

PROJECT 14

Barry McGee

2004

The stars were aligned...

28 October – 5 December 2004
Metropolitan Meat Market, Melbourne

Water wall mural

28 October – 5 December 2004
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

BIOGRAPHY

Beginning his career in 1984 as a graffiti artist under the tag name 'Twist', Barry McGee became known for his signature droop-faced figures, vibrant optical patterns, tags, drips and doodles. In the 1990s he expanded his signature style into a museum context, creating extraordinary installations from amassed imagery, piles of derelict materials and objects, creating an entropic vision of the contemporary city.

FACTS

- Barry McKee earned his reputation as a street artist.
- *For me, graffiti it mean making marks on surfaces using just about anything, be it markers, spray, paint, chalk, lipstick, varnish, ink. Or it can be the result of scratches and incisions. The aim is to maintain the energy created by disturbance or excitement in the street.*
– Barry McGee
- For Project 14, McGee worked with a 'tribe' of co-collaborators and family. He surfed in the day and worked at night. He created sculptures from found and painted objects.
- Small self-portraits of McGee were painted on empty liquor bottles and hung in abundance. McGee saw these as "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, a bit like graffiti."
- In this work the figures of the 'everyman' are seen as both tragic and heroic, colourful debris of the city streets in the 'cheerful hell of urban life'.
- *My work explores the sometimes humorous ills of contemporary city life.*
– Barry McGee

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PROJECT OVERVIEW

Starting his career as a graffiti artist, over the past decade Barry McGee's signature droop-faced figures, vibrant optical patterns, tags, drips and doodles have populated vast and complex installations in museums and galleries around the world. For Project 14, McGee transformed the old Metropolitan Meat Market into a cacophony of chequerboard shapes, urban characters and cast-offs, booming and colliding with sound and energy. A mural was painted over the National Gallery of Victoria's glass waterwall and acted as an alternative billboard for the event. Together the works evoked the sensory overload of contemporary consumer culture and paid homage to the outcasts of a disposable world.

McGee first started to do graffiti in 1984 at the age of 18, with the tag name 'Twist', and became known for his unique images and visual style. Developing this style into extraordinary installations in the 1990s from hybrid sources – across cultures, urban architecture and the detritus of the streets – McGee's amassed imagery, his piles and stacks of derelict materials and objects, create an entropic vision of the contemporary city. In Australia, McGee launched the newly converted Meat Market contemporary art space in North Melbourne with his installation *The stars were aligned...* The historic building, built in 1880, was clad with an expanse of false walls, dented with cut-out paths and alleyways that evoked the architecture of the street. Painted panels of harlequin and oblong shapes lined the space, pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle of mismatched fragments. A patchwork of colour, they appeared like cartoon buildings, bricks, tiles and stairs, amassed into an abstract pattern of forms.

The centrepiece of the installation, *Truck pyramid*, piled 11 derelict trucks on an open shipping container. The tagged trucks were upended, overturned or tipped at odd angles, their doors flung open, lights flashing and wheels still turning, as if in the aftermath of some apocalyptic collision or cartoon pile-up. At the top of the heap, mechanical legs jerked enthusiastically over the top of an old sofa. Underneath, in a surreal collage of urban space, the shipping container was converted into a public bathroom with cubicles, basins and soap dispensers.

To the side of the installation, a circular wall of flickering video and blaring sound was created from old television monitors stacked on the floor. Their square screens framed diamond shapes, appearing like hand-drawn test patterns and scenes of illegal street activity that recalled surveillance camera footage. Empty liquor bottles, painted with McGee's small coloured portraits, were hung in an overlapping, fragile cluster in one section of the main walls. Their disembodied faces, coloured red, blue, white, brown or green, all bore a similar worn-down look. Some, open-mouthed, seemed to be telling their story; others appeared quiet and despondent.

Kaldor Public Art Project 14: Barry McGee, *The stars were aligned...*, 2004, Metropolitan Meat Market, Melbourne, 28 October – 5 December 2004

Photo: Garry Sommerfeld



Kaldor Public Art Project 14: Barry McGee, *Waterwall Mural* 2004, NGV, Melbourne, 28 October – 5 December 2004

Photo: Predrag Cancar

