

Arts Photography 14.04.10

Naked in New York

From street to open road, his portraits of youthful optimism have made Ryan McGinley a star. By **Edward Helmore**

It took two police cruisers with sirens blaring and a fire engine to shut down the overcrowded opening of Ryan McGinley's most recent exhibition in New York. As a thousand or so fans and friends blocked traffic in the streets, the photographer tried to reason with the authorities. "They're gonna use the water cannon!" he reported to the crowd through a loud-hailer.

More or less the same thing happens every time the 32-year-old has an exhibition. A star of Manhattan's downtown scene, McGinley represents a kind of street cool the city once specialised in but has lately lost. He published his first book of photographs, *The Kids Are Alright*, at 23; a year later, he became the youngest artist to be given a solo show at New York's Whitney Museum of American Art.

Throughout the noughties, McGinley hung out with a circle of friends that included the artists Dan Colen and Dash Snow (who died of a heroin overdose at 27 last autumn). "I was documenting my adventures with Dan and Dash," McGinley recalls in his Chinatown studio, "and following my life as every photographer does: you shoot your friends hanging out, partying on rooftops. I photographed everything."

In a series taken between 1999 to 2002, McGinley would take ipecac, an emetic, and throw up on camera. He found an early supporter in the fashion designer agnès b, who asked him to design a T-shirt. "Dan said, 'Give her one from the vomiting series, dude. No one will ever wear it.' So of course I did, and people were wearing a picture of me with puke pouring out of my mouth." Notoriety followed. McGinley and his friends were dubbed "Warhol's children" by *New York* magazine. The other members of the group found new ways to work - with chewing gum, graffiti-covered rocks, semen-covered newsprint - but McGinley stuck to photography.

There are echoes of Larry Clark, Nan Goldin and Robert Mapplethorpe in his photography, but McGinley has made the move from punky street reportage to portraiture, from art to fashion, and then back again, in ways that were unavailable to them. For

several years, he focused on naked models on roadtrips, up trees or - jumping from fire escapes. For his most recent exhibition, *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*, he has dispensed with landscape, colour and movement altogether, working for the first time in a studio. He chose 150 subjects, mostly spotted at concerts and festivals, and then spent two years editing down thousands of shots to just one per model. Some are friends, some are strangers; some are comfortable, some are shy. "No one is really a model," he says, "so it could be the first time they're being photographed in a professional setting. I like people with a punk-rock attitude: I look for the kids who are totally freaking out and losing themselves, so I know they have a sense of performance."

Unsurprisingly, McGinley's empathy for youth has brought the fashion world to his door. He has photographed Kate Moss for *W* magazine, shot a campaign for Levi's and another for Pringle, featuring Tilda Swinton wandering a ruined Highland castle. There is a slight conflict, of course: McGinley likes his subjects naked; fashion likes them clothed. Isn't he always wanting people to strip off? "No," he laughs. "People in fashion look at my nude work and it makes it really easy for them to picture the models with their clothes on: 'We want it to look like that!'"

There is more to McGinley's photographs than nudity. Their sense of dreaminess and the open road is in stark contrast to the era of hard, self-centred glamour that prevailed,

particularly in fashion and portrait photography, in the last decade. That carefree atmosphere is not an accident: for five consecutive summers after his Whitney breakthrough, McGinley set off across America in a bus with a dozen or more models and a camera. "It wasn't meant to be back-to-nature," he says, "but I am interested in Woodstock, the happenings and the lifestyle the hippies led, hitting the road - these extended trips where you're just nude every day and not really part of the world."

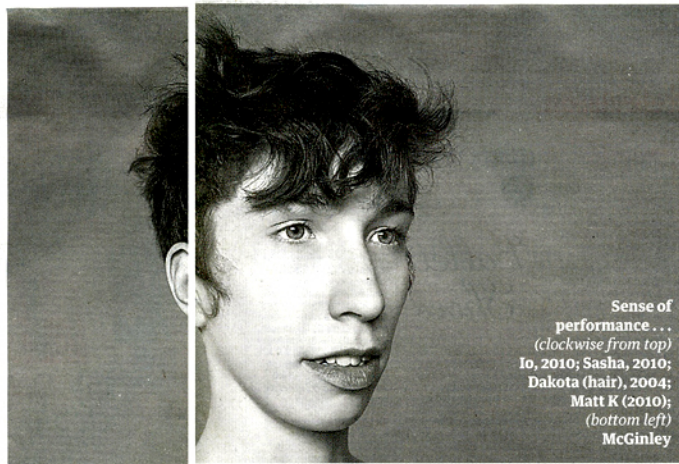
His work also draws on a strong sense of family. As the youngest of eight by 11 years - a "surprise from the baby Jesus", his mother likes to say - McGinley grew up with a tribe of elder siblings in the New Jersey town of Ramsey. "All my work, really, is based on my brothers and sisters," he says. "I had so many adventures with them and a big part of the work is to recreate those. It's easy for me to be around a lot of people, because I can retreat. I can watch everything."

McGinley says he started watching people as a teenage skateboarder in New York. "That's what you do when you're skating: you watch. Uptown, looking at the business people. Downtown, the homeless people under the Brooklyn Bridge. Just watching the way light hits people." When he was older, he began taking Polaroids of everyone who visited his apartment, friends and boyfriends. (In the foreword to his new book, McGinley tells the artist Catherine Opie that one of the things he likes best about himself is being gay. As if to prove it, he has the word "penis" tattooed on the inside of his lower lip.)

If McGinley's photographs started out as snaps, they are now carefully composed. He has an assistant, Brandy, "my hype girl", whose job it is to keep the subject entertained and engaged, allowing him to focus on composition and "almost fall into the frame". But his theme remains constant: "a sense of carefree optimism that you really don't get when you're older, a sense that anything is possible".



In pictures: see more of Ryan McGinley's work at guardian.co.uk/artanddesign



Sense of performance... (clockwise from top) Io, 2010; Sasha, 2010; Dakota (hair), 2004; Matt K (2010); (bottom left) McGinley

