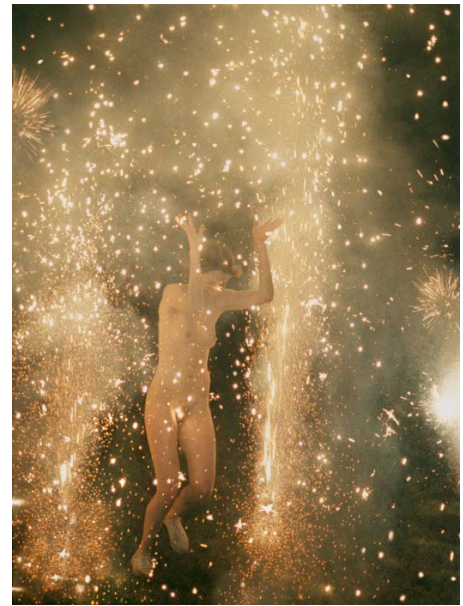


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## Ryan McGinley's Endless Summer



*Untitled (Nudes, Van, Horse)*, 2005 and *Fireworks*, 2002, from the series "Photographs" on the artist's website, various portfolios/shows, photographic film scans, various sizes, Ryan McGinley



*Marcel, Ann & Coley*, 2007 and *Hysterical Fireworks*, 2007, from the series "I Know Where The Summer Goes" on the artist's website, various portfolios/shows, photographic film scans, various sizes, Ryan McGinley

“What if Ryan McGinley’s models were black?” asks Stan Banos in his photo-centric blog *Reciprocity-Failure*. “Would he be: 1 - Every bit the celebrated wunderkind 2 - Another emerging photographer with potential [or] 3 - Ryan who?<sup>1</sup>” This (as stated) “hypothetical” question by a relatively unknown source hits right to the center of a rarely discussed issue with the work of photographer Ryan McGinley - and begs another question in response - with the widespread popularity of his work, why hasn’t this question been asked before? McGinley’s work can be examined in context, and then semiotically dissected leading to the discovery of many culturally important signs within the images. These signs can be interpreted as enforcing a myth of youthful adventure within the American spectacle - this myth is not as innocent as seen at first glance: it becomes disturbing when we examine its place in our society and who is included in this particular idealized vision, a vision undeniably linked to “whiteness.” Just as interesting is how these themes have gone mostly uncommented upon, possibly because of the nature of the commercial art world as a place of rebellion only in theory - often acting as an enabler of the status quo, a sheep in wolf’s clothing.

These first two images were selected from the website of artist Ryan McGinley, under the section “Photographs” labeled as *Untitled (Nudes, Van, Horse), 2005* and *Fireworks, 2002*<sup>2</sup>. They have both appeared in a variety of shows and publications of the artist’s work, and are in a general sense representative of his earlier work as an art student and emerging artist. The second pair of images, *Marcel, Ann & Coley, 2007* and *Hysterical Fireworks, 2007* are from his latest series of personal work (un-commissioned) titled “I Know Where The Summer Goes” which exhibited in 2008.

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<sup>1</sup> Stan Banos. “What If Ryan McGinley’s Models Were Black?” *Reciprocity-Failure*. March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2009. <http://reciprocity-failure.blogspot.com/2009/03/what-if-ryan-mcginleys-models-were.html>

<sup>2</sup> Ryan McGinley. “Ryan McGinley.” Portfolio Website. <http://ryanmcginley.com/>

*Untitled (Nudes, Van, Horse)*, as may be expected, depicts naked youth (of both conventional genders) with a van (on top of a van, with another possibly in the driver seat) facing a horse. They are placed within a landscape, a field that stretches to a distant horizon, with a mountain sloping towards the right of the frame, balanced with clouds and the hint of a sunset on the left. The second image in the spread, *Fireworks*, shows a young girl, also nude, leaping through the frame while sparklers or fireworks create bursts of light around and, because of the nature of light and longer photograph exposures, through her. She is frozen solid in the frame by a flash, catching her madcap smile and extended body. Behind her, presumably to shield herself from sparks, stretches a patterned article of clothing, or perhaps a shawl or blanket.

*Marcel, Ann & Coley* pictures the three gangly youths sitting together, all nude, in a wooden structure. It is not quite clearly defined, either a viewing deck on a building at the edge of a river or possibly the back of a boat. The background is an American western landscape, though it is also a slight mystery - something about it suggests the aesthetic of old movie backdrops. In fact, both *Marcel, Ann & Coley* and *Hysterical Fireworks* have a vintage film look to them, even more so than his earlier images (which look like they may have been produced a decade or two later than the 2007 pictures.) *Hysterical Fireworks* is *Fireworks* exponentially increased and is one of at least five pictures of nudes with fireworks in "I Know Where The Summer Goes." Though the technical lighting of the images in this body of work is more complex, the theme is very similar to his earlier work.

*Fireworks*, along with other images of his frolicking friends, was self published by McGinley in a book titled *The Kids Are Alright* in 2002<sup>3</sup>. He delivered it to gallery owners, critics, and photographers that he admired. Relatively fresh out of art school - he graduated Parsons in 2000 - the work seemed to be what people were looking for, and it gained him prestigious shows and press, including a solo show in the Whitney in 2003<sup>4</sup>, In a review of this show, the New York Times speaks of Warhol's snapshots with "none of the after-hours decadence, nor the grit of [Larry] Clark's work, nor the nourish narcissism of [Nan] Goldin's." It says the work is "refreshing to encounter ... artists operating to some extent outside the mainstream of the art world."<sup>5</sup> A later article in the Times remarks that the early images are "as playful as they are voyeuristic, straddling a line between exuberance and disorientation"<sup>6</sup> and a short story on McGinley in Time Magazine says "the images were unairbrushed and unironic, which freed them of the twin burdens of prettiness and ponderousness."<sup>7</sup> However, McGinley himself seems closer to bridging the images and their meaning in our society, when talking about his work in the Times article. Though calling them a celebration of life, he follows, "they are a world that doesn't exist. A fantasy."<sup>8</sup> His later work embraces this fantasy wholeheartedly. In the first Times article, the reviewer states that "volatile energies -- aesthetic and political -- are too often stroked into crafty, resistance-free acceptability" - optimistically implying

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<sup>3</sup> Philip Gelter. "A Young Man With An Eye, and Friends Up A Tree." *The New York Times*. May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?pagewanted=1& r=2>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Holland Cotter. "Art In Review; 'The Kids Are Alright' -- 'Photographs by Ryan McGinley.'" *The New York Times*. February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2003. <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE5DE123AF937A25751C0A9659C8B63>

<sup>6</sup> Gelter, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?pagewanted=1& r=2>

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Kluger. "Ryan McGinley." *Time Magazine*. May 29<sup>th</sup>, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1810317,00.html>

<sup>8</sup> Gelter, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?pagewanted=1& r=2>

that McGinley avoids this fate<sup>9</sup>. However, as his fantasy continues, it is obvious that he is complicit in this process within the art world.

We can delve deeper into the meaning of this fantasy by borrowing tools from semiotics - often used to dissect advertising imagery<sup>10</sup>. While these specific images may not be promoting a product, every image makes certain statements within itself. Every part of these images may be thought of as a sign, part of a coded statement that, when examined within the rest of society's code, can tell us more about the intended (or unintended) meaning of the image. In order to understand what the signs signify (what they mean, what concept they represent) we must continue to examine the signifiers (the representations attached to meaning)<sup>11</sup>.

In describing the images previously, we have already started to examine the first layer of signage - in photography, this may be considered the indexical. Since this kind of photography consists of images made by light bouncing off the subjects in front of the camera, the images here directly represent (on one level) the subject matter in front of the camera. The images are also fairly iconic, since the referred are represented in a way that visually is similar to themselves<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, when we talk about the smiling girl in *Fireworks* it is understood that this picture was made by pointing a camera at the subject - this image is both *of* and *means* "smiling girl." This most basic level of analysis, to anyone who understands the nature of photography, does not add much to the understanding of the particular images. To increase understanding, we can expand the context, and examine them in relation to the code of contemporary American culture.

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<sup>9</sup> Cotter, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9C0CE5DE123AF937A25751C0A9659C8B63>

<sup>10</sup> Gillian Rose. *Visual Methodologies*. London: Sage Publications, 2005, p. 69.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 74.

It must be understood that most artists of McGinley's generation are extremely visually conscious - he grew up spending much time in New York City during the 80s, a city plastered with all kinds of advertisements and visual amusements<sup>13</sup>. The horse, the sunset, and the landscape itself in *Untitled* may all be part of a conversation with the ubiquitous Marlboro-spearheaded advertising image of "America." These signs represent the great outdoors, the epic and timeless landscape that must have seemed quite enticing to a Jersey boy. *Marcel* speaks directly, again, to this exploration, with iconic landscape behind the figures. The inclusion of a cigarette, being smoked by the girl, seems to return to the Marlboro billboards and related advertising culture.

*Fireworks* and *Hysteric Fireworks* are also involved in this celebration of America, as the namesake explosions are linked to 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration as well as youthful excitement. Even the cloth flowing behind the figure in the earlier piece is suggestive of a flag, somehow, its shape held by the pole of the girl's body. The smile, the lighting in these photographs, the beautiful figures (human and equine) all suggest that this America must be a wonderful thing - indeed, youth, nudity, action - these are all associated with "Freedom" - the signified and signifier, a loaded concept in and of itself. While not quite as obvious, the van also plays an important role in this dialogue. It is denotive (describing directly) of a means of travel, a way to get to this "America" but it is also connotive (through inference, obviously in use and off the "beaten path") of a higher level idea - the great American road trip, the dream of adventurous adolescents.<sup>14</sup> It has roots in the westward wagon trains of heroicized settlers, crosses through the travels of self discovery of cultural icons like Jack Kerouac, and now resides in the pop culture

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<sup>13</sup> Gefter, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?\\_r=4&pagewanted=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?_r=4&pagewanted=1)

<sup>14</sup> Gefter, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?pagewanted=2&\\_r=4](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?pagewanted=2&_r=4)

inanity of Tom Greene in “Road Trip” – proclaimed on the promotional poster, “The greatest college tradition of all!” The sexuality present here is also part of this fantasy - the sexuality of teen movies, the eroticism of a youth, McGinley, who claims inspiration from glossy lifestyle erotica of the 70s<sup>15</sup>. In the later work, the vintage aesthetic of the images pushes this connection more strongly. This idea of the American Road Trip is part of the broader myth of carefree explorative youth - a myth that presents itself as innocently beautiful, but is nowhere near simple.

Gillian Rose, in *Visual Methodologies* - discussing Barthes’ understanding of mythology - states that “myth makes us forget that things were and are made.<sup>16</sup>” Indeed, these images were made embracing the mythology of a specific youthful lifestyle. One of the most obvious signs, however, both promotes and casts doubt upon the projected authenticity - the nudity. The girl is running naked through fireworks. The group is sitting naked upon a van. These things are out of the ordinary, which is why they are striking - but their strangeness also suggests their constructed nature. It is possible that these scenes could be found, but unlikely - it is dangerous to run through fireworks naked, dangerous to be naked on top of a car - and the technical skill evident in the images speaks to a knowledgeable shooter. It is quite possible that *Fireworks* is one of many images of this girl from that night, running through the sparks until McGinley was sure he had one perfect image - and he continues to present fireworks images in his later work, as shown by the example included here. This time, in *Hysterical Fireworks*, the figure wears shoes - perhaps unintentionally revealing the absurdity of the action.

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<sup>15</sup> Gefter, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?pagewanted=2& r=4>

<sup>16</sup> Rose, 90.

On a simpler level, the average person simply does not see naked people with the same frequency as they appear in McGinley's work. While work by earlier photographers, such as Nan Goldin, seems to share visual similarities, as photography critic Tim Conner remarks, "Then too, Goldin's photos have a strong sense of story. Her images capture emotional pulses - mostly crises - in lives we can actually imagine. McGinley's are disturbingly random, as though plucked, this-frame-as-good-as-that-frame, from a playacted version of endless summer.<sup>17</sup>" It is this feeling of "playacting" that infuses his work, causing a sense that the viewer may be being sold this idea, at the cost of other critical thought. There was some surprise at the admission that the images in "I Know Where The Summer Goes" were staged, but as ArtCat commentator Adda Birnir states "the truth is that McGinley's images have always been staged in his drive to create an aesthetic world where youth runs wild" and "this explicit admission forces the photographs to stand on their own, without playing on the audience's fantasies about the spontaneity of their creation."<sup>18</sup>

Understanding that this is not "real life" - the subjects may be called into question and it must be asked what their identity signifies. They are white without exception - white, young, beautiful (and in the case of *Untitled* and his later works, paid<sup>19</sup>). They were cast for their beauty, their youth - and it must be the case - their "whiteness." Whiteness itself is often associated with "purity and innocence" - themes sometimes read in McGinley's work<sup>20</sup>. It could be argued that within his background

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<sup>17</sup> Tim Conner. "Ryan McGinley: Building A Youthsex Brand." *Tim Conner*. May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2007. <http://timconner.blogspot.com/2007/05/ryan-mcginley-youth-brand-in-art-biz.html>

<sup>18</sup> Adda Birnir. "Ryan McGinley at Team." *ArtCat Zine*. April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008. <http://zine.artcat.com//2008/04/ryan-mcginley-at-team.php>

<sup>19</sup> Gefter, [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?pagewanted=2&\\_r=4](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?pagewanted=2&_r=4)

<sup>20</sup> Tyler Stallings. "From White to Whiteness." *Whiteness: A Wayward Construction*. Ed. Tyler Stallings. Iceland: Oddi Press, 2003, 18.

(skateboarding, art school, etc<sup>21</sup>) he simply knows more white people, and it is unintentional - but this seems extremely forced, especially because of his association with New York City graffiti culture. He resides in one of the most diverse countries on the planet, in a city with an extremely colorful population - and no biographical example possible is as homogenous as expressed. Whether it is an allusion to the 70's magazines he cites as inspiration or simply part of his aesthetic mode - the selection of his models is undeniably intentional.

This is an image, then, of a very specific America, a very specific American youth. Adventure and sexuality may be freer (and gay, youthful McGinley himself is adamant about this) but there is a possibly disturbing undertone that this fantasy is for a certain group of people, the people approved and selected for this lifestyle. Then, for the majority of the world, even outside of its ridiculousness, it is exponentially unattainable. You must be young, American, waifish, freely naked, and part of "whiteness." It is here, ever more specifically, that the work continues its travel into the collective Spectacle - the domain of Guy Debord's societal criticism - it joins product advertising in creating the image of an unattainable lifestyle - the "world vision which has become objectified."<sup>22</sup> McGinley shoots thousands of rolls of film, creates elaborate situations, to attain what he expresses as "the life I wish I was living." If even he - young, hip, white, famous, and increasingly wealthy - cannot actually attain this lifestyle, it is hard to comprehend it as existing for anyone outside of the shallow frame of his camera.

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<sup>21</sup> Gefter, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/06/arts/design/06geft.html?pagewanted=2& r=4>

<sup>22</sup> Guy Debord. *Society of the Spectacle*. 1967. Translated, Black+Red, 1977. Published online by Greg Adargo, *Marxists.org*. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>

As Debord states, “The spectacle aims at nothing other than itself.<sup>23</sup>” This lifestyle representation replicates itself, not only through McGinley’s work, but with an army of admirers seeking to “express themselves” and show their lives (or present their lives idealistically), flooding Flickr with commoditized images of their young sexuality. With America often claiming a puritan like nature, it is comfortable for these youth to see this as rebellion (edgy) - a rebellion in actuality easily part of the system. Debord later warns of “pseudo-goods [style, art] to be coveted. It offers false models of revolution to local revolutionaries.<sup>24</sup>” This comes very close to the lifestyle of our latest generation of “rebels” - McGinley may not actually be conscious of the “whiteness” and societal impact of his work.

Bruce LaBruce, in an article for Vice, observes “Ryan and the graffiti kids he will be photographing, despite their radical pursuits and flagrant disregard for the law ... are surprisingly apolitical. The only thing they seem to want to boycott is talking to me seriously about graffiti.” He describes Ryan’s early social circle (“the most glamorous graffiti crew in New York City,” IRAK<sup>25</sup>) as destroying billboards to “ups fame” instead of any interest in ad-busting - interested in personal gain and adrenaline rushes instead of street communication<sup>26</sup>. Jeffry Deitch is quoted in *The Warhol Economy* - “Artists are involved with building this alternative world, childlike, the art is not aggressive” - with fashion and music uninvolved in larger social issues<sup>27</sup>. When McGinley talks about his work, he doesn’t often go too deep into the repercussions of presenting his idealized

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<sup>23</sup> Debord. <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/debord/society.htm>

<sup>24</sup> *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Currid. *The Warhol Economy: How Fashion, Art, and Music Drive New York City*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007, 123.

<sup>26</sup> Bruce LaBruce. “The Vice Guide To New York Graffiti.” *The Vice Guide to Sex and Drugs and Rock and Roll*. Ed. Suroosh Alvi. New York: Warner Books, 2003, 168.

<sup>27</sup> Currid, 41.

lifestyle. In a review on Art Fag City, Paddy Johnson suggests that his images “might be as vapid as the lifestyle they depict.”<sup>28</sup>

Most of the criticism of his work comes from this angle - that it is light on substance and possibly high on narcissism. Birner, though more a fan of his later work, said she resented the earlier work for promoting “a patently false, fetishistic image of an East Village hipster milieu whose reckless abandon is largely inspired by self-destructive drug use. At best, this falsehood was a tired old cliché that has sold art for decades. At worst, it was part of a collective fantasy of immortality that can — and has — had disastrous consequences.”<sup>29</sup> It seems, though, that may *not* be the worst the work has to offer.

It is surprising that the issue of race is almost never touched upon. After a long article on the narcissistic overtones of McGinley’s work, where Ryan Tracy of Counter Critic points out “Narcissism’s insular hallmark ... *Why bother photographing people I don’t know when the people I do know are the only people that matter to me?*”<sup>30</sup> it is in the comments that Jonathan David Jackson suggests that the answer has something to do with only “knowing” white people, people similar to oneself. He says that in the “insiderism of the “The Male Gaze” exhibition, “thin white boys” (“boys” because youth is a fetish) get pride of place while a few differently constituted beauties wallflower the edges in an effort to make the aesthetic feel like it’s not the work of closet bigots who don’t even know and wouldn’t take pains to examine their own bigotries. They would brush such examinations aside with the words “that’s just my preference” without

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<sup>28</sup> Paddy Johnson. “Ryan McGinley at Team Gallery.” *Art Fag City*. May 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008. <http://www.artfagcity.com/2008/05/07/ryan-mcginley-at-team-gallery/>

<sup>29</sup> Birner, <http://zine.artcat.com/2008/04/ryan-mcginley-at-team.php>

<sup>30</sup> Ryan Tracy. “Look, Mommy! Gay male bonding!” *Countercritic*. May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007. <http://countercritic.com/2007/05/20/look-mommy-gay-male-bonding/>

understanding that preferences often flower from our racial and class consciousness and subconsciousness.<sup>31</sup>”

This is such a poignant response - one placed as a comment on a blog instead of inside a prominent art or mainstream publication - suggesting that they are also complicit in the perpetuation of this manner of “gaze.” The only other mentions I have found of race are in a blog post by Savannah College of Art and Design Professor Steve Aishman, where he responds to the Team Gallery’s press release (which says McGinley is a “serious artist with a rare gift for creating enduring color photographs - photographs that show us the best of youth.”) by stating that “Apparently, unless you are thin and white, you are ranked lower than “the best of youth” and if “one interprets McGinley’s images as somehow representing a fantasy of youth or of by-gone youth... he has constructed a race exclusive fantasy.<sup>32</sup>” The third public mention was in the small post by Banos that I quoted in the introduction - a post made while I was actually working on this paper.

Why such a broad failure of public criticism to address this issue - one Banos describes as a “blatant 800 lb gorilla?”<sup>33</sup> It is possible that criticism of this nature would make possible art buyers highly uncomfortable - making it harder for his pieces to continually sell. What seems hard to believe is that most reviewers were simply oblivious. There is, however, precedence for this - “whiteness” has a history of being “invisible.” Much of our culture presents whiteness as “the norm by which all ‘Others’

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<sup>31</sup> Jonathan David Jackson. Comment on “Look, Mommy! Gay male bonding!” *Countercritic*. May 22, 2007. <http://countercritic.com/2007/05/20/look-mommy-gay-male-bonding/#comment-5>

<sup>32</sup> Steve Aishman. “A Report from the Phantom Zone: Telling Jokes.” *Steve Aishman Photography*. April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008. <http://steveaishman.blogspot.com/2008/04/report-from-phantom-zone-telling-jokes.html>

<sup>33</sup> Banos, <http://reciprocity-failure.blogspot.com/2009/03/what-if-ryan-mcginleys-models-were.html>

fail by comparison.<sup>34</sup>” David R. Roediger talks of “stealth whiteness” that “functions beneath the cultural radar, as a norm and as a power that need not announce itself racially.<sup>35</sup>” If, as Banos asked, McGinley’s models were entirely black or any other minority, race would undoubtedly be part of a critical discussion. This “normality” is entirely constructed - whiteness only exists as a norm when enforced as a norm, through media or actions. Perhaps the art world reviewers had trouble viewing whiteness as a concept in the work because of their participation *in it*. Or perhaps it is because “whiteness signifies so much that it is commonly seen as apart from race.<sup>36</sup>”

Regardless, once cured of its invisibility, whiteness often borders on obscenity. In fact, in an essay titled exactly thus, *The Obscenity of Whiteness*, Amelia Jones muses on another possible reason for reviewers not mentioning whiteness - the risk of seeming “self indulgent.” She jokes, “Gee, I get to write about myself and my culture yet again, and this time under the gloss of being racially conscious!” and then more honestly hopes that her “admissions of failure and vulnerability - and, in truth, confusion about race - will at least mitigate that effect.<sup>37</sup>” It’s important to not let fear or confusion get in the way of discussion. This fear of obscenity (literally as being regarded as taboo to even talk about) might tie directly into discussion of McGinley’s work. His work is called edgy and challenging, but nudity is commonplace in art, and the sexual and cultural aspects of his work are not much more “edgy” than advertisements or crass TV shows directed at teens.

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<sup>34</sup> Daniel Bernardi. “Introduction: Race and The Hollywood Style.” *Classic Hollywood, Classic Whiteness*. Ed. Daniel Bernardi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> David R. Roediger. “I Came For The Art; Exposing Whiteness and Imagining Nonwhite Spaces.” *Whiteness: A Wayward Construction*. Ed. Tyler Stallings. Iceland: Oddi Press, 2003, 56.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid* 59.

<sup>37</sup> Amelia Jones. “The Obscenity of Whiteness.” *Whiteness: A Wayward Construction*. Ed. Tyler Stallings. Iceland: Oddi Press, 2003, 87-88.

Perhaps the edgy feeling from his work comes from an uncomfortable feeling given by whiteness, by the unattainability of the lifestyle.

Though critical study of whiteness in American culture is relatively new, it will continue to gain momentum inverse to the prevalence of whiteness as a societal norm. As stated by Stallings, “the ultimate goal of the cultural study of whiteness is simply to recognize the United States as a multicultural nation, where whites, as Lucy Lippard has written, “will be encouraged to see themselves as simply another Other.”<sup>38</sup>” Already, people identifying as white are in the minority in some parts of the country, and conservative census estimates state that “by 2050 the nation will be almost half non-white.”<sup>39</sup> It will be increasingly difficult for mass media to present a predominately white society as normal and it is logical that the art world will reflect this. Whether it leads or follows remains to be seen - for now, McGinley’s work is firmly rooted in the past.

What I am hopeful about is criticism’s ability to drive work forward. Obviously, as an artist he is free to photograph whatever he desires, but it is our responsibility to examine it. By using a past method of historical analysis - semiotics - and exposing both the myth of the American spectacle and the place of “whiteness” within it - we as observers can put pressure on an art world system that often blindly encourages the consuming of work without examining the possible negative effects of it upon society.

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<sup>38</sup> Stallings, 17

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, 16.

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