

Ryan McGinley: Naked and Famous

In the beginning, Ryan McGinley was an outsider. He used his band of beautiful friends to create photographs—rarely not naked but never quite sexy—that he now calls “evidence of fun.” But in the past decade, McGinley’s vision has evolved and expanded into a tidal wave of influence, affecting the look of art, advertising, music videos, film, even Instagram—and making him arguably the most important photographer in America. So why are so many of us just learning his name?

BY ALICE GREGORY | PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD BURBRIDGE

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 Photos: Ryan McGinley's Ethereal Oeuvre in Ten Images

(naked young people, a stranger taking notes), McGinley doesn't bother. The effect of this assumptive apathy is that he always gets what he wants.

McGinley's workspace, which he's occupied for ten years, is lined with art books, strewn with snacks, and shares a wall with a Chinese bridal studio. There's the usual phalanx of lank-haired, androgynous-looking kids. (Uniform: T-shirt + tight pants + comically utilitarian boots.) Many people have keys. An Olivier Theyskens look-alike leads me back to the studio, which is kept toasty and bright. When the first girl comes in, McGinley introduces himself, hugs her, and instructs her to undress and throw her clothes on the couch. Madison is the girl's name, and she looks like Audrey Hepburn with a semi-buzz cut. She lives in Brooklyn, reviews music for a blog, and works as a seamstress at a downtown atelier that services drag queens. Check, check, check.

All this information is extracted not by McGinley but by Brandee, his “hype girl,” whom he calls Boo Boo. Brandee's here to talk to the models and get them comfortable so that McGinley can get a natural shot. Can a person's name evoke its homophone? If so, Brandee's does. Just hearing her talk is probably more effective than three glasses of wine, inhibitions-wise. *Have you ever broken any bones? What's your boyfriend like? What's with those Canadians who think they're French?* These are the type of questions that occur to Brandee. Her extemporizing is impressively arbitrary and incredibly disarming. She is really great at her job.

“Your eyebrows are sick,” Brandee tells Madison.

“Yeah, I love your eyebrows,” adds McGinley.

“Technically, eyebrow,” Madison says, laughing nervously.

The plan is to sit in as he shoots nudes. These girls, like the tens of models (male and female) that Ryan McGinley shoots in his studio each week, have been scouted. Phoebe, one of his many assistants, hits the streets in search of faces, hanging around downtown, roaming the campuses of art schools. She knows what he likes.

It doesn't seem to occur to anybody that the models might be made uncomfortable by my presence. McGinley, 36, one of the world's most successful and omnipresent photographers, projects the authority of a confident, truant teenager. Whereas many people would at least pay lip service to the potential problems a reporter might pose

Brandee asks about her years in fashion school and presses Madison when she makes a face that seems to suggest distaste with the industry. Madison says she doesn't like the people. McGinley nods sympathetically. “It's so tough,” he says. This is about as much shit as I'll hear him talk about anyone or anything during the time we spend together.

McGinley pulls out a trampoline and starts blasting Madonna. Brandee bobs around, tacitly urging Madison to do the same. She slowly loosens up, but retains a self-consciousness that's sweet and appealing. But maybe that's not what McGinley wants? Maybe there's not enough id here? I can't tell.

McGinley's career as a photographer in the art world has taken on a folkloric quality in the minds of young artists and those prone to self-identify as “tastemakers.” His early work—including the majority of what was shown at the Whitney, when, at 25, he became the youngest artist in thirty years with a solo show—was documentary, pictures he now refers to as “evidence of fun.” There are black eyes, bloody noses, obviously stoned girls, tattooed guys lying supine on linoleum floors, naked friends piled into a bathtub, wet hair plastered to one another. He was often compared to Larry Clark (the seeming exploitation) and Nan Goldin (the glamorized substance abuse).



↑ Golden Grassland, 2013. Photo: Courtesy of Ryan McGinley Studios

His photographs of the past ten years, however, are more ambitious, more formally complex, and more expensive to produce—if just as suspiciously savvy. They're the result of studio shoots like this one or, more often, of costly and complicated road trips across America. The models spelunk in Technicolor caves, do flips off barn roofs, trudge through mud, run through fields with sparklers, climb waterfalls, hang from trees, zip-line, play tag, and leapfrog over one another.

Despite all the stunts, the photos themselves don't depict physically ambitious bodies in space so much as they do a lush, often fashionably forlorn picture of American youth. It's a picture of seemingly wholesome activity made melancholy by diffused lighting, dreamy filters, and props from the indeterminate past; it looks a lot like what you see on Instagram, plus nudity.

McGinley is also a ubiquitous force in the music and corporate-advertising worlds. He's shot countless commercial campaigns for global brands including Marc Jacobs, Uniqlo, Wrangler, Myspace, and Levi's. These projects reach his widest audience. You might not know it, but you have definitely seen his pictures.

The next model up is Sofia, a dead ringer for Cookie Mueller in *Pink Flamingos*. She has a very high and very long ponytail. Facts about Sofia, again obtained by Brandee: She traded a bag of weed for her first tattoo when she was 15, her mom taught gender politics at NYU, she's spent the past few months trying to find an analog photo booth to install somewhere in New York City. Nancy Sinatra starts playing, then they put on "The Twist." Sofia twists, Brandee twists, McGinley even twists a little, as much as he can at least while still holding the camera steady.

"You're really great at dancing," McGinley says.

"The ponytail's a cheap trick," Sofia pants. "It doesn't make me a good dancer."

Thirty minutes later, as Sofia gets dressed, she tells him she's "never felt so comfortable naked in front of a stranger before." McGinley suggests she come along for his upcoming road trip. It's proposed casually, maybe even idly, but it seems significant that he didn't ask Madison to come. It's the only difference in the way he treats them.

Unlike Madison and Sofia, the girl who comes in next is an actual professional model. Rebekah is genuinely hot, not in a transgressive way or in a way that makes you feel interesting for appreciating her. Just hot. She's narrow-hipped with weirdly muscular arms that look merely slender unless she flexes them. Her tits are perfect. Brandee says so. Rebekah doesn't just look like a model. She's more dynamic, moving without being asked to, holding positions for milliseconds longer than a normal person might. McGinley pulls out an auto mechanic's dolly so he can slide around on his stomach and capture her every movement. Meantime, Rebekah chatters away nonstop with the hammy, unregulated candor of a coddled child. She pouts and grins and stretches like a cat. The fun she's having is exaggerated in the way popular teenage girls perform their own happiness with too-loud laughs and oversize smiles. It's impossible to look away, but watching her is exhausting. She has no tattoos, no cellulite, no stretch marks, no ingrown hairs. False as it sounds, her lack of imperfections is boring. She makes Madison and Sofia seem more beautiful, at least in retrospect. Despite a lifetime of knowing I should feel this way, it's the first time I actually do. Everyone looks more beautiful if you pretend you're looking at them through McGinley's eyes.



When McGinley was 17, his elder brother died of complications due to AIDS. Nineteen years later, it's still the most formative experience of his life. Growing up in suburban New Jersey—the youngest of eight kids—McGinley assumed the role of underage hospice worker. "I almost had to repeat junior year because I was spending so much time with him at home," he says. "I'd wheel him around the neighborhood. We'd smoke cigarettes and see people staring out their windows at us." Less than a year after the funeral, the first protease inhibitor was approved, and a year after that, McGinley came out. "It was hard telling my family, because their only reference for gay people was my brother and his friends, and they all died of AIDS. Every last one of them," he says. "When I told my mom, I just knew how much she'd worry about me.

"When you grow up in a family of ten people, you learn to be an observer," he says. "And when you're gay, you learn to *really* be an observer." He describes his road trips as an attempt, in part, to recreate the experience of being in a big family. "All of the people who model for me are versions of my brothers and sisters," he explains. (It's true that many of them share his lunar pallor.) McGinley's teenage years were spent mostly in New York City skateboarding, a hobby that's had a lasting impact on his work. The athleticism and the natural grace of his subjects, his sought-out (often illegal) locations, they're all present.

For his first real show, a DIY affair housed in an empty SoHo building in 2000, he produced a hundred handmade books filled with pictures of his friends horsing around, often at night, often intoxicated. Most of the books were distributed among friends; in some Velvet Underground-esque act of artistic inevitability, a few reissued versions made their way to the desks of the city's most important curators and museum directors. Three years later, the Whitney show.

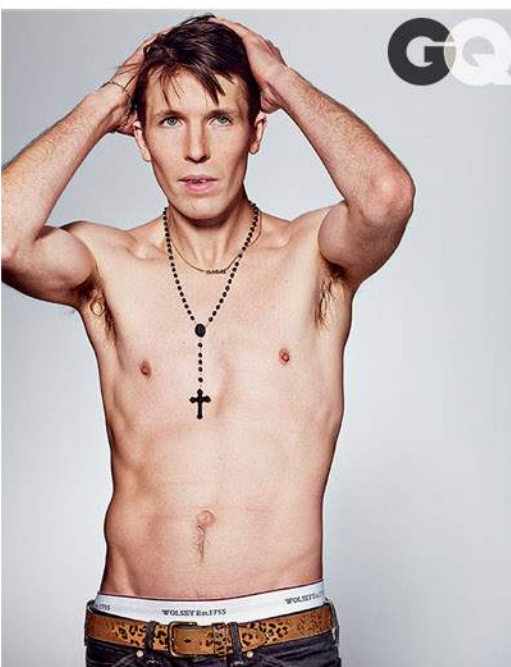


† Marcel, Ann & Coley, 2013. Photo: Courtesy of Ryan McGinley Studios

"The snapshot nature of the work underlined the youthfulness and how radical it was that without the market support he got himself a show at the Whitney," says José Freire, the owner of Team Gallery, McGinley's sole New York City rep. "You couldn't say, 'Oh, the machine was partly responsible.' There was no machine responsible, which I think is part and parcel of why he has become this odd, mythic creature for young people. The guy did it himself."

McGinley's physiognomy is certainly not inconsequential to his charm. His skin is poreless, and his cheeks are chiseled at Platonic angles. His hair is that noncolor that men who were blond as boys always have. He is beautiful in the way that Rimbaud was famously beautiful, and appreciating his physical perfection objectively makes me feel like a eugenicist. There's no way that McGinley's early patrons were immune to this quality.

And thanks to them, McGinley now has an adult career that takes him to some of America's remotest areas. His road trips, legendary among city-dwelling creatives under 30 (they all know someone who knows someone who "went on one"), have been annual summer occasions for almost a decade. McGinley and his assistants start planning the journey in January. They consult maps, newspapers, travel books. It usually starts with a specific desire—wanting to shoot kids in a cypress tree with Spanish moss, say—and the trip itself is plotted according to where such a setting can be found. Lots of acquaintances' parents' summerhouses are used; his team searches VRBO, a website specializing in vacation rentals by owner, for terms likely to result in large, secluded pieces of property: "acres," "farm," "hunting," "ranch."



Over the years, McGinley's budget has increased, allowing him to be more lavish and spontaneous in his scouting. He now rents out bowling alleys, roller rinks. McGinley is very concerned with "keeping people happy," which means frequent stops at roadside thrift stores, drive-in movie theaters, gas stations, and "the Trinity" (Taco Bell, Domino's, Subway). A trip typically involves three legs, each attended by a different cadre of models, all of whom sign up for whatever dates are most convenient for them, almost like it's summer camp, but one where nudity is required. Before a cast is finalized, producers will ask the models

—or as Freire calls them, "Ryan McGinley accomplices"—whether they're on any medication. "It can get intense," McGinley explains.

Petra Collins, who went on last summer's road trip and is now one of McGinley's most photographed subjects, has maintained extremely close friendships with the other models from her trip. They slept naked together every night, inspected one another for ticks. She refers to the trip as "one of the best experiences of my life," and there are now five official McGinley photographs to prove it, and hundreds, if not thousands, of unprinted shots. "He's creating his own reality," she says. "It's cool to live in it, in this environment that's so free and uninhibited, that he made for us."

But that free and uninhibited environment is a constructed one, a set of conditions purposefully orchestrated by McGinley himself to yield the images he wants. "It's no longer interesting for me to wait for things to happen," he says. "I want to *ask* people to do things." The operational complexity is daunting. There are insurance policies to take out, van drivers to vet, motel deposits to make, water bottles to buy in bulk. It's all in service of maintaining a safe, hassle-free atmosphere, which, not coincidentally, happens to be the type that produces good photographs.

"Everyone thinks we're making a porno," McGinley says, laughing. "We usually don't run into people, but when we do they're like, 'You're making a porno, aren't you? C'mon, you can tell me!'"

And yet the past decade has been miraculously free of incident. The bus broke down in Colorado five summers ago, and once some cops issued a bunch of tickets because the crew was Jet Skiing nude on Lake Erie. That's about it, though. McGinley seems to naturally deflect trouble.



It's a gift that's served him well—saved him, even. Because besides his photographs, the most famous thing about McGinley is his friends, an expansive, legendary group of wild downtown figures, all of whom he refers to by first name only. In its earliest iteration, the crew consisted of roughly fifteen kids, including Dan (Colen), an artist he's known since high school; Aaron (Bondaroff, a.k.a. A-Ron, the Downtown Don), the co-founder of Los Angeles gallery OHWOW; Hanna (Liden), a photographer; and Emily (Sundblad), an artist, singer, and co-owner of N.Y.C.'s Reena Spaulings Fine Art gallery. The group's most notorious member was Dash Snow, a graffiti writer and artist, who died of a heroin overdose in the summer of 2009, two years after two of their other friends met the same fate.

It wasn't political stance or artistic ambition per se that united them. When asked what did, McGinley stalls. "Going out to bars at night? Nothing?"

One thing was McGinley himself, who documented their nocturnal adventures, sometimes shooting twenty rolls of film in a single evening. McGinley was skilled at getting very close to danger but just marginally escaping it himself. For years, he seemed always to be mischief-adjacent, a participant-observer profiting off the debauchery of others. It seems like more than just a lucky accident that McGinley is alive and a fair share of his friends are dead.

There's a slipperiness to McGinley. He speaks in a soothing monotone, is happy to answer questions, and is totally transparent about his personal life. He's sincere but not self-congratulatory about it, honest but not candid exactly. It's rare—and unnerving—to be in the presence of a person like this. Somebody who doesn't force you to parse his personality or close-read the failed intentions of his mannerisms. Somebody that straightforward.



† Falling Green Water, 2007. Photo: Courtesy of Ryan McGinley Studios

"I remember going to these dinners before we had a dime," Ryan says. "He would always bring like twelve of us. Just having that audacity is a talent. From day one, it was like, We're going to make a living doing this; we'll redefine what it means to make a living or what it means to be alive if we have to."

"What I remember most about Ryan from that time is that not only did he have a lot of energy and an impressive work ethic, but he was really talented at *producing* work consistently, even before he was showing," says Elizabeth "Lizzy" McChesney (stage name Lissy Trullie), a musician and friend from college. "The inclination to archive and collect—it's the way he was able to build faith in his own work. Maybe he had a clue that he was going to blow up, but I didn't."

One of McGinley's portraits of McChesney—taken in the bathroom of a gay club into which he dragged a mini trampoline for her to bounce naked on—was used as the lead image for his Whitney show. In it, Lizzy is caught in midair, feet a blur, mouth caught in the earliest milliseconds of a smile. The background is bisected at her torso—from the waist down, it's all graffiti, but from the waist up, it's a celestial mural. Her head pops up between two spacecrafts; her breasts—obscured by her own wrist—look to be about Saturn-sized. Twelve years later, it's still one of McGinley's most collectable photographs. José Freire calls it "one of the most beautifully optimistic things you'll ever see."

"It was extremely special," says McChesney of the specific moment in which she and McGinley were young. They came of age just before the proliferation of blogs and social media, with a kind of innocence made obvious only in retrospect. "We had the last gift of being free," she says, "of knowing, I'm going to go out and have fun and see my friends show their work and play in bands, and it's just going to be our moment, and it's not going to be shared."

When I put this to McGinley a few days later, he agrees, but he's nostalgic for more than just the intimacy of an unpublicized good time. For a portrait photographer, a subject's spontaneity and lack of self-consciousness are requisite but increasingly elusive qualities. "People didn't know their camera faces," he remembers. "I don't think I could have done what I did if I was a photographer starting out today."

He's careful of not coming across as too sentimental, though. "I really don't like when people say, 'New York is boring now. New York isn't like it used to be.' I hate that. It's one of my pet peeves. No, motherfucker, you're boring! *You're* not like you used to be."



This morning, McGinley is due in New Haven. He's going to Yale to do crits (critiques) with MFA students at the art school and have a public conversation with Gregory Crewdson, one of the few other living photographers as successful as he is. It's a nice break. McGinley's had a hectic past six months, traveling first to San Francisco for an exhibition, then to Seoul for a retrospective, then to Paris for a solo show, then to Miami for Art Basel, then to Tokyo to visit a friend's new baby, then to the Maldives for an artists' retreat organized by Tilda Swinton.

In his car on the way up, McGinley seems a little pissed. "Bummed" is what he says. Just last night, McGinley was kicked off Instagram. The last straw, the post that got his account shut down and more than one hundred photos erased, was of his dog. It was the caption, not the image, that baited the censor. McGinley's dog, a striped rescue hound, is named Dick.



Click to enlarge.

To McGinley, the suspension feels like an unfair punishment, especially considering his acrobatic obedience to the rules of the app. Almost all the other photos he's posted capture naked young people in fits of hedonistic joy. The creative precaution he's taken over the past two and a half months in sanitizing his shots (clip-art shamrocks on crotches, hearts over nipples) is, he laughs, "almost an art form in itself." Getting kicked off Instagram despite all that effort, he says, feels simultaneously like he's been broken up with and that he's lost his hard drive.

At Yale, whether talking to a kid who's made an installation centered around the surreal voice of a phone-sex worker or a guy who takes pictures of men in the military, McGinley's approach is the same. He asks them about their families, repeatedly urges them to take out a notebook so they can later Google books and people he mentions. McGinley volunteers relevant information about his own life, and many of the students mention friends in New York whom they suspect he will know. Invariably, he does.

Later, over pizza, McGinley fields questions about his photographs, first from Crewdson and then from the students themselves. His advice, surely to the distaste of some of the more high-minded in the bunch, is more about PR than it is about photography. "Don't be scared to put yourself out there," he says. "Don't be scared to market yourself." That's his first tip. His second is stated without a hint of derision: "Don't say things that you wouldn't say in a normal conversation." A pretentious, needlessly vague vocabulary is perhaps the chief occupational hazard of being an artist, and though it's refreshing that McGinley is advising against using words like "dialectic" and "void," it's dubious counsel. When it comes to communicating in the art world, there is no winning. Either you talk as McGinley suggests, like someone at a party or skate park, and you sound stupid, or you talk as McGinley advises against, like a non-native speaker with an inferiority complex, and you sound even stupider. His last piece of guidance, maybe the most pragmatic, is "Get a crew."

Whether or not McGinley recognizes how singular his career is—and how difficult it is to emulate—he delivers his advice offhandedly, making clear that it's grounded in nothing more than personal experience. It's the best he can do. McGinley's visit to Yale, like his prestigious gallery representation and near constant exhibition calendar, is proof that he's fully capable of keeping a foot in the "real" art world while also enjoying the benefits of commercial work (the earnings from which are funneled directly into his road trips). And yet his ability to straddle both worlds seems somehow to dilute his success in each. It muddies his brand. Unlike, say, Terry Richardson, the other photographer from the past decade who has dominated the visual aesthetic of youth culture (and who has become far more famous than McGinley, due almost entirely to his commercial work and celebrity shoots). McGinley's in-between-ness is an exceptional place to be, but also a kind of purgatory.

Art Basel in Miami Beach is an annual four-day bacchanal both beloved and ridiculed by those who attend it. The urban tropic paradise is sold as a lure—a balmy midwinter retreat—but being in a convention center is hellish no matter where you are, and Miami's reliable seventy-five-degree warmth and sorbet-like sunsets make being inside almost physically painful. From the beach, the Deco high-rises look like Disneyfied petits fours, and the tanned, toned, expensive bodies of native Floridians only make the art people from New York and Berlin and London stick out more. They're pale, tattooed; they sun themselves awkwardly on ad hoc beach blankets assembled out of black clothing. In Miami, they're as close as you're going to get to the kind of body Ryan McGinley might vie to shoot naked.



↑ Spider Monkey (Soft Pink), 2012. Photo: Courtesy of Ryan McGinley Studios

This is McGinley's eighth year coming to Miami Basel, and he has his system down pat. He puts in his earbuds, turns on a long play-list made especially for the fair, and proceeds to snake his way through every single booth, all 258 of them.

It's only here, away from New York and his strict ten-to-six work routine, that McGinley is difficult to pin down. In New York, his days are monastic. For a guy who has built a reputation photographing downtown's most depraved revelers, he's remarkably organized, disciplined, and abstinent. He makes his bed every day. He doesn't eat meat. He no longer drinks or does drugs. It's clear that Miami does not feel like real life to him, and so he suspends its rules. He blows off engagements. He lets his cell phone die. He leaves his own party early to catch up with an old friend. In Miami, McGinley seems like the kind of guy who'd unintentionally make you feel uncool for buckling your seat belt.

Then again, he's here to sell art. In Team Gallery's booth hang two McGinley prints, both rare in that they depict interiors rather than expansive landscapes. In "Susannah & Shane," a naked boy and girl (despite the models' ages, "man" and "woman" never seem to be quite the right words to describe McGinley's subjects) are flopped facedown atop a made bed. "London (Carpet)" is the portrait of a young black guy—Afro, very thin—lying like a snow angel on a shag rug. Multiple sources tell me that his photographs of black models are among the few that do not sell, a fact that says little about McGinley and a lot about his collectors. His smaller-scale photographs go for \$14,000 and his larger ones for \$50,000 (the prices of both have doubled in the past decade), but just printing and framing them can cost up to \$5,000, and if you factor in the amount of money it takes to put on the road trips that produce the work... Well, it's safe to say that McGinley is not getting mega, Jeff Koons-style rich—not that he seems to care.

Freire calls the fair a "success." But he adds, "My job is to always be dissatisfied, to always think that not enough work sold. That there's not enough exhibitions for the work, that the artist isn't respected as they should be respected. I'm perennially disappointed. So I think..." He pauses. "I think the work is underappreciated."

By whom, exactly?

Another long pause.

"The Museum of Modern Art does not own a Ryan McGinley photograph." Pause. "And it's not because we haven't tried bringing the work to their attention."

So why, then?

"My feeling is that Ryan McGinley's handicap is his popularity," he says. "It's used by some people as a weapon against him or as an easy way to not really have to think about the work." Here he assumes a nasty faux whisper and begins to pantomime McGinley's notional detractors: "How can this be *good*? He's so *popular*. How can this be *serious*? He's so *popular*."

But he's popular for a reason. Stand in a room full of McGinley's photographs, or scroll through a slideshow on his website, or flip through *Whistle for the Wind*, his 2012 Rizzoli monograph, and you will be subsumed by a mood. As with any body of work, there are high points and low points, photographs that are categorically breathtaking and others that are ho-hum. But regardless of whether or not you think the images are uninteresting or trivial or overhyped, cumulatively they evoke an overwhelming *vibe*, which, when it comes to experiencing art, can feel both extremely pleasurable and extremely manipulative. Unlike his steeply pitched career trajectory, the *vibe* of McGinley's photographs is relatively easy to replicate, which is why you see imitations everywhere you look. Distrusting that which you sense to be simple and overhyped is a good impulse, but it can lead to unearned criticism. There truly is a magic to McGinley's photographs, and while you can be resentful of the tricks, there is no denying that the illusion is impressive.

Not long ago, McGinley wound up at a Met Gala afterparty where he met Jay Z. Jay Z's video for "Young Forever" is a black-and-white short that includes shots of skateboarders carving through empty swimming pools, running through the night with sparklers, and hanging out in vast fields.

McGinley introduced himself to Jay Z, and they got to talking about the sorts of photographs he takes. Jay Z had never heard of him but said the imagery in the music video sounded similar to McGinley's pictures. McGinley said lots of his friends in advertising tell him that his photos often end up on their mood boards. They speculated that this was probably how the "Young Forever" video ended up looking the way it did.

It's probably the same reason why more things than you or I or McGinley himself could ever count look the way they do, from book covers to TV commercials to Hollywood blockbusters to the scenes we imagine when we read certain novels. Infiltrating the collective subconscious is a peculiar kind of power in that the most affected are also the most oblivious. To anonymously penetrate the culture requires the ability to be both critic and artist, satisfying people's latent desires while also inventing something new they couldn't have identified themselves in the first place.

"Now, *that's* exciting," McGinley says, thinking back on the conversation with Jay Z. "When somebody makes something—something that's on such a mass level—that's influenced by your work. And they don't even know it."
