

DIVINE ANIMALS (2023)



R.J. Kerw



“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 to carry their stories and experiences to a broader audience.”

R.J. Keru



Live Action Role Players, Blue Earth County Fair, Minnesota (2022)
archival pigment print mounted on dibond, 40 x 53 inches, Edition of 3 + AP



Opichi Drum performance at Mahnomen County Fair, White Earth Indian Reservation, Minnesota (2022)
archival pigment print mounted on dibond, 40 x 53 inches, Edition of 3 + AP



Winona County Fair King and Queen (2023)
archival pigment print mounted on dibond, 40 x 53 inches, Edition of 3 + AP

DIVINE ANIMALS: THE BOVIDAE

“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.”

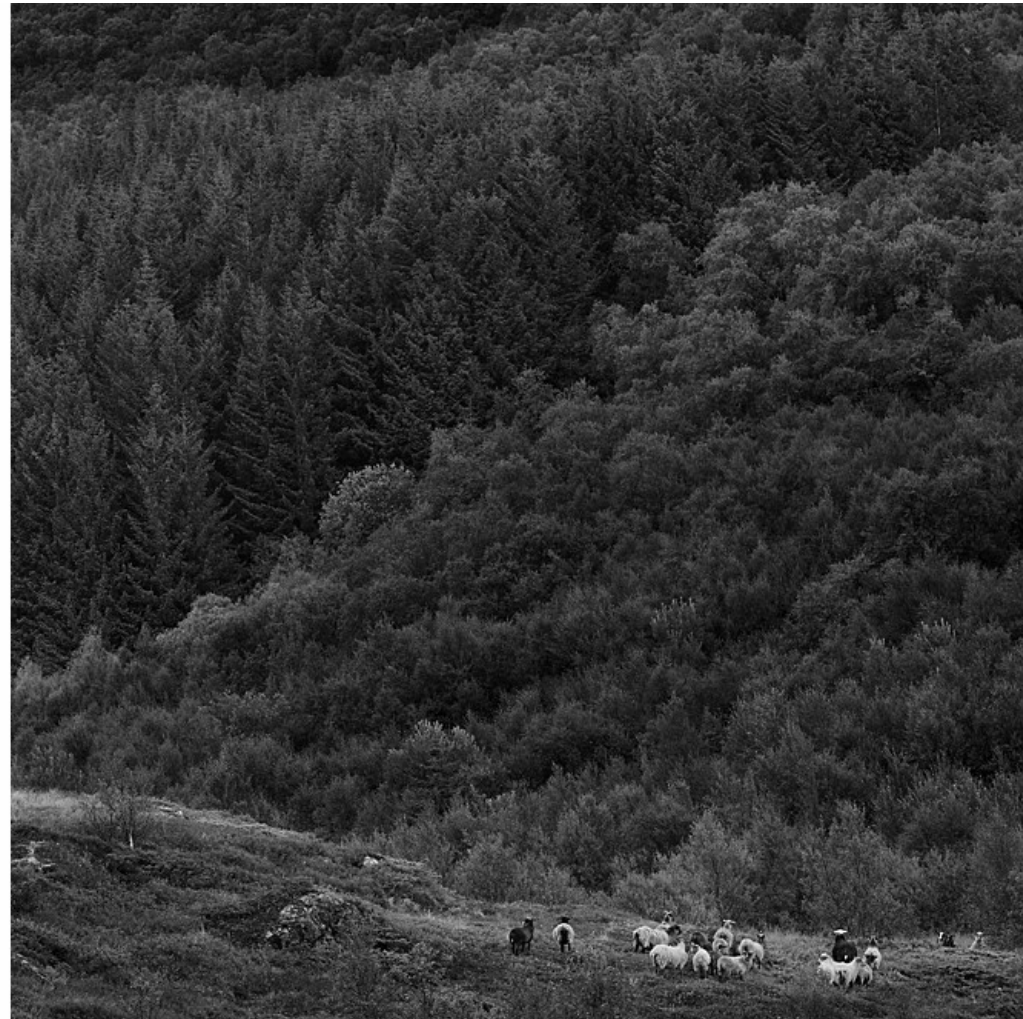
Lisa Volpe

Associate Curator of Photography Museum of Fine Arts, Houston

Featured essay in *The Sheep and the Goats* (Kehrer Verlag, 2018)



Bogstad Pastoral Study I, Norway (2023)
archival pigment print mounted on dibond, 40 x 53 inches, Edition of 3 + AP





Blackjack (2023)
archival pigment print mounted on dibond, 40 x 53 inches, Edition of 3 + AP



Espresso (2023)
archival pigment print mounted on dibond, 40 x 53 inches, Edition of 3 + AP



The Flock that Kept Returning Home, Stamsund, Norway (2023)
archival pigment print mounted on dibond, 40 x 40 inches, Edition of 3 + AP



Drikkehorn, Aimee's Farm, Stamsund, Norway(2023)
archival pigment print floated on board, 27 x 35 inches, Edition of 7 + AP





Drikkehorn, Aimee's Farm, Stamsund, Norway(2023)
archival pigment print floated on board, 27 x 35 inches, Edition of 7 + AP





Work from *Divine Animals: The Bovidae* (installation view)
archival pigment print mounted on sintra with museum glass, 25 x 31 inches, Edition of 7 + AP



“To view R. J. Kern’s photographs is to open a catalogue of bovid ciphers. Whatever and wherever these animals have been, or will be, we meet them here in spaces that we envision for them as “home.” Don’t they seem to be at home? Despite warnings about projecting, it seems unavoidable, even appropriate, to read these crisply white quadrupeds as *tabulae rasae*.

In plain speech, we anthropomorphize the heck out of these creatures. Even-toed ungulates—camels, llamas, deer, pigs, sheep, goats, cattle, and others in the order Artiodactyla—have served humankind for centuries. Perhaps we express our gratitude by crafting elaborate symbolic realms for them to inhabit. Perhaps we idealize and elevate them in order to assuage our collective conscience while we process them as commodities.”

George Slade, Writer, Photography Consultant, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Featured essay in *The Sheep and the Goats* (Kehrer Verlag, 2018)

Sheep Bed, Lofoten Islands, Norway





Valberg Pastoral Study V, Norway



“The abundantly green topographies in his images vary from flatbed pasturage to craggy shorelines and mountains. Kern is comfortable with, even pursuant of, the resemblance his photographs take to paintings. The sublime, the pastoral—these art historical constructs are the photographer’s partners in the luminescent, shallow-focus spaces he cultivates with lens and light.”

George Slade, Writer, Photography Consultant, Minneapolis, Minnesota

Featured essay in *The Sheep and the Goats* (Kehrer Verlag, 2018)

Spare Time Club (Søndre Aas farm)

Next page: *Bogstad Pastoral Study II* and *Copper and Ginger, Bogstad Manor*







Bishop Fjord Pastoral Study III

Where the Reindeer Nap, Narvik





Olaf's Old Home, Strønstad

ABOUT



R. J. Kern (b. 1978) is an American artist whose work investigates ideas of home, ancestry, and a sense of place. His portraits focus on intimate, interdependent relationships of people, animals, and landscape as a means of exploring how ancestry shapes identity and how myth intertwines with personal history. His camera has led him from an inquiry into his lineage in the farming communities of Scandinavia and Ireland to the examination of similar communities near his home in Minnesota. Increasingly, his attention has been captured by the next generation of young people, who may or may not be the stewards of rural communities and economies in the future.

Inspired by master landscape painters of the 19th-century, Kern embraces the heightened expressivity of natural and artificial lighting techniques. To draw sharper connections between traditional and modern farming routines, he adopts both historical and current photographic processes. While illuminating the ephemeral beauty of youth, Kern probes the current realities of agrarian practices, aspiring to enhance awareness and interest in the changing face of American pastoral life.

BIOGRAPHY

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), among others, and in solo exhibitions at the Griffin Museum of Photography (Winchester, MA) and the Plains Art Museum (Fargo). Kern's work has been shown at galleries including Afterimage Gallery (Dallas), Burnet Fine Art & Advisory (Minneapolis), Klompching Gallery (Brooklyn), Olson-Larsen Galleries (Des Moines) and Veronique Wantz Gallery (Minneapolis).

Awards and 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, three Artist Initiative Grants (2016, 2018, 2020) and two Creative Support for Individuals Grants (2021, 2022) from the Minnesota State Arts Board. 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), Oklahoma State University Museum of Art (Stillwater, OK), and Plains Art Museum (Fargo, ND).

R.J. Kern

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