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art ●●●

At Two Locations, Photographer Katy Grannan Returns With Richer, Riskier New Work

Only the Lonely

by **Jerry Saltz**

September 12th, 2003 5:00 PM



Laid bare: Grannan's *Mike*, private property, New Paltz, NY (2003)

(photo: Katy Grannan/Courtesy Artemis Greenberg Van Doren Gallery & Salon 94)

Katy Grannan

Artemis Greenberg Van Doren Gallery
730 Fifth Avenue
Through October 4

Salon 94
12 East 94th Street
Through October 12

Katy Grannan has taken a leap forward in her work. Her second New York solo show is better than her impressive 2000 debut because it is richer, riskier, and more elusive. There's less explicit nudity, and the complicated ways she combines voyeurism, banality, and pattern have gotten even more complex and creepy. This two-gallery exhibition is so disquieting that it's possible to argue—without stretching the bounds of credulity—that Grannan is not only one of the best portrait photographers working today, she may be a legitimate heir to Diane Arbus.

Although Arbus's subjects are much more unusual than Grannan's, both photographers excel at putting something embarrassingly, almost excruciatingly intimate in front of you. Both have a feel for the off, the awkward, and the lonely, and make you experience the jarring sensation of feeling simultaneously sympathetic and superior to their subjects.

Arbus was a master of the brazenly strange. She stalked her subjects and was drawn to the marginal. Grannan is the exact opposite: She's more removed, less vivid, but often as devastating—Arbus by way of Duane Hanson. Grannan is lured to the inwardly marginal outwardly ordinary: apparently normal people who have a mysterious need to be seen by strangers. She places ads in newspapers that read simply: "Art Models. Artist/photographer (female) seeks people for portraits. No experience

necessary. Leave msg." People call her; she goes to their homes, meets them in parks, or—like Humbert Humbert, who described himself as an "ensnaring spider"—has them over to her house (which has some of the weirdest wallpaper I've ever seen). The rest is eeriness.

An intricate game of cat and mouse ensues. Multiple traps are set and sprung. It's never clear who's under whose thumb. Grannan, who is smart but skittish and shy, gives her subjects little instruction. They decide where to stand, how to pose, what to wear or not wear. She holds the camera and places props, but the ball is in their court. Which may be why her pictures often provide a bizarre, sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes chilling peek into the inner lives of these average people.

For this show, Grannan photographed in color and, to stunning effect, in black-and-white. Some of the black-and-whites, collectively titled "Morning Call" (at the Salon 94 space), were made in Allentown, Pennsylvania, in an area photographed by Walker Evans. Many of these untitled images radiate a formal lucidity reminiscent of Evans. In one picture that packs some of the wallop of Arbus's *A Jewish Giant at*

home with his parents in the Bronx, an overweight girl, wearing only patterned pantyhose and a sleeveless top, sits musing on an overstuffed couch. A little porcelain bird looks up at her from the shag carpet. As with so many of Grannan's best pictures, this image exudes a startling ugly-duckling quality and provides a glimpse into the mysterious fissure between self-love, self-loathing, delusion, and desire. The interior is a riot of pattern, material, and texture that, along with the off-center, slightly tilting composition, makes this photograph riveting.

In another bewitching image, a young man wearing nothing but a silk robe that he's let slip suggestively open, sits on a chair. He looks out at us as if from an Annie Leibovitz *Vanity Fair* photo, but the chair is too small, so he appears ungainly, throwing the whole would-be seduction into a tailspin. The drowsy dog under his legs adds a submissiveness and neediness to an already aching image. In another work, a young folksinger type with her skirt hiked up to her hip slumps on a chair with a guitar precariously balanced against it. A tense conspiratorial air pervades this and many of Grannan's photographs, the sense that these young people waited for their parents to leave or dressed up, chose props, then slowly revealed more than they thought they would. It's like seeing strangers enact Cindy Sherman and Robert Mapplethorpe pictures.

The works in the equally excellent color series, "Sugar Camp Road" (at Artemis Greenberg Van Doren), were all made outdoors on public land. Many ooze a furtive seediness, as if Grannan and her subjects know something's off, and that if they got caught there'd be some discomfort. My favorites here include the black girl in an orange crocheted bikini, who sits on the side of a road like Manet's *Olympia* or a displaced diner from his *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*; two bare-chested fat boys in shorts; the overweight girl in black panties who squats in a pool of mud; the girl who lies on her back in a river; and the man with an erection. One of the most troubling and pathos-filled is the young nude man who lays back against a tree like some dazed Venus or naked Maja. His clothes are crumpled nearby, his body pumped, his arms tattooed, and his pubic hair groomed into a perfect rectangle. The flop of his penis echoes a nearby root. As he looks directly at Grannan, who looks directly at him, time stops and an injured psyche is laid bare. It's shocking. Grannan isn't mastering the perfect moment but the perfectly flawed one.