Neighborhood Watch: A Microhistory of the Mission School

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San Francisco's topography is notoriously composed of microclimates, a phenomenon that certainly led to the formation of the city's neighborhoods and our appreciation of them. The Mission School, arguably the only identifiable "movement" to emerge in the Bay Area in the late twentieth century, trades on notions of locality as they relate to time and place. One can pinpoint this artistic strain of scrappy, witty, heartfelt San Francisco–made work to a couple of zip codes—the sunny 94103 and 94110—and a time frame roughly spanning the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s. While there are a few artists who are immediately associated with it—Barry McGee (pl. xx), Chris Johanson (pl. xx), and Margaret Kilgallen among them—the Mission School perhaps better describes a state of mind and a pivotal, modern-day fin de siècle moment in Bay Area social and art history, one that unfolded in various pockets of the city.

In the decade that encompasses the turn of the millennium, San Francisco was the locus of a cultural shift dramatic enough to be compared to the rise and collapse of the Gold Rush. The dot-com era coincided with the unveiling of an official new cultural neighborhood, Yerba Buena. SFMOMA opened its new building in 1995 in an economy that was just getting its bearings. Yerba Buena Center for the Arts had appeared just fifteen months before—its construction-site walls featuring graffiti-inflected figurative murals by the then-emerging artist Barry McGee.[1] The Metreon entertainment mall started business in 1999, the Museum of the African Diaspora opened in 2005, and the Contemporary Jewish Museum debuted in 2008. In the late 1990s the art market hadn't yet blossomed its circuit of international art fairs and biennials—each of which played into an increasingly robust art market—so it took a few years for this district, and San Francisco itself, to forge a more forceful identity as an art-world destination.

Creative production, however, was energetically taking place elsewhere in the city, namely in the Mission district, where young artists and new technology workers converged. Emerging from the early 1990s recession, the city plodded along until technology came to an ambiguous rescue. The trickle up from Silicon Valley triggered a youthquake of hopeful young engineers and entrepreneurs who flocked to the city in search of a schizophrenic combination of bohemia and nouveau Internet riches.

Tech businesses brought major media attention (though little of it art-related) and job opportunities (even for artists), but it also disrupted the creative community as its presence

XXX **BARRY MCGEE,** *Untitled* (detail), 1996. Mixed media, 108 x 242 in. (274.3 x 614.7 cm). Ruth Nash Fund and Louis Vuitton N. A. purchase, 96.494.1–325

drastically inflated real-estate prices and spurred an accelerated gentrification process. Prior to the tech boom, artists had been able to live in the low-rent comforts of spacious Mission district flats, with room enough to carve out studio space. The late David Ireland (pl. xx) was a pioneer in the hood, living in his installation of a Victorian residence at Twentieth and Capp Streets. He was a neighborhood elder who could often be spotted in the morning, defiantly sweeping his front sidewalk free of condoms and syringes, as if autumn leaves. He was lucky enough to purchase his home in 1975 when it was affordable. Younger artists faced a much higher-priced version of what was now called live/work space. Studio buildings were razed for loft developments.

In their 2002 book *Hollow City,* Rebecca Solnit and Susan Schwartzenberg tracked the shifts while they were happening: "New businesses are coming in at a hectic pace, and they in turn generate new boutiques, restaurants and bars that displace earlier businesses, especially non-profits, and the new industry's workers have been outbidding for rentals and houses out from under tenants at a break-neck pace."[2] Artists—themselves earlier and perhaps gentler agents of gentrification—took to the streets, banding together to stage performative protests. *Art Strikes Back,* for example, was a series of events in the summer of 2000 that created confrontation between costumed artists and folks dining at newly opened chic restaurants along Valencia Street.[3] Artist Megan Wilson hand-painted dozens of signs that read "Home," placards she distributed to the homeless as markers of the displaced (pl. xx).

The Mission School emerged from this neighborhood, not the least because it was the visible center of a demographic struggle between what could be termed digital and analog folk. By this I don't mean to pit progressive early adopter against stodgy Luddite; rather, the "analog" faction attempted to enact a sense of resistance to the capitalist greed and sleek, impenetrable surfaces associated with new computer screens.[4] For a variety of reasons—heartfelt political beliefs, visual sensibilities, income level—a number of Mission-based artists made art reflecting the gritty, sometimes beautiful reality of the street while the world around them fermented in the giddy vapors of dot-com stock options. When the tech bubble officially burst in 2000, there seemed something particularly appealing about turning to work that really was made on a budget and didn't require a downtown commercial gallery or museum to be displayed.

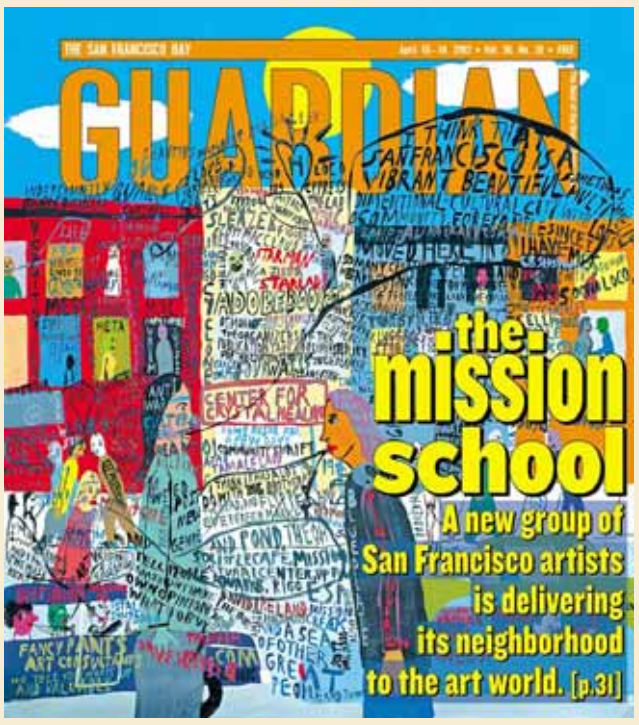
Artists including McGee, Kilgallen, Johanson, Rigo 23,[5] Alicia McCarthy, Aaron Noble, and others relished the handmade, folksy, easily accessed elements of graffiti, comic books, sign painting, green culture, and social activism. Some were involved with bike, skateboard, and

XX **MEGAN WILSON**, *caption TK*

surfing subcultures, which in the spirit of neighborhood are tight, if not geographically bound, communities. The artists practiced a kind of political action, but their position was more observational and born of interests in hands-on making. Many employed materials rescued from dumpsters, be they two-by-fours or misfit house paint. Amy Franceschini was the rare bird who managed to link the tech and analog attributes with Futurefarmers, her interactive and graphic design company that worked for corporate clients while also creating critical web-based projects, such as *They Rule,* which pointedly used gaming structures to reveal the troubling interconnections of corporate power mongers.[6] The then-independent curator Eungie Joo wrote in *Flash Art* that these artists created "a new wave of work that actively defies distinction between high and low art forms and demonstrates an anti-capitalist's sympathy and respect for the old, worn, and recycled."[7]

A scrappy spirit pervaded. Johanson, who infamously skateboarded around town and observed the sights, sounds, and smells of the city's down and out, made cobbled-together painting installations on plywood and various other refuse, as much for the fact that it was free as for the green-thinking of the gesture. McGee, who got a BFA in painting and printmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute, more covertly used the city as a canvas, tagging walls and such with his signature heads, feeling some ambivalence about showing work in galleries instead of the streets. Although he created high-profile works for the Venice Biennale in 2001 and the Prada Foundation in 2004, and garnered an ardent international fan base, his public demeanor has always been quiet and humble, his work making honorable mentions of his constructed and actual family.

Kilgallen, who died in 2001, created large-scale mural installations inspired by hand-painted signage, folk heroines, and modern-day, train-jumping hoboes. Folklore was a key component of her practice, a theme that helped to generate mythologies about her own artistic community. She was married to McGee, and they were profiled together in an episode of the PBS series *Art:21,* fittingly titled "Place." Footage of Kilgallen gathering source material in the streets of San Francisco demonstrates how firmly the city is connected to the art. Their works were literally presented on the streets, as murals in the Clarion Alley Mural Project (CAMP), a sanctioned Mission block available to young artists, as well as in a network of artist-run galleries including the Backroom Gallery at Adobe Books, fourwalls, Kiki, scene/escena, and others, which operated at modest, affordable scale with an alternative-minded ethos. Most of the people who ran these spaces had a keen awareness that there would be little public support or grant money for their endeavors. Jack Hanley, who had previously operated an eponymous gallery near Union Square, opened a space on Valencia that showcased a number of artists associated with the Mission School, with opening receptions often featuring live bands. The Luggage Store, a gallery founded by Laurie Lazer and Daryl Smith, served as something of a



community center near the gritty intersection of Market and Sixth Streets.

The Mission artists showed in the same group of galleries in San Francisco, Los Angeles (New Image Art), and New York (Alleged Gallery), but they didn't form a certified movement. The Mission School, as a label, went public with a cover story I wrote in 2002 for the independent weekly *The San Francisco Bay Guardian*.[8] That year, Chris Johanson, Margaret Kilgallen, and Futurefarmers were all in Lawrence Rinder's 2002 Whitney Biennial, and it appeared they were getting more mainstream exposure outside the area than at home. The article was intended to give their work a local context, not to mention a congratulatory shout out. Various terms for the group of artists emerged in interviews—Renny Pritikin called them Urban Rustics, while Joo used New Folk—but the *Guardian* editors settled on the Mission School for its identifiable San Francisco element. Johanson made an original work, which referenced his community of artists, to be reproduced on the cover (pl. xx), in much the same way that he customarily creates original graphics for his group and solo exhibitions.

The article is credited with cementing the term, which has also been criticized as a "vague catch-all" moniker.[9] Indeed, it's not easy to apply the appellation to specific artists, or to pinpoint specific dates associated with the work in question, yet the term has functioned to identify an enduring aesthetic ethos. What's interesting, though, is how easily the name stuck, probably more for those looking at the art than those making it. Naming something inherently erodes a bit of its underground cachet, but such is the way with art history.[10]

Art institutions engage in another form of certification in their acknowledgement of significant works. Exhibitions at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, while not a museum, offered initial institutional showcases for Mission School–associated artists, and the venue perhaps served to make the work visible to local audiences as well as international curators and collectors. SFMOMA's most conspicuous support of Mission School artists and its extended community came through the biennial SECA (Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art) Award exhibition, which has served as the museum's primary showcase of younger/emerging Bay Area artists—as well as a way for their work to enter into the collection. Tracking these shows over the last seventeen years offers insight into the evolution and legacy of this artistic strain. The 1996 award show included McGee, who created a site-specific installation comprised of dozens of his small works—drawings, photographs, and found images—all in thrift-shop frames (pl. xx). These diverse images were displayed in overlapping fashion on a background of stains and paint

XX **TK,** *caption TK*

applied with rollers, brushes, and spray. For the 1998 exhibition, Rigo 98 created the site-inspired *Looking at 1998 San Francisco from the Top of 1925* (1999; pl. xx), an ink-jet on canvas that depicted the urban gentrification of the area adjacent to SFMOMA. Johanson was awarded in 2002, and he responded with a new, eco-themed sculptural installation titled *This Temple Called Earth* (2002). The room-size piece is an enterable igloolike structure made from sheets of plywood and scraps. Inside, he built a glass enclosure for a forest of handmade trees.

To look at subsequent years reveals an aesthetic continuum and legacy of the Mission School spirit. Simon Evans and Shaun O'Dell, who were featured in the 2004 SECA exhibition, both work in a manner that merges literary and handmade sensibilities: Evans creating funky, torn and taped maps and charts to track social and psychological conditions, and O'Dell referencing American history, literature, and emblems in his drawings and installations.

A decade separates McGee's 1996 exhibition and the 2006 SECA winners, which included artists whose sense of eco-activism and use of humble materials bear a strong tonal relationship to the Mission School, even if the term has somewhat evaporated as a classification.

Leslie Shows depicts expansive, imagined American landscapes in her mixed-media paintings, such as the brooding *Two Ways to Organize* (2006; pl. xx). Composed of acrylic, charcoal, metal, mud, rust, and collaged bits of paper, it exerts a powerful sense of environmental awareness. Like Evans and O'Dell, Shows also works frequently with words, collaging fragments from books to point to notions of reconfiguration. Sarah Cain's painting installations have an earthy, scavenged feel, though they are infused with bright color and given titles that skew them in a metaphysical direction. Mitzi Pederson (pl. xx), also included in 2006, creates sculpture and works on paper that are seemingly scavenged from the street—crumbling cinderblocks, leftover craft supplies, remnant bits of tape. Pederson uses these materials to more formal ends than Johanson does, yet the simplicity of her work, which expresses delicate balances and physical tension, bears some connection to the Mission School (pl. xx).

Amy Franceschini, long part of the social community of Kilgallen, McGee, and others, was also 2006 SECA artist, showing works related to her Victory Gardens project, *VG2007* (2007), a piece that engages notions of environmental sustainability, food politics, and community. Her work extends the Mission School ethos into the realm of community-based social practices, new curatorial models, and collaborative projects. Her work diverges visually

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from the funky and handmade, but Franceschini's interest in the organic and communal fits quite well.

These artists reflect a legacy that has been passed down to younger Bay Area like Brion Nuda Rosch, Michelle Blade, and others currently employ painting, sculpture, and collaborative actions in their work, such as Blade's *Sunset Conversations* (2009–ongoing), in which she shares "conversations inspired by the setting sun."[11] The utopian vibe of the piece echoes work by O'Dell and Johanson.

In the last decade, street culture has increasingly merged with digital business, the result creating new distribution networks and a sense of community and financial sustainability for artists. The currently thriving DIY culture, which is as much about aesthetics as utility and sustainability, is one example of this phenomenon. *ReadyMade* magazine (cooked up in the Bay Area in 2001 by editors Shoshana Berger and Grace Hawthorne) is perhaps a bible for the DIY camp and its numerous boutique businesses, while the Brooklyn-based website Etsy facilitates e-commerce for handmade objects in a manner akin to eBay. The Internet has become a proven tool to foster subcultures, as with fecalface.com and its corresponding bricks-and- mortar exhibition space, fecalface.gallery. Park Life, a gallery and bookstore in San Francisco's Richmond district, is perhaps more directly related to the Mission School. The space features multiples by McGee, Johanson, Marcel Dzama, Chris Ballantyne, Paul Wackers, Jules de Balincourt, Tucker Nichols, Jason Jagel, and others.

Park Life's existence seems to have much to do with a creative commodification that operates within an alternative business model. While the space does have a gallery, the works—books, magazines, self-published zines, T-shirts, and various other artist-branded bric-a-brac—are more available, more affordable than those in conventional galleries. The connection to skater, graffiti, and surfing communities also speaks to the alternative distribution networks of Park Life and similar enterprises, and the technological ability to imprint work on skateboards and the like gives artists an opportunity to work as illustrators, graphic designers, tattooists, and all-around entrepreneurs. Similarly, Electric Works is a mixed-media print facility (for both digital

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and traditional methods), a gallery space, and a quirky book/gift store. There are numerous other examples, including Needles and Pens, Curiosity Shop, and Rare Device, all of which are in or near the Mission and could be viewed as direct descendants of the Mission School.

In the mid to late 2000s grassroots and apartment galleries such as Eleanor Harwood Gallery, Ratio 3, Triple Base, and 2nd Floor Projects proliferated in San Francisco, extending the DIY ethos to the realm of art dealership. Harwood oversaw the exhibitions in the Backroom Gallery at Adobe Books, one of the key venues for many of the artists discussed in this essay. Her shift from a closet-size space with little emphasis on sales to a full storefront space and her frequent participation in international art fairs exemplify the mode of thinking on which the other aforementioned spaces operate. Each one uses the codes of the contemporary art world to maintain a sense of creative independence and to promote Bay Area artists outside of the area. The microclimates may have shifted with the economy (and global warming), but what remains heartening is how the Mission endures as a site of evolving, fortifying, down-to-earth practices.

NOTES

1 These murals were commissioned by Renny Pritikin, the director of the Visual Arts Program at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, who was an early and important supporter of McGee, giving him his first major solo exhibition in 1994, as well as other Mission School artists.
2 Rebecca Solnit and Susan Schwartzenberg, *Hollow City: The Siege of San Francisco and the Crisis of American Urbanism* (New York and London: Verso, 2002), 14.
3 Mark Martin, "Artistic Statement in Mission, *San Francisco Chronicle,* August 5, 2000, at http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2000/08/05/MN8220.DTL; and Megan Wilson's website, www.meganwilson.com/projects/.
4 It's worth noting here that general art world trends of the mid-1990s expressed a kind of struggle between identity politics, as expressed in David Ross's notorious 1993 Whitney Biennial, and Matthew Barney's slick, self-enclosed *Cremaster Cycle,* the first film of which appeared in 1994.
5 Starting in 1984, Rigo 23 worked with various iterations of his name to track his years as a working artist. In 1999, for example, he was known as Rigo 99, with works made at that time attributed to that name. In 2003, he settled on Rigo 23, using the first and last numbers of that year.
6 See www.theyrule.net
7 Eungie Joo, "The New Folk," *Flash Art* (May–June 2002): 124–26.
8 See Glen Helfand, "The Mission School," *San Francisco Bay Guardian,* June 30, 2002, at www.sfbg.com/36/28/art_mission_school.html.
9 From the Wikipedia entry for Mission School: "The term 'Mission School' has been criticized for being too geographically specific (many artists outside of San Francisco share this aesthetic, while others living in the Mission District do not), while at the same time being a vague catch-all, with many artists who are referred to as 'Mission School' having a hard time seeing how they are part of this 'school.'" See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mission_School.
10 *Beautiful Losers,* an exhibition and book organized by Aaron Rose and Christian Strike of Alleged Gallery in 2004, could be viewed as a form of sub-branding. The project, which was presented at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, included a more geographically expansive group of artists who worked in similar aesthetic veins. In addition to Bay Area figures McGee, Kilgallen, Johanson, Clare Rojas, and others, the show included artists such as Shepard Fairey, Mike Mills, Ryan McGinley, Terry Richardson, and others from the East and West Coasts. The publication and marketing of the exhibition has had a strong impact in creating something akin to a brand, as is evidenced by the show's continual touring schedule and a 2008 documentary directed by Rose and Joshua Leonard. To date, nothing similar has been produced with Mission School as organizing term.
11 See Michelle Blade's website, www.michelleblade.com.