

## Profile: Sean Kernan

by Larry Frascella, from *Communication Arts*

As you pull into the semi-circular driveway of photographer Sean Kernan's Connecticut studio, there's a surprise to the eyes. He doesn't work out of his home, a loft or an office building. Instead, you find yourself standing before a schoolhouse of the classic two-story American type—"formerly classes one through six," Kernan cheerfully points out. The building comes complete with flagpole in front, wide nostalgia-provoking staircases, and metal-bar releases on the doors (although Kernan has abandoned grim high-school colors for tan and muted green walls). The main hallway is lined with leftover class pictures that stretch all the way back to 1903. Kernan has occupied the place since 1982.

As it turns out, a schoolhouse is a suitable place for Kernan who is not only a photographer but a teacher—with, among other credits, over twenty years at the New School. Plus he's something of a perpetual student.

Trim and youthful at 60, Kernan lays out his basic philosophy. "I studied Chinese calligraphy with this great woman for about twelve years. She's in her 80s now. And she's like a little kid—'Oh, look at that! Oh, look at that!' That's what's wonderful about her. She reminds me that my task is not to have a career. My task is to just stay awake."

Amazingly, he has managed to maintain his energy, optimism and sense of inquiry after years of working in the tough world of commercial photography, and racking up a deep list of clients which includes AT&T, Pratt and Whitney, the New York Times, Adobe Systems and Microsoft. He's also managed to keep himself from being pigeonholed, practicing still life, portrait and landscape photography, working in color and black-and-white ("my first love," he says) and dealing in imagery that can be both straightforward and surreal. But very little about Kernan seems to follow a typical pattern. In his own koan-like words, he likes to "go places that I don't even know are there."

Kernan describes himself as having "backed into photography." Born in New York and raised in New Jersey, he wanted to be a writer. "I'm from quite a serious family," he says, "a family of bankers, stockbrokers, lawyers. So I had to be as different from them as I could, of course."

"Reading was my great escape as a little kid. I had grandmothers who gave me books. And I would hide out in my room and read. It was a way of getting out of New Jersey." But after studying English at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, he took a right turn and became involved with Connecticut's famous Long Wharf Theater—one of America's first great regional theaters—which was just getting off the ground.

After two years performing various duties at the Long Wharf, he decided to travel around. "That's when I bought my first camera," he says. "I thought I should take pictures

because that's what you do when you take a trip: you take pictures. And when I came back, the director at the theater asked me to come take some pictures for them. So I started doing that and that's how I paid for my little life at the time. I still didn't think photography was anything I wanted to do. I was 24, 25. It wasn't time to think yet."

During the next few months, he met playwright/cartoonist Jules Feiffer—which led to a major consolidation in his young and fuzzy aspirations. "He was doing a play called Little Murders. So I went to Look—it was the good old days of Look magazine. And I told them that Jules Feiffer was a pal of mine—exaggerating considerably—and he's doing this show and dah, dah, dah. And they said, 'If it's a hit, you can do a story.' So there I was. I had a camera in my possession for six months and I was doing my first story for Look. So I said, 'This is easy. I'll just do this.' But it was never that easy again," Kernan quips, laughing at himself. "Anyway, that's what cemented it. That's what got me stuck in photography."

At that point, Kernan hoped to become a photographer in the great tradition of Look and Life magazines. But, as it turned out, he entered the field at the end of a cycle. "Suddenly, the magazines disappeared and there were all these Look and Life guys on the street with 60 tear sheets and I just had my two, so..." But as often happens in his life, luck stepped in just when he needed it. "Somebody called me up and offered me an ad, for a rug company, mainly because my services were cheap, and that's sort of how it all began to work out."

Kernan has had a long career and he's hesitant to detail every step of it. "It's like a toboggan ride," he says. "It doesn't seem interesting to think back over it. I actually feel like I haven't started yet, to tell you the truth."

But suffice to say, he eventually established a studio in a Manhattan loft. ("Again, I had luck. It was the 1970s and I found the last of the lofts in Tribeca that was on a commercial lease.") And in 1982, in a major life change, he began shifting his base of operations from Manhattan to the sparkling, idyllic waterside hamlet of Stony Creek, Connecticut.

"It was the early '80s," he explains, "and I was visiting my girlfriend who lived in Stony Creek. We were out riding bikes and came across a little old colonial farmhouse with a 'For Sale' sign in front. I love old buildings. I guess I think there might be a picture somewhere inside. It's my Walker Evans influence. A week later, I had a house. A year later, I had a wife."

Kernan managed to make the transition out of the city without a precipitous drop in assignments. In fact, he confesses that "in the late 80s and early 90s, I was so busy running the business and so forth that I wasn't paying attention to the artist, the person I started out to be." But that all changed in late 1992 when he began work on his book about books titled, appropriately enough, *The Secret Books*.

The Secret Books is made up of an evocative series of black-and-white photographs of what seem to be ancient tomes provocatively lit and juxtaposed with suggestive objects (snakes, candles, stars, mirrors, skulls). Plus it contains some hard-to-procure texts from master Argentinean writer Jorge Luis Borges. ("It took longer to get the quotes than it did to do the book," Kernan jokes.) In many ways, the book is an evocation of Kernan's love of writing and reading and, just possibly, an aspect of his path not taken.

The project started simply enough. "I had some black stones and I had a book, and I put them together on a table. And I thought: What does that mean?" He'd just taken a wonderful writing class, so it struck him that this particular combination of objects was like a poem. "It doesn't tell you everything. You have to go to it to find out. So I just took a picture of it. And for the next four years, the project kept growing and growing and growing."

He found a treasure trove of beautifully-worn Latin, Spanish and Italian books which suited his purposes perfectly because—surprisingly—he doesn't want people to actually read the texts of the books in the photographs. "A book is not what it contains. It's this thing you see through—into whatever the author put there and whatever you put there."

The Secret Books turned out to be the "keystone" to a new direction for Kernan. Ever since, he's ended up in this kind of back and forth between personal and commercial work. In fact, in some ways, his personal projects have taken the lead. The day we met he laid out several series of new work, all with strong traditional—almost classical—photographic qualities, recalling Penn, Avedon, Adams. He proudly displayed a series of black-and-white portraits taken in Mexico and Italy, and a tender, majestic, soon-to-be-printed book about trees. He had recently returned from Egypt where he developed a project for the new Biblioteca Alexandrina (which, as he informs us on his Web site, "replaces the one founded by Alexander the Great in 385 B.C. and subsequently burned in 358 A.D."). He hopes to return to Egypt soon to begin a series he refers to as the "imaginary museum."

When asked to define himself and his lengthy, hydra-headed career, Kernan says, "What I hope I am is a person with imagination. Any fool can use a camera but not every fool can use their imagination to do something deep, give it enough coherence so that if it were a ladder, somebody could climb on it. It's so easy just to toss out ideas. But it's harder to come up with something that will really bear weight."

"I think the job of art is to change your mind, literally re-pattern your brain. That's what I'm after—for myself. And if it happens for me, I hope somebody else will get it too."

- Larry Frascella