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- January 20, 2011
- By Seth Curcio
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[Boulevard: An interview with Katy Grannan](#)

Roaming the streets of a metropolitan area, it is easy to become overwhelmed by the scale of urban architecture and the number of individuals that occupying the space. So often, the individual gets lost in the equation; attention is turned to the sum over the parts. For the past three years, San Francisco-based photographer [Katy Grannan](#) has walked the streets of Los Angeles and San Francisco observing what many choose to overlook — subjects for whom life has been hard and despair has been plenty. Working within the grand tradition of portraiture, Grannan has selected a wide range of subjects for her recent body of work, *Boulevard*, which is currently on view at [Fraenkel Gallery](#) in San Francisco. Grannan turns the city into her studio, shooting each subject on a variety of white surfaces found on location. Relying only the strong California light and a stark white backdrop, the physicality of her chosen subjects open a myriad of narrative possibilities that simultaneously evoke hardship and optimism. I recently spoke with the artist about the series, *Boulevard*, her upcoming film project, *The Believers*, and the shared history between the viewer and her subjects.



Katy Grannan. Anonymous, LA, 2009. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery

Seth Curcio: The portraits in your new series *Boulevard* are striking in their simplicity. Yet, given the reductive context, each photograph speaks volumes about the subject. The physical qualities of the individual make evident their distance to the what most call the American dream. With the narrative possibilities being so strong, I wonder what are the guiding principles used to select your subjects?

Katy Grannan: It's difficult to explain what makes someone especially interesting to me – it's a combination of personality, spirit, and their actual, physical being. These photographs, as you mentioned, are so reductive – photographic description and detail is virtually all there is – & hopefully physical description becomes illuminating on another, psychological level. It's important that the photograph describes a particular subject, but it also has to speak to something much larger, so that the viewer has the sense of a shared history; they're portraits of all of us.

SC: It's interesting that you mention photographic description and detail being all that is available to the viewer. Given the reduction of image context, light becomes an even more prominent component in this work than in earlier series and remains consistent, as each figure is illuminated on a stark white ground. This purity of light is something that is evocative of the west and California in particular. Do you view the light as a metaphor? Something that is simultaneously seductive and revealing?

KG: Yes, certainly. It was the first thing I observed when I moved to California. The light is so seductive and comforting, and at the same time it kills everything – nothing stays green very long – and the light can be relentless and indiscriminate. It illuminates everything, everyone.



Boulevard installation image, Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery

SC: Each of the portraits speaks to how the ideals of a particular city can physically wear on the subject. It seems that this is most evident in your portraits from LA, as the city has come to represent celebrity and wealth, while its reality is often much darker. It seems like the vain pursuit of beauty has worn physically

on many of the subjects, leaving little more than the residue of longing for an unobtainable dream. Yet, there is a persistent optimism that runs through the series.

KG: I'm glad you mentioned optimism. I definitely did not want the series to be a parade of despair, nor am I interested in smiley happy people (family photo albums are already filled with those pictures – this has always irritated me). Each one of these photographs is like a short story and part of that narrative, of course, is the part where they're working with me to make a photograph on the spot, right after we've met. The dynamic is different every time, but it's almost always a lot of fun. People really get into it, and it requires a generosity and openness to be part of this process, to dance on the sidewalk in front of traffic, to wave at strangers honking. And I love the spirit of someone like the 80 year old woman who still wears bright lipstick and eyeliner – she deserves to feel gorgeous, and she is. Or the eighty year old man that handed me his business card that read "International Playboy." These are the people I want to know better. But of course, all of our histories are complex – there is disappointment, shame, loneliness, and there's also joy. I want all of it to exist, messily and awkwardly, in the photographs. Because that's life.

SC: Have there been any personal stories shared with you by your subjects that you find particularly captivating?

KG: Yes, almost everyone shares a lot with me. Each one is like a story from *The Dubliners* or Chekhov. A few women spoke to me about having a nervous breakdown after they had kids and their husband didn't help out, then rejected them after their breakdown. Now they're alone; they were never able to fully recover. I see them as especially sensitive women – they're not crazy or strange, they're women who are vulnerable and sensitive and who live every day knowing their kids are out there somewhere, and these kids might never know that their moms did try, but it was just too much.

I've made several good friends – Nicole, Melissa, and Linda are three women that I spend a lot of time with, and whom I've also filmed for the past year.



Katy Grannan. Anonymous, SF, 2010. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery

SC: I understand that you have used that footage to create a video project titled *The Believers*, which premieres tomorrow night at 1453 Valencia St. in San Francisco. Tell me a little about the process of creating the video. How did this time-based medium effect the way that you approach the work, and how do you feel that it changes the viewer's relationship to the subject?

KG: I've thought a lot about this – it was really important that the film not “explain” the photographs, or reveal the mystery or ambiguity of the photographs. The film has a relationship to the photographs but it is entirely it's own thing. It's a little difficult to explain the premise of the film, but it deals with the nonlinear, disruptive nature of experience and memory. It is all footage that I shot of several women, with existing, ambient sound and dialogue, but it is not a documentary film by any means. I don't like that term, anyway – “documentary” – but the film intentionally weaves different subjects together, creates relationships and confusion among all of them. You don't necessarily know anything biographical about the subjects – except that they're all performing and masquerading – but it's meant to be disjointed and to mimic the way that one person or moment reminds me of another, and experiences are recalled in entirely new ways – they're almost reinvented, re-imagined memories. The film also shows the way that subjects and I interact with each other – they'll boss me around, tell me where to stand, etc – so it more directly deals with this aspect of collaboration and control. The women in the film have big personalities and strong opinions, and I respect that.

SC: Looking back at your older bodies of work, such as *The Westerns* and *Mystic Lake*, it is apparent that your work is in dialogue with the history of portraiture, both classical and commercial. It seems easy to place you in the lineage of Diane Arbus, given your choice of subjects, or Richard Avedon, given the reduction of context in the portraits. However, I think much of your work goes beyond this type of comparison, leaving me feeling as if it is too easy to just lump you with those photographers. Which photographers of the past do you feel best inform your practice and which contemporary artists do you look to for inspiration?



Boulevard installation image, Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery

KG: I take no offense in comparisons. I often think artists and people who write about art place way too much importance on the appearance of novelty and obtuse sound bites, but if they really did their homework they'd see relationships and historical precedents all over the place. Arbus and Lisette Model, Robert Frank and Walker Evans, etc. are obvious examples. No one works in a vacuum; there is precedent and dialogue in every medium and expression and those relationships can be really interesting. ("Tradition and the Individual Talent" by T.S. Elliot should be required reading). The uniqueness or particularity of serious work is often in more thoughtful, quieter differences – all of which have to do with our own biography, experiences, and the world that we're faced with at any given time.

I could give you a very long list of artists whose work I admire, and an even longer list of writers and film makers that have influenced my work. But I really like what Robert Gober said: "Whenever I give a talk about my work I am invariably asked who my influences are. Not what my influences are, but who.. As if the gutter, misunderstandings, memories, sex, dreams, and books matter less than forebears do. After all, in terms of influences, it is as much the guy who mugged me on Tenth Street, or my beloved dog who passed away much too early, as it was Giotto or Diane Arbus."



Katy Grannan. Anonymous, SF, 2009. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery

SC: *Boulevard* is accompanied by a beautiful catalog that includes additional work not on view at Fraenkel Gallery. In the back of the book there is an amazing quote taken from the Kinks song *Celluloid Heros* written by Ray Davies. The lyrics contain the stanza...

*“Everybody’s a dreamer and everybody’s a star
And everyone’s in show biz, it doesn’t matter who you are
And those who are successful
Be always on your guard
Success walks hand in hand with failure
Along Hollywood Boulevard”*

This line really captures the feeling that your subjects could be anyone of us, at anytime. What we constitute as our reality is often much more fragile than we perceive. You made a statement that “the viewer has the sense of a shared history; they’re portraits of all of us.” That statement, coupled with the *Celluloid Heros* lyrics, is really poignant. It seems that for many, the West is still synonymous with freedom and boundless opportunity. This is obviously an illusion, but has working on this project caused you to reflect on your personal relationship to California or the West in general?

KG: Sure it has. But what’s impressed me more is that many of us still try; we make the leap of faith; and sometimes we willfully create an alternate, perhaps even a delusional reality. That isn’t limited to California – it’s only limited by our imagination and our circumstances. My grandmother was the queen of alternate realities, and I think it’s what kept her alive and joyful for a very long time. She wasn’t crazy – she was imaginative and stubborn and, to paraphrase Tony Kushner, sometimes living in the world can be unbearably ordinary.

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1.  [daniel](#) [January 20th, 2011 at 8:49 am](#)

A few women spoke to me about having a nervous breakdown after they had kids and their husband didn’t help out, then rejected them after their breakdown.... Your quote reminded me of John Cassavetes’s movie “A Woman under the Influence”. In irony, the body of works echo’s the film’s cinematography. Beautiful!

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- Check out our interview with Katy Grannan on DS today! <http://bit.ly/fXnl1P> about 2 hours ago from web

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Discussion

- ["A few women spoke to me about having a nervous breakdown after they had kids and their husband didn't help out, then rejected them after their breakdown.... Your quote reminded me of John..."](#)
—daniel
- ["the part about kanye wanting his album to be banned for publicity is untrue. it was debunked on his fansite \(kanyetothe.com\) calvin tomkins can go and fuck himself."](#)
—Droolin
- ["It's snowing outside the windows after act 2 and 4. Pretty cool."](#)
—Harry
- ["nice observations. I love accidental \(or not so accidental, these are curated exhibits after all\) conflicts and context that you find in large collections."](#)
—Colleen

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