

visual art

Free jazz: O, say, can you see Ryan McGinley's all-American, naked idylls — *Running Field*, left, and *Fireworks Hysteria*.



Starry-eyed and stripped

Ryan McGinley dreams of a New World

By Glen Helfand

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REVIEW More than one witness has reported that Mayor Gavin Newsom, fiancée in tow, dropped by the jam-packed opening reception for photographer Ryan McGinley's show at Ratio 3. The civic-minded pair joined the fray of cool kids and art world cognoscenti — I heard John Waters and Todd Oldham were there — and in some ways the appearance was apropos: the artist and politician share a lineage of tall, charismatic Irish Catholics who inspire others to action. Noting celebrity, political, and religious connections is admittedly a little suspect in a review of a contemporary art show; still, the youthful but stately mayor's presence at a gallery on a somewhat gritty Mission side street has meaning as an expression of the widespread appeal of McGinley's pictures. Who could resist lush images of nubile white boys and girls cavorting naked amid what seem like national parks and roadside America?

McGinley is a particularly American artist. One of the photographs on view is even a dead ringer for an Andrew Wyeth painting. Rather than Christina crouched in the

wheat field, McGinley's *Running Field* (2007-08) offers a lithe young woman dashing through golden rolling hills wearing only white sneakers. His choreographed vision is a brand of hipster organic purity, a dream of back-to-the-land naturalism and free love.

McGinley also manages to straddle a number of positions and demographics. Among the 16 pictures in this satisfying exhibition, there's full frontal male nudity, and a wonderful image of a shirtless blond guy embracing a black bear, both of which unabashedly read as queer. A centrally placed picture of a group of hikers in a rocky canyon plays like a still from an update of Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* (1970). McGinley's photograph exudes cineaste hippie-spiritual vibes, as does the acid trippy image titled *Blue Falling* (2007-08), in which the silhouette of a male figure — the hair on his legs crisply visible in profile — is seemingly suspended in an intensely hued sky. *Dakota's Crack Up* (2007-08), visualizing an ebullient male/female couple caught in an active moment of undressed while roller-skating, brims with both clothing-optional resort appeal and fashion photo bravado.

The youth and nakedness of

this universe seems to be related to Larry Clark's kid obsessions, except McGinley is still young himself — he had a solo show at the Whitney five years ago, when he was 24 — and his surprisingly wholesome pictures are more hooked on fresh air and community than the more troubled eroticism of the wizened though still dreamy-eyed elder artist. A cinematic influence also binds these two figures. Most of the photos in McGinley's show blur the line between naturalism and studio artifice: the hikers on the rocks are positioned in light in such a way that they appear to have been inserted digitally, the woman in *Fireworks Hysteria* (2007-8) seems to be floating in a glittering, celestial space, as do other subjects who have been catapulted into thin air. And is that a naked dude embracing a stuffed animal or a real live bear?

According to the artist, the animal is a living thing, albeit a trained one. He also admits the colors in his works are achieved through an intense darkroom practice. That gray area between the real and the imagined works in the artist's favor, lending his images a sense of the uncanny: the activities captured in his photos did happen, though they come across as otherworldly.

There's also a performance art backbone to McGinley's process. His photos depict a team of models,

cast for their looks as well as their athletic abilities, who travel together for extended periods. The constant contact promotes intimacy and physical fearlessness, and while they are very believable as an actual pack of marauding, hopeful young people, they are in fact a constructed entity — a family of paid actors directed by an artist with a clear vision of a kind of communal lifestyle. McGinley assuredly realizes these images, but they don't come off without some suspicion. Where can these photographs go from here? The likeability of the pictures — and models — is tinged with envy and perhaps a resentment of the cool high school kids who seem impervious to social or sexual obstacles. That McGinley's models reportedly sustain their share of photo-shoot injuries only attests to his winning feats of fiction. It all appears so smooth and dreamy. I don't know what the mayor thought, but in the end, McGinley's work won me over, and I want the feeling to last. **SFBG**

RYAN MCGINLEY:
SPRING AND BY SUMMER FALL

Through June 21
Wed.–Sat., 11 a.m.–6 p.m.
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