



WORDS BY  
KIMBERLY HADDAD

# UNWORLDLY CREATURES

Photographer and experimental visual artist Ryan Burke is the zenith of ever-evolving exploration and self-expression. Tapping into emotional shifts of the subconscious mind and defying the traditional philosophies of beauty, Burke has caused a stir in both the high-fashion and performance worlds alike. His eerie characters and transformative self-portraits channel a conceptual kind of artistry and fierce manifestation of individualism that transcends labels and has garnered the likes of some of the most beloved couture leaders of our generation.

**BASIC:** Talk to us about your upbringing and creative background. What in your personal life has influenced you to pursue a creative career and become an explorative photographer and visual artist?

**RYAN BURKE:** I grew up in southern Virginia with a very open-minded and supportive family who encouraged me to be active and creative every day. Television and video games weren't an option at my house and I'm thankful for that as I was able to develop an artistic and explorative mind. Playing dress up with my brother was the first major influence over what would later become my artistic career. Self-expression and identity were big themes for me, especially being gay in a conservative rural setting. In college I become a fine arts major with a focus on photography. I was inspired by portrait photographers such

as Annie Leibovitz and would shoot my friends and peers to look editorial. I began shooting myself during a long-distance relationship as a way of connecting with my boyfriend at the time and my self-portraits began to become more conceptual. When I moved to southern California and explored nightlife, I took my work to the next level and everything else developed from there over the last 10 years.

**BASIC:** In your own words, describe what the word "creativity" means to you. When was the first time you realized that you were a creative person?

**RYAN BURKE:** For me, creativity is about connecting with the subconscious mind and allowing ideas to flow organically until a concept takes shape. I was raised in a family full of artists and believe everyone is creative.



@ryanburkevisual



Tapping into that power is the only difference from what makes a person a creator or not.

**BASIC:** Talk to us about the general themes of your photography and visual art. How did you define your personal creative style and what is the ultimate message in your creative expressions?

**RYAN BURKE:** The theme of my work is mostly about physical adornment as a way of creating beauty and finding power within myself. I feel the way one chooses to adorn themselves not only tells a story, but also allows them to feel their ultimate form. For me, that ultimate form shifts with my emotional state and circumstances of which my work is always a reflection. I create from an organic place and allow ideas to manifest themselves rather than plan everything out. Gender and culture references are less relevant for me as I feel beauty transcends labels. I am very proud and humbled that my creative expressions have encouraged so many others to find their own power in their definition of beauty.

**BASIC:** The Manish Arora SS2020 series is wildly beautiful. How do you make the leap from an idea in your head to the execution? What is your creative process like?

**RYAN BURKE:** Thank you! It was a lot of work, but a lot of fun. It was an amazing show and I loved working with Manish. That show had me running all over Paris looking for materials in flower and craft stores to go with the looks I had to create on myself and two other models. I began building the looks after I collected enough materials. I laid everything out and tried different placements until I liked a design. Then I developed the look from there, adding details and other elements. I finished the headpieces first and then created the makeup to coordinate. I was working all night until the call time at 5:00 a.m. It was almost 24 hours straight of developing the looks and executing them. My creative process tends to always be this way. I don't usually have a clear concept in mind, more like an idea of colors, textures, and shapes I want to play with. I collect materials, lay everything out, and let it all come together.

**BASIC:** Are you able to visualize your finished product before you begin, i.e. the makeup, overall aesthetic, the editing of a particular photograph?

**RYAN BURKE:** Sometimes I do, but most of the time I work better by just allowing things to happen in the moment. I occasionally draw out a concept and then execute it, but this has become very rare. I have

Earrings EDGAR MOSA @edgarmosa  
Nose Piece INAUREM @inaurem  
Dress SHO KONISHI @sho\_konishi  
Head Piece RYAN BURKE @ryanburkevisual  
Silicone Face Appliance VULPINIC  
VESTMENTS @vulpinicvestments

a hard time visualizing a full concept outright. I usually need to start with some sort of base and let the idea take shape as I execute it. This also goes for photography. I will usually start with one type of lighting and as I see how the look photographs. I will change the set up and take different approaches until it reaches a place that feels right.

**BASIC:** In terms of your creative endeavors, what has been the greatest obstacle you had to overcome?

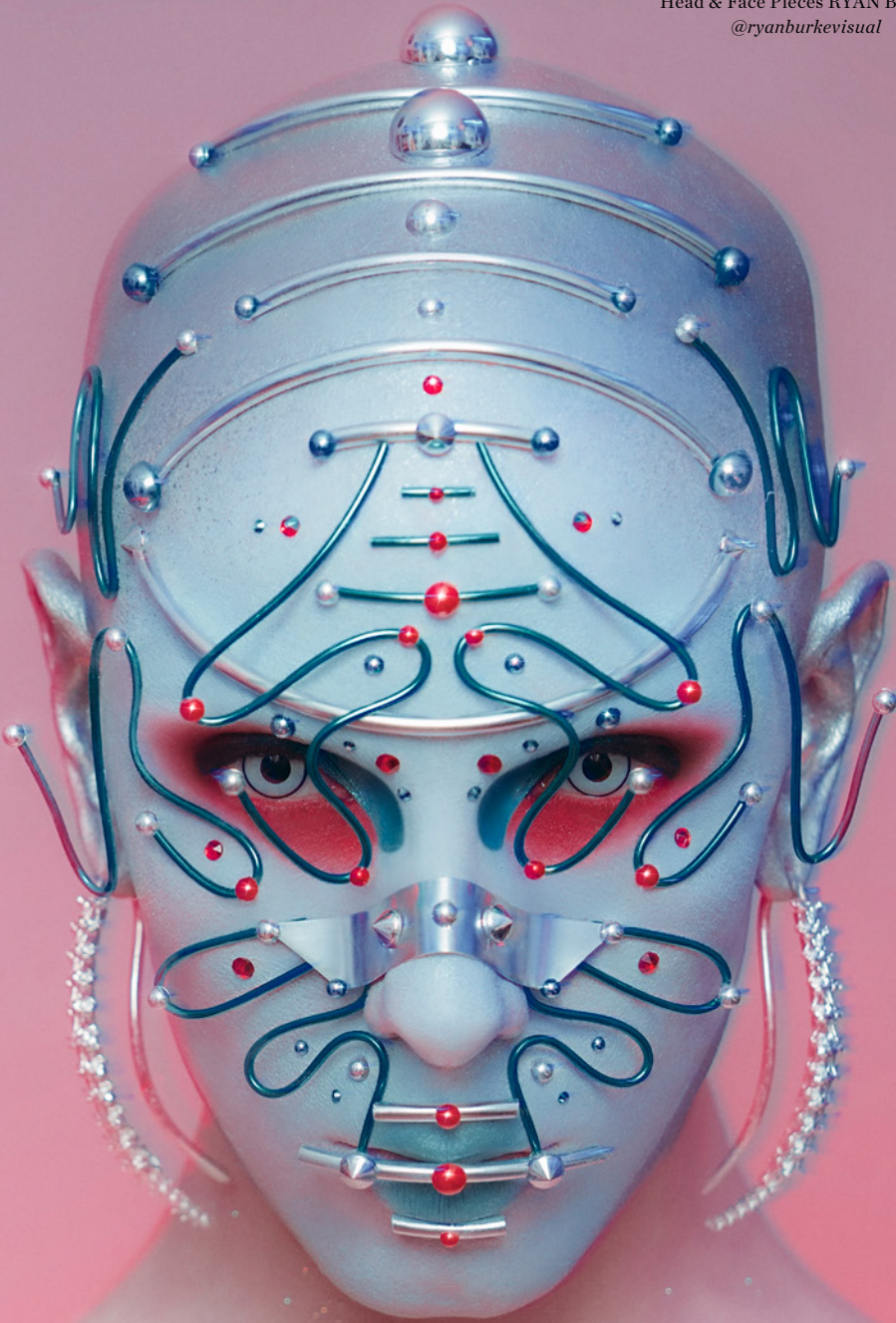
**RYAN BURKE:** I think confidence or lack thereof has been the biggest obstacle. I became a makeup artist and photographer through a series of life events rather than intention. This affected my confidence because I never studied makeup or photography specifically, even though that's what I would get paid to do. In the beginning especially, not feeling credible or trained would make creative endeavors a bit stressful for me. I learned a lot of what I know from just doing things and making mistakes. Overcoming this fear was a matter of practice and forcing myself to do projects I wasn't sure I was able to handle. I've always known that growth takes work and occasionally, failure. The more I grew, the less I found myself failing. While I have less fear, I can't say I'm always confident, but I think it's important as an artist to push yourself to do things that you are a bit unsure of.

**BASIC:** Who or what inspires your creative urges and ideas? Do you think personal emotions play into your creativity?

**RYAN BURKE:** Personal emotions are the basis and inspiration of my creativity. Everything ultimately comes from an emotional place—be it an expression or an escape. I get inspired by the vibe of where I'm going and the mood I'm in. I've never attached myself to one particular "character" design or form because I've always wanted to express different sides of myself based on what I am feeling. The emotion isn't always obvious, but it is there and that is where my creativity stems from.

**BASIC:** Is there anything that you haven't done or created yet that you feel compelled to achieve in the future?

Earrings TAWAPA @tawapa  
Head & Face Pieces RYAN BURKE  
@ryanburkevisual



**RYAN BURKE:** I was actually just talking about this to a friend yesterday and we both think the next step for me would be an entirely digital version of what I do physically. I would like to create a 3D scan of my face and develop my skills as a 3D artist to design makeup and looks in the digital realm. The possibilities are endless. I have been taking courses in graphic design during quarantine and will be moving in this direction over the next couple of years. I also am exploring music as another medium of expression. I would like to create conceptual video work with my own soundtrack.

**BASIC:** If you knew that you had only one

last opportunity to express yourself creatively, what message would you want to convey to your admirers?

**RYAN BURKE:** If I could convey anything it is that beauty is universal and self-expression can connect you to your higher self. Love is essential and self-love is the key to a fulfilling life. This isn't something I've always understood, but as I've developed as an artist and matured as a human, it is something I realized I was seeking and finding within myself. It is truly a magical thing when you find that and I wish the same experience for all people.