

CONTEMPORARY ART AND LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE

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WHITEWALL 92

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When we met with Barry McGee in New York, on an unseasonably hot fall day, he seemed relieved to have his recent retrospective at the ICA behind him. McGee was working on the installation of his first show at Cheim & Read in New York, which included framed drawings, hand-painted wood panels, stacked surfboards, furniture, and found objects such as carved wooden busts and pottery. It was his first show in New York in eight years.

McGee is one of the best-known artists from the Bay Area, and he loves the city he calls home—so much so that the interview almost ended early when he found out that we hadn't spent any time in the city. We managed to get over that little hump to discuss why he felt so uncomfortable about having a retrospective, how he finds inspiration on the roadside, and why he thinks city bike shares are the best art experiment ever.

WHITEWALL: *So this is your first time showing with Cheim & Read.*

BARRY McGEE: Yeah, I've done some things with them with the art fairs and things like that, but this is my first gallery-specific show.

WW: *Was there something behind what you wanted to do here, a specific focus?*

BM: Well, New York has a really strong tradition in painting, and I'm highly aware of that. I would say I'm a little bit looser, a more California style.

WW: *In a previous interview you were talking about how when you go to a museum you don't always see what you want to see and you prefer the gallery for some reason. Is that something you think about when you're creating work for a gallery space? Is there a difference for you between a museum show and one in a gallery space?*

BM: They haven't put any restrictions on me here. I think museums have more of a protocol. There are a lot more people you have to address. There is a huge difference, but it's been so long since I've done something in New York in a gallery of this caliber. I used to show at Deitch Projects, so it's a different kind of aesthetic and setting. I feel like I've done adjustments for it, micro-adjustments.

WW: *Given that it's in New York?*

WW: *I think that's pretty fair. Museums can be alienating and that's something worth looking at.*

BM: Do you think it's generational, though? It could just be a generational thing. At that time the artists were in their forties, midcareer, and were in museums, a lot of eighties New York artists.

WW: *But you've had these big museum shows, like this year at the ICA in Boston and before that at SF MOMA. So is that something you were thinking about, making sure you connected with people when deciding what to show?*

BM: They're in such weird situations, though. The thing at the ICA in Boston was a midcareer survey thing. It was like looking at old things. I want to bury a lot of that stuff. It should never see the light of day. Obviously, I can't disagree to it, but it's hard; it consumed almost three years, looking at the work, finding it, exhibiting it, and traveling to install it.

WW: *Usually you make something, like with your graffiti work, and it goes away.*

BM: I feel like once it's made, it's done. There are some things that I do like—I could see it again, I know what I was trying to do—but for the most part I never want to see it again. Once it exists, it's just a thing you can go back and reference so easily. In this day and age it's harder to hide things.

“THE NOTION OF MAKING ART IS DIFFERENT . . . HOW WE VIEW THINGS IS SO DIFFERENT FROM 20 YEARS AGO, EVEN. HOW QUICKLY WE ASSESS IMAGES”

BM: Yeah, a little. I think about things a little bit more in context. Because New York is just so . . . the conversation is about painting, drawings, and sculpture. California is like so wide, an open playing field. Do you feel like that?

WW: *I'm very East Coast. I grew up in New England.*

BM: Have you been to San Francisco? It's a special place.

WW: *I'm embarrassed to say I haven't.*

BM: I can't believe that. We can't have this conversation . . .

WW: *Not for lack of wanting! You grew up in San Francisco right?*

BM: I grew up in San Francisco. I have a strong connection with the Boston/New England area for some reason. In art school all my roommates were from the Boston, Cambridge area. But going back to your previous question about painting, I don't think I ever answered that . . .

WW: *When you said you're not always seeing what you want to in museums, why is that?*

BM: It never spoke to me or to any of my friends. I think it's changing now, but when I was younger, in my twenties and thirties, I loved going to museums but nothing ever communicated to me. I couldn't find a strong connection or dialogue, like I know exactly what this person is trying to get across. I feel like it's different now, but maybe I didn't know as much at that point.

You change, but I feel like if you had a body of work and you really didn't like what you were doing, you could burn it 10 or 15 years ago and get rid of most of the evidence. There might be some photos floating around, but it's not something that a museum could pull out. I know that's exactly what the history of art is built on—commissioning, buying it, and it's collected and preserved—but it's the system.

WW: *Is it a little strange for you?*

BM: It is horribly strange.

WW: *Do you ever see your work in a collector's home?*

BM: I have seen that. I like seeing that. A lot of times people send me photos and that's the most interesting part: Someone is living with it. I think about the context too much, a little bit more than I should, because it doesn't really matter. Especially after it's sold.

WW: *Is there anything that's in this show that is particularly new? Or something that you're really focused on making lately?*

BM: [Pointing out carved wooden heads and pottery gathered in the corner] Do you ever pick up stuff on the street? I have stuff that are shapes of things. There was this thing, it was on the freeway for three years, and every time I'd drive past, it was still there for three years. I was dropping a friend off one night, it was three in the morning and I was just like, “I have to have this thing.” I think I fixate on things like that. I want my art to be that thing that sits in that spot, and no one really knows why it's there. Is it art? Is not art?

WW: *Is that a drawing on it?*

BM: Yeah, I drew on it, but I don't know if it's better or worse.

WW: *So are all carved heads things you found?*

BM: These are all found kind of like in thrift stores. They're so weird. They're from all over. I just have no idea how it exists. They're like found sculptures. I don't know how I feel about them. I'm just going to sit with the artwork . . .

WW: *Do you see any relationship between these funny heads and the characters you draw sometimes?*

Opposite page:

Barry McGee

Untitled

2005–13

Ink, graphite, acrylic, screenprint, photographs

on paper, found objects, and frames

on plywood and Masonite

16 feet x 22 feet 6 inches x 55 inches overall

Courtesy of Cheim & Read



WHITEWALL 96



Opposite page:
Barry McGee
Untitled
2013
Acrylic on wood panel
87 inches x 10 feet 5 inches
overall
Courtesy of Cheim & Read

Above:
Barry McGee
Untitled
2013
Mixed media
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of Cheim & Read



WHITEWALL 98

BM: Yes, they're primitive like my drawings. The shapes and the backs are amazing. I don't even care about the faces that much.

WW: *When you were younger, what were some of your big influences?*

BM: When you're young there are so many weird things influencing you, it's hard to pinpoint what got you to work.

WW: *Was it your parents, siblings, friends, or just San Francisco?*

BM: My parents were creative people, but they weren't in the arts or anything. I had a weird understanding of art early on.

WW: *What was your understanding of it?*

BM: I probably came at it through design and graphic design more. I was into BMX and things like that. I always gravitated to bold graphic imagery. I also drew and stuff. I'd just be drawing a logo. Drawing on the street was what we did. It was what other people were doing, too. Some people stuck with it longer; some didn't. It doesn't really raise an eyebrow now. It's like experimenting with drugs. It's part of growing up almost. Everyone has tagged some point in their life.

WW: *Yeah, most guys I grew up with tagged stuff at some point or another. Guys, though, not girls. It's almost hypermasculine . . .*

BM: Unfortunately, yes, but in San Francisco it isn't. San Francisco has strong female writers. A lot of girls doing it, especially when I was doing it. It wasn't gender specific at all. It wasn't male dominated out there. The field was way wider in San Francisco. It was a very special time through the nineties. There's a good amount of girls doing it and changing what it could be and what the rules are. It felt loose and without restriction. I feel like there are a lot of restrictions on graffiti now. I feel lucky to be able to witness it firsthand. It got too popular now, and it became something I'm not interested in.

WW: *I think for young people it's still interesting.*

BM: Of course. The dialogue is still good, but the conversation is, "I'm going to put some things in the street so I can get a show at ____."

WW: *Once you were in a gallery space, was there a type of work you wanted to show?*

BM: I was trying to do something that doesn't work in the past. Trying to illustrate how the lifestyle of whatever you're doing, it doesn't fit in a gallery. I feel the two worlds can share certain areas, but they don't mix so well. One's so specific about who sees it and the other one is so open about who sees it. It's hard. I don't know if they go together. I wouldn't want to show works on the street inside. It functions really well outside or on a rooftop or something specifically in transit. But when you do it indoors or in a gallery, it gets really messy.

WW: *I saw this fun interview you did with a book website where you talk about how you like to read biographies.*

BM: Oh, yeah. I'm so into art books, both visual and biographies.

WW: *You said you like reading artist biographies because it gives you a better understanding of what art is.*

BM: Yeah, that and it's almost a romantic notion of how art, in not so long of a period, too, probably like 20 years ago, the notion of making art is different. It's really different now. Like how we view things is so different from 20 years ago, even. How quickly we assess images.

We process imagery so fast now. Maybe not, but I just feel like I'm looking at a lot more images. They land in your pocket. If you're a curator you're probably looking at millions of images anyway.

WW: *I saw another interview where you said, "I'm more interested in less than more. Our society has become obsessed with having more, having it all. To what end? Excess, while fascinating to watch, is not the answer to me. Most overbudgeted art projects I have seen are terrible."*

BM: [Laughs] I said that? Well . . . have you seen any art projects that are very expensive that are still good? There are probably some like that. I feel like the bike share project is one of the best art projects I've seen. It's amazing. They just got it in San Francisco. I was in Fort Worth, Texas, and they have it everywhere.

WW: *Who is biking around in Texas?*

BM: Nobody! But they had it probably six years ago. It's wild right now. No one is paying attention to the stop signs. Even when I ride, I go down one-way streets, sidewalks, and if I'm doing it I feel like everyone must be doing it, too. And they're having fun. It's the greatest experiment I could ever think of!

Normally, I would ask the gallery to get me a bike here, or in Boston at the ICA, but they have it everywhere now. I love it as an

experiment. San Francisco was like the last city to get it.

WW: *Well, New York just got it this summer. And I know Philadelphia still doesn't have it.*

BM: Philadelphia doesn't deserve it [laughs]. They have a strong underground bike scene. They would convert them all to fixed gear immediately.



Barry McGee

Untitled

2013

Acrylic on wood panel

94 inches x 17 feet 2 inches

overall

Courtesy of Cheim & Read