I shouldn't be doing that much stuff, and I went out a little more, no one would know that I did it because it's like civilian hand, you know? It's not fancy graffiti hand. It just looks like someone that needed to communicate something, bought a can of spray paint, and just started. Basically like the old internet where you just posted what you wanted to say.

RAIL: Do you photograph at all, everything that you do now? If you go out?

MCGEE: If I like it I do, and if it looks like a civilian actually did it. San Francisco has an internal playbook—I don't know how, but people just do it, like with that sign, too, it's just everywhere—protests happen in a really fast, really organic way. Maybe because people are on social media, but it's really organic. So, yeah, I was driving, probably like three months into [the Trump administration], and it was like, "are you doing your part? for the resistance," and I was in shock—"no I'm not."

RAIL: Hit the brakes.

MCGEE: It's close to where my studio is, and I couldn't believe it. You could just see "resistance," and I went back to my studio, and I was like, "I just want that thing," because it's the most honest real thing that I'd felt or seen at that point of internal turmoil. I made another one that just said the same thing, I put it back up there, and it was gone in three days or something. But I have the original. [*Laughs*] And I don't know if that has anything to do with art, but it's there. It's so weird. Everyone's processing the same stuff everywhere. That's why I love New York. It just keeps on, nothing matters, people are what matter, like this right here is what matters.

RAIL: And also a kind of urban memory, I was thinking about that.

MCGEE: Oh, urban memory, that's great.

RAIL: Because the first thing I thought of when I walked into the gallery is the other shows I've seen in this space, and how this show activates this space in a different way, and I think about it all the time when I go around the city, because you have a kind of urban memory of what was there. There was a painting there, or that used to be this shop, or that used to be this, or this neighborhood is totally transformed, but there's a little snippet of the past. The way that graffiti artists paint over each other over and over and the way that galleries present the same thing, even the Metropolitan Museum of Art—you go to an exhibit and you think about what was in that space that you saw previously. Like the Michelangelo show now there—I'm going to think about that Sistine ceiling reproduction any time I walk in those rooms no matter what new exhibit is there.

MCGEE: It's like a collective memory thing.

RAIL: Maybe it's something that just imprints on your memory, and then it becomes a part of your fabric as you navigate through your environment. And I'm wondering what you see now in New York, as someone who spent time here. And seeing it, not as a resident, but just coming back now and again and now and again.

MCGEE: I love this city so much. It's really a great city. It's fantastic. I've been riding bikes here, just the Citi bikes, which I'm pissed off about just because they're Citi bikes. It's like a conflict of interest for me, but they're so convenient and great in that way, and like they're also chaotic—you stick your card in there, you're off on the streets, and you're moving a lot faster than the rest, but you're causing people to slow down, too. And you're looking at your phone like "this street here?" and with the snow and everything. What an amazing experiment—we're just gonna throw these here, we'll see how this goes down.

RAIL: They've changed the laws of the jungle [*Laughter*—the bike lanes. It happens every time there's a new invention. You have to adjust.

MCGEE: Oh they're great, I love it. They are not emitting anything. There is no carbon footprint, other than what Citibank is doing. This trip got really cooking when we got out of the single digits temperatures and I could go out. I did not have the right stuff to go single digits, but the last three days has just been pure bikes.

RAIL: And fairly safe?

MCGEE: It's not safe at all. The bike lanes are not getting cleared at all.

RAIL: But they made them wide, so a plow can get through.

MCGEE: There's not one plowed right now. My Italian friend was saying just stay on the streets, don't even go on the sidewalk. I was over by the Drawing Center and wanted to do a tag on something—I don't know why a fifty-year-old is still thinking about doing tags—and I went up on the sidewalk, and I was like, "wuuuuuuup." I was in BMX mode again and just caught myself. The sidewalks are really slippery.

RAIL: Let me ask about going out and working, because my current project is on Andy Goldsworthy.

MCGEE: Great. He is cool. I met him in San Francisco at a dinner one time. It was so cool.

RAIL: I see a lot of commonality between what you do.

MCGEE: He is really cool that guy. I have never seen the commonality but—

RAIL: He goes out every morning and works in nature. He calls them ephemeral works, and he makes stuff, and he sends out photographs of it to his listserv. He activates the outdoor site and then lets it loose in the world, basically, and then it exists in the photographs, and it's very physical, and what you have done seems very similar. But his canvas is whatever he finds out there, and his materials are the natural materials. I imagine that going out working on a bike in the snow, there's a physical element to it.

MCGEE: It's so physical...

RAIL: And tagging something and maybe photographing it. And I don't know how you disseminate what you are doing now.

MCGEE: I don't have any social media, but I like the old fashioned way that the really pure—the old-fashioned graffiti communication systems.

RAIL: Which is?

MCGEE: "Hi, I am here!"

RAIL: And people see it. And then word of mouth.

MCGEE: It circulates that way. I like to see it working, functioning the old-fashioned way. You see it before you pull out your phone or do anything.

RAIL: How do you perceive the division between seeing it in reproduction and seeing it in the flesh?

MCGEE: When I see my favorite things on the street here, the hair on my arms stands up. I say, "holy crap." Old guys or things that are just really bold, or something that I don't even know what they're doing. I don't know what I am looking at. That's before I would even take a picture. I am interested in that little short period where you're thrown off, probably the same with Andy's work—who is arranging this? I wish I was in nature, but that kind of thing doesn't really belong in nature.

RAIL: But you are in a different kind of natural environment. You work with whatever is around. It is not calculated in the sense that you are not in a studio.

MCGEE: The special thing of being in New York is there are so many sleeper cells everywhere. After the opening there were three different paths opening up—I was going to go with my assistants, or it could have been very mellow with old friends, but there was this other trajectory of young kids with a couple of markers. It started out with four or five and turned into eight and

then into twelve, so somehow I got caught up in that, just because it was the most interesting thing. I really couldn't get off the direction. I was getting swept into that vortex. We were just doing basic groundwork, just doing some simple tagging on things, construction sites, just out of the blue, like between cars, one of my favorite writers, Chino, says, "can I get a tag?" I was like yeah, only in a New York way, and then a couple of other people, I think they were off-duty police officers said, "Oh, can I get a quick tag?" It can only happen in New York. It's in a lot of people's basic DNA, because there are so many generations of people who used to do graffiti—when you see a group of people, it's always just natural to pass the writing instrument to the next person. That's what I mean by if I came across that without knowing what it was—"Oh my god, this group of people were together?" I am saying that in the simplest way. You could be on the freeway here at 65 miles an hour, and you can see what three people did what. It's like another language, like knowing English and then knowing the graffiti language. Some people know it really well, and some people have no idea of what these people are saying. I am sure from the outside it looks like all the same person doing the same thing, but there are enough visual cues that you know exactly who each person is, who they're with.

RAIL: That's a kind of inner connoisseurship in a way.
MCGEE: It's probably a lot like on the internet though, you know.

RAIL: How you find the little tangents that interest you.
MCGEE: It's kind of a visual communication thing but without the screen.

RAIL: It's interesting to be able to communicate to multiple different sorts of audiences in a way, because the way that you speak about it, it sounds like a conversation, and it's a conversation over time.
MCGEE: Yeah, it's a conversation, and it's a lot about style and visuals, and always the best person has the best style and is at total ease about doing it in the most complicated area. They will do the most complicated, beautiful tags, in the most high-density [place], right underneath the police station without showing a sense of fear at all. There is a sense of, "I am just going to do it perfectly; the police station is right there." I think that's why a lot of it happens during those snowstorms, to be perfectly honest.

RAIL: No one wants to be out.
MCGEE: No one wants to be out, and you are just on the street for a few hours.

RAIL: So you wake up in the morning, and the streets are covered in beautiful snow and there are all new tags and boot tracks everywhere?
MCGEE: Yeah you can see there is a lot done during this little period.

RAIL: But that's ephemeral work.
MCGEE: I love that.

RAIL: That's land art, in a way.
MCGEE: They are so beautiful, and no one touched them; they are just like a tag on white snow. I have to be completely honest, I was coming to the opening, and I came around the corner right up here, and again one of my favorite writers, he writes "Adek," A-D-E-K; he had a perfect black tag on snow. It messed me up in the best way—told me not to go to my opening! It was the placement, the person.

RAIL: Did it cast in relief what you had done here?
MCGEE: No, it was just great; it was a perfect moment, for me.

RAIL: It's a New York City story.
MCGEE: I hadn't seen anyone tag on the snow in a serious way.

RAIL: What material did he use?
MCGEE: Spray paint. It is on perfect snow. I don't know why someone didn't just step on it. I saw it when I went around the corner. Here's Adek's BTM here [shows me a photo].

RAIL: "BTM" is what?
MCGEE: "Boom that's mine." That's what that stands for.

RAIL: So, is it strange to kind of have one foot in each of these worlds, in the world of A-D-E-K and Duchamp at the same time?
MCGEE: I love both of them. It's all visual; it's all game to me; it's lines, beautiful lines drawn in new ways. But then it gets popular. Then I am not interested. I want to back away. It's way too popular right now, and I want to just make art and be taken seriously in some other way. Then I get bored of the art. Does that sound stupid?

RAIL: No. One of my favorite works that I first noticed when I came in is in the dome room, and it is five framed pictures in a cluster, and it looks like snow. One at the right has a little bit of horizon, and one on the left had a lot of texture on the surface, and it felt like that is a new way of thinking about your practice.

MCGEE: It is. Those have been sitting in the studio for a long time. I wanted the whole show to be that, but I have to make a living, to be perfectly honest. I have to sell things to keep this whole thing moving or else. This is my job. Maybe in five or six more years I can just do that—I like that stuff in there. That's my favorite room, actually. It almost puts me just as curating junk off the street, at that point, which is my favorite thing anyway. Someone's probably made the most perfect thing I'm looking for—if I look hard enough or close enough it's already sitting out in the street or leaning up against something.

RAIL: And then you feel like you need to intervene with it a little bit, to insert yourself.

MCGEE: A little bit, but ideally maybe not. Just grab it and put it in. I had a friend drive all the stuff out in a U-Haul truck. All the wood was just holding all the stuff together.

RAIL: All the fiberboard stuff?
MCGEE: All the stuff that's out there, that just looks like garbage. I had to make sure that none of it got thrown away [laughter]. It is garbage, in its pure sense. It's rubbish!

RAIL: [Laughter] But you turn it into something different, something magical, that's the great thing. And it's aesthetic. That's the dichotomy—the aesthetic and the repulsive at the same time. And I don't care about all the Surrealist mumbo-jumbo. It's irrelevant. This is what we're living in now. The work reflects that, in a sense.

MCGEE: I love Surrealism and things like that.

RAIL: But they did not make enough art. They talked about it a lot.
MCGEE: I know, they didn't, huh? There's a touch of it in all of us, though. Surrealism. Expressionism. I think we can take a little bit from everything, depending on what's going on on that particular day. What's in the news feed, you know. It could be complete Abstract Expressionism, don't you think?

RAIL: That's chaos.
MCGEE: [Laughter] Yeah. It's like a Japanese action painting.

RAIL: And then the walls start to bulge. [Laughter] And then you really have a problem. ☹

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