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In View

Barry McGee: One More Thing

Deitch Projects, New York

7 MAY – 13 AUGUST

'Pure Wagner effect.' The phrase belongs to Robert Morris, who one imagines would have no problem uttering it in response to Barry McGee's massive, 'museum scale' installation at Deitch Projects. And if he did, Morris, an artist particularly attuned to the aesthetic excesses of twenty-first-century art, given his foundational role in last century's late-breaking sculptural asceticism, would be on the money, and in more ways than one. For the Wagner effect names the grandiose in both art and commerce, where all is immediate attraction and complacent submission. On this note, McGee's *One More Thing* does not disappoint; it is nothing if not big, in both scale and aspiration. It has a pileup of cargo vans that reaches to the roof; a tower of 57 TVs, all switched on and tuned to an idiosyncratic array of programmes producing a more colourful noise than 'white' can possibly describe; and, when I visited, the whole thing was serving as backdrop for a *Vogue* photoshoot. Oh yes, when Morris coined the phrase, he was quick to remind us that, though the effect belongs to

Wagner, its practice began with Pollock.

McGee's apocalyptic wallpaper, however, resembles nothing so much as the aftermath of an acid trip shared by Louis Albert Necker and Josef Albers. Except for a few breaks, the walls are either painted or panelled in 64-bit colour and Op-inspired geometries. Breathing room is provided on one side by a Wizard of Oz-sized cartoon portrait of Dick Cheney overwritten by graffiti reading 'Smash the State', the author of which is

apparently a mechanized version of one of McGee's signature saggy-eyed characters, *Untitled (Blue Figure)* (2005). On the other side, an improvised totem pole of mannequin 'taggers' (who heroically stand atop an upturned Hyundai located one storey down) stretches up the empty wall as if to demonstrate the lengths such comrades-in-arms will go to in order to lay hold of that last bit of unmarked and impossibly placed urban canvas. This has always been one of graffiti's more attractive aspects: like



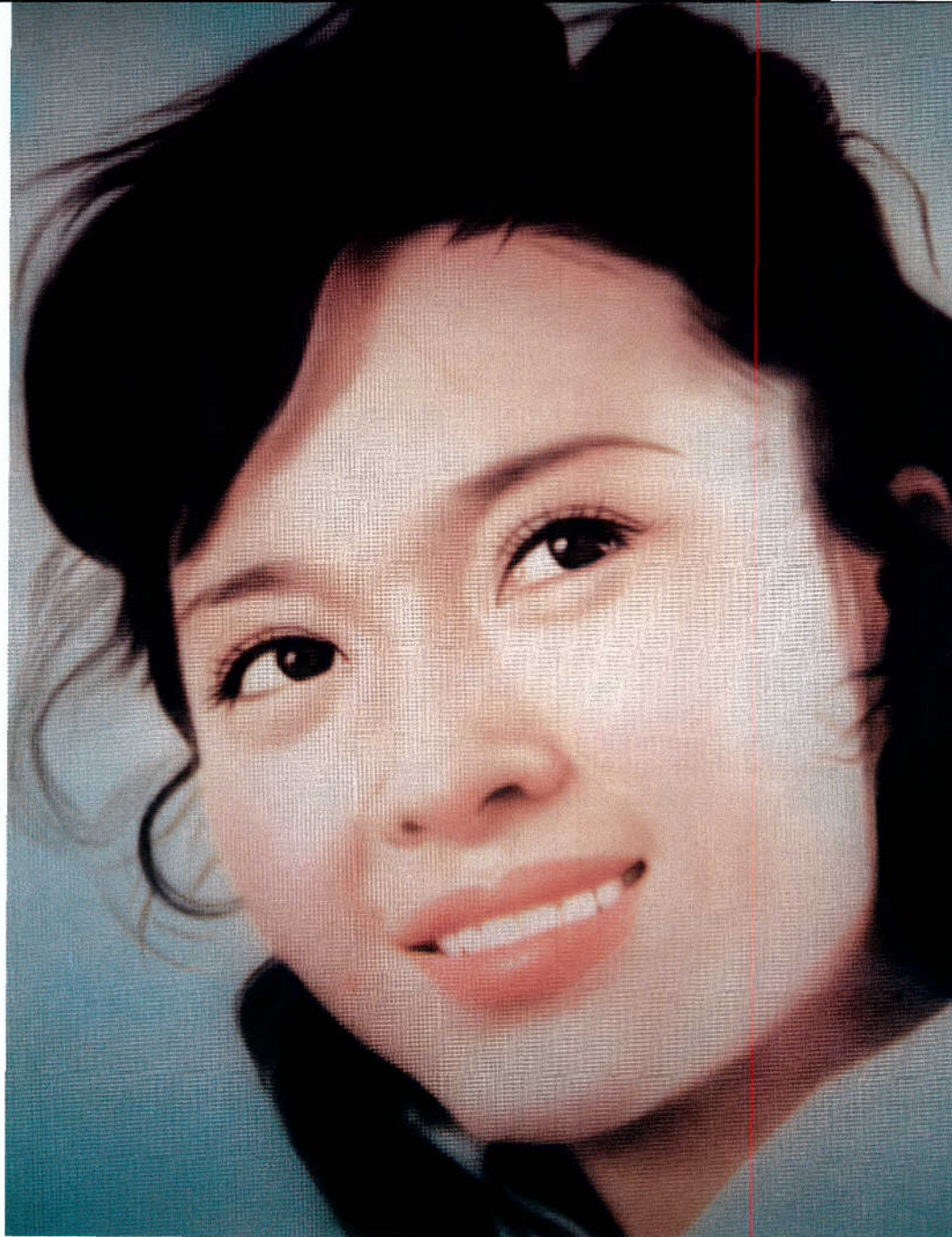
Facing page
Installation shot of Barry
McGee: *One More Thing* at
Deitch Projects, New York.
COURTESY DEITCH PROJECTS.
PHOTO: TOM POWELL IMAGING

Right
Zhou Tiehai *Movie Stars*
of the 80s Series, Fang Shu,
2003, acrylic airbrush
on canvas, 200 x 150 cm
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND
SHANGHAI GALLERY, SHANGHAI

discovering a latter-day Lascaux, there is a touch of the marvellous that accompanies a glimpse of impossible signatures upon seemingly unreachable surfaces.

Graffiti is political insofar as it operates as an index of power and property relations. And any question as to what it's doing in a SoHo gallery is too theoretically tired to be asked again here. Graffiti that has been tamed by the gallery will always appear structurally different from its cousin in the wild, and any dialectical tensions which such transpositions once generated have been creatively accounted for in our era of postmodernity.

This is why Cheney's face coupled to such an anarchic slogan is too heavy-handed a reminder that McGee wants his work to bear some political and social seriousness. His installations, we are often told, are street-level reminders of urban disaffection and anomie. But all this seems to miss the junkyard/playhouse sensibility; it's like fort-building for thirty-somethings. From the mechanized mannequin legs that hang over the edge of the warehouse's loft area, to the hipster figure spray-painting the walls of McGee's mockup of a public bathroom, to the sign that reads, 'To all taggers, please do not mark on this truck and do not remove this sign. Thank you,' which apparently worked more as a provocation than as a proscription to the would-be misfits who covered the truck in ink and paint (but then they did leave the sign), McGee's work animates a somewhat frustrating quip attributed to Ad Reinhardt: 'Art is too serious to be taken seriously.' Indeed. JTDN



In View

Follow Me! Chinese Art at the Threshold of the New Millennium

Mori Art Museum, Tokyo

2 JULY - 4 SEPTEMBER

The thing that immediately struck me about this exhibition, was the extent to which it differed from other recent attempts to survey Chinese contemporary art, attempts that seemed more inclined to mirror Western conventions. Since I was walking around this show in Tokyo rather than in New York, Los Angeles or London, maybe I let down my guard against the increasingly boring sameness of the twenty-first-century international style that continues to grow in the Petri dishes we call biennials. I found myself pondering the two questions *Newsweek* raised as headlines in their recent special report, *China's Century*: 'Does the Future Belong to China?' and 'What Does China Want?' Limiting them to Chinese contemporary art, the simple answers seem to be that 1) it's not China's century for art, because the entire notion of the

centre of the artworld is surely gone for good, and 2) Chinese artists want access to the bigger picture. This exhibition demonstrated the substantial level to which many of the artists included have already achieved the latter because of the conceptual and material clarity and resonance of their work.

Japan, of course, has its own complicated relationship to China, which made the lack of any direct invocation of that relationship on the part of the art in the exhibition interesting. Given the obvious care with which the show was organized, I'm willing to accept that such work doesn't exist – these artists have much more on their minds, and the past, while clearly not forgotten, is the past. Moreover, in her highly informative catalogue essay, curator Kataoka Mami introduces her

thoughts on the current situation of emerging Chinese artists by invoking the beginnings of the Neo-Dada group in Japan in the 1960s, effectively building a bridge between distinct histories of contemporary art production that have directly engaged European and American practices. (I was also moved by the essay by Hu Fang, the Artistic Director of Vitamin Creative Space in Guangzhou, in which he evokes pachinko as a metaphor for art and life, and begins by admitting that he has never been to Tokyo.)

No surprise, then, that what did exist in the exhibition were works that directly take on the West with what I would characterize as good humour: most entertaining was Cao Fei's short video *Hip Hop* (2003), in which a cross-section of Guangzhou residents, from elderly women in Mao

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TITLE: Barry McGee: One More Thing: Deitch Projects
SOURCE: Modern Painters O 2005
PAGE(S): 114-15
WN: 0527401632043

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