

MODERN PAINTERS

INTERNATIONAL ARTS AND CULTURE APRIL 2006

Katy Grannan: Mystic Lake

Greenberg Van Doren Gallery

4 JANUARY - 4 FEBRUARY

Katy Grannan's method of finding models for her photographs is well-documented: the artist places anonymous ads in newspapers appealing for sitters. It's a shrewd tactic, but the results are more remarkable still. Her new exhibition of work - 15 portraits of people in a state of partial or total undress in a sylvan setting - deftly raises questions of complicity and desire.

Grannan's work embodies a cultural moment where voyeurism and exhibitionism intertwine. The urge to be represented is a primal one, for the act of rendering provides undeniable evidence of our existence. Simultaneously, gazing at Grannan's subjects - their uniqueness and their banality - we become aware that our desire to look at others is inseparable from our need to judge them.

Although the tradition of creating strikingly honest portraits, whether of large-nosed aristocrats or of misshapen dwarves, is one that extends back throughout the ages and includes works by artists as noted and diverse as Rembrandt and Goya, Grannan's *Ken*, b. 1961 (2004), of a man lying in the grass wearing nothing but a pair of black socks, is still striking. It's a rare moment: the staple of business-world conformity (the suited salaryman) collides headlong with primitive, unabashed naked man, whose blasé, lounging pose and trousers and briefs heaped on the ground nearby speak volumes.

The models' eagerness, often tinged with uncertainty, is key to the friction in Grannan's work. Unlike

Degas's nudes, they are not on the far side of the barrier created by the voyeur: They want to be engaged, making their position both wilful and vulnerable. *Cassandra*, b. 1983 (2004) is a pretty redhead with a direct gaze and dirty toes. With her hand placed protectively between her legs, we are unsure how to proceed - does she enjoy or resent being assessed?

Unlike Diane Arbus, who specialized in specimens of weirdness, Grannan presents these people on their own terms. The impersonal pastoral settings allow the individuals to assert themselves. For instance, *Frank*, b. 1956 (2004), with his hands on his hips and his greying goatee, seems to swagger without moving an inch.

Grannan carefully avoids grandiosity. The relatively small scale of these pictures (72 x 91 cm) ensures their intimacy. We approach them with curiosity and a certain wariness at their mildly pornographic content. There is a touch of amateur exhibitionism to the suggestive look of *Carolyn*, b. 1982 (2004), whose black underwear is visible beneath her burgundy dress. Or the inquisitive stare of *Alan*, b. 1951 (2004), proudly nude, his round belly covered in hair.

Grannan eases us into a world of personal paradoxes and uncertain façades. We only know these people for one moment, but it's a moment they've sought. Grannan provides a stage for these small-town residents to act-out their fantasies. But while her subjects are indeed players, in trying to present their desirability, they ultimately reveal their own humanity. DC

