

Art

## For His Latest Project, Ryan McGinley Hands the Camera to His Friends

By Ariela Gittlen Jun 26, 2018 3:13 pm



Ryan McGinley, *Amy K*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

*Give yourself encouragement, say to your reflection: "You're doing great, sweetie."*

*Get close, look into your eyes, see if you can find your reflection in them.*

*Imitate your favorite statue (Lady Liberty, Sphinx, Buddha, David, Thinker, Nefertiti).*

*Push everything off a tabletop, then shoot several photos of yourself around the mess.*

Those are a few of the many instructions Ryan McGinley gave the models for his most recent series, “Mirror Mirror.” But the photographer wasn’t in the room to deliver them—he wasn’t anywhere near the shoot, for that matter.



Ryan McGinley, *Hunter*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Instead, McGinley provided an evolving set of written instructions that were delivered to each model’s home by an assistant, who also brought along 15 to 20 large rectangular mirrors. The models were charged with shooting five rolls of film on a Yashica T4 point-and-shoot camera; they were asked to follow the instructions, and to try and keep an open heart. Although McGinley has himself switched entirely to digital, he knew it was important that his remote collaborators shoot on film—it would give the participants fewer chances to self-censor or edit, since they wouldn’t actually be developing the images themselves.



The photographer is used to being behind the camera, of course—whether during the free-wheeling road trips that marked his early series, or in more recent studio-based portrait sessions. Was it strange to surrender so much control over the process? “I loved it,” he said, simply. McGinley has effectively automated an aspect of his creative practice, creating an instructional artwork that can function independently, like a recipe or a musical score. One of the most essential examples of the genre—and one that directly inspired McGinley—is Yoko Ono’s *Grapefruit* (1964), a book that collected simple, poetic, and occasionally impossible instruction-based artworks. (“Imagine the clouds dripping,” suggests one page, “dig a hole in your garden to put them in.”)



Ryan McGinley, *Bridgette*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Ono's suggestion that the artist was not the sole creator of an artwork was a radical notion in the 1960s, as was the idea that an artwork is just a list of instructions that anyone can follow. Although Conceptual art has a well-deserved reputation for obscurity, instructional artworks are typically accessible and essentially democratic—they belong to everyone.

“There are so many conceptual artworks [that] I've loved over the years,” McGinley said, citing like-minded projects by everyone from Miranda July to Rob Pruitt and Sol LeWitt. “But I never thought I could do something like that with photography.”

The results, on view at Team Gallery in New York from June 29th through September 29th, are intimate, thoughtful, and occasionally psychedelic, due to the multitude of reflective surfaces crammed into small rooms. The models range in age from 19 to 87, their bodies a panoply of colors, shapes, and sizes. They're cast from McGinley's social circle: friends, friends' parents, former models, former lovers, artists, choreographers, musicians—creative people with small New York apartments. The mirrors are arranged around the room according to sets of instructions that correspond to each roll of film. Bedsheets are rumpled and tabletops are cluttered, giving the impression that we're intervening in a private moment. With mirrors leaning against nearly every surface in their apartments, the models are compelled to examine their own bodies in a way that few of us ever do. All are nude, per McGinley's request (though one model resolutely decided to keep on her high heels), but they each display various degrees of modesty—some chose to keep things modestly hidden, while others let it all hang out.

In *Elena and Alexander* (all works 2018), the foreground of the image is divided neatly into thirds, where three mirrors touch. A woman and small child sit on the floor, both with one hand raised in the air. The scene somehow manages to evoke both developmental psychology (the mirror

stage) and a placid vision of Madonna and Child. In *Hunter*, a man stands, bathed in golden light. He looks off-balance, as if caught mid-step. He's reflected in so many mirrors that he appears to be visible from nearly every angle simultaneously, like a Cubist portrait or a piece of statuary installed at Versailles. *Quinton* presents a visual puzzle, breaking up a tall, pale body into a mish-mash of floating parts; *Jade* makes the mirrors dissolve altogether, showing instead the luminous head and shoulder of the model, who has achieved an almost perfect crop and composition.

Even though the camera wasn't in his hand, much of "Mirror Mirror" looks as if it could have been shot by McGinley himself. The series fits neatly with the artist's now-familiar aesthetic: intimate details, charismatic people, and a curiosity about—and appreciation for—the nude form that approaches reverence, as if the subjects are all Renaissance *putti* or Greek gods. McGinley traces his longtime interest in the nude form to the visual milieu of his Roman Catholic upbringing. "My parents were very, very religious," he explained. "We would read the Bible together and look at all the religious paintings. Going to Rome when I was 18 and seeing all those paintings—nude bodies kind of flying through the air—I think it all spawned from that."

A second source of inspiration comes from interior design magazines—like *Apartamento*, a favorite of his—which feature the homey spaces of artists and other creative types. (Petra Collins shot McGinley and his New York apartment for the magazine in 2015.) "I love looking at people's stuff and how people choose to decorate their spaces," McGinley said. "Mirror, Mirror" privileges these intimate details; a flowered duvet, teal-colored walls, or a wide-eyed painting of a cat seem to add a tender layer of meaning to each model's portrait. "There's something so intimate about seeing people in the spaces that represent them," he continued. "Giving them a camera and letting them photograph themselves there—there's poetry in that."



Ryan McGinley, *Janie*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist.

Although he's become known for outdoor photography—young people climbing trees, running through fields, or lying below frozen waterfalls—staging photos inside the apartments of his peers is something of a callback to when McGinley was just getting started. Photos from the early years of his career were often shot in his friends' crowded apartments in downtown Manhattan. In fact, it's the little details of how people live—their bookshelves, babies, and pets—that draw him in. “That’s my favorite part of this project,” McGinley said. “Sure, I’m interested in the body, and I’ve seen a lot of bodies over the course of taking photos for the past 20 years. But in certain [of these] photos, you’ll see a person and their nude body reflected five times, and if you look really closely in the corner you’ll see...a tiny little cat.” ●