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GURU(S): ARTISTS BARRY MCGEE AND CHRIS JOHANSON

Barry McGee and Chris Johanson / Photographed by Curtis Kulig



Now that longtime friends and artists Chris Johanson and Barry McGee have transcended their underground status to become established figures in contemporary art, it seemed appropriate to see what they would have to say to each other all these years later. We've known them both for ages, first seeing the mayhem they wrought upon San Francisco in the '90s as leading figures of what would be known as the Mission School. This was soon after having met them when they began showing at New York's Alleged Gallery, and following them as they mounted their first spectacle shows at Deitch. In that period of time both artists' work defined a generation. While Johanson's art came out of the random craziness he saw while skateboarding through the nether-regions of SF, McGee, who originally worked on the streets under the name Twist, spoke directly to the vandal's impulse of graffiti art. McGee has quipped that the more famous he becomes the less fans he has, and for all the truth in that, the two have earned a place in art history and youth culture that has brought them many more fans than they could have possibly imagined.

Even though we've loved these cats for decades, the best thing about putting them together here is how much longer they've known each other. And as it so happens, the following conversation, which took place at Johanson's L.A. home, marks the first time McGee (who's based in San Francisco) and Johanson have gotten together in 12 years. They've run into each other at art events throughout the years, but hadn't had a proper catch-up. Like old warriors exchanging battle stories, a lot of the references are pretty damn obscure. That's kind of the point -- it's not just that they are compelling creative spirits allowing us a rare, intimate view into how they think, it's that great art comes out of dynamic and unpredictable scenes. Here they reminisce about the old days, complain about the new ones and pay tribute to their friends and collaborators who, throughout the years, may not have gotten their proper due. -- Carlo McCormick



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Installation view from the exhibit, *Barry McGee*, at BAM/PFA through December 9, 2012. Photo by Sibila Savage

Barry McGee: So what about the phrase "street art"?

Chris Johanson: I never understood that. When people started asking me about street art, I would say, "Well I don't know. I was up really late at night and skating on the street a lot." So in a weird, fucked up kind of way, it was an accurate description for me to be called a street artist. I really don't think the catchphrase that went around applies to this though.

BM: It's a term I hear often... It scares the living daylights out of me. Street artists need to get back to actually doing things on the streets, instead of in the galleries where they all seem to be ending up. I hope this term street artist falls from the face of the earth, in my honest opinion. They are taking up precious space outdoors, which is normally reserved for tagging and thoughtless vandalism.

BM: Let's talk about traditional gallery owners. I've noticed most are manic depressives, much like myself.

CJ: Like, as equally fucked up as the artists.

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"Window Painting #5," 2012 from Chris' recent exhibit, *Windows*, at Mitchell-Innes Nash Gallery.

BM: A lot of gallerists started as artists like we did. It's certainly as tough as being an artist, running a gallery and taking care of neurotic, unpredictable prima donnas. I know I behave this way. Making a high-profile sale must be similar to a toke on the crack pipe.

CJ: And then right after, it's like total defeat. The stakes are so high because of this high-rent U.S.A. lifestyle shit we have here.

BM: Then you start getting bills and all your artists need things. And quickly you need another sale.

CJ: It's like a mental hospital. And the more money an artist makes, the less they can keep their coping skills. Suddenly you don't have to do all these things you had to do before. Like, "I can't book my plane ticket! No fucking way!"

BM: I'm so guilty of that. I toss everything to my gallerist Chris Perez. I'll be like "I can't decide which date to go, can you just decide for me?" That part of my brain has died; it's completely dead. It frees me up to obsess on other weird shit.

CJ: Suzanne Geiss handles almost everything for me now. She rules. And I have no idea how to do that stuff now. A few years ago I was like "I don't wanna go anywhere, ever again. I'm done." And now I have a rider like bands have.

BM: She helped set up a rider for you?

CJ: Yeah, like, "Chris won't go anywhere without Christopher Garrett, and they travel together. And there has to be all these things there or else he will leave." And of course, I'm sure that turns off a lot of people but...



Detail of "Untitled," 2005 from *Barry McGee* exhibit at BAM/PFA. Photo by Colin M. Day

BM: I think it's probably a lot of help for people just to have pure information like that.

CJ: At San Francisco City College, when I went to school there from '89 to '92, there was this figure-drawing model. He was really buff, and he was older, and he had this like...

BM: Did he have "the staff"? **CJ:** Yeah, he would get hard-ons. I think that was his thing. I feel like it was kind of a power ritual. He was an older dude, great body. He might have been on a raw food diet because everything was really defined. He had butt muscles, like, muscles above the butt.

BM: I love that so many artists drew from him... from all angles. For a period of time too, it must have been like a 20-year span.

CJ: So you had him, too?

BM: Yes. I had him at SF City College and then at San Francisco Art Institute.

CJ: When I watched *Milk*, it made me so nostalgic for that particular time when I moved to San Francisco. That particular kind of guy that was there. In school I had this teacher with a handlebar mustache. It was like that incredible, gay, lesbian culture.

BM: When you are young, your mind is so wide open and accepting... to just about everything placed in front of you. It was truly a very inspiring time to be an aspiring artist in San Francisco.

CJ: The first place I ever had an art show was with William Passarelli, who had a gallery called Emmanuel Radnitzky Found Objects. He was this tough, kind of queeny gay dude and so full of information and energy. And he died like two years after that.



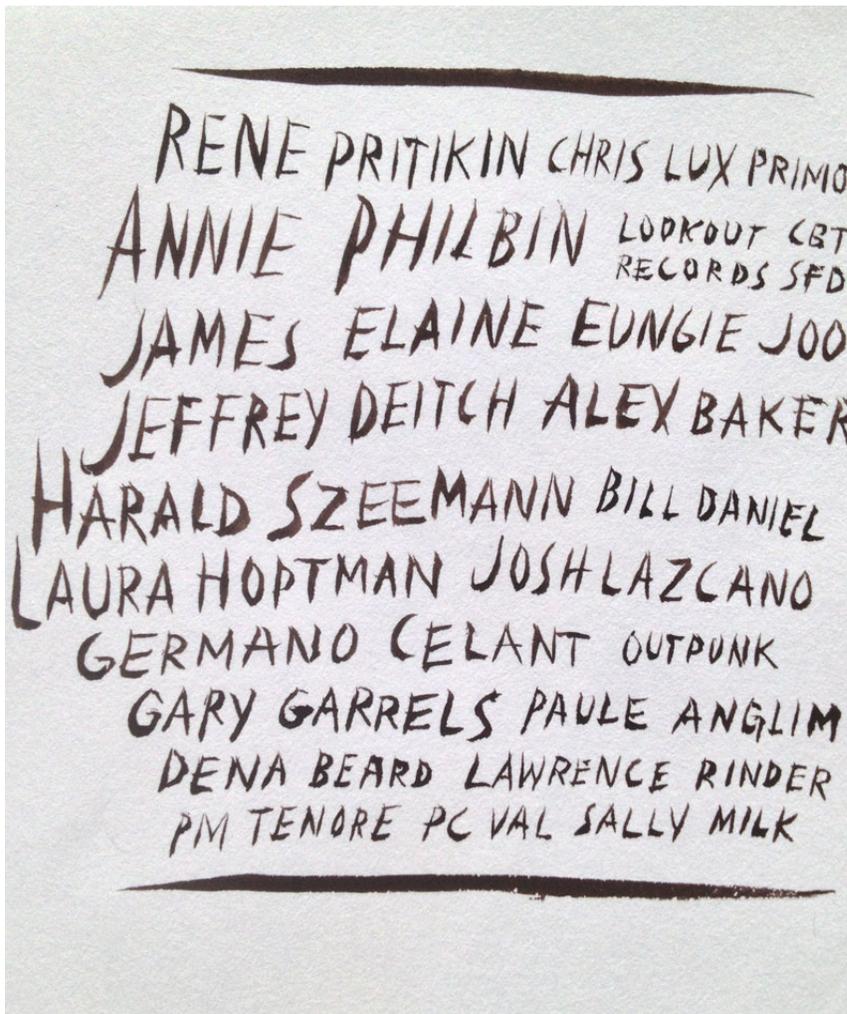
"Window Painting #?," 2012 from Chris' exhibit, *Windows*, at Mitchell-Innes Nash Gallery

BM: So much San Francisco art as we know it began with Alicia McCarthy. She was one of the first to liberate the SF graffiti and art scene. Her and Ruby Neri. Together, they opened up the playing field. They carried on where Dirtbox, Wally and Grime left off in the '80s. I hold her so dearly... She just seemed so much grander and above selling art or playing the game. The curators have yet to understand the importance of this period in SF art history.

CJ: I relate to that absolutely. She exemplifies everything I love about that time. I met her at the San Francisco Art Institute when Karla Milosevich curated a show there. Really bringing new people together.

BM: Did you ever do the nonprofit sector? They were like the indie record labels of art: New Langton Arts, Southern Exposure, SF Arts Commission, Capp Street Project, the Luggage Store. There were so many then.

CJ: Not so much. I tried to get into those shows. But they always shunned me. It pissed me off, man. It pissed me off hard. I was in some shows but me and the grant people did not connect.



Barry would like to give a shout-out to...

BM: Laurie Lazer and Darryl Smith, who run the Luggage Store, spoiled it for me. They were some of the first people I worked with. I have yet to meet people with such integrity and vision since my first contact with them in the early '90s. They opened their doors to anyone who would venture up the staircase on 6th and Market. Once I snuck over to the commercial side, I had the incredible opportunity of working with Paule Anglim. Her lineage with old school Bay Area artists and her carpeted gallery at 14 Geary have been a fixture for decades in SF. Paule and Ed Gilbert are two of the greatest people you may ever encounter.

CJ: I think Renny Pritikin, Arnold Kemp and René de Guzman, when they were working together at Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, that was a nice time too.

BM: When did you connect with Jack Hanley? His gallery always had a great SF vibe and a solid platter of degenerates on board.

CJ: Jack is an artist's dealer, a Grateful Dead twirler. I think he was an outsider to that noise of the downtown art scene. I found out about him from Kiki Gallery on 14th next to the Bearded Lady, which was run by Rick Jacobsen, who has since passed away. Jack had bought some pieces. Then Scott Hewicker invited me to be in a two-person show at Jack's in 1995, and that started a many-year relationship. Jack is epic and one of a kind.



"Portrait of Chris," 2012, a portrait of Chris Johanson by Barry McGee

BM: Cliff Hengst and Scott Hewicker are always on my favorite artist list... such amazing artists and personalities. Absolutely Frisco till death. I think this is a good time to point out how important all these characters were and are to the development of the SF art scene. It can't be narrowed into a "school" or certain artist -- it was about an entire scene of artists challenging what came before them.

CJ: So many people met and exchanged ideas. Sean Regan, Bwana Spoons, Christopher Garrett, Ruby Neri, Rigo, Aaron Noble, Rob Trains, Andrew McKinley, Matty Luv, Johanna Jackson, Margaret Kilgallen, Christine Shields, Lara Allen, the Red Man, Swan, too many people to mention. That's a perfect moment I guess for me, and maybe that's youth speaking. From La Boheme to the Hickey Hotel, art shows in houses. Bob Lickey, Hickey, Amy Franceschini, Ovarian Trolley, Star Cleaners, Studio 4, Komotion.

BM: Yes, indeed. Changing the status quo. Seeing you and your band at that time, the Deep Throats, playing shows at Leeds Shoes, or Kinko's during the graveyard shift... this was so important to the SF scene. I liked that the normal indoor paying venue somehow became obsolete during this period.

BM: It seems a lot of curators nowadays are not looking, they're listening. I like when you termed it "diet curating" in reference to the group shows that some curators were putting together years ago. They didn't do their work, they skipped a lot of steps and left a lot out. It's very unsettling. It's happening even on a grander scale, like at SFMOMA. I somehow thought the institutions should have SF history somewhat correct. I'm losing all faith.

CJ: It was very strange when galleries like V1 in Copenhagen, galleries on that side of the planet, started showing mutations on the art that was so dear to me in San Francisco, but by people from different places and from different time periods. Talking about San Francisco makes me feel protective. I do however feel that everything is in the air. Just think about Eileen Quinlan. I really like her photographs, I wonder how she feels. Because now there're many people that are making art that looks just like it now. I wonder how that feels, to be in the new wave of photography. Because everything just gets gobbled up.

BM: Fast. And overnight.



Barry and Chris photographed by Clare E. Rojas

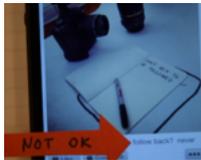
Barry McGee's career retrospective, presented by Citizens of Humanity, is on view at the Berkeley Art Museum through Dec. 9. Chris Johanson's monograph will be out via Phaidon in spring 2013.

Top photos by Curtis Kulig

THIS STORY WAS PUBLISHED ON NOVEMBER 15, 2012 12:30 PM

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