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BARRY MCGEE

Exclusive Interview
at the Alessandra Bonomo Gallery
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When we walked into the Alessandra Bonomo Gallery I felt like I had entered a playground of color and geometric shapes. Barry was in the backroom of the gallery adding the finishing touches on one of the pieces and in the front room there lay his clustered masterpieces on the floor ready to be hung. He said that there was still work to be done, so I took a seat on the floor next to him and while trying to concentrate on the questions that I spent hours meticulously laying out the day before, I couldn't help being absorbed into the world he was creating. I started flipping through my notes, trying to organize my thoughts and find a confident beginning. Here is the result:

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DRAGO: Born and raised in San Francisco. What was it about growing up there that led you to be an artist? Specifically a graffiti artist?

BARRY MCGEE: Nothing really. I was always really into drawing when I was a kid and I was always drawing but I didn't really know what to do with it. The eighties were really awesome and there was a lot going on, for example the Survival Research Laboratory really blew my mind. There were rallies and protests, just a lot of things to get involved in.

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D: So you began street painting at 18 and you even had gallery shows. That's pretty big, what pushed you to go to art school? I mean, it seems like you kind of started a career as an artist before you enrolled at the Art Institute.

BM: I was always drawing, but I didn't really know how it was going to play out. I still don't know how it's going to play out. I was working in a print shop and I didn't want to do that anymore. I was also taking art classes at a community college and they provided grants to the Art Institute.

D: Which then led to Brazil, no?

BM: Yeah, I spent a year there. In Sao Paulo. I also traveled a lot.

D: I read somewhere that your famous technique of clustering your paintings was inspired by church decoration in Brazil. Views on religion? Or, was it just an aesthetic thing?

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BM: It was more aesthetic than anything. But there was an honesty about it that really appealed to me. It was a really basic form of getting a point across. They were just normal people putting things together in an unconscious way. I found it really powerful.

D: From the most recent biography I could get my hands on, between solo exhibitions and group shows, you have a more or less equal presence on U.S. soils as you have internationally. What are your thoughts on the international art scene? Where do you think you fit in?

BM: I don't really know where I fit in, but I feel at home in San Francisco. Graffiti here is different than back home, it has been here for so long and has had such a different purpose. Maybe because of that the European art scene seems to be more open, more willing to take a chance and it appears to do so effortlessly. In the states it always seems to be about logistics. There is more radical stuff here than in the states. There is more tolerance for graffiti in Europe, maybe because it's younger. It kind of feels like the eighties, there is something new and naïve. There is this feeling of innocence that results from being behind the rest of the world, an openness that hasn't been corrupted. Groups of kids are referencing the movements of the seventies and eighties, the taking the best parts, and making them their own. There seems to be less police interference, I mean you can find a blank wall almost anywhere, in San Francisco there is no space, it's all closed down.

D: So by openness you don't mean only openness of mind, but physical openness as well?

BM: Yeah. Rome's openness is physical as well as mental. There is this sense of lawlessness. In the States everything needs to be super organized, here not so much.

D: Yeah, lawlessness. I would have to agree. So, what do you think about how your work is received here?

BM: Its considered an art form here. I don't consider this an art form.

D: So, what is it?

BM: This is commerce. I'm not trying to bring the street into the gallery. There is real graffiti and there is trend graffiti. There are those who are doing the real thing and those who are selling out. There is a lot to be said for the trappings of a price tag. The maintenance of purity comes from treating this as a hobby, not as a profession. Graffiti is a passion and a lifestyle; it doesn't come with a price tag.

D: I read somewhere that in the beginning your work was very much a reaction to the ills of the urban experience...

BM: (Laughs)

D: So I take it that's not the case?

BM: I'm more up beat now. When I was younger I was more world-weary. I guess it's a part of getting older.

D: So why the title "Mr. Brown"?

BM: I like it. (laughs)

D: And what about the geometric versus the figurative stuff?

MB: I'm trying to do less of the figurative images. They kind of became a staple, but they have their place. There are some scattered about, but I'm trying not to use them so much.

D: What still needs to be finished?

BM: Still need to hang these (motions to works laid out all over the floor of the gallery), and then there is some illegal stuff over by the Macro...