

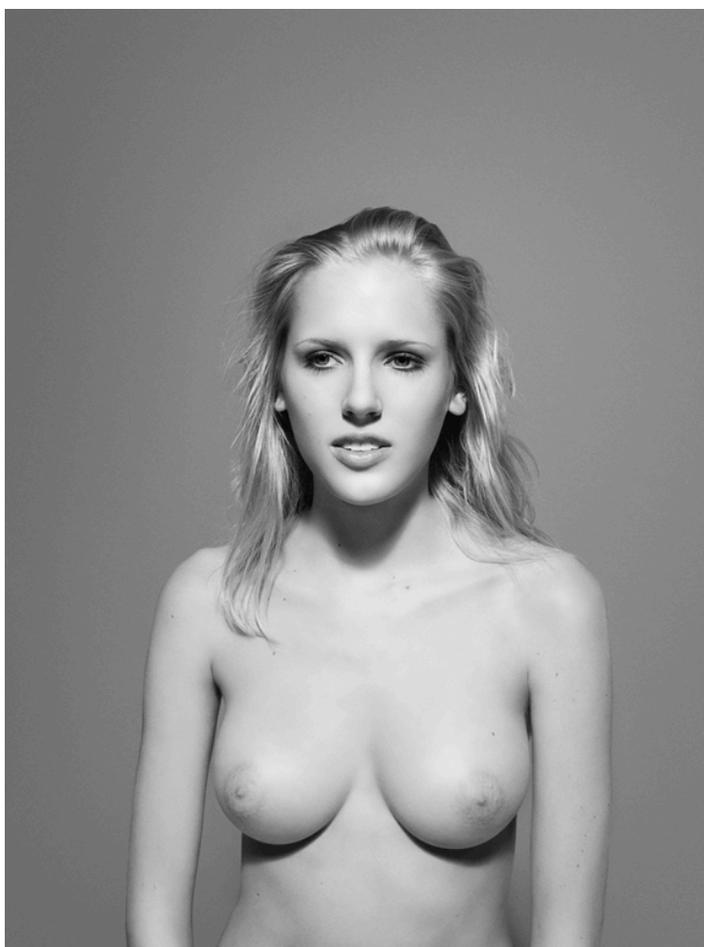
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Ryan McGinley Interview

by Alec Friedman

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This Thursday, Ryan McGinley will have his third solo show at [Team Gallery](#). An exhibition of new work, *Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere*, will run from March 18 through April 17 and will be accompanied by a monograph published by [Dashwood Book](#). David Strettell, the book's publisher (also, of course, the owner of the New York's only independent photography bookstore, Dashwood), spoke with Ryan for us to help us understand his segue from outdoor colors to black and white studio portraiture. Ryan also provided us with a preview of images from the new book.

David: When did you start this project? Was it a precursor to the summer road trips?

Ryan: Neville Wakefield asked me to do a project for a new magazine he was curating right before I was hitting the road in early summer of 2008. I'd always wanted to shoot in the studio, and then I thought, "Let's make it totally different from anything I've done. Let's do black-and-white photography, and let's do proper studio lighting and soft boxes and a seamless." Just go in the totally opposite direction, and I did.

David: And some of those pictures survive in the book?

Ryan: Yeah, some of those pictures are in the book from that initial shoot. I fell in love with the studio. It was such a different way of working, you know. I'm so used to being outside—

David: Running around all over the country with a caravan of people.

Ryan: There was something really nice about having a rotating door of people coming in but I'd always be in the same place, spending two or three hours with each person, and really having it be bare bones and removing the landscape. It's just you and the subject and a backdrop and you have to figure out how to make that interesting.

David: And then, as a result, did the summer trip work become more like a studio?

Ryan: No in the studio I'm trying to recreate the same sort of energy and actions that I would have in my color work, so there's a whole process of physical activities we go through. People are running and jumping and standing and sitting, and I have these flash cards with facial expressions on them that an actor would use, that say things like, "jealous." Then in between that activity I also find very quiet moments that are very interesting.

David: They've become these three-hour marathons.

Ryan: It's really fast, and it's non-stop, and I have a hype girl, Brandy, who helps me, really gets people going. There's a point where a photographer's brain shuts off and gets lost in the camera. In the beginning I try to hold a conversation with my subject in order to pull emotions out of them and get different expressions or gestures. But at a certain point I really need to focus on the composition and start considering the picture, and that's when having Brandy really comes in handy, because she keeps the person going, and she knows me so well that she knows what I want from them. She can see when it's working and when it's not.

David: And the subjects remain focused on what they're doing.

Ryan: They're constantly moving and engaged which keeps them un-self-conscious and gives me a free flow.

David: Is this style something you think you're going to continue to do, or is it over?

Ryan: I want to do some more of the work I was doing with people and animals together. I've made a few of those photos and it's been really fun, because it's so spontaneous. Animals are so funny that way. They're just crawling and jumping on people, and the way that people interact with animals is really special too. A person changes so much in the presence of an animal and I love that.

David: Although I understand that you put a lot of work into all your projects, and it's an exhaustive process, it does seem like it's a very fun process, as well. And what's interesting is that there's no reference to what other people are doing right now, and I think that's one of the reasons why you've become so popular, because you're doing something where there's no real reference to other people. There may have been when you started, which is pretty normal, but now you're doing something that's an accessible approach, and you seem to have a lot of fun doing it.

Ryan: This chef in Mexico once said to me "If you love what you do, you'll never work a day in your life." I definitely have a lot of fun making photos. Shooting in the studio is such a different way of working, you know. I don't get that sense that everything can go wrong like you do when you're on location, and you're thinking, "Is this really going to work out?" I've had to bring that energy into the studio. I shoot in so many different places, all over

the United States, places that I've never been to before, so there's always a bit of fear of what it's going to be like. Maybe I've seen some location pictures of the place, maybe I've researched this location on the internet, but you still have that gut feeling where you never know what's going to happen. I guess that's what's exciting about shooting outside, but in the studio, there's a comfort zone, and it's this place that's framed. It's a real challenge to make something interesting happen. It's like your home or something, especially since I've shot a decent amount of them in my own studio. I'll shoot from 9:00 a.m. until 7:00 p.m., literally with no breaks. I'm eating a taco in one hand and shooting with my camera in the other. Different people are coming all day long.

David: And I'm guessing you're not meeting many of these people that come to the studio for the first time.

Ryan: No, actually, it's the first time with a lot of them.

David: Really? So you have the whole dynamic of, "How are they gonna be when they get their clothes off?" Not only what their body's going to be like but also how comfortable they are going to be.

Ryan: That's the exciting part of my job. You never know what people are going to be like. One of my responsibilities is to make people feel comfortable very quickly. You have to learn how to do that very quickly, because you have to be comfortable too. If you're not comfortable, they're not going to be comfortable. The hardest part of my day is the first shoot, because I've just woken up. I haven't seen anybody nude yet. Everyone's still kind of getting into it, and so to be the first model of the day is always really tough.

David: Probably very intimidating, yeah.

Ryan: But after one shoot, I'm into the groove, and then people come in, and I'm like, "Hey, what's up? Okay, take your clothes off. All right, stand over here, do this, do that." because we're on a schedule, so there is no time to waste. Sometimes it's nice when people are awkward in the sense that you get that awkward energy from them and you can use that.

David: Yeah, some of the strongest ones in the book are definitely ones where you feel people breaking through some barrier. There's one of a girl where you can feel her awkwardness with the process, but it's very powerful at the same time.

Ryan: It's a combination. Obviously, when I see something that makes me go, "Wow," I really want to explore that emotion or that gesture or that expression. I'll be like, "Okay, let's work with this."

David: I also thought Catherine Opie was a really interesting choice for the Q&A in the book, because obviously she's known for the studio pictures and the nudes that she's done, but her work is much more about identity and about gender, much more obviously political than your work. But both she and you, unlike many photographers, have done projects that are very, very different—the studio work and then those photographs of freeways, in her case. When you started shooting outside of the city in nature after your initial show at the Whitney, that was kind of a big shock for everyone to see, kind of, "Where did that come from?"

Ryan: Well, first of all, I feel like I didn't have a normal artist career where you would make work and no one would really see it for a while, and you would have time to develop. I was lucky in some ways, but at the same time, I was just thrown in with the lions. So the work that you saw at the Whitney was literally the first work I ever made, which is pretty insane.

I've always wanted to be an artist that did different things. There are lots of artists that I look at, and I love their work, but they get stuck in a style, doing one thing, a comfort zone.

David: People keep asking them to do the same thing, and they do.

Ryan: I never want to do that. I always wanted to take risks and to have that sort of uncomfortable feeling of not knowing what to expect. I like to make mistakes and learn from them. I think my work evolves from making mistakes doing new things. If you're not making mistakes you're not doing anything, you know?

David: Well, it takes a lot of self-confidence to do that.

Ryan: One of my favorite photographers who I've always looked up to is Bernice Abbott. I admire her career. I've always wanted to kind of model my own path on hers. She fell into photography and started making these very beautiful portraits in Paris. Pictures of her crowd. Jean Cocteau, Man Ray, Andre Kertesz. One picture in particular of James Joyce always comes to mind where he's wearing his glasses, because the light hurts his eyes too much. And then she just abandoned portraiture and moved to New York City, and started making photographs of buildings and neighborhoods. She chronicled New York City being built. The photographs are so amazing. She makes another beautiful body of work, and then she kills it. Then she starts making all these scientific photographs about the laws of physics. I've always thought about that: You do something, and then you kill it, and then you just go and do something else. I feel like I can revisit things that I've done in the past when I want to, but I think it's important to keep pushing.

David: Yeah, I think most photographers that I can recall that have had the immediate success that you had with the Whitney show, it's been a kiss of death for them, really. It's been very, very difficult for them to move beyond that, so obviously you have to make something really deliberate and go in a different direction.

Ryan: I'm so happy I've escaped that in the press now. I don't really get "the young photographer" anymore, which I got forever. During the Whitney exhibition it was hearing "flash-in-the-pan" quite a lot, you know.

David: Well, there's a lot of haters out there, aren't there?

Ryan: Oh, my God, especially when they can be anonymous on the internet!

David: Yes, indeed.

Ryan: Be careful not to read the comments.

David: Right. Okay.

Ryan: Let's talk about you. What was the first book you published?

David: The first book I did was with Ari Marcopoulos, and I talked to him very vaguely. I met him through the Dashwood Books store and he kind of bullied me into it, but it was a really good decision. I was very happy to be bullied into it, I was so thrilled, and am now looking at all these other projects, but I have to be patient.

Ryan: Do you think that you want to get into book publishing now and have it be full-on?

David: I want it to be semi full-on, because I like the idea of the store. It's a good community, and everything builds from that.

Ryan: That's why I wanted to do a book with you, because of that sense of community and the sense of doing something with someone in New York who is in my neighborhood. That was really important to me.

David: Yeah, that's also where you're really on top of the whole process, and I'll do what I did with other books in the past—sell your book directly into the hands of 500 people that I know.

Ryan: I love that. Keep it grassroots, baby!

David: Exactly. It's a very old model. A lot of the original publishers were bookstores, so it's like a Dickensian model.

Ryan: Can we talk about our book and how fancy it is?

David: With our book, we could have done something that was much more like a catalog, but in the end I thought you've got such a big following in publishing in your photography anyway. Technically our book has a 300-line screen, where as most publishers have 150, 175. So the reproduction will be unbelievably good.

Ryan: So you'll see all the details, beautiful tones and it'll be lush, right?

David: Yes, it will look like an old Irving Penn book.

Ryan: What do you think about book collectors in general? I'm really fascinated by the way that works, especially when I see one of my books on the internet, and it's \$500. Or sometimes I'll see my first handmade book selling for \$5,000, and that simply amazes me. Martin Parr just told me he bought one for \$5,000!

David: Someone offered me one for \$3,000 the other day.

Ryan: Oh, nice. That's a deal! What do you think of that?

David: I asked them to bring it in and I photographed it for my website and everything, but I think it's insane. I'm a little ambivalent about it, because I'm a book dealer, as well. The focus of what I do is not on high-end collectors, so I don't sell that many books for that price really. I kind of like dealing with new books, but also finding books that are not that well known. But, to go back to your question, I think it's super-irrational, but it's not the kind of thing you do unless you have disposable income, and it's kind of a fetish for objects.

Ryan: Yeah. I can understand the obsession. Collecting rare art books is a condition. You can really get hooked on the glass pipe quick.

David: I find the problem about books and all of the recent interest in collecting books and the prices that books have gone up to is that when you start pricing your book at \$3,000, \$5,000, \$10,000, you can no longer look at it, because every time you look at it, you degrade it. It's like comic books. Okay, it brings more attention to the book form, but unless someone is right there to print a new version of the book, it kind of kills them, because all the books get bought up.

Ryan: Do you have a limit on the number of books that you'll sell to a person?

David: I put limits on it all the time. In fact, with your last book, *Moonmilk*, I bought more than anybody else in the United States, because you're a local artist. It was very popular. I sold 100 of those books in six days, and that was insisting on not selling more than one to anyone.

Ryan: Oh my God.

David: The idea was that I had something exclusive for a while, and I wanted to get it to as many people as possible, and I don't want someone coming in and buying 50. There's no point to it.

Ryan: Because then it becomes like ticket scalpers.

David: Yeah, and there are some pretty sleazy people around.

Ryan: Do you have some favorite photos in this book we did together?

David: I do. I like the cover very much with the big breasts and the inside cover picture we chose. It's funny, I was expecting the pictures of men to be a lot stronger than the pictures of women, but I actually think it's in reverse, in general, although I think most of my favorites are of women. And you?

Ryan: I like them all equally. I feel like with all the projects that I do it's such a long process to arrive at one image. I've spent so much time shooting these people, and even more than shooting them I've spent so much time editing them. So I'm really investigating their bodies with the camera and then looking at every single minute detail of a finger flipped up or an eye to the left that I feel like I know these people so well. Once I have chosen it, it really just falls into this place where I have a very personal connection with all of them. And once they come together I feel like it's kind of one big family. It's really like they're all like my children, like I'm the mother or something.

David: When I first met you, you referred to—I don't know if it was just this project but maybe about the approach to a lot of your projects—thinking it stems from the fact that you come from a really good family, and you're the youngest. And you've got like, seven siblings?

Ryan: Yeah, my mom had seven kids in seven years and then had me eleven years later.

David: Wow.

Ryan: All my work ties into my family. I feel like the all the models look the way that my brothers and sisters looked when they were younger, when we were growing up in New Jersey. I grew up in a middle class suburban town, about 30 minutes out of New York City. I was raised by my brothers and sisters. Obviously my parents were involved, but my brothers and sisters really wanted to raise me. They wanted a baby, so I was around them so much, and there's so many different kinds of personalities in my family, from the stoner to the mathematician, to the jock to the cheerleader, to the punk, to the drag queen, and I got all of that growing up. It's had such an impact on me and my life that the people who I photograph really just look like my brothers and sisters did when I was a young boy. They're my heroes.

David: Well, that is something that ties the work together, isn't it? Your initial work was photographing what became your immediate family in New York, your close friends, and then you took a family on the road with you, and now you're recreating another family in the studio.

Ryan: I like to be around lots of people. It makes me feel very comfortable. It's nice when you're around a lot of people and you're making photographs, because you can draw back, and let the chemistry happen between the group, and watch everything unravel. That's what I spent so much time doing when I was young, watch all my brothers and sisters interact.

David: The family dynamics and all of that.

Ryan: Yeah. I remember one of my first shows where my mother came, and she was like, "Wow, all these people just look like..." and she named all my brothers and sisters. And she was right. In a sense it's sort of a self-portrait.

David: And you're still really close with your family?

Ryan: Yeah, with everybody.

David: Will they come to the opening?

Ryan: Yeah. Although my mom doesn't like this body of work. She's not really into up front nudity. She liked the cave work the most, because it was really about the landscape more than anything.

David: It was more formal.

Ryan: The caves were about abstraction and color. But with this, you're removing the landscape, removing the color, and it's completely about the person.

David: And your dad?

Ryan: Nah, he likes anything.