

August 21, 2005

Embalming the American Dreamer

NEW YORK, SUNDAY, AUGUST 21, 2005

By PHILIP GEFTER

KATY GRANNAN finds models for her portraits by placing classified advertisements in local papers: *Art models wanted: Female photographer seeks people for portraits. All ages. All types. No experience necessary. Will pay.* But she's not looking for adventure. "I was uncomfortable approaching people I didn't know," she said on the phone from Berkeley, Calif. "Out of that trepidation I started to place ads."

More than 70 of these pictures - made primarily in New York City, upstate New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania - are to be published next month by the Aperture Foundation in "Model American, Katy Grannan." Although each subject was a stranger to Ms. Grannan, none of the pictures seem formal or distant. What comes across instead is an unlikely blend of intimacy and artifice.

Initially Ms. Grannan, 36, who commutes regularly from her home in Berkeley to New York, was surprised by how many people answered her ads, and by the similarities in their living circumstances. In the small towns in upstate New York where the ads appeared for her first series, "Poughkeepsie Journal," many of the respondents were young women in their 20's who had just moved back home after college.

"I noticed the similarity to my own experience - a lot of common ground," said Ms. Grannan, who was a graduate student in photography at Yale at the time. For one thing, she said, that region of New York reminded her of the suburbs of Boston, where she grew up. She would meet a model, she recalled, "feeling like I was meeting an old friend, or at least empathizing with a time in someone else's life from which I had just emerged."

The young women all lived in the same kinds of houses - decorated with similar carpeting, wood paneling and framed landscape paintings - and many made the appointments to be photographed when their parents would not be home. This added a secretive adolescent element to the portrait sessions, as if, Ms. Grannan said, the girls weren't ready to be adults yet.

Their eagerness to be photographed also had a quality of rebellion, which led to a conspiratorial intimacy between photographer and subject, like that of fast friends in high school.

For each session, Ms. Grannan arrived with a 4 x 5 camera, lights and a fan. A fan? "When I was a kid," she explained, "my friends and I used to imitate glamour pictures by setting up a fan and putting on lots of makeup."

She would spend several hours with each model, asking questions and letting each one describe her life as they walked around the house looking for a spot to take the picture. In the process, the models showed her clothing or pointed out objects that were meaningful to them.

In the case of "Ghent, 2000," the first thing Ms. Grannan noticed about the young woman's home (which she shared with her mother) were dozens of birds in cages. After some discussion, the model ran upstairs to put on her mother's old prom gown. In this mundane environment, with the glare of photographic lighting against wood paneling, the model struck a classical pose in her elegant dress, graced by the bird on her hand: a suburban teenager transformed, for the moment, into a John Singer Sargent heiress.

Ms. Grannan says she thinks that her models volunteered as a way to assert their individuality against their seemingly bland surroundings and circumstances. The portrait sessions required a leap of faith, trust and risk by the subjects; what motivated them, she mused, could be a longing for new experience and for transformation, combined with naiveté and a streak of exhibitionism. Many of her models opted to pose naked, as in the portrait of one young woman in the "Poughkeepsie Journal" series who stands like Venus on the half shell in her living room. She was posing nude in defiance of the wishes of her boyfriend, who was not present. "She began posing in a way that came too close to imitating Playboy poses," Ms. Grannan said. "I asked her just to stand in front of me and walk toward the camera."

In Ms. Grannan's pictures, the subjects are captured between a fantasy of what they aspire to be and who they really are. "I always liked Stendhal's definition of beauty being a promise of happiness," Ms. Grannan said. "It implies something that is always out of reach."

The first photograph in this body of work, "Untitled 1998," was taken after Ms. Grannan walked through the house with her 18-year-old subject and looked through her closet. They picked an outfit - a little girl's dress that suggests an emotional age at odds with the model's chronological age - and chose a spot outdoors. What emerges in the portrait is a porcelain-skinned doll superimposed on - and out of proportion with - her backyard surroundings. Ms. Grannan often plays with this disparity between subject and background. With the camera positioned below the girl's waistline, she looms large in the environment and is also somehow apart from it.

As an influence, Ms. Grannan cites one of her teachers at Yale, Philip-Lorca di Corcia, whose color photographs, though highly premeditated, look as though he just happened upon the scene. The tension between artifice and spontaneity gives his work a hyperrealistic clarity - and for the



Courtesy of the Aperture Foundation
"Ghent, 2000," from the series,
"Dream America."



Courtesy of the Aperture Foundation
"Untitled, 1998," from the series,
"Poughkeepsie Journal."



"Untitled, 1998"

Courtesy of the Aperture Foundation

viewer, a sense of entering his pictures in medias res. The same can be said of Ms. Grannan's pictures, which have a posed, frozen feel, but also the immediacy of a snapshot.

Even more significant an influence, Ms. Grannan said, is Diane Arbus. Ms. Grannan's models are far more conventional than Arbus's dwarfs and transvestites, of course, but her way of capturing them in mock performance exposes them in ways that defy our expectations.

Richard Avedon liked to say that all of his portraits were self-portraits. The same could be said of Ms. Grannan's pictures, which reflect an unusual biographical detail: she comes from a family of undertakers, and many of her figures look virtually embalmed. (The Grannan Funeral Home has been in business in Arlington, Mass., for decades.)

"My great-grandmother lived in the funeral home in an apartment above the viewing rooms," she said. "We'd visit on Sundays after church, and I was always obsessed with the knowledge that there was a dead body beneath us. So many times, I'd sneak down there and have a private viewing - usually a body in an open casket, surrounded by lots of flowers, ready for visitors later in the day."

In her highly collaborative portrait sessions, she tries to identify with her model. But, at a certain point, she steps back and isolates some quality of experience - aspiration, delusion, weakness - and holds it at arm's length, as if it were something universal that supersedes the subject, suspended in photographic relief.

"The work isn't an invitation to gawk or judge," she said. "We all share aspects of the photographs - physical and psychological scars, desire, vulnerability, etc. I want to find that common ground, whether it evokes sympathetic understanding or intense discomfort or, hopefully, both."

In her most recent series, "Mystic Lake," Ms. Grannan abandoned domestic environments. Instead of the leafy wallpaper and other decorative elements she found in her models' homes, the landscape itself became the backdrop. "Paul, b. 1969" was photographed in a wooded location about five minutes from where Ms. Grannan grew up. To her, he seemed the image of a tough guy from East Boston, where he lived - that extra amount of hair gel, saint medallions around his neck. Because it was a sweltering summer day, he removed his jeans to reveal long underwear, and he pulled up his shirt.

"I thought of Sally Mann's photograph of the very pregnant woman and her daughter, with the woman's dress or skirt pulled up over her belly," she said. "He didn't exactly look androgynous but his belly was huge and womanly."

Most of the men in Ms. Grannan's portraits seem feminized. Often they are leaning back or lying down, either naked or wearing clinging fabrics. Recently, in California, she has been photographing transgendered people. "I have been thinking a lot about how it is the ultimately courageous act - to be born one way and to feel alienated from one's own body, and then to live openly as someone new."

That sense of assuming a new identity - at least for the moment, in front of the camera - is palpable in her portraits. The title of her new book, "Model American: Katy Grannan," underscores that notion: American stereotypes are transformed into a new breed of model Americans, through the collaboration of subject and photographer.

"Every person is a brand new idea for every single picture," Ms. Grannan said. But "looking at the book as I put it together, this reveals more about me than I ever realized."

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"Paul, b. 1969," from the series, "Mystic Lake."

Courtesy of the Aperture Foundation