

ART

Almost Two Decades Later, Ryan McGinley Revisits His Youth

By KIN WOO FEB. 6, 2017



Ryan McGinley, courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, New York and Los Angeles, and © Ryan McGinley.

In 1999, the photographer Ryan McGinley self-published “The Kids Are Alright,” a book capturing his crew of downtown friends and lovers in varying states of nudity, ecstasy and reckless abandon. He shot prolifically, using up to 20 rolls of film a night. “At the time, it was really important to document my life because I was the only one out of my friends who was doing it,” he says now. He sent copies of the handmade book to a few gallerists, curators and photographers he admired. Among them was Sylvia Wolf, then the head of the Department of Photography at the Whitney Museum, who helped arrange McGinley’s breakout solo exhibition there in 2003. He was 26 — one of the youngest artists ever to have a solo show at the museum.

But now, it all feels like ancient history. For “Ryan McGinley: The Kids Were Alright,” a new show that opens at the Museum of Contemporary Art Denver this month, McGinley returned to the period between 1998 and 2003 — unearthing some 1,500 Polaroids that have never been exhibited before. In revisiting these unfiltered images of his hedonistic past (self-

portraits of him having sex, or friends masturbating and doing drugs) McGinley describes a kind of emotional release. “It wasn’t painful, but in a way it was cathartic to have almost 20 years’ distance on my photos and go through my archive and see how I grew up.” He continues: “I’m very in touch with my vulnerability and I’m proud of those photos where it’s really raw. It really was my life at the time.”



“Sace,” 2000. Ryan McGinley, courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, New York and Los Angeles, and © Ryan McGinley.

But there are also moments of extreme tenderness — in the intimate photos of McGinley and his first boyfriend, the artist Marc Hundley. For McGinley — who came out after a period in his late teens spent looking after an older brother dying of AIDS — making and showing the prints the first time around was a liberating experience. “It was very freeing for me, as someone who was having a hard time admitting he was gay, to not have to say it to people but show photos of my boyfriend making love or kissing — to have these photos and release them into the world and see what happens.”

There is a note of poignancy running through the exhibition when looking at pictures of McGinley’s friends who have since died — in particular the artist Dash Snow, who overdosed on heroin in the summer of 2009. (The book accompanying the exhibition from Rizzoli is dedicated to Snow.) But when he returned to these pictures, McGinley says that rather than seeing ghosts, he was reminded of the alchemical connection he had with his group of friends. “Going through those photos made me realize how much I loved and how close I was to certain people,” he says. “My crew really lived in our own world — we slept all day and were out on adventures all night. We were really the only people in each other’s lives — it made me realize how we were like magnets to each other.”