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THE BOSTON GLOBE

Weekend D5

Arts & Performance

Brand identity

Inspired by corporate logos and graffiti, Ryan McGinness's images pop



By Cate McQuaid
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BEVERLY — Step into "Mildly Subversive," Ryan McGinness's exhibition at the Montserrat College of Art Gallery, and you might feel as tiny as a ladybug, crawling across the glossy pages of a book about graphic design. Great, bright loops swirl down from the ceiling, taking over the space and dwarfing visitors.

Then come close to one of McGinness's silkscreens, and you're suddenly mammoth, scrutinizing forests of crisp, fingernail-size images that reference Pablo Picasso, Jeff Koons's gaudy sculpture of Michael Jackson and his ape Bubbles, and fairy tales.

McGinness has knocked the stuffing out of the spare, modernist white-cube concept of a gallery and filled it with his own brand of art: ornate, jazzy pop visions that spring as much from graffiti and corporate logos as they do from art history. The language of graphic design is simple and direct, closer to Abba than Beethoven, but McGinness orchestrates it like Rostropovich, multiplying, layering, and expanding

his lowbrow material into high art.

McGinness, an artist with buzz and an international following, insists that although "Mildly Subversive" overtakes the gallery, it is not installation art.

"I don't consider myself an installation artist. To me, that has always meant a pile of dirt in the gallery. Something arty," McGinness says. "I just want to own this space. This was and is Montserrat's gallery, but now it's mine."

The artist has paused to chat in the midst of installing his show, which features prints, vinyl decals, wall murals, and skateboards covered with his logos. Avid undergrad assistants busy themselves around him, touching up paint and affixing decals to the wall.

McGinness's art is brash, florid, and encompassing, but he himself is retiring, even self-protective. At 34, he still has the air of the reedy, bashful art geek hunched over the drawing table in high school art class. His waiter-style white shirt and black pants and the long dark hair slicked back over his head accentuate his ner-

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RYAN MCGINNESS:
MILDLY SUBVERSIVE
At: Montserrat College
of Art Gallery, Beverly, through
April 5. 978-921-4242,
www.Montserrat.edu

Ryan McGinness (below) fills the gallery at Montserrat College of Art with jazzy pop visions in his show "Mildly Subversive." At left: "RM Soccer Balls."



GLOBE PHOTOS BY WENDY MAEDA

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WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF (LEFT)

Ryan McGinness (left) with a stencil of melting ice cream trees for his show "Mildly Subversive." Above: A piece from his "Project Rainbow" series. Below: "Programmed to Receive" (left) and "Middle Class Fancy" are also in the show.

Artist's images make Montserrat gallery pop

► MCGINNESS
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vous pallor. He's clearly not fond of being the public face of his art. In an interview last year with *Metropolis* magazine, he confessed to sending an imposter to an awards show at which he was to be a presenter.

Once he warms up, though, McGinness — if this is, indeed, McGinness — talks easily about his work.

"I grew up in Virginia Beach, a surf culture, where the culture of cool is defined by logos and icons and name brands," McGinness explains. "From early on, I recognized that logos create perceived value."

He studied graphic design at Carnegie Mellon University and minored in painting. For a long time, he says, he struggled with

the chasm: between the two, until a fateful day in 1999 when graphic art and fine art collided.

"I was trying to make 'art,' and up to that point, I was always making paintings that mimicked my favorite painters, like David Salle," McGinness explains. "Then I decided, 'I should just make something I want to, rather than what I perceive to be art.'"

The result was "Part of Everything," a giant grid comprising 360 9-by-12-inch panels, painted in enamel on canvas. Bold white graphics paraded over the blue grid: arrows, rainbows, and people rendered as symbols, like those on a restroom door.

You could say McGinness is a latter-day Andy Warhol. His iconographic imagery is accessible and hot-button. And he deploys commercial strategies to make cutting-



edge art. Warhol mass-produced his silk-screens. McGinness stamps his designs out on T-shirts and soccer balls, which he sells at museum stores and online and incorporates into his work (a net full of the balls sits in one corner of the



gallery). But McGinness shrugs off the suggestion that he's a crossover artist.

"He doesn't see them as two separate entities," explains Leonie Bradbury, the gallery director, of

the worlds of commercial and fine art. "They're fused. And the minute he let that be OK, he came up with this unique vocabulary and iconography. That's when his work took off."

She says the students love it; they couldn't wait to sign on as gallery assistants. After all, there's something, well, mildly subversive about art co-opting T-shirts, rather than the other way around — the museum-shop staple of van Gogh-on-a-V-neck.

When you see McGinness's work, such theoretical constructs fall away in the face of its startling beauty. Splendid, dense veils of silk-screened fleurs-de-lis — "signs and signifiers for wealth," McGinness says — provide a baroque contrast to the simplicity of his letterpress logo prints. But even these take on a dreamlike density,

pressed over and over onto a sheet of paper. You don't know what you'll find in these engaging thickets of imagery: a duck with its back being vacuumed; a graphic of Warhol's hair; another referencing "Girls Gone Wild."

What's next? The artist is putting together an exhibit in New York, to open later this month. There he'll show sculptures made of aluminum disks emblazoned with his designs. "The next step is to take the disks and stack and build them off each other in three dimensions," McGinness reveals, with a glint in his eye.

He thrills at the prospect of moving more deeply into three dimensions. "I'm exercising power," he says. "I don't want to walk into someone else's world. I want to make my own world, and have others in."