

A FEW DEGREES NORTH-WEST OF NORMAL

Geof Kern lives in two worlds, that of the **REAL**, where gravity impales us onto the planetary pin-board and condemns us to the mundane roles of consumer and provider, parent and partner; and that of the **IDEAL**, where visions assume solid form, gravity loosens its grip and we float, free to fly in pursuit of dreams.

Kern himself walks the streets of the Dallas suburb that is his home while his mind soars through a world more real than those gritty pavements, his own world, a virtual world, the **WORLD OF KERN**.

Kern's **WORLD** came into being almost by accident, through quirk of fate when Brooklyn-born Kern attended a California film school without facilities to actually make films. He recalls: "I just picked up a 35mm camera to test out ideas I had. This was the late '60s, and even then I had a particular way of seeing things – it's just the way I am."

In the way of the time, Kern was drafted into the Navy, trained in photography and then dispatched to Vietnam. Inside that alien place, a few thousand miles distant but several light-years away, Kern's job was to document the disintegration of people and everyday things amid the ravages of war.

When he got back into the real world, Kern left film to further his photography, attending the Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara. From there he moved to Dallas, turning on its head the cliché of Texan-in-New-York to become a New-Yorker-in-Texas. Kern explains: "I heard it was a good place for new photographers. I had a family and sick child."

"I didn't want to take them to New York, and I was looking for some kind of benign suburban society." At the time, Dallas' reputation as a centre for design excellence was growing, and eventually many of its magazine art directors and photographers would achieve national renown.

Kern commenced work on more mundane commercial assignments, corporate functions and hotel-site excavations among them, while pursuing the grail of more creative photography. He elaborates: "I started photographing in my style in '78, '79, and I worked for magazines that allowed more creative freedom in those days. My commercial rep kept saying I can't get any work; this is just too artistic!"

"I was competing against people shooting annual reports and booze bottles on black plexiglas, with no sense of history or photographic artistry. There was really no market for what I was doing until 1987 when this sort of photography became infused into the mainstream."

That year Kern broke into the national consciousness with a photograph for Bloomingdale's of a mannequin with a bouquet of roses for a head, coinciding with a Fashion Institute of Technology show on fashion and surrealism. Since then clients from all over the world, from Matsuda in Tokyo to Selfridge's in London, from *Spy* magazine to the *British Sunday Times* colour supplement, have vied to have him recreate the **WORLD OF KERN** on their behalf.

Kern has subsequently become one of the most awarded photographers ever, but that hasn't affected the way he lives and works. He operates out of the same low-tech North Dallas studio with the same collection of elderly equipment and minimal staff, with his greatest assets his unfettered imagination and his refusal to repeat himself.

Each new assignment occasions Kern to stop and revisualise his imaginary world, and for all the oddities we encounter in its streets, the **WORLD OF KERN** still feels oddly familiar, uncannily right, situated as it is just a few degrees north-west of normal. 🍷