



RYAN MCGINLEY PHOTOGRAPHER

Ryan McGinley is sitting in his bedroom before a glistening Mac G3, flipping through images from something he calls "the puking project." He explains: once a month, he eats a lot of food, gets trashed, and takes pictures of himself vomiting. Not of the vomit, but of himself vomiting. This is a key distinction. Sometimes the vomit dangles from the side of his mouth. Sometimes it comes shooting toward the lens. Sometimes it is a reasonable beige, at other times an angry neon green. It is a new and comprehensive way of looking at vomit. "People throw up," shrugs the 25-year-old photographer. "People do it every day. Why shouldn't I take pictures of that?"

Right now, no one is arguing that McGinley shouldn't do anything really, mostly because his pictures take the most time-worn viscera and effluvia of youth and give them the raw, sexy languor that the CK ad department has been laboring in a vacuum for years to create. He started shooting around downtown New York City four years ago, getting published in the pages of magazines like *Vice* and *Index*. His photographs—and he always calls them "photographs," never "pictures," even when the extra syllables are inconvenient—are energetic studies of young scenesters, skateboarders, graffiti artists, and often himself (his boyfriends and his boyfriends' body fluids also turn up occasionally). The pictures are distinctive and polarizing. To some McGinley is "bold" and "fresh"; to others he's a social gadfly who's gotten famous by ripping off the established vérité style of Nan Goldin and Terry Richardson.

But it's a self-negating insult: the quality of the exploited says something about the taste of the alleged exploiter. McGinley's best photographs are an aesthetic bridge between Larry Clark and *Jackass*. Their raw, joyful exuberance make him one of the most interesting photographers of precisely this time—that rare occurrence: the zeitgeisty nonfashion photographer. A mid-career retrospective, "The Kids Are Alright," opens this February at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. **Michael Martin**

MICHAEL MARTIN When did you first start taking pictures?

RYAN MCGINLEY In 1998 I started taking photos of my friends. I think that's how everyone starts taking pictures. That's when I started learning how to look at photos and take them. I came from a strong art-history background, but I wasn't studying photography at school. I was studying graphic design. I think it was really important that I didn't study photography. As opposed to finding photography, I think that photography found me.

MM What's the worst instruction you got at school?

RM This is the bad thing about institutions: it's really hard to find teachers, because teachers don't get paid shit. I had teachers at Parsons who had been there since, you know, the '70s or '80s, and they didn't have the concept of photography as art. They're telling you, "Oh, you want to hear about a really great photographer? You should check out Robert Frank." And it's like *What the fuck? What year are we living in?* They didn't really teach you the possibilities that a photograph could have.

MM How is taking pictures of your friends art?

RM I consider my work art, and I definitely consider myself an artist. My art is based around my life. When I started out, I was documenting what was going on at the time. I was taking so many pictures and waiting for things to happen. There was a lot of crazy shit happening,

and it was fun. But it got to a certain point when instead of just waiting for images to happen, I wanted to make images happen. And that's when I think it crosses over to art.

MM What's the craziest thing you've asked people to reenact?

RM Nothing really too crazy. There's, you know, some people jacking off. I wanted to create an image that was sort of pornographic but that didn't really have any sexual aspect to it, so I asked my friend to jack off for me. I'm really interested in pornography. It's one of my biggest inspirations, one of the biggest parts of my life. I've always wanted to shoot pornography, but I just can't do it. Anyway, I wanted to create an image that would be less about a big hard-on and more about hand gestures and eye contact. It wasn't anything too explicit. Or I guess it was to some people. I know my mother's not happy about it.

MM She's seen it?

RM She has. She's seen all my work. I've always thought it was important to be honest with your family. I can't hide stuff. I mean, I'm on the internet. My mother can type in my name and find thirty different articles about me. My parents represent a different generation of viewer. If my mother can't understand what I'm doing with my photographs, then I don't think a lot of people can. My parents are hard-core Roman Catholics. And at the same time, they're really open-minded. Sometimes they're not happy. I mean, there's an image of me fucking my ex-boyfriend in my last book. It's a really rough image to show my mother, but she has to realize that I have sex. I think my work is really kind of honest and open, and that's why people can relate to it. It's comforting because it's honest.

MM What kind of porn are you fascinated with?

RM Definitely '70s porn. It makes me extremely depressed about pornography today. I like it because it's shot on film; I like the body type, the kind of male that's being portrayed. It's this kind of beautiful American boy that's kind of skinny and goofy. I think that the guys I photograph are really very similar to the guys that you'd see in a '70s porn movie. But there are some companies that are producing stuff now that's really great too. This guy named Dirk Yates films marines and straight guys jacking off. There's a lot of similarities to my work, because I take a lot of people that don't know each other and put them in really awkward situations.

MM What do you say to those who accuse you of ripping off people like Nan Goldin and Terry Richardson?

RM I think that's a really easy thing to say. There's an obvious similarity, but if you look at my work, it becomes something different. Terry Richardson is predominantly a fashion photographer. He's made his mark, but he's using his photographs to sell other people's clothing. I think that once you get involved in fashion photography, you compromise a lot of your artwork.

MM But you've shot fashion too.

RM Um, I don't shoot fashion. I've tried once or twice. Once for *Vice* and once for *Index*. There's a photo in my book called *In the Garden*, and it's As Four in a garden wearing As Four clothes. That was fun. But it's not something I'm going to pursue.

MM A bit elitist, no?

RM No. I want my photos to work on all different levels. I'm really obsessed with Jeff Koons's *Banalilty Show*. It was these statues of the Pink Panther. He talks about how an art critic can appreciate the art-

work because he's educated and he knows where it's coming from, but if a little kid walks in there, he also can really appreciate the artwork, because he's seen something that's really beautiful to him. I think that's what I'm going for.

MM Do you intentionally try to shock?

RM In the beginning I did, but not really anymore. My photography works in the sense that I'm taking from everyday life, and it's not about shock value; it's about people's morals, what they consider obscene. I took a photograph of myself puking; it's going to be in the *Whitney* show. So many people have looked at that photo and freaked out. They can't understand how I took it; they don't know almost what's happening in it. When I showed it in *Vice*, thirty people called me and said, "That's the most fucked-up photo I've ever seen. It makes me want to throw up myself." I think that's the greatest thing that could happen to me.

MM How do you feel about your photos being read as gay downtown—New York life now?

RM Oh, that's a big one. "East Village gay photographer Ryan McGinley." I am gay, but I'm not trying to be the downtown gay photographer. I think there's an element of masculinity and homoeroticism in my work, but I don't think it's overtly gay. I'm more kind of fascinated by the things that boys do. I have a photograph of two guys sleeping next to each other, and what does that mean? I mean, lots of guys sleep next to each other; that doesn't mean they're going to be sucking each other's dicks.

MM So how do you pick guys to shoot? Just guys who turn you on?

RM Not really, because I usually photograph a lot of my friends. I guess that if I didn't know them, I could possibly be attached to them. Once I start photographing them, it becomes something more than sexual. But yeah, I guess there is a specific Ryan McGinley type. There has to be some aesthetic beauty to him, and it also has to come through in his personality as well. I could never just go to Elite or IMG and say, "Can I see your male models, because I need someone to photograph?" It has to be someone who works on many levels.

MM Have you worked with Bruce LaBruce?

RM We were supposed to do a book together at one point, but it never got made. But Bruce is one of my best friends. We've talked every single day for, like, the last five or six years now. And he's one of the smartest people I know. That guy is hands down a genius. He is an amazing person in that he can work with people on many different levels. Bruce could be at a dinner uptown at the Guggenheim and then take a cab downtown and hang out with, say, me and a bunch of graffiti kids and skateboarders and do drugs until noon.

MM Would you ever work in front of the camera for him?

RM Oh, he's photographed me before. And I'm going to be in his new film. It's a porno. I'm not going to be in the porno, but I'm going to play a character in it. It's about the Bader Meinhof, the faction of terrorists in the '70s who believed the only way to change things was by pure destruction. Me, Leo Fitzpatrick, one of my models, and my friend Dash are going to play terrorists.

MM He shot you by yourself?

RM By myself. Bruce is one of the first artists that I approached and said, "I'm really interested in your work," and that's how I started making connections in the city. I think you shouldn't be afraid to call up someone who you're inspired by and hunt them down and spend time with them. It's nice to have older mentors. I've been friends with Larry Clark since 1992. I used to come into the city every day after school to skateboard. I didn't know anything about photography, especially in 1992. I met Larry, and he was an older guy on a skateboard with a camera who said he was making a film. And I still didn't get it. Even then I thought, *What is this? This is so weird.*

MM Are you ambivalent about showing your work at a mainstream museum like the Whitney?

RM No way. I want the widest possible audience to see my photographs. If you show at the Whitney, you're getting people from all around the world, from little kids to really old people. That's why working for *Vice* is great: it's free, and you're going to get the weirdest motherfuckers reading that. People read magazines, and it affects them. As much as we don't want to admit it, magazines make changes. I had an article about me in this really, really trashy porno magazine. Amidst all these hard dicks and really disgusting Chelsea guys—it was a really gross magazine, too—there, on page 32, were my photographs. I thought, *Damn. This is so great. This is exactly where I want this image to be.* Not necessarily around hard-core porno images, but in the sense that photography can work on all different levels. It's nice to be in *Artforum*, but it's also nice to be in *Vice*. And it's also nice to be in a porno magazine.

MM Where do you see yourself at 50? Will you be another Larry Clark, obsessed with youth?

RM Yeah, I can probably say I'll be obsessed with youth. I could be doing something totally different, though. I think my art will progress; I think it will change. I could be like Berenice Abbott. She started out taking portraits of Hemingway and Man Ray in the '30s, when Paris was at its peak for art. And then she moved to New York and started doing architectural photography. And then she went to MIT and did all these scientific photographs of nothing, of light beams. And I think that's really great. I'm really excited about what I'm doing now, and it's only going to get better.

Dan on Dust, 2002

Photography Ryan McGinley

Lent by the artist, courtesy Peter Hay Halpert Fine Art, NYC
"The Kids Are Alright" will be at the Whitney Museum of American Art February 1–June 1, 2003
For information: www.whitney.org