



9.16.99 - 10.24.99

**BARRY MCGEE  
HOSS**

Rice University Art Gallery

The first work of Barry McGee's that I remember is not one of his large-scale painting installations, or his tag *Twist* on the back of a street sign, but a small piece in a group show in New York. Tragicomic figures with slack faces and stooped shoulders stood at the bottom edges of blank, yellowed sheets of paper, and reappeared on cleaned-up liquor bottles. From another group show, I remember a single work comprised of framed drawings, paintings, and photographs hung edge-to-edge to form a huge cluster of images. Only upon leaving the gallery did I discover more evidence of McGee's hand; a tiny figure painted low down on the wall in a crack where some plaster was missing. It stood, a distinct if inconspicuous presence, unable to be contained by the formal arrangement on the wall. Such details, stowed away in corners or out of the normal sight line, are indicative of McGee's artistic wit, and how he sees people or things the rest of us overlook. From the tired eyes of his street people, to McGee's own sense of self as a role model for kids who feel empowered by their name on a wall, McGee identifies with, and celebrates those aspects of life that have fallen into the cracks of contemporary urban America.

Barry came to Houston for ten brutally hot July days; he worked in the gallery during the afternoon, and in the cool night, rode his bike through city neighborhoods. His impressions of Houston, drawn from these ventures, are manifest in his work – a pair of carefully drawn cowboy boots fits over the “feet” of a spray painted tag, “Giddy up” appears under a chin, a word bubble near the ceiling reads “Texino,” – *Hoss* is laced with subtle nods to McGee's “Texas experience.” Following the exhibition opening we took him, and a group of young graffiti artists who had driven four hours to see their hero, to one of Houston's oldest Mexican restaurants. When Barry noticed the parking lot guard was dressed in what is a typical western outfit here, including a wide-brimmed cowboy hat, he exclaimed, “That's Hoss!” Before entering the restaurant, Barry asked the security officer if they could pose together for the perfect urban Texas picture.

We are grateful to noted Houston art writer Susie Kalil, for her insightful essay *Street Creed*. Informed by long-held knowledge and appreciation of graffiti, as well as the California surf and skate culture that only a native can possess, Susie has an acutely felt empathy for Barry's work. Her background provides the ideal lens through which to examine his endeavor, and her essay captures the formal significance, as well as the edgy, rebellious nature of *Hoss*.

Kimberly Davenport  
Director

Rice Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the Rice University Campus at 6100 Main Street, Houston, TX 77005, or on the web at [www.rice.edu/ruag](http://www.rice.edu/ruag)

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Cover taken from *Hoss* announcement by Barry McGee  
Unless otherwise noted, all photos are courtesy of Barry McGee



## STREET CREED

Susie Kalil

Entering Barry McGee's installation *Hoss* is to sense the presence of a mind that is wired in a different way. Standing out against a blood-red ground that envelops the 40 by 44 foot gallery space, McGee's slack-jawed and droopy-eyed faces drift weightlessly amid passages of graffiti, bulbous wasp-nest shapes, empty word balloons and painted booze bottles. With their wildly exaggerated, rubbery noses and fat, pouty lips, McGee's hobos, job slaves and walking wounded belong to an ever-expanding repertoire of highly stressed and stylized creatures. High and low life images skid around and do pratfalls in a way that seems out of control. The work is less a finished project than a record of exploration. The title *Hoss*, is edgy and ambiguous, perhaps a nod to Texas slang, perhaps street jargon for "the man." Just a glance around the room of these wrinkled bums tells you this stuff is loaded with unsettling, if gut-clutching qualities eager to expose the vertigo of get-and-spend society. While the pace is breakneck, McGee's compositions have a feeling of measured contemplation that balances gut appeal and practiced smartness. Interwoven among the figures are colorful profusions of abstract shapes that mimic "buffs" or paint-overs of street graffiti. Heightening the cartoonish combustion of the display are exaggerated drips and tintured "teardrops" that let loose from the edges of McGee's playful blobs and amoeboid forms. Crisply drawn lines curve, loop and sometimes clump like engorged globules. The dense layers of unrelated images create a raucous visual field, in which seemingly incompatible pictorial incidents simultaneously inhabit a single moment in time and space. *Hoss'* complexity makes room to accommodate an experience of multiple, even contradictory impulses – violence, joy, pain, radical upheaval, loss, ugliness, and beauty.

The installation, in fact, reflects McGee's desire to document and emulate the performative aspects of graffiti by translating the gestures of the street within the formal space of the gallery. Like a number of talented artists who aimed to blur the distinction between art and pop-culture – Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Kenny Scharf and David Salle, among others – McGee mixes things up, only on an unusually personal level. He amalgamates sources

from a tough vernacular – the homeless and skate punks, old hand-painted signs and custom car detailing, the red doors of San Francisco’s Chinatown and storefront window displays – into a densely choreographed scenario that accelerates in frenetic rhythms. His pedal-to-the-metal bravura opts for more, jamming the walls with a glut of tinkerer’s doodles and hodge podge. Huge Olmec heads are situated alongside tiny faces peeking from behind painted clods of trash and other tucked away spaces. Such pairings not only reveal the full potential of McGee’s comic book illusionism, but also his remarkable draftsmanship.

Although he holds a degree in painting and printmaking from the San Francisco Art Institute, McGee has made graffiti the focus of his life for over a decade. He sprays images and tags his nickname on the buildings, street signs and freight trains of every city he visits. McGee also scrawls “Twist” onto “Hello, My Name Is” stickers and posts them like popcorn trails wherever he goes. Despite the visual continuity between his graffiti and his installations, McGee maintains the two worlds separately in his mind. Installation work is created inside with the permission of the gallery and is presented to a willing and self-selected audience. Conversely, some believe that graffiti is nothing more than defacement of public property, symbolizing violation and social anarchy. For them, the presence of graffiti increases the sense of lawlessness and danger. Even so, graffiti is a radical art with a radical methodology because it is illegal. Crossing the border into criminal behavior, however, may be necessary to give graffiti its authenticity. To the uninitiated, graffiti looks like scribbles on the wall, at best a hermetic babble of hieroglyphs. But for those who know the code, graffiti is a language distinguished by balance, flow and symmetry. It is any kind of message put out in the public realm for the viewer to see without first asking permission. It is just there – on Xeroxes all over cities, in “zines” and even on the Internet.

But as graffiti continues to evolve the same questions persist: Is graffiti a destructive excess of culture gone haywire? Is it really art? Such questions have hindered graffiti’s integration into the art world ever since East Village writers such as Crash, Wasp and Lady Pink in New York City changed private behavior into a commodity over twenty years ago. While computers have made graffiti more accessible, allowing viewers who wouldn’t drive by the sites to pull up similar images on their screens, graffiti’s increasing commercialization has



turned the scrawls and big fat letters into corporate logos purveyed by MTV and Coca Cola. Yet directions in the movement toward an authentic street art continue to be thrust from below, from a life begun quite literally underground by graffiti writers who stake out their claim on a postindustrial world. Beyond the subways that link Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan to the streets and freeway underpasses of Pittsburgh, Los Angeles and San Francisco, neighborhoods have been transformed overnight by the random scrawls and wild-style lettering of mysterious hands bearing names such as Kase 2, Dondi, Phase 2 and Fab 5 Fred. For graffiti writers the name is the thing, as they elaborately repeat their monikers in crunched together and interwoven letters evoking the animated rhythms of Celtic or Arabic writing. Naming power is supreme power; it creates value and even takes on mythic significance. "Graffiti, done one hundred percent on the streets or wherever is the purest form of empowerment, defiance and occasionally entertainment," says McGee. "It feels like ownership in a society where it's hard to own anything. You may not have anything, but at least you have a tag on the street."

Graffiti can be viewed as the outgrowth of a genuine aesthetic impulse, the personal expression of an oppressed and disenfranchised group. It also represents unrestricted freedom. Spray painting walls, or "bombing," is done outside the system, thereby liberating the graffiti writer from the normal standards of artistic expression. What is at issue is not only the difference between wealth and poverty, but a much deeper and older set of oppositions between the private and the public, between the self and the world at large, between success and failure, between hidden obsessions and shared exchanges.

McGee's installations create a legal forum for street art that, unlike commercial attempts to appropriate graffiti, make no attempt to neutralize or elevate it, but rather, ask mainstream audiences to reexamine their regard for it. His work reflects on the meaning of art in a media and consumer influenced era. In doing so, it aims to displace the principles that have upheld the engineered conventions of mass culture's images. Partly melancholic and half-icy – desirous, pissed off – McGee's work turns this impossible situation into a mesmerizing meditation on dissonance and harmony. McGee knows too well the tightening grip of the forces of reaction, the increasingly homogeneous production approved for mass consumption. His attempts to bring graffiti back into the

mainstream of public service strike at the very bastions of entrenched power. From the desperation of the streets, McGee creates a formidable visual as well as verbal lyricism. Direct and unmannered, even exhilarating, McGee's installations concern themselves with present dangers and real life horrors. The emotional charge of materials, the personal relationship to experience, the desire to make contact with something real provides the challenge. To be sure, there is something gripping and immediate about his work that grabs you viscerally and insinuates a poetic understanding of the plight of souls. Anxiousness is a seething undercurrent. A sense that things aren't quite right engages you subliminally, wells up and overpowers you. Such intensity, however, is not achieved so much through a mastery of techniques, as by a courageous hand.

Throughout *Hoss* McGee balances vital, pulsating energy with an unmistakable eloquence of touch. Evidence of the hand, of course, represents the personality and very soul of the artist. In a world of mass-produced images McGee re-empowers the hand, making it a seismographic recorder of the shocks, eruptions and tremors of the fitful paths of his nerve endings. Everything seems ready to burst apart or collapse together. *Hoss* is defined at each point by a tension between expressiveness and structure, between delicate lyricism and compulsive insistence. This tension – itchy, under-the-skin, haunting – gives McGee's work the agitated and altogether unexpected quality of something seen for the first time.









Excerpts from an Email Exchange between Susie Kalil and Barry McGee, July 1999

**Susie Kalil:** Writers have varying lists of influences on your work – Keith Haring, David Salle, Dr. Suess, R. Crumb, Tim Rollins and KOS, Lari Pittman, Christian Schumann, Jim Nutt, Big Daddy Roth, Kurt Schwitters, Philip Guston, Mexican muralists (Rivera, Orozco) San Francisco figurative painters, the Beat generation – I'll add Robert Williams, Becca, Anthony Ausgang, Stussy, Tiki heads and old hand-painted signs – how much of this is conscious (or are critics merely projecting again)? Maybe we should be talking about car detailing instead.

**Barry McGee:** The influences that you mentioned, the only one that I feel really inspires me is, "hand painted signs." Before that, I would put graffiti. That is truly my main inspiration. I really have no interest in the "influences" you mentioned.

**SK:** How did you start out in graffiti – what was the stimulus? Who influenced you and why? What was your first bomb?

**BM:** A friend who rode a Vespa introduced me to graffiti. He wrote, "Zotz." 1984.

**SK:** How much are your decisions informed by art vs. street intuition? I know you've said you can keep inside and outside separate, but won't Twist and Barry McGee begin to merge with more installations, more gallery shows, etc.?

**BM:** I wish I knew this answer myself.

**SK:** How do you stay at the fringes of the art world, of society? Is the gallery environment a compromise of sorts?

**BM:** I don't think I stay anywhere different than the next person. I may choose to look at different things, and paint in different settings, but I am not trying to be "underground" or any of those other dumb trappings society tries to label people. Once it has been labeled, in can be marketed as a "trend." Disgusting.

**SK:** Where do stickers fit in the Twist/Barry McGee/graffiti/art world/commercial world? Stickers as ads, logos, on skateboards?

**BM:** I make stickers so I can remember where I have been, similar to leaving a popcorn trail, or dogs peeing on everything.

**SK:** What makes for compelling art these days – where are we going?

**BM:** Compelling art to me is a name carved into a tree. Sometimes a rock soaring through a plate of glass can be the most beautiful, compelling work of art I have ever seen.

**SK:** You've described the work as the "cheerful hell of urban life" even though it's gloomy, intense – why are the cartoony images so riveting? Why do they engage people (vs. more politically correct statements that are overbearing)? The red ground (violence) – also jokey?

BM: In Chinatown, red doorways were my favorite doors to tag on, with drippy Marsh ink. I thing lots of other kids have this same "moth to the light" experience.

**SK: What did you look at in art school? How much of it is still with you (formal decisions, professors, etc.)?**

BM: Art school, I liked that. I spent lots of time in the library and lectures, seeing what people would do, how they would document it, and vavoom, art. Then I looked back to the streets.

**SK: Do you use specific media for specific jobs in the installation – markers, spray paint, acrylics, etc.?**

BM: Multi-media. I use anything near me.

**SK: Some critics have written that you're the "real thing." (They said the same of Basquiat, Haring, etc.) How do you remain humble and honest about your work without being co-opted by the art world, especially when it demands you to churn out the work?**

BM: "Real" is the kid doing pure 100% graffiti expecting nothing in return. Haring, Basquiat, were all surrounded by "real" graffiti. In art history you never hear about the kids that were making the stuff that Haring pulled energy from. Never.

**SK: In the Rice installation, why did you choose plywood veneer to paint on vs. walls? Also, why are your images almost totally male?**

BM: I'll paint on anything. This time it happens to be wood. Yes, my images are almost totally male.

**SK: You're half Asian – do you study Buddhism? If so, does the "letting go" pertain to allowing the space to unfold on its own, take on its own momentum?**

BM: I am half Asian, half white. 100% American. I feel lucky to have a little of both.

**SK: What are the issues of bringing illegal activity into a university gallery?**

BM: There is nothing illegal happening at Rice University (in my show). I have permission from Kim, thus not illegal, not graffiti. Illegal activities, malicious mischief, are things all American citizens should partake in. It's the American way. At least that's what I read on a wall.

**SK: How has the meaning of graffiti changed for you, for society? (It has faded in and out of the art scene since the 80s.)**

BM: Graffiti still interests me the same as when I was 18.

**SK: Isn't graffiti in its purest form anti-art world? How do you keep the soul of graffiti intact after doing a number of installations and gallery shows? Is graffiti really disturbing or confrontational to the art world or are you preaching to the converted?**

BM: Graffiti done 100% illegally on the streets, or wherever, is the purest form of

empowerment, defiance, and occasionally, entertainment. As I have mentioned before, I have permission, most of the times, indoors. Two different worlds.

**SK: Why is evidence of the human hand important to you?**

BM: The human hand inspires me, this computer and millions of other ways do not.

**SK: You've said that you "look for things in my life: pure and impure" – what are they?**

BM: Good and bad, as the nightly news says.

**SK: Why did you decide to join the art world after resisting to show work in the galleries?**

BM: I don't think I have ever joined, not this week, at least.

**SK: Is it all the same – everything merging, blending, floating – is it all meaningless? To dominate space, then dismantle it (letting go)? Are your images just part of the vernacular?**

BM: Yes, you described it perfectly.

**SK: You've been described as a "post-graffiti artist." In your view, what is that?**

BM: Someone called me that. I never felt it.

**SK: Again, why "break into" the art world? Can you "keep it real" in the gallery?**

BM: I'm not breaking into anything. I do shoplift occasionally. Shoplifting is "real" in my mind. Mountain Dew and Coke are not.

**SK: I'm more interested in your father – he customized cars, right? Who and what influenced him? How did that influence you?**

BM: My father influences me. He is a tinkerer at heart, customizer by trade.

**SK: How did you get from there to graffiti, to art school to graffiti? How did your signature face develop, and has it become a sort of logo now? I need to know what you were doing, say ten years ago in terms of images, graffiti – how you came to your current images?**

BM: I would like to know also. I do know I have still been tagging on telephones since that time.

**SK: Lastly, about the title of the show, "Hoss" – I takes this as "the man," the power, the police, the bad ass – am I projecting? It's as edgy as the show, also ambiguous.**

BM: Hoss. It reminded me of Texas.



## About the Artist

Barry McGee was born in 1966 to a multi-racial family in which everyone drew. During the 1980s, he took his drawings into the streets using the tag, "Twist." In 1991, he received a BFA in painting and printmaking from the San Francisco Art Institute. McGee has exhibited at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco; the Museo Lesar Segall, Sao Paulo; the Drawing Center, New York; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. This is his first exhibition in the Southwest.



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