



**RYAN
MCGINLEY
BODY
LOUD!**

This Charming Man

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*Punctured bicycle / on a hillside desolate / will nature
make a man of me yet?*

1.

It has been a little over ten years since Ryan McGinley's work erupted into New York's photography world with his breakout exhibition *The Kids Are Alright*, held at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 2003. This current exhibition at Tokyo Opera City assembles highlights from his career, evolving from its roots in underground scenes to oversized photographs of wide-open landscapes.

2. Visual Culture

*Sing your life / just walk right up to the microphone and
name / all the things that you love / all the things that you
loathe*

Never more has the influence of media been a pervasive presence in daily life. This is in part a byproduct of the changing nature of media, shifting away from a centralized hegemonic broadcast source to something more egalitarian. At the same time, the divide between media consumers and media producers has been punctured by the spread of social media platforms. During this process—an era starting in the 1990s—participating in media became a means of self-actualization as media became interwoven part of our societies. The battles for representation in legislature are now superseded by representation in media. The United States of the 1990s was a generation of coming out not just for gays and AIDS awareness but for all cultures that were otherwise invisible in mainstream media, thereby changing subculture to culture in general. The zines made and distributed by Riot Grrrls, for example, were an example of how imperative it was to make their own media—an idea that was spreading rapidly. Seeing one's own image in a publicly accessed media platform has gone from being a fluke or novelty to being a requisite

proof of existence. The proliferation of new media has brought with it the potential for new voices. In this world, representation is a political act. That was the milieu that helped create the stage for Ryan's work to shine.

His early use of the zine as a platform to get his work out into the world is an example of using new media to generate a cascade of self-representation. Taking a photo was one thing but then also becoming an active agent in its dissemination became yet another. Eventually Ryan migrated away from being the autobiographical, habitual photographer to creating structured and composed images. But perhaps what allows him to do so is the magazine work that he regularly engages in, such as the *New York Times*. Despite the slowness and deliberateness of his work now, his ethos and photography is still very rooted in dissemination via media. In this climate of "my media is yours," the models are also active participants in the photograph. The incidental people, their smallness on a large stage has a reverse economy now. It's their smallness and particularity that gives them their strength when we consider the larger politics of representations that he is engaging because Ryan's work itself has expanded to the level of being a form of media unto itself, a media that is widely seen and rebroadcasted to an even broader and divergent international community. His awareness of this and his use of this demonstrates the responsibility he feels in what he does as an agent for representation.

3. Photography for Walls

*Hand in glove / the sun shines out of our behinds / No it's
not like any other love / this one's different because it's
us!*

Despite the intensely photographic nature of how Ryan interacts and processes the world about him, I am beginning to think that he ultimately has a painter's approach to context and advanced ideas about where a

photograph belongs. His lush colors and rich hues are like buckets of paint thrown on walls to cover as large a surface area as possible. When Ryan was experimenting as a photographer back in the 1990s, photography as a genre was still considered less than painting, sculpture and such fine arts. Dedicating museum walls to photographic prints was still a relatively fresh prospect in most places and there was a recognizable schism between art and photography that photographers like Nan Goldin or Larry Clark traversed with a certain degree of controversy.

Not only in form but in content too, Ryan's work has pointed toward a fine-art direction from the outset. His strokes are large and sweeping while at the same time generating a tension in his subjects. The nudes of his recent photographs engaged in acrobatic maneuvers typify the never-gonna-die mentality of youth while creating a tension for what may potentially happen. That comfort with risk mixed with exuberance points back to the skater culture of his younger days. Such light-heartedness is an antiseptic to control, analysis, and categorization. With "The Kids Are Alright," when he put skater culture and the foibles of youth on the walls of a museum, not only was photography being shown with a new sense of gravitas but the underground subculture that was once peripheral and incidental had become mainstream. But viewing moments of such frivolity in isolation, within the configuration of a museum or gallery, is part and parcel of the photographic process. Recontextualization. How Ryan demonstrates an acute sensitive to this process is a great deal of what is happening in his work.

4. Photo-Play

Spending warm summer days indoors / Writing frightening verse / To a buck-toothed girl in Luxembourg / ask me, ask me, ask me

The litheness of Ryan's models and the intimacy between subject and photographer intimates a type of sexualism that is brought into action through the camera as a device. Both parties, model and photographer, participate in a certain type of photo-play that has an erotic charge resulting for casual intimacy and the lack of sensationalism. The starkness of his nudes—absent

are clothes or other markers that connote a social dialectic—and their isolation makes it feel as though the models are just goofing around in front of a mirror. Exploring. Uninhibited. But allowing the camera to view is an intimate exchange in itself; the comfort in being naked together is an excitement different from voyeuristic arousal or placid nudism. And that curious type of sexualism in Ryan's work goes beyond sexual politics. Refreshingly, dealing with sexuality in this manner separates it from sexual identity. In the photo-play of Ryan's images, we do not have a collapse of identity onto a sexual identity. You are free to be whatever you are, which goes beyond differentiation and labeling. These photo sessions with Ryan are a space for simplicity. Imagine that: sexuality liberated from shame, labels, politics or the compulsion to identify.

5. YEARBOOK

I am the son and the heir of a shyness that is criminally vulgar / I am the son and heir of nothing in particular

For the few times that YEARBOOK has been shown, it has taken the form of a full-surround installation, like an enclosure. It changes a white-walled gallery space into a club, a notion that was reinforced by having a live band perform inside the installation on the exhibition's opening night at Ratio 3 in San Francisco. Nonetheless, this means of presenting his work is a subtle and simple recontextualization. This time, instead of putting youth culture on the walls as photographs, he's modifying the space to serve a different purpose. The prints are pasted directly onto the walls like posters. With the prints flattened out prints in this manner there is extra space for the party that is about to spontaneously happen inside. Yearbook is a word that may not be familiar to a Japanese audience. Upon graduating high school, each student receives a hardcover book that includes headshots of all the graduating classmates. It's funny to think that instead of debate club photos or rows and columns of headshots annotated with pithy sayings underneath, Ryan's YEARBOOK is a more authentic portrayal of that time in one's life. And in this context, Ryan would be the nameless yearbook photographer just doing his job as systematically as possible. The accumulation of images and the sheer volume of work

represents the state of mind that the photographer has maintained for many years with this on-going, open-ended project.

6. Grids

Dear hero imprisoned / With all the new crimes that you are perfecting / Oh, I can't help quoting you / Because everything that you said rings true

Ryan's engagement with music is on the surface. In 2004, he started following Morrissey to his tour dates and photographed the audience members. Photographing attendees of music events became the basis for *You and My Friends*, presenting close-up shots of concert attendees. The prints are larger than life-size and the different colors of the individual images are from the lighting of the stage (not post-production effects). This series of photographs is quite antithetical to how he works with his subjects otherwise because he has no direct contact with or control over the models. This release from that control (the release of that control) is a definitive aspect to this project, even if his methodology for generating these images followed a strict regimen to create a consistency of composition, focus, and balance. The use of grids to organize color and format a display not only maximizes the use of wall space but points toward the artist and how he has chosen to step back. The rigid structuring represents the photographer's working method while allowing for the different colors to be juxtaposed dynamically, indicating different states of elation that concert goers feel. That exaltation is beyond requiring an explanation and is solely an experience; exceeding reason but feeling so very right. Meanwhile, Ryan is shooting these people without their awareness of being photographed. What is it that he is searching for in their expressions? He's closely examining them from a distance, making his photography both an engagement and a distancing at the same time. This grid of faces is a speculation. How could each person of a crowd of people, all experiencing the same thing, be locked into his own frame (of reference)? This is not a collective consciousness but rather each individual is alone in the crowd. And the photographer, observing this from the distance through a camera, is simultaneously aloof from his subjects but experiencing the same sort of isolated

elation that they are.

7. Music

Can you squeeze me / into an empty page of your diary / and psychologically save me / I've got faith in you

Ryan uses music continuously through this shoots to relax his models and create an atmosphere that releases tension from the body or facial expression. But the relationship between photographs and music extends beyond the shoot, beyond a function of achieving an end. The relationship extends into the image itself. But how? The emotional response to a work—rather than something intellectual or based on rhetoric—are like fragments of lyrics that don't add up or lead to a definition, conclusion, or some sort of point. And thinking of photographs as song lyrics (words written to accompany music) may be a more appropriate way of considering photography because lyrics sometimes get drowned out by the sound of music, or perhaps a vocalist is too breathy on stage or slurs a line, making the individual words incomprehensible. But through their repetition, hearing the sound over and over again, the lyrics register on some level and get lodged in our memory even before we realize they're in our prefrontal cortex. The lyrics are there all along even if we didn't know what they meant as we hum along.

8. Friendship

Take me out tonight / Where there's music and there's people / And they're young and alive

Let's consider the photographer's work in association with the artistic output of two close friends of his. By just simply describing the work or methods of two artists that influenced Ryan, perhaps this will stimulate alternative ways of seeing Ryan's work. Dash Snow (b. 1981 – d. 2009) was a graffiti artist, someone Ryan considers an inspiration to his own work. Snow made Polaroids non-stop and through that they formed their initial connection, he was also always with a camera in hand and shooting. Snow's Polaroids of his life and world capturing the nightlife of New York City, with its sex and drugs. And being out of control and defiant were prominent features

of Snow's character. A Polaroid, if you'll remember, is quite different from the digital cameras of today or even film-based photography. It's all just one take and Snow's short life embodied that grasping at life, creative and equally destructive as it may have been. Dan Colen (b. 1979) is a painter who is a childhood friend of Ryan's from New Jersey. They lived together for about ten years after moving to New York. Colen's early paintings were done in oil with a considerable degree of verisimilitude of quite banal scenes but to which he introduced the magical, such as the figure of Jesus Christ or his deceased grandfather. In the ordinary is the presence of the extraordinary. But Colen changed this style of painting and started to use chewing gum to apply color to the painting surface, effectively trading the serene control of the brush with clumpy and clumsy blobs of color. His paintings went from being representations or metaphors to sculptural presences that spilled out of the canvas frames, the weight of their own presence more physically real than visual. Colen traded control for something more dynamic. He created a structure that allows his artistic intentions to be modulated by lack of control.

9. Expanding Universe

*Last night I dreamt / That somebody loved me / No hope,
no harm / Just another false alarm*

The scale of the images and the wonderment that Ryan presents do not diminish the figures of his human subjects to oblivion, even as they instill a sense of awe. Ansel Adams showed us Yosemite Park with its majestic mountain range under an almost boundless sky. Adams demonstrated the capability of photography to point toward the transcendent. Photographer Minor White worked with similar ideas, though his palette relied on a more immediate repertoire of motifs found in everyday life, which all had some palpable scale relative to the human form. In particular White's *Frost on Window* (1950s) represents how the simple and quotidian could signal an expansive universe within our midsts. For Adams, though, the human form as a unit of measure is imperceptibly small in the pristine scenes he photographed. In Ryan's images, on the other hand, the world and the larger universe has a place for us—even if the shivering cold can seem inhospitable and we are helpless aliens

exploring a terrain where humans aren't meant to enter. In his most series of photographs, *Fall & Winter*, the world is colorful, bright and even surreal. Massive water structures are suspended in motion, allowing for a temporary, clear space of reflection and presence. The motifs are quite dramatic and far-reaching but his model's poses are serene and composed, presenting a mindset of crystalline purity.