



GALLERIES



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Richard Kern's proud EVOLution No-Wave iconoclast-turned-soft-porn patriarch talks about his classic film oeuvre, kicking drugs and why the revolution will not be Facebooked

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BY DAVID BALZER May 03, 2010 16:05

One of the premier visual stylists of the No-Wave scene in 1980s New York, filmmaker and photographer Richard Kern worked with musicians and performers like Lydia Lunch, Henry Rollins, Kembra Pfahler and Lung Leg, a.k.a. Elizabeth Carr — who, most famously, appeared on the Kern-shot cover for Sonic Youth's 1986 album EVOL.

Kern now photographs full-time, producing pastel-hued, soft-pornographic nudes of nubile young women for publications like VICE, who calls him their "favourite girlie photographer" and hosts a show on their broadband network entitled Shot by Kern. EYE WEEKLY caught up with him for an espresso at the Drake during his brief artist residency at Studio Gallery, which is also currently hosting a from-the-vaults show of his work, including a film series.

What is a good photo to you?

I know it when I see it. It has to be a little bit weird. At the show, there's only one photo you could call "sexy." Most of the stuff is just people standing there, doing things without clothes on. Well, they have panties on or whatever, but it's not like they're adopting sex poses.



It's impossible not to notice the marked shift in style that happened in your work in the early '90s. It's like you became a different person.

It was 1988, around there. It was when I got off drugs.

Everything lightened up quite a bit. The films still had humour, but most of my aggression had lifted.

What's your opinion on the remarkable lifespan those films from the '80s have had?

It's extremely weird! I think it was a really lucky time to be doing them. It was right at the beginning of the video age, and I put them out on video, so people who were looking for something interesting had alternatives — you could see something different.

You're associated with the No Wave and Cinema of Transgression movements. Was making art for you just a by-product of being a listless young person, or was there any intentionality to it?

It's more like a "fuck you" to everybody. That was the big statement. Back then my favourite band was the Sex Pistols: everything was shit; fuck everybody; you're all stupid. And then I stopped drugs and it was like, "Wait, I'm stupid!" Except, people still identify with those films.

You collaborated with Lydia Lunch, and those films [The Right Side of My Brain, Fingered] have dated very well. Would you say she was approaching art-making in the same way? What was your working relationship like?

The reason those films stand out is because of her. She's in them and her personality is all over them. The second one, Fingered, was made in direct response to The Right Side of My Brain, which got bad reviews. People were like, "What is this shit? This is misogynist!" And we were like, "You think that's bad? Wait until you see the next movie." We wanted people going in and expecting a Maya Deren film or something and leaving totally disturbed.

There are a lot of young women now who like and identify with those films.

Yeah. It wasn't that way at the beginning. It was the exact opposite.

Lung Leg has become an underground post-feminist icon. Does that seem strange to you? Do you feel the burden or responsibility of that?

No, I don't. It's just that it seemed like everyone else finally figured out what we thought we were doing. Ideas get into society and mutate and affect people's opinions. Video is really powerful for that kind of stuff.

But did you ever have any kind of feminist intentions in making those films?

My main intention was, "I'll make these films, people will watch them and I'll fuck up their heads." I always thought, this is a Trojan Horse: they think they're coming to see something cool and it's gonna really fuck them up. Just your basic anarchist manifesto.

A lot of your recent photography is notable for its extreme prettiness, softness, exquisiteness.

It's the same stuff; it just doesn't have that darkness in it. And jokes! A lot of jokes. If you watch [my film] Manhattan Love Suicides it has a lot of the same jokes that are in some of the photos. The girl with her head in the toilet, that kind of thing.



Aside from getting clean, does that aesthetic shift have to do with getting more successful, with having more resources at your fingertips?

I pretty much live the exact same lifestyle as I did then. I've had a couple of good years with photography, and I can actually make a living at it, but there aren't that many photographers who get rich. When I got off drugs I was so broke a friend of mine was letting me stay at their house. And the only thing I could afford was black-and-white photos, so that's what I shot.

How has underground culture changed since you started working?

I know underground culture is out there somewhere right now but I don't know what it is. I don't do Facebook or Twitter. I'm on the 'net nonstop but, and it may be a stupid thing to say, but I feel like Facebook is like joining a fraternity. It's just a giant group of people saying, "Hey, let's all do this." The challenge to me now would be to somehow get outside of all of that stuff, where nobody is. All I know is that if there's something you want to do you've just got to do it, all the time. People who are making good art aren't sitting around on Facebook all day.

Why are you so private and exclusive when you do your photography work?

I think a lot of people are surprised when they work with me that it's not so crazy shoot. It has to be quiet. It has to be small. And when I do some something that's commercial and there are a lot of people around, the first thing I say is "Don't talk. If you've got anything to say to me, say it outside." Because I'm just walking around thinking. It's about me and the model.



Do you keep touch with a lot of the models you work with?

Yes, quite a few. I don't hang out with them, but everyone has email accounts. Big shock, though, when I see someone I shot 20 years ago. Big shock when I look in the mirror! Lung Leg, for example: you just think of this 18-year-old girl with this really beautiful face. She doesn't look quite like that any more. She still has the exact same style. But it looks like she's had a hard life.

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