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## Underneath It All

Mary Jo McGonagle's lively, expressive art explores the subtle dynamics of everyday human interaction.

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BY JULIE DUGDALE

Mary Jo McGonagle designs bold, edgy wallcoverings like this graphic black-and-white one, which she created in 2013.

**M**ary Jo McGonagle lives with her husband and four children in a suburban Connecticut home surrounded by a lovely lawn. It's a typical suburb—except, she says, suburbs are anything but.

In any suburb, behind the neighbors' closed doors and neat shutters are unspoken feelings, thoughts, and struggles that the rest of us can't see, and that's exactly what inspires McGonagle's edgy paintings, wall coverings, and installations.

"The idea is, everybody looks perfect from the outside, but family dynamics and relationships might be filled with dysfunction," she says. "We are all imperfect. That's what I'm really trying to express."

McGonagle, who trained at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design and the School of Visual Arts in New York City, brings a graphic-design background to her work. With an expressive and distinctly provocative flair, she paints both dreamy abstracts and vibrant text art—phrases hidden in graphic patterns—in



**McGonagle wants her work to be “humorous, but verge on making people uncomfortable, so the viewer isn’t sure how to take it.”**

acrylic on canvas or board.

Her installations are a combination of painting, wallpaper, and video. Project names like *Get Out*, *What Lies Beneath*, and *Things I Teach My Children* represent what you might find within the walls of suburbia. “I feel like the message is more important to me than the medium, as far as what I’m passing along,” McGonagle says. “My titles come from my inner thoughts and what I would imagine others to think. They are based on what happens in our relationships and interactions with others.”

In a clever blend of direct expression and shrouded nuance, McGonagle’s

text-art collection captures the undertones of human relationships. The statement pieces showcase words and phrases—what you might think in your head but never say aloud—ensconced in colorful, cheerful patterns. Only when the viewer steps back after the first glance and refocuses on the painting do the words and message emerge. “The idea of making everything look good in our lives is universal,” McGonagle says. “Most people conceal how they truly feel from



those around them; they feel they have to keep up appearances to be accepted. So the statements of our inner thoughts are camouflaged in the patterning to reveal our true feelings.”

On the flip side, text art can be just plain fun, and McGonagle embraces the light side of her work. Clients will often commission her to “paint their phrases,” which might become an “Eat it or starve” painting for the kitchen, or a “How much do you love me?” piece to hang in the bedroom. Any of her paintings can also



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Get Out* (2011), an installation at the Provincetown (Massachusetts) Art Association and Museum. Detail from *A Time To Talk* (2013), acrylic on board, 48" x 48". *Squall* (2014), acrylic on board, 48" x 48". *Just Stop* (2013), a custom-designed wallcovering for a private client. FACING PAGE: *Just Pretend* (2013), neon, 24" x 24".

be made into wallpaper that will breathe life, whimsy, or a good dose of sass into any room. "No matter what's going on in my life, I use humor to get through it," she says, noting that she intends her work to be "humorous, but verge on making people uncomfortable, so the viewer isn't sure how to take it."

Of all her pieces, McGonagle says she's partial to the abstracts. Some, entitled with evocative phrases like *Solitude* and *Always in My Head*, convey sentiments. Others transport the viewer to an ethereal landscape or moment in time. "Maybe abstracts are my favorite because you can put yourself into that place," she says. "When I look at *Swimming Hole*, I'm there swimming, in that dark hole. It's my interpretation of how things are."

McGonagle's inspiration comes from



her family, her past, and her place in domestic life—because that's where she is, she says. But it wasn't always that way. Before she had children, McGonagle lived in New York City, where her creativity was inspired by the avant-garde pulse of the melting pot.

Life changed, and McGonagle's inspirations changed with it. "So many artists living in New York feel like that's the only place they can survive," she says. "They thumb their noses at the suburbs. But if you're a creative person and you're open, you can live anywhere. In some ways, I'm more creative than I've ever been. You just have to find it." •

**EDITOR'S NOTE:** Mary Jo McGonagle is represented at the Sorelle Gallery in New Canaan and in Albany, New York, [sorellegallery.com](http://sorellegallery.com). To see more of her work, visit [maryjomcgonagle.com](http://maryjomcgonagle.com).

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