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Studio Visit | Ryan McGinley

CULTURE | By HORACIO SILVA | MARCH 18, 2010



Ryan McGinley, *Sean R*, 2010.

Ryan McGinley knows from adolescence. As the chronicler of (usually naked) misspent youth, the 32-year-old photographer has made a not-insignificant career out of capturing and exalting this most evanescent of states. T dropped by McGinley's Chinatown HQ for a sneak peek of "Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere," his new exhibition of black-and-white nudes, which opens tonight at the **Team Gallery** in SoHo.

Q.

Your last project, "Moonmilk," or the Cave project as it was better known, was such a radical departure for you in many ways, and this new show is certainly not what I was expecting. Unlike "Moonmilk," in which you pulled so far away and the nudes blended into the environment, here the black-and-white images are very up-close, and very old-school glamorous for you.

A.

The whole Cave project was a way for me to slow down. All my photography up until that point was about running and jumping and dancing, which is great, but I wanted a project where I would really have to analyze everything — the lighting, the three-minute poses that the models would have to hold because of the long exposures — and just kind of construct it from the ground up. Then moving on from that, I just want to be an artist that...

...keeps people guessing?

Exactly. So with this project I decided to go into the studio and remove the landscape. It's really about the person. I've never done a project where you really get a sense of what the person looks like or who they are. It's always the dynamic between the person and the landscape or the color.

Is this the first time you have shot digitally?

Yeah. I've always shot film, but digital is the only way that I can work in the studio, because I sort of approach using the studio camera like a candid camera. And it would be insane to shoot as much as I did on film because for each portrait: I shot between 1,500 and 2,000 photos.

The other big difference here is that there is a lot more attention to surface glamour. There's obviously more retouching.

Well, it's actually not *that* much retouching. It's mostly an effect done with a soft box. But I did want them to feel Hollywood. I wasn't interested in going the route of studio photographers who are about showing each pore, where you really see the grit and grime. The world in my photographs has always been a fantasy.

Walk me through the process of a typical sitting.

I spend about three hours with each of the models. I have cards that actors use to kind of pull emotion — they have expressions on them like "sad," "demure," "jealous" — and I have cards that have pictures of Bart Simpson or SpongeBob with really silly expressions. It just gets people in the zone, and it gives me options. And I have that girl who posed for me, Brandy, who is also my hype girl.

Explain.

Basically, when someone walks in, I'll talk to them, but then I sort of retreat into the camera. And if there's one thing that I hate is that really silly photographer talk where you're like, "Oh, you look great. Keep doing that." So having someone else there with me who's constantly engaging the model just lets the person be totally un-self-conscious. Brandy has the gift of gab, and everyone just loves her, so when people come in, she just instantly makes them feel very comfortable.

Am I wrong in thinking that this is sort of a continuum from the black-and-white portrait series you did for Vice last year?

Yes, you are, because I actually started these before that series. [Laughs.] I started shooting these pictures in the summer of 2008. I would do it about once a month, and then, more recently, we really turned up the volume and got more people in.

How do you cast?

I have a girl who casts for me. She goes to rock ‘n’ roll festivals and art schools, and has street castings in cities. For this project, she’d come back each month with photos of hundreds of people, and then I’d kinda see who I liked and then e-mail them or do iChat interviews. Then we flew a lot of people in. A lot of the people in this series are from all over the world.

Other than the youthful nudity, which is a constant in your photos, the focus on androgyny is also very much in keeping with your past work.

When I can find someone androgynous, it’s the best because it’s like a two-in-one package. [Laughs.] That really is interesting to me. I went through a pretty big David Bowie period when I was younger, and that has affected me profoundly in my life and my work.

In addition to Bowie, your inspiration is also a little closer to home, right?

I have a really big family, and pretty much all my work is about my brothers and sisters. I’m the youngest of eight — my mom had seven kids in seven years, and then she had me 11 years later — so I was basically raised by all these teenagers. And I always feel like the look of the people in my photographs resembles the way that my brothers and sisters looked when I was younger. Those are the people who raised me, and who I kinda idolized — them and their friends.

Was there anything that surprised you about this project in the end, technically or otherwise?

Maybe they are more emotional than I thought they would be. They’re about the way that people hold themselves and the way that people feel, and I think that there’s a certain poetry to them. That’s what you can take from this: the person’s emotion. When you remove everything and it’s just in the studio, it’s only really about emotion — who is this person and what are they feeling? You make up a story about what’s going on in their heads. But, technically, I don’t know. I’m so bad technically. I never trained in photography. I studied graphic design, and I always ask them just to put the camera on automatic. Seriously.

You have said that in a way you’re preparing to eventually make a film. Is that still in the cards?

I know that my mind is so A.D.D., and I want instant gratification — and photography can provide me with that — but at some point, I want to make an independent feature. Not like making a film is the end-all or anything. I mean, it would be great, but I’m interested in doing lots of things. I want to direct commercials, and I want to make more music videos. I want to switch it up. I don’t want to be an artist that gets stuck doing one thing. I don’t want to be an artist who people look back at and say, “His early work was really great.”

“Everybody Knows This Is Nowhere” runs through April 17 at Team Gallery, 83 Grand Street.