

REVIEWS

Whitehot Magazine

October 2013

Richard Kern @ Feature Inc

by Tessa Maffucci

Now something of an icon to the devotees of American Apparel and VICE, Kern first built a name for himself in the '80s East Village underground scene by making low-budget, angry shorts as part of the Cinema of Transgression, alongside punk favorites such as Lydia Lunch and Nick Zedd. Kern's films were intended to shock and arouse, tempered with black humor and a distinctly cynical edge. During these early years he also had a brief flirtation with performance art, though he explains away these experiments as a tactic to draw attention to his main work, which by the '90s had become almost exclusively photography.

Kern's most recent series *Medicated, Etc* is now on view at Feature Inc in the Lower East Side. These photographs accumulated over several years of shooting, without the express purpose, at least initially, of exploring this particular theme. Since turning his focus to photography, this has been the way in which his artistic series have tended to develop. While shooting on editorial or commercial projects, Kern will notice a motif that is appealing to him, such as couples or voyeurism, and then actively create images in that vein. This particular series emerged organically as Kern observed that many of his subjects were medicated, specifically those in the US and Canada. Together with the opening of this show, Kern released his most recent book *Contact High*, published by PictureBox, which is a playful collection of naked girls smoking weed.

The images in this exhibition, coupled with Kern's new book, present a diverse view into the familiar questions that are raised around medication and self-medication. Images such as *Dana Smokes* (2010) and *Val Stoned* (2010) have the hazy warmth of complacency, while *Hydroxyzine Pam / Doxepin / Lorazepam / Setraline / Colonazepam* (2011), unsurprisingly, has a clinical feel. Kern has placed these portraits alongside photographs from a series that he did with schoolgirls in side-by-side images, one clothed and one nude. For this exhibition, Kern has repurposed these images by overlaying the nude and clothed photographs to create a double exposure, slightly offset, which nods to the experience of a drug-altered state. He has also produced a twenty-seven-minute-long video where a few of his subjects speak on their use of these pharmaceuticals; the video has a documentary bent that is reminiscent of A&E's *Intervention*, but without the intervention. One girl holds up a battered copy of Jacqueline Susann's *Valley of the Dolls*, another says she's considered going off her meds, but then shrugs and explains that they make her feel like such a baller, so she probably won't.

Kern himself does not live the rock-and-roll lifestyle that his photos may imply and he opts out of any direct social critique with his images, freely admitting that he doesn't recognize most of these drugs by name. While he was surprised by how many of his models were medicated, he doesn't view his photos as a cautionary tale or moral warning, but rather, like all of his works, as portraits where the focus is on the narrative of the sitter, not anything more.

What is there really to say? The images themselves are beautiful and compelling. Perhaps the subject matter is off-putting, even vaguely annoying, but yet it is hard to look away. The images spark storylines, and touch on issues of crafted identity and manufactured beauty, but also have the intoxicating appeal of the pseudo-real.

The New York Photo Review

October 8 to 15, 2013

Richard Kern

Medicated, etc.

by John D. Roberts

It has been almost thirty years since Kern's wild beginnings in Manhattan's East Village. In the company of Lydia Lunch, Nick Zedd, Sonic Youth and Henry Rollins, Kern set out on a quest to offend, exploit, and enlighten the underground film scene. Bathed in blood and bodily fluids, Kern's subjects seemed desperate to seek out the darkest parts of their nature. With the film "Fingered," Kern solidified his place in the artworld by being booed off stage at the 1986 Berlin Film Festival, where he was set to screen before John Waters' Hairspray.

In the years that followed, Kern would come to embrace his role as an art world outcast, exploiting his own sex life by driving it to extremes and then juxtaposing it to ideas of sex presented in modern mainstream cinema of the time. Willing participants would partake in rape fantasies and narrative fictional hardcore snuff films, exploring the realms of sadomasochism, necrophilia and drug abuse. In a movement Nick Zedd would coin "The Cinema of Transgression," Kern and company created works that were passed around quietly in small circles among NYC's Lower East Side, totally unaware that they would one day come to be celebrated for the way in which they pushed the limits of what a modern audience was willing to endure.

That said, thirty years have changed both the artist and the neighborhood that fostered his creativity. Gone are the bombed out blocks, squatters and punk venues of Regan's Manhattan. Seeming to follow suit, the work displayed in the Feature gallery on Allen St. shows almost no evidence of Kern's journey to the bottom of this place decades ago. Gone, too, are the images of gratuitous torture pornography and tremendously irresponsible use of needles during Manhattan's AIDS crisis. As the title of the exhibition would imply, viewers are exposed to an artist sedated.

Keeping things simple with a mere twelve images, paired with a 27 minute documentary titled "Medicated," the presentation here feels minimal, sanitized. Welcoming onlookers to the space are three stoned women from Kern's book "Contact High," which is available for purchase inside and whose images were originally intended to be the showcase of this exhibition. According to the owner and director of Feature Inc., Kern himself expressed a greater interest in showing images from his new project.

Inspired perhaps by the self medication of the subjects found in "Contact High," the video "Medicated," as well as the images that accompany it, focus on ambiguously aged 'girls next door,' and the numerous medications that anchor their existence. Alongside the filmed interviews are four portraits of women from the film, each one taken in the subject's bathroom, surrounded by the clutter of their daily grooming products and holding in their raised hands the prescriptions they are currently taking - the bottles clearly legible. The matter of fact presentation of these women is surprisingly difficult to pin down. The subjects simultaneously read as prescription drug advertisements, American Apparel Billboards, and mug shots. The positioning of the girls with their hands in the air has the subtle effect of making them look as if they've been caught. They are totally exposed: viewers are able to see clearly even what runs through the blood inside of them. We are reminded by the titling of each piece that the girls are identified by the bottles that they are holding.

On the opposite wall hang five portraits of a somewhat different nature. Here Kern has taken two images of each subject – one donning a simple white blouse and one topless – laid one over the other to produce the effect of a slightly off center double exposure. The colors here exist only in mid-tones, with no strong whites or blacks. The effect here would be off putting if it weren't so clearly intentional. Kern's careful hand ensures that this odd tonal manipulation has the effect of blending the two images in a way that makes the two seem to exist in the same space at the same moment. Gazing into the beautiful faces of these women, it becomes hard not to wonder what they carry with them beneath the surface.

One thing that has been maintained in Kern's work over the years is his profound interest in knowing what lies beyond the beautiful facades he captures. Kern is exploring the impossibility of perfection. He begs viewers to question their own less than desirable attributes and forces them to wonder what made them so different from his degenerates to begin with.

Modern Painters

September/October 2008

"Richard Kern" at Feature Inc., NY

by Piper Marshall

Several of Richard Kern's recent photographs are titled after the cut-rate retailers where he purchases the panties he gets his models to pose in: H & M, Target, etc. Tacking the used underwear to the wall just below their photographic representations, the artist simultaneously distances and brings us close to this certain object of desire. In a recent Q & A, Kern postulates that "art collectors, memorabilia collectors and panty-collecting perverts all share a similar desire to own something that has been by a specific person."

The artist attempts to prove this point, presenting us with numerous photographs literally accompanied by used skivvies, and others that expose us to a highly invasive view that can only be touched with the eyes. In *Upskirts (2008)*, Kern places twenty photographs in a grid, each shot from the ground looking directly up the folds of a young woman's skirt. Concentrating on nothing but the thighs and the graphic patterns of the threadbare panties between them – polka dots, plaids, stripes, and hearts (synthetic and cotton) – the artist teases with the tantalizing proximity of his lens, repeatedly staging scenes of unobstructed voyeurism that use the allure of a sexual fetish to eclipse and/or undermine his artistry.

In *Divided Beauty (H & M) (2008)*, Kern places flesh-colored boy shorts and a bralette between two color prints of different models sporting the ensemble. The double portrait blatantly borrows from the pornographic genre. But is it pornography? This two-for-one erotic configuration hints at a certain packaged anonymity, suggesting that anyone can easily slip in and out of the generic pose as well as the mass-market undies that seem to be there for the taking.

"Richard Kern" originally appeared in the December 2008 / January 2009 issue of Modern Painters.

Art Review

October 2008

Richard Kern

Feature Inc., New York City

by Skye Sherwin

Eye candy for the hetero male gaze has been splashed all over art from time immemorial, evidenced in recent years by John Currin's porn paintings or Richard Prince's babes on car bonnets. In the case of photographer Richard Kern we are offered something more direct: through - which co-contemplate pornography's wide embrace: he has done editorial work for top shelf titles like *Juggs* while creating arty-porny series of up-skirt shots and, in what now seems a predictable career move, shoots for high-end fashion magazines such as *Purple*, all of which have been displayed in galleries. One such series is to be shown at New York's Feature Inc. this month: playing (typically) on Peeping Tom fantasies, it 'catches' young women crouched in bushes, panties down, seemingly in the act of relieving themselves. Less arousing than numbly familiar from the standard visual language of youth-oriented fashion-brand campaigns, such images provide ample food for thought, bolstering what Roland Barthes famously observed: that sex is everywhere in America, except in sex.

Artforum

January 2005

Feature Inc.

by John Kelsey

Before becoming known as a photographer, Richard Kern was a director of short death-punk films, pioneering a post-Warholian B-porn aesthetic that made itself at home on Sonic Youth album covers and in East Village basement screening rooms at a time when it was still possible to call such culture “underground.” In the meantime, Kern’s photographs have been published in magazines as various as *Purple* and *Barely Legal*. Kern does porn, art, and also fashion photography, sometimes all in one shooting day, but it’s not in this cross-over potential that the singularity of Kern’s work resides, it’s in the way he strips this multi-tasking down to its hollow core and in how he elaborates his peculiar distance from the labor he performs whenever he picks up a camera and aims it at a posing model.

The nine photographs on view at Feature Inc. all play on pornographic tropes of voyeurism. Kern’s lens peeps through windows and half-open doors to capture glimpses up his models’ skirts or down their blouses, locating panties or nipples. Blurry foreground elements such as doorknobs, potted plants and window glare eroticize the simultaneous proximity and remoteness of the unseen photographer. It’s hard to say whether Kern is referencing “amateur teen” and “up-skirt” porn genres, or if these images were actually taken on the job. I prefer to think that we are looking at up-skirt porn that is referencing itself, that Kern and his female models are conspiring to open up a pose within the pose, cheating an off-the-clock art moment on the porn clock. This new pose and the gaze it plays for may not look immediately different from those of pornography, and the model, photographer, and décor are all the same, but the singularity of the chosen, agreed upon moment seems to tear itself away from its initial context, re-territorializing itself here, in a picture like *Woman undresses* (Chicago), 2004. These are stolen moments, captured on negatives the artist chose not to turn over to his editor.

Unlike Terry Richardson, whose work seems fully invested in the dream of making commercial fashion transgressive, or transgression fashionable, Kern doesn’t pretend that image culture is a non-stop party. And unlike Ryan McGinley, whose photographs seem to document a dream of youth freely exposing itself in moments as innocent as nature, Kern exposes the economics and the artifice of every situation. They make work seem like play, whereas Kern plays at working. The crucial difference, and it’s always sensible in his strangely uptight images, is that a Kern moment is aware of its own non-belonging as either play or work time. In *Office* (NYC), a model posing as an office worker seemingly caught unaware as she squats to retrieve a fallen document, conspires with Kern to re-appropriate the pornographic situation, coolly reproducing it in an image that is closer to the sensibility of Pierre Klossowski than the snapshot neo-realism of wild boy lifestyle photography.

We see nothing, really, in *Up Skirt 1* but the lavender dead end of the model’s panties. We see an image not bothering to break the rules of the genre its title so straightforwardly names, and a hobbyist’s attention

to form and detail. We see Kern showing himself seeing not much, and his model agreeing to show it. A Kern image seems to start from the boredom of looking at a world already photographed in advance, then finds its discrete distance from this boredom and this world. Kern captures nothing but some young, blank flesh, a moment slipped into panties and carefully, soberly returned to its own opacity. There is no simulated joy in this moment, only the joy of simulating it.

NY Times

November 5, 2004

ART IN REVIEW

Richard Kern and Lily van der Stokker

Feature Inc.

by Ken Johnson

These two separate solo shows could be presented under a single title, "Innocence and Experience." While Richard Kern's erotically raw pictures of women border on pornography, Lily van der Stokker's wall paintings project a childlike sweetness.

Though they look as if they were taken by a roving voyeur, Mr. Kern's medium-size, snapshot-style color photographs are staged, using attractive young female models. Subjects include a view up a standing woman's short skirt; a fully dressed woman on a park bench exposing a breast as she bends to adjust a shoe; and a pregnant woman smoking on a back porch wearing nothing but bikini bottoms.

These photographs may strike some people as sexist and others as sexy. Either way they are uncommonly visceral instances of the so-called male gaze.

With their finely coordinated pastel colors, blobby shapes, cartoon flowers, doodle-like lines and cheery words, Ms. van der Stokker's works look like nursery murals. One, consisting mainly of a big amorphous pink shape with a three-dimensional set of painted steps attached where it meets the floor, has a speech bubble announcing, "I am an artwork and I am 3 years old." Another, titled "Old Kind of Good Advice (Happy Childhood)," praises "parents that give children goals that are achievable."

This may sound dopey, but the slyly quirky faux-innocence Ms. van der Stokker has been practicing for more than 10 years is still genuinely charming, both visually and poetically.

Art Press

October 2004

by Richard Leydier

Translation, L-S Torgoff

We know the photos of Richard Kern (born 1954) well, obviously because they've been regularly shown at the Jousse gallery, but especially because of his books, *New York Girls* and *Model Release*, both published by Taschen. Yet this artist has never had a major exhibition in France before. Now that's been rectified with this retrospective organized by the magazine *Uovo* (1) and Jerome Sans. Does this mean that the Palais de Tokyo is finally adopting a new orientation? It's already being bruited about that there doesn't seem to be much difference between these pictures and what [makes] an image interesting. For that they need "good reasons," like modernism, for example. OK, let's find some good reasons. How about composition? How can you not notice the originality of this picture of a young woman with her legs spread wide reduced to a head sitting on a crotch by the angle it was shot from? Or content: how can you not be moved by these young women with a lost look in their eyes, their anxiety reaching its heights with a brunette who's pressing a steak against an eye we're sure is swollen? In the skin flicks nothing is ever out of place; the whole thing is based on an illusion of perfection. There's almost always some disturbing detail in Kern's photos: a girl brushing her teeth, another flossing the first girl's teeth and a third, in a very explicit gesture, doing a deep throat with a gun barrel. But what most makes these photos different from the classical magazine pics is once again the question of desire. The lad mag photos are not really, sexy at all because they always cling entirely to corny stereotypes and never deviate an inch from them, just like icon painters. Kern's photos, like those of Roy Stuart (see art press no. 303) radiate sensuality, overflow with a primitive, animal sexual energy, precisely because they were made by an artist (and not a "porno bureaucrat") who infuses his photos with his fantasies or at least makes us believe he does. Apparently Kern has a thing for open- crotch pantyhose.

Along with the photos you could also see the films the artist made in New York during the 1980s, when he shot the edgiest underground stars of that time, such as Nick Zedd and Lydia Lunch. The footage is funny and well served by remarkable soundtracks by Sonic Youth and Killdozer. Describing these shorts where sex gets mixed with the goriest grand guignol, Kern has written, "For me, making these movies is like dropping a great big smelly turd in the middle of the street, standing back and watching the people marvel at it." One of the most memorable is *My Nightmare*, in which he shows himself lying in bed masturbating while thinking of a model (played by Susan McNamara) with whom he indulges in wild erotic games. As soon as he ejaculates (back to reality!), he quickly wipes his hands on his pants and opens the door to greet the young woman of his fantasies. But things don't go as planned at all. The minute he gropes her behind as she poses for a photo, she slaps him and angrily ends it, storming out the door. Is *My Nightmare* an excellent metaphor for the relationship between the photographer and his model and the fantasies most people imagine going on at porno shoots? Whatever. Kern has chosen just the right profession.

*In its eighth issue the magazine *Uovo* publishes an interview with Kern along with a special section of his most recent photos.

NY Arts

Summer 2002

Richard Kern Gets (Other People) Naked

by Randy D. Gladman

On a recent Saturday afternoon, I found myself standing in front of a series of framed photographs by Richard Kern, writing in my journal notes that seemed more like Penthouse letters than art criticism. "Staring wantonly into the camera lens, Lucy slides her delicate hand into her bikini bottom, daring the viewer to come to her with a glance impregnated with innocence and desire... Now taking a soothing post-coital haul from her Marlboro, the buxom blonde opens her legs to reveal the used condom still protruding from her vagina and the mess her unseen lover has left inside her legs." "Oh my God," I hear gasped behind me. A middle-aged woman had just entered the gallery, looking as small-town as Shelly Long in an infomercial, obviously not aware of what she was about to encounter. I didn't hear the rest of the brief discussion she had with her companion in front of the works, their whispers barely resounding in the small empty room. Embarrassed, they quickly scurried away, clearly fearing for their morality and their souls, but only after glancing at each work with temperate shocked disbelief.

Richard Kern's models pose before his lens in manners most people only ever experience with their most intimate partners. Tucked safely into the backroom of Feature Inc., his newest offering of color photographs achieves the same transcendence of pornography and sensuality expected from this small-town Baptist boy. Treading in the shallow underground waters that flow periodically between art and porn, Kern's images carry the feeling of privacy and intimacy you normally draw only from those home movies or Polaroid/digital pictures of your past sexual partners you keep locked away in a dusty box, somewhere hidden from your current lover. Standing before the beautiful works, a feeling of invasion of someone else's private life smacks of embarrassment. I was reminded of an ugly college party I passed through years ago, watching a fifth generation, grainy copy of the infamous Pamela Anderson/Tommy Lee video. This was a record, albeit pornographic, of a couple in love, a personal memory of their vacation time together. It was never intended to be viewed by anyone other than the two stars / camera operators, and made me feel dirty and wrong watching it with a roomful of howling drunks. My stomach turned with the uncomfortable realization that I was a pervert again, voyeuristically peeking into the private lives of total strangers. And yes - enjoying it.

But unlike unfortunate Pam and Tommy who (apparently) didn't know at the time of filming that they would be the coming attraction to VCR near you, these models knew what they were doing, and appear to be relishing the very exhibitionism of the medium. The artist has hired these women, not simply subjected them to a post-coital photo session, and posed them knowingly and purposefully. These situations are created, not caught.

Digital photography, with its ease of use and lack of laboratory developing, brought private photography to the masses in a scale the Polaroid never achieved, and created home pornographers out of all of us. No longer fearing that Billy the camera geek at the local drugstore foto-mat would file through your snapshots, home pornography has

become a viable and favorite pastime for new lovers and anniversaried pairs trying new spices. (You know what I am talking about, don't you?) Although Kern's works are not digitally manipulated in any way, the actors they depict have the comfort level of trusting lovers and resemble the intimate moments captured for private consumption made possible by home digital photography. Yet, these girls have accepted the artist's camera and perform before it, decidedly challenging the viewers to stare, contorting their bodies and divulging their secrets, clearly aware of the shock value of their revealing openness. Natasha Merritt has taken this performative aspect to a more personal level in her Taschen publication *Digital Diaries* (2000), by placing herself before her camera, laying bare her own, very real sex life with the same shocking earnestness as Kern's actors. Kern, however, has been at this project for many years, and Merritt's images, while more beautiful aesthetically, are clearly derivative of Kern's ability to elevate pornography to a personal level of art while at the same time soiling the pictures with enough dirt to render their scopophilic pleasure absolute.

NY Post

May 17, 2001

Beauty's in the Lens of...Photographer Richard Kern Who Loves New York City Girls

by James Gardner

Richard Kern is hardly a household name, but in pockets of Paris, San Francisco and Berlin, his fame as a photographer surpasses even Robert Mapplethorpe's.

He is most famous in the East Village, where he has lived and worked since the '80s, capturing on film the neighborhood's air of menacing and slightly baroque decrepitude.

The 46-year-old Kern accomplished this not by photographing crumbling row houses but a species of "New York Girls" in a 1995 book of that name.

Now the prestigious German Taschen Books has brought out "Model Release," a sequel to Kern's underground best seller. Several dozen of the images in the book, mostly nudes, go on view this evening at the Feature Inc. gallery in Chelsea.

Challenging every norm of beauty and even pornography, Kern's New York Girls are scruffy, disabused and cynically impertinent. Typically, they study at Parsons or the New School, read Foucault and Bukowski, listen to techno and shave only when they feel like it.

Like many quintessential New Yorkers, Kern comes from somewhere else, specifically, Rocky Mount, N.C.

Kern - who seems to cultivate the look of a clean-shaven, if slightly gangly, adolescent fresh from the sticks - is the product of a solid Baptist upbringing. He comes across as scrupulously polite and respectful. To this day, his mother isn't exactly sure what he does in New York.

Kern had his epiphany one day while cutting class in 10th grade. "I was hitchhiking to a mall 30 miles away when this beat-up old car full of young N.Y.C. glam girls stopped for me. They had weird haircuts, vinyl hot pants and platform shoes. I sat there in the back seat with my mouth hanging open, like the hick I was."

As soon as he could, Kern headed for New York. But it was years before he began photographing his girls.

He made a name for himself as a pioneer of the "cinema of transgression." These short little movies parody film noir, with titles such as "The Evil Cameraman," "You Killed Me First" and "Submit to Me Now." Kern associates them with a darker period of his life, when he was hooked on heroin. He made some influential videos of groups like Marilyn Manson and Sonic Youth before abandoning film altogether.

Kern, who has a fine arts degree, sells his portraits for \$900 to \$2,300. He also peddles some of them to pornographic magazines, including Barely Legal, Finally Legal, Tight and Taboo.

As pornography goes, his subjects are not to everyone's taste - there are no implants, no big hair. One unglamorous young woman brushes her teeth, another flosses, a third stands stupidly with her finger in her nose. There's a moral element to Kern's work. The overwhelming message seems to be that freedom is good, whether it's the freedom of a photographer to expose his obsessions, of a sitter to expose her body or of viewers to indulge their fantasies.

This is the freedom those women in hot pants incarnated for Kern all those years ago. For the kids of small-town America, it's the freedom that has always made New York the center of their desires and the most amazing place in the world.

Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes

2000

Schirmer Books, New York, pages 334-335

By John Rocco, ed. by Richard Kostelanetz

RICHARD KERN (Dec. 20, 1954). The nurse who takes care of Jimmy Stewart in Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window* has a line that goes to the heart of the film viewing experience: "We've become a race of Peeping Toms." Hitchcock's movie about a voyeur who stares out the window at his neighbors has been taken as an allegory of spectatorship itself. The desire to look runs throughout Hitchcock's work and is literalized in *Psycho* when Norman peeps through a hole in the wall at Marion Crane undressing for the shower. We look with Mr. Bates and we take the bait and become implicated in his voyeurism. In the same year as *Psycho*-- 1960 --Michael Powell released the infamous *Peeping Tom*, a film about a filmmaker who literally kills with his camera as he records the action. This fascination with the dark side of looking-- with the dynamics and aesthetics of voyeurism-- is Richard Kern's theme and it runs throughout his films and photography. In many ways, Kern's work is a culmination of self-referential approaches to depicting the artist's relationship to his "subject." And his subject is looking.

The above invocation of mainstream films is important for a discussion of Kern's early work because in many ways his movies are responses to popular film and commercial culture as a whole. Kern has made this relationship clear: "I take what interests me in the movies and put it in a shorter format so I don't get bored. What interests the American public are sex and violence and the seamy side of life." In his effort not to be bored, Kern moved to the Lower East Side and began a series of Super-8 films that eventually became associated with the Cinema of Transgression (*). His first Super-8, *Goodbye 42nd Street* (1983), is indicative of his approach to movie making: the camera moves down the fabled street of vice and takes in store signs and marquees of porno and exploitation movies. Spliced into this movement down the street are scenes of strippers in booths, a man putting a cigarette out on his face (Kern himself-- the Auteur as Ashtray), various killings (a woman turns Buñuel [*] on his head by stabbing her male lover in the eye) and suicides.

Kern's early career was spent making his films-- movies like *Zombie Hunger* (1984) which depicted a group of people shooting up and then vomiting-- and screening them accompanied by outrageous performance pieces that created a Grand Guignol (*) for the Lower East Side. In the tradition of Andy Warhol (*) and John Waters, Kern employs actors from his social world and they reappear throughout his films; some of these denizens of the Kern Super-8 include Lydia Lunch, Clint Ruin (aka Jim Thirlwell), David Wojnarowicz, Lung Lee, Karen Finley (*) and the filmmaker who is credited as the founder and first promoter of the Cinema of Transgression (*), Nick Zedd. What this evolving cast depicted in films such as *The Right Side of My Brain* (1984), *The Manhattan Love Suicides* (1984), *You Killed Me First* (1985), and the glorious dark ride of *Submit to Me* (1985) was nothing short of an assault upon the conventions of filmmaking and spectatorship. *Submit to Me* consists of a series of scenes depicting bondage, violence, sex, and suicide, many of which were suggested to Kern by the actors themselves.

As the underground reflection of Reagan's America, Kern's films embraced the subculture of the Lower East Side and the avant-garde impulse of those on the

fringe of the established art world. However, a split occurred in Kern's career around 1987 when he decided to quit the Lower East Side to remove himself from its drug culture. This split is depicted in *The Evil Cameraman* ('87-'90), an allegory of Kern's evolution as a visual artist. The first part of the film is made up of two segments depicting Kern "arranging a model" in provocative S&M scenarios; the imagery and music is dark and the threat of violence is palpable. Then the title "2 Years Later" appears and we are given two very different segments of a different Kern-- back from his hiatus-- who works with two "models" who do not play into his "control" as photographer. The film ends with a rejected Kern looking into the camera. This new relationship to the women in his films-- playful, puzzling, rejecting the anticipatory action of "pornography"-- colors his later films: *X = Y* (1990), *Nazi* (1991), *Catholic* (1991), *Horoscope* (1991), and *The Bitches* (1992). During this period Kern also shifted his attention to a different visual form.

Although he has continued work on his own films and on music videos, Kern has lately concentrated on photography. His pictures have moved from the gore and "splatter" effects of his early films to a concentration on the women he photographs. The pictures themselves are more fluid than his films: they easily cross over into the world of pornography (he has contributed work to magazines such as *Hustler* and *Barely Legal*.) But what distinguishes Kern's pictures from prosaic porno is that his work is remarkably beautiful and, more importantly, it continues his play with the force of voyeurism. Each of Kern's photographs is a mini-movie, a story the viewer steps into and "sees." This "seeing" of a Kern photo is fascinating because after the viewer takes in the picture he/she must take in the effect of their looking. In his preface to *New York Girls*, Kern describes the feeling he has about taking pictures: "For me, nothing compares to the experience of building an environment with light then adding a living person as an unknown to make a temporal image." The "unknown" here is a Kern model, but it is also the Kern viewer: we are the unknown looker encountering an image and trying to decipher its "story." His pictures tell us we are voyeurs and we are then forced to look at our own looking. Each of Kern's photographs tell a different story-- his entire artistic output is *The Story of His Eye*-- but all of them tell us something he once admitted in an interview: "The best part of anything is watching."