

# RYAN MCGINLEY *Early*

by Timothy Francis Barry

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“Tuesday, December 28, 1982—Aspen. Colorado:

At 8:30 Barry Diller invited us to have cocktails with Calvin Klein and Maria Cigogna and Diana Ross. Diana came in and she had just bought a cowboy hat and big white shoes and she was out for action. We all got in cars and followed Barry, he’s a bad driver. Then Barry invited us out to dinner to Andre’s. The food there was disgusting. Jon lost part of his Kieselstein-Cord belt. Diana was dancing on top of the table and everybody wanted to dance with her and she said ‘I’m dancing with *all* of you!’ That was a great line.”

– From *The Andy Warhol Diaries*, ed. Pat Hackett, (New York: Warner Books, 1989).

In Ramsey, New Jersey at the tender age of five, little Ryan McGinley had no idea that his future aesthetic was being shaped by a ghost-faced man from Pittsburgh wearing a wig. The names are different, and the circumstances don't match exactly—Warhol was by all accounts born an artist, while McGinley came into it sideways, from the world of snowboarding—but the template doesn't much vary: gather around a crazy-quilt of creatives, the famous and the infamous, take a million Polaroids of them, have an awful lot of fun, then share this with the world.

But where Warhol's art was transformative, taking images as a jumping off point, McGinley's is sociological; he presents his subjects warts and all (warts preferred), giving the viewer visual cues that describe the activities of his East Village friends. It's a strategy adopted by Larry Clark, by Ed Templeton, by Wolfgang Tillmans, by Nan Goldin. Degrees of shock are part of the program of this school of photography, which is one reason why this early work of McGinley's, while undoubtedly well-photographed, according to the doctrines of the blood-and-body-fluids-snapshot, seem today to pack a lesser punch.

An erect penis on an art gallery wall makes less of a statement than it did a decade ago. Blowjob photos now appear very much an aspect of style; it takes little stretch to envision these as advertising photos for a Prada campaign.

Some of the pictures in the exhibition succeed on formal terms in composition or through the manipulation of background blasts of color, almost in spite of their documentary quality. For instance, there is an arresting portrait of the African-American graffiti artist Kunle Martins as a sexualized nude odalisque. Lying diagonally across rose-colored sheets, with a white pillow forming a sort of halo, the patterns of a knit comforter draped across one arm supply triangles and diagonals that pivot against the diagonals formed by his arms.

McGinley uses a flame-like flash of red as a background for *The Kiss*, which gives it a dreamlike quality. And in a moody cityscape he summons feelings of loss and loneliness by capturing a moment at dusk shot through with beauty, the deep

black tones of the buildings providing a framing device. The use of color here is no accident.

Ryan McGinley is a paradigm of the arriviste who rode right-place-right-time to breathtaking levels. His minutely documented rise is worth considering: from competitive snowboarder to Parsons art student, futzing around in your East Village flat taking pictures of pals and wander-ins, to suddenly having a show at the legendary locus 420 West Broadway, then at twenty-five, a Whitney solo show. Try doing that.

As Team Gallery's press-release notes, "His fame roughly coincided with the advent of image-oriented social media platforms, the Internet quickly serving as the primary means of dispersal and consumption of his pictures." Along the way: monographs, catalogues, mountains of Polaroids. Show after show at the toniest of institutions, "Kunsthalle this" and "Fondazione that." Now on the eve of his fortieth birthday, the enfant terrible in a grisaille key has a large, culminating exhibition of these early Polaroid works at MCA Denver, *The Kids Were Alright*, accompanied by the obligatory fat Rizzoli book.

Around the year 2000, McGinley could be found on the masthead of the era-defining *Vice Magazine*, as Photo Editor At-Large, and this involvement in the world of journalism and reportage remains a constant throughout his career. In a 2011 book on Boston School photographer David Armstrong, *615 Jefferson Avenue*, McGinley contributes an interview of his mentor and primary influence, which also sheds quite a bit of light on his own working methods and ideas.

RM: When I'm making photos I'm removed from the experience because I'm so interested in the composition and having the camera in front of my face. But when I'm all alone on my couch at 2:00 a.m. and going through rolls of photos, I feel like I'm reliving the experience ten-fold. Like, "Oh, that *was* what happened."

[...]

RM: You're not creating the narrative, but the viewer definitely is. You're just leading the person up to a point and from there they can make their own conclusion as to what is happening. That's what's so sexy about the pictures [Armstrong's]. You're forcing people to use their own imagination. Part of why you're such a great artist is you can lead

precisely up to that point, and you know when to stop. [Armstrong replies, “I’m sure you feel that too.”]

Clearly, narrative is central to McGinley’s Team Gallery exhibition. The stories told are limned by detail—a bruised face, a bleeding arm, his running buddy, the gadfly artist Dash Snow lit up like a firecracker—but the “what happened” is important only in relation to the viewer’s curiosity. Mostly the “what” is obvious.

One of the keys to McGinley’s worldwide success and acceptance is the fact that his works, though in and of the gay world, are decidedly less homo-erotic than the likes of Jack Pierson, or David Armstrong for that matter. Naked girls occupy as much space as naked boys. As Warhol memorably noted, “One great thing about New York is that there are always new girls in town.”