

Reviews

Ryan McGinley, "Irregular Regulars"

★★★★★

Team Gallery, through Feb 10
(see Soho)

Morrissey sang, "I want to see people and I want to see lights." McGinley delivers on both counts.

By **Noah Chasin**

In 1986, my best friend Eric and I drove to see the Smiths at the Great Woods Performing Arts Center in Mansfield, Massachusetts. At some point during the concert—maybe during the lengthy rendition of "I Know It's Over"—Eric bolted from his seat and disappeared without a word into the crowd. When he returned half an hour later, drenched in sweat, he described how he'd managed to fling at Morrissey's feet an inscribed copy of a short-story collection by the Viennese writer Robert Walser.

This anecdote illustrates the rabid, almost mythic devotion that Morrissey continues to inspire more than 20 years later. Conventional wisdom holds that fans—short for fanatics—walk the line between obnoxious geekiness and enviable zeal. Building on this truism, the young photographer Ryan McGinley has tapped into the minds and morals of Morrissey followers, shot at nearly 200 concerts over the course of two years, for his first solo show at Team.

Twenty color photographs are mounted on foam core and placed behind glass in frames that nearly resemble vitrines. The images are saturated with flamboyant blues, oranges and yellows, as if seen through the multihued gels of theatrical lighting. Fan after fan stands slightly agog at the spectacle onstage, exhibiting no glee, no rapture, but simply earnest absorption. Art historian Michael Fried famously argued that the most successful art presents its subjects in a state of oblivion regarding audience; any direct, frontal engagement breaks the hermetic serenity of the scene and contaminates it with an objectionable air of self-conscious theatricality. McGinley follows a Friedian line here, skulking



Untitled
(Morrissey 17)

undetected through the crowd to single out scenes of absorption. These are supremely silent pictures, free of the hysteria that one might expect from a rock & roll audience. There is, instead, something transhistorical and almost iconic about them. The lone girl cast in halcyon yellow light in *Untitled (Morrissey 25)*, looks

surprisingly serene given that her mouth is agape midscreeam—she's an emo Vermeer milkmaid. In fact, it's hard to imagine any of the assembled characters breaking free from the daze in which McGinley captures them: mesmerized by the main performer. He appears as a dervish, striking poses from a distance, his

unbuttoned shirt fanning out around him, translucent with the perspiration no longer of wanton, youthful lust but of middle-aged angst.

Morrissey is a renowned fan himself; president of the U.K. New York Dolls fan club in his youth, he managed to reunite the band in 2004. But few of the images here actually portray the legend himself. McGinley has chosen to focus on the audience, viewed from either high above the stage—perhaps on a catwalk—or else from amid the feverish rush of the crowd. "Moz," when he does appear, is often viewed from behind or obscured by

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the glare of the stage lights. His stature is slight, dressed most often in his standard uniform of heavy cotton work pants, boots and an untucked button-down shirt. A resolutely anachronistic pompadour provides a heroic crest to an otherwise unremarkable profile: a simple, rather coarse-faced man of idiosyncratic beauty whose candid willingness to rip open his heart and spill its contents—at times sentimental, at others caustically and bitterly humorous—in front of his public is alternately admirable and cringeworthy. *Untitled (Morrissey 17)* is the signal portrait: Moz is captured in a pyramid of glare, his guitarist barely emerging from the shadows behind him. At just 14 x 9 inches, the image is more icon than altarpiece, an object of private, not public, devotion.

Strange that McGinley's photos fail to represent the most idiosyncratic of Morrissey's cliques of aficionados: Mexican neogreasers, whose dedication to the British singer has become legendary. Instead, McGinley chooses precisely the characters one would expect: scads of sullen white kids appealing to the only deity whose beneficence might grant redemption from their own ersatz misfortune. ■