

Action man

Richard Kern's work has been published as both art and pornography but, finds Diane Smyth, he's made a career out of doing just what he wants

There's something for everyone in Richard Kern's latest publication, *Action*, in the sense that there's something to offend pretty much everyone. Generic T&A that looks like it comes straight from an adult magazine? Check (and it does). Scenes of bondage and hints of sexual violence? Check. The fetishisation of urination and feet? Check. A woman with the head of a Ken doll inserted into her vagina? Check, bizarrely enough.

It's hard to imagine this book keeping anyone altogether happy. Fans of adult magazines might not go wild for a grungy photograph of a girl with her fist in her mouth. But equally, fans of *Vice Magazine*-style visual gags might not get off on pouting women with fake tans and fake nails. It seems that Kern, one time punk and original contributor to the Cinema of Transgression in 1980s New York, still can't quite

bear to play by anyone's rules.

It makes for an unsettling publication. Take the Ken doll image, for example. It's so graphic that the *BJP* can't publish it but, briefly, it's got the Ken doll and the woman, the woman is dressed in fairly typical black lace underwear, stockings and high heels, and she's been shot in what looks like someone's, possibly her own, living room. The image is a bit *Readers' Wives*, but too well shot for that, and it's a bit typically 'glamour', but much too weird for that.

And the mismatches don't end there. This image is now included in a hard-back art book, but it was originally shot for an adult title, *Leg Show*. A long-term fetish magazine, *Leg Show* was nevertheless edited by a woman at the time, Dian Hanson, who took an unusually cerebral approach to porn. The idea for the shoot came from her and, far

from being born of the idea that pornography belittles women, was inspired by fantasies of their power.

'She said: 'There are all these little guys fantasising about these big women, let's really do it. Let's show a guy being engulfed'.

'I was a punk in the 1980s in New York when I did the Cinema of Transgression and I guess the work I do now is still transgressive to someone,' Kern continues. 'The Transgression stuff was totally different, but in a way I think I was trying to do something similar in a lot of it. I was trying to make a joke.'

Art school

Perhaps the weirdest thing about *Action*, though, is the fact that Kern himself doesn't seem too comfortable with certain aspects of it. 'I have a hard time looking at a lot of the images because I shot them for porn,' he says.

'It's hard to take them out of that world and look at them just as photographs. There aren't tons of jokes in this book. Taschen didn't want to show the jokes.'

Kern was born in North Carolina in 1954 and, inspired by his newspaper-editor father, got into photography, and then art school. He moved to New York, where he still lives, in 1979, producing the series of short bloody films that became associated with the Cinema of Transgression, and shooting the occasional music video for artists such as Sonic Youth and Marilyn Manson.

He switched to photography full time in the 1990s, and has published seven photography books. In the last few years he has shot fashion and editorial for magazines such as *i-D*, *Nylon* and *Spoon*, but from 1996 to 2002 he shot nearly exclusively for adult magazines. Many of the photographs in *Action* are from

that period – picked out by Hanson, who now works full time at Taschen. Kern hasn't shot porn for two years though, which perhaps explains some of his ambivalence.

'She was saying "OK, this is going to be a sexy book",' he recalls. 'About 75% of this stuff was shot just to make money. I see shots and just think "They never made it to another book". With sex magazines you have almost a formula, shoot this, shoot that, and you can get it down pat. Once I got it I could do three shoots in a day, and pull in serious money.'

Spontaneous

But, he says, *Action* also includes 'a lot of nice shots', taken for himself rather than for the money. While working on porn

shoots, he often tried to get images for himself, many of which weren't suitable for the adult magazines. The photograph of a woman with her fist in her mouth, for example, was shot when an adult magazine model volunteered the fact she could do it. 'I said "Oh really? Wow, go ahead",' he says. 'This isn't an image for a sex mag.'

Some of his other more eccentric shots have come about in similar ways. A photograph of woman with a gun in her mouth, for example (not included in *Action*), happened spontaneously when the model found a gun in the apartment in which they were shooting. An image of a woman with a bloody nose, meanwhile, was taken in a shoot inspired by spurious excuses for topless shots.

This image caused considerable offence when it was exhibited at London's Institute of Contemporary Art four years ago, which Kern says took him by surprise. 'I thought the show was funny and well rounded, so when I saw the reviews I was shocked,' he says. 'It's my own blindness to my own stuff.'

'One critic wrote all this stuff about my photograph of a woman with a bloody nose, saying that's my fantasy and I was thinking "Wow, that never even occurred to me",' he says. "It was just a series where I tried to think of a reason why a woman would have her top off.

'That particular shot happened because one day I saw a girl run straight into a guy's elbow and thought "What a great shot, we've got to try that".'

Amoral

Blind he may have been that time, but he's included a similar image, showing a girl with bloody teeth, in *Action* all the same. Kern may be playing dumb about how offensive his images could be – he does also laugh and admit that he 'can't wait' to see the reaction to *Action*. But mixed in with the desire to shock, a genuine amorality seems to be at play. Pressed hard on the ethics of shooting porn, for example, Kern says he simply doesn't know if it's right or wrong.

'Sure, it can be demeaning on a lot of levels, but then if people are begging me to shoot them, is it demeaning?' he says. 'I don't know. I've never asked someone if they'd model for me.'

'Of course some of the girls are

just doing it for the money. But a lot of girls I've shot wanted to do it. Stuff I've shot for myself I could only give them \$25 an hour, so they weren't doing it for the money. For that person it's about free expression. I don't know if porn is expression or repression. I think it depends on the woman.'

In the business of adult magazines, he adds, there are exhibitionists and voyeurs, which means it's perfect for everyone involved. This is an interesting point, because it's perhaps only when his work has been taken out of that market and put into the 'art' world that it has caused offence. And the fact that the art world has taken him up is something that he seems a little bemused about.

'I approached the first gallery

to get some publicity because I had a book coming out, but after that, they all approached me,' he says. 'I'm glad that the galleries and Taschen are interested but I've always wondered why. My work is being placed in different contexts. I think a lot of art has to do with context.'

'The art gallery thing is a big mystery to me. I grew up in the middle of nowhere. I didn't know what art was – I had an art class in high school but it was usually a lesson you could just skip. I had more experience of *Playboy*. My first experience of art was really college.'

Intimacy

From Kern's point of view, he's just shooting what he enjoys shooting. In fact, he's described shooting porn as 'a safe way to

get into intimate situations' and 'a shy man's dream' and cheerfully admits to shooting younger women because he's trying to recapture his youth. Perhaps this personal approach to his work explains their undeniably intimate content – intimate in the mental, rather than physical, sense of the word.

Most of the images in *Action* look like they're shot at home, for example, and the models look natural, even when at their most perverse. Images of women shaving their legs, biting their toenails and plucking their eyebrows jostle alongside the more hardcore set ups, and all of the models look recognisably human.

'I want to see a girl who might work in a corner store, but here she is naked,' he says. 'I don't do retouching. If there are spots on

the model's ass, I'll show them. They're there. The kind of stuff I shoot, I really want to show some innocence about being naked.'

'I shoot different types of model,' he adds. 'I shoot some quite big girls, although not many of them made it into the book. When I was shooting for the girlie mags, they didn't care what the girl's face looked like or how old she was and I got some great shots. Sometimes I've had people say to me, "Why did you shoot that big girl, you're making fun of her". I was like "I wasn't at all, I thought she was really hot!" That's about more how other people see them.'

It's an honest approach, whether you like what he does or not. And it also throws some light on why he dislikes 'erotic' photography – the more generally

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acceptable end of the whole erotic photography spectrum. 'Black-and-white nudes are half-assed and stupid,' he says. 'I don't like stuff that's pretending to be something else. The people who do it are shooting naked models. I can't tell their work from mine.'

Voyeurism

In fact, he's more influenced by the pornographic images now available on the internet, particularly the ones that look like paparazzi shots and 'the shit you're not meant to see'. This has inspired him to begin a new book, featuring images that look like they've been created through spying. They take voyeurism on a step further than his earlier work, in which the model usually looks directly into the camera but, he says: 'Even if they don't look it, they're all cooperative. The model has to be willing.'

And, he says, the internet is affecting the way that pornographic images are made and disseminated, as well as their aesthetic content. The adult magazine has, apparently, been hard-hit by the emergence of online porn and, he says, the images on it have often been taken by amateurs – and not uncommonly by the models themselves. In this context, he happily acknowledges, his older images may start to look dated, and may even lose their shock value.

'With porn it often looks kitsch when you look back at it,' he says. 'Hopefully with my favourite stuff, I will be able to look back and say it was of its time. That's generally what happens with good photography.' **BJP**



In print

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