



PHOTO BOOTH

RYAN MCGINLEY'S
INTROSPECTIVE
COLLECTION OF HIS
FRIENDS' SELF-
PORTRAITS

By Andrea K. Scott 5:06 P.M.

“Desmond,” 2018. Photographs by Ryan McGinley / Courtesy Team Gallery

In the summer of 1978, the Museum of Modern Art opened an exhibition titled “Mirrors and Windows,” in which the influential curator John Szarkowski proposed two major categories to describe American photographs taken since 1960. The first, Mirrors, which reflected what he described in the catalogue as “an intense sensitivity to the mystical content of the natural landscape,” amounted to self-portraits of the artists who made them. The second category, Windows, opened up more realistic views of the world. The artist Minor White, who co-founded *Aperture*, in the nineteen-fifties, was the patron saint of the first group (*Aperture* was the first magazine dedicated to photography as fine art since Alfred Stieglitz started *291*, in 1915); Robert Frank’s indelible road pictures, collected in the book “The Americans,” paved the way for the latter.



“Nicole,” 2018.

Asking which category Ryan McGinley’s new series belongs to might seem like a trick question. Its title is “Mirror, Mirror,” but McGinley’s work has always been both a looking glass and a lookout. His early pictures, which earned him a solo show at the Whitney, in 2003, at the tender age of twenty-five, were at once fairy tales and slices of his own life, transforming the dive bars and barren rooftops of lower Manhattan into an enchanted world where beautiful lost boys and girls lived on the edge but never fell off it. The fact that some of McGinley’s beautiful, fast-living friends died tragically young—the impossibly charismatic artist Dash Snow overdosed in 2009—hasn’t tarnished the story. Not all fairy tales have happy endings.

Shortly after the Whitney show, McGinley began taking his camera on cross-country road trips, à la Frank, and he began casting strangers and acquaintances (some models, some not) in the rambunctious roles his close friends used to play. These images of free spirits dancing naked with fireworks, sprinting across highways wearing nothing but shoes, and spelunking in the buff inside icy caverns—specks of humanity dwarfed by natural splendor—are ecstatic anthems of halcyon youth, and they led to McGinley shooting ad campaigns for brands like Wrangler and Levi's.



"Mary V. and Chella R.," 2018.



"Hunter," 2018.

“The thing about being a photographer that’s so cool is that you get to participate, but you also get to disappear,” McGinley once said in an interview. He really vanished for “Mirror, Mirror”—he wasn’t even there when the pictures were taken. Instead, he supplied his friends with cameras, rolls of 35-mm. film, twenty mirrors, and instructions to shoot some self-portraits. What qualifies the series as McGinley’s work has to do with the edit: he chose one image per sitter to include. The results take his work in an exhilarating and surprisingly contemplative new direction, if also a logical one for an artist who has always treated his subjects as collaborators. We’re accustomed to those co-conspirators being young, white, thin, and good-looking; refreshingly, the sitters in these new portraits come in a wide range of ages, skin-tones, and shapes. For every Liz, a pink-haired sylph who proliferates in the mirrors like a manic-pixie chorus line, there is a Janie, a Rubenesque badass, who holds her camera at crotch level and gazes off into space.

It's hard to believe that McGinley developed his eye in the age before social media: scroll through Instagram and you might think he invented it, or at least its [#vanlife](#) celebration of gypsy freedom. There is no doubt that he's adapted; a quarter-million people follow him on Instagram. Still, you wouldn't confuse these new images for selfies. Their intimacies and intricacies are introspections and an antidote to see-me thirst traps. They're a collective portrait of the artist through the eyes of his friends—people he's drawn to, perhaps, because they share his intense sensitivity to the mysteries they confront in the mirror, which is really just another window.

“Mirror, Mirror” is on view at Team gallery through September 29th. A related book will be published by Rizzoli on October 9th.



“Imma,” 2018.