

BARRY'S BIG PILE

With *SB Mid Summer Intensive*, Bay Area artist Barry McGee has transformed the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara (MCASB) into a dazzling and crowded fantasy space expressive of his street-wise, surf-splashed approach to making art. Working in high volume with mostly ordinary materials, McGee has painted, stacked, clustered, wrapped, paneled, wallpapered, Sheetrocked, and even bulged the galleries into another dimension. His repertoire of powerful techniques for processing space employs the same scaled-up idiom that he uses when tagging on the street and re-creates some of the intimacy of his studio or perhaps other, unknown spaces. Taken individually, few of these objects would carry the same aesthetic weight, but installed together by an artist with McGee's range and formal inventiveness, they take on greater meaning. As time elapses, the ultimate impression made by *SB Mid Summer Intensive* shifts from aggravated yard sale to post-minimalist sculpture.

So, how do you tag a room? In other words, how do you take up the space in a white-box gallery such that the blankness between the objects goes away, and the compositions you install make gestures appropriate to the scale? For McGee, large stacks of old surfboards are one kind of giant vertical with which to stake his claim. Rolls of mosaic patterned wrap are another. These signature patterns employ high-contrast colors and geometric patterns that are visual super-stimulants, retina bombs that can take over any surface, and that work as hyper-colors when viewed from a distance. McGee uses the mosaic patterns not only to make large collage paintings but also to wrap boogie boards; one of the show's chief pleasures lies in noticing just how many interesting ways the artist has discovered to insert this mesmerizing design element.

Hanging small, framed pictures in clusters, McGee creates another kind of mosaic and then gets a third visual rhythm going by coating walls and corners with irregular panels of letters and numbers rendered in savage sign fonts and unruly, bright colors. For furniture, he sets up a love seat or two, a motorcycle, vitrines full of graphic art, and tables covered with small sculptures, ceramics, prints, and paper ephemera.

Like any street artist worth his Instagram, McGee wields a quiver of noms de aerosol and has a visual signature, the "Barry McGee heads." Many of McGee's most devoted fans begin their narratives the same way — "I knew him as TWIST before I knew him as Barry." As TWIST, a teen McGee tagged the Bay Area all over and introduced his much-imitated, unmistakable cartoon heads. The artist draws these distorted biomorphic blobs in the clean, sinuous lines of commercial cartooning, yet the way they squint and bunch up at the edges locates them in another psychic world, emotionally distant from the sanitary domains of logos and advertising.

The backstory of this celebrated figure, whose first wife, the artist Margaret Kilgallen, died of cancer just weeks after the birth of their daughter in 2001, reads



IN MY ROOM: Barry McGee's installation at MCASB converts the gallery into a private fantasy world.

like a West Coast alternative melodrama. But the tone of his work remains remarkably positive and optimistic, especially when compared to earlier manifestations of a deliberately lowbrow California aesthetic such as can be seen in the work of Mike Kelley or Paul McCarthy.

For the most part, McGee keeps it relatively clean, and the underlying sense of shame that usually clings to art that celebrates a perpetual male adolescence never mounts to toxic levels.

What we are left with is Barry's Big Pile, an art of

accumulation the most direct expression of which is the bulging wall at the rear of the main room. These signature architectural elements — McGee's friends refer to them as "boils" or even "pimples" — conjure a moment that's at once a great fullness, and the penultimate phase of an inevitable explosion. ■

**BARRY MCGEE'S
SB MID SUMMER INTENSIVE
SHOWS AT MCASB THROUGH OCTOBER 14**

by **Charles Donelan**



HEAD-ON: Two of McGee's most common signifiers: the diamond pattern and the cartoon head

4-1-1 Barry McGee: *SB Mid Summer Intensive* is at MCASB (653 Paseo Nuevo) through October 14. Visit mcasantabarbara.org.