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## RYAN MCGINNES

*Photography*

CHRISTINA LESSA

*Interview*

BRETT LITTMAN

**BRETT LITTMAN:** I know you started in graphic design. Can you talk about how you started your career and how this background influenced you.

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** I studied graphic design at Carnegie Mellon University. That was my major. I've always made art, and fine art was actually my minor. I came to NYC pursuing both art and design in parallel which meant for me doing design work was something that I did on a freelance basis to make money while painting at night and on the weekends. The two disciplines didn't merge for me for a few years, and it came about as a result of having people over to the studio and seeing them respond more to my design work and pointing out to me that the work I was doing in that industry was what made me unique. So then I just decided to forget about making art, and I made whatever I wanted to make. My work took on an aesthetic that has traditionally resided in the world of graphic design, but I wasn't interested in the work serving any commercial agenda or even existing in that service industry.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** The last time I came to the studio you had a pretty interesting theory about art and design in the 1920s where there seemed to be almost this merging between the two disciplines and then all of a sudden graphic design kind of spun off and really was divorced from art. Can you talk about this since I think in some ways your work tries to bring these two things back together.

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** In general there was an aesthetic effort that was emerging in the 1920s that strove to visually communicate ideas and concepts in a way that would speak to a global village—an attempt toward making a universal visual language. This idea is problematic in itself for various reasons, but also it was about the same time that this kind of design and advertising industry started to emerge to support the new industrialized world. This visual language was so successful at communicating that it quickly got co-opted by industry. It had a utility (which actually is not one of my qualifiers for what art is—there is no “use” for art) so various agendas soon attached themselves to this aesthetic—whether it was in the service of society in the form of signage or in the service of commerce in the form of advertising. This entire aesthetic pursuit spun off from the formal history of art as it became co-opted and consumed by industry.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** Can you talk about a specific image from that period of time that represents that kind of merging before the split and maybe even describe the image itself?

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** One of my favorite artists from this time is Gerd Arntz. He was making woodcuts and developing these iconic drawings or isotopes which represented very specific words or concepts. He was making info-graphics in the service of society, but he was also making some incredible woodblocks for himself that were commentaries on society and the new industrialized world. These are black and white works, very simplified with subject matter about class, war, fascism, and the sex industry. When you look at this group of artists from this time, a lot of the imagery looks similar because the solutions to distilling down forms results in a similar aesthetic.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** Sometimes people have compared your work to Julian Opie and I wanted to know what your thoughts are about this comparison and if you and Julian are trying to do similar things.

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** I see that, and love his work. Obviously there are differences. I definitely think that he is one of the few people, among whom I include myself, who is taking back this aesthetic and trying to position it within a fine art context. He's actually more aligned with Gerd Arntz. Specifically, I'm not concerned with line as much as I am with shape. One of the problems that arises when you're defining forms in a picture plane is what I call the form-on-form problem. For example, when two shapes communicating two different ideas need to occupy the same pictorial space, the tendency is to represent the idea of overlap with figure-ground swapping. But, of course, overlap is a lie in two-dimensions. I would never draw a shape that turns from black to white and then from white to black. To me that is a cop-out solution. I believe you should only use shape in a picture plane to define an area. There is absolutely no need to use line and shape to define space. That's one of the very specific differences between what I'm trying to do compared to Gerd Arntz and Julian Opie.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** Julian tends to not have multiple figures, there's no layering of information. It's usually just one image. It seems you are more interested in building a vocabulary.

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** You're right. The layering is an attempt to super-saturate the picture plane and push the legibility of the different drawings while implying an infinite space that extends beyond the borders of the painting. (This is different than representing overlap.) This layering of images reflects the world we're living in now. We're getting better and better at being able to read layers of information. I envision a time when opaque screens will disappear and images will be projected onto imagined planes in space.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** This interview would have been interesting if we were walking through a museum gift shop. I'd like to hear your critique of the merchandising of paintings. I imagine that you'd be an interesting person to develop a new kind of museum gift shop, which might have original artwork.

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** I'm not interested in using products as simply vehicles for reproductions of artworks. That is a superficial approach to considering the potential of making products. I don't think products are art, because of their utility, but I do think they can be artfully addressed. Fully exploiting the qualities of each product increases the object's integrity. The same approach is taken with prints and multiples. I love print making, but I'm not interested in using prints to make reproductions—to make a lesser or more accessible version of a painting. I'd rather try to fully explore what each specific process can do.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** A lot of people misunderstand your process and assume that you appropriate your icons from other places. You are one of the most systematic and analytic artists that I've seen working in the studio. Basically I'd like you to explain the process beginning with the hand sketch, where each of these icons starts in an analog form, to the finished canvas.

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** There exists within the paintings what I call units of meaning. The paintings are made up of these iconic drawings, which, you're right, a lot of people assume are appropriated. It's a little frustrating for me that people make these assumptions, but it also means that the drawings work. They are so well drawn using this visual language that they feel universal, and they feel like they are from somewhere else. That's my point—to subvert that aesthetic. But you are absolutely right—each individual drawing starts with a thumbnail sketch. Each initial sketch then goes through a process by which I am making a drawing of a drawing and refining the image with each stage until I find the final solution which is based on an exacting geometry. I'm not one of these artists who can magically make a perfect drawing and it's done—I have to go through many stages of failing to get where I want to go. This is how I learned to draw in design school. Any ways, once I have the final drawing figured out, I bring it into the computer so it can serve as a template for me to redraw it as more of a mechanical drawing, where every line is perfectly straight and every angle and every line is perfectly tangent to circles—making an efficient and precise drawing with minimal points and lines. The drawing then exists as a digital vector file which means it's resolution independent, which means it can be scaled infinitely up and down. So when I'm drawing on the screen there's no sense of size. There's only relative scale with all drawings relative to each other.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** You have a lot of limitations in hand drawing because you know what the next steps are going to be. You have a certain kind of curve in your drawings because you know it can be vector mapped and eventually outputted in a way.

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** I never really thought about those parameters, but they do exist, and they exist because of the kind of imagery that I want to make. So for instance, in designing an icon for public signage, there cannot be a broad range of scale shifts within the image. You can't have big sections and small details. The whole image has to exhibit the same level

of detail throughout so that it can be just as easily read at one-inch square as at one-foot square. To draw an image with that kind of potential is exciting to me. And you're right, certain angles are too acute to be machined, so I will avoid those or I won't have an angle come to a point, because if I were to have that drawing water jet cut or laser cut the machine would not be able to make that angle.



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(<http://flattmag.wpenginepowered.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Screen-Shot-2014-09-25-at-2.48.10-PM.png>) **BRETT LITTMAN:** Where does the source imagery come from? **RYAN MCGINNESS:** For years the sources for the imagery have been anywhere from dreams or hallucinations to pop songs or science articles. Anything in the world really. I'm always filling my sketchbooks with various ideas. The content of the individual drawings has been all over the place. As a result, the paintings become non-linear, random access landscape. You don't really get meaning out of the work until you look at the individual units. Once I've developed a set of drawings, and I engage in the process of building a painting, I'm concerned primarily with aesthetics and the very basics of what it means to make a picture — color, composition, form, and tension, regardless of what the individual drawings mean. But then when you actually go in and look at all these individual drawings, they'll take you to all kinds of different places. More recently I've decided to concentrate on different bodies of work. This way I can make

distinct sets of drawings and then be done with the series and move on to the next. For example, I looked at the permanent collection of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and made 200 drawings based on objects found there. The whole project was called Art History Is Not Linear. I did something similar with the Geometric Primitives body of work by investigating the collection at Pace Primitive. Another example is this Women series based on figure drawings. **BRETT LITTMAN:**

How big is the library of images that you have? **RYAN MCGINNESS:** Well over 1,000. In fact, I want to make a book called 1,000 drawings that goes back and catalogues every single drawing. What makes it difficult to quantify is that I'll go back and make multiple versions of drawings. Again this comes from my design background where multiple drawings would be developed and then evaluated. I want to quantify the images because it helps me organize. With the women drawings, I have 300 different drawings and I'm capping it there. From that I can make this whole body of work. I've been working for three years on that set. **BRETT LITTMAN:** Well it seems that you are kind of building an encyclopedia and it is interesting that maybe previously the work had a more fluid, as you described it the "random access mind-scape," but now you are kind of focusing on taxonomy, schools of images that might be interrelated and I wonder whether these images are going to resurface when you complete these projects and come back into the work in some way and maybe there will be 20 women that all of the sudden inhabit your unconscious. **RYAN MCGINNESS:** No. In order to keep myself organized, the drawings will remain within their series. I am, however, continuing with the mind-scape paintings, and these will accommodate desires to make off-subject drawings. Keeping everything separate and closing a chapter on a body of work helps me move forward and forces me to develop new imagery and explore new territory. When I say close a chapter, I mean literally close a chapter, because I love making books and making books is another way to organize my output and keep everything straight in my mind. **BRETT LITTMAN:** I've been thinking about artists of your generation who are following similar paths, like Matthew Brannon and Matt Kegan. **RYAN MCGINNESS:** The thing is, I don't get out so much, so I'm embarrassed to say I don't know their work. The best use of my time is to work in the studio. **BRETT LITTMAN:** In some ways Ryan, you are an influence on a generation of artists because when you started to hit the scene...when was your first show? When was a moment that you fused together all of the things that you were thinking about. **RYAN MCGINNESS:** Around 2000, I began to make work that I was absolutely comfortable with and proud of. I was making work that was uniquely my own. I did an exhibition at the now legendary Alife on Orchard Street. They were a kind of a crossover boutique that hosted art exhibitions. Todd James and Steve Powers did a show there and then Shepard Fairey. Mine was the third exhibition. They asked each artist to create a mural made up of 360 panels. This was about the time I felt "this is what I do, and I don't care if you like it or not" which, of course, is the position every artist needs to take. **BRETT LITTMAN:** The printout show at the MoMA on right now has a lot of posters, wallpaper and a lot of use of language, language in the old style of multi-colored posters that were printed for rock concerts. It's an interesting show because what it really looks at is the basis of the communicative arts and graphic design arts in contemporary print making and visual art print making. I kept expecting to see your work because it would fit in that context. I'm thinking that there is a move back to some of the origins that you talked about like in the 1920s, when there was a move towards the universalization and simplification of imagery. When you strip everything back and you are left with a statement – language on a poster – sometimes it can be profound and sometimes it can be silly – there is a larger aesthetic that is being embraced by a larger amount of artists. **RYAN MCGINNESS:** Maybe this is part of a larger desire to communicate. Shouldn't all art be "communicative arts?" Otherwise, what's the point? **BRETT LITTMAN:** It could be. There is an issue today and obviously there are a lot of knocks on art that require tremendous amounts of wall text that's so obscure, or being obscure, the intellectual games that you have to play... I keep on saying that if I'm asked to do a biennale, it will be called There's Nothing Left To See, which could be a fairly negative biennale, in the sense that so many of the shows I go to, you're mostly reading, you're mostly looking at charts and graphs and the work is really now quantitative, rather than qualitative. **RYAN MCGINNESS:** It's funny, and this is a complete aside, but I have seen some of this text-based work that a lot of people are doing and it upsets me, because it's created without discipline and without a knowledge of typography. A lot of what I do is fueled by anger or a desire to do something better, especially when I am well-versed in a field. So, I may have to start fixing the landscape text-based work.



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**BRETT LITTMAN:** But one of things I've noticed in your work is that you never have text.

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** That has been a very deliberate decision, but I'm now about to change my mind. Now I envision this whole body of work based on typography that's going to be done correctly, because I studied and love typography. But one reason why I haven't used type is because I don't want the work to be English-centric. I've wanted to create and use this universal visual language—so it can cross all language barriers and cultures.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** I've spent a lot of time talking to Lawrence Weiner who makes all text based work and is not so concerned with the universality of language so if there is a poetic statement it can be translated, sometimes the statements can be translated, they feel a little awkward in Farsi or French and he feels that's part of the issue. He views his work as sculptural and not text based, so they are not poems. He is like you in that he is also looking for universality. He wants something that anyone can experience that there is no need to go to art school to be able to read a sentence.

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** In addition to wanting to contribute something better to type-based work, I now I feel like I have things to say. I have very specific words to communicate. Behind you is over fifteen years of sketchbooks that I'm culling from in order to make a series of 2,000 buttons. The buttons are little pithy phrases —bumper sticker and t-shirt philosophies. I am working on those now, and they will be used for a series of works at Pace Prints in the fall.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** This sounds like a good project for election year because of all the political slogans and that's the time that the buttons really get pulled out of the closet.

**RYAN MCGINNESS:** Right. Like, "I like Ike". Well, the beliefs and convictions that I have about art are certainly the most cemented they have been, so I feel like I'm in a better position to express them with type.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** And in this process you are looking for typefaces that match. In a way it's merging form and function or you're trying to make a disjunction between the two things. There are visual jokes, such as a font that you are using that might be totally inappropriate for the statement you are trying to make.



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**RYAN MCGINNESS:** Even with the paintings, in which I use silk screening, I'll make these moves, screening layer over layer and weaving images together, which are kind of inside jokes for people who understand the silk screening process. A layperson isn't going to pick up on those moves. Same with the type-based buttons. There are insider jokes like a descender crashing into an ascender. Maybe I'll deliberately use a typeface made out of logs for the word 'camp'. Sometimes form matches the meaning of the word, sometimes deliberately not. Perhaps I will mix two similar sans-serifs together that most people won't pick up on, but I will find hilarious. So what I'm doing now is developing 2,000 buttons, which will then be pinned to a canvas like I've done before, but they've always been pinned into a larger drawing. These are going to be full-bleed monochromatic color field paintings made of buttons. Each canvas will be composed of buttons in one limited color spectrum. From afar the canvas will look like one color field, but up close you'll actually be able to extract specific meanings. Again, units of meaning.

**BRETT LITTMAN:** The last thing I want to do today is have you describe a little bit, the new works you are preparing for the show at Gering & Lopez, I was surprised the last time I came to the studio, when you showed me the two framed maquettes for the exhibition. You had these four individual pieces of paper starting with the sketch, a redesign, then a vector drawing and then a final digital output. Why did you decide to denude the process so much? You seem to be striving for some kind of transparency, which maybe you haven't been so interested in before.



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**RYAN MCGINNESS:** I haven't been interested in sharing my sketches and my sketch process, because they've always only existed in my sketchbooks. And, more importantly, I've always thought of my sketches as residue and as failings. What you see in the sketch process is what leads up to the final drawing — all the mistakes and all the failings and everything that I'm not particularly proud of. In this new Women series, the initial figure drawings aren't that great, but they are just good enough for me to get to where I want to go, which is the final perfected iconic forms. But now I am more comfortable sharing this process. Perhaps it is because I have graduated from the emerging phase of my career, and it's apparent that my work is here to stay, so I can afford to be more transparent with my process. But it's also important for me to address these assumptions about the work that people have made in thinking that the images come from

somewhere else or may have been appropriated. To show the process is to demonstrate the integrity of the images and prove their originality and ultimately their cultural value.



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