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To Painter Sam McKinniss, With Love

GQ's Rachel Tashjian sends a letter of adoration to the New York artist who's turning celebrity fandom on its head.

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Dear Sam,

When I was first assigned to write a profile of you for America's premier men's magazine, I was already impressed with your sophisticated nature and red-hot career. But as I spoke with your friends, professional partners, and admirers and gazed at your work, I realized something.

I love you.

To talk about you in the ordinary magazine way—to describe you picking at a salad, explaining your vision—would inadequately encapsulate you, this brilliant artist who is so far and of our time. The only way for me to talk about you is to talk to you. Because I understand you better than anyone else does. Just keep reading and you'll see.

I know you as funny and biting, the life of any party. But I felt, during our Zoom conversations and

hangout at your studio last fall—thank you for the Pellegrino; I still have the bottle—that you wanted this to go a certain way. That thrilled me even more, to get a new angle on you. Sam McKinniss: serious artist, at a serious time.

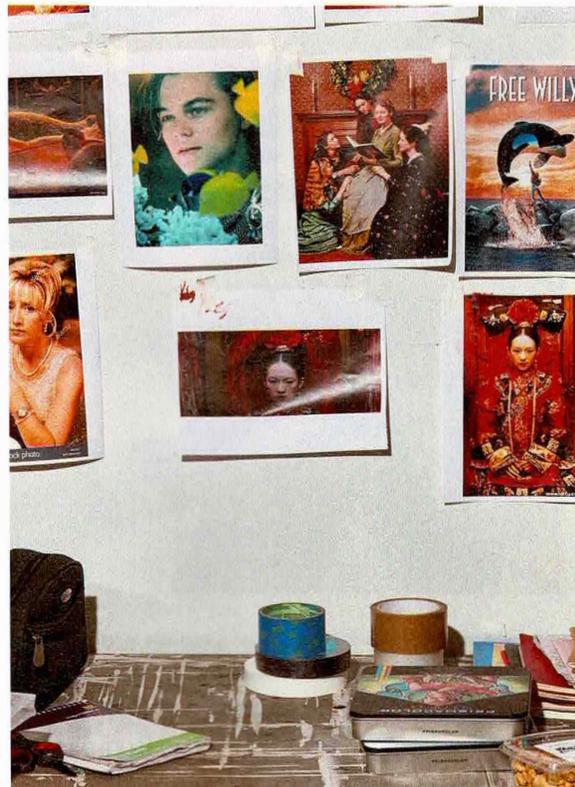
Indeed, this past year has been crazy for you. While the rest of the world was somehow both on pause and in decline, you were working on your biggest commission ever: nearly three dozen paintings for a solo show in Beverly Hills at the private in-home gallery of Michael Ovitz, the cofounder of Creative Artists Agency, the former Disney president, and one of the world's preeminent American art collectors. "We collect contemporary art, we collect modern art, we collect Chinese furniture, African antiquities, Rembrandt etchings, Japanese bronze flower vases,"

Michael told me. (I called him—I hope that's okay?) By showing in Michael's enormous gallery, you're following in the footsteps of luminaries like Sterling Ruby, conceptual sculptor Carol Bove, and photographer Roe Ethridge. Michael said he had you out to Beverly Hills for lunch and then took you to the space. He told me, "He can do whatever he wants, period."

My eyes became hearts.

Of course Michael took a liking to you. "Sam and I share a very interesting common denominator," he said. "We're both film buffs." That's putting it mildly, Michael Ovitz! Because like him, you aren't merely a "buff," you are a loving obsessive. But the difference is you render venerated paparazzi shots, promotional images, and film stills of pop culture superstars—Justin Bieber, Serena Williams, Prince,

In McKinniss's Brooklyn studio: a finished painting of his friend the writer Sarah Nicole Prickett, left; iconic images from film and television, many of which became works for his Michael Ovitz show.



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McKinniss dresses the way he paints: with a cool, classic elegance that shows he is in complete control.

Princess Diana—in painted portraiture. Your ability to exalt the familiar in glossy pigments has a supernatural effect on people. Just listen to what Michael had to say about the first painting he bought from you, a still of Julianne Moore in *Magnolia*, the Paul Thomas Anderson movie. "He does imagery of things that I was involved with!" Michael practically sang. But "they're injected with a little bit more feeling than normal."

You reduced one of the most feared men in Hollywood to a groupie. Or maybe you elevated him to the highest possible state of existence: fandom.

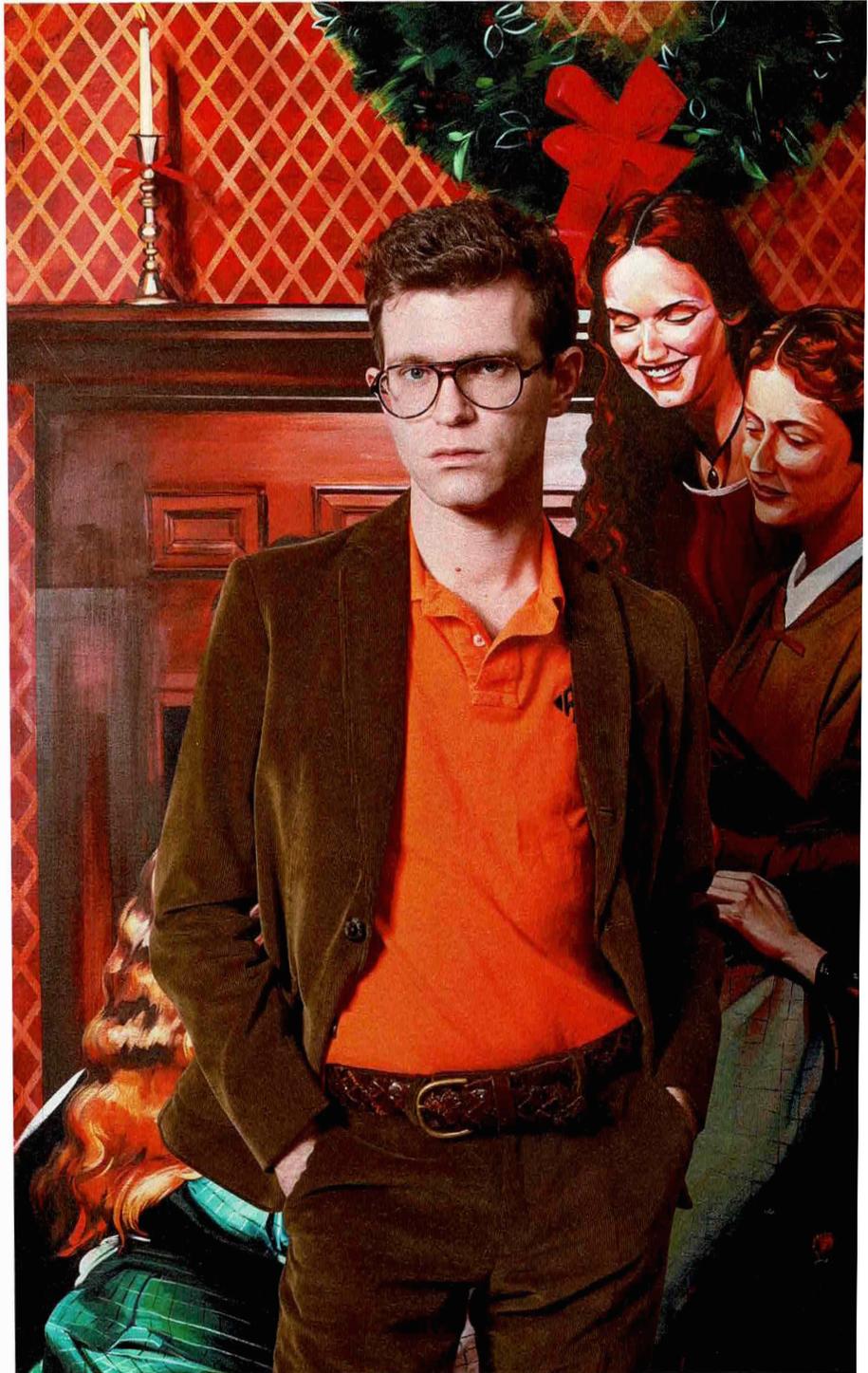
Apparently your paintings have this fanatical effect on everyone. Your friend and former gallery rep Alissa Bennett, who showed your work at the now defunct Team Gallery, said people have "intensely personal" reactions to your art. Your pieces spur viewers into a supernatural communion with their idols. She said witnessing this made her think about the phenomenon of celebrity as a circuit: "When fandom is really complete and perfect, it creates the circuit between the image and the admirer."

Can you feel us growing closer?

In addition to the show at the Ovitz gallery, you're opening one at the prestigious Almine Rech, in London, in April. (All this, plus you're now being represented by JTT in New York!) I guess you meant it when you tweeted that bon mot in response to Billie Eilish bragging about finishing one song during quarantine: "I made like thirty paintings." So funny!

Because I consider you the #1 painter in my life, I asked Alissa, who now works at Gladstone Gallery in New York, to explain where you are in your career. You will be pleased to know she believes you're in a great place. "It's really a moment where there's excitement," she said, adding, "and with that excitement, always comes scrutiny." (Don't worry: I'll make sure nothing bad happens to you.)

But I believe showing your art in a place like Michael's home gallery adds a whole new meaning to what you do, and I know you agree. "It's



going to be interesting to put my work—nestle it very firmly, very comfortably—within a Hollywood sphere," you said last year (remember?). You were vaping in your studio in what you call "prime Williamsburg," perched in front of a painting in progress of the promo shot for *Little Women*—the 1994 Winona Ryder version. "So the context will be very in the know, it'll be very business. That's a level of access that I wasn't expecting," you paused. "I wasn't expecting to be given that ever."

My darling, you deserve it.

"Those are exciting moments, and they don't happen very often," you said, reflecting on your showbiz bona fides, like painting Lorde for her 2017 album cover. "And when they do, it feels like a snake eating its own tail. I think I have a flair for the obvious."

I moved to New York with big dreams of meeting someone just like you: handsome, sharply dressed, talented, and 35. The image you cut makes an impression. "He's very, very antique," Cooke Maroney, another Gladstone Gallery director (what's in the water there?!), told me. "He's as close as I've gotten to meeting someone in a Proust novel." Alissa said you're like a Frank O'Hara or Truman Capote character. "I think that he somehow has been able to reconstitute all of these old-fashioned kinds of identities into something that's incredibly contemporary in a special way," she said. "He's such a strange amalgamation of familiar things, which is what I think the work is also—and that's why people connect to it." Michael said you were the "nicest, smartest guy to be around."

It's almost like you're the antithesis of the tortured, asshole genius painter. You are the kind artist. The polite artist. The elegant artist. "Elegance, I think, is important," you told me once, your delivery dry as a Communion wafer. "I think that's one of my core values." I wrote down your other core values and drew smileys around them: gratitude, love, friendship. Cosmopolitanism. "Having good posture. Propriety. Things like that. All this leads to

situations or circumstances where you can transgress or when you can bend rules," you said. "When you can ask for more than you think you deserve."

I love the way you wear simple American clothes—button-downs, slacks, penny loafers, corduroy suits—with a pure, modest beauty. You treat appearance as a fine art. "It behooves me and any other member of cosmopolitan society to dress nicely and to present mindfully, thoughtfully," you said. "I don't want to dress in order to raise eyebrows or turn heads, but I do think it's important to be memorable. I would like to leave the room and remain in your thoughts."

I remember one day last year, when I asked how your paintings begin. The prime Williamsburg sun was streaming through the

For example, I asked Michael if he thought Leonardo DiCaprio would want the portrait you made of him in *Romeo + Juliet*. "If I was Leo, I'd want to own that picture," Michael said. "So I don't see anything strange about that at all."

Cooke told me that when he first encountered your work, "for some reason, I liked the idea—or I thought it would please Sam—for the person in the painting to own the painting. It makes no sense to me now." Cooke offered Cam'ron your painting of Cam'ron, he said, "and Cam'ron was like, *Yeah, I'm not into art.*" (You told me that you really appreciated that: "Why should he like it?") "The painting subject matter is them, but it's not about them," Cooke said, laughing. "It's about us. It's about the outsiders, really,

"I don't want to dress in order to raise eyebrows or turn heads, but I do think it's important to be memorable. I would like to leave the room and remain in your thoughts."

windows of your studio and onto your handsome face as you revealed your inner process. "What I set out to do is to present a gathering of images, of pictures, that establish a mood, an attempt at telling a story," you said. "But before I can do that, it's like I have to try to take the temperature of the air of the culture, basically, of my constituency.... I want to be able to tap into and access emotional wells that are often sublimated into that drama of entertainment and theater and pageantry and presentation, fashion and glamour. Trying to know the mood of the world seems inherently political to me."

But here's the thing: I feel like everything is going your way, so what happens when the celebrity painter becomes not just a painter of celebrities but a celebrity who paints? What if you become an insider? Can you still play the role of loving observer of celebrity culture?

who remember these images from our lives. The memory we have of the image is not really that person."

Alissa went even further, and I'd never felt so alive. "It goes back to this idea of people forging these intensely personal connections with his work in a way that I think is pretty uncommon," she said. And yet, "It's not even rooted in ownership. It's really the thing where people are like, 'No one will understand this the way that I do.' It's like the narcissism of the fan, where you look at this thing and somehow those surfaces become reflective on people in a way that's very complicated."

Maybe I sound crazy. But I knew if I could just get this letter to you and lay it all out, you'd understand. After all, doesn't your work make you the ultimate fan?

*With adoration,
Rachel*