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Katy Grannan's Modesto on the Edge

by Andrea K. Scott



"Anonymous, Modesto, CA," 2012. Courtesy Katy Grannan / Salon 94.

In the final seconds of the trailer for Katy Grannan's first feature film, "The Nine," an oneiric portrait of life on the margins in California's Central Valley, two young men are seen riding bikes at night in the flooded parking lot of a motel, their tires trailing glittering churn. Off screen, a woman whose voice sounds both girlish and cracked from fatigue, says, "I bet we'll all be surprised if we pay more attention to things. Maybe we'll see something beautiful once in a while. It's all there, we just need to look more carefully.

Grannan, the American photographer whose exhibition "Hundreds of Sparrows" is currently on view at Salon 94 Bowery, has been looking carefully at overlooked people since the late nineties. For her earliest work, from the late nineteen-nineties and early aughts, the artist placed classified ads in local newspapers in upstate New York looking for models and photographed the volunteers in situations of their own choosing. They often chose to be nude, posing in vacant lots and low-ceilinged rooms. Even when the sitters appeared fully clothed, the results were unnerving, an alloy of vulnerability, bravado, and nerves. The title of the series, "Dream America," succinctly conveyed how the American dream had been turned inside out in a country full of dead ends.

For the past four years, Grannan, who grew up outside of Boston and now lives in Berkeley, has been spending stretches of time in the Modesto neighborhood that gave "The Nine" its name. It's a haven for drifters, where

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living paycheck to paycheck must sound like a dream to men and women hustling day by day for enough money to rent a room and support a habit. Yet Grannan's portraits emphasize dignity. One reason for this might break your heart: the artist's childhood best friend took to the streets as a teen-ager and died while she was in her twenties. "Every portrait I took in Modesto," Grannan told me recently, "is in some sense a portrait of Heather."

Modesto is located in the same Central Valley where Dorothea Lange took her indelible photograph of the "Migrant Mother" during the Depression, for the Farm Security Administration. But while the hardscrabble lives Grannan conveys may have affinities with Lange's weathered mother, her aim is not documentary. Her portraits and the in-between moments that join them—a scrum of kittens, a dead lamb drawing flies—remain open-ended. They're impressions rather than facts. " 'The Nine' is not a call to action," she told me. "It's more personal, more intimate. It isn't about activism so much as about allowing connections—and generosity—to flow in both directions."



"Nursing Feral Cats, Modesto, CA," 2014. Courtesy Katy Grannan / Salon 94.