

PHOTO

RICHARD KERN'S FILMS ARE STILL SHOCKING AS HELL

By Christian Storm

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If you know VICE, you know Richard Kern. He's been taking picture of young, supple women not wearing clothes for us (and a myriad of others, as well as for his own fine art) for years. Hell, he even has **his own show** with us. But what some of you whippersnappers may not know is that Richard wasn't always making his current brand of hot naked girl art. Back in the day, Richard, along with buddies like Lydia Lunch, David Wojnarowicz, Lung Leg, Sonic Youth, and Henry Rollins, made some of the most bloody, sexually devious, and generally fucked up short films ever. Labeled the "Cinema of Transgression," Richard and like-minded film makers shocked viewers to the core with their art. All of his films from this era were just remastered and **released on Blu-ray**. I recently came to work one morning and found a copy of the collection on my desk. Of course, I had to watch it. I then called up Richard and convinced him to come talk to me.

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VICE: I was given a copy of the collection. I put it on the Blu-ray player at work and sat in the dark and watched all of it. There were some things that were hard to get through, to be honest, but it was definitely visceral and striking.

Richard Kern: And old, 40 years old.

What do you see when you watch the films today, now that the time has passed?

Pretty much the same as they were before, it hasn't changed one bit. It's like it was just yesterday, that's the weird thing with time. It seems like yesterday. But I still look at it and wonder what people are seeing when they see it. There's a couple of films I've got a really good idea of how the audience is going to react, but not in general. Like the very first one I made was *Goodbye 42nd Street*, that's on there. The first time I showed it, I was really surprised people were into it. I just thought it was such a shitty Super-8 movie, but people responded well and that encouraged me. The first time it was at a screening, it wasn't allowed to be screened. They immediately said, "You can't show this." That was also inspiring, to say "fuck you" to those kind people.

So you were part of Cinema of Transgression. Were you trying specifically to shock people and freak them out or was that an after-effect?

The group of films that immediately preceded it in the underground were all very boring. It seemed like one of the qualifications was to make it boring and slow and long. So our plan was to make it short, and make it non-boring, if possible. And that may not work now, but back then it did, and we just tried to break down any moral thing or taboo you could. One of my personal things was to fuck up relationships and fuck up people's heads as much as possible. People were completely shocked by some of the stuff. But this was in the 80s, so I don't know how they will react now.

Do you think it's as shocking now as it was then?

There was this show in Berlin at the KW Institute of Contemporary Art in Berlin. They did this whole Cinema of Transgression month where they installed the films in this club-like atmosphere, like you would've seen back then, in different, weird rooms. People said it was really effective, and it was. I walked through and there was one film that I watched that a friend of mine made that I hadn't seen since then and I couldn't sit through the whole thing, it was just too fucking hardcore. So it's definitely a negative attitude, everything was negative, everything was nihilist. It's the whole belief, and it probably sounds stupid sitting here in this restaurant, but you have to destroy everything to start over again. That was the whole anarchist approach, which was pretty much the punk attitude. It was "fuck everything." And I felt the only way you could really destroy and fuck with people was to fuck with their love life and their personal relationships. When you see something, it coarsens you. Every bad thing you see coarsens you. Think about video games, like playing *Black-Ops*—it fucks with your head. I don't care what people say.

I was reading some of the reviews and one of the main critiques was that these people were shitty actors. Was that a secondary care for you?

It's funny you just said that because I never thought about that. It wasn't the same kind of approach, and if I was making one now, I still wouldn't think about it. I never thought about that. But yeah, they are shitty actors. It's all your state of mind when you're looking at them, everybody in the movies is pretty real.

Yeah, the things they were doing were real.

Believe me, in *Fingered*, Marty Nation was exactly like that, no exaggeration. The guy who's lifting weights, he was like that. Everybody was real. Lydia Lunch was like that. Lung Leg was like that. The story was based on Lydia and Marty's travels when she was 16 and they would hitchhike and get picked up by somebody, and Marty would take his knife out and start stabbing and cutting up the upholstery in the car, looking at the guy. All those guys were really scary. The guy who's lifting weights in it got killed about two years ago, somebody shot him finally.

You were pretty prolific in that time period, when these films were made. Were you just obsessed with making these films?

Yeah, it was what I did and I had a lot of ideas and I had all the equipment, which wasn't much, it was a Super-8 camera and three lights and I had a big apartment to shoot in and plenty of people who wanted to do stuff. And I wouldn't call them actors, I'd call them performer types. Nothing was scripted, the closest thing we had to a script was *Fingered* and *You Killed Me First* and those were just, "This is what's gonna happen in this scene. You're gonna say this. Or you say something like this." Lydia and Marty in *Fingered* would just make up dialogue as they went. They would play off of each other. I would tell them what we were gonna shoot tomorrow and they could say what they wanted. It wasn't traditional filmmaking by any means.

How much contact are you in with these people now?

I saw Lydia a few weeks ago in a bar in Williamsburg doing a reading. And she's playing in Williamsburg again next Monday. But she lives in Barcelona, I see her occasionally.

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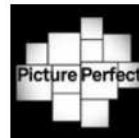


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Lung Leg in Submit to Me Now

I'm really interested in understanding the evolution from doing these nihilistic films to the stuff you do now, which seems a little bit more gentle and subtle.

Fingered was one of John Waters' favorite films, and I hung out with him a few times and he said, "It's interesting to be an angry young man when you're young, but when you're old you just look like an idiot to still be angry." A lot of those films were made when I was a drug addict, and when I got clean the only thing I could afford to do was take photos. And I started taking photos of everybody I knew and tried to get them naked. And it just evolved into this other thing.

There's some films I've made that are still like the old ones. There's one I finished last year that was harder than anything I ever did. It's just hard to watch. And it's the perfect movie for me because it's a documentary about a girl explaining why she cuts herself, and then she does it. I shot it with a shitty little video camera, I set the camera up and she sat there and talked about it. But it's a really powerful movie. It was in a show here in New York at Maccarone, and at the opening it was just bumming people out like crazy. For me, that was a huge success. To be able to have that effect, and it wasn't fake, it wasn't set up, it was just a real thing that really bummed people out, and I was lucky enough to get it. It's the same attitude. But then there's these other films, *Face to Panty Ratio* for example. It's a pretty film, there's nothing bad going on, but you're looking at girls' panties, looking at their faces, it's very hypnotic. But you realize, "I'm looking at girls' panties." A lot of people are into the movie, but it's a little music video about girls' panties. So other people think it's perverse.

You can't say it's porn, because it's not porn. It's just focusing on two really interesting parts of a female, their face and their panties, and what's wrong with looking at it? One of my things has always been to make no apologies for what you're doing, and if you have some kind of perversion, it's not a perversion. Guys like to look at girls' panties, plenty of girls like to look at girls' panties, but people act like it's such a big fucking deal if they get caught doing it.

Everything's a joke. Every film. A joke on the audience.

I thought I saw a bit of your work now in *Submit to Me* and *Submit to Me Now*.

I quit making films for like ten years and then around 2008 I started again and then I really started again a couple years ago. All this stuff is just random stuff I shoot when I shoot photos, it's not completely random, I have these themes. Just this past summer I spent four months making ten or 20 films, all made up of all these pieces I shot. I just collected them for four years and then sat down and edited them. But that is not traditional filmmaking. I would just say to the girl, "OK give me a walk from here to here, this way to this way to this way." I just shot a whole bunch of girls, like b-shoot photos, I was like, "We're gonna shoot some video. You sit here, and I want you to cry. See if you can cry, can you cry?" They go, "Maybe." And I just sit there and wait for them to cry, and if they cry I got it. Or I have them throw a fit. "Beat the bed, beat the couch," and all this shit will end up in different movies. It's not the traditional filmmaking or videos.

I think it's interesting, especially in the *Submit to Me* stuff, they're almost like moving photographs, there's not a plot but they're still very interesting.

I was looking for weirdness. Just trying to think of what weird thing can this person do. There was one guy with a really little dick and he said, "I really want to be in there." He would just bug the shit out of me. And I said, "OK, you can just shave your pubes." Which was a weird thing back then, if you're a guy. So he said, "OK, I'll do that." And it was just really weird.

You can see more of Richard's work on [his site](#) and you can buy the collection [here](#).

By Christian Storm | 4 hours ago

Tags: Richard Kern, cinema of transgression, lung leg, lydia lunch, sonic youth, film, naked girls, lots of blood

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