

COLLECTOR'S EDITION Prospectus

THE BEST  
OF  
THE BEST

R. J. Kern

## INTRODUCTION

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, PhD  
Department of Photographs  
National Gallery of Art  
Washington, DC

(Excerpted from the essay, *Salt of the Earth: R. J. Kern's The Best of the Best*)

## COLOPHON

The COLLECTOR'S EDITION of *The Best of the Best* by R. J. Kern represents the artist's third book project which engages a range of artisans and essayists. This project debuted in a solo exhibition at Burnet Fine Art & Advisory in Wayzata, Minnesota, August 8 - 31, 2019.

The project coincides with the commemorative artwork commissioned for the 2019 Minnesota State Fair. This artist book—illustrated with a classic photographic processing including both hand-coated salt prints and contemporary salt prints over archival pigment prints—marks and celebrates this milestone.

Each COLLECTOR'S EDITION contains a 15-page accordion-fold visual book and print folio. From its 11 x 14 x 3 inch box, the accordion-fold book unfolds into a sequence of photographs and three-dimensional pop-ups. The book includes twelve bound salt prints along with four pop-up salt prints with salt print backgrounds. The book may be opened from either direction and displayed upright in an array of presentation shapes to include a rectangle (similar to barn stalls), a star, or a line. If exhibited in a rectangle form, dimensions are 41.25 x 31 inches. The print folio includes one freestanding salt-over-archival pigment print signed by R. J. Kern; each of these prints is a unique animal pair drawn from an edition of 10.



The salt prints were printed and gold-toned by the artist on Fabriano Bristol+ (250 gsm) paper, waxed with white beeswax and lavender oil. The pop-up elements were constructed and hand-cut by Kyle Olmon with the application of a pH-neutral archival polyvinyl acetate (PVA) glue. Keith Taylor created the book binding, book cradle, and print folio. Each of the pages was made with book board, bound using archival materials and processes. The Dragon EF font by Elsner + Flake was used in the embossing and text. The red canvas backdrop used in the photographic project was painted by Sarah Oliphant using acrylic on canvas prepared with gesso. A cut segment from this canvas appears in the book cradle of the wooden box. Jeff Berg built the walnut and maple spline presentation box and prepared the UV-protecting acrylic glazing with pull tab. The archival pigment prints were printed by Ethan Aaro Jones on Hahnemühle Photo Rag (308 gsm) paper. The salt prints and the salt-over-archival pigment prints were printed by R. J. Kern in Minneapolis, Minnesota.



*The Best of the Best* is an edition of eighteen copies; twelve copies numbered 1-12; two copies noted AP1 and AP2 for the artist; three contributors' copies lettered A, B, C; and one *hors commerce* copy—each signed by the artist and contributors.





## THE BEST OF THE BEST

The Best of the Best is a collection of the most exceptional sheep from the United States. These sheep are the result of years of selective breeding and are known for their unique characteristics and high quality wool. The collection includes a variety of breeds, including Merino, Rambouillet, and Corriedale. Each breed is represented by a photograph and a brief description of its characteristics. The Best of the Best is a testament to the hard work and dedication of the sheep breeders in the United States.

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## DETAILS

- Twelve bound gold-toned salt prints, waxed with white beeswax and lavender oil
- Four pop-up salt prints with salt print backgrounds, waxed with white beeswax and lavender oil
- One freestanding salt over archival pigment print signed by R. J. Kern; each of these prints is a unique animal pair drawn from the edition of ten. Choose from the following: cattle, chickens, dogs, ducks, geese, goats, horses, rabbits, sheep, swine, and turkeys.
- Twelve copies numbered 1 -12 available for sale: one copy per animal pair.
- \$5,500

## CONTRIBUTORS

R. J. Kern, *Artist & Publisher*

Kyle Olmon, *Pop-up Book Artist*

Keith Taylor, *Master Book Binder*

Ethan Aaro Jones, *Master Digital Printer*

Sarah Oliphant, *Master Backdrop Painter*

Jeff Berg, *Master Wood Craftsman*

## ESSAYS

Anjuli J. Lebowitz, Department of Photographs, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

Eric T. Kunsman, Visual Communications Studies, Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, NY

## COLLECTIONS HOLDING THIS BOOK

Francis V. Gorman Rare Art Book Collection, University of Minnesota Library, Minneapolis, MN



*Featuring twelve bound gold-toned salt prints, waxed with white beeswax and lavender oil.*



## TESTIMONIALS

“R. J. Kern bridges the history of photography with the present, and I think he beautifully does that in a way that is so seamless that you feel like you’re looking at something old and new at the same time. When Kern photographs these animals, they become significant portraits, almost like archetypes.”

— Deborah Ultan, Curator, Gorman Rare Art Book Collection, University of Minnesota, “R. J. Kern photographs 'best' animals for Minnesota State Fair” Alicia Eler, *Star Tribune*, August 18, 2019.

“Kern’s utopian ark unites pairs of exemplary farm animals with an unprecedented array of creative innovations. From the exquisitely engineered wooden case (Noah would be so jealous!) and paper pop-up barnyards embraced by a crimson fence adorned with alluring salt prints, to the tour de force coupling of ancient (salt) and modern (inkjet) printing presented under Plexiglas atop the object, *The Best of The Best*, befitting its name, is truly an incomparable achievement.”

—George Slade, Writer, Photography Consultant, *re:photographica*, Minneapolis, Minnesota

## ABOUT THE ARTIST



R. J. Kern (b. 1978) is an American artist whose work explores ideas of home, ancestry, and a sense of place through 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 (Anhui, China), and solo exhibitions at the Griffin Museum of Photography and the Plains Art Museum. Awards and accolades include *PDN's* 30 2018, Critical Mass Top 50 (2018, 2021), CENTER

2017 Choice Award Winner (Curator's Choice, First Place), the 2017 Taylor Wessing Photographic Portrait Prize (Finalist), and three Artist Initiative Grants from the Minnesota State Arts Board (2016, 2018, 2020). 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*.

Collections holding his work include: Center for Creative Photography, Fidelity Corporate Art Collection, Francis V. Gorman Rare Art Book Collection (University of Minnesota Library), General Mills Corporate Collection, Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art, Plains Art Museum, Masur Museum of Art, Minneapolis Institute of Art, Minnesota Historical Society, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, and the Nevada Museum of Art.

## OTHER EDITIONS BY THE ARTIST

Fine-art prints and limited-edition books are available for acquisition. Contact the artist for details.



*The Sheep and the Goats* (2018) by R. J. Kern, essays by Lisa Volpe and George Slade, interview by Stuart Klipper. Kehrer Verlag: Heidelberg. Features signed and number book, limited-edition print (choice of 1 of 2), *National Geographic*, fiber weaving, and relics.

Edition of 50 + 6AP, \$575



*The Unchosen Ones: Portraits of an American Pastoral* (2021), Deluxe Edition Portfolio by R. J. Kern, essay by Alison Nordström. MW Editions: New York. Features 12 limited-edition signed prints, clamshell box, and accordion book featuring QR codes linking to video documentary.

Edition of 12 + 2AP, \$5500

Your support helps sustain on-going artist initiatives including community engagement through exhibitions, artist talks, and workshops. To bring an exhibition to your community and/or schedule a public presentation, contact the artist directly:

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Website: [www.rjkern.com](http://www.rjkern.com)