



SUPERIMAGES

KATY GRANNAN

BY CHARLIE WHITE

In a society that values notoriety and celebrity, acknowledging suffering is an act of disruption. In her photographic series and a new feature film, American artist Katy Grannan immersed herself in a part of America that operates beneath poverty and put struggling human beings in front of her lens, highlighting the complex relationship between photographer, subject and viewer. Here, the photograph is a proof of existence, just as much as it is a *memento mori*.

CHARLIE WHITE Let's begin with the question of place. *The Nine* brings us into a part of America that's been left out of the grand narrative, one that operates beneath poverty, between urban and rural. Can you speak to why this liminal strip of the west has such significance?

KATY GRANNAN The Nine is the local name for a notoriously blighted street in Modesto, California, located in an agricultural region called the Central Valley. The area was the setting for Dorothea Lange's famous Depression-era photographs; it also served as the backdrop for *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Valley looks and feels nothing like America's mythical west—it's where the American Dream comes to a dead halt. As Joan Didion once remarked, it isn't the California a tourist would come to see. That said, *The Nine* is not an essay about a region, or about economic disparity; those realities are implicit in the film, but this isn't journalism. Instead, it addresses an existential paradox: we all want to feel like we matter, that there is some purpose and value in our lives, and yet we're faced with the uneasy prospects of impermanence and insignificance. The photograph is proof that we were here. So what does it mean, then, to be rendered invisible? Our society values notoriety and celebrity—we're addicted to distraction and escapism. Acknowledging suffering disrupts that fantasy.

CW *The Nine* makes greater sense in light of Lange and Steinbeck's work; you realize that the people in the film come from a particular lineage of American suffering. However, there is something utterly contemporary about your subjects' struggles in the face of a greedier, modernized form of inhumanity. To look at it so closely must have required intimate engagement.

KG Yes. I'd been making photographs throughout the Central Valley for a while, traveling up and down Highway 99. Modesto is right off the 99, and one day I randomly exited, parked and walked around. I met a woman named Inessa, and she introduced me to other women, all of whom live in motels along Ninth Street. This small community is its own universe, almost completely removed from

the surrounding world. It has a reckless energy, and the people who live there are unabashed and irreverent. It's a day-to-day existence, and they're on their own. Earlier in my life, I'd witnessed a childhood friend detach herself from the "real" world and end up like the women on Ninth Street. The last time I saw her, she said, "It's strange how life turns out. I would have thought you'd be me and I'd be you." I think about that almost every day—how our lives can take an unexpected turn at any moment. At some point my friend turned a corner and, almost immediately, her life began to unravel. So I felt like I understood these women pretty well. I understood that they had an entire life that preceded Ninth Street. Sadly, though, they've all become Jane Doe. They're disregarded as though they're invisible and inconsequential. I wanted them to be remembered, to make something that reflected their their energy and intelligence. So, having earned their trust over time, I asked a few women if they'd be interested in making a film with me. I think they felt comfortable because I had good intentions, without judgment or condescension.

CW How did you approach working with them?

KG Although the film is mostly *vérité*—though with some poetic license—I treated each person in the film as I would an actor. I was grateful for their participation and valued their time—everyone received a day rate, and others from the community who weren't in the film became my ad hoc crew. So there was an understanding from the outset that we were *working*. Traditional documentarians might consider this anathema, but again, this isn't journalism—it's more like making cinema from life. Also, these weren't brief engagements. I was there all the time, and that kind of immersion requires reciprocation. A *vérité* filmmaker claiming to be a fly on the wall isn't entirely accurate—anyone with a camera in their face knows they're being filmed, and it affects the way they present themselves. But after thousands of hours spent together, that wall comes down, and people stop trying to be the best versions of themselves.



The most courageous lay themselves bare from the beginning. Kiki, who is the heart and soul of the film, loves being on film; she vamps and flirts and puts on a show. She's wonderful and magnetic, but she also develops a complicated relationship with the filmmaking process, as she bases much of her self-worth on being seen and heard for the first time. She grew dependent on me as her only family. So the nature of our relationship was very layered, very complicated, and our lives were deeply intertwined.

CW You spoke earlier about identifying with your subjects as women. There is a deep sense of humanism in this film, as there is in all of your work, but *The Nine* stands out for the depth of its portraiture: it's clear that you're personally invested in these women and their lives. Did making the film change how you interact with your subjects?

KG It did. In the past, I sought out short-lived relationships with the people I photographed. They answered an ad and we met as strangers, spending a few hours together for the sake of a picture. We met in the middle, sharing a desire to see and be seen. It was like a short-lived love affair: no disappointments, no rejection. The past five years, however, were exponentially more involved, more complex and emotionally taxing than anything I'd done. I shot over two thousand hours of footage—which doesn't include the hundreds of hours spent doing things outside of the film, hanging out or driving people around. *The Nine* was about real relationships, which are always complicated—incredibly vital one minute, disappointing the next. So I shifted from an idea or sketch to something much deeper and more difficult to unpack.

My pictures had always depended on other people's interest in being photographed and their willingness to trust a stranger. We were both thrill seekers, in a sense; it was always a leap of faith. *The Nine* was like that, but on steroids. This was still a leap of faith: *Is Katy really making a movie? Is Kiki bullshitting me? Am I being manipulated?* But over time, as I shared the footage with them, things became tangible and more exciting for everyone, despite the fact that the movie

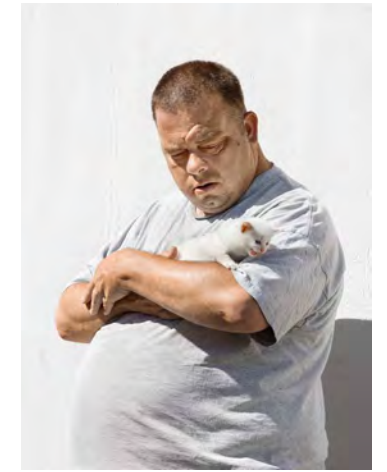
is tough. Watching yourself on film can have the unusual effect of creating distance, enabling a person to see herself more clearly—or, in this case, more empathetically. They were *proud* of what we were doing together: their lives were being honored but not sugarcoated. I resisted all the easy narratives, the obvious and sensational elements. Those are the familiar stories, the ones that further alienate a population that's already alienated. I was more interested in the ordinary moments: being alone, waiting, gossiping with friends, listening to the radio. I was just as interested in describing what was happening all around us simultaneously—the fly on a bedspread, the rattle of an old air conditioner, the mournful gaze of a neglected cat. Even when there wasn't much happening, there were endless possibilities. It made me realize how much I'd missed in the past. I'd spent so many years focused on a particular way of seeing and making photographs. Meanwhile, all this magic was happening around me.

CW This gets us back to the humanism of your practice. Your approach has long been predicated on a sense of openness and reciprocal trust between strangers. In *The Nine*, this lenticular empathy transforms an erred strip of blight, prostitution and addiction into something far more human. It makes me curious about your upbringing. Can we go back to what preceded your artistic practice, and try to understand why you began putting people in front of your lens?

KG As a kid, I never aspired to be "an Artist." I had no reference for that, or at least for what our collective perception of an artist looks like. For me, my grandmother embodied what it meant to be an artist, to experience the life-sustaining potential of art. My grandparents lived in a funeral home. They kept a red phone in the hallway, and we knew that when it rang, it meant that someone had died. That phone loomed large in my imagination: Who had died? Did he live well or die with regrets? Would she be missed? When would the phone ring next? Growing up, this was all normal; the facts of our lives, the insidious particulars that we experience as commonplace, only



Anonymous, Modesto, 2014



Anonymous, Fresno, 2014



Anonymous, Fresno, 2014



Anonymous, Bakersfield, 2014



Anonymous, Bakersfield, 2014



Anonymous, Oakland, 2014

reveal themselves much later as the very things that help define us.

We all perceived my grandmother as eccentric and remote, always lost in her own world. She busied herself by photographing the things around her: a lamp, a rose bush, lawn chairs. She photographed birds at the feeder and parades as they passed, making meticulous notes on the back of each photograph. (“The Blue Jays arrived today! So lovely!”) But the world I observed was markedly different from the one in her pictures. I realized that my grandmother was reinventing history, reconstructing her reality through images. So I understood early on that the camera lies, and that photographs often reveal more about the maker than they do their subjects.

She eventually gave me my first camera: a Kodak Instamatic with the flashcube. After that, I mediated the world through that lens. Everything fascinated me, and the world was more compelling, more mysterious when described in a photograph. Underlying all of this, however, was a deep melancholy, a kind of desperation to stop time from passing. I photographed people obsessively, which had everything to do with understanding that they wouldn’t be around forever. The photograph was proof that they’d been here—this moment had happened, this person had mattered.

As far as religion, my family was strict Irish-Catholic, and I attended a crazy Opus Dei school where I had to go to Confession each day. Every lesson reinforced finality; every decision was a matter of Heaven or Hell; every commandment began “Thou Shalt Not.” I deeply resented those restrictions and I developed another life, completely hidden, where I broke those rules,

tempted fate. But I still believe in the basic tenets of most religious thought. They’re underlying principals found throughout art and literature—Chekov and Joyce, Marilyn Robinson and Alice Munro. Each one observes and understands what it means to be a human being with contradictions and flaws. They see complexity in every detail, and tackle the big stuff through “small” stories—the universal revealed through the specific.

CW Yes, but a specific that is honed and refined by its author—which brings us to the equation of an image with its maker. You’ve described two poles: Confession, which demands unabashed honesty, and then the pattern of hidden truths and subverted desires born from this very expectation. I’d argue that your practice today bridges these poles, highlighting the complex relationship between photographer, subject and viewer. Your work shines an unyielding light on suffering while maintaining the complexity of each subject. Can you speak at all to these acts of observing, interpreting, projecting?

KG This question makes me think of post-mortem photography from the Victorian era. Photography has always had a direct relationship to death; the very act of photographing a person (dead or alive) produces this object: a *memento mori*, meaning, “remember you must die.” So when I photograph people, there’s a kind of paradox at play: on one level, I’m asserting the significance of each person and every detail, while at the same time the photograph is a reminder of our impermanence, our mortality. This sense of inevitable loss is palpable, almost overwhelming. It could easily go two ways: it could mean savoring each moment, or it could elicit something more reckless. My practice embodies both. 🙄

Katy Grannan (American, b. 1969) is a photographer and filmmaker who lives and works in the Bay Area. She is represented by Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco, and Salon 94 Bowery, New York. After her recent solo exhibition “Hundreds of Sparrows” at Salon 94 Bowery in New York, Grannan’s upcoming film *The Nine* is set to be released in festivals and theaters in early 2016.

Charlie White is an artist who lives and works in Los Angeles. He is represented by Looock Galerie, Berlin, and François Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, where he will have a solo exhibition in the fall of 2017.



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