

PHOTO BOOTH

RYAN MCGINLEY'S EXUBERANT DOWNTOWN, 1999-2003

By E. P. Licursi 07:00 A.M.

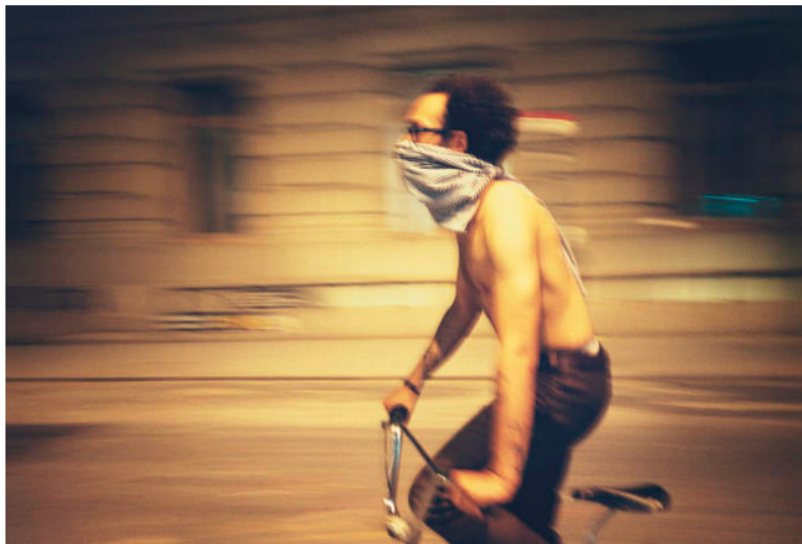


"Dash (Manhattan Bridge)," 2000.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TEAM (GALLERY, INC.)

Ryan McGinley has mentored a generation of influential young photographers, from Petra Collins and Sandy Kim to Ren Hang, the Chinese photographer who died last week, in an apparent suicide. These artists' photographs bear the unmistakable marks of McGinley's early work: chromatic portraits of friends and lovers, with an energetic, spontaneous, and intimate—rather than objectifying—fixation on the human body. But, in reflecting on his patronage, McGinley lacks the possessive bitterness toward newcomers that many of his downtown artist forebears were famous for, preferring to see the next generation not as usurpers but as rightful heirs to a lineage that long predates his work. "I really consider these photos in the tradition of a lot of other artists that photographed their inner circle of friends in the city, starting with Allen Ginsberg and Andy Warhol, and then Peter Hujar and Nan Goldin," he told me recently, at a preview of "Early," an exhibit at Team Gallery of photographs he took between 1999 and 2003. "I feel like everyone has their crew of people who are creative, that they're coming up with, and they're all spending their time between Fourteenth Street and Canal Street, east to west, and there's a long tradition of it." These suspended moments, captured before McGinley became the youngest photographer to have a solo show at the Whitney, in 2003, emanate the contagious exuberance of being young and beautiful, and also down and out, in New York.

One gleeful shot features the artist Dash Snow hanging out of the window of a moving car, with the Manhattan Bridge glowing gently in the darkness. Snow's pose and McGinley's depiction of light in motion give the image a sense of ecstatic pace. Snow is voracious. With his mouth open, eyes wide, and arms outstretched, it's as though he's trying to expose as much of his body to the city as he can, letting it wash over him so he can absorb it. Snow, who died of a heroin overdose, in 2009, is the subject of another, very different photo, this time showing him in the shower with his wife, the artist Agathe Snow. "They're the first couple to let me inside their romance," McGinley told me. The scene is undeniably tender, but something in the couple's eyes, cast down in cognizance, belies the presence of McGinley's lens. There is a palpable sense of exhilaration, and also a trepidation, perhaps a natural consequence of allowing a third party, however familiar, into a private space. Another scene, of a man and woman kissing passionately, provides a peek into the aesthetic trajectory of McGinley's work, which would become increasingly compositional in the following decade, with subjects' bodies fitting ever more gracefully (and with astounding precision) into floods of color, light, and texture. As the couple pull toward each other, her hands around his neck, his grasping the waistband of her jeans, billowing red and orange hues enlase all around them, bathing them in what seems like an ethereal manifestation of their love.



"Sam Ground Zero," 2001.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND TEAM (GALLERY, INC.)