On not labelling yourself

Photographer and filmmaker Richard Kern discusses finding a form, the practical reasons for not identifying as one type of artist, and keeping your work in the honeymoon phase.

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As told to J. Bennett, 2733 words.

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Do you consider yourself an artist?

I just consider myself a photographer, I guess. To me, an artist is someone who sits at an easel and paints. But who am I to judge? I do know that a lot of people I see on Instagram are not artists. When they say artist, it's like, "Hey, I just want to say I'm stupid." Real artists, they're not going to say it. They're not going to label themselves. Because who wants to have a label anyway?

Your early films were considered part of the Cinema of Transgression movement. Was that useful, or did you not like having your work lumped in with that of others?

Oh, I was happy to be in there. But the whole Cinema of Transgression thing was something that Nick Zedd came up with. Me and Nick hung out all the time, and he wrote an article for a film magazine, under a pseudonym, describing us as this movement. And he wrote a manifesto called "The Cinema of Transgression." It was all his idea. He said, "If we have a label, everybody will remember it and history will call us that." And he was right, man. He was so right. I mean, they teach Cinema of Transgression classes in school. It's really funny. But it was mainly three or four of us just doing stuff.

When did you figure out that you wanted to make films and take photos?

That was when I was a kid. I went to art school, by the way. I studied art. When I was a kid, my father was a photographer for a small-town newspaper. He was the editor of the newspaper, too. It was like a three-man operation. We're talking in the '50s. He had a teletype machine, and I remember seeing the moon landing pictures come over the teletype. That was so fascinating.

The whole process was pretty fascinating. I had a Kodak 110, one of those little cameras. I would make model cars and make smoke out of cotton balls and prop them up so they looked like they were doing wheelies. I'd take photos of those and send them into these model car mags to see if I could win a prize, but I never did.

When I was in my teens, my father loaned me a camera, and I would just take it around with me. This still holds true today. We're going to take some pictures later. We have something to do today. We're going to have fun. We have a purpose. We're going to do something. It was always a reason to do something. That holds true to this minute for me. We're not going to just sit around and look at Instagram. We're going to go and actually do something. And that holds true for playing a guitar. It holds true for painting a picture. In that sense, everybody is an artist that does stuff like that.

What did you get out of art school?

It was a good experience. Like I say, I grew up in a small town. Long before the internet. *Rolling Stone* was about the most counterculture thing that we had. College was, for me, mainly a way to get out of going to Vietnam—but I was really glad that I did go, because it just opened my mind up. I feel like these days, kids' minds get opened up a lot faster because of the internet. They don't necessarily need to go to college.

I'd taken a couple art classes in high school, and it was great, because you could skip that class. And the teacher didn't care because he was cool. But in college, at first I studied philosophy. I had no idea what I was doing there. I studied philosophy because I thought that was cool. I was doing everything based on what I thought was cool. I studied philosophy, and I thought, "Oh, yeah. Existentialism. French people." Stuff like that.

But then art class in college? I just couldn't believe that it was a subject where you could make things and get graded on it, so I got really into it. I was really influenced by Chris Burden at the time. He was just getting started, and he was doing all this crazy shit. I thought, "Wow, this is great. This guy is practically killing himself over and over and getting attention for it."

Anyway, I just liked the whole idea. I liked that you could just kind of explore things you wanted to bring into existence, and that can be a subject. When you're in an art school, at least back then, one thing they teach you is to document everything. And for that, the camera came in really handy. I bought my first camera while I was in school—an Olympus LM1. It was the first small camera. If you had a big army coat, it would fit in your pocket. You could carry it around. That was a big deal for me to get that camera.

You've been taking photos and making films for decades now. Is there an underlying philosophy or through-line that connects your work?

Well, there's definitely this kind of creepiness. It doesn't go all the way back, I guess, because I was making sculpture in school for a while. But even in school, I was doing these kind of "fuck you" pieces. I had a teacher on the first day of class and he did a slideshow. He'd show us a piece of art and he'd go, "Is this good art?" People would say yes, and he'd go, "No, this isn't good art." Then he'd show another one and say, "Is this good art?" People would say no, and he'd go, "Yes, this is good art."

So I took two photos, a modern sculpture and some classical thing, and I walked around and did a poll in the college town—asking if it was good art. This is UNC Chapel Hill. I did the poll, and then I presented it as an art piece in his class. And the guy got so pissed off. He knew exactly what I was doing. I did a lot of stuff like that. Later, I'd show at a gallery in New York that would encourage me to piss people off. The guy would say, "Do whatever you want. You're the type that bugs people. That's a good thing." But that was always kind of a motive from the very, very beginning.

The creepiness factor of your photos that you mentioned earlier—you've definitely toned that down in recent years. Why is that?

Oh, it's definitely toned down. When the age difference between me and the person I'm shooting gets wider and wider, then it just gets creepier and creepier. I remember around 2009 or '10, I'd do an interview and I would almost apologize in advance, especially if it was a woman: "Yes, I know. I'm very old, and it's kind of creepy." But it's also a cheap trick. It's a cheap trick to be shooting pretty young people. Pretty by my standards, which is almost anyone—especially if someone's young. It's almost impossible for them to look unattractive, boys or girls. So that, right off the bat, is a cheap trick.

Because you're playing to people's sexual desires?

I think about this a lot. Most people project their desires. Okay, I'm going to use the term "artists." Artists will paint their desires or project their desires onto some project. Photographers do it all the time. At one point, I thought it would be a funny way to kill myself if I could flush myself down the toilet. Instead, I got

this model. I said, “Can you stand on your head in a toilet?” She told me she was a gymnast, and then she did it—and I just shot it. So you kind of act out stuff, using someone else.

Okay, so you’re an older man and the models you shoot are young girls. When you say that becomes creepier, you mean for the viewer, right? Or is it creepy for you?

To the viewer, yeah. To me, it’s like Matthew McConaughey in that movie.

***Dazed and Confused*. “I keep getting older, they stay the same age.”**

Yeah. Except I’m not messing with them. I’m using them as subject matter. Traditionally, it’s been a common practice forever: Painters painting models, photographers shooting women—whatever. It just became a problem recently. But from what it seems to me, that’s kind of turning back around again.

But I should say that the stuff I do, it has so many different periods. This period of shooting young, naked models is about a 15-year part of it. I really got sidetracked into it. At one point, I got sidetracked into shooting porn. I shot porn for…not porn movies, but for girlie mags.

You shot for *Hustler* for a while.

Yeah, I shot for those for a few years. And I’ll have to remind everyone: Robert Mapplethorpe did that. And Jack Kerouac wrote for those magazines. It’s just a way to make money. I had a gallery that said, “We can’t really show you anymore, because you’re a fashion photographer now.” I’m like, “What?” All that shit’s mixed up.

From what I can gather, you kind of fell into shooting naked women and it became your calling card. But it wasn’t something you sought out, right?

Here’s what happened: I got off heroin around 1988. At the time, I was so broke. I was working as a handyman. All I could afford to do was take black-and-white photos. I had all these friends, and I said, “Hey, can I take photos of you?” And they started being naked photos. So it was like a way to be kind of intimate with someone without being intimate. There’s a big space between you: They’re over there, and I’m over there. And they’re doing their thing, whatever their motives are, and I’m doing my thing, whatever my motives are. It was just a fun way to start, and I couldn’t believe I could do it.

As you mentioned, you shot porn for a few years. What did you get out of that experience?

Well, I should say how I got into that. I was doing music videos—I’d done Cop Shoot Cop and Marilyn Manson and some Sonic Youth stuff. The most I ever made on one was $3,000 for a month’s work. Usually, I’d make 500 bucks if I was lucky—for all this work. Then Allan MacDonell, who has been the editor of *Hustler*, the executive editor of all those mags, he called me and said, “Hey, we’re starting a new magazine.” He said, “We’ll give you 2,000 bucks for ten photos. Send all you want.” And I was like, “Holy shit, this is so much easier than doing music videos!” That’s how I got into it.

Are you thinking about the audience at all when you’re shooting your own stuff?

Well, I’ve put a lot of dancing videos on Instagram, for example. Of course, the first few dancing videos I did, I noticed people liked them, and they looked really good to me. This was probably five or six years ago. So I’m thinking, “Will this look good?” But I’m not really thinking, “Will this look good to the audience?” I’m just thinking, “Will this look good, whatever this setup is?”

So I guess I’m not thinking too much for the audience. I know what I can sell books of. I still shoot girls smoking pot because I love that subject matter. I’ve done two books, and I’ll probably just keep on doing them. So in that sense, I’m thinking of the audience. But—here I go with Instagram again—if I put a photo on Instagram, I try to make sure there’s someone smiling or something, so it’s not so…I don’t know. A lot of the photos I pick

are confrontational. I'm shooting them from the perspective of, "I wish I could approach her and talk to her, but I can't." It's like that movie, *She's Out Of My League*.

Are you talking about the photos you've done of women holding guns?

Well, that was a very early incarnation of that, but I realized I don't have to have a woman holding a gun to make her look threatening. I mean, just their eyes can do it. That's all it takes—eyeballs and the look on their face. And if you look through my photos, almost every single person has a similar attitude. I mean, that's what I'm looking for when I'm doing it.

What kind of direction do you give them? Or is that a trade secret?

There's no trade secrets here. It's all luck. I'm just setting up the lights and I'm looking at the background. Sometimes the model will say, "Am I doing okay? And I'll say, "I'm not looking at you—I'm looking at the background, trying to keep the lines straight." But I'm just shooting and hoping for that moment. A lot of times, I know if I put them in this position and this place, I will get that look at some point—usually pretty fast, within 30 shots. The marvel of digital is you can shoot 50 shots and hope to get that look with no problem, in three minutes.

The only other direction I would have is, "It looks like you're posing. Can you stop, please?" But it's funny when you edit because the professional models have about five faces that they do. There's the first face, the second face, third face, fourth face, fifth face—and they cycle through. It's interesting, but it also means you don't have to work as hard because you can cycle through the faces on the couch. Then cycle through in the bathroom. It's really efficient. They know exactly what they look like and how to make it look in a photo.

As someone who has taken many photos of naked or partially clothed women, how do you see your role in the concept of "the male gaze"?

Well, you know exactly what I like to look at, that's for sure, just by looking at the photos. But it's something I can't help. Sometimes I walk around outside and just take photos of people on the street. It's like collecting friends, except they're not my friends. I mean, I'm here in Florida living by myself. I've got a couple of friends, but a lot of the time I'm by myself. When I go out and take photos, it's like I'm making friends. I'm not, really, though—I'm just collecting photos of them.

But there's always this yearning. There's always, "I wish upon a star"—that kind of thing. It has to do with the mystery of it. When you first get in a relationship, everything is new and exciting and serious, because you don't really know everything about the other person. That's the honeymoon phase. In the photos, I'm even a little before the honeymoon phase, where I'm just seeing them for the first time, and I don't know anything about them.

So you try to stay in the honeymoon phase—or close to it?

I like to be there, yeah. A friend was telling me about this poet—I can't remember the poet's name, which is unfortunate—but he was an older guy and he was talking about how he has these five-minute romances every day. He's walking around, he sees someone, and he just falls in love with them instantly—and then walks right past them. I don't know if other people do this, but I do it all the time. In any room, the first thing I do is find someone I like to look at. And if it's something like a class or a regular meeting, looking at that person is something to look forward to. It's funny to have a life driven by yearning.

Richard Kern recommends:

The Three-Body Problem by Liu Cixin

Right now wrong then, directed by. Sang-soo Hong

Rules of Attraction by Bret Easton Ellis

Nelly and Mr. Arnaud, dir. Claude Sautet

Photographs and video projects by Rineke Dijkstra

Name

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