

THE UNCHOSEN ONES

AN EXHIBITION OF PHOTOGRAPHY

BY

R. J. KERN



The Unchosen Ones exhibition, Watermark Art Center, Bemidji, MN, 2023

MUSEUM & GALLERY EXHIBITION PROSPECTUS

“The more time I spend with young people growing up on farms and the more I learn about their plans for their futures, the more enthusiastic I am to use the tools I understand, pixels and light, to carry their stories and experiences to a broader audience.” — R. J. Kern

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Farming can be isolating, but annual gatherings provide a chance to come together, to see what others are doing, and to showcase our own best products. County Fairs have become the venue where both city and farm folk come together and exchange ideas, exhibit their best wares, and engage in friendly competitions. Central to these fairs are livestock competitions. More than 3,200 fairs are held in North America each year. The Unchosen Ones begins 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 of its kind, in the world.

This exhibition celebrates our connections to the land, and honors the agricultural traditions that were carried from the Old World to the New, showing us one of the ways humans understand animals. While this understanding includes commodity, spectacle, trophy, and power, Kern’s photographs also show us a more profound relationship between children and the animals they love.

“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, 2017

The exhibit encompasses a series of portraits of young people posing with the animals they have raised, cared for, and groomed for entry into a best animal competition, with dreams of the glory of moving on to State Fair victory. No victory is shown here, however. These animals and their young owners were not deemed champions; they came in second or third or not at all. Here, on the sidelines of the main events, these disappointed children and their beloved animals illustrate a small backstory, preserving a moment of failure, loss, love, and hope, as only photography can.

Four years later, R. J. Kern re-photographed many of the subjects of the original series. In some cases, the animal and its handler are photographed together again. In other cases, the child has moved on and replaced the animal with some new pursuit; a tractor, a chicken, a fishing pole. Once a series about the love, pride, joy, and disappointment that comes with being passed over, The Unchosen Ones is now a record of the original sitters choosing how they will live the next part of their lives.

A secondary layer to the exhibition continues with additional photography from the artist’s Out to Pasture series, which provides insight into the cultural landscape these animals call “home.” This work explores how we see animals in a place, how we shape that place, and how it shapes us. The pastoral environment not only serves as a backdrop for better understanding the cultural and physical landscape that have shaped this species, but how human behavior is often mirrored in response.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“The Unchosen Ones,” is an interdisciplinary installation of documentary photography showcasing relationships between humans and animals.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

The Unchosen Ones project was published in *National Geographic* magazine (November 2017). The project was awarded CENTER’s Curator’s Choice Award (First Place) by juror Corey Keller, Curator of Photography, SF Museum of Modern Art. The work has been exhibited internationally including the National Portrait Gallery (London, UK), the Griffin Museum of Photography (Boston, USA), the Yixian International Photography Festival (Anhui, China), and the Rokko Photographic Garden (Kobe, Japan). The book, *The Unchosen Ones*, featuring over 65 participants from the project was published in 2018. The project was supported by the Minnesota State Arts Board Artist Initiative Grants (2016, 2018).



Behind-the-scenes at Clay County Fair, 2016



R. J. Kern, photo by Jake Shivery

ABOUT THE ARTIST

R. J. Kern (b. 1978) is based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His work explores ideas of home, ancestry, and a sense of place through the interaction of people, animals, and cultural landscapes. In 2018, Kern published his first monograph with Kehrer Verlag titled, *The Sheep and the Goats*. Public collections holding his work include the Center for Creative Photography, the Griffin Museum of Photography, the Plains Art Museum, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston. He is represented by the Klompching Gallery in New York and Burnet Fine Art in Minnesota.

ESSAYS ABOUT THE WORK

EXCEPTS FROM *THE UNCHOSEN ONES*

“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. Youth is fleeting. Disappointment is inevitable. Love endures. We carry on.”

— **Alison Nordström**, *PhD Independent scholar, curator, and writer*



*Pre-press meeting at National Geographic headquarters, Washington DC.
photo by Giovanni Savino*



Gallery solo exhibition at Central Lakes College in Brainerd, Minnesota.

“No matter what place or award is received, the bond between the exhibitor and their animal is hard to break. The time spent feeding, training, watering, and grooming, along with the discipline to exercise and train their animal to hold its head high or to place its feet, hoping to catch the judge’s eye and win the highest approval. To many of these children, the animals become a friend or a pet. The exhibitors will carry the life skills and memories for a lifetime.”

— **Joe Scapanski**, *Minnesota State Fair Board of Managers*

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 exhibited in a number of notable exhibitions, including the Museum of Modern Art (Tbilisi, Georgia), the National Portrait Gallery (London, UK), the Yixian International Photography Festival (Anhui, China), and solo exhibitions at the Griffin Museum of Photography (Boston, MA) and the Plains Art Museum (Fargo, ND). Awards and accolades include *PDN's* 30 2018, Critical Mass Top 50 (2018 and 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), with his series *The Unchosen Ones* and *Out To Pasture*. 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, Center for Photography at Woodstock, Griffin Museum of Photography, Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art, Francis V. Gorman Rare Art Book Collection (University of Minnesota Library), General Mills Corporate Collection, 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.

Kern resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota with his wife and two kids, ages 5 and 6.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS FOR THIS PROJECT

- 2024
Blanden Art Museum, Fort Dodge, IA
Museum of Culture and Environment, Central Washington University, Ellensburg, WA
University of Arkansas - Pulaski, North Little Rock, AR
Crossroads Carnegie Art Center, Baker City, OR
- 2023
University of Oklahoma Museum of Art, Stillwater, OK
Masur Museum of Art, Monroe, LA
Elkhorn Valley Museum, Norfolk, NE
Living History Farms, Urbandale, IA
Arts Council of Wichita Falls, Wichita Falls, TX
Watermark Art Center, Bemidji, MN
- 2022
Burnet Fine Art & Advisory, Wayzata, MN
- 2020
Thomas-Reuters Gallery, Minneapolis-St Paul International Airport
Watermark Art Center, Bemidji, MN
- 2019
Plains Art Museum, Fargo, ND
- 2018
The Griffin Museum of Photography, Winchester, MA
Burnet Fine Art & Advisory, Wayzata, MN
Klompching Gallery, Brooklyn, NY



The Unchosen Ones exhibition, Watermark Art Center, Bemidji, MN, 2023

PROJECT HISTORY

This project began with preliminary research and testing conducted at the Minnesota State Fair in Sept 2015. In January 2016, the Minnesota State Arts Board awarded a \$10,000 Artist Initiative Grant to support the project. In April 2016, the artist attended a lighting workshop in Los Angeles offered by Felix Kunze, Annie Leibovitz's former lighting assistant. From June - August 2016 the work was created across 10 county fairs in Minnesota. In May 2017, Corey Keller, Curator of Photography at the SF Museum of Modern Art, awarded the project Curator's Choice Award (1st Place) at CENTER. In November 2017, the work was published by *National Geographic*. From November 2017 - February 2018 an image from the series was exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in London. In January 2018, the Minnesota State Arts Board awarded a second \$10,000 Artist Initiative Grant to support a traveling community exhibition traveling to county fairs in the summer of 2018. In May 2018, the series of exhibited at Klompching Gallery in New York and June - Sept 2018 the series of exhibited at Burnet Fine Art & Advisory in Wayzata, MN. The Griffin Museum of Photography featured the work from both series, *The Unchosen Ones* and *Out to Pasture*.



Artist Talk at the Griffin Museum of Photography, Winchester, MA

AUDIENCE

As evidenced by the popularity, the installation has the potential to reach a broad audience, its universal subject matter and unique and unusual methodology offers great potential for the development of educational outreach programming relating to art, science, and psychology.

In conjunction with the installation, panel discussions have been presented at venues with professionals and experts from livestock and agricultural communities. The questions and discussion that followed create thoughtful dialogues regarding the installation's ability to articulate a pictorial access to typology in animal contests and its artistic connections to animal husbandry. As a fundraising opportunity, a similar panel could be planned in your community.



EXHIBITION CONTENTS & OPTIONS

Fee Includes:

Press Kit
Registrar's Packet
Programming Guide
Text Panels
Narrative Labels & QR code stickers to [videos linked here >>](#)
Full Insurance
Installation Instructions
Custom-Designed and Built Crates

Exhibition includes up to 20 color archival pigment prints on fine-art paper which features a matte finish. The exhibition ships in two large boxes, approximate the size of two golf club bags. Prints are shipped rolled in tube with paper in between. Wooden frames are shipped in a box wrapped in foam padding.

Works include an exhibition set (not for sale) of archival pigment prints sized 43 x 53 inches featuring unique wood frames which suspend prints from wall (up to 20 images). Of special uniqueness is the tactile quality of these works and their accessibility to a variety of audiences.



REQUIREMENTS

SIZE: Up to 200 linear feet. Four “large” prints installed takes a minimum of 20 linear feet. For 20 “large” prints installed, approximately 120 - 150 linear feet is recommended.

INSURANCE: The exhibition is fully insured at no additional expense to you, both while installed and during transit.

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS: The installation of each portrait takes approximately 15 minutes per image. Two people are required to safely hang the large portraits suspended in the wooden frames. Standard gallery lighting is suitable. No additional equipment is required to power the exhibition.

BUDGET: 7-week booking period: \$3,750. 10-week booking period: \$4,250

SHIPPING: Exhibitor will be pay flat \$500 shipping fee to cover all shipping expenses for the exhibition.

OFFERINGS: Educational Programming, Book Signing, Artist Talk, Photographic Workshops (all ages), and a series of 30-minute shows (detailed next page).

2023 - 2027 OFFERINGS

R. J. Kern will appear at your venue showcasing his enthusiasm for photography and agriculture. Shows are booked on a first come, first-served basis. R. J. will require electricity and covered shelter to perform his show, preferably in a darkened area for optimal viewer experience (video projector and audio included)

30-minute Shows

1. On Being a *National Geographic* agricultural photographer

Learn what it is like firsthand to create and publish photographs by a National Geographic photographer, showcasing the agricultural roots of Minnesota's county fairs.

2. On Being a Commemorative Artist for the Minnesota State Fair

How do you wrangle 24 Supreme Champion animals to look at the camera? Learn behind-the-scenes stories as told by R. J. Kern, the first photographer commissioned to create the Commemorative Artwork for the Minnesota State Fair, a highlight of *The Best of the Best* in Minnesota agricultural history.

3. The Unchosen Ones: Advice for 4-H Competitors and Life Skills Learned in 4-H

Watch and learn with storytelling by R. J. Kern on life lessons learned from participants in his project, The Unchosen Ones, who showed animals at Minnesota county fairs and did not win. Participants 4-years later offer wisdom learned to others fellow 4-Hers.

4. iPhoneography Tips for Your Award-Winning Photography

Photography means "writing with light," so how can we shape to take our best photographs? Learn tips and tricks on seeing and using light from an award-winning photographer.

5. History of Agricultural Photography 101

Did you know some of the first photographs we see are of prize-winning animals? The birth of photography and animal fairs were mid-19th century experiences both have been shaped by technology over the last 150 years. Learn how animal husbandry has been shaped by photography since 1850.

6. NEW FOR 2023! Historical Photography Demonstrations

Watch and learn how R. J. Kern creates tintype photographs, using the Civil War-era wet plate collodion process. The fairgrounds will be subject to the photograph and a digital copy will be shared with participants.

1-3 Shows

\$350 per show + travel expenses

4-6 Shows

\$325 per show

HOW TO SCHEDULE:

Email R. J. Kern at rj@rjkern.com or call (303) 474-0983

HOW TO PURCHASE BOOKS / PRINTS:

Email R. J. Kern at rj@rjkern.com or call (303) 474-0983

SUPPORT THE PROJECT

Fine-art prints, limited-edition artist books, and COLLECTOR'S EDITIONS are available for sale. Contact the artist for details.

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

To bring an exhibition of images to your community and/or schedule a public presentation, contact the artist directly.



R.J. Kern



R. J. Kern is a fiscal year 2016 & 2018 recipient of the Artist Initiative Grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board. This activity is made possible by the voters of Minnesota through a grant from the Minnesota State Arts Board, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund.



SAMPLE OF YOUTH INTERVIEWS

KENZI AND HOOTIE

Anoka County Fair

What was it like NOT to win grand champion? How did you feel?

“I know I did everything I could to prepare for the show, so I’m ok with not winning grand champion. Judging is partly based on judges opinion and how well the goat is built. Those things I can’t control.”

What advice would you share with other competitors at fairs?

“No matter how much you work with your animal, behavior is one of those elements you can’t always control. I say smile and have a good attitude.”

What life skills have you learned through showing your animals?

“Learning responsibility and the importance for caring for others has been really important.”

How have those skills shaped your life?

“Showing animals has taught me the value of leadership skills in helping others and the importance of teamwork.”

LOUIS AND DUMB
Freeborn County Fair

What was it like NOT to win grand champion? How did you feel?

“I felt fine about not winning. it’s just fun to be at the fair all week. I agreed with the judges decisions.”

What advice would you share with other competitors at fairs?

“Have a positive attitude, learn from your mistakes to do a better job next time, and always look at the judge and smile when showing.”

What life skills have you learned through showing your animals?

“It takes commitment, hard work and patience showing animals. From this experience I have improved my confidence, people skills, and knowledge in animal stewardship.”

How have those skills shaped your life?

“Programs like 4-H offered me opportunities to grow as a person and develop important “people skills” which helps in everyday life.”



Goats and Dogs
Protein Doggy Paw



RYLEE AND NELLY

Clay County Fair

What was it like NOT to win grand champion? How did you feel?

“While I have won grand champion before, and it was a great feeling, winning wasn’t the main focus. I just love showing. All my livestock are grand champs to me, with or without ribbons.”

What advice would you share with other competitors at fairs?

“Always walk into the show ring with a smile and always walk out with a smile. Always have fun and try your hardest. You learn from your animals and other people at the fair, too.”

What life skills have you learned through showing your animals?

“I’ve learned the importance of never giving up, always helping others learn, and the importance of teamwork when working with my animals.”

How have those skills shaped your life?

“It has taught me about the goodness of hard work and how to care for others through love.”