For the past five years, Katy Grannan has been driving 100 miles south almost every week from her home in Berkeley on the edge of San Francisco Bay to Modesto in California’s Central Valley. Like other cities along State Route 99 – Stockton, Merced, Fresno, Bakersfield – Modesto is one of those places that tourists driving between San Francisco and Los Angeles pass through without stopping. This is the area where, in the 1930s, John Steinbeck set *The Grapes of Wrath* and Dorothea Lange took her famous photographs of migrant sharecroppers. Both were beacons for Grannan during the making of *The Nine*, her first feature-length film, which will be screened in London next week.

South Ninth Street – known locally as “The Nine” – is Modesto’s most blighted neighbourhood, with its cheap motels, drugs and prostitution. Grannan’s film features several of its desperate inhabitants, whom she came to know while working on a series of photographs there between 2011 and 2013. When they asked her, “Why do you want to see drug addicts dying?” she told them about Heather. Heather was Grannan’s childhood best friend. They lived in Arlington, Massachusetts, a town on the edge of Boston that Grannan considered “unbearably boring” when she was growing up there in the 1970s and 1980s. She and Heather had parallel lives: they lived in almost identical houses, pretty clapboard cottages two doors apart on Spy Pond Lane, and they went to the same schools. They dealt with the boredom by getting into trouble. Nothing serious, says Grannan, just “stupid stuff”: running away, hitchhiking with strangers, occasional shoplifting. Of the pair, Grannan says that she was the more reckless. “I tended to tempt fate in a way that Heather did not.”

When she was about eight years old, Grannan’s grandmother gave her a Kodak Instamatic. She used it obsessively – taking mainly portraits of her friends and family. “It was a very controlled and comfortable way for me to navigate the world,” she says, “to be skirting around the outside and paying attention through the lens.” Photography, for her, was “a tether.”

At 18, Grannan went to do a liberal arts degree at the University of Pennsylvania, after which she planned to apply to medical school. One day in 1994, sitting on her bed, she picked up a copy of the New York Times Magazine with a grizzled portrait of the legendary photographer Robert Frank on the cover. Grannan read the article and marvelled at the black-and-white photographs from *The Americans* that Frank made on a road trip across the country in 1955 and 1956.

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Grannan found her subject matter in some of the toughest parts of American society. Now she has made her first feature film about them. She talks to Jonathan Griffin about invisible lives made visible, and beauty in the ugliest of circumstances. Portrait by Bryan Schutmaat
that moment. I knew. I had no idea that one could do that.” She grew up in the plains of becoming a doctor and, after a period of travelling, in 1997 applied successfully to study photography at Yale.

She and Heather had grown apart in their late teens, when Heather took up with a different, druggy crowd. She had lived for a time on the streets of Boston with Heather. Grannan knew people from her elementary school who’d ended up the same way, and one of her cousins had lived for a time on the streets of Boston with Heather.

The last time that Grannan saw Heather was in 1993. She was walking with a cane and must have weighed, Grannan guessed, no more than 80lbs. Heather said to her, “It’s funny how life turns out. I thought I’d be more like you, and you’d be more like me.”

There is not a day that I don’t think about what she said,” Grannan says. “She was walking with a cane, and I knew that moment. I knew. I had no idea that one could do that.”

A

At Yale, Grannan was a star student. In 1999, one of her professors, the photographer Gregory Crewdson, included her work in an exhibition at the Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren gallery in New York titled Another Girl, Another Planet. Of the 13 young photographers in the show, 12 were women. The exhibition was the talk of New York, and Grannan — along with others of the group — was featured in glossy magazines such as Vogue,Numero and Harper’s Bazaar. “It felt like an out-of-body experience,” she says, “watching the whole fuss and hype and backlash.”

There are many bizarre portraits from this period: a series she called Protagonist Journal after the local newspaper in upstate New York where she had placed an ad for non-professional models: “Art Models. Artists/Photographer (female) seeks people for portraits. No experience necessary. Leave msg.” Many of the responses came from young white women of a similar age and background to herself, whom she photographed in their unremarkable suburban homes.

For her next series, Dream America, she included men. “I started pushing the boundaries of discomfort, towards what was increasingly more risky,” she says. She took her models to secluded locations, into the woods or to a lake, and two years later shot another set of pictures near her childhood home in Arlington. “I was never scared, not really,” she tells me. “I liked making my way through the discomfort, the awkwardness, and getting to a strangely familiar place and an ease with each other.”

Her intention, she says, was never to be critical of them, male or female. After all, these were people who were volunteering to be photographed, who chose how they wanted to present themselves, clothed or unclothed, reclining in underwear or even — as with her 2003 portrait “Jada” from her Sugar Camp Road series — semi-naked and knee-deep in a muddy bog. These are many bizarre portraits from this period: a young woman lying in a shallow river, reminiscent of John Everett Millais’ “Ophelia”, or another sitting in the dirt beside a country track wearing an orange knit bikini. Not only are the photographs, on the whole, unflattering, they seem to reveal something about their sitters that they never intended us to see: a mismatch between their self-image and the image captured by the camera. Grannan says that the same is true even when she sees photographs of herself: “It’s of me, but it’s not me. Portraiture can be interpreted as a kind of betrayal,” she says, “but in fact it’s fiction.”

G

raman, who at 46 is strikingly elegant, with pale green eyes, high cheekbones and fair hair pulled back, now lives in Berkeley with her husband John McNeil, an advertising art director. They have three children (two daughters, eight and 4, and a son, 12), and they moved from Brooklyn to California in 2010, after McNeil was offered a job in San Francisco. Grannan, in any case, was finding the effort of balancing motherhood and her career in New York to be intolerable.

In California, her modus operandi changed, though it was hardly less risky. Instead of placing small ads in newspapers, she began to approach strangers in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district and on Los Angeles’s Hollywood Boulevard, both downtrodden areas afflicted by social problems, and asked to take their photographs. She frequently chose a plain white wall as the backdrop — something that came to be her trademark, along with the harsh, bleached-out tones cast by the unforgiving California sunlight. “I wanted to remove them from context,” she says of her subjects, “almost like an abstraction. You didn’t need to know where they lived — it wasn’t about that — it was really all about the person.”

Around this time, Grannan began to do something she had never done before: she developed friendships with some of...
I wouldn’t spend my life taking pictures of people I was judging.” She does not see her work as being cruel. “I think the covers of W magazine are cruel, or the depictions of lives in Hollywood movies.”

The idea that there are people in society who should not be photographed, who are beneath representation, is anathema to her. “Do you not ever go there? Or do you go there in the spirit of fairness, or even love? I think the best portraiture comes out of love.”

Grannan went to Modesto for the first time in 2009. She was looking for Nicole, who had disappeared – as she had before – from the Tenderloin. She knew that South Ninth Street is a place where people like Nicole often end up. She knocked on doors of motel rooms, showing people photographs of Nicole and asking if they had seen her. She didn’t find Nicole, but she did meet many other people whom she later photographed for her series The 99 (which includes people from other cities along Route 99) and The Nine. By this time, Grannan says, “I was feeling out how to make a film.”

Although she rejects the terms “documentary” and “fly-on-the-wall”, her film The Nine consists entirely of unscripted footage of people in their natural environments, the sitters and photographed them repeatedly. She became especially close to Gail and Dale, two middle-aged transvestites from San Francisco, and to Nicole, an attractive young woman whose problems with addiction reminded her of Heather.

The people to whom Grannan found herself drawn, particularly in her Boulevard series from 2008-10, were those who were struggling through the world, “whose inner lives”, she says, “are revealed in the lines on their faces”. If not necessarily homeless, they are part of a large urban underclass, people who scrape together a living and are ignored by society. “They know that people will not look them in the eye. They know that they are barely regarded as people. We live in a society that values fame, that values being visible, and equates being visible with having worth. What does it mean to be invisible?”

Throughout the Boulevard series we encounter people, such as the ageing Marilyn Monroe impersonator, who plainly want to be seen, who dress flamboyantly and pose confidently and unapologetically for the camera. These are individuals who are down but not out, for whom, says Grannan, “there was still that glimmer, there was always a sense of possibility.”

“I don’t understand people who say the work is exploitative,” she says. “My intention is the opposite. We live in a society that values fame, that values being visible. What does it mean to be invisible?”

Grannan says, “I was feeling out how to make a film.” Although she rejects the terms “documentary” and “fly-on-the-wall”, her film The Nine consists entirely of unscripted footage of people in their natural environments.
going about their business. On South Ninth Street, where the homeless and unemployed spend their days shooting dice, shooting drugs and hustling for their next fix, that can make for grim viewing.

The Nine is remarkable for a non-fiction film about the depths of poverty and addiction because throughout it is not only watchable but also often profoundly beautiful. “The truth is that beauty and ugliness coexist,” Grannan tells me. “The river does look beautiful on a sunny day.”

People in Modesto go to the river to relax, to forget about their troubles, even though it is well known that dead bodies have been found in the water with sickening frequency.

Grannan’s personal involvement with her subjects made things difficult, too. As she came to know the ins and outs of each person’s story, her sympathy became tempered with something else, something harder. “I worked very hard to keep judgement out of the equation,” she says. “I wouldn’t have wanted to be there if I was feeling critical. But I’m also probably not the bleeding heart that I was when I started.”

Where Grannan could help people, she did. She paid everyone for their time – up to $50 per hour of filming, or a week’s rent in exchange for a full day. Because of this, it seemed that almost everyone on South Ninth Street wanted to be in the film, so she had to make choices.

“I didn’t go there to try and save anybody – that wasn’t my purpose – but when people asked for help, I was definitely there for them.” But there were times when she felt taken advantage of, too.

**‘I WORK VERY HARD TO KEEP JUDGEMENT OUT OF THE EQUATION... BUT I’m ALSO NOT THE BLEEDING HEART I WAS WHEN I STARTED’**

Towards the end of the film, Kiki speaks directly to Grannan (who is behind the camera), in tears. When she was 11, she says, she discovered that her uncle was sexually molesting her baby nephew. She took his gun from where she knew he hid it, and shot and killed him. She does not regret it. Her parents abandoned her, signing over responsibility for her care to the state and, designated mentally unstable, she bounced between group care homes throughout her teens. Eventually she ran away to fend for herself on the streets.

While Grannan’s camera rolls, Kiki opens up completely. “You are the only family I have,” she says through her sobs. “I don’t want you guys to feel sorry for me, the only thing I want... just don’t leave me.” Grannan told me that she felt in that moment that Kiki was “about as brave as I’ve seen anyone ever be”. It was Kiki who confronted Grannan with the question that she was asking herself at the time: “What do I do when I’m done with this movie?”

Grannan doesn’t hide her friendships with her subjects, nor her pride in their achievements. She tells me that she speaks several times a week to Kiki, who has just announced that she is getting married. Nicole lives a couple of miles from Grannan in Oakland, sober and finishing school. “We were all aware, at all times, that we were making a film together,” she says. “It became this common creative project. People really valued being seen and being heard. And someone caring.”

It is a thread that has run throughout her work since her earliest photographs of strangers: the power of the camera not only to objectify but to dignify a subject as someone worth looking at.

Katy Grannan will be in conversation with Phillip Prodger, head of photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, London, on May 19, 4pm-5pm, at Somerset House; photolondon.org. Her film “The Nine” will be screened in the NPG’s Ondaatje Wing Theatre on May 20, 2.30pm, tickets £7; npg.org.uk