



September 2, 2011

In the Art World, No Lack of Ryans

By [DAVID COLMAN](#)

ART lovers can be forgiven for mixing up some names. Consider the confusion between Steve McQueen, the British artist, and Steve McQueen, the 1960s Hollywood legend. Or between the American steel sculptors Tony Smith and David Smith. Or how about Judy Chicago, Gary Indiana and Marfa Texas? (Trick question: two are places, and two are people.)

But these are child's play compared to the perplexity of the moment, in which it seems that every other male artist is named Ryan.

A casual count reveals no fewer than eight: There is [Ryan Trecartin](#), with a one-man show at MoMA PS1, and Ryan McNamara, the performance artist who entertained Hamptons galagoers at the Watermill Center benefit last month. There are up-and-comers like Ryan Johnson, Ryan Sullivan, Ryan Gander and Ryan Humphrey. And the best-known of the Ryans — the photographer Ryan McGinley, whose 2003 solo show at the Whitney Museum propelled him to art fame at the age of 25 — is often confused with his sound-alike peer, the painter Ryan McGinness.

It's as bad as 17th-century Holland, when everyone was named Jan.

The profusion has provoked some awkward moments. Last fall, Mr. Sullivan got a phone call from a well-known charitable arts organization, informing him that he had won a \$25,000 grant for his performance work. Who wouldn't like a phone call like that? The problem was, Mr. Sullivan is an abstract painter, not a performance artist.

"They went on for two or three minutes," Mr. Sullivan said. Then the coin dropped. "I realized they were talking about Ryan McNamara."

Ouch.

"It was a gaffe on their part," said Mr. Sullivan, who added that he took no offense. "But I was happy for Ryan. I knew who had nominated him, which was kind of why I knew who they were talking about. It's always so hard for performance artists to make money for what they do that I think they should get grants."

For his part, Mr. McNamara was mortified to hear about the blunder, having been on the other end of such mistakes. At an art-world gala last year, he met one of the art hive's buzziest queen bees, who generously proceeded to escort him around the party and introduce him to everyone.

As Ryan McGinley.

"I didn't know what to say," Mr. McNamara said. "It was so awkward, and she was being so nice, I didn't know how to correct her. Plus, I thought it was kind of funny. Later I told Ryan McGinley about it, and he said it was cool. He said, 'I still get mixed up with Ryan McGinness.'"

Ryan McGinness, who was working on a project in Amsterdam, confirmed that this was the case, but that it had long ceased to bother him. "Luckily I know Ryan, and he's a good guy, and we like each other," he said. "If he weren't, it

would be a different story.”

Mr. McGinley was traveling and declined to comment. Mr. Trecartin plays such a mean game of phone tag that he could take it to London for next summer’s Olympics. But he briefly acknowledged this quirky art phenomenon — call it Ryan-ism — and added, “And we’re all gay!”

Well, it’s certainly hard to keep them all straight. But strictly speaking, only Messrs. Trecartin, McNamara, McGinley and Sullivan are gay. Mr. Gander, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Humphrey are not. Nor is Mr. McGinness, whose relationship with Mr. McGinley is purely homonymous.

Though it seems statistically improbable, Ryan-ism isn’t limited to the art world. Hollywood has four heartthrobs named Ryan in current circulation: Reynolds, Gosling, Phillippe and Kwanten.

There may be a simple explanation. According to the Social Security Administration, which keeps track of the most popular baby names, “Ryan” first cracked the top 100 in 1971 — coming in at No. 51 — and rose steadily to No. 11 in the 1980s, resting there, give or take a notch, for a good 10 years.

The reason? The prime suspect appears to be “Love Story,” the 1970 movie that featured a dreamboat to end all dreamboats: a rich Harvard student named Oliver Barrett IV, who loses his head and heart for a saucy Italian Radcliffe student, who in the end loses her life to cancer. He was played by a fresh-faced Ryan O’Neal, and it’s safe to surmise that, for a while at least, the “Ryan” vogue owed an enormous debt to him.

Not having even been born when the movie came out, the real-life Ryans were of two minds on the theory. “It was my grandmother’s maiden name,” Mr. McNamara said. But he added, “The other day I met a Ryan whose mother told him point-blank that he was named that because of ‘Love Story.’ ”

These days, though, with a drug arrest, a stint in rehab and a lawsuit over a missing Warhol painting, Mr. O’Neal is not exactly a name-inspiring role model. “The idea that a generation of people would name their kids after him seems crazy,” Mr. McNamara said.

It might be a coincidence that “Ryan” dropped out of the top 20 baby names in 2010. Then again, it might not.