



RAMSEY DE GIVE FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

## The Art World's Pied Piper

Ryan McGinley is the center, and nurturer, of a set of talented young members of the downtown art scene.

By NATE FREEMAN

The social orbit surrounding the photographer Ryan McGinley can sometimes feel like the world's most exclusive nightclub, populated by good-looking and talented 20-somethings, who with their perfect skin and classic faces all seem to have walked out of a Kerouac novel, an idyllic Midwestern town or an American Apparel ad.

But these are more than just hangers-on. They are also newcomers in a downtown art scene carved out by Mr. McGinley.

There's Petra Collins, 20, who curates a women's art collective called the Ardorous; photographs for Tavi Gevinson's online magazine, Rookie, and designs extremely graphic T-shirts.

There's Sandy Kim, 27, a taboo-breaking

photographer known for nudes and bodily fluids, who hosted parties at the recently closed East Village bar Heathers, and shoots for Purple and Vice magazines.

And there's Chad Moore, 26, who came to New York as a BMX-riding extreme sports guy and now has two books of his own photography, shows at the Lodge Gallery on the Lower East Side and has shot for Coca-Cola and Creatures of the Wind.

Ryan McGinley walking his dog on the Lower East Side. He has a studio in Chinatown.

They have all apprenticed for Mr. McGinley and are now living a kind of bohemian archetype of what it's like to be young, supremely talented and scene makers.

It is a story line that Mr. McGinley knows well. Back in the early 2000s, he was at the center of a hard-partying crew of artists, most prominently Dan Colen and

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# Pied Piper of the Downtown Art Scene

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the late Dash Snow, who created a new myth of the downtown artist. Now 36, the former enfant terrible parties a little less (Mr. McGinley no longer drinks) and has matured into an improbable dean to the next generation of scrappy artists, with his Chinatown studio serving as a de facto clubhouse.

"It's an education," Mr. McGinley said recently in his studio, a tin-roofed loft on Canal Street that he originally shared with Mr. Colen. Surrounded by a hive of stylish assistants, Mr. McGinley sat in an anteroom that serves as his primary work space, still looking boyish in a white T-shirt and leather motorcycle jacket.

"In a way, it's a curriculum, as I can give people advice because I've been through it," he said.

"I was the first person to get attention within my crew, and I wanted people to share the success that I was enjoying.

"There's no manual for being an artist," he added.

As Mr. McGinley tells it, he did not set out to become a role model. He just wanted to keep the party going, partly because his band of merry pranksters inhabits the same waiflike world that his photography captures.

That's how he met Ms. Collins earlier this year: the two were dancing at the Beaver, a raucous bar in Toronto, when they were introduced. "He's a really great dancer and I am, too, I like to think," Ms. Collins said. They exchanged numbers, and the next day, Mr. McGinley happened to stop by a student art show curated by Ms. Collins and others at the Ontario College of Art and Design called "Period Piece: The Gynolandscape."

"I got a text from him with a selfie he took in front of a piece he wanted to purchase," said Ms. Collins, a lithe woman with deep, penetrating gray-green eyes and blond hair that curls into ringlets.

Mr. McGinley invited her to come along as a model on a road trip. She said yes immediately, and they became fast friends as they traveled through West Virginia and Georgia, shooting in tree houses and mucky swamps. "He's kind of like the big brother I never had," she said. "There is just such a realness you get from him that is so rare to find in people."

Ms. Kim, the photographer, met Mr. McGinley at the 2010 Pitchfork Music Festival, where she was tagging along with her boyfriend, Colby Hewitt, then the drummer for the band Smith Westerns. They were introduced backstage, and bonded over the allure of photographing rock stars. (Christopher Owens, the former lead singer of Girls, is a favorite subject of Mr. McGinley's.) Soon after, McGinley began dropping Ms. Kim's name to friends and in interviews.

"For a while, he was telling everyone I was his favorite photographer, which shined a lot of light on me," said Ms. Kim, who has since had solo gallery shows in New York, San Francisco and Tokyo. "He's very supportive of young artists, and will always push for the ones who he believes in."

Mr. McGinley doesn't only seek out future members of the avant-garde. He sometimes also looks for what he calls "re-covering jocks," citing the drive and discipline instilled in a person who played sports growing up.

"Ryan used to always love the fact that I was an athlete in high school and in a fraternity in college, yet I loved the Smiths and studied art," said Christian Storm, 27, who became the photo editor at Vice magazine after Mr. McGinley recommended him for the job.

Mr. Moore, the former BMX rider,



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RYAN MCGINLEY

whose work also focuses on beautiful youngsters, met Mr. McGinley after applying for an internship on a whim. At the time, he treated photography as little more than a way to capture his bicycle tricks, but starting thinking critically about his pictures after assisting Mr. McGinley on various shoots.

"The people he photographs become part of the family," Mr. Moore said. "I feel like Ryan would rather hang out with them than go to some fashion dinner or something like that."

Those who visit Mr. McGinley's studio often feel as if they've stumbled upon some latter-day Warholian factory populated by millennial nymphs.

"I have met countless models, assistants and interns, and they always appear such likable, genuine, fascinating and hard-working people," said José Freire, the owner of the Team Gallery in SoHo, which represents Mr. McGinley. "They make you curious about what they do outside of Ryan's studio."

BEFORE HE WAS a big-name artist with a cultlike following, Mr. McGinley was himself a young rudderless teenager. He grew up in Ramsey, N.J., the youngest of eight children raised by a churchgoing Catholic mother and a father who worked at a fiberglass manufacturing plant.

He was closest to his brother Michael who returned home ravaged by AIDS. The family told neighbors he had cancer. In 1995, not long after Michael died, Ryan moved to New York to attend Parsons, where he quickly came of age. He lived in an apartment at 177 Bleecker Street, where he would do odd jobs like wash the dishes for the female dominatrix who lived upstairs. After continually rebuffing her advances, Mr. McGinley found himself one night making out with a boy named Harry on a dare, and he never dated a girl again, he said. Since then, he identifies himself as gay.

His life as an artist blossomed, too. One night, when he was 19, he met Jack Walls, an artist who once dated Robert Mapplethorpe. "He was really like a godfather to me and Dan and Dash," Mr. McGinley said. "He taught me how to be an artist."

Though Mr. Walls downplayed his role, he nonetheless opened Mr. McGinley to a new world. "I would tell him about daggerreotypes, and he'd be like, 'What's a daggerreotype?'" Mr. Walls said.

When Mr. McGinley was ready to display his early pictures, Mr. Walls helped secure a location, a then-vacant space at 420 West Broadway. The show, called "The Kids Are Alright" was a collection of vivid snapshots he took of his rail-skinny, often-

Protégés of Ryan McGinley (seated left), from left: Phoebe Pritchett, Michael Bailey Gates, Sandy Kim, Chad Moore, Christian Storm and Benjamin Morsberger.

naked friends getting in trouble on the streets and intimate in bedrooms, and it was a sensation. A book by the same name became samizdat, passed around by the art cognoscenti.

In 2003, Mr. McGinley became the youngest artist (he was 25 at the time) to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He was also named Photographer of the Year by American Photo Magazine. "I've seen this happen twice," Mr. Walls said. "I've seen it with Robert Mapplethorpe, and I've seen it with Ryan."

While his early works didn't require anything beyond his keen eye and a cast of nubile beauties willing to gallivant around downtown, his later works were more logistically complex (road trips to the amber fields of Oklahoma, treks to the blue caves of Idaho) that required a battalion of assistants — not to mention fresh faces. So he hired young artists and found himself teaching them his methods of photography.

"Ryan is incredibly generous," Mr. Walls said. "At one point there was a young photographer, and Ryan was giving him all his equipment. The trampoline, the smoke machines, everything."

Mr. McGinley also opened doors and forged introductions. He introduced Arthur Stachurski, an intern just out of high school, to the film director Harmony Korine, who hired him as a production assistant on "Spring Breakers." He helped Felix Frith, 27, a former intern, become an agent at Artist Commissions, his management agency. He got Jeff Luker, 28, another former intern, a gig shooting ads for a Levi's billboard campaign.

And like alums from an elite university, Mr. McGinley's acolytes have, in turn, helped one another out, sometimes collaborating on new projects.

Benjamin Morsberger, a former intern, formed an indie rock band, Cable, with Tracy Antonopoulos, yet another former intern. "Almost everything I do these days somehow traces back to Ryan," said Mr. Morsberger, 24, who recently returned from Paris, where he played in Dev Hynes's band Blood Orange. "The friends I've made, my girlfriend, jobs, my cologne. The list goes on."

BACK AT HIS STUDIO, Mr. McGinley told an assistant to turn off a video camera that was recording the interview, as he surveyed the hubbub around him. Technicolor images were spattering out of printers, books were being stacked and emails were being dashed off.

There was much work to do. A retrospective of his work was opening at the Daelim Museum in Seoul in on Nov. 4, and his first show with Galerie Perrotin, which represents him in Paris was opening Nov. 13. Plus, Team Gallery has a booth at Art Basel Miami Beach next month.

Yet even as his assistants fluttered about in the narrow Chinatown loft, each clearly in awe of the rebel-turned-legend, Mr. McGinley still looked like a kid himself, like the wide-eyed character from the French New Wave film "The 400 Blows."

"When I photographed Petra this summer, I didn't realize she had such a presence," Mr. McGinley said. "I remember one day looking at her Instagram, and she had a picture from our trip and I said, 'Oh my God, Petra, you have 17,000 Instagram followers?' I was mind-blown. I thought it was like the coolest thing."

Mr. McGinley paused and turned his chair to look at a giant print of Ms. Collins lying naked in mud, her enormous eyes fixed upward. "You talk about being a mentor, but it goes both ways," he said. "I'm learning just as much hanging out with Petra as she is hanging out with me."