

***Susan kae Grant: Thirty-Year Retrospective***

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Essay for Exhibition Catalog by Hannah Frieser, Director, Light Work

Young children go about life with a hunger for exploration that is guided by a world still interesting and new to them in its many facets, where life's many mysteries may be hidden under every leaf, around every corner or behind every closed door. Occasionally falling or scraping a knee, they are rarely deterred in their push for new adventures. They may be blind to the many dangers around them, but they are also untainted by ambitions or grand expectations. For a short time in their lives, they experience their days in a tumult of emotions and adventures that all too soon shifts to an endless struggle between the things they would like to do and the things they have to do. Many of us lose the ability to explore without judgment and feel inhibited to go where our mind might want to take us. Artists, more than most people, retain the natural need to explore and to try new things, and thereby pursue their artistic aspirations in the medium of their choice, but few artists have embraced an intuitive path guided by a passion for their work quite like Susan kae Grant has in a career that has stretched over three decades and is continuing stronger than ever before.



"Waiting" © 1983



"Falcon" © 1983

Beginning with Grant's earliest photography series, she has been willing to embrace her ideas, allowing them to grow into full-fledged productions regardless of the time and effort needed. Not one to stop an idea prematurely, Grant's work has led her to carry generators into remote landscapes, reject material after material until the perfect one was found, and hunt down unusual props (such as a human brain), and all while following her inspiration like an invisible trail through any terrain necessary. Guided by this creative process, Grant has remained fresh and anticipatory in the approach to her work, and she has been able to marry her successful career as a photographer and book artist to an equally successful career as an educator.

Grant's work is often rooted in years of research, resulting in photographs and books that are complex and multilayered. No material is chosen lightly, yet every aspect that makes up a final work fits so naturally, making another solution unimaginable. Grant distinguishes her work processes for photography and bookmaking, seeing the image-

by-image process for photography as a faster one. A series consisting of many photographs may take years, however a single artist book may take even longer. She comes back to an idea again and again, until all aspects of material and content, form and sequence are resolved. The result of Grant's extensive work process is not a singular message. Instead, Grant leaves it up to the viewer to glean his or her own meaning from the work. This approach is evident in her photography, but even more so in her books. As multidimensional objects, the books combine imagery and text within the book form. Grant utilizes unconventional materials such as lead sheeting as pages or soft animal fur as book covers to achieve a tactile sensuality and richness that spins the meaning of the words and images allowing for multilateral interpretation.

Viewing a retrospective is much like a whirlwind tour through an artist's life that highlights the best work within a career while also revealing changes in style, methods and content in the work. It can indicate shifts in interest and early manifestations of new ideas, and hint at changes within the artist as a person.

Grant's early photography, especially her *Autobiographic Dramas*, is as raw-edged and emotional, as it is unsettling and open-ended. There is a recurring theme of feminism and an intense questioning of women's role in society. Fast-forward twenty-some years and the work changes dramatically beyond a shift in style and methodology to subtle installations of light and shadow depicting otherworldly dreams. The aesthetics down to the visual vocabulary and emotional impact are different. Something changed dramatically with the *Vestiges* installation that finds its conclusion in the *Night Journey* series. This change goes beyond a jump from extroverted to introverted, or loud to quiet. The angry, frustrated energy and probing of earlier images has been transformed into a veil of calmness that beckons the viewer to slow down while viewing the work. A shift can be identified as early as the *Color Grids* series with a greater passivity of the female figure (the artist herself), though with the use of clippings from porn magazines and the intensity of the ritualistic burial scene, these large-format grids are far from subtle. However they are less aggressive in their message, and the viewer has to work harder to understand what the work is about. The *Vestiges* installation captures the sanctity of an altar. The installation mixes images of animal hearts with text and audio voices in the room. The installation and the accompanying artist book are no less emotional than early work, yet they reach out to the viewer by seducing rather than confronting.



"Vestiges" Installation & Detail @ 1991-94

Asked about the shift within her work, Grant explains, “One can only make work from the place one is at.” Much of her work was inspired by autobiographical aspects, drawn from ideas noted in her journals or dreams she captured in her studies in the sleep lab where she worked with Dr. John Herman. The biggest change in her work so far occurred after the loss of her mother. Grant describes being with her mother in her final days and seeing her drift in and out of consciousness. “It was during that time that the idea to use the shadow as a metaphor for creating the *Night Journey* series came to me. The shadow seemed like the perfect access to the unknown, an outline of something happening but without the clarity of who the characters are.” While the *Night Journey* series is based heavily on her research on R.E.M. sleep, the newest work is more intuitive and less pre-visualized, which Grant describes as moving objects in her shadow images around until the storytelling works. “I originally thought the work would be much more violent and include more of the difficult dreams, but as I worked, the images intuitively became much more magical and whimsical. I no longer felt the desire to make images of angst and despair, and I became more fascinated with lightness and memory and mystery in the unknown.”



“What’s Being Offered” @ 20002, “Thorn Girl” © 2009, “She’s trying To Seek Comfort” @ 2002

While a retrospective exhibition may have us look to the past, it can also offer a glimpse forward. It may be old adage to say the best is yet to come, but as with all good explorations, in younger and in older days, there will be surprises, there will be something fresh and new, and it will be just perfect. Susan kae Grant presents herself in her work with all honesty and courage. We look forward to no less in the future.

Hannah Frieser