



CARMINE GALASSO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

"When people look at them, it's about a celebration of life," Ryan McGinley says of his photographs, now on display at the Whitney Museum.

Village people

Wunderkind develops a following with his spirited photographs



"Dan and Eric," New York, 2001.

By **LESLIE KOREN**
STAFF WRITER

Ryan McGinley has an opportunity few young people are afforded: People are listening to what he has to say.

Which works well for him, because the baby-faced 25-year-old has a lot to say, and you get the feeling he'd explode if not for his audience's open ears.

McGinley takes photographs, something he began doing five years ago as an art student. He prints them poster size, and about two years after he began shooting, he compiled them into a book and sent them, unsolicited, to friends, artists he admired, and magazines he liked.

His shots document the lives of his friends and lovers in the East Village and beyond. They do what generations of youth

have done before; they have sex, paint graffiti, do drugs, sleep, ride bikes, and skinny-dip in the waters off Coney Island at night.

But unlike his forebears, whose photographs portrayed a darker, more painful image of sex, drugs, and rock-and-roll, McGinley finds an easy, carefree color in his friends' experimentation. He is so convinced he has captured their essence, he titled his self-published book after The Who's album "The Kids Are Alright."

"We might be rambunctious, running around naked ... but my photos are not depressing at all. When people look at them, it's about a celebration



"Self-Portrait Root Canal," New York, 1999.

of life," he said.

This *joie de vivre* has taken the art world by storm. Last month, McGinley became the youngest artist to have a solo

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"BMX," New York, 2000.



"Crash."

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McGinley: Youthful exuberance catches the public eye

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show at the Whitney Museum. Taking its cue from him, the museum used the same title, "The Kids Are Alright," for the exhibit.

"I see a willingness to take risks and a joyfulness as well," said Sylvia Wolf, the Whitney's curator of photography. "There's a vitality that I sense and a courage and a curiosity."

He's also had solo shows in Paris, Milan, Berlin, and Toronto. His prints are priced between \$3,000 and \$5,000, and Elton John is currently the largest collector of his work. The E! television network is planning to do a profile of McGinley, and he has been commissioned by HBO to make a documentary on a subject of his choosing.

"Maybe once in a blue moon, an artist comes along who seems to be saying something that strikes a chord and is in the right place at the right time," said Peter Hay Halpert, who represents McGinley. "It feels like I am fielding requests for work or interviews or pictures to illustrate articles or commissions for him to take pictures on a daily basis. I've never seen anything like it with my artists."

The breakneck speed of McGinley's ascendance from Parsons School of Design student to the art world's golden boy is also due to determination and a natural ability for self-promotion. McGinley is passionate, charming, and unassuming. And he has been cultivating well-known mentors since, as a teenager from Ramsey skateboarding on the streets of New York City, he first met controversial filmmaker Larry Clark ("Kids," "Another Day in Paradise").

"I see the whole visual world opening up to Ryan and I like his energy and I think he's going to do good things," Clark recently told an audience at the Whitney.

Once McGinley began taking photographs, he did so obsessively, sometimes shooting up to 25 rolls a week. He took a bookbinding course and then sewed 100 copies of "The Kids Are Alright" by hand. He also put together his first solo show in a month's time, displaying 65 large-scale prints in a West Broadway gallery. He distributed fliers to advertise the show, and about 500 people showed up for the opening night.

"I think Ryan's got an eye and a lot of talent, but he also works very hard," Halpert said. "He's very industrious and he pays attention to the details."

The sudden spotlight has proved treacherous for many of those in whose footsteps McGinley is following.

"It's not the ideal way I see my career going," said McGinley's roommate and fellow artist Dan Colen. "At such a young age, it would almost make my working that much harder — with all the pressure. He's dealing with people on a daily basis."

But McGinley has orchestrated this for himself, said Colen, who first met him eight years ago when the two were both high school students travelling from Bergen County into the city to skateboard.

"I'm really interested in reaching an audience, regardless of whether they like it or not," McGinley said. "I think it's important for people to be able to see photography and artwork. So many photographers or painters make work, but a lot of times it just sits in a box or it just stays in someone's studio, and I don't believe in that at all. I want people to see what I'm doing."

McGinley hopes to offer people his unadulterated reality, which is something he longed for growing up in suburbia. In Ramsey, he says, everything felt hidden and covered up. McGinley grew up watching MTV and craved the diversity he saw represented on the cable TV station. He is also gay, and though he never experienced homophobia when he was young, he still feels the suburbs are not an easy place to be homosexual.

"It's not that I wasn't happy living in New Jersey, but I wanted more. More options. Ramsey's so predominantly white, suburban, and I just wasn't interested in that."

McGinley was the baby of eight children, with an 11-year spread between him and his next oldest brother. His Irish Catholic parents, Paul and Mary Jane McGinley, had been much stricter with their older children, but Ryan got away with whatever he wanted, said his father.

"Ryan is a free spirit," he said. Punk rock and skateboarding were his first escape routes, and art was the ultimate road out.

McGinley was not schooled in photography. He first picked up a camera while studying graphic design at Parsons. Ultimately, "The Kids Are Alright" caught the attention of editors at Index and Vice magazines, and from there his career snowballed.

The technical aspects of pho-

tography do not interest him, and he doesn't print his own work. For him, image is everything. McGinley is fascinated by both the sensational and the banal, but he turns the two around. He portrays sex matter-of-factly, but he celebrates mud on the bottom of someone's shoe. He is obsessed with people's backs, as well as flannel shirts and old towels found at thrift shops.

"I'm putting it all out there," McGinley said. "And some people may like it and some people may not. But that's OK, because at least I'm not trying to hide who I am."

He has a series of himself vomiting, which he hopes to one day make into a book, and has taken more than 1,000 Polaroids, mostly of people who come into his Seventh Street apartment.

His friends, who grew up surrounded by media and are aware of the power of the image, are his models. They perform, with ease, in front of his camera. They are comfortable naked, either bouncing in front of a graffitied wall or flying through fireworks. Homosexuality is present, but not at all remarkable.

"He's the perfect embodiment of the post-gay sensibility: a horny queer kid who's not alienated, not conflicted, and not apologetic," wrote art critic Vince Aletti in the Village Voice.

McGinley is hyper-aware of those who preceded him. His fifth-floor walk-up is lined with art books, including those of Wolfgang Tillmans, to whom he has been compared. He spends the first part of his morning looking through the books for inspiration.

His exhibit at the Whitney is part of the museum's "First Exposure" series, which gives young photographers their first museum solo show in New York. Wolf, the curator, saw dozens of young artists before choosing McGinley's work, which will be on view until May 18.

"There's a wonderful kind of energy — kind of a zaniness, enthusiasm, a spirit to his photographs," said Phillip Block, director of education at the International Center for Photography in New York.

"I'm not sure my mom would see it ... but there's a very kind of freshness to the work," continued Block. "A sense of that love of life, that anything's possible."

McGinley's parents were among the throng that came to the opening at the Whitney and stayed for the after-party at a

downtown space, which fit 1,000. They were most impressed by the number of friends their son seemed to have. They have a mini-gallery of his photographs, printed on a smaller scale, in his old bedroom, which they now use as a computer room. They are very supportive of him, even if his mother might disagree with some of the images he calls art.

"I'll explain to her what I'm trying to achieve by making the photograph, and she's really religious, so she has a heavy package of things that are taboo, but she's always willing to sit down and

talk about them," he said.

McGinley loves to talk about his work. A recent talk he gave at the ICP lasted more than two hours.

"Art is so personal, especially the kind of art I am making, so public speaking is kind of like being in therapy. I have a lot to get off my chest and the audience has to listen to me even if they're not interested in what I'm saying. It's super cool," he said.

He also craves the feedback. On occasion, he sits anonymously on the black bench in the Whitney's fifth-floor gallery and

eavesdrops as the visitors take in his work.

"There was a whole group of high school kids in the gallery [a few weeks ago] and that got me so excited, you know. For them to use my work and to kind of be confronted with my vision, kind of my take on what's going on," he said. "For them to get inspired by that and go back and make their own work. I think that's what it's all about. I can't ask for anything better than that."

Leslie Koren's e-mail address is koren@northjersey.com