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## Will Cotton & Ryan McGinness in Conversation



Ryan McGinness, "Hell Shines Up," 2021, acrylic on linen, 56.5 x 51 in. (143.51 x 129.54 cm) Courtesy of the artist.

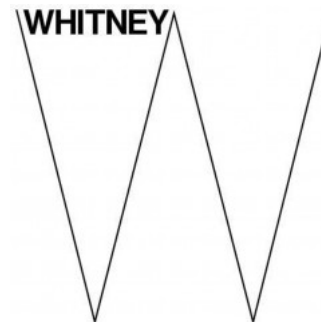
By RYAN MCGINNESS, February 2022

The following exchange was born out of a studio visit broadcast to the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art in Virginia Beach, where McGinness grew up. The two artists revisited topics covered in that original interview with several subsequent studio visits into the fall of 2021.

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**Ryan McGinness: I believe the first time we met was in 1997. We both had solo exhibitions up at the time, and mutual friends were telling us to see each other's show.**

**Will Cotton:** I know I saw a piece of yours before I met you. I recall it having a silvery background. And I think there was a simplified image?

**RM:** Yes, it would have been a clip art image of some sort. I was painting images from the public domain. I think there was some shared sensibility between us. But as is most often the case, when people make those comparisons, it's usually just a superficial sensibility. Perhaps our color palettes were similar. I remember you were painting Mr. Bubble, images of Candy Land, the Trix Bunny, and other characters from pop culture.

**WC:** Yeah. And there's an aspect of advertising in there as well. Those were mostly advertising icon toys, which I kept finding in flea markets. I'd become interested in this hybrid of play and brand awareness/commercial persuasion.

**RM:** I could see people wanting to put us together. And I'm sure that we met before those exhibitions. Perhaps we were even in group shows together.

**WC:** Yeah, maybe so. I recall that around that time I had somehow set up a studio visit with you, meaning we must have known each other, at least a little. I was in a real drinking/druggie period at that time, and I had literally been up all night. I think the visit was for around 9 or 10 in the morning. I hated canceling things so I showed up on no sleep. I must have seemed pretty off.

**RM:** Oh, I don't remember anything about your condition or anything like that. But, what I absolutely do remember is that you helped me recognize that which I was good at and liked doing—which was outside of my paintings at the time. My studio was split between the painting area and the design work I was doing to stay alive. So I had pinned on my wall posters and logos and icons I was making, and in the paintings I was interested in using line art images from the public domain. But the paintings were hand-painted, and they looked like art, you know what I mean?

**WC:** I do. That was the studio on Broadway right?

**RM:** I was on Broadway between Prince and Houston. Andrew Kreps was in that building and José Freire. In fact, I remember seeing an exhibition of little dainty delicate paintings of flowers with smiley faces and thinking, oh I wonder what little girl painted those. This must have been 1995. They were the first Murakamis I saw.

**WC:** Yeah, that's funny. I remember seeing those too!

**RM:** So, yeah, you would have come to the Broadway studio where I had all the design work pinned up. But I was caught up in this concept of making paintings of anonymously made drawings pulled from the public domain. I was actually more attracted to the aesthetic of my design work. And you responded positively to the design work. That work was more mysterious and impressive to you. And, it was more "me." You asked my why I wasn't painting that. That was a huge question for me! You helped me make that breakthrough.



**WC:** And then a few years later I was fortunate enough to be invited to your drawing salons on Allen Street. And, we've shared some of the same galleries like Baldwin, Kohn, Horowitz in East Hampton, and we've both done projects with Pace Prints. And recently you were in the group show Inka and I curated at Miles McEnery Gallery. I'm really just establishing our overlaps here.

**RM: And now you just finished an exhibition with Templon in Brussels and have Baldwin coming. When do these paintings ship?**

**WC:** They go out July 9. I don't know how they can ship them that quickly. Because the show opens July 30.

**RM: I suppose they get loaded onto that weekly shuttle.**

**WC:** I was going to ship sooner, but now that there's a covid vaccine I can have studio visits again. And I paint so slowly, maybe six, seven paintings a year maximum. And so once these go out, I won't really be able to have a studio visit for at least another probably five or six months. So I delayed the shipping to be able to have more people over to see the work.

**RM: So, of course that begs the question, what's next.**

**WC:** I just had a nice conversation yesterday with Michael Nevin, from Journal gallery. Do you know Journal?

**RM: Yes, of course. I love Journal! They're right around the corner.**

**WC:** I'd like to show a piece there.

**RM: Show three or four?**

**WC:** Well I don't think I want to do that. I think I'll show one big one on the back wall so you can see it from the street and then one little one in the window. What I want to do in New York right now is just show one major piece.

**RM: What would that painting be?**

**WC:** You know, it was cool. Michael came over and got really excited about this piece I'm pointing to, it's a unicorn portrait, with no cowboy. It's called, "The Fearsome Animal Passions of Raw Nature."



*Will Cotton, "The Fearsome Animal Passions of Raw Nature," 2021 oil on linen, 54 x 41 in. (137.2 x 104.1 cm).  
Courtesy of the artist.*

**RM: Where does that come from?**

**WC:** I just scour the internet for little phrases and words and things that I like

**RM: You collect them?**

**WC:** Yeah. And I don't attribute them. I could probably do a Google search and find out where it came from.

**RM: Or, anyone could. That's a great topic to talk about: titling as opposed to just labeling. And, as opposed to untitling or just numbering or attributing a titling system. Are you always collecting phrases?**

**WC:** A lot of titles in this show are actually very simple. So this one is called Shoeing. It sounds descriptive but it's really more pointed than that. A real descriptive title could be "Two men shoeing a pink unicorn standing in melted chocolate ice cream". But you know, it's just called Shoeing. It's a verb. When I add a title it really adds another layer of content.

**RM: And that's what I'm getting at, because titles are an opportunity to imbue the work with meaning that someone may not conjure up themselves. The text is directly tied to the work.**

**WC:** Right. Exactly.

**RM: Like you, I am always collecting phrases and ideas for titles. When a painting is finished, I will match it up to a phrase. For me, titles are an opportunity to add meaning, explain or at least hint at something in the painting, or even purposefully confound.**

**And, unique titles help assert the uniqueness of the painting as opposed to a label with a number for a work that is one from a series.**

WC: That's great. I have to admit, I don't know many of your titles. Well, now I'm gonna pay attention.

**RM: And mine can be out there! Sometimes my titles are designed to trigger interest in the phrase so that it is researched. It serves as a rabbit hole for a topic related to the painting or even just something I'm interested in. So, the titles are often coded. I want to finish our discussion on titles, but first let's get back to what comes next.**

WC: I'm planning some trips that will put me in the presence of cowboys and horses. And I'm at a place with this material where I feel like if I'm to continue, I need to find something new, something I haven't thought of yet.

**RM: I remember seeing some printout collages of this one when you were sorting out the composition. Do you save those collages?**

WC: Yeah, they're digital so I've got the files. And some of the printouts I save as well. I've got drawers full of them.

**RM: Do you have any urge to share them?**

WC: I don't. In fact, I really should destroy them because they're not good. They're not art. They're just process. And as opposed to the preparatory drawings, which I think are very different, I wouldn't throw those away. But if the printed collages were great, that'd be the end product. I wouldn't need to make the paintings. But they're not even close.

**RM: Maybe you should destroy those files. They could be mistaken for having been considered "art" by you. And, sketches clearly communicate, "this is process." Those digital collages could be mistaken for the painting.**

WC: Probably not if someone's really looking. But yeah, because most people don't really look. (Laughing)

**RM: It's good to think about worst-case-scenarios when you're not around. Someone will have that hard drive and try to reconstruct what your practice was like. And that might be even more reason to save the printouts and even mark them up, because it is still part of the process. They tell us how your early 21st century paintings were made. I can even see those receipts and invoices for the stock photos being included in your archives. OK, so you know that the forthcoming paintings will be a continuation of this series.**

WC: Well I have a concept for the one that I'm going to do for Journal Gallery. I'll take this idea of the unicorn portrait and run with that, and it might be more of a full figure portrait I think, because I want to make it large.

**RM: I like that you said "full-figure" when referring to the unicorn. It may be interesting to keep the painting portrait orientation instead of landscape.**

WC: Yeah, I might do.

**RM: You practice a lot of restraint when deciding what to do next. You allow yourself time. You allow your travels to inspire what will be next.**

**WC:** I do, and it's really just that I selfishly want to always be excited and challenged in the studio, every day. And I've found that if I plan too far ahead, I start to feel like I'm just working for somebody else. With a new painting I need to be thinking, how would I do that? What would that look like?

**RM: And that's a mistake I make in my planning. I over plan, and I find myself always catching up to myself. I get stressed about trying to finish a series I began, five years ago, for example. You know those "Mirror Before a Girl" paintings I've been making? I mirrored the title.**

**WC:** Yeah I remember those.

**RM: I started those three years ago. I'm still not done with the series. I hope to finish this fall. I got it stuck in my head that I need to make ten for the series to be complete. Ten makes the statement.**

**WC:** And what are the variables? What are you playing with?

**RM: Color and composition. The artwork is already burned into all the screens—about 40 or 50. All the parts make up the variables that are combined in unique ways for each painting. There is a system I've been working with, and now it has taken me over three years. It's coming close to doing what you said before—just working for the series. My goal is to be able to do what you seem to be practicing—making work in real time.**

**WC:** It's been hard for me to slow down to that point, to be honest. I mean, it's not that I was planning an entire series, but spending 6-8 weeks on a painting is a slightly unnatural speed. I think if I could make one painting a week, I would really feel like nothing is untapped. Like all my ideas are getting made, for better or for worse. It's just intriguing to me to think about what would that be like? Because then I'd be making around 50 paintings a year, and really working through ideas, quickly. I think this is more on my mind recently since I did a rough calculation like okay, I'm 56 I've got this many more years left, if I'm making six paintings year... Oh, God, that's not very many paintings, you know? I want to do a lot more paintings than that.

**RM: In order to work through ideas?**

**WC:** Yeah.

**RM: So that's a different approach than making finished products. Do you currently work out some of those ideas in drawing?**

**WC:** Or collage. There are a lot of collages that I make and drawings that I get pretty deep into, pretty far along. And then I completely abandon the composition because it just isn't working. Painting more quickly would probably feel more like that stage, more like the one week timeframe. And if I could manage to feel like that's the output, that's done, that's the finished piece, then I could do one a week, I'm sure. But, you know, they need to be painted by me. It's not a thing I can shop out to somebody else, so for now it's still a slow process.

**RM: Do you keep a sketchbook?**

**WC:** I do. I keep a number of sketchbooks, scraps of paper.

**RM:** So those are the ways for you to capture ideas and express

**WC:** And I've got flat files full of those sketches and drawings, and I consider those art. And I've shown some, but the vast majority have not been seen. And a lot of these, of course, are like the figure drawings that we do together. And some of those have grown into compositions that I've actually painted. If I get to do some more cowboy figure drawing, that might happen again.

**RM:** Why even make pictures? Assuming, that's what you think you're doing.

**WC:** Yes, I do think I'm making pictures. It takes a lot to get me there. It's not a given. I don't just make paintings because I'm a painter. I've got to feel like there's something in this idea that I haven't seen before. A painting I'd like to own.

I don't know quite how to describe this. I'll just start talking about it. As the ideas are coming through my head. The ones that tend to catch my attention are the ones that feel the most wrong. Most stupid, least like "real" art and consequently somehow transgressive.

**RM:** In content?

**WC:** Yeah. In content.

**RM:** Well, for example, we rotated that painting over there...

**WC:** Oh, true.

**RM:** ...and that got us excited, because the composition seemed so wrong. It was weighted in the corners, and that felt awkward.

**WC:** Painting with good craft now is also a transgressive act in the context of the New York art world, and I fully understand that in the rest of the country it's not, it's just what people do. But considering the context of where it's going to be seen is necessary for that gesture to feel that transgressive.

**RM:** Right. So, that's the kind of work you like and appreciate. It comes back to this idea of novelty. And, not to sound antagonistic, but, why try to be transgressive? What's the point?

**WC:** It's a great question. I'd say it makes my engagement with the audience feel more compelling for me.

**RM:** It does. I agree. That is how we move forward—by subverting the convention. By disrupting.

**WC:** Yeah, I mean, maybe transgressive doesn't paint the whole picture. But the context matters. And I guess what we're really talking about is what gets me excited. So whether or not it feels transgressive to anybody else doesn't really matter. Now the first time I thought of painting a girl in a cotton candy cloud, (and this came through some roundabout kind of reasoning), I thought, *oh no you can't, that's ridiculous*. And then I start thinking, yeah, but I could. And that spark of wrongness, felt right.

**RM:** Right. Because it is an extension of your character. To do something purposefully wrong? I know that's the case with me.

**WC:** I get bored easily. I don't like small talk, you know, I like to go deep, we go deep, often. And I don't want to just paint what you're supposed to paint, whatever the art world is talking about at the moment, or the thing that your art teachers told you was relevant back in art school.

**RM:** But the urge to do that is what separates capital “A” artists from lowercase “a” artists.

**WC:** I think it is

**RM:** I want to bring up the difference between pictures, which we've established you make, and posters. I compose my paintings as posters. The difference is in how the picture plane addresses the world beyond its frame. Some of your compositions really confound me.

**WC:** So you see yours is a totally closed system?

**RM:** Yes.

**WC:** There is nothing beyond the border?

**RM:** Right, even though some of the images “bleed” off the edges. And there I borrow a graphics/print term, you know—like, a “full bleed” image. I approach painting from the graphic arts. The picture plane is the whole world. It is a closed system. Your paintings, on the other hand, are windows into other worlds. Elements in your paintings are cropped, but they presumably continue into the imagined world beyond the painting. This really represents two very different ways of conceiving of what a painting is.

**WC:** I think it's partly just to say, yeah, this is a snapshot, this is a piece of a bigger story. And so your mind can go through a kind of “if then” scenario so like, oh, if you're putting a glittery shoe on a pink unicorn in an ice cream landscape, then you could also be riding this unicorn, you could be shoeing a green unicorn, it's not a hermetically sealed system, it suggests other possibilities.

**RM:** Right. Which brings us to the idea of narrative. These are narratives, right?

**WC:** Yes they are, even in something like a portrait, which is probably on the less narrative end of the scale, there is a narrative.

**RM:** And in that unicorn portrait, for example, the subject is looking at the viewer. That is unique among all the paintings in this group. In having the subject look at the viewer, the painting is breaking the fourth wall. And you can play with that. In that painting, the pupil is not parallel to the surface. The unicorn's head is turned. So, the subject is simultaneously aware of a world within the painting.

**WC:** So, let me ask you this. Let's say you had to be me for a bit, and you're composing something like this picture. What would you do?

**RM:** But composing as me?

**WC:** Yes, you're you, and you have to make my painting.



**RM: OK, I would bring this elbow in so that you have these triangles, and these points which bring the eye around. I would bring the figure down, of course. Because part of me sees this painting and asks, “Wow, you couldn’t just bring that part down and make it fit neatly in that space?” And this happens with the horns a lot for me. The horns are very considered as they approach the edge, and they create a lot of tension. And those positionings read as more purposeful than those other croppings that don’t seem to acknowledge the edges.**

WC: I wanted to pin that figure of the cowboy to the top of the painting compositionally. It suspends him in a way that it wouldn’t if you could see the whole elbow.

**RM: I agree. It would be more static. I see what you mean now. It’s a much more active way to position the figure. Now, in the case of your paintings that I call the “icingscapes,” the imagery is abstract, and the compositions are “all-over” and “full-bleed.” Those were a bit more experimental.**

WC: It felt very natural to me. I did abstract painting in art school. I love looking at abstract painting. de Kooning is one of my top favorite artists. So that didn’t feel weird to me at all.

**RM: To what degree do the worlds within your pictures conform to the rules of our shared reality? They could be characterized as surreal.**

WC: I don’t want them to feel like a magical environment. I want them to feel believable. I want you to feel as if you been there, or that the scenes are plausible. I think where I deviate from our laws of nature is when I put figures on cotton candy clouds, for example. If there were such things as cotton candy clouds, they still wouldn’t be able to support the weight of the people.

**RM: So, something magical is happening!**

WC: Well, the way I reconcile that is that I allow myself to tweak some things in nature, but not to an extreme—just a few properties and a few materials to make something new happen.

**RM: So, you have your own rules.**

WC: I really do. It matters to me immensely. For example, when I was sketching out those pictures with the unicorns moving through the air, some of them looked like flying unicorns, and I hated that. Because, unicorns don’t fly! They’re obviously way too heavy. The whole pegasus thing I think is just ridiculous. I know something about aerodynamics, and that is just never ever going to happen.

**RM: So, a flying unicorn would bring the picture into more of a fantasy world.**

WC: That’s right. I really don’t want to bend those rules to the point where I’m making magical realism. Or surrealism. I don’t think they’re surreal.

**RM: They are not absurd. You want them to look as real as possible without looking photo-realistic.**

WC: That’s right. I still want them to look like paintings...

**RM: ...of something real.**

**WC:** I feel like as a language, art historically, painting has been the dominant form of image making for so long that there is a certain believability to it. You wouldn't question a painting the same way you might question a photograph and say, "Well, obviously, that's a Photoshopped image." That doesn't come up with painting, because there is this suspension of disbelief. You see Tiepolo's painted ceilings with horses and chariots flying across the sky, and you don't think, oh, that's photoshopped.



*Will Cotton, "Falling Cowboy," 2021, oil on linen, 54 x 72 in. (137.2 x 182.9 cm). Courtesy of the artist.*

**RM: Right. That's the faith we put in painting. There is truth in painting.**

**WC:** Yeah. And we have a lot of trouble putting that same faith in photography. We just don't trust photographs.

**RM: And while you use Photoshop to collage together the compositions, Photoshop doesn't even come to my mind when I look at these paintings. Although, I wonder if it would to a young person.**

**WC:** I could see a young person looking at these paintings on a phone and thinking so... but I wonder. I guarantee you people will look at our work differently as time goes on.

**RM: In reproduction?**

**WC:** In person. I walk through the Prado, and there's a picture of Jesus on the cross. I'm immediately drawn in by the light and the musculature on his leg. In terms of my appreciation for that work, the fact that the subject is Jesus on the cross is lost on me, because it is not a mythology that I care about, but I'm interested in the painting anyway. That's a different appreciation than it was for most people who saw the painting when it was made.

**RM: Right. Intentionality gets lost over time.**

**WC:** It does, which is why I don't put much credence in that at all. You know, in studio visits, people will often ask, "Well, what does this painting mean? What is this painting about?" I've been thinking a lot recently about the veils of meaning that hang over every piece of art,

everyone has their own set of interests and biases that affect their interpretation of the work. I see all interpretations as valid.

**RM: Now we can jump to meaning. And even the meaning of meaning. Is meaning assertion righteousness? You invite the viewer to bring meaning or project meaning. In most cases, people assume the work is made with meaning or a kind of intention.**

**WC:** And there is the assumption that the intended meaning is important to me, unambiguous, and what they're essentially asking is for me to decode the image for them.

**RM: Right. What is the right meaning?**

**WC:** Right. Do I have this wrong or not?

**RM: And that's what undermines a lot of art appreciation. That is, the burden is on the viewer to get it right or not. And that's one of the problems with a lot of contemporary art.**

**WC:** Say you're looking at a 17th century Dutch painting that is full of metaphors and parables and...

**RM: ...clues and puzzle pieces.**

**WC:** It's fun to learn about all those clues and play that game. And, I'm willing to participate. I think people want a way into the picture, and I don't want to give it to them any more than I already have with the image. I don't want to pin words to the work. And I've actually been spending the past few days trying to do that, because I have had some studio visits where people ask me, "Hey Will, why unicorns and cowboys." It's not a distinct set of reasons. You know the way you put a lot of your symbols together? It's probably more direct in your paintings than in mine, because they are symbols, and you're going to want to go in and decode them and find reasons for this and that. Now, what would you say to that? Are the symbols ever there just for the compositional value as opposed to the symbolic meaning of the symbol?

**RM: So, I liken my paintings to R.A.M. Random Access Memories. The paintings reflect how the mind works, especially in the dream-state where a lot of imagery is colliding together, and your waking mind is forced to impose meaning. The individual symbols that I draw, I actually refer to as "units of meaning." They are the elements that come together to form the compounds, that, in turn, form mixtures. This is a model borrowed from chemistry, of course. I am not putting them together to create pictures with intended meaning. However, that is a direction I'm moving toward—creating pictures with narrative. It's a huge shift for me. The "Studio Views" are my first foray in that direction.**

**WC:** That's a first step outside the picture itself.

**RM: Exactly, because you have an implied space and objects in that space. You have a thing, the painting within the painting, in a space.**

**WC:** That's not a small difference.

**RM: It has taken me years to get to that little step. What has really happened is that my paintings have become symbols of my paintings. I recognized that my paintings had become “McGinnesses” regardless of content. They had achieved symbol status (and not necessarily status symbol). The paintings within the paintings simultaneously read as reproductions and primary productions at the same time. I like that the images exists in two states at the same time. But the real point is that I am moving toward creating narrative pictures. I want to create symbolic pictures that assert meaning.**

WC: I have this feeling that if I’m describing a very specific narrative action, then I’m making an illustration.

**RM: So, what is the difference between a painting and an illustration?**

WC: I think of an illustration as an image that is made in the service of words.

**RM: That means the picture has utility, and in my definition of art, it has no utility.**

WC: I totally agree.

**RM: In order to safeguard these works from reading as illustrations, they also have to read as “paintings.” You have very deliberate gestures and moves within the paintings where a brushstroke can serve this double-duty. It can serve the picture as well as reading as pigment pulled from a brush.**

WC: I love it when that happens, and that is another thing I’m trying to do more of.

**RM: And that was happening more in the cake paintings.**

WC: It was purely that.

**RM: So, this is one way of asserting that these are paintings. And, your subjects rarely acknowledge the viewer. If you had this cowboy looking out at the viewer, it might read as more of an illustration or advertisement.**

WC: Yes!

**RM: And that changes everything. These paintings are not in the service of a narrative, the are a narrative.**

WC: And, I don’t want to come up with a specific story that explains what the painting is “about.”

**RM: So, there is a fine line between asserting meaning and allowing for some space for interpretation.**

WC: I also think that illustration tends to traffic in clichés. And art does not. Unless that’s the point like with Jeff Koons. Or perhaps cliché can be used as a jumping off point.

**RM: And this comes back to your point about wanting to be transgressive. You can’t do that with clichés, so you’ve got to use the exact opposite.**

WC: That’s true!

**RM: So how do you do that with subject matter that comes so dangerously close to cliché?**

**WC:** Well, there's that razor's edge that I find to be a motivational tool for making art. I love that edge. If it looks too much like art, I'm not interested. If it looks too much like illustration, I'm not interested.

**RM: And that's what makes these paintings so unique.**

**WC:** In a way, they're really deadpan. In fact, there is a little bit of that in the titles. To call this painting, "Shoeing" is pretty straight-forward. "Shoeing a pink unicorn" would be about something else entirely. So it's just "shoeing."

**RM: The title helps do the thing that you described before. That is, you want these scenes to be mundane in their subject matter in order to help make that world real. And, the paintings are not realistic (as in, photorealism). Rather, they are believable.**

**WC:** Yes, exactly. Believable is a good word to use.

**RM: It reminds me of this other word we might be able to apply to this world. Magical.**

**WC:** "Magical" makes me uncomfortable. As does "whimsical." I think it comes back to cliché. You say "magical" or "whimsical" to someone, and they've got an idea in mind. That idea has no overlap with art.

**RM: If you were to go magical and whimsical, you would amp-up your color palette. But you use very calm colors.**

**WC:** Yes. You know, it's funny, because over the years people have described my colors as bright and happy, but it's just not there.

**RM: Your palette evokes those colors without having to be those colors. But if I were to enter your world—to go through the painting and look around on the other side, that world would be those bright crazy colors. But your paintings don't depict that fictitious world realistically. It's as if you've taken pictures of that world with old film. There's a haze over them. And that's what makes the paintings more believable.**

**In removing the viewer one dimension back from that world, you make it more believable. You evoke the feeling of reproduction when you make these painting look like paintings. The painting is self-consciousness.**

**WC:** One of the questions I often ask myself is "what if this was really happening?!" The very beginning of this for me goes back to the mid-nineties. I saw this old game, Candy Land, that I had played as a child and hadn't seen in decades. And I thought, my god, that felt like such a real place to me. And I wondered, what if it were a real place? I want to paint *that!*

**RM: And it's this filter that makes it believable. All the paintings in this group have the same feel, except for this one. There's glitter in this one. On the horseshoe. What's that about?**

**WC:** It's symbolic, as I think all the other things in the painting are. Like that hats are symbols of cowboys, the cowboys are symbols of American masculinity, etcetera. When I painted a regular horseshoe, it didn't feel like the narrative was complete. What could make this more real? Well, a glittery horseshoe. That's obviously what you'd be putting on a pink unicorn. Not a regular horseshoe.

**RM: But this is “real world” glitter as opposed to a trompe l'oeil painting of glitter.**

**WC:** That’s something I’ve never done before. I just needed it to be pushed over the top a bit more. And I felt like in this case. That’s the solution. I don’t see it happening again. I like to allow myself to have those thoughts. The painting is the master here. And, that painting demanded I do that.

**RM: And, the painting demands certain dimensions and wants to be a specific scale.**

**WC:** Yes! And, I have little control over that.

**RM: So, this painting over here, is unique in that it’s smaller and the figures are still at about 1:1 scale with the viewer. They’re life-size.**

**WC:** That’s true. That’s something I’ve been comfortable with in terms of the believability of it.

**RM: But this one feels like a painting of a doll of a cowboy.**

**WC:** That’s how it feels to me. And it’s not that you couldn’t pull it off that scale, at that size, but it’s not working yet. I did another painting that size that’s now in the FLAG group show. In that painting, the cowboy is slightly larger than life. And the unicorn as well. And I felt like that worked without question. But this is something I’m still trying to fix. I’d like to be able to make small paintings that are really compelling. I think it’s a challenge.

**RM: Compelling by being meaningful. When someone comes into your studio and asks you what a painting means, what do you say?**

**WC:** I think they’re asking for a way in. Most people are visually illiterate. I don’t think they trust themselves to analyze an image and come up with anything besides what they see directly with their eyes. We’re not taught aesthetics in school. Even in art schools sometimes. I’ve had curators come in here and be unable to talk about the work at all without having either read something about it or heard from me about it. But I am interested in how the work is read by those who are able and willing to read it themselves. I’ve asked you to read some of my mock-ups and tell me what you see.

**RM: I’ve recently starting to think about how my work is seen by others. I’ve never made my work with an audience in mind, and I’m realizing how short-sighted that’s been. Or rather, I’ve never realized that people see my paintings differently than I do. To me, because I am so familiar with the images, and because I am so fastidious with the compositions on a micro scale, I just assume people see them the same way I see them. It turns out, some people think my paintings are a mess! But I see all these interesting connections between the images. To me, they are this delicate lattice of connectivity. Everything is perfectly placed.**



Ryan McGinness, "Perception Management," 2020, acrylic and metal leaf on wood panel (triptych), 84 x 60 in. (213.4 x 152.4 cm) each, 84 x 180 in. (213.4 x 355.6 cm) total. Courtesy of the artist.

**WC:** I think that raises an interesting question, which is, Does it matter to you how others see your work.

**RM:** And it does.

**WC:** To the point where you would change the work you're making?

**RM:** Yes, to help me stay on course to where I alone want to go. There's a clear difference between acknowledging an audience and catering to one. I'm happy to receive feedback, and the best criticism is useful. I have a background in design, and in design the burden of communicating is on the sender. If the message is not received, it is the fault of the creator. But that's not the case with art. If someone's doesn't "understand" a work of art that doesn't mean that the artist has failed.

**WC:** I feel the same way.

**RM:** The burden is on the viewer, and that's why a lot of contemporary art makes people feel bad.

**WC:** In some cases, they can't read. And in other cases, they simply won't read. I point out that there are a bunch of symbols here, and when you put them together, I ask, "What do you see?" What meaning or narrative can you come up with. What do you think the unicorn means? But some people just can't do that. You know what I've noticed? When I give a lecture or talk, and I explain about the narratives in the work, that does not excite people as much as anecdote. When I was making the Candy Land paintings which are all about hedonistic excess and getting and doing everything you want, those were made at a time when I was living like that. And I tell people about that context, and that's what resonates with them about the work, not the more academic description.

**RM:** Of course the human-side. Whereas we appreciate art (or at least I do) in terms of reasons.

**WC:** Or philosophy. Philosophy came in and took over art appreciation in the 70s and 80s.

**RM: Well, a philosophical approach to art appreciation was certainly popularized with Pop Art in the 60s. It forced people to ask “why?” Having come out of a reaction to abstract expressionism, which was a visual expression of action painting, which is largely appreciated by asking “how.”**

**WC:** I’m starting to see a way out of that which is a more poetic interpretation of art. Let’s kick it back to the poetry department.

**RM: Which means a more personal art.**

**WC:** I think we’re in a time right now when biography is everything. And that’s fine. However, there is a very particular kind of biography that is popular now, and that’s the biography of struggle. It’s like the only thing people are interested in right now. And the students feel that. If they have lived through something appropriately difficult, they are encouraged to make work about it.

**RM: We see paintings not expressing ideas, but rather expressing feelings or experiences. Is this an extension of the selfish generation? It’s all about me! Or (hopefully) these are attempts to get to a universal through the self. This speaks to my shift from making idea-driven work, to making narrative-driven work.**

**WC:** I’ve seen you start to do that with the Mother & Child paintings. I thought, “Wow. He’s daring to go there with something more heartfelt.”





Ryan McGinness, "Mother & Child (Ball Chair)," 2019, acrylic and metal leaf on linen, 72 x 60 in. (182.88 x 152.4 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

**RM:** I've always talked about my work in terms of the concepts for the work. I've found meaning in the ideas that are expressed. But, as you'll attest, humans really relate to stories and narratives more. The lines I'm making in my charcoal drawings are designed to look like lines that are searching for forms. There is a degree of theatrics that communicates that narrative of struggle in making the work. But it's completely fiction. As I've always held art up as the truth, and in fact, a standard of truth, these new drawings feel very uncomfortable. It's manipulative. It's using art to manipulate an audience. Those drawings are a lie. Are your paintings fictitious?

**WC:** It's not an easy question to answer, and it's one that's really on my mind a lot. People speak of "realism" in art, but that really has to do with the reality of our lives usually found in the mundane and grotesque. In that sense, my work is really not realism. I'm not responding

to the pandemic. I'm not responding to the Trump presidency in any direct way.

**RM: Well, they are a realism of your reality, not a shared reality.**

**WC:** I practice that kind of fiction you're talking about in the way that they are painted. I want them to feel like a reference to painting as it was made in art history.

**RM: I wonder if anyone would pick up on that.**

**WC:** Honestly, I hope not. I hope it's seen as this is just the most natural way for Will Cotton to paint. This is how it comes out of his fingers. With some of those brushstrokes you were talking about that really stand out as brushstrokes, I made that brushstroke ten times. The other nine were just boring. So, in that sense it's fiction.

**RM: Now is that a lie? Is that theater?**

**WC:** A little bit. I suspect Sargent did the same thing. When you see how he described satin and light you wonder how he did it with such an efficiency of marks. And you brush it on and scrape it off and brush it on and scrape it off until it works and it just looks like you had a happy day of painting, and it all looks wonderful.

**RM: And does that make the paintings a magic trick?**

**WC:** To some degree, yes. I don't think that makes them disingenuous. All our art heroes did the same thing. There's a narrative that I think I'm telling that is not entirely the truth. The way that a painting looks does not reflect the way the painting is made. I hope I make it look easy. On the other hand, the reason I love those Giacometti paintings is because they look so labored. It looks like nothing came to him easily. And knowing about his process, I know they didn't come easily. And all those traces are there for you to see in the final painting. In my paintings they are not.

**RM: Right. But, those traces of labor are calculated and constructed.**

**WC:** Well, that would be another level.

**RM: That's like my charcoal drawings. I put in these guidelines in as if I'm trying to find the forms. The drawings look as if I am conducting that search in the drawing itself. It's not unlike Basquiat putting his canvases and drawings on the floor and encouraging people to walk on them so that they accumulate a patina that would suggest he made the work with casual abandonment. That is the narrative that he wants us to believe. The narrative that he cultivated.**

**WC:** That's right. I feel like this is not discussed enough.

**RM: Because it's part of the magic trick.**

**WC:** That's true. It's more about not lifting the curtain.

**RM: So my artistic gesture is to be transparent about the charcoal drawings and declare them to be lies. Art is artifice. It's all a construction. It's all theater.**

**WC:** You know, there's a dominant style of painting right now. It's a kind-of de-skilled bad painting. I think that's so popular right now, because it looks like "authenticity." It's not the same as the Basquiat authenticity. This is like, "I'm not good at painting but I'm going to do it anyway because I believe so strongly in the subject matter".

**RM: This is honest! You need to respect my identity as a bad artist.**

**WC:** Now the other case is the popular George Bush paintings. Our former president. What those look like is a person who was never trained as an artist who really really wants to make that look like Vladimir Putin. And he wants to make that shadow on his cheek work, and he can't, because he doesn't actually have the skills. But, I think those are appreciated so much, because his struggle reads as authenticity.

**RM: And, does empathy play a part? It's almost like, "the people's art."**

**WC:** Yes!

**RM: Its very Trumpian. I'm not a politician, and I'm not qualified, but elect me, and we'll do this together. It's so bad that we can relate to it.**

**WC:** That's right. We're not being tricked! My, god, in life right now we are being tricked right, left, and center. Show me something honest!

**RM: But its also not quite the "My kid could do that" mentality which would be a reaction to Twombly, for example. It's almost like there is this "uncanny valley" for talent. Don't demonstrate so much skill as to be alienating.**

*Will Cotton was born in Melrose, Massachusetts and raised in New Paltz, New York. He has a BFA from Cooper Union, and lives in New York City. His work often explores themes of desire, insatiability, and most recently the relationship between a cowboy and a pink unicorn. His paintings are in the permanent collections of the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; Seattle Art Museum, Washington; Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio; and Orlando Museum of Art, Florida, as well as many prominent private collections. Cotton served as the artistic director of the California Gurls music video for pop singer Katy Perry. Cotton is the subject of a monograph published by Rizzoli, USA.*

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#### RYAN MCGINNESS

Ryan McGinness is an American artist, living and working in New York, New York. He grew up in the surf and skate culture of Virginia Beach, Virginia, and then studied at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, as an Andrew Carnegie Scholar. During college, he interned at the Andy Warhol Museum as a curatorial assistant. Known for his extensive vocabulary of original graphic drawings that use the visual language of public signage, corporate logos, and contemporary symbology, McGinness is credited with elevating the status of the symbol to fine art through the creation of his paintings, sculptures, installations, and books. Concerned with the perceived value of forms, he assumes the power of this visual language in order to share personal expressions. The New York Times noted, "In the past decade, McGinness has become an art star, thanks to his Warholian mix of pop iconography and silk-screening." Vogue declared, "Ryan McGinness is a leading pioneer of the new semiotics." His work is in the permanent public collections of the Museum of Modern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego, Cincinnati Art Museum, MUSAC in Spain, and the Taguchi Art Collection in Japan.

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