

ART IN REVIEW

'The Kids Are Alright'

'Photographs by Ryan McGinley'

Whitney Museum of American Art
945 Madison Avenue, at 75th Street
Through May 18

It's not all that often that an artist makes his New York solo exhibition debut in the august galleries of the Whitney. But Ryan McGinley, 26, is doing so as part of the museum's "First Exposure" series, a showcase for new photography. Mr. McGinley works in what might be described as a lifestyle genre. Like much contemporary art, it harks back to that compulsive and omniscient shutterbug, Andy Warhol. Its most prominent recent exponents are Nan Goldin, with her first-person record of the Lower East Side demimonde, and Wolfgang Tillmans, with his intimate, family-style pictures of his youthful social circle in Europe.

Mr. McGinley's initial influence, though, was Larry Clark, whom he met in Manhattan when Mr. Clark was hanging out with some skateboarders. One of them was Mr. McGinley, in high school at the time. Later, as a student at Parsons, he started taking pictures, which he put together in a self-published book, "The Kids Are Alright," titled after a film about the Who. That was in 1999. The book found an admiring audience; New York group shows and magazine assignments followed.

The 20 large color prints here are portraits of Mr. McGinley's 20-something friends, lovers and fellow artists. The show opens with an evocative image: a distant, jittery nighttime shot of a silhouetted figure — it could be a boy or a girl — spray-painting a wall high above the city. The glamour turns funkier in pictures of young men rolling joints, vomiting or masturbating, though the tone is relaxed and playful, as if the world were on recess. Two women — the artists Hanna Liden and Emily Sundblad — cavort in the woods. A man and a woman go for a nude nocturnal swim. Two men named Dan and Eric wake up together in bed.

The pictures have none of the after-hours decadence of Warhol's snapshots, nor the grit of Mr. Clark's work, nor the noirish narcissism of Ms. Goldin's. They are closer to Mr. Tillmans's work, but less sexily poetic. In fact, Mr. McGinley's approach



Peter Hay Halpert Fine Art

A detail from "Self-Portrait, Root Canal" (1999) by Ryan McGinley, from "The Kids Are Alright," his exhibition at the Whitney Museum.

to sexuality is one of the interesting things about his work. Same-sex attachments predominate, but there is no "gay style" in evidence, or at least not a familiar or obvious one. The wardrobe hanging over Dan and Eric's bed consists mostly of flannel shirts and camouflage-pattern fatigues. If this represents an update of the 1970's clone look, the new model is hip-hop instead of Marlboro Man, which suggests intriguing sociopolitical shifts in masculine self-presentation, gay or otherwise.

What those politics might be, exactly, is hard to say, though the question arises in light of the apparently carefree spirit of Mr. McGinley's pictures. The artist seems to understand this: his inclusion of a shot of a friend, speeding away from ground zero on a bike, his mouth covered by his shirt, carries a jolt of reality-check surprise. However the work

develops, it is refreshing to encounter, as we seem to, artists operating to some extent outside the mainstream of the art world itself, where volatile energies — aesthetic and political — are too often stroked into crafts, resistance-free acceptability. It would be great if that process proved to be not all right with these kids.

HOLLAND COTTER