

BULLETT

HEAVENLY CREATURES

photo by TIM BARBER

IT'S BEEN OVER 10 YEARS SINCE PHOTOGRAPHER RYAN MCGINLEY BECAME THE YOUNGEST ARTIST TO GET HIS OWN EXHIBITION AT NEW YORK'S WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART. EVER SINCE, HE'S BEEN AT THE CENTER OF THE MOST SENSATIONAL—AND, ARGUABLY, INSPIRED—NEW YORK ART SCENE TO EMERGE SINCE WARHOL'S FACTORY. NICK HARAMIS SITS DOWN WITH THE ETERNAL SKATER BOY TO REMINISCE ABOUT LOVE, DEATH, AND MOVING ON.

TWO WEEKS AGO, Ryan McGinley nestled into a beanbag chair on a floating raft in the middle of Phang Nga Bay, a body of still, emerald-green water enveloped by vertiginous cliffs. Dusk had just cloaked the Thai horizon on that balmy evening in March, and little by little, specks of stars began to radiate through the night sky. The era-defining photographer sat next to Ole Scheeren, one of the world's preeminent architects. Experimental musician and CBGB fixture Arto Lindsay was there. Actor and jewelry designer Waris Ahluwalia spoke in hushed tones to award-winning filmmakers Gregg Araki and Apichatpong Weerasethakul (everyone calls him Joe), who, along with Oscar-winning actor Tilda Swinton, had gathered together esteemed friends for their inaugural four-day arts festival, Film on the Rocks Yao Noi.

The journey from his Chinatown apartment to a pontoon in the middle of southern Thailand wore thin on McGinley, the chronicler of youthful abandon who, even though he's now 34, remains the New York art world's prodigal son. He'd flown from New York to Seoul, then from Seoul to Bangkok, then from Bangkok to Phuket, where he boarded a boat to Yao Noi, a quiet refuge from the sex tourism that plagues (and sustains) the island's neighboring towns. As soon as night fell, however, all memory of his exhausting journey dissipated with the day's heat. Floating on water in their majestic, makeshift Thai drive-in, they settled in for a screening of the 1903 version of *Alice in Wonderland*. Famed composer Simon Fisher Turner performed a score he'd written to accompany the film. "It was unreal. I was like, Wait, what's happening?" says McGinley from a window table at Café Petisco in lower Manhattan. While he decides whether or not to order a beet salad, his seven assistants, only a few blocks away at his studio, are frantically readying the artist's two new solo exhibitions at José Freire's Team Gallery: "Animals," portraits of "marmosets, turtles, and donkeys," and "Grids," photographs of concertgoers being transported to near ecstasy by their favorite bands.

Although the trip to Thailand was unlike anything he'd experienced before, "little adventures," as he refers to them, are nothing new for McGinley, who typically spends six months out of every year in transit. Last fall, he flew to South Africa

at Bono's request to make a short film for the philanthropic rock star's (RED) and ONE charities. When McGinley isn't traveling on assignment, he spends most of his time putting together solo exhibitions at one of the many galleries that represent him: Team in New York, Ratio 3 in San Francisco, Alison Jacques Gallery in London, The Breeder in Athens, and Tomio Koyama Gallery in Tokyo. In a few days, he'll travel to London to attend an art opening in support of Marc Hundley, a fellow Team Gallery artist and his on-and-off (currently off) boyfriend of 13 years. "I'm trying to have some Ryan time at the moment," he says. "I definitely go on dates, but I'm pretty happy being single right now. I'm rarely home, anyway. Whoever I'm with is going to have to accept that I'm gone most of the time."

Since becoming, at the age of 23, the youngest artist ever to have a solo show at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art, McGinley has racked up a dizzying number of frequent-flyer miles. In 2001, *Index* flew him to Berlin to take photos of Momus, an electronic musician and regular contributor to the magazine. ("I remember keeling over with stomach pains at the airport on my way there, so frightened that I might have to ask this guy to take his shirt off.") From 2004 to 2006, he toured the U.S., Mexico, Scotland, England, Ireland, and Australia, taking commissioned pictures of Morrissey at hundreds of the rock icon's shows across the world. He's signed the sneakers of screaming fans in Japan. He's dodged literal bullets in the Bible Belt. ("I've had run-ins with serious, *Deliverance*-style hicks, people who ride around on ATVs, screaming like good ol' boys and firing shotguns into the air.") He's been pulled over by the police while photographing a group of naked teens riding around on Jet Skis in Lake Erie. ("The cops had no idea what was going on. We didn't get arrested, but I got ticketed up the ass.") He's been stuck in the middle of a terrible hailstorm in Colorado's Great Sand Dunes during one of his now-infamous annual summer road trips, for which he, his team, and a handful of models cross the country taking nude photos in caves, atop mountains, and across expansive plains.

"I love photographing people nude," says McGinley, who's wearing a pair of jeans and a blue sweater zipped up to his neck.





"I think most people look at it sexually, but I think everyone looks sexier with their clothes on. For me, making photographs is the least sexual thing ever." Take *Untitled (Bathtub)* (2005), which, despite capturing five models—three men and two women—sandwiched together in a tub, gives the impression of a goofy slumber party rather than a ménage à cinq; or *Christie* (2010), in which the model's exposed breasts are overshadowed by a dirty sling wrapped around her waist and affixed to her right arm; or *The Boy With the Thorns in His Side* (2011), a close-up of a male model's scab-covered backside. These images, which are natural heirs to the work of Eadweard Muybridge, Diane Arbus, and Nan Goldin, are among the 150 photographs that appear in McGinley's first major monograph, *Ryan McGinley: Whistle for the Wind*, out in June via Rizzoli New York. "The thought that my work might be titillating or shocking never crosses my mind," he says. "But when people stumble upon me shooting stuff on the road, they're usually like, 'Are you filming a porno?' A similar thing happens when I'm editing photographs next to someone on an airplane. I have a privacy screen now."

McGINLEY didn't travel when he was younger. With the exception of the few times he tagged along with his father, a salesman for Owens Corning who drove up and down the East Coast peddling fiberglass, he spent most of his youth in Ramsey, New Jersey, the youngest (by 11 years) of eight kids. As a teenager, he immersed himself in skateboarding culture,

the philosophy of which he still abides despite giving up the sport when he began studying painting and, later, poetry at New York's Parsons the New School for Design. "Even though I don't do it anymore, skateboarding is in me at all times. It's like how hip-hop isn't just a style of music—it's also a swagger. Skating is about how you hold yourself. It's about sticking with something until you get it right. No matter what, keep moving." It's become a mantra of sorts for McGinley, not only throughout his work—resplendent, sun-drenched photographs that capture the human form running, fucking, and falling through the air—but also in his personal life.

Everything changed for McGinley following his historic show at the Whitney. Over the course of a few months, he went from total anonymity to being heralded as his generation's Andy Warhol—and not just because of the democratic art he made, which appealed to both elitist scholars and the uninitiated masses, some of whom still call Team before an opening to ask about the dress code or the cover charge. Memories of the Factory echoed through his group of likeminded friends, a pack of equally promising artists that included Dan Colen (with whom McGinley lived for 10 years before moving into his current apartment), the late Dash Snow, Dash's wife Agathe Snow, Rita Ackermann, Nate Lowman, and Terence Koh. Amid a surplus of drugs and antiestablishment stunts, they bulldozed their way through downtown New York, weaving together the intellect of fine art with the hedonism of nightlife.



© Ryan McGinley, from *Ryan McGinley: Whistle for the Wind*, Rizzoli New York, 2012



There was an innocence to their experience—a freefalling whimsy not unlike the kind found in McGinley's photos—and it was a fantastic party until it ended abruptly on July 13, 2009, with the heroin-overdose death of Dash Snow. The camera, McGinley claims, saved his own life. "Being a photographer removes you from a situation," he says. "Of course I was participating in the drugs and the whole thing, but I was more of an observer. It always kept me from going too far. When things started really spinning out of control, I knew that I had to get out. I started traveling."

McGinley knew the perils of excess from a young age. As a kid, he'd regularly take the train from New Jersey to Manhattan's Upper East Side to spend the weekend with his older brother Michael, a female impersonator who died of AIDS in 1994, and his brother's boyfriend, who "did" Barbra Streisand professionally. He jumped between Shelter, Tunnel, and Limelight nightclubs, where he befriended everyone from party promoter and doorman Kenny Kenny to a young Chloë Sevigny, who was, at that point, "just a cool girl from Connecticut, not an actress." McGinley says he was "always half in and half out of the scene. Since I can remember, I've wanted so badly to be a part of downtown New York, but at a certain point I realized I could create my own scene through my photographs. Knowing that it was my job to capture the party became more interesting to me than

the party itself, which obviously couldn't last forever." Quietly, he adds, "It's so crazy thinking about everything that's happened. We've all been in it for so long and so deep. It's sometimes weird looking back. Some people who were alive then aren't alive now. It's just..." He trails off, his eyes as vulnerable as his smile is kind.

In a few days, McGinley will submit the pieces he's showing as part of his Team Gallery exhibitions. But he's already moved on to the next thing. "By the time something comes out, a book or a show, I've already worked on it for so long that my mind's gone to another place. I love thinking about what's next." Given the considerable losses he's suffered—the deaths of his brother Michael; his friend Dash; his first boyfriend, Will Munro, who died of brain cancer two years ago; and his father, who passed away last year at the age of 86—one wonders if McGinley's unflagging desire to keep moving has something to do with self-preservation. He can't wallow in the reality of his past if he's focused on conjuring fantasy worlds in future photographs. Death doesn't exist in McGinley's artwork, where cuts and scrapes abound, always tempered by the beauty and youth of the bodies to which they belong. In the universes he creates, his subjects are immortal blurs of bodies in motion. They represent heaven—a place of boundless possibility, narrowly avoided danger, and infinite chances—as imagined by their creator. ☼