

## **A Conversation with Sean Kernan**

By Caryn B. Davis

Photographs by Sean Kernan

Sean Kernan is a storyteller, but not in the traditional sense. He prefers to observe the underlying rhythm of his subjects rather than disturb it, or concretely define it. Whatever medium he chooses, and whether the work is commercial or personal, his relationship to the material is the same. And although he may strive towards a definitive plan, his best work has often come through the abandonment of it, and being present to discover and uncover something less obvious that may have otherwise been overlooked.

Sean started his career in the theater after graduating from the University of Pennsylvania's writing program. He worked his way up to production stage manager, but soon desired to travel with a camera in hand. Although he traded the stage for photography, he circled back when the Yale Repertory Theatre asked him to take some rehearsal pictures. There, he met dramatist Jules Feiffer who had a play opening off Broadway. Sean pitched the story to *Look*. Within six months of buying his first camera, his images were published in a national magazine. This began a lifelong profession and passion with the arts.

Since then, Sean's images have appeared in numerous publications and have been exhibited worldwide. He is the author of four books, a writer of articles on creativity, art and commerce, a teacher, a lecturer, and has been a keynote speaker at art and photography centers, and universities. He has won awards for teaching, and photography, and has an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters (HC). As an advertising photographer, Sean has worked with many Fortune 500 companies and financial intuitions, and as a creative warrior he has produced many personal photographic essays, which he explains the essence of in his own words.

### **In Prison**

This project chose me. A door opened I didn't know was there and I went through it. I was driving home from Ohio. I was doing a project on carnival workers that had failed. I had too many Walker Evans pictures in my head. I got off the highway in this little town. Up the street was a grim, castellated looking building. It turned out to be a prison. I knocked on the door. Sometimes, a crack appears. In my case, the warden was feuding with the sheriff. He had his own agenda so he let me in.

When I got home and looked at the pictures there was one I really liked because there was less of me trying to be a photographer. That had been the whole problem with the carnival workers. I went back and spent another week and thought, 'I never want to go back there again.' But six months I was saying, 'You know, there is still something there.' So I went.

It was published in photography magazines and shown in a lot of places. In the end what it really came to for me, was this excursion into this other universe of tough, angry people. At least those are the ideas you go in with, except I met some wonderful people too.

I showed a slide show once and someone came up to me and said, 'You really showed what animals those people are.' The next person said, 'You really showed what society has done to these poor victims.' People are coming from their own experiences and are playing with their own deck. Sometimes the best response is from people who are just shut up by it.

### **The Secret Books**

I had been taking a poetry class and thinking about the connections between things that are best left unarticulated, that leave a viewer / reader room enough to resolve them in their own way, to be participants in the creative process.

I had these stones to put away, and also some old books. (I'd been using them as props for I don't know what.) And I just put them together. I felt there was some connection that was not logical but was instead ineffable and real. I thought it looked mysterious and wonderful, that it had a meaning of some kind. It looked like a poem because it didn't tell you everything. It left out a lot and I think good poetry does that. It was so exciting to do a photo that was concrete but not literal, that I decided to try another, and then another.

As for light, it is not natural, but it is very simple. My idea of the lighting was that it was coming from a gray sky through a narrow window set into thick walls, someplace like a medieval library. There were some variations on that as the props needed them, but it never strayed far.

### **Among Trees**

I would look at student's work and realize music was a good way to discuss composition to say there's space, there's thick, there's thin, there's light, there's dark, there's loud, there's soft. Working with the trees was away to explore that. I would go some place for work and take a few extra days to drive around and take pictures. Often it was of trees. It started to accumulate. One day a publisher called me up, if you could imagine this happening, and said, 'Do you have a book in you?'

I delivered it a year later, which allowed me to look at the whole piece and say, 'I need some jungle.' Or, 'I need to go to England where they have been barbering their forest for over 800 years.' It feels a little less impassioned than other things. It sticks closer to an idea and that's its problem. But people really like it. They have a predilection for nature and trees.

### **Kampala Boxing Club**

I always wanted to go to Africa but you just don't buy a plane ticket, turn up and see what's going on. A friend who works for NGOs invited me tag along. I tried to think of a plan. I thought it would be interesting to find refugees to do portraits of, or people who had been attacked or hurt to see what remains. I got there and wondered how to make it happen. My friend told me about a little boxing club on the other side of town. I stopped in, and that was it. I knew it was going to be like fishing in a bucket. It was all there. They let me right in. I was integrated right way.

If you think about what a boxing club in Africa would be like it would be bright, dark, sweaty, energetic, smelly, and noisy. So whether its written or photographed, it's more about, 'Can I recreate some of this? Can I bring it back out with me so somebody else can see it and say that's what it feels like?'

Someone who had worked in broadcast television saw the video I did of the club. They said, 'I love it, but I want to find out who are they, where they live, what they think about.' I said, 'I understand but that is exactly what I don't want; is to have somebody presenting their own perceptions. I just want to say this is what it feels like.' You get a sense of what is going on for them but you don't find out great detail. The things people think about are often less interesting than what's really happening. The undercurrent is where the art and drama really is.

### **The Crow Project**

This is the most daunting project because I really don't know what to do with it. When you work with the tribes you can plan all you want, but when you get there none of it happens.

My first trip to Montana was three years ago. I didn't do any video and hardly took any pictures. The next time I went I did some video and suddenly it's turned into a video project. I still don't think I have taken one good picture, but the video is starting to work.

When I first arrived, my contact out there asked me what I wanted to say with this project. I said, 'I didn't want to say anything. I just wanted to listen. It's a confusing place and I don't want to clean it up. I want to let it unfold.' Seeking out something is going to throw you off. We all work towards comfort and having a plan. We make sure our batteries are charged and are lenses are clean. When it starts to get uncomfortable, things are either falling apart or coming together. You have to hang on long enough and try not to resolve it to see what it's going to be.

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"I think creativity is about a state rather than an activity. That's the thing I try to keep getting back to. What really moves me about a project is if it changed me; if it made me see more broadly. When you go into a prison, now you're bigger. When you go to Africa, now you're bigger. I hope to be moved myself and then

there's a chance that somebody else will be. You have to abandon yourself to the experience, whatever it is.

A lot of photographers or more so people who are not photographers think, 'Oh you go out and find interesting things.' Its not about interesting things, it's a chance to be alive. This attitude frees you from the tyranny of subject matter."

*For more information log onto [www.seankernan.com](http://www.seankernan.com).*