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# ARTFORUM

## New York Review: Katy Grannan, Salon 94 Bowery

by Barry Schwabsky



Katy Grannan, *Inessa Waits Near South 9th Street, Modesto, CA, 2012*, ink-jet print, 46 1/8 × 61 1/4".

Times are tough out there, but they look even tougher than in most places in Modesto, California. At least that's how it appears in the works that made up Katy Grannan's recent exhibition "Hundreds of Sparrows." Is this arid, desolate landscape, populated mostly by loners who've been hardened by life yet still look tremendously vulnerable, really the same town where George Lucas set his bittersweet but innocent *American Graffiti* (1973)? The short answer is no. Lucas's nostalgic reverie on middle-American adolescence is clearly fictional, and probably owes as much to the equally reimagined Rimini of Federico Fellini's 1953 *I Vitelloni* as it does to Lucas's own memories of his hometown; the gimlet eye that Grannan casts on this hardscrabble landscape and its scruffy inhabitants may give her work a quasi-documentary air—the legacy of Dorothea Lange is evoked—but make no mistake, her Modesto is likewise a world of her own invention.

My inclination to reach for a cinematic comparison in thinking about "Hundreds of Sparrows" may not be unconnected to the fact that Grannan has been working on a feature film, *The Nine*, set for release in 2016, but probably has more to do with the artist's adroit way of approaching her material in multiple ways, like a director alternating close-ups, long shots, and different characters' viewpoints. The components of the exhibition were made between 2011 and 2015: five color portraits of anonymous individuals, hard-bitten in appearance, often heavily tattooed, represented in extremely fine-grained detail and with an almost sculptural sense of volume against a white wall, each even more monumental in feeling than in literal scale; nine slightly larger horizontal images in black-and-white, in most of which named characters are shown in desolate landscapes (just two of these images show a landscape empty of figures); nine quite small color images focusing on oblique details of a body (some strands of red-dyed hair; a shoulder; soapy hands giving a dog a bath), all of them referred to as "film stills"; four small black-and-whites, somewhat disparate in imagery (a dead lamb, a church mural of Christ's open hands); and four brief color video loops showing such scenes as a woman eating a Popsicle in a shabby room while gazing into space. Although each of the photographs in the show is a compelling stand-alone presence (the videos perhaps less so), as a group they compose a hallucinatory polyphonic essay on a place that is also a state of mind.

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The most important thing that happens in these pictures is nothing. For most of the length of the video *Inessa Sleeping in a Tree over the Tuolumne River*, 2015, the figure seems impossibly still as water rushes by and wind ruffles the foliage around her. In the photographs, a sense of utter anomie seems to insulate the characters from any possible role in an overarching narrative. Everything is adrift. Deprived of dreams themselves, perhaps, though wandering through the landscape they inhabit like somnambulists, these people are nonetheless actors in the photographer's dream of isolation and loss.