

## THE YEAR IN PICTURES

THURSDAY, JANUARY 6, 2011

### Boulevard



When I spoke about surprises in my recent Top Ten, I didn't expect to be surprised so quickly and as dramatically as I was when I opened up an envelope from the Fraenkel Gallery to find a card with the image above on the cover announcing Katy Grannan's new show (opening on Saturday in San Francisco).

I've written admiringly about Katy Grannan before, but her new series, **BOULEVARD**, takes her work to a whole new level. As Fraenkel's website describes the work, these pictures were made over the past three years in Los Angeles and San Francisco. Shooting against white stucco walls in strong midday light, the city streets became Grannan's outdoor studio. The characters who populate Grannan's Boulevards are a parade of down and outers and eccentrics – the lady above being (I think) an exception. But every picture is shot with mesmerizing intensity and shocking jolts of color.

What was most surprising to me, though, was that I normally HATE this type of photography. The passion for displaying photographs of low-lives and losers is so far from my aesthetic I can never understand how people could ever want to live with these kind of pictures. But to me Grannan's photographs are about something else. First, they seem to belong more to the school of street observation in the tradition of Evans and Callahan and De Corcia than to the freak school of Arbus and more recently Robert Bergman. Note how in Grannan's pictures no-one is making direct eye contact with the camera. The subjects are aware they are being photographed, but they are more rooted in their own world and their own reality than the photographer's. Secondly, the color and light in these pictures is just extraordinary. It must have taken some technical expertise to get it just right. Lastly, there is a humanism in these pictures that makes them extraordinarily complex. Everyone seems to contain a story. Take the woman pictured above. Is she rich? Is she poor? Is she beautiful or ugly? Is she proud of her color coordination, her lipstick, her hair? Is her expression the result of a life well-lived or one of regrets? Whatever the answers, the pictures are masterpieces.