

# COOL HUNTING®

## Interview: Ryan McGinness on NFTs and the Art World

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8 February 2022

Though Ryan McGinness creates art that's best known in its physical forms, he's no stranger to digital mediums. His paintings and installations all include a graphic layer (or layers) born on the screen and later rendered to canvas in concert with intensive hand- and brush-work. Our past visits to his studio included as much time looking at completed pieces and work in progress as it did sitting together in front of a computer. This is not to suggest that using software as a component of making art instantly prepares anyone for the tokenized web3 world. McGinness has always been a digitally savvy artist with a lot to say about the art world and as such formulated many opinions about NFTs which he shared in a Non-fungible Token Primer published last year with 30 thoughts on NFT art and some elaborations on NFT art appreciation. We recently checked in with him to find out if his assertions then are still relevant now.



Ryan McGinness "Hyperkulturemia" (2021), acrylic and metal leaf on canvas, 72 in. dia. (183 cm dia.), Courtesy Ryan McGinness Studios, Inc., © Ryan McGinness / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

**A lot has changed since you wrote your NFT Primer and a lot has stayed the same. Of the 30 thoughts on NFT art you shared, which are you currently most passionate about?**

I'm most passionate about the idea expressed in Number 22. It's the side note: "Web 2.0 companies benefited from not being legally categorized as publishers. They asked for that non-status. Accordingly, they were not responsible for the content they were publishing. Claiming to be simply platforms for user-generated content absolved them from being held accountable for that content." This is the crux of most of the problems with the internet and internet culture. I'm surprised it's not talked about more. "Platforms" are indeed publishers and should be held accountable for the content they make public.

**22) COMMUNITY IMMUNITY  
WE CAN NO LONGER REFER TO "THE NFT COMMUNITY." WE  
MUST NOW REFER TO THE "THE NFT CORE COMMUNITY."  
AND, EVEN THAT IS FRAGMENTING. PLATFORMS WANT TO  
REMAIN NEUTRAL AND UNASSUMING BY ACCEPTING  
(ALMOST) EVERYONE. BUT ARTISTS WANT TO STAND NEXT  
TO OTHER ARTISTS THEY ADMIRE, ARE FRIENDS WITH, OR  
FEEL ALIGNED WITH.**

I also like the notes about "Empathy vs. Magic" under NFT Art Appreciation. With digital art, mystery and magic replace empathy. "We appreciate material artworks, because we can imagine how those materials were manipulated. Conspicuous material manipulation—a viscous brushstroke, for example—allows us to imagine having manipulated the material ourselves. Empathy drives appreciation in the same way we appreciate athletes, because we know what it is like to run and jump. The challenge with digital art (NFTs) is that many of us cannot empathize. They are magic tricks. Many of us don't know how to use the tools or manipulate the materials. We are left to wonder at the warm glow of flickering lights."

**Any of those 30 thoughts you'd want to rewrite or remove?**

Oh, no. Part of the charm of the NFT Primer is in all the embarrassing parts. For example, in Number 17 I wrote "punk as fuck." That's a bit silly. And in Number 3, I wrote "NFT artworks are pure orgasm..." That's also a bit dramatic.



Ryan McGinness, "Pineal Gland" (2021), acrylic and metal leaf on canvas, 72 in. dia. (183 cm dia.), Courtesy Ryan McGinness Studios, Inc., © Ryan McGinness / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

**Many of your thoughts on NFT art are very relevant to all mediums. Same for the NFT Art Appreciation section. At times I felt like this was an art appreciation primer for crypto kids more than an NFT primer for the art world. Would you agree?**

Yes, definitely. The NFT Art Appreciation notes apply to all art. In fact, those notes can be applied to just about anything you want to appreciate. Lately, I've been thinking about the idea of "business appreciation." There are many more criteria by which we should evaluate businesses besides profitability. Appreciating things outside yourself begins with appreciating yourself and understanding your own values and then holding those values up against the thing you're evaluating. I think people are already tuned into this idea when evaluating businesses.

**If you did agree with that last question, let's flip it. What are the most important things the art world needs to understand about web3 and NFTs?**

I'm not sure NFTs and web3 should be understood by "the art world." Actually, the first thing to understand is that there really is no singular "art world." There are many art worlds—from all the different stratospheres of the museum world, to the different layers of galleries, and from

community-driven art worlds to various subculture art worlds. NFTs are really just another world to emerge and be added to the overall art omniverse. The NFT world cannot be absorbed or co-opted by any of the other art spheres. This was Christie's [the auction house] mistake in positioning that goofy NFT in the context of more serious art. That's why people were so upset by it, because they were trying to put it into an existing box instead of just appreciating it for what it was: just something wonderfully silly. They used the market to define it as culturally valuable instead of just allowing it to be expensive crap. There is nothing wrong with expensive crap. There is a market for everything. When those world membranes rub up against each other, you get the situation described in Number 28: Arty McArtface.

**28) ARTY MCARTFACE  
KEEP IMAGINING: A DAO COMPRISED OF HUNDREDS OF  
MILLIONS OF MICRO-INVESTORS COULD SWELL UP TO  
EXPRESS THE ABSURDIST WHIMS OF "THE PEOPLE."  
COLLECTIVE URGES IN POPULAR CULTURE COULD  
INFLUENCE CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS (OR AUCTION  
HOUSES) TO DISPLACE THE VALUES OF THE  
INTELLIGENTSIA. (OR HAS THIS ALREADY HAPPENED?)**



**You've minted a few things [like the animation "RM.NFT.3.TheLanguageGame" which is embedded below]. Was there anything about that process that influenced your perception of the medium?**

Since my work has always had a digital component, there wasn't much that was new to me in terms of the medium. But on the market side, I was surprised to find that the same old tenets hold true. Market value is equal parts projection and reception. I had to decide how I value my NFTs in relation to my already established works. Do I value them the same as a large painting? The same as a small painting? A work on paper? An editioned work? I felt that projecting a value of anything less than equivalent to a work on paper would be a disservice to the NFT community. I did not want to assert that NFTs are incidental to me. I did not want to position them as insignificant. So, my NFTs are one-of-a-kind works of art that are priced at a premium in terms of NFTs and as equivalent to one of my unique works on paper (about \$20k). Now, my projections have not yet been received, so no market has yet been established. Middlemen are required to bridge that gap. This is Number 20: Why Gatekeep the Gatekeepers?



Additionally, as noted in Number 17: *The Market Is the Medium*, the purchase of an NFT artwork is a symbolic gesture that creates the work. This means that NFTs only exist in the marketplace and only exist in public. I make paintings in my studio, and then I choose to make them public. Sometimes they remain private and remain privately held. You can't make a private NFT. It is an art that must be seen by others in order to exist. It is an art for entertainment. It is art as entertainment. Also see Number 9: *Entertainment*.

**Any plans to release new NFTs created in a manner that's unique to the medium?**

Oh, yes. I'm ready with my second set of three unique works. These second three are very simple—just black and white. Perhaps animated. In fact, there is really no need for an NFT to manifest visually. See Note 15: *Material Is Immaterial*.

**15) MATERIAL IS IMMATERIAL**  
DIGITAL ART HAS, UP TO THIS MOMENT, RELIED ON MATERIALIZATION AND SINGULAR PLAYBACK TOOLS TO BE APPRECIATED IN THE MARKET. NOT ANYMORE. EVEN STILL, SOME COLLECTORS OF NFT ART ARE CURIOUS AND ANXIOUS ABOUT HOW TO DISPLAY OR LIVE WITH THEIR ASSETS. THIS IS NATURAL, SINCE WE STILL INHABIT BODIES AND THEREFORE RELATE TO A UNIVERSE OF THINGS. NFTS, HOWEVER, EXIST ONLY IN THE DIGITAL REALM AND ARE ON-DEMAND. THIS URGE TO MATERIALIZE SPEAKS TO OUR INABILITY TO ESCAPE OUR BODIES. THE MATERIALITY OF A WORK OF ART HAS TRADITIONALLY CONTRIBUTED TO ITS APPRECIATION—THE OFTEN DIFFICULT-TO-EXPLAIN “ISNESS” OF A WORK OF ART.

TO FULLY APPRECIATE AN NFT, YOU MUST TRANSCEND THE PRISON OF YOUR MATERIAL WORLD AND CUT YOUR TETHER TO THE ISTIGKEIT. ART HAS NOW ENTERED THE SPIRITUAL REALM SECURED ONLY BY FAITH (AND THE BLOCKCHAIN). ART CAN NOW BE AS COLD AS CODE.



**As you look at the NFT space what genres of work or which artists are you most excited about?**

I like the gamification of the market. See Note 23: Day-Trading Art: Now we can sell art without all the messiness of art.

**23) DAY-TRADING ART**  
MONEY AND ART CAN CO-EXIST IN SPIRITUAL HARMONY. NOW WE CAN SELL ART WITHOUT ALL THE MESSINESS OF ART. THIS IS THE GAMIFICATION OF THE ART MARKET. THIS IS NOTHING NEW, EXCEPT NOW WE CAN DAY-TRADE ART. IMAGINE ART-BUYING BOTS TRADING AT LIGHTNING SPEED. WE CAN EVEN REMOVE DECISION-MAKING WHEN IT COMES TO ART.

