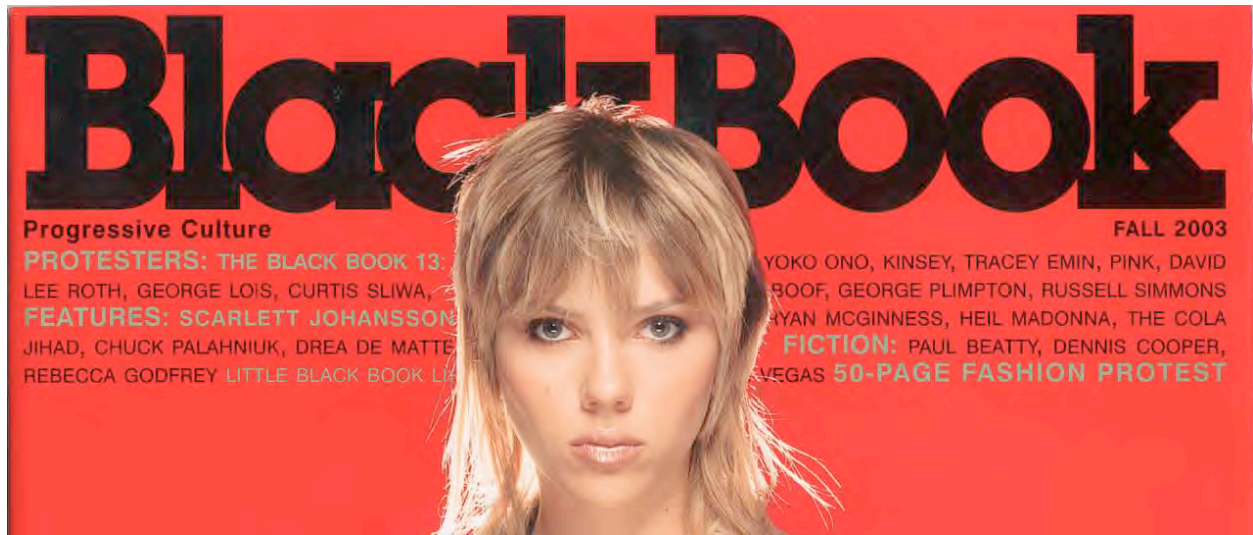
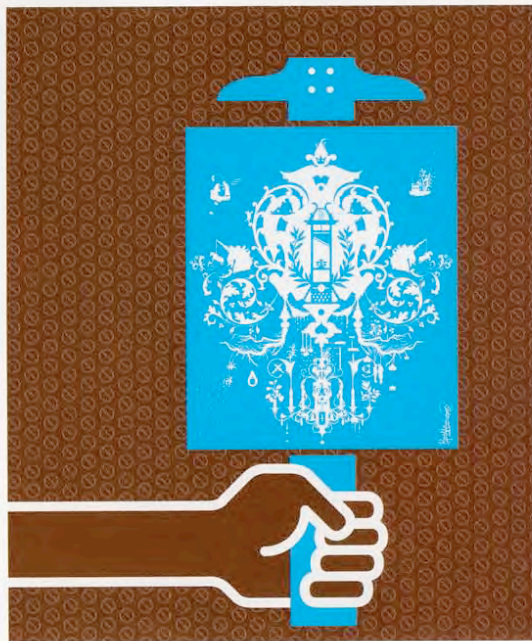


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ARTIST



unk Soul Brother

story Carl Swanson

By subverting corporate iconography, former skater punk Ryan McGinness has built a reputation as a Warhol for the 21st century.

 Ryan McGinness is a pretty orderly guy for an artist. He married his high school sweetheart and his closet is stuffed with 15 copies of the same billowy white dress shirt he wears most days. He makes you take off your shoes when you walk into his loft, where there's a selection of fuzzy slippers by the door. The front part of the loft is his studio, with three work cubicles equipped with Macintoshes and a large whiteboard with parallel to-do lists: The black-ink list on the left is his professional design work—running a company called Ego ("Standard Hotel icon; Training Camp identity; Penguin store")—and the list on the right, in blue ink, is his personal work, which includes an upcoming solo show at the buzzy, blue-chip New York gallery Deitch Projects, best known for its promotion of Fischerspooner and its art-Broadway revues.

McGinness's pieces are strewn about in neat piles: flags with his wry, deadpan commercial icons printed on them, just back from a show in Japan. The skateboards he designed for Supreme with Pantone chips painted on their decks. A rack full of T-shirts screen-printed with his new set of more delicate, Edward Gorey-esque, less modernist iconography (dinosaurs, trees, an octopus with a knife). They're being sold at Barney's. He pulls out one he designed for the Tibetan Freedom Concern. Yeah, he's friends

with the Beastie Boys.

But McGinness's power comes largely from trading off his graphic-design talents, and burnishing them by being in the art world. Jeffrey Deitch, whose gallery is also home to Vanessa Beecroft and the Keith Haring estate, is betting on McGinness because he sees him as part of the current "convergence, a kind of period that comes around every 20 years or so where the borders between art, music, graphic design and fashion are blurred." Deitch saw that with the punk scene in New York in the 1970s, and feels that it's popping up again. "Someone emerging from graphic design can turn out to be one of the most interesting artists. And Ryan is a very good example of that—interesting innovations in painting and drawing coming out of a graphic-design background." In addition, "The whole thing that comes out of the Internet—the interest in these icons—also relates to Ryan really well."

McGinness grew up in Virginia Beach, a suburban community that sprawls inland from a dowdy, overbuilt middle-class seaside resort. Much of the economy is funded by the various local military bases, though the kids spend most of their time pretending they actually live in a much cooler beach town, like in, say, Southern California.

In high school, McGinness marked himself

studiously with the appropriate surf-shop brands. "It was all about the 17th Street Surf Shop logo and the WRV logo," he says, speaking of the two most powerful and distinguishable icons of the local high school's status culture. "They were cool forms and they epitomized cool. It meant so much. That's why I'm so interested in T-shirts. I can remember staring at the WRV logo (a serrated wave form composed of overlapping, jumping dolphins) and trying to figure it out."

Virginia Beach is a resolutely middlebrow town: the only encouragement McGinness got in art was from a teacher at the local gifted and talented students center. That teacher was later arrested for child pornography, which annoys McGinness endlessly. "The one fuckin' dude who cared," he says. "And it was all a façade. Just like Virginia Beach."

After majoring in graphic design at Carnegie, McGinness moved to New York in 1994 to work at Pentagram, a very corporate design firm, where he helped craft the brand images of such clients as Sony, Sega, and MTV, all of which needed to cloak their big-shot corporate activities in the graphics of the new. McGinness has always been fascinated with the strange power of corporate iconography. "That goes back to early childhood when I'd trace book covers and typefaces."

ARTIST



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His zen-snide sticker art—'I Love My Attention Deficit Disorder'—perfectly captured what the dot-com age was about.

A lot of the tension—the satire, parody and crotchiness of McGinness's work—comes from his fluency in this vocabulary of power, and his attempts to turn it to his own uses. He takes widely distributed images—uncopyrighted clipart, very basic fonts, images that are all around us, secretly communicating stable meanings—and works them over obsessively.

"It's very iconic; it's taking what already exists in the world and tweaking it," says Tony Arcabascio, a partner of Alife—a shoe store-cum-art gallery on Orchard Street in New York—and a player in the downtown skater-art scene. "So a lot of times you're looking at his work and you think you've seen it before, but it's his twist on it. That's why it's easy for a lot of people to love; they can relate to it, they feel close to it already."

Even as he was attaining success doing anonymous corporate work, a good portion of McGinness's personal art was the product of an ambitious newcomer arriving in the big city and facing up to the pressures of navigating the art world. Since he'd been cleaning out his storage room, a lot of this was on display in his studio, like a piece that included six dollar bills screen-painted with art-world haiku-jokes. One reads: "Julian Schnabel / Sometimes I just don't get it / Man he sure is rich."

Of course, it didn't take long for McGinness to crack the art-world code himself. First, he quit Pentagram and started his own business, designing things for friends. His big break, weirdly, came when his studio abutted the offices of then-fledgling new-media

design firm Razorfish, which later came to represent much of what was gloriously ludicrous about the dot-com economy. His zen-snide sticker art—"A Lot of Art is Boring"; "I Love My Attention Deficit Disorder"—perfectly captured much of what that age was about.

"His studio was right next to our first office," says Craig Kenerick, one of Razorfish's founders. "There was a window between the two offices, and he had lined the bottom of it with Joy detergent bottles. The window was way up high, so we could only see the bottles, nothing else in the room. One day, I just had to find out who was the man behind the bottles." Thus began a collaboration, which included McGinness decorating some of the massive Razorfish parties (he once strung up a huge plastic sign announcing: "Razorfish Sucks!" Aaah, remember the late 1990s?). "He made a bunch of logos for me. I am a collector of his art—in fact, my company was actually his patron for a long time," adds Kenerick. "We paid him to make art." They also published his first of nine art books, *Flatnessisgod*, which was seeded throughout the office as if to show how different and creative Razorfish really was. His stickers were everywhere, too. Inevitably, a sticker printed with the legend "This Is What You Value" kept ending up on the toilet.

In late 2000, McGinness convinced Alife to let him redo the entire store. He glued hundreds of plastic army men on plywood to make a carpetlike sculpture he called *Saving Ryan's Privates*. Since then, he's done shows in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Germany, and Japan, as well as a collaboration last year for Deitch, for whom

he also co-curated a show of skateboarder-themed art to go with a swimming pool-like skatebowl that the gallery had installed last winter.

"Right now, there's this whole area of explosive creativity in the skateboard scene and new-music scene, and this revival of downtown culture," says Deitch. "And Ryan is very much a part of that. And so somehow, the aesthetics of the skateboard culture—the logos, fashion and attitude—are going right into the new imagery and attitude in art."

Arcabascio of Alife begs to differ, and chalks up Deitch's interest to the art world's search for new energy, no matter where it comes from. "All the people who you look up to in the art world used to be young once," he says. "I just think they're trying to go to the next step. Skating is just what the young people do."

That's why McGinness's style works equally well for corporate clients and the most exactly attuned and self-policed hipsters, and why he can come to represent the urban edge of skinny-boy DIY skate culture that has lately swamped the art world, even though he's hardly ridden a skateboard since he was in high school. He's too busy and too afraid to do it in the city. But that's what people want him to be, and he can't help that.

"Project Rainbow," 222 Gallery, 222 Vine Street, Philadelphia, 215.873.0750, October 3–November 28. "Worlds Within Worlds," Deitch Projects, 76 Grand Street, NYC, 212.343.7300, October 4–November 1.

Ryan McGinness Burton Snowboard, mixed media snowboard, 2002; 60" x 11.5", edition of 1,500