

The Mission school

San Francisco's street artists deliver their neighborhood to the art world.

By Glen Helfand

IF PLACES LIKE the Left Bank and Greenwich Village feel vaguely historical, it's pleasing to note that artistic movements, even under the reign of globalism, can still be traced to neighborhoods, the physical places where artists, writers, and thinkers congregate. Perhaps because San Francisco is so compact, its cultural innovations, more than many other cities', have always been identified with specific, romanticized intersections. Castro and Market, gay liberation. Haight and Ashbury, hippies. Columbus and Broadway, beats. Most recently, 16th Street and Mission has become the locus of a yet to be labeled brand of art that's become one of San Francisco's most notable exports.

In the art world, however, the idea of provincialism is viewed with suspicion and even condescension, which is why it's somehow so satisfying that Barry McGee, Margaret Kilgallen – who succumbed to cancer last year at 33 – and Chris Johanson, among others, have become international icons of a thirtysomething generation of San Francisco artists who mine an aesthetic of the local streets. For them, it's a road that, surprisingly, has led to huge popularity in New York and even Japan, illustrating the old rock and roll truism that sometimes an artist has to leave the country to get real notice at home.

It's even more satisfying that these artists have gone global with an extremely humane and honest approach. Their work is heartfelt, handmade, and deeply observational, and its urban realism is filtered through interests in graffiti, comic books, green culture, and social activism. They're refreshingly scrappy, modest, hardworking, and community oriented, attributes that resonate in a climate of global uncertainty and palpable physical threat. They serve as an indigenous piece of the Bay Area's art history in the unstudied way they incorporate the experiential drive of Bay Area conceptualism (see Tom Marioni's 1970 *The Act of Drinking Beer with Friends Is the Highest Form of Art*), the revered Bay Area figurative school, and perhaps a gentle counterbalance to the scarier politicized street robotics of Survival Research Laboratories.

While the funky, assured projects the current generation of artists creates may not suit everyone's tastes – this is material rooted more in an "up with people" spirit, and sometimes a messy, childlike ethos, than in the shiny, distanced intellectual aura of art theory and media critique that informs much other contemporary art – no one can argue the fact that the generous neighborhood spirit of their work is appealing. Whether it's "Think globally, act locally," or the same process in reverse, there's a certain bumper-sticker enthusiasm to this ad hoc artistic movement, which is being called everything from "urban rustic" to "The Mission school."

16th Street

Cruising around the neighborhood on his skateboard, Chris Johanson stops in at Adobe, a used bookshop just below Guerrero Street where you can always find a tattered paperback Kerouac and encounter a scruffy, slightly crazy local napping on the overstuffed green velvet couch. It's probably someone who's hit on a patch of hard luck but has great stories to tell, and Johanson's most likely chatting him up, soaking in his vibe with innate ethnographic skills. The artist says he stops in the place every day, at least every day he's in town.

Lately he's been away more and more, working on projects like a show-stealing installation in the current Whitney Biennial – an important New York show intended as a snapshot of current American art production – and forthcoming exhibitions in L.A., New York, Vienna, Tokyo, and even San Francisco. Here in the Bay Area, he's as apt to show at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts or the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (where he'll make an installation later this year) as in the Back Room gallery at Adobe. The bookstore is perhaps a more fitting venue; it's a charmingly disheveled refuge from the static electricity generated by the sidewalk traffic – tech-industry casualties, drug addicts, geniuses, wanna-be DJs, artists, homeless people, transsexuals, and lucid New Age types, all of whom face the cultural dilemmas of corporate greed and the basic, universal human struggle to be happy. It's easy to see how Johanson's roughshod, sometimes humorous drawings, paintings, and installations stem directly from the diversity of the Mission District.

"I'm really into the ethnic culture blender of San Francisco," Johanson, a San Jose native, tells me. "It's like breathing oxygen for my brain to grow. The air smells like hepatitis shit, incense, cigarettes, exhaust, the bay breeze, and food from all the incredible restaurants, it's a good aroma."

That inspiring scent wafts three blocks away to Clarion Alley, where the backsides of nearly all the buildings, at least those not torn down during the recent development frenzy, are emblazoned with pop-inflected murals painted in ways that take off from the more classic, '30s-influenced, Diego Rivera style found deeper in the Mission with a broader, postmodern range of subjects and sensibilities. The Clarion Alley Mural Project (CAMP), which began in 1991, features wall paintings that exude comic book panache and an outlaw graffiti edge. The corrugated metal roll-up door on the side of Community Thrift is emblazoned with graceful, spray-painted, monochromatic images of, among other things, a giant screw, a mutant bee in full flutter, a floating book, and a comic syringe arching backward like a modern dancer.

The latter are images by Barry McGee, a.k.a. Twist, who is perhaps the most sought-after young artist working in San Francisco today, in the worlds of both graffiti and gallery culture. He developed his tag-inflected art and signature giant, squarish male heads on outdoor walls in the Mission and the Tenderloin, and some evidence still stands, though many of his street pieces have been nabbed by confused collectors or covered over by the Department of Public Works. Like Johanson's, McGee's work reflects the down-and-out aspects of city life – he often paints on discarded liquor bottles – with a gritty, if more

refined, ethos. His gallery installations, for example, are conglomerations of glossy painted surfaces and refuse scavenged on the street.

After a fellowship trip to Brazil in the early 1990s, McGee developed a style of working with dense wall groupings of small, framed pieces and bottles painted with his cosmology of characters. During the ensuing decade he's had shows all over the world and become a god to both young taggers and aspiring gallery artists. He's now in Milan, working on a major installation and book for the Prada Foundation – a lavish exhibition space oiled by proceeds from the high-fashion conglomerate that once outfitted a whole cadre of S.F. tech youth. If it's those people who seemed to wreak havoc on the art community, there's a satisfying irony to the fact that art, and art deeply rooted in that community, is the thing that emerges most solidly from the dot-com rubble.

McGee and his wife, Margaret Kilgallen, whose death was a shock to many, shared an interest in making their art in both public and private spaces. Kilgallen's images of the streets were inspired by signage, the hand-painted letters on pawn shop plate glass windows, the scrawled-on-cardboard pleas of the homeless, and old-fashioned typography. While her work shows similar interests and an aesthetic affinity with McGee's, it deals in a different palette and subject matter, one with a different sort of vibrancy and sweetness. Her massive illustrations of street scenes are populated with iconic nomadic women – banjo players, surfers, and full-figured matrons. She's also included in the Whitney Biennial, with an installation originally made last year for a show in Philadelphia. The piece, titled Main Drag, is a massive patchwork cityscape composed of signs, paintings of storefronts, and a towering structure made from painted plywood remnants. It's a monumental project that has much to do with community.

Even though their work has been showing in international venues as tony as the aforementioned Prada Foundation, they stuck close to their roots by also showing in local alternative spaces and tagging in the streets. They have been major inspirations to young artists, in both spirit and style. (Both also received Goldie awards from the Bay Guardian, Kilgallen in 1997, McGee in 1994.) Janet Bishop, a curator of painting and sculpture at SFMOMA, currently in the midst of studio visits as part of the selection process for the biennial IN/SITE (formerly SECA) Award to Bay Area artists, has been constantly confronted with evidence of this. "The influence is huge, and not only here," she says. "I see them in so many artists' work. The challenge is for them to find their own voices in it."

Cred

While their success may generate envy in some, these are artists, who, being sincere and even shy, represent the opposite of cutthroat careerists. These San Francisco artists are antithetical to the whole concept of the 1980s art star – the large-living Julian Schnabel and his overblown expressionistic canvases, Jeff Koons's oily, self-generated personality and slick postmodern appropriations of kitschy Americana, and even Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose graffiti-inspired paintings landed him in designer duds. You'd be hard pressed to find artists like McGee in a chic eatery wearing expensive boutique-bought

attire, much less in a trendy nightclub. Rather, his and Kilgallen's work is thrift store-dressed.

They are active members of their community, which includes a host of artists who are as vital, if not quite as well known. Alicia McCarthy, Rigo, and Aaron Noble, for example, have related aesthetics, are deeply connected to the Mission, and have works in Clarion Alley. This generation of artists emerged a decade or so ago in now defunct Mission spaces such as four walls, Kiki, ESP, and scene/escena and continues to work in the Mission, in places like the still very vital Luggage Store, on a Tenderloin stretch of Market Street.

"Every time I do a gallery piece," McGee says on PBS's Art21, in the same episode in which they profiled the god of large-scale steel sculpture, Richard Serra, "I have to put 110 percent more outdoors, to keep the street cred. It's the audience I'm most concerned with." Indeed, that audience worships him. "The amazing thing about Barry is that no matter where he shows, 12-year-old boys make pilgrimages," says Renny Pritikin, chief curator at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, the institution that gave McGee his first major exposure by commissioning him to do murals on its construction fences in 1992. "Twist is nationally known, legendary – his tags are the only ones that don't get hit with graffiti."

"One thing that unites these artists is that they don't care about money or the art world – they've been poor," says Amy Franceschini, a friend, artist, and Web designer whose work is also included in the Whitney Biennial. Her work shares an earthy, human scale and tone, even if her forms are more driven by technology. "When you hang out with Barry and Margaret, you get the sense they're in a different world. They are very perceptive, noticing every curve in the road, every inch of a street."

Inside/outside world

San Francisco's position as a more casual art market than New York, Los Angeles, or Chicago allows for just that kind of pondering. It permits many to sidestep the distractions of competitive art-world climbing, though this low-pressure condition is the very thing that causes a large number of promising artists to head to those bigger centers to forge a career after honing their craft and ideas here. The fact that this particular crop of artists can use San Francisco as a base, tapping into its various grassroots energies, yet create projects internationally is a hopeful sign.

"I think there's a lot of energy here right now," says Jack Hanley, who shows Johanson as well as similarly positioned artists from around the world in his storefront gallery on Valencia near 15th Street, across from the Valencia Gardens public housing project. It's an unlikely but fitting art venue where unkempt guys often stumble in to peddle found pieces of hardware. "It's a street-meets-modernism thing," Hanley says of Johanson and others he works with. "The artists are not totally naive, but they feed off of different stuff." He cites skateboarding, surfing, and playing in rock and roll bands, as well as a coterie of peers such as performative S.F. artists Will Rogan, Bob Linder, Scott

Hewicker, and Cliff Hengst. "I got to be tight with Chris through music," Hanley says. "So many of the artists play music, it's truly a community, and they see each other at more than just openings."

Many of those artists are cropping up all over. Noble, who served as the administrator of CAMP and recently relocated to Los Angeles, has a group of impressive large-scale wall paintings at UCLA's Hammer Museum. He identifies the CAMP works as something "between graffiti, underground comics, and traditional muralism. They also add a sense of outsider art – Creativity Explored is an influence."

Rigo 02, who annually changes his name to reflect the year, is often working in his native Portugal, though always returns to San Francisco, where he creates politically conscious works that are perhaps a bit more studied than McGee's. Still, he finds there are connections. "There is a bond, perhaps even a spiritual bond, which is a difficult word to use these days," he says. "There's an empathy or humanity, for example, that comes out of Chris's characters muttering to themselves, in Alicia [McCarthy] trying hard to do a perfect grid, and it comes out humane and weaving, more like someone's crocheting for the first time. Or Barry's giant down-and-out heroes. I don't think any of the work is coming out of anger or cynicism."

Rigo, McGee, Kilgallen, Johanson, and McCarthy, as well as Eamon Ore-Giron, Nick Ackerman, and others, were included in an homage to Kilgallen last year, called "Widely Unknown" and held at New York's massive and flashy Deitch Projects. The show's title alludes to the unshowy ubiquity of the included artists, but it ironically served to put the idea of a Bay Area aesthetic on the New York map. The show reportedly drew thousands of people, an uncommonly energetic mixture of young artists, skateboarders, and uptown art types.

McCarthy, who works with a range of materials to create earthy conglomerations of patterns and text, recalls the process of creating "Widely Unknown" as a heartening, communal experience – people sleeping in the gallery, going out for late-night dumpster dives for materials. "We lived together in the space for 11 days," she says. "I think we may have weirded people out in New York, but it truly was a group of friends who are really supportive of each other. I remember Barry saying, 'I don't want to go home. It's been so nice living with you all.' "

In keeping with the crunchy California spirit of the group, McCarthy worked for years in the produce department of collectively owned Rainbow Grocery, going on early-morning runs to buy organic tomatoes from farmers and lending her artistic talents to the Rainbow truck signage. She describes her practice as scrappy and resourceful, and apparently it resonates, as she lists a busy roster of exhibitions that will unfold over the next several months all over the country.

Brand: new

The mythic narrative of the street adds appeal to the tales of these artists. This isn't a calculated effort, however. Rather, it's the natural outgrowth of talented people working in the same area, having a dialogue. Since we live in a brand-driven world, though, it's not surprising that a group of like-minded artists' work would generate a brand name that's easily adaptable to Bay Area art history, not to mention the marketplace.

"When you look back at the beat scene, that was less than a 10-year period," says Ed Gilbert, director of Gallery Paule Anglim, which will show McGee's work this May. "And there were distinct relationships between the key figures. There's something similar about the current group of artists who emerged when the SoMa, graffiti, and skateboard scenes were intersecting with art-educated kids. Down the road, they might be simplified into a bit of history."

Buzz terms have been cropping up. "The Mission school" has been uttered with some regularity. "Urban Rustics and Digital Bohemians" were the terms given in an article by Center for the Arts curator Renny Pritikin. "Born between 1965 and 1975, as children and young adults they have endured corporate eco-porn advertising and the simultaneous creation of the professionalization of the environmental movement," he writes in an article to be published in a book of Franceschini's work. "Their resulting cynicism about good environmental intentions and rhetoric is wed to an absolutely conflicting near-religious belief in salvaging what is left of a fugitive authentic world."

Eungie Joo, the former Bay Area writer and curator who organized "Widely Unknown," terms this work "the new folk" in a forthcoming article in the international art magazine *Flash Art*. "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," she writes, identifying San Francisco as a center of its production.

Joo, now based in New York, has curated a number of exhibitions around the work of McGee, Kilgallen, and their peers, most recently at the request of gallery owner Jeffrey Deitch. "He offered the opportunity to create a context for these artists, which has been lacking," she says. The large-scale New York venue has been supportive, mounting solo shows and publishing books devoted to McGee, Kilgallen, and Johanson (who will appear there later this year). "The interest in these artists, however, has been a little slow in coming," Joo continues. "Maybe it's about national exposure and what people think of the S.F. scene and its own self-proclaimed provincialism. As much as I respect what people do in the Bay Area, you have to admit it is a tiny place."

Bay Area aesthetic

It may, however, be the intimate scale that allowed these artists to forge their visions. So many of them developed in small spaces like the Luggage Store, near the fragrant intersection of Market Street near Sixth. "Their work exudes a sincere expression of self," says Laurie Lazar, who codirects the space with Darryl Smith. "They're not trying to impress anybody; they're passionate – qualities that have the capacity to reach a broad cross section of people."

Through the Luggage Store they may have reached Pritikin, who in turn suggested them to curators at New York's Drawing Center. "Renny first told us about Barry," says James Elaine, who coordinated shows at the Drawing Center with Ann Philbin and currently serves as the projects curator at the Hammer Museum. "Then we met Margaret and saw her work. Ann and I looked at each other and nodded, 'Yes!' in code." Both Kilgallen and McGee had well-received early-'90s shows at those venues. "We realized there's a real peculiarity to San Francisco, there were so many artists working in that genre. They were young artists whose work for some reason was not getting to New York. Is it a Bay Area aesthetic? Well, that's where we found it."

Larry Rinder, chief curator at the Whitney, who came to the position after stints at the Berkeley Art Museum and the California College of Arts and Crafts Institute (now the Wattis Institute), clearly found something here for the Biennial, a show that's the closest the art world comes to the Oscars. "I didn't make the Bay Area selections with any preconceptions about what I wanted to represent," Rinder says. "As with art from anywhere in the country, I simply selected works that I found to be vital, urgent, and compelling. Seeing many of these pieces here, though, there certainly is a sense of culture clash. Although I don't read any bad reviews, I gather that some of them (i.e., the New Yorker) have latched onto precisely the sense of the handmade, do-it-yourself youth energy that characterizes the work of Johanson and Kilgallen. It's a sensibility that's just alien to New York. To me these works look tremendously fresh and invigorating." Rinder refers to the New Yorker, whose art critic Peter Schjeldahl condescendingly pointed to Kilgallen's and Johanson's installations as "insouciantly trashy" and gave them "the prize for forced high spirits."

"Chris and Margaret's work does emerge, I think, out of a specific place-based sensibility," Rinder continues. "Margaret's work especially is imbued with numerous references to the California coast. Chris's tends to be more universal in its iconography, though I think aspects of his style are connected to a do-it-yourself permissiveness that has been flourishing in the Bay Area for some time. Their aesthetic sensibility has been cultivated within a specifically San Francisco milieu. Having said that, I don't think their work is incomprehensible outside of that region, as witnessed by the New York Times' exceptionally positive mention of Chris's piece."

Johanson served as the glowing finale to Holland Cotter's Times review of the show. "Passionately utopian, [Johanson's piece is] about light as sustenance and greed as poison, about the power of fellowship and the possibility of being lifted up. With its almost childlike, graffiti-based images and its huge ideas, Mr. Johanson's work is an inspired addition to the show, and to this city right now."

While it may be difficult to think of Chris, skateboarding through the Mission, as a "Mr.," his current installation definitely deserves respect. In the Whitney's low-ceilinged modernist stairwell, he's created, with the help of friends from home, a rising cross section of contemporary humanity that plays out in a series of diorama-like vignettes made from wood scraps he found on the streets. (Those pieces, apparently, had to be

disinfected before entering the confines of the museum.) At the base of the stairway he starts with a pair of guys lost in a jungle of scrap wood color-coded with flat wall paint; on each successive floor he depicts strata of urban living – a hectic street scene, with stores that have no trouble advertising their actual wares, greed or truth and goodness. His wood cutout "floaters," are prone, mostly male bodies, painted on wood and suspended from the ceiling, poised below a depiction of planets, and on the final landing, there's a vibrant, yellow star burst.

The piece is major yet bravely vulnerable, not only in its utter lack of preciousness and the fact that its position in the secluded stairway invites touching, but also in its sincerity. It presents the joys and horrors of the world with directness and deceptive simplicity. Within this childlike universe are the universal issues of environmentalism and basic human needs.

"Installations are my favorite form," Johanson says. "It's like math equations: you need a whole room to express ideas. That's where it's at. I feel so lucky [to be in the Biennial], I can't even believe it!" It's a kind of honestly humble expression that typifies this particular community of artists and its hardworking ascent to national prominence. As McCarthy puts it, "the nice people are finally getting some play."