

Barry McGee

Fondazione Prada

Milan

11 April – 9 June 2002

On Thursday 11 April, at 6 pm, the Fondazione Prada will inaugurate in Milan the first exhibition in Italy devoted to the American artist Barry McGee (San Francisco, 1966).

Intended specifically for the Fondazione Prada's space in Via Fogazzaro, this huge installation devised by McGee is entitled *Today Pink* (2002). This is entered through an unusual and decidedly bewildering passage, which, when one emerges, turns out to be the back of an overturned truck. In the exhibition space one finds oneself in a chaotic scene, consisting of abandoned vehicles covered with graffiti, figures painted on huge metallic or monochrome walls, and fragments of lighter, fluctuating objects. This is a world rich in signs and symbols that contain references to life in today's cities and are linked to images of American culture – such as the large, enigmatic figure of a Native American painted upside down on a wall made of rusty iron sheets. As in the aftermath of a road accident, two abandoned vehicles invade the space. On their bodies the artist has painted his familiar faces, which, with their sad eyes, are a reminder of bowed, resigned humanity. "The presence of this male figure is kind of like this everyman, and it's very specific to San Francisco, where there's a huge homeless population that everyone wants to be free of [...]. The subject is to do with graffiti and the homeless... kind of like an outcast, things that the city is trying to get rid of, or trying to hide, or pretending doesn't exist."*

On the walls, the dominant colour is red. This refers to a detail of the urban environment that has inspired the artist: "In Chinatown in San Francisco the doors are painted red. They are great surfaces, they attract me a lot. Red is the colour of life."*

Innumerable drawings appear on all the walls, following each other without a gap. Here the rapid gesture is interwoven with a clear, delicate line that depicts a world of images realized with a wide range of techniques (enamel, acrylics, spray paint, chalk and pencil): the result is a veritable crowd of human faces. Dominating the white space is a huge male figure with a childlike face: wearing black pants and a light-coloured shirt, it has the severity and majesty of the Mexican murals.

The intensity of the installation is reinforced by the presence of a bunches liquor bottles, used by McGee as supports for his paintings, together with a large number of miscellaneous multicoloured objects such as painted cases, road signs, table napkins, dry leaves, shop signs, panels, cast-off clothes and small drawings by the artist and by people dear to him.

McGee studied painting and printmaking at the San Francisco Art Institute, graduating in 1991. His career began in the 1980s, when he was active in the streets of San Francisco producing works that he signed with the tag "Twist." Since then the artist has always regarded the city as the ideal space for his intervention. The city is seen as a non-place where everything happens and where a wide variety of ideas and

lifestyles are mixed together, drawing their strength from this amalgamation, and where the contrast between the centre and the periphery, between the wealthy districts and the slums, is even more striking.

McGee's first works simply involved painting on walls and shutters, but he soon began to use waste materials, such as wrecked cars, empty bottles, discarded signs, broken cartons, abandoned bicycles, old sheet metal and any object or fragment attesting to the alienation, the precariousness and resignation of the city-dwellers: "I use anything near me [...] I'll paint on anything,"** says the artist, "My work reflects the melancholia, humour, and sensory overload of urban street life."***

On the occasion of the exhibition, Fondazione Prada is publishing an artist's book, comprising assemblages of photographs taken by McGee in the streets of the American cities where he realizes his works, designed to create a dialogue between his own personal writing and the public dimension, consisting of urban landscapes with their vestiges of industry. In addition, the volume contains an interview with McGee by Germano Celant, a biography of the artist and a bibliography relating to his activity.

* from an interview with Barry McGee conducted by Germano Celant, in the book published on the occasion of the exhibition at the Fondazione Prada, Milan, April-June 2002.

** from an interview with Barry McGee conducted by Susie Kalil, in *Hoss*, catalogue of the exhibition at the Rice Art Gallery, Houston, 1999.

*** Rosa Venus, "The Artists in Their Studios: Barry McGee and Margaret Killgallen," *Flaunt Magazine*, Los Angeles, March 2000, p. 32.

Exhibition Information

Title: Barry McGee
Date: 11 April – 9 June 2002
Venue: Fondazione Prada
Address: Via Fogazzaro 36, Milan
Opening times: Tuesday to Sunday, 10 am – 7 pm, closed Monday
Admission: free
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