

Nine Lives

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Katy Grannan, *The Nine*, 2016, color, sound, 98 minutes.

KATY GRANNAN'S debut feature-length film, *The Nine*, is bisected by an off-screen murder. Police find a body floating beneath the South Ninth Street Bridge in Modesto, California, a hardscrabble Central Valley town about ninety minutes east of San Francisco. The news spooks the film's central characters, who live in and around the area known as The Nine, and whose vulnerability is sharpened by the prospect of a predator. Grannan and her sound editor, Gus Koven, create a wash of overlapping chatter after the news breaks. Eventually, a woman intones, "They say everybody dies in threes, but this year they died in nines."

The violence remains out of the frame, but it haunts Wanda, Robert, Tony, Inessa, Jordan, and others Grannan follows as they struggle to patch together decent lives on the American fringes. Often we see them literally at the edge: They stand street-side, loiter on riverbanks, and mosey along railroad tracks, observing and commenting on what passes them by. Our primary guide is Kiki, with whom Grannan spent hundreds of hours over several years. Kiki is simultaneously clear-eyed and delusional, the victim of assaults both personal and societal. Her compelling story creates a tense codependency with Grannan. She needs Grannan to listen to her, to believe her, when few others will. Grannan needs Kiki to give *The Nine* the narrative propulsion and focus its impressionistic set pieces would otherwise lack. Like the film itself, Kiki's story is an artful construction that weaves together fact and fiction.

Fans of Grannan's remarkable photographic portraits will already be familiar with Kiki and others in *The Nine*. It can be uncanny to see, for example, the interactions between Ginger and her daughter Chastity that inspired a particularly affecting 2012 photograph of them embracing. Yet unlike those portraits, often busts or three-quarter-length views, *The Nine* features many close-in shots of hands and feet, underscoring the fact that Grannan's subjects lose the bigger picture by focusing in on details. They also reveal how the world has inscribed itself on her subjects' bodies. The bright, clear California light of Grannan's pictures likewise characterizes the film, though daytime is paired with nighttime scenes illuminated by jittery headlights and storefront neon.

Grannan was first intrigued by the Central Valley because of its stark contrast to the Bay Area, where she has lived for the past decade. Modesto and its neighboring towns are strung along US 99, a north-south highway that photographer Dorothea Lange traversed during the Great Depression. Like Lange's pictures, *The Nine's* rough beauty and humane approach are affecting; I found myself thinking about Kiki for days afterward. I had hope for Grannan's cast, who sought redemption in God, in drugs, in the words of parents, in the dream of opening a business, in the music coming out of tinny speakers.

Watching it again recently, after the US presidential election, I was struck by a different, somewhat bleaker thought: that *The Nine* is a crucial document of the kinds of people who will be left behind completely by American callousness. In the film, after everyone processes the news of the murder, Grannan's camera glances up at a bright half-moon hanging in an empty black sky. That sky goes blue and the camera suddenly plunges into the river's water: a baptism to purify what has come before. In the next four years, during which time the weak will be made more vulnerable by the dismantling of vital institutions, I fear such redemptions will not be forthcoming.

— Brian Sholis

The Nine plays December 16 and 18 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.