

Liked the Show, Loved the Afterparty

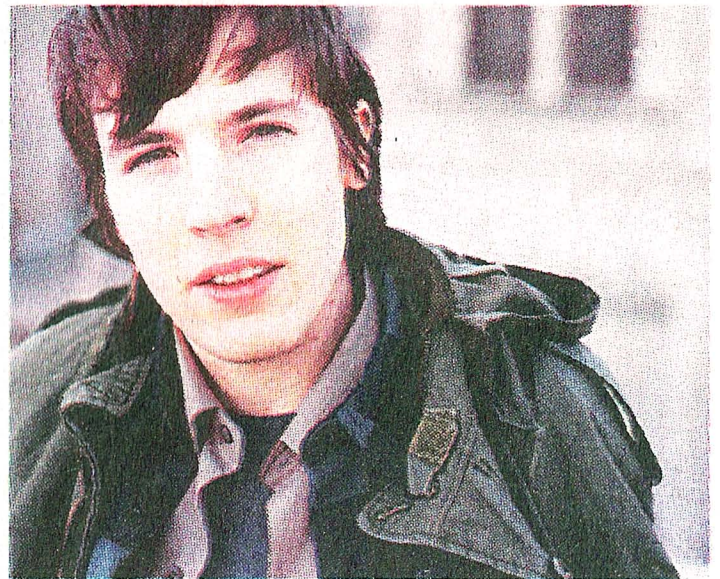
By CARL SWANSON

THE opening of the Ryan McGinley photography exhibition early this month at the Whitney Museum did not draw the usual art-appreciation crowd. For one thing, there was hardly anybody over the age of 30. The afterparty, sponsored by the clothing designer Agnès B., Stella Artois beer and the indie magazine Index, was bigger than the museum event, packing a vast space on Hudson Street with exactly mused downtowners in trucker caps and vintage sneakers. The 22-year-old fashion designer Zac Posen was pressed up against a singer from a punk band called Le Tigre, and graffiti artists swilled beer with members of an electroclash band, W.I.T. The hall buzzed with the energy of a demographic celebrating itself.

As indeed it was. Mr. McGinley is 25 and first picked up a camera five years ago. His show, "The Kids Are Alright," part of the Whitney's "First Look" series introducing young photographers, documents his life in downtown Manhattan and his young, dirty, often half-naked and usually ecstatically stoned-looking friends.

At a time the art world is enamored with new photography, Mr. McGinley, with his detached yet intimate vision of what it is like to be underemployed, underweight and conversant with the underground culture, inspires comparisons with a young Nan Goldin, whose fly-on-the-wall photographs put Lower East Side friends on intimate display.

Sipping Earl Grey tea in his East Village walk-up shortly before his Whitney debut, Mr. McGinley discussed his anointment. Friendly and solicitous, he comes across more like someone's goofy younger



Amy Dickerson for The New York Times

CHRONICLER For five years, Ryan McGinley has been photographing friends in the city's underground culture. Some of the images are at the Whitney.

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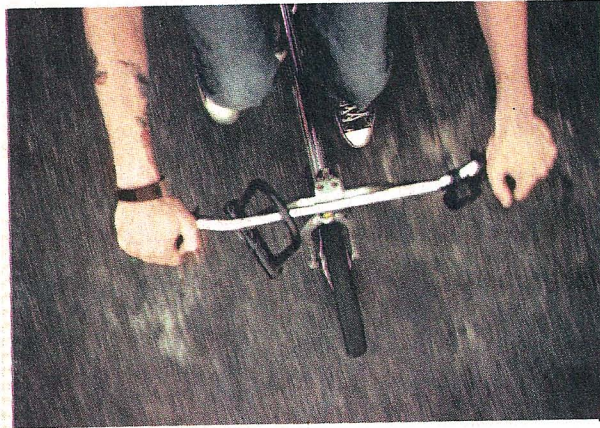
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brother than a rising art star, often breaking off into bashful giggles when talking about himself.

"I was in a group show at the Andrea Rosen Gallery, and the woman from the Whitney heard about it," he said, referring to Sylvia Wolf, the Whitney's photography curator. "Sylvia called me up and said, 'Do you want to do a show at the Whitney? I'll give you a day to think about it.' And I was like, 'Uh, I don't need a day.'" He leaned forward and widened his eyes big for emphasis.

But to say Mr. McGinley was plucked from obscurity would not quite do him justice. While other 20-year-olds busied themselves sending cover letters and getting dressed for job interviews, Mr. McGinley spent the last five years palling around with a steadily accumulating set of art mentors, including the Toronto filmmaker Bruce LaBruce, the photographer and filmmaker Larry Clark and Agnès B., publishing his photographs in hipper-than-thou magazines like *Index* and *Vice*, and generally insinuating himself in the New York art and music scene like the latest revived 1980's haircut.



"I've never seen something come to global domination so quickly," said Michael Bullock, advertising sales director of *Index*, which first published Mr. McGinley's work, in 2000, and put out a small book of his photographs last February.

Some are more impressed by Mr. McGinley's networking skills than with his artistic eye. An article in *The Village Voice* dismissed him as *Vice*'s "gay lad mascot," and *V*, an insider's fashion magazine, teased him for having become famous by "ripping off the established vérité style of Nan Goldin and Terry Richardson." But Holland Cotter, writing in *The New York Times*, assessed his portrayal of friends, lovers and fellow

artists as "relaxed and playful, as if the world were on recess" as opposed to Ms. Goldin's "noirish narcissism."

Mr. McGinley's apartment, which he rents with a painter named Gargantuan Dan and a D.J. who calls himself Kid America, bears all the hallmarks of someone tipping out of one world and into another. His bed is on cinder blocks, the sheets are from the Salvation Army and a pile of sneakers covers much of the floor. Then there's the gleaming MacIntosh G4, and the number for Hedi Slimane, the men's wear designer for Christian Dior, on a pad next to the phone.

Like the work of Mr. Clark and the photographer Wolfgang Tillmans, Mr. McGinley's images of wan drug-using friends provide access to a certain world that the Range Rover crowd might find titillating.

"It's not just peering at beautiful young people; it's also being admitted to the circle," said Luc Santé, who wrote about bohemian New York in the book "Low Life" and who teaches the history of photography at Bard College. "Older viewers get that twinge of envy. The younger viewer gets that feeling they're not cool enough or something. It pushes a lot of emotional buttons."

Mr. McGinley maintains that he is not about pushing buttons. And although much of his work reflects his life as a young gay man, he does not want to treat that matter-of-factly. His photograph of his friend and muse, Eric, masturbating, for example, might seem shocking, even deliberately so, but Mr. McGinley insists he is really trying "to make the sensational banal."

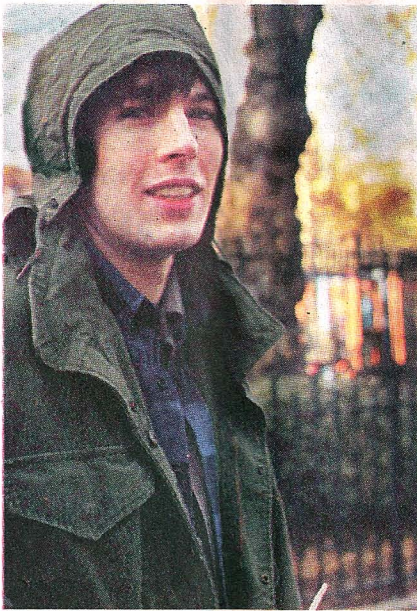
The same goes for his treatment of the beer and cocaine parties he chronicled in *Vice*. "It's about the happy effects of the drug, as opposed to Nan Goldin, which is about dramatic effect," he said. "They

shouldn't make you sad. It's not about the art of drugs; it's about how the drugs induce your performance for the camera."

Ms. Wolf of the Whitney agrees with the distinction. "The thing that strikes me is that he has an almost innocent, exuberant approach, but it's tough-minded at the same time," she said. "It's not in the same vein as Larry Clark; they're not down and out. I see a generation that's been raised with visual images, where people are posing and scenes are staged."

Raised with computer technology, Mr. McGinley has never bothered to master the darkroom.

"I never learned how to color-print," he



Amy Dickerson for The New York Times

DOWNTOWN STROLLER Ryan McGinley, above, walks around his neighborhood in the East Village. His photographs of his friends are in an exhibition, "The Kids Are Alright," part of the Whitney Museum's "First Look" series.

said. Instead, he scans negatives into his computer. "It's like D.J.'ing with an iPod," he said, "You don't have to collect records for 20 years. It's great if you're that guy. But nobody can tell the difference."

It's an attitude that irritates detractors. A lot of people are grumbling, said the photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia, a leading influence on fashion and advertising photography who teaches at Yale. "There's always going to be carping from photographers because there's such a large contingent of them who base their identity on some sort of technical aspect of it," he said. "And then somebody comes along and makes it seem easy."

Mr. McGinley grew up in suburban Ramsey, N.J. His father hoped he would be a tennis star. Instead he became a skateboarder. He and his friends would head into Manhattan after school and skate in Washington Square Park, a place that turned out to be something of a Groucho Club of networking opportunities for the freestyle set. It was there, in 1991, that he met Mr. Clark, when the director was looking for amateur actors to cast in "Kids," his brutal 1995 depiction of aimless youth. (Mr. McGinley's friend, Leo Fitzpatrick, got the lead.)

In 1996 Mr. McGinley moved to New York to attend the Parsons School of Design and study graphic design. One day in a graphics class he was having trouble getting a drawing of a church right, so — fed up with his inadequate efforts, and because he just found the idea of cheating funny — he decided it would be easier to take a photograph and trace it.

Within a year, he said, he was documenting everything in his life with a camera. In



Photographs by Ryan McGinley

1999 he got the attention of the editors at *Vice* and *Index* after self-publishing a book of his photographs at home on his Epson printer; assignments followed. *Index* also reprinted 1,500 copies of his book. He ran into Agnès B. at a party, where she saw his book and decided to exhibit his photographs in her Los Angeles store last summer. "I had to fight a bit with people I work with," she said. "It was the image of his friend masturbating, placed by the door, which got the most complaints."

Throughout his short career, Mr. McGinley has had a seemingly unerring ability to attract mentors and sponsors, and once in his orbit, it is easy to see how he does it. At his opening he worked a crowd with the ease of a Kiwanis clubman in his free Agnès B. suit, shaking hands and slapping friends on the back. Occasionally he pulled guests over to pose for souvenir Polaroids, which he posted on the wall.

While his work has the hipness of a party only very few people are worthy of attend-

ing, Mr. McGinley himself is constantly accommodating, inviting you in, sounding you out. Join me; let me take your picture, is the message he sends.

Mr. McGinley also seems to have reached a mellowing phase ahead of his peers. Once he had a reputation for partying: the high jinks that went on at his apartment were so legendary that they inspired Mr. Clark's latest exploration into the excesses of youth, a Showtime series on which Mr. McGinley has been collaborating. "He was interested in writing about what used to take place in my apartment," Mr. McGinley said of Mr. Clark's project. "It's settled down a lot."

"It was drugs, sex, total excess," said Gavin McInnes, editor of *Vice*. "Most people don't come out of that. But somehow he had the sense to just do his work."

The evidence is on the wall of the Whitney, although the activities have abated somewhat.

"Lately," he said, "I've slowed down a little bit to learn about this business of art."