

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

Contact: Laurie Duke
laurie.duke@nyu.edu or 212/998-6782

ENERGY THAT IS ALL AROUND
Mission School: Chris Johanson, Margaret Kilgallen,
Alicia McCarthy, Barry McGee, Ruby Neri

Early 1990s works on view at NYU's Grey Art Gallery

April 15–July 12, 2014

New York City (February 28, 2014)—Presenting more than 125 works by five artists who launched their careers in a gritty San Francisco neighborhood in the early 1990s, *ENERGY THAT IS ALL AROUND/Mission School* is the first East Coast museum exhibition to highlight these artworks that have achieved cult-like status in the Bay Area and beyond. Most are never-before-seen early pieces from the artists' own collections. On view at New York University's Grey Art Gallery from April 15 to July 12, the show was curated by Natasha Boas and organized by the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), where **Alicia McCarthy, Barry McGee, and Ruby Neri** were students, and where they hung out with **Margaret Kilgallen and Chris Johanson**. *ENERGY THAT IS ALL AROUND* features paintings, drawings, sculptures, and installations (including a number of the artists' classic "cluster" pieces) alongside more recent works created especially for this exhibition. Also included is an extensive selection of ephemera, such as sketches, letters, journals, scrapbooks, and cut-outs.

Johanson, Kilgallen, McCarthy, McGee, and Neri came into their own as young visual artists in San Francisco's Mission District at a time when affordable housing and studio space was still available for those bucking the mainstream. The early 1990s also heralded a Bay Area dot-com boom, which brought an influx of young professionals, upscale shops, chic restaurants, and eviction threats to the Mission District, then a more diverse neighborhood offering cheap rent and food. As undergraduates, these artists were influenced by lowbrow visual culture—such as cartoons, signage, and folk art. All were very involved in making and promoting graffiti, and each had one or more tag names. Although each developed a distinct artistic style and philosophy, they shared a penchant for the radical and the political. They all took inspiration from Bay Area Figuration, the Beats, Funk art, and Punk. And they were all first-hand witnesses to how hard San Francisco was hit by the AIDS epidemic.



Barry McGee, *Untitled*, 1994
Mixed media on driftwood
Collection of Mariallidia Marcotulli

They likewise railed against the decade's creeping gentrification and rampant consumerism. "They were part of a community that responded acidly to the social and aesthetic values associated with '80s consumer culture and corporate hegemony in the dawning of the age of the internet," states Natasha Boas, the San Francisco-based independent curator who proposed the



Margaret Kilgallen, *Untitled*, 2000
Acrylic on paper
Courtesy the Estate of Margaret
Kilgallen and Ratio 3, San Francisco

show to SFAI's Walter and McBean Galleries. "With their raw, immediate, and gritty street and studio practices, these post-punk, key artists of the Mission School would soon become international icons for new generations of art students and makers."

Operating outside the traditional art market, Johanson, Kilgallen, McCarthy, McGee, and Neri were friends, collaborating and exhibiting together at local venues such as Four Walls, The Lab, New Langton Arts, the Luggage Store, and Adobe Books. In 2002, they were retroactively dubbed the Mission School by critic Glen Helfand, who commented on the escalating attention paid to these previously obscure artists in a *San Francisco Bay Guardian* article, which is excerpted in the accompanying publication. In 2010, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art canonized these high-octane, formerly underground artists in a wall text which stated that the Mission school was "the most significant art movement to emerge out of San Francisco in the late twentieth century."

"*ENERGY THAT IS ALL AROUND* does not purport to be a definitive survey, nor did these artists set out to create a 'school,'" observes Lynn Gumpert, director of NYU's Grey Art Gallery. "Instead, they worked within a close-knit community to critique society by employing aesthetic concerns normally associated with craft, street, and folk art, literally standing our culture's notion of 'high art' on its head." Indeed, the exhibition intentionally questions what constitutes a "school." In her essay in the exhibition catalogue, Dina Pugh notes: "More expansively, Mission School could be understood not as a 'movement' but as a shared ethos, and then it can extend to countless others who are similarly engaged in the art of resistance." "We are very pleased to have organized *ENERGY THAT IS ALL AROUND*," states Hesse McGraw, vice president for exhibitions and public programs at SFAI. "Through their various formal and informal affiliations with the San Francisco Art Institute, Chris, Margaret, Barry, Alicia, and Ruby have changed the language of this institution. *ENERGY* provides a raffish and spirited introduction to the idiosyncrasies and human legacy of this particular art school."

All five artists display an affinity for cheap and/or discarded materials, a devotion to community, and a decidedly anti-consumerist stance. **Chris Johanson** (b. 1968), is perhaps best known for his cityscapes painted on found board or canvas, filled with everyman stick figures speaking universal truths from cartoon bubbles. His triptych *Life is Shit* (1997) exemplifies the kind of sped-up, angsty, ironic, rebellious representation one could find on storefronts and mailboxes in the early '90s. **Alicia McCarthy** (b. 1969) employs the tags "Fancy" and "Probe," and, like her contemporaries, often uses recycled materials, dumpster-diving for supplies and obliquely commenting on the environmental damage caused by rampant consumerism. Along with Neri

and Kilgallen, she channels a feminist sensibility. **Ruby Neri** (b. 1970; aka “Reminisce”), has developed a reputation for her bold, expressive hand-modeled sculptures and brash paintings that recall the likes of Mike Kelley and Nicole Eisenmann. **Margaret Kilgallen** (1967–2001; aka “Meta”) revered American folk art and hobo culture. Referencing it frequently in her studio work and her outdoor mural paintings, she similarly often incorporated signage typography. Her untimely death at age 34 marked a huge loss for the art world. Over the years, **Barry McGee** (b. 1966; aka “Twist” and “Fong,” among other monikers) is perhaps the Mission School’s most recognized member. Employing discarded objects and graffiti in a wide range of media, McGee has effectively brought the street into the museum. His *Untitled* (1990–2013), commissioned for the show, is composed of a damaged panel from a found Mission District storefront painted and tagged over with words and images from the wide range of motifs he has employed from 1990 until now.

These five Mission School artists share essential formal and thematic concerns but, at the same time, have devised their own personal styles. As Boas notes, their collective and individual work evokes a paradox: it appears to be unfinished but is actually highly considered and resolved. All move easily between representation and abstraction. Their installations combine mural painting, sculpture, drawing, found objects, and multimedia. Johanson, McCarthy, McGee, and Neri remain friends and continue to collaborate. Foregrounding their aesthetic contributions as well as subversions, *ENERGY THAT IS ALL AROUND* brings the decidedly lowbrow and defiant early work of some of California’s current influential and innovative artists to New York and the tri-state area.

Exhibition catalogue:

The exhibition is accompanied by a 120-page catalogue published by Chronicle Books, which features brief biographies of the artists and installation views from the show’s presentation in the Walter and McBean Galleries at SFAI. An introduction by Hesse McGraw is followed by an essay by Natasha Boas, “Nostalgia Is No Longer What It Used to Be,” which contextualizes the group in terms of the Bay Area’s changing social landscape in the 1990s. Former gallerist Dina Pugh’s “Off the Tracks: Ethics and Aesthetics of Recent San Francisco Art” explores the artists’ philosophies and social engagement. Glen Helfand’s influential 2002 article “The Mission School: San Francisco’s Street Artists Deliver Their Neighborhood to the Art World” is excerpted. “Mission School: Yes or No,” features excerpts from an SFAI panel discussion in which Dena Beard, David Kasprzak, Kevin Killian, Ruby Neri, and Renny Pritikin debated the value of using the term “school” as a stylistic designation. Jack Hanley, who has presented the artists’ works in his gallery, paints a picture of community and life in the Mission District before the Silicon Valley dot-com boom.

Sponsorship:

ENERGY THAT IS ALL AROUND is curated by Natasha Boas and organized by the Walter and McBean Galleries, San Francisco Art Institute, where it was graciously funded in part by Stephen and Maribelle Leavitt; Nancy and Joachim Bechtle; San Francisco Honda; Alexandra Bowes; Emily Carroll; Ann Hatch; Roselyne C. Swig; and Susan Swig. The presentation at the Grey Art Gallery is made possible in part by the generous support of The Suzanne Geiss Company; Jane Wesman and Don Savelson; Susan and Steven Jacobson; Cheim & Read; Ratio 3, San Francisco; RVCA; the Grey’s Director’s Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends; and the Abby Weed Grey Trust. In-kind support is provided by Jack Hanley Gallery, David

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About the Grey Art Gallery:

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on exploring art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information:

Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, New York, NY 10003
Tel: 212/998-6780, Fax: 212/995-4024
E-mail: greyartgallery@nyu.edu
Website: www.nyu.edu/greyart

Hours:

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11 am–6 pm
OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm
Saturday: 11 am–5 pm
Sunday, Monday, and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge