THE NINE
A FILM BY KATY GRANNAN
THE NINE is an intimate and unflinching portrait of a ravaged community living on Modesto’s South Ninth Street—“The Nine”—a barren, forgotten street in California’s Central Valley (the setting for The Grapes of Wrath and Dorothea Lange’s Migrant Mother). The film focuses on Kiki, an effervescent and childlike drifter, whose only means of escape is through her imagination, and whose precarious sense of self-worth hinges on the making of the film. THE NINE never sensationalizes—rather, it is a quiet elegy to Kiki and others living on The Nine, each of whom clings to the possibility of an alternate life. Through Kiki’s brave vulnerability, keen observations of lost childhood and the fundamental need for connection, the distance between ourselves and “the other” is erased.

LOG LINE

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The film takes place in Modesto, one of the many off-ramps dotting the sprawling, barren highway that runs down the spine of California’s Central Valley. Writer Joan Didion once described Highway 99 as “the trail of an intention gone haywire”—a road that “would never get a tourist to the California he came to see.” Through Grannan’s lens, the town and the street, The Nine, becomes a kind of Neverland in which people live in a constant state of arrested childhood. Unwilling to face the pain and responsibility of straight life, the characters in the film behave as children, reveling in the bliss of their perceived but unreal freedom. However, unlike Neverland, these characters do grow old. They cannot escape the terrible consequences of their actions, and rarely find the love they so desperately seek.

This is the world of THE NINE.

At the center of THE NINE is Kiki. Grannan’s deepening friendship with Kiki, and Kiki’s generous spirit and heartbreaking revelations offer an immersive and intimate perspective on her complicated life. We see her exuberance, delusion, and her struggle to escape both her memories and her own skin. As the film unfolds, we realize the extent to which Kiki is attached to the process of making this film, and her dependence on Grannan as her only trusted friend. The film candidly addresses the complicated nature of subject and author, and the responsibility Grannan has to her friend Kiki.

We meet Robert and April, once a suburban family, now homeless and mourning the loss of their child; Inessa, a transgendered woman who is the biological father to son, Jorden, now also living the hustle; Tony, the conscience and sage, whose love of music and singing becomes a temporary respite and source of joy for the entire community; Ginger, a gentle woman incapable of leaving her life on The Nine, who lets everything that matters to her slip away; and Wanda, who constantly speaks of her plans to open a mud wrestling club she’ll call “Modesto Down and Dirty.” These are the characters of this world—each unique but all collectively trapped in a place where the only thing that seems to move is the sun.

This cycle of desperation becomes its own normalcy—moments of sadness and humor, hope and regret, love, and ultimately, beauty, are as much the stuff of this world as they are of our own. The obvious truth revealed by THE NINE is that, perhaps, all any of us really have are our delusions—the stories we tell ourselves.
“I don’t want it to be that familiar story of blight and heroism or blight and pity. It’s like going into Purgatory and trying to find something shining, almost holy.” KATY GRANNAN
As much as this is Kiki’s story and about her life on The Nine, it’s also a deeply personal story. My first friend in the world—my next door neighbor, my daily playmate and friend from preschool well past high school—was unable to stop a terrible downward spiral and ended up on the street, where she lived for more than 20 years. The last time I saw her alive, she was slumped over, walking with a cane and looking about 30 years older than her actual age. She said she felt invisible. She was Jane Doe. After we exchanged details of our adult lives, she said to me, “It’s strange how life turns out. I would have thought I would be you and you would be me.”

Every person—particularly every woman rendered invisible and regarded as another Jane Doe—deserves to be seen and heard, and ultimately, to be remembered. So this is Kiki’s story, but it’s also my friend Heather’s story, and it’s the story of every other person who is part of an invisible America. They resemble anyone else in fundamental ways. They seek connection and love, and even when reality is unbearably cruel, they hang on to the possibility that tomorrow might be different. It’s that glimmer of hope, that shift in perspective, that is so remarkable.
Grannan was first recognized for an intimate series of portraits of strangers she met through newspaper advertisements. Informed by her own childhood in New England, the photographs are imbued with secrecy, desire and hidden intentions.

Since moving to California in 2006, Grannan has explored the relationship between aspiration and delusion—where our shared desire to be of worth confronts the uneasy prospect of anonymity. Together, Boulevard and The 99 unfold as a danse macabre of "anonymous" individuals.

Grannan’s photographs are included in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, the New York Guggenheim Museum, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others.

KATY GRANNAN

Katy Grannan (b. 1969, Arlington, Massachusetts) is a photographer and filmmaker living and working in the Bay Area. Grannan received her BA from the University of Pennsylvania and her MFA from the Yale School of Art. There are five monographs of her work: Model American, The Westerns, Boulevard, The 9 and The 99.

THE NINE, Grannan’s upcoming film, is an intimate, at times disturbing view into an America most would rather not believe exists. Raw, poetic, direct and unnerving, the film is less a window into a foreign world than a distorted mirror, reflecting our own shared existence.

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“Grannan is not only one of the best portrait photographers working today, she may be a legitimate heir to Diane Arbus.” JERRY SALTZ, THE VILLAGE VOICE

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THE NINE
TRAILER
Katy Grannan
Photographer and filmmaker Katy Grannan’s work is a spontaneous collaboration with places and their residents – from the East Coast to San Francisco, Hollywood, and California’s Central Valley. Grannan often grapples with the false promise of the American Dream and mythologized West. Her latest projects – “The 99,” named for the highway, and “The Nine,” named for a Modesto neighborhood – document the people of the marginalized Central Valley. She currently lives in Berkeley, CA and is working on her first feature film “The Nine.”

Outlook

As a kid, the only thing that I knew I loved to do was make photographs. I really had no clue that it could be my entire life. I had no point of reference. I was planning on going to medical school. In fact, I had just taken the MCATs when I read a New York Times piece on Robert Frank. I thought, “I’m not an art school kid. I’m not that person. I’ll be a fish out of water, but whatever, I’ll try.”

At some point I met a woman, a painter who had just graduated from Yale. She was the girlfriend of a friend. Anyway, she was so effusive about her experience at Yale and insisted that I at least give it a shot, because it had been so transformative for her. Her enthusiasm was contagious and it emboldened me to apply, even though I had never imagined myself in art school. I thought, “I’m not an art school kid. I’m not that person. I’ll be a fish out of water, but whatever, I’ll try.”

TS: So you thought of yourself as an artist?
KG: That was fifth grade.

TS: At some point I realized that photojournalism wasn’t exactly the kind of practice I wanted for myself. I recognized that it was important for me to face a more mundane reality and the distractions we invent to bear it. Meanwhile, I did whatever—I was a receptionist, had a temp job, whatever to make a little bit of money. Then I made my work at night and on weekends. Everything else was just a means to an end.

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But I was certain I’d be told there had been a mistake. (laughs) That I didn’t actually get in. For the first year I was filled with so much anxiety. I felt like I was among artists but I was not one of them. Even to this day, when people ask a question like, “Are you a photographer or an artist that uses photography?” I couldn’t care less about that conversation. It smacks of protesting too much. I just make the work I make.

I assume that, from that time to now, you have come into contact with many successful people who have similar stories of feeling fraudulent. Why do you think it’s so common for a talented person to believe in their work but also feeling like they might be fooling everybody?

KG: We know ourselves best, including our weaknesses, so that is a common thing. It’s this underlaying, deeply innate fear that you’re going to be found out—that everything you know to be a weakness in the work, everything that you recognize or believe to be the breaking point, will be discovered and called out.

At some point, I became more comfortable with the flaws, the failure—they’re a necessary and often compelling thing in the work.

TS: I think that it’s interesting that, as a kid, [you photographed] profiles in front of gingham wallpaper.

KG: That was fifth grade.

TS: So most of us in fifth grade—I was taking pictures with me curling my hair and maybe having a floor fan blowing on me and having my hair go back.

KG: I did, too. I did the model pictures. I tried to look like Cheryl Tiegs. Remember her?

TS: Of course. I was more of a Farrah Fawcett girl myself.

KG: I had her poster in my room.

TS: When you went to take pictures of others, you shifted gears into something with a theme?

KG: I never looked at it as having a theme. In retrospect, I can recognize that growing up around a funeral home influenced the way that I looked at every single human

Tabitha Soren

In conversation with Tabitha Soren for Issue Magazine

Do you remember the first portrait you ever took, or maybe the first time you attempted to take a serious picture, an art picture?

Katy Grannan: If I remember correctly, it was a Candida portrait I did of my mom and my dad.

TS: No. It’s a totally specific and great answer.

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being in the world. Photographing people was a way of memorializing them—acknowledging their value and their mortality at the same time. I was almost mourning every person. In the back of my mind I was always aware that people, that life, kept moving on.

**TS:** You were kind of preserving them?

**KG:** Again, I wasn’t so aware of this at the time. I remember exactly when I realized I was photographing people almost as if they were falling into their graves. It was the Mystic Lake pictures where I was over them and it was as if they were—

**TS:** Oh my God.

**KG:**—being sucked into or spit out of the earth. But again, (laughs) I didn’t go into it thinking, “I’m going to make these portraits of death.” It wasn’t that. But later it was so clear—yeah, I’m kind of doing that.

In retrospect, part of what I was doing was recognizing that a photograph would live on—it would have a life of its own. And this gesture of making a photograph was an act of tenderness or love that maybe I wasn’t comfortable enough to express personally, so the photograph was the communication.

**TS:** Do you feel like it also affects how you are drawn to subcultures of people who live their life on the edge, and their mortality at the same time? I was almost mourning every person. In the back of my mind I was always aware that people, that life, kept moving on.

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had an instance where you felt either physically threatened or someone was actually psychotic?

KG: Not really. Maybe once or twice.

TS: You’ve always been able to pull out the camera, take the picture, and not run out of the woods screaming, “Help!”

KG: Never.

TS: You’re not reckless with this.

KG: I’m somewhat reckless. But now I have kids. I don’t want to get injured and I don’t want to die. I’m not playing those games anymore. I’m here to make something.

TS: Tell me, because I just feel like your plate is very full. I know how hard it is to make television, film, moving pictures. It’s more complicated in a technological way—more equipment, more to carry, more people involved. I know you’ve made a film [associated with] “Boulevard.” What was it?

KG: It was an installation, “The Believers.”

TS: That’s right. So you already made “The Believers.” And what was that, 20 minutes?

KG: It was a looping nine minutes. It was an installation using three screens, and the video was a continuous loop, which probably made it seem like 20 minutes.

TS: Was that thrilling to have another element in the mix—now you’re making a full-length feature?

KG: I wanted to encompass the totality of what was going on. To make something out of all the amazing, unexpected relationships and experiences that surround the pictures. It’s really the stuff of life, the memories that you cling to. Which is actually, funny enough, the ordinary moments. My motivation behind making the work, which had everything to do with uncertainty, was having faith in what might unfold. After working all this time, I really just reached a point where I thought, “Really? Is this all I know how to do?” This is getting a little—

TS: If I see one more white wall—

KG: Exactly. I’ve visited everywhere in the Central Valley—up and down the 99, to the border and up the coast, and I kept revisiting this one neighborhood. It’s a very small, peripheral neighborhood in Modesto on South Ninth Street—locals refer to it as The Nine. I initially photographed a few people there for “The 99” work. I became friends with a few people on The Nine and they inspired me to make something new, to make another kind of portrait—a portrait of a place.

TS: A film portrait.

KG: Yeah. The film is called “The Nine.” I also needed to be a beginner again. I needed to risk complete failure. I’d been making photographs for so long, and “The Boulevard” and “The 99” work took quite a while to make. I was ready to unlearn what I knew.

I keep a quote by Philip Glass in my notebook that says “The work I did is the work I know, and the work I do is the work I don’t know. And it’s the not knowing that makes it interesting.”

So, making a film was like setting up a nearly impossible task for myself. This was brand new territory for me, and I knew almost nothing.

TS: There’s a bit of flying by the seat of your pants.

KG: I’m always flying by the seat of my pants. Even though some of the work might look formally repetitive, the process is always filled with uncertainty. I’m always going somewhere where I don’t know, finding my way around, never knowing who I’m going to meet. Usually I think, “There’s no way. I can’t do this anymore. It’s not going to work.” The process is full of variables and uncertainty even if the pictures formally look quite—

TS: Deliberate.

KG: And they are deliberate. But the making of them is filled with unknowns. And this kind of filmmaking is about responding to real life coming at you full speed. You never know how things will unfold, so you need to trust the process.

The degree of collaboration is greater, too. I’ve been working with Hannah Hughes, who was just out of college when she began helping me with the film. She’s a very talented photographer, so at some point I said, here, take a camera and let’s film this thing together.

We’ve also collaborated with and relied upon an entire community—we’ve relied on their interest and participation for nearly four years. With this level of commitment and time and energy on all sides, there’s a lot of give and take. And nobody’s just giving and nobody’s just taking. That was something I thought was really important to address in some way—the complicated nature of the artist/subject relationship.

In the film, Hannah and I are addressed a lot and obviously our presence affects everything. I’m also asked direct, difficult questions regarding my intentions and our relationships. Am I there only in the service of my work? Of course, the answer’s no. I’m there because
I’m deeply compelled—I see my friend Heather in every single person on The Nine.

And of course I’m also there to work. I’m making a film. I’m committed to this film, and yet I struggle with what to reveal or withhold—I don’t want to betray anybody. And at the same time, I’m making a film that embraces paradox and an uncomfortable complexity, because that’s what life looks like. It can be beautiful and horrible at the same time.

I want to convey all of the qualities about people that made me go there in the first place and inspired me to make this film. But I also don’t want to be false—I can’t be too polite because it’s not a polite place. People are way more complex and interesting than that. One of the women in the film, Kiki, told me how she thought I should make the film. She advised me to show what the place really looks like, not...

**TS:** Sanitizing it.

**KG:** Yeah. I thought it was such a brave thing to say. It’s something I’d really been struggling with. I don’t want it to be that familiar story of blight and heroism or blight and pity. And it’s not a film about addiction or what people do to make money. It’s a portrait of a complex place that’s also at times very familiar, even ordinary. The film uncovers what’s beautiful and resonant, and at times this seems like an impossible task. It’s like going into Purgatory and trying to find something shining, almost holy.

And you’ll recognize something of yourself in people, even though the world of The Nine might appear so utterly different from your world. Essentially, though, what we need and value, and what brings joy to our lives are quite similar—they’re the small victories. Not the epic drama, but the moments that are easy to overlook.

There’s a lot on The Nine that is utterly familiar. There’s also enormous hardship. More often than not though, there’s a lot that’s very wonderfully ordinary.

**TS:** There’s also a lot of resiliency in that community that I don’t think is apparent at first glance.

**KG:** Right. And they’re not hiding their lifestyle. They don’t have to pretend. Some people have returned to their families, but feel like they don’t fit in with that perceived normalcy, or with people they think are well adjusted, well-behaved, polite. They find The Nine to be their comfort zone because they don’t have to pretend. And there’s something to be said about that, having come from a much more stoic background where you don’t share your hardship with anybody—there’s this perception that you’ll be burdening people with your problems.

Another thing about the Central Valley is that it appeared to me to be without delusion. In the past, I was interested in a kind of delusion—delusion as a survival mechanism and an inventive reimagining of a person’s world. You can see that most clearly in “The Westerns” and “Boulevard,” which were made in San Francisco and Los Angeles. The Central Valley could not be more different. I found it to be a relief in a way.

**TS:** You’re not able to delude yourself as easily there.

**KG:** John Muir described the landscape as an endless carpet of flowers, abundant with elk and birds—an Edenic landscape. It doesn’t look anything like that now. It has its own quiet, expansive beauty, but it’s also been devastated by aqueducts, irrigation, pollution and poverty.

**TS:** It’s a dust bowl.

**KG:** So you’ve got to contend with what it all means, because it can often feel like history is unfolding someplace else. What do you do with that? Maybe you just live your life. I think it could be perceived as sort of sad or without ambition. But I don’t necessarily think that’s the case. It’s just having the perspective that life can be meaningful and fulfilling almost anywhere.

I didn’t realize what I was looking for, but I immediately fell in love with what I perceived as this absence of delusion and just contending with the day—the sun, the dirt, the quiet landscape. It’s not surprising that so many great writers have come from the Central Valley. It’s an incredibly rich landscape. It’s also a place that’s overlooked and ignored. Like Joan Didion said, it’s not the California that tourists come to see.

The Central Valley is often considered a place to pass through, which of course marginalizes and ignores what’s really there. It’s much more interesting and complex than it’s given credit for. As a place, it’s very similar to some of the people I’ve recently photographed, who’ve been marginalized and almost rendered invisible. Originally, I envisioned the work—both “Boulevard” and “The 99”—as this procession of humanity, an army of dissident soldiers, the broken, the outcast. My kind of people. I always thought of it as a danse macabre of the powerless.

**TS:** That’s interesting. When is the movie supposed to be done and out? When can people see it?

**KG:** We’re aiming for the fall of 2015.

**TS:** You going to take it to film festivals?

**KG:** Yeah. It’s a brand-new universe for me but I’ve started working with a great producer, Marc Smolowitz, who’s helping me navigate this world. Up until now, I’ve

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**JOHN MUIR**

A naturalist, author, and activist who worked to preserve the wilderness of California’s Sierra Nevada mountain range.

**JOAN DIDION**


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TS: The other half is really necessary if you want an audience. And then the Central Valley won’t be anonymous anymore.

KG: I’d love to hear you talk more about what you do. You wonder why I add more chaos. Well, why do you add more chaos to your already chaotic life?

TS: It is not quite so obvious—my projects have not been so overtly in a community where everyone, on the surface, seems like they have a daily wrestling match with misery.

KG: But people are running for their lives in your photographs! Aren’t we getting at the same thing? Or at least we’re motivated by something similar?

TS: I go on road trips and I travel with baseball teams and we spend time in the Central Valley. These people can feel really hopeless—every single night it’s an audition, and they could be cut at any time. They have no money. They often stay with families in the Central Valley because they can’t afford an apartment.

There’s a hopelessness there sometimes too. But it’s not a life-or-death sort of thing. I feel like I’ve broken up some monotony for my baseball players, frankly, as annoying as it is to have a camera around all the time. Once they got used to it, it was actually more fun—it’s not just another game that they have to play.

KG: I mean obviously, as artists, we have our unique impulses and that’s what can make art interesting—you get the see the world through a very specific set of eyes and maybe understand the world in a way you possibly didn’t understand it before. That can mean feeling frustrated or uncomfortable or, for a minute, even irritated or pissed off.

TS: I think he’s succeeded at that. I can see why that relates to your work completely.

I was a journalist before and loved it because I was paid to learn about something new over and over and over and over again. I was a good enough student and researcher that I could become a temporary expert on a topic and meet my deadline. That’s very different if you’re making a documentary or making a film where you’re spending three years with a community, which I have never done. But I have worked on something over the period of a year.

I saw your project from a journalist’s perspective at first, which is “She’s getting a window into a subculture that either she doesn’t know, or the rest of the world doesn’t know, or that we don’t actually ever get to see.” Because it’s often dark and they’re on the other side of the tracks, so to speak.

Then, I think the difference for me, what interests me in art photography and art films instead of just nonfiction work is that I’m actually more interested in the emotional life of what’s going on. And so, in terms of my baseball work, [it’s been] 11 years. There was a huge transition where I just decided I’m going to have to stop faking that I actually care about baseball. But I really am interested in the trajectory of these kids, and psychologically what goes on, both in terms of becoming a product and becoming a successful baseball player. And then everybody else.

KG: And also what it means as a human being to have aspiration, to have a taste of success, and then to experience failure.

TS: And how you go from there.

KG: That’s all human experience. That’s the meta-perspective. I think often times with art that’s located in the world, specifically photography, it’s often taken literally and misunderstood as journalism when it’s actually entirely subjective. And it’s also deeply committed to an emotional life.

Work has to be located somewhere, even if it’s located in abstraction. Joan Didion and Richard Rodriguez wrote about Sacramento, but it’s really a literary landscape, it’s a setting for very personal and acute observations about life and what it means to be a human being. That specific landscape opens up an entire creative universe. So, I think that’s what you’re talking about as well. You’ve recognized what is actually at the heart of this very specific community that you keep revisiting. And it’s not your love of baseball.

I think in the Central Valley, or particularly in Modesto, part of what I’ve always tried to do is to make something very beautiful—and I don’t mean simple or just pretty and pandering—but how can I make something complex and very beautiful in a place that appears to be devastated.

The comparison that I make in my own life is that, since I was young, I’ve always found “real life,” the mundane stuff to be almost unbearable. At some point, I recognized that I was completely wrong, because that’s exactly where the magic is happening. So now it’s like I’m seeing familiar things for the first time.
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