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# Barry McGee's Municipal Surf Museum – An Interview

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By Debra Herrick



Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara begins the summer with an epic site-specific exhibit from San Francisco-based artist Barry McGee and his crew.

LUM met with McGee the afternoon before the opening. Piles of art lined the gallery floors as installation of over 700 individual pieces hit critical mass. Known for bringing the street vibe to the white box, McGee brings a tidal wave of Santa Barbara surf culture to MCASB in his exhibit SB Mid Summer Intensive.

*LUM: When was the last time you were in Santa Barbara?*

Barry McGee: I come here a lot. It's really sensible. I stay in Carpinteria or a little north in Goleta. I like both of those towns. I've been coming here my whole life to some degree.

*Does it mean anything to you that you're exhibiting here now?*

I feel really fortunate, I'm honored to be. I showed here a long time ago in a group show, at the Art Forum.

*Have you learned anything new about Santa Barbara in working on this exhibit?*

Well, there are a couple things that are really ingrained and built into Santa Barbara for me. Some of the best surfers and surfboard shapers are from here. So, it has this ongoing history with me that I like. And there is this weird underground thing going on here with surfing. It's not about the corporate and contest part of surfing. It's for something else that people surf. And I like that. There's a real soul here.

This room (Bloom Project Gallery) is basically for Renny Yater who's been here since the late 50s. I initially got interested in his boards because there was one in an old surf shop and I saw the logo and I was like this logo is amazing—just design wise.

Yes, that's my entry, surf. That's just what I do though to get off the land and clear my mind. It was sometime in the 90s that I came across an old Yater longboard and I was like 'wow.'



*Does your work say something about surfing or does surfing say something about your work?*

No, I feel like they're different. But for this show, I was able to put the things I like in it. The opportunity revealed itself—the Santa Barbara thing. I can't really do it anywhere else because it doesn't make sense, the location.

*Can you talk a bit more about the SB Mid Summer Intensive?*

It's all the things I love about this town—all in one room—as kind of a minor thread. Originally the show was supposed to be me and Robert Crumb, the both of us, but they couldn't get Robert Crumb for some reason and the whole show landed in my lap. I was trying to figure out a loose narrative to pull it all together.

It kind of started that I wanted it to be like a municipal museum. You know those municipal museums? Where it just has artifacts from the locals. I like that layout where it's everyone's family heirlooms that end up there, like a people's history. I want

this show to be like a community center, as a common thread, like a community center art show. All the local folk contributing. In my mind that's how I want it to be, but starting in 1960, right around there.

*Do you have a favorite work or grouping in the show?*

Renny Yater just brought these photos that are from that period, the 1960s. They are stunning. I don't know what to say about them, they're just unbelievable. They pull on all the heartstrings.

*What can you tell me about the healing center within the exhibit?*

It's an effort to help with the current climate we're living in, heal through the arts. An attempt, I'm not sure if it's going to work. It's something that has a lot of creative energy. Enough that you feel somewhat healed, inspired and encouraged—a kind of uplifting feeling. Not in a way that's outwardly political, but completely political.

*Are there any thoughts or questions that you see circulating in the exhibit?*

A couple questions are being posed for sure, a few mysteries. Things I'm not sure what they are, I'm still working on them, seeing how they look together. I'm really trying to keep it like the municipal museum thing where it's really like a hodgepodge of my work and someone else's work that shouldn't be



together but is together. It feels collaborative and like a loose narrative. I just put it out to a couple people that if they had any works with Santa Barbara in the mindset. (And people responded.) So I have all that material and I'm trying to not tie it into my work, but have it all in the same space. I don't know what the reason is that they're in the same space.

*It looks very loose and fluid, is that an illusion and there really are a lot of control sets in place?*

It's out of control right now.

*But by the time the exhibit is complete will you have controlled every aspect or allowed for others to contribute their points of view?*

That's what I think is the best part—letting other people fill in the blanks or share the space—it's more of a dialogue. There's something weird about solo. I don't like solo. Not one person deserves that, for me the spotlight's too harsh. I like when there's a conversation, like 30 different ideas thinking about the same location in mind. It feels site specific. I want it to be like a site. It just happens here and that's it. It wouldn't work anywhere else. It wouldn't work in Los Angeles. It wouldn't work in San Francisco. Its built for here.

*Are there any rules to how you start, practice or finish?*

There's going to be a lot of things unfinished. I have loose rules, but I try not to, but art is pretty wide open. I could go to total control to absolutely no control in a five minute span.

*Is there anything that you'd like viewers to be disappointed with?*

I made a banner. It's going to go in the show. It's not disappointing, I really like it. For sure, though, there are going to be some things that might be hard to weed through for a Santa Barbaran or someone coming from a pretty nice city. There are some urban things that might be—not challenging—but abrasive. Those are the things that I used to do when I was younger but I like the way they look. A lot younger.

*How would you describe yourself in three words?*

A mess. Wait, that's two words. A real mess.

*And the show?*

It's a mess now but it's tightening up. A lot of things. I don't know what is going to happen yet. I like that. I'm a little anxious—how am I going to land the plane?

Opening night – View slideshow below.



Install – View slideshow below.



Photos by Debra Herrick

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Barry McGee: Mid Summer Intensive is on view from July 1 to October 14, 2018 at the Museum of Contemporary Art Santa Barbara, 653 Paseo Nuevo, Santa Barbara.