

**Barry McGee >**

(below) Views from the exhibit, *Barry McGee*, at BAM/PFA through December 9, 2012.  
(top to bottom) Installation view, PHOTO BY SIBILA SAVAGE and detail of 'Untitled,' 2005, PHOTO BY COLIN M. DAY.



**TWO LEGENDARY  
WEST COAST ARTISTS  
REUNITE... AND IT  
FEELS SO GOOD.  
PHOTOGRAPHED BY  
CURTIS KULIG**

**guru(s)**

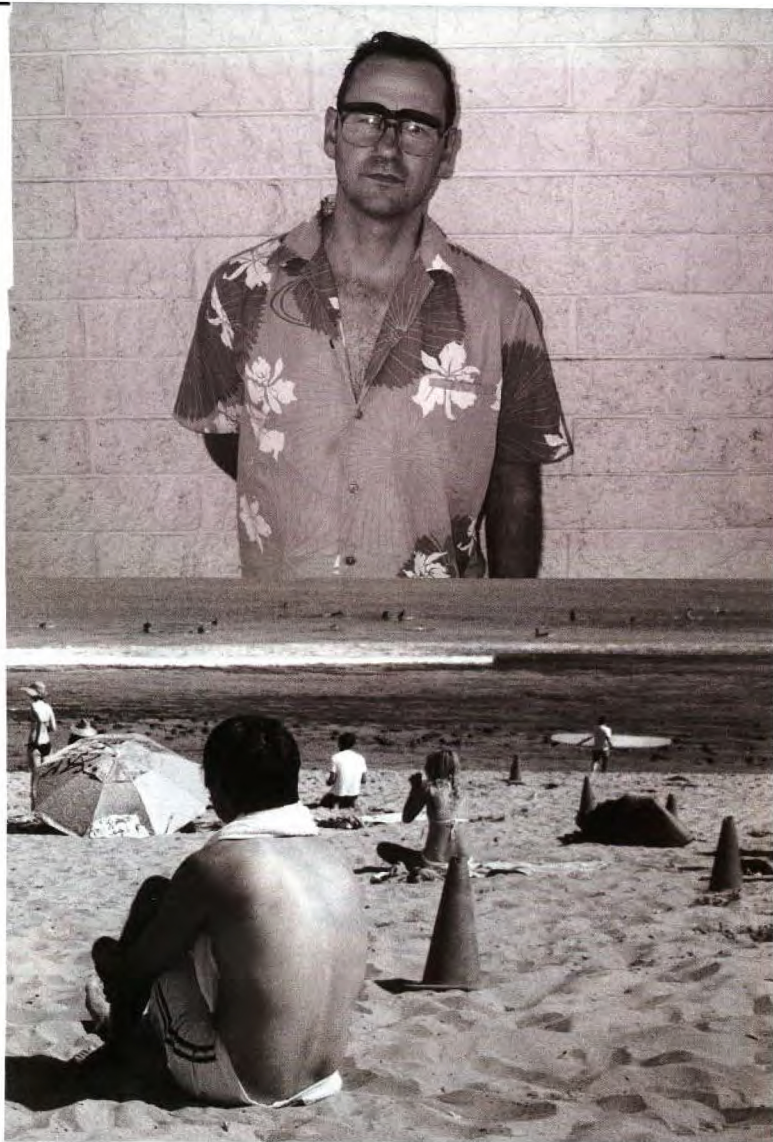
★ **barry mcgee**  
**chris johanson**

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**





< **Chris Johanson**

(below) Paintings from Chris' recent exhibit, *Windows*, at Mitchell-Innes Nash Gallery. (top to bottom) "Window Painting #5," 2012 and "Window Painting #?," 2012.



**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.

**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...

**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 Passorelli, 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.

**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

(right) Barry and Chris photographed by **Clare E. Rojas**.

(below) Barry would like to give a shout-out to...

RENE PRITIKIN CHRIS LUX PRIMO  
ANNIE PHILBIN LORRAINE CAT  
JAMES ELAINE EUNGIE JOO  
JEFFREY DEITCH ALEX BAKER  
HAROLD SZEEMANN BILL DANIEL  
LAURA HORTMAN JOSH LAZCANO  
GERMANO CELANT OUTRUNK  
GARY GARRELS PAULE ANGLIM  
DENNA BEARD LAWRENCE RINBER  
PHIL TERPHE AC PAL JALLY MILK



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.

**BM:** Really extreme things could happen at those nonprofit venues without necessarily having an object to sell. They

could do massive things that weren't commercially viable.

**CJ:** Yes, I think San Francisco was completely like that back then. Whether it was object-based art or not. It was such a dead zone in some ways when it came to financial energy for art.

**BM:** So I know this is stating the obvious, but the SFMOMA is so far out of touch with art that has happened in SF in the last 20 years. It's really a huge disappointment.

**CJ:** There are these real SF lifers that get no love from the institutions. None of the schools hire them. There is some square academia going on there in SF. The Luggage Store and that show we were in, *Streetopia*, that Erick Lyle, Kal Spellsetich, me and many others put on recently, really said a lot to me about the SF that I love.

**BM:** Laurie Lazer and Darryl Smith, who run



