

The retro but contemporary kitsch of Peter Granser

Text

Félipe de Almeida

Photography

©Peter Granser / Photonet

Peter Granser, a young photographer born in Hanover in 1971, offers us different facets of the American way of life with a certain sense of humor. Entirely self-taught, he not only concentrates on the United States, by also on Austria, his native country. He is interested in the way the landscape has changed with the arrival of tourists, and especially in the ridiculous knickknacks that are sold to them.

In his series Sun City, he immortalizes well-off American retirees and residents of a city built for them in the Arizona desert. A joyous ambiance reigns, accented by the kitsch of their accessories, decorations, headwear, clothing, and other artifacts as varied as they are

colorful. The inhabitants are presented in situations that appear both innocent and familiar. The realism of these pictures makes them paradoxically almost unreal. It is without mockery that Peter Granser produced this work, and in fact his fondness for his subjects shines through his work.

It is another America, a more outdated one, which the photographer depicts in his series entitled Coney Island. He reveals to us an amusement park that was created in the 19th century imagining the America of tomorrow and its new leisure activities. The site is now rusted, dirty, and out of date, but the artist presents to us its morbid charm.

The American dream has often been at the heart of Peter Granser's work. Thus, he did an Elvis series for the occasion of the annual celebration of the singer in Memphis. The event is organized for fans of the King who come from all over the world dressed like their idol to display their findings: souvenirs, videos, objects of all kinds, and memorabilia. To each his Elvis, to each his part of the dream in the skin of the rocker who himself offered a composite picture of an ideal America.

Sur La Terre met with Peter Granser, who tells us a little more about his approach of the kitsch universe in the western world.



Couple in a pool



Man with a bag

discovery



Front garden I



Front garden II

Sur La Terre: Do you consider yourself more of a photojournalist or an artist?

Peter Granser: I see this more like a change, an evolution. I started as a photojournalist for newspapers and magazines. Next I started my personal projects with a new format and trying out different types of film.

Now, I work with cameras of medium format. I don't do reporting, but rather look at things and people under a personal angle shot. I take pictures that don't try to explain everything but that leave interpretation open-ended, allowing each individual to see and understand the picture subjectively. I would describe this process as an artistic documentary.

Could you describe the touch of irony present in your work?

I work on two kinds of projects. The first are the ones that get published, like *Sun City* or *Coney Island*. It is a look at everyday life in western society and its strangeness.

Sun City, for example, is a city built in the Arizona deserts in the early sixties that is reserved only for retirees over 55 years old.

The pictures in Austria show the way the country is changing with the arrival of tourists. These are situations that I don't understand myself. There is a touch of irony in my work since I take pictures from my point of view. But when I show the pictures of *Sun City* to the people who live there, they of course see no irony at all in the pictures of their daily life at the hairdresser, in their garden, or with their pet. It is the public—especially in Europe—who sees the irony in this way of living, in the futility of an existence too well tuned. They cannot believe that this place really exists.

I also work on projects with a social nature like Alzheimer's disease. I invest a lot of emotion into these pictures.

How would you define the notion of kitsch?

I think that I foster a love-hate relationship with kitsch. It is not something bad or ugly. If you look at the picture of pink flamingos in a front yard, it is quite funny. These kitsch elements fascinate me. These people are proud of these decorative objects, and I can only honor this because they are displaying what they love without worrying about what others will think. I am absolutely not trying to make fun of them.

Are you always looking for kitsch when you are interested in places such as Sun City or Coney Island?

No, I am not specifically looking for it. It interests me because a large part of our daily life is full of kitsch, of irony, and of ridiculous details. I am interested in projects on places and peoples that seem unusual to me.

Sometimes your pictures don't seem contemporary. Are you nostalgic about the aesthetic of the nineteen-seventies?

All my pictures are from today, but I grew up during those years, therefore I certainly get my inspiration from them. The colors are probably giving you this impression because they are slightly pale, more light-colored than in reality. These tints are not digital, it is the way I use my film and the photo paper that causes the colors to be lighter and become pastels.

I read in the Sun City book that this work is not a German style. Can you explain this remark?

I didn't write this text, but what I find bizarre is that when I show these pictures in other countries people find them very German, while in Germany the contrary is true. The humor in these pictures is not considered German because there is no humoristic tradition in

German photography, like we find in England. And the reason my photographs are considered German is due to the style, the use of the medium format and this exact look taken on things.

I also read in this Sun City book that you show a country and its inhabitants as they desire to see themselves and to be seen. In this project, did you let the people select the details in the photos, like their clothes for example?

These characters are part of the city... they are the city. The man with the handbag in *Sun City*, I saw him standing waiting for his bus and I asked him if I could take a portrait of him. He is photographed in his reality. For the Elvis project, these people dress just like they want. These are their costumes and I did not attempt to influence them. Sometimes I select the scenery for the pictures, but only when light or background is an issue. Sometimes I ask them to turn toward the left or the right, but that is not a true setting.

What position do you give to realism in your work?

I would like to show the subtle or sometimes nonexistent limit between reality and illusion.

What photographers influenced you in your work?

First of all, I must name Martin Parr, whom I met in 1997 and who truly triggered a change in the way I work. I used to photograph only in black and white until that time. I saw his work and he told me about his transition to color photography. After that, I tried different types of film and started to use color.

I am very touched by the work of Diane Arbus and the people to whom she is attracted. I like William Eggleston and Stephen Shore and their view of reality and everyday life.



Hand with rings



Elvis Tribute Artist

What symbolizes Elvis for you?

To start with, I truly love his music of the sixties and seventies. I also found interesting the huge movement at that time of the youth wanting to become SUPERSTARS in Europe and the United States. I wanted to create a project on the first superstar ever to exist: Elvis Presley. I was intrigued by these people who dress like him, attempt to speak like him, sing or move like him, and want to draw attention by becoming Elvis look-alikes. They even have their own fan clubs.

Today, who is, in your opinion, a superstar?

I don't know because nowadays we only talk about VIPs, top mod-

els, and TV hosts because of the power of the media and television. It was precisely these personalities with whom I did not want to work.

According to you, what is the importance given to photography nowadays by the world of art?

I think that photography has been more and more accepted by the world of art since 2001. I participated in the Saar Art Award contest, and of the 25 finalists, two of us were photographers. I think that a few years ago we would not even have been selected.

But this integration remains more difficult for journalism photography.

How do you see the evolution of your work?

Many things have happened for me from 1997 to 1999. In 2000, I started the Sun City project, which marked a new start for me, since before that I had always only worked in black-and-white with 35 mm film.

As for the future, it is difficult to say. For now, I'll continue my work on Alzheimer's disease, which will be the subject of my upcoming book that will be published soon.

And I have many other projects in mind or that I have already started. One of them concerns Japan and the Japanese society. Right now I am looking for sponsors or grants, because it'll be a pretty expensive

To read:

Sun City, Benteli, Suisse, 2003
Alzheimer, Kehrer Verlag, 2004

For more information on the work of Peter Granser:
www.granser.de



Recruiting station (2004)



No couple (2004)

project. I'll also continue my project on Coney Island, and I hope to find a publishing house for this work. As with Sun City, I will go two or three times to Coney Island because it is important to take a break between each trip to be able to reflect about what I did, and to discuss it with friends or galleries to get different points of view.

What is a good photo?

For me, it really just requires that I am touched by the picture when I look at it.

Peter Granser received the Leica Oskar-Barnack 2004 Award for his photographic project "Coney Island." This award is involved in promoting photojournalism.

He was also a finalist in the Saar Award in 2004 and the Umbo Award in 2003, which is awarded to photographers who live and work in Germany.

Peter Granser was the award winner of the Découvertes d'Arles 2002 Award for his Sun City, Coney Island, and Alzheimer projects.

His work has been the object of different personal exhibits, among them one at the Kamel Mennour Gallery in Paris (2004), one at the

Haus der Fotografie, in Hanover, Germany (2004), one at Photo España in Madrid, Spain (2003), and one at the Marangoni Foundation in Florence, Italy (2002).

He is a member of the POC PROJECT, an international project for contemporary photography. www.pocproject.com