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Boulevard

KATY GRANNAN

JAN 06 - FEB 19

by Jeremiah Barber

Katy Grannan's new exhibition, *Boulevard*, at the Fraenkel Gallery, consists of twenty-five portraits, which, in this talented photographer's hands, amount to twenty-five short stories. Her subjects tell the stories of San Francisco's and Los Angeles' hardened street culture, rich and profuse like a contemporary *Canterbury Tales*. See here how the woman with weak knees has dressed her giraffe-print dress to match her beaded swan bag, while the man in drag has whiskers peeking through densely rubbed on base; look at the shirtless, pierced, and decorated playboy with two tattoos of scorpions, one twenty years old and one crisp and fresh.

Grannan has surrounded each of these figures with an aura of almost-white: stucco or painted plywood patterns reveal under-layers of dirt and graffiti. The sun is always hot and high, setting long, macabre shadows across their faces. It's just not possible to maintain a facade, as many of Grannan's figures sport eyeliner and lipstick that don't quite match up.

Produced digitally, each work is titled *Anonymous*, and Grannan's subjects turn their eyes defiantly from her camera. More "street" than posed, detailed ink, dirt, and stains hint at untold histories. One woman with a painted mole is dressed in a Marilyn dress and wig. Her eyebrows furrowed in deep distress, she yearns for celebrity and finds something of the sort through Grannan's photograph.

Grannan established herself through portraits that pushed the boundary between reflection and exploitation of her sitter's identity. Half-clothed and reclined at awkward angles, her subjects rarely seemed comfortable in their nudity. Grannan often channels Diane Arbus, as some of the rougher inhabitants of *Boulevard* are cast into the explicit lens of high art (the exhibition's press release calls them "hustlers, strutters, addicts and beauty queens"). Though Arbus' exposés are still the subject of great controversy, her willingness to explore ineffable stories, as Grannan has taken to, might have helped thin the



Anonymous, Los Angeles, 2008; Archival Pigment Print, 39 x 29 in. Courtesy of Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco.

margins of society. The photograph can, after all, transform oddity into celebrity.

It may be contentious ground, but there is no mistaking the gentle handling of the subjects of *Boulevard*. Grannan's photographs are heroically colorful, her subjects' upturned perspectives dignified. They win a lively affectation, surely the product of a great quantity of time and attention—elevated, endearing attention. And we all want a little attention.

BOULEVARD IS ON VIEW AT [FRAENKEL GALLERY](#), IN SAN FRANCISCO, THROUGH FEBRUARY 19, 2011. KATY GRANNAN'S FILM *THE BELIEVERS* WILL BE SCREENED CONTINUOUSLY FROM NOON UNTIL 7 P.M. WEDNESDAYS THROUGH SUNDAYS AT 1453 VALENCIA ST., SAN FRANCISCO.

Jeremiah Barber is a writer and inter-media artist investigating the intersection between art and action. A recent graduate of Stanford University's MFA program, he is teaching video art there as adjunct faculty. A former member of Marina Abramovic's Independent Performance Group, Barber has exhibited his work at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, and the Chicago Cultural Center, as well as at the Worth Ryder Gallery and San Francisco's The Lab. He is a regular contributor to KQED's Visual Arts blog. And he has spent the last several months trying to capture a cloud of smoke that is shaped like his head.