

## **The Unchosen Ones**

**RJ Kern**

**East Gallery**

**May 4 - July 20, 2024**

### **Artist Statement:**

**In 2016, I made portraits of youth contestants at Minnesota county fairs. Each participant—some as young as four years old— spent a year raising an animal, which they entered into a 4-H livestock competition. None of the youth I photographed succeeded in winning an award, despite the obvious care they have given to their animal.**

**Four years later, in 2020, I returned to photograph the young subjects, asking them what they carried forward from their previous experience. Some of them have continued to pursue animal husbandry while others developed other interests. We imagine some of these kids will choose to continue running their family farms, an unpredictable and demanding way to make a living.**

**As I created the second group of photographs, I asked them what were their thoughts, their dreams, and their goals for the future? How do they fit in the future of agricultural America?**

**The Unchosen Ones depicts the bloom of youth and the mettle of the kids who grow up on farms, reminding us how resilient children can be when confronted with life's inevitable disappointments. The formal quality of the lighting and setting endow these young people with a gravitas beyond their years, revealing self-direction dedication in some, and in others, perhaps, the pressures of traditions imposed upon them. The portraits capture a particular America, a rural world, and a time in life when the layered emotions of youth are laid bare.**

### **Bio:**

**R. J. Kern (b. 1978) is an American artist whose work investigates ideas of home, ancestry, and a sense of place. His portraits focus on intimate, interdependent relationships of people, animals, and landscape as a means of exploring how ancestry shapes identity and how myth intertwines with personal history. His camera has led him from an inquiry into his lineage in the farming communities of Scandinavia and Ireland to the examination of similar communities near his home in Minnesota. Increasingly, his attention has been captured by the next generation**

of young people, who may or may not be the stewards of rural communities and economies in the future.

Inspired by master landscape painters of the 19th-century, Kern embraces the heightened expressivity of natural and artificial lighting techniques. To draw sharper connections between traditional and modern farming routines, he adopts both historical and current photographic processes. While illuminating the ephemeral beauty of youth, Kern probes the current realities of agrarian practices, aspiring to enhance awareness and interest in the changing face of American pastoral life.

