

# Arkrush Interview

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Katy Grannan



*Paul Laster interviews [Katy Grannan](#) about her photographic portraits of people in domestic settings and natural environments.*

**AK:** How do you find your models?

**KG:** Different ways. I used to almost exclusively find them by [placing ads in newspapers](#), but now more often than not, I approach people wherever, whenever. Also, many subjects refer their friends and acquaintances. There is often a weird, loose network of people that know one another throughout my pictures.

**AK:** How much instruction do you give your subjects? How do they arrive at the final pose that you choose to print?

**KG:** It's always different. There isn't a prescription. Some people ask for lots of direction — where to look, how to hold their hands, etc. Others are naturals — they come up with their own thing. Usually, though, I photograph them long enough that any initial discomfort or uncertainty fades away. I think some people just get bored or go into another zone. Right now I am photographing someone who directs me a lot. She has very strong opinions and her own ideas. I have to work really, really fast with her because she is always moving around, always telling me to hurry up. It's rare that I am bossed around. But she makes the pictures better; that's for sure.

**AK:** Do you ask the sitters to pose nude? Why do you think some subjects want to model nude and others prefer to be clothed?

**KG:** Ultimately, they make that decision. First, I often share my work with them so they have a sense of the kind of pictures I've made, and then they tell me what they're comfortable doing or not doing. As for why some people are comfortable with nudity and others are not, the explanations are as diverse and unique as the subjects themselves. So it's a long, varied answer. Another interesting question points to the viewer: why do some viewers respond to the pictures with generosity, sensitivity, and even humor, while others feel ashamed and incredulous? Even worse, why do some feel ashamed for the subject? An art critic here in San Francisco, of all places, [recently wrote](#) that he was embarrassed for some of my subjects since they were physically imperfect and, in his mind, not sophisticated enough to know what they were doing. It astonished me.

**AK:** Do you think being a female photographer makes your subjects more comfortable at posing nude?

**KG:** Probably. A lot of women tell me they wouldn't pose for a man. Though more important than gender is probably a gut feeling they get about me, and, in turn, I work with people that I trust — even if we're meeting for the first time. It's an intuitive thing.

**AK:** Is there a psychological interpretation that the viewer brings to your portraits or is that something you capture in the pose?

**KG:** All of the above. Hopefully more. I mean, I am not interested in making illustrations. And I am not smart enough to tell people what to think.

**AK:** The [Sugar Camp Road and Mystic Lake series](#) were shot outdoors. How does the natural environment affect the sitter?

**KG:** Almost all of the shots were in public spaces, so there was always the possibility of being watched, interrupted, or stumbled upon. One time, a guy was hiding in the bushes, videotaping me, and the woman I was photographing, who was clothed. I was furious and called him out. He was so pathetic hiding back there. When I asked him to shut off his camera, he said we were on public land and he had the right to film us. I guess he was right, in a way, but it still felt like a violation, especially since he never took the camera away from his face and kept on filming as I pleaded with him. He probably zoomed in on my mouth, blah, blah, blah. It's kind of funny in retrospect, but at the time, it felt almost violent to me.

**AK:** Art critic [Jerry Saltz](#) said that your subjects seem like "strangers enacting [Cindy Sherman](#) and [Robert Mapplethorpe](#) pictures." Do you believe that the people responding to your classified ads are that savvy? What do you think they are trying to say about themselves?

**KG:** I think what he is referring to is performance — the knowledge that one is being photographed and, more importantly, being seen. And sometimes we imitate conventions whether or not we're even aware of it. We all do it. How someone, any of us, wants to be seen and how we are actually perceived is another long conversation. Every day we interact with people and present ourselves to the world

in a way that is entirely caged in our own perception. A person I photographed recently in San Francisco told me, "All we really have are our delusions, dear." It was so [Baby Jane](#). Absolutely perfect. I have always been interested in the ways photography can be transformative — even as a kid I made pictures as a way to escape and to create my own universe. [Garry Winogrand](#) explained it best: a picture is a new fact.

**AK:** The press release for your 2005 monograph [Model American](#), which was published by [Aperture](#), touts you as a protégé of [Gregory Crewdson](#). Did you develop your photographic style while studying with him at Yale? What artists have inspired your work?

**KG:** I studied with Greg and with [Tod Papageorge](#), and they were both influential to me. They are very different artists, but the combination of their yin and yang was invaluable. Plus, Gregory is a very generous guy. He is supportive of a lot of his students. This is a rare thing in the art world and something for which I am extremely grateful. Yale is a place that isn't interested in put-on, artsy flourishes or theory-laden conceits. It suited me well. I had never been to art school — before then, I worked in complete isolation; I don't think I even had any artist friends — so I was nervous that I'd be out of place, not savvy enough. They couldn't have cared less. Yale is rooted in [Walker Evans'](#) and Garry Winogrand's approach to picture-making: let the pictures speak for themselves. Obviously, if you're an intelligent, hardworking artist who has something to say about the world, then the ideas will be there. No need to spell it all out or hide behind rhetoric. I remember [Dean \(Richard\) Benson](#) telling sculpture students to "stop talking and start making." It was almost radically un-arty. As for influential artists, well, Cindy Sherman, [Philip-Lorca diCorcia](#), [Diane Arbus](#), [Peter Hujar](#), and [Paul Outerbridge](#) have been and still are important to me. I'm also enormously influenced by music, all different genres. To me, it is the greatest art form. With music, you either feel something or you don't, and a song can transport you to a specific time and place in your life. A beautiful voice breaks my heart. [Billie Holiday](#), [Neil Young](#), [Will Oldham](#) — they sound so raw and vulnerable. I forgot [Robert Plant](#). Can't leave out [Led Zeppelin](#)!

**AK:** Your photographs have primarily been shot in rural areas of the Northeast. How is living in San Francisco influencing your recent work? When will it be unveiled?

**KG:** The outdoor areas appear rural, but they're mostly in suburban parks. A few locations in upstate New York were more rural. I've been working so much out here in San Francisco. It's been a very productive time. I love this place — the light, the people, the mythology, and expectations in moving west and starting over, only to be faced with yourself. I think I've been making my best work out here. It'll be shown soon...

*Katy Grannan is represented by [Salon 94](#) and [Greenberg Van Doren Gallery](#) in New York, and [Fraenkel Gallery](#) in San Francisco.*

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