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LAST CHANCE

Different Angles on the Portrait

By KAREN ROSENBERG

While putting together the catalog that accompanies his current show at Team Gallery, Ryan McGinley asked another photographer, [Catherine Opie](#), if she would interview him. In some ways it was a strange choice. Ms. Opie, 49, is best known for studio portraits that are as static and deliberate as the 32-year-old Mr. McGinley's photographs are hyperkinetic. And while both artists explore queer identity, they're separated by gender, geography and nearly a generation.

Their conversation, as recorded in the catalog, is probing and insightful. And now there's another, even more revealing dialogue in two Manhattan galleries, between Mr. McGinley's show at Team and Ms. Opie's at Gladstone.

At the heart of this exchange are ideas about studio portraiture, and about the photographers who defined this art form in the 20th century: Penn, Avedon and especially [Mapplethorpe](#). Also evident is a renewed interest in community and family.

Both artists also happen to be going through transitional phases. Ms. Opie, working in Los Angeles, had a midcareer survey at the Guggenheim in 2008, and Mr. McGinley, in New York and settling into his 30s, is trying to move beyond the kids-behaving-badly imagery of his 2003 New York solo debut at the Whitney, a first impression that still defines him, at least commercially.

Ms. Opie tends to work cyclically, moving from portraiture to landscape to cityscape and back again. She also seesaws between the personal and the impersonal, following up portraits of fellow lesbians and practitioners of S&M with steely conceptual-documentary shots of freeways and mini-malls. Her series on surfers, ice-fishers and high school football players fall somewhere in the middle: these groups are foreign to her, but they have a similarly extreme relationship to the body.

At Gladstone she's back within her social milieu, revisiting early-to-mid-'90s portraits of friends and intimates, but with the confidence of maturity. Her subjects represent subcultures, sometimes sub-subcultures, yet they're connected in subliminal and powerful ways to a mainstream history of portraiture.

Her show "Girlfriends" is split into two sections: recent color photographs and a small gallery of older, black-and-white works. Everything has been installed with tremendous sensitivity, particularly in the larger galleries, where studio portraits on brightly colored backgrounds alternate with more spontaneous shots taken outdoors.

The formal portraits, among them "Pig Pen (Tattoos)" and "J D," evoke paintings by Hans Holbein, primarily because of their walls of color, but also because the subjects are shown in three-quarters view, with unfocused gazes. The sense of continuity is only partly interrupted by the women's masculine facial hair, piercings and (in some cases) prominent tattoos.

The color shots are consistent with Ms. Opie's mid-'90s work, but they're softer and less theatrical, especially in the portraits taken outside the studio. In 1993 Ms. Opie photographed her friend Idexa wearing a fake mustache, a studded cuff and a knife holster, one hand on her hip. At Gladstone Ms. Opie shows the same woman at ease in the woods, topless and heavily tattooed. Ms. Opie's women are still tough, but their attitude seems to come more from within.

Most of them are fellow creative types, well known in their fields: the musician [K. D. Lang](#), the writer Eileen Myles, the artist Harry Dodge. It's clear that they know and respect Ms. Opie. There's a sense of ease, familiarity and warmth, even in the formal portraits. Some images are coyly seductive ("The L Word" actress Kate Moennig blowing smoke rings); others brazenly come-hither (the model Jenny Shimizu propping up her black combat boots on a pristine white bed).

The black-and-white works in the back gallery, from 1987 to 2008, have a different feel. Showing Ms. Opie and her friends in leather boots and sadomasochistic get-ups, they relate clearly to Mapplethorpe and perhaps also the Swiss photographer Karlheinz Weinberger's shots of rebellious teenagers.

Some of it is posturing, as in the aggressive gesture of "Angela (crotch grab)" (1992) or the fake beards and mustaches worn by the women in "The Gang" (1990). Even in this part of the show, though, Ms. Opie's softer side is apparent. Some of the earliest photographs show women lounging quietly in hotel rooms, nude or in bathrobes. Others convey intimacy through close-ups of hands and feet.

For Ms. Opie, black-and-white studio portraiture is an affirmation, or a reaffirmation, of self. For Mr. McGinley, it's a shift away from everything he is known for: working in color, often outdoors, with distance and the illusion of spontaneity.

Studio photography, for Mr. McGinley, seems to be synonymous with control. Each of the 150 models was selected from thousands of hopefuls, and photographed 1,500 to 2,000 times. During the shoots, Mr. McGinley relied on a mini-trampoline, party music, facial-expression cue cards and a "hype girl" named Brandee to encourage the requisite degree of enthusiasm.

Physically, the lithe young models who appear in the pictures at Team Gallery don't look all that different from other McGinley subjects. Yet in black and white, and with the isolation of the studio, they're suddenly awkward and even indecent.

The best images have a rangy, manic quality. In some of these the models are only half in the frame, as if the photographer didn't click fast enough. In others they're aggressively frontal, hunching or crotch-thrusting toward the camera as if they'd just popped up on Chatroulette. Least interesting are the closeups of faces; movement, not expression, is Mr. McGinley's forte.

That sense of movement sometimes evokes Weimar-era gymnastics photographs, in a way that's vaguely disturbing. More formal poses, meanwhile, often seem to quote erotic images by [Man Ray](#), [Irving Penn](#) and [Alfred Stieglitz](#). And the installation, a rigid grid, has deadening, typological implications.

But you have to admire Mr. McGinley for making such a decisive break with the work that has earned him critical accolades, a hipster following and a substantial commercial portfolio. His choice of Ms. Opie for the catalog is part of the shift. In a way he's disowning earlier role models: "I feel like if I get compared to Nan Goldin and Larry Clark again, I'm going to buy a gun and start shooting people," he jokes in the catalog interview.

As interviewer, Ms. Opie poses some good questions. Why take the exhibitionism indoors, for instance? "In a place like a studio, where the person is already stripped from all context," she asks, "what is your interest in the body and in representing it?"

She's also probably one of the only people whose first reaction to Mr. McGinley's photography is to historicize it. His shots of teenagers exploring the wilderness are "steeped in a nostalgia for freedom that dates back to the 19th century," Ms. Opie says. "Like, I look at your work sometimes and I think about F. Holland Day." Her observations are borne out in several large color photographs at Team, set on cliffs and in caves, that serve as a foil to the black and whites.

Ms. Opie also draws out Mr. McGinley's interest in family, which she shares. Mr. McGinley is the youngest of eight children, and his siblings are all more than a decade older than he. Everyone in his pictures, he says, "resembles the way that my brothers and sisters looked when I was a child."

In a way, his relationship to Ms. Opie has the same dynamic. She's the cautious older sister, and he's the adventurous little brother. But as their shows imply, those roles can sometimes be reversed.

"Catherine Opie: Girlfriends" continues through April 24 at Gladstone Gallery, 515 West 24th Street, Chelsea; (212) 206-9300, gladstonegallery.com. "Ryan McGinley: Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere" continues through Saturday at Team Gallery, 83 Grand Street, SoHo; (212) 279-9219, teamgal.com.