

R. J. Kern | Photography Projects

Exploring Ideas of Home, Ancestry, and Place



Kenzi and Hootie, Anoka County Fair, Minnesota (2016)

FOUR PROJECTS:

The Sheep and the Goats

The Unchosen Ones

The Best of the Best

The Last Fair

Biography

R. J. KERN (b. 1978) is an American artist whose work explores ideas of home, ancestry, and the sense of place. He uses the photographic medium in multiple formats, utilizing both natural and artificial light to document the interaction of people, animals, and cultural landscapes.



HIS WORK has been included in group exhibitions at the Zurab Tsereteli Museum of Modern Art (Tbilisi), the National Portrait Gallery (London), and the Yixian International Photo Festival (China), and solo exhibitions at: Griffin Museum of Photography, Plains Art Museum (ND), Masur Museum of Art (LA), and Blanden Art Museum (IA). Kern's work has been shown at galleries including Burnet Fine Art & Advisory (Minneapolis), Klompching Gallery (Brooklyn), Olson-Larsen Galleries (Des Moines), and Veronique Wantz Gallery (Minneapolis).

AWARDS & ACCOLADES include CENTER 2017 Choice Award Winner (Curator's Choice, First Place), 2017; Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize (Finalist), 2017; Critical Mass Top 50, 2018 and 2021; Royal Photographic Society International Photography Exhibition 160 (Silver Medal), 2017; PDN's 30 2018, and six grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board (2016, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2024). Kern was the Commemorative Artist for the 2019 Minnesota State Fair.

KERN'S WORK has been presented in a number of publications, including a feature in *National Geographic* (November 2017). Kern published his first monograph with Kehrer Verlag titled, *The Sheep and the Goats*, awarded one of "The Most Beautiful German Books 2018" by Stiftung Buchkunst and awarded Bronze by the prestigious Deutscher Fotobuchpreis 2018-19. His second monograph, *The Unchosen Ones: Portraits of an American Pastoral* (MW Editions, 2021) was listed as a 2021 Top 10 Favorite Photobook by What You Will Remember.

SELECTED COLLECTIONS holding his work include: Center for Creative Photography (Tucson, AZ), Center for Photography at Woodstock (Woodstock, NY), Fidelity Corporate Art Collection (Boston, MA), General Mills Corporate Collection (Minneapolis, MN), Griffin Museum of Photography (Winchester, MA), Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art (Tarpon Springs, FL), Masur Museum of Art (Monroe, LA), Minneapolis Institute of Art (Minneapolis, MN), Minnesota Historical Society (St. Paul, MN), Museum of Fine Arts (Houston, TX), Museum of Fine Arts (St. Petersburg, FL), Nevada Museum of Art (Reno, NV), North Dakota Museum of Art (Grand Forks, ND), Plains Art Museum (Fargo, ND), and Rourke Art Museum (Moorhead, MN).



The Unchosen Ones,
Solo Exhibition,
Plains Art Museum,
Fargo, North Dakota
(2019-2020)



The Unchosen Ones,
A Community Exhibition
of Photography,
Hubbard County Fair,
Minnesota (2018)

The Sheep and the Goats

The Sheep and the Goats represents two bodies of work, *The Bovidae: Divine Animals* and *Out to Pasture*, in visual conversation. The work calls attention to the cultural landscapes surrounding domesticated animals. *The Bovidae: Divine Animals* looks at animals and environments in Kern's ancestral heritage: Ireland, Germany, Norway, and Iceland. *Out to Pasture* responds as a meditation on rural America from his home state of Minnesota, USA. Together, these projects offer perspective on the meaning of pastoral in contemporary time. Among Kern's influences are landscape painters of the nineteenth century, especially regarding the use of light and composition.

The Sheep and the Goats – Book Excerpt

In R. J. Kern's portrait, the sitter seems to possess wisdom and self-assurance. Maybe it's the sitter's slight tilt of the head, a posture of confidence and certainty. Or it could be the determined glare that stares down the camera lens. Perhaps it is the silvered hair, shot through with patches of white. This sign of age suggests it is wisdom born of experience. Or it could be the calm confidence that is conveyed in his unperturbed stillness, though storm clouds swirl in the distance. This goat is poised and wise. Animals have always been a canvas onto which mankind projects emotions or ideas. Kern's personal examination of his ancestry in Ireland, Germany, Norway, and Iceland resulted in an artistic project in which goats and sheep represent issues of identity and history.

(...)

Kern's evocation of nature as a device to understand his own sense of self draws upon historical precedence: the use of animals as metaphor and the pastoral tradition. Yet the artist's broad concept — his exploration of identity — is firmly grounded in a contemporary context. This tightly knit series of images, which together characterize the author, is common to our age of social media. Kern's aesthetic, however, emphasizes clarity and projects a warm stillness that is a balm to an overstimulated society. This contrast too — the ties to digital media and the rejection of its characteristics — deepens this pastoral project. Yes, it is a photograph of a goat, but it is also more than that. Just as man's relationship with the animal world is multifaceted, so too is Kern's work.



Hazel, Geiranger Fjord, Norway (2013)



Mr. Hofsós, Skagafjardarsýsla, Iceland (2014)



*Dumb and Dumber
Freeborn County, Minnesota, USA (2016)*



Nelly and Mate, Clay County, Minnesota, USA (2016)

The Unchosen Ones

The Unchosen Ones takes place on the sidelines of county fair animal contests in Minnesota in 2016. These county fairs lead up to the Minnesota State Fair, one of the largest and best-attended expositions in the world.

One isn't born a winner or loser, but a chooser. This theme is explored in this series.

As we look at them, they look back, allowing us to think about how we choose winners and the repercussions for the ones not chosen.

The project consists of over 65 portraits made at 10 Minnesota county fairs in 2016. The photographs showcase the subject facing the camera, allowing the viewer to decide what connects and distinguishes these subjects.

With a vantage point straight onto the figures, the direct stance portrayed develops a typology, showcasing individual styles and characteristics. With a serial and systematic approach, the human condition is exposed in real-time.



Rylee and Nelly
Clay County Fair, Minnesota (2016)



Kol and Annabell
Anoka County Fair, Minnesota (2016)

The Unchosen Ones – Book Excerpt

The Unchosen Ones stands, to be sure, as a document of these subjects, and of specific hot summer afternoons in Minnesota; I have no doubt that a hundred years from now viewers of these photographs will marvel at their truth, and greedily consume every fact and detail. This is what documentary photography is intended to do, but the best documentary, as this work is, transcends the specificity of time and place. In the language of actuality, Kern has preserved decisive moments in photography that are also universal human moments.

ALISON NORDSTRÖM | *Independent Scholar, Curator, and Writer*
Cambridge, Massachusetts

“I chose R. J. Kern as the first place winner, a series of posed portraits of children and their non-prize-winning goats. The question of what it means to be a victor certainly had new resonance this year, but for me the issues of winning or losing were far less pressing than the sensitivity of the portraits, both of the children and of the animals (two subjects notoriously difficult to photograph) and most essentially of their relationship to one another. The simple conceit of a uniform backdrop called attention to the act of photographing and also highlighted the differences in scale, attitude, and pose among the sitters, both human and hircine. I found the project beautifully seen and surprisingly tender.”

COREY KELLER | *Curator of Photography*
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art



Solo Exhibition, Burnet Fine Art & Advisory, Wayzata, Minnesota (2018)



Solo Exhibition, Griffin Museum of Photography, Winchester, Massachusetts (2018)



Solo Exhibition, Klompching Gallery, Brooklyn, New York (2018)

The Best of the Best

The Best of the Best records champion animals at the 2018 Minnesota State Fair, one of the most competitive animal contests in the world. Animal breeding, like photography, is an arena of technical and material evolution. This series explores the relationship between the present and the past, drawing parallels between early animal contests at agricultural fairs and the first major exhibition of photography at the 1851 World's Fair in London.

This project documents an event in which 12 pairs of animal species are judged supreme champion — the best of the best. Using a digital camera, the winning exemplars of domesticated animals were photographed then combined with 19th-century salt printing techniques and contemporary inkjet technology into images that emphasize changes in breeds over time and advances in photographic technology. It is science and art; it renders both an objective typology of animal husbandry and commentary on animal contests at this time and place. The hand-crafted portraits reference similarities between the history and development of photography and the advent of animal contests.

As with life, animal breeding, and photography, the contributions of chance remind us that we are not in control. Two champions do not guarantee champion offspring. The unforeseen result of science and chance can be the embodiment of beauty or success. When several animals meet and exceed the standards that judges rely on to guide their decisions, the winner becomes a subjective choice.

The color red is a unifying element and a nod to French photographer Nadar (Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, 1820–1910), who used the color in marketing his work. Historically, the color red has represented life, health, and victory. It also symbolizes a shared characteristic between the animals: the color of blood, whose principal ingredient is salt — an essential element for mammals and birds.

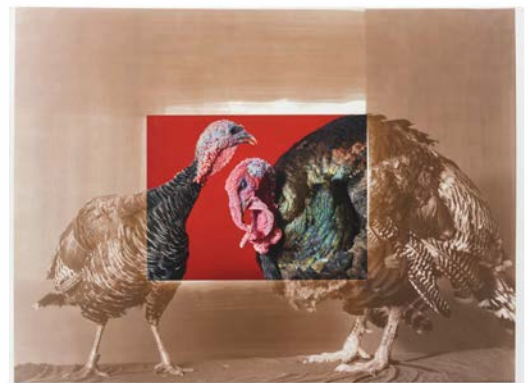
Salt prints, a photographic process popular between 1839–1860, connect to photography's historical roots; printing on them digitally connects to the present. Combining these two printing processes softens photography's particularized quality. The subtle tones of salt printing express mood and emotion, a contrast to the sharpness of a digital print. Subject, process, emotion, science, and chance combine to make both an immediate document and a comment on photography's past, present, and future.



Supreme Champion Rabbit Matching Male/Female Pair
Salt over pigment print, 20 x 24 inches (2019)



Supreme Champion Swine Male/Female Pair
Salt over pigment print, 20 x 24 inches (2019)



Supreme Champion Turkey Male/Female Pair
Salt over pigment print, 20 x 24 inches (2019)



Supreme Champion Goose Male/Female Pair
Salt over pigment print, 20 x 24 inches (2019)



Solo Exhibition, Burnet Fine Art & Advisory, Wayzata, Minnesota (2019)

The Best of the Best – Book Excerpt

Do animals have a claim on history? Is culture expressed in the shape of a beak, girth of an udder or the slope of a snout? With their abbreviated lifespans, do they carry cultural memory in their feathers, fur, and hides? These are the questions R. J. Kern poses in *The Best of the Best*. With twelve pairs of animals — one female, one male — Kern intertwines the history of animal competitions with the history of photography to explore some of humanity's most urgent questions about its relationship to its fellow earthly creatures and their interwoven fates. Kern's intricate prints, which layer salt prints over digital prints, foreground historical inquiry, human intervention, and nature's persistence.

(...)

Kern weaves these together through the warp and weft of sepia and scarlet, matte and glossy, salt and blood paying tribute to the histories of photography and animal competitions while laying a path for the evolution of the one and the preservation of the other.

ANJULI J. LEBOWITZ || Department of Photography
National Gallery of Art || Washington, D.C.



The Collector's Edition of *The Best of the Best*, Installation View, Burnet Fine Art & Advisory

The Last Fair (2021- ongoing)

“If this was the last year of your county fair, what would you miss most?”

With the cancellation of St. Paul Minnesota’s Ramsey County Fair in 2020, I posed this question to visitors I would meet at dozens of other fairs. “The 4-H animal shows” was the common response. I considered how joy is not always fully appreciated until it is gone.

Small agrarian communities in the U.S. are changing, often radically. The 360-acre family farm has grown to over 10,000 acres and have become monocultures, creating a resounding impact on rural America. County fairs are among the casualties. A few generations ago, every farm boasted a variety of livestock and the competition at fairs was fierce. Now, the same county fair might have only two entries for a competition.

The county fair isn’t necessarily the highlight of a kid’s summer the way it used to be. And yet, kids who invest their time in the care of animals embrace life lessons passed down through generations. Although there is evidence that this way of life is disappearing as kids leave the farm, the crisis of climate change and a concern for both sustainability and stewardship of the land point to a path for survival for agricultural practices and traditions. And the county fair may play an important role in shaping the future of American farming.

Inspired by the Dutch painter Pieter Bruegel and the American folk artist Grandma Moses, I employ a large format camera with studio lighting and a high angle of view to showcase the current realities and agrarian practices on display at the remaining country fairs. By embracing the constraints of “in-camera photography,” I intend to show the social and economic spectrum of rural communities, and to raise awareness for the changing face of American pastoral life.



Live Action Role Players, Blue Earth County Fair (2022)



Opichi Drum Corps, Mahnomon County Fair (2023)



County Fair King and Queen, Winona County (2023)



Houston County Fair, Minnesota (2023)



Solo Exhibition, Veronique Wantz Gallery, Minneapolis, Minnesota (2024)



The Unchosen Ones: Deluxe Edition Portfolio (16 x20 inches, Edition of 12)



The Unchosen Ones touring exhibition, Oklahoma State University Museum of Art, Stillwater, Oklahoma (2023)

How to Purchase Artwork

Fine-art prints, artist books, and Collector's Editions are available for acquisition. Contact the artist for details. Collector's Editions include:

The Best of the Best (Edition of 12, starting at \$5,500)



The Unchosen Ones: Deluxe Edition Portfolio (Edition of 12, starting at \$5,500)



The Sheep and the Goats (Edition of 50, starting at \$325)



How to Schedule

R. J. Kern has produced a museum-quality traveling exhibitions available for booking through 2027. He is interested in giving educational lectures, workshops, and helping to organize panel discussions in conjunction with the exhibition and book signings.

To schedule an exhibition, gallery talk, book signing, or educational gathering, please contact R. J. Kern directly.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "R.J. Kern". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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Your support helps sustain on-going artist initiatives including community engagement through local exhibitions, artist talks, and sharing the messages of projects such as *The Unchosen Ones* to communities across the globe.