

PORTFOLIO

GIRL
FRIEND
BOY
FRIEND

RICHARD KERN

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“I have to remind myself to shoot some random photos of the model lying around looking pretty when shooting or everything comes out looking static.”

Girl Friend Boy Friend, the latest monograph by renowned photographer and filmmaker Richard Kern, showcases his talent as a portraitist, and his stylish flair as a uniquely attuned cultural figure.

Kern, the much sought after photographer of young women and men who exude vivid hipster cred, as well as a distinctive naturalistic beauty that transcends simplistic categories, and reveals how certain strains of youth culture look in this era. Kern's penchant for capturing unadorned yet magnetic subjects has been influential over several decades, and his vision has been so prevalent, that one can take for granted how instrumental his photography has been in representing and defining alternative taste, and the particular ways young people express their identity, and identification with music and fashion culture.

Kern recently spoke with George Pitts where they discussed *Girl Friend Boy Friend*, and his terse, yet assured manner of talking about his work.

GP: GEORGE PITTS
RK: RICHARD KERN

GP: Your lighting and choice of colour in this series is so particular. Do you think through the lighting in advance for each subject; or do you tend to

adjust the colors, and the visual tone on set, then make minute decisions in contrast with how each girl and boy looks?

RK: I came to the project with a lot of colour ideas and combinations already in mind but adjusted and selected what I wanted to use based on the subject. We shot over two nights — the studio needed to be very dark so I could see what I was doing with the modeling lights before we shot. This was all done with strobes. Back in the 90s I would do this kind of colour photo with hot lights.

GP: How did you go about casting for this book? The young men and women are listed as "Models". Are they actual couples?

RK: The project was proposed to me by Shizen Books creative director Yoko Okutsu. Shizen is a New York / Tokyo based Hair salon that also produces book projects with photographers they are friends with. They've done books with Tim Barber, Kathy Lo and others. This is my second book for them. For this project, we pulled models from their

clients and models I've worked with. They are all boyfriends and girlfriends but not of each other. The title "*Girl Friend Boy Friend*" came from the book designer Peter Miles. The look of this book, the design, the concept, etc. was very much a collaboration among everyone involved. I just played with some gels and worked the camera.

GP: Among your many pictures, and projects, you alternate between studio and location photographs. How do you determine which setting to use? Is it a pleasurable hassle to sort out where to do certain shoots?

RK: The location is as important as the models. I have plenty of models but limited access to locations. I prefer to shoot people in their own environments. Since this project was studio based, it was very easy.

GP: Your straight forward frontal representation of each person is one of the styles you're known for; you capture attitude, style, often unconventional beauty, androgyny, and a variety of expressions that suggest sweetness and darkness. In your direction, did you coax certain qualities out of people to meet the theme of your book, or did you take a more random approach in doing the portraits for *Girl Friend Boy Friend*?

RK: For this book I had a set number of suggestions like "look up, look over there, smile," etc. so I could have some movement to shoot between. Also I had to move the models into and out of the light slightly to get the shadows etc. I wanted. I shot maybe 20 — 30 frames for each person. For this kind of shoot, it's best to keep it simple. The models do all the work.

GP: Was this project on your mind for a while; and will you continue with these gender contrasts indefinitely?

RK: I've been doing a few colour shoots like this over the last few years. Some were also gender based (one for VICE was called "*GENDER BENDER*" — girls as guys and guys as girls). These projects usually are proposed to me by people that have always been into my old lighting from the "NEW YORK GIRLS" period in the 90s and want to adapt it to something they need. I recently did this same kind of thing for Purple that they called Masculine Feminine. Until you mentioned it I didn't make the connection to gender-based shoots. I guess other people did.

GP: Do you still use "found" pictures as references for your location photographs, such as in *Looker*? And do you ever reference "found" pictures for portraits like these?

RK: I don't use any reference for portraits. Portraits are so easy — if you put a camera close to someone's face, it's pretty hard not to make something interesting to look at if you have a little bit of style going. These days I do screenshots of Instagram posts that I find interesting for references or ideas. I also occasionally pull images from advertising. I was working on one project in which I copied advertising images of women wearing watches or holding handbags except I did it very badly with rough looking women.

GP: Would you say that you're more concept-driven in your present work? Or do concepts and project ideas emerge only after shooting a certain range of people over time?

RK: I'm more concept-based at the moment. I have to remind myself to shoot some random photos of the model lying around looking pretty when I'm shooting or everything comes out looking static. I'm much more interested in presenting something pretty bland but a lot of people tell me they like my stuff because they find beauty in the casual shots. Lately, I've been doing a lot of video interviews to go with the photos.

GP: When / Why did you become interested in capturing "something pretty bland"? Your deliberate exploration of this quality strikes me as an interesting idea.

RK: When I said bland I guess I meant blank. If you look at the models' faces in my photographs they almost always have the exact same expression on their face. That's not so much the case with this set of photographs. But, whenever I do a series for my personal work everyone looks blank.

GP: Do you want to discuss or mention any project work in progress?

RK: Right now, I am re-editing my first book, *New York Girls*, for Taschen, for a 20th anniversary edition that will come out in the fall. This version will have lots of outtakes from the original shoots and will be a much larger book. When the book comes out I will have a show at Marlborough gallery here in New York at the end of the year. I'm also working on a lot of different video projects that I hope to complete by the end of the year.

GP: With your video work, are you returning at all to the kind of short films you made in the 80s-90s; or are you more committed to the documentary studies done for VICE, and the insert disc from *Action* (Taschen Books)?

RK: I'm working on a lot of different style movies these days. There are documentaries that go with the photos like the movie *Medicated* goes with the photos I took for the Medicated series and there's some movies similar to the old ones you referred to from the 80s and 90s; and there's some random abstract ones like the ones on the desk: extra shots by Kern and extra action, two sets of short movies that accompanied books that Taschen put out. I've also been shooting a feature off and on for the last few months. Who knows if that will ever come out.

GP: The early films, *Submit To Me Now*, *Fingered*, *The Right Side of My Brain*, featured acting performances. Is it more demanding to direct your performers in the narrative films as opposed to the later documentary work?

RK: In the documentary films, the people are just talking and being themselves. So maybe it's more demanding directing performers in a narrative film. Again, just like with the photos, finding places to shoot and setting up the logistics of getting something done is probably the most demanding thing.

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Richard Kern
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