

Susan kae Grant: Thirty-Year Retrospective

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Essay for Exhibition Catalog by Nancy Whitnack, Conduit Gallery



Casting, staging and directing are all part of Susan kae Grant's activity in producing the bodies of work she has shown from the late 1970's to present. Her photographs have a cinematic quality, a pushed, slightly over-the-edge dimension that leads the viewer to consider the other side: the fantastical, the dark side, the dream state, the traumas and humor that reside in life. The work is largely autobiographical and is a synthesis of her journal writings, as well as literature and film. Gender issues and relationships are imbedded in the ideas that spawn the images. But photographs are only part of the whole. Her book arts flesh out the story of her journey, through a more personal and intimate art form.

The artist has published thirteen handmade, limited-edition books that incorporate letterpress and digital technologies on handmade papers with photographic imagery and text. Each book is the culmination of several years of research, design and construction before the edition is printed. The books, while concerned with topics related to her photographs, detour into the use of exotic materials that are provocative and symbolic, giving tactile significance to the work. Some books are playful, such as the trio of flip books, *The Wink*, *The Kiss*, *The Slap*. Each successfully entices and beguiles the viewer with fur-bound covers and the allure of graphic titles. *Vestiges* and *Radioactive Substances* however, press the viewer to the harsh, clinical content within by way of their materiality, symbolism and repeated text. In *Radioactive Substances*, timeless feminist issues are examined through the life of Marie Curie. It chronicles her life and hardships as a scientist, wife and mother. *Portrait of an Artist and her Mother* considers the same subject but through a much more personal lens: comparative photographs of the artist and her mother are a vehicle for addressing aging and relationships. Both *Radioactive Substances* and *Portrait of an Artist and her Mother* are handled as documentaries, yet invoke sympathetic feeling for the subjects. Morality, identity and history are motifs that cycle through these books, balancing form with content and eliciting emotional response.

Susan kae Grant's seminal color works (grids and rectangular pieces) from the 1980's are gripping and dramatic. Color is emphatic. The works have an intense, determined visceral punch, plunging the viewer into a look at a variety of themes in today's world: the role of women and sexual politics, among others. Confronting personal issues and articulating those feelings via Autobiographical Dramas, the artist developed a series of photographic narratives with ambiguous dilemmas, provoking questions, rather than answers. Sometimes she used models, and other times she photographed herself in the narratives, but always as a vehicle for examining universal ideas.

Dreams, memory and the unconscious have long been a fascination for Susan kae Grant. In 1993, she collaborated with John Herman, PhD, at the sleep research laboratory of the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas. To access unconscious visual memory, the artist used herself as subject and was digitally monitored while sleeping. Trained technicians questioned her during REM sleep. She used the tapes of those narrative interviews as inspiration to create the on-going body of work, Night Journey, from 2000-2007. The series is composed of intriguingly haunting large-scale images that recreate the fragmented and multi-sensorial experiences of dreaming. The photographs are of shadows from sets created in the studio, first produced on sheer fabric, then as black and white iris prints. The shadowed images are stretched and distorted, allowing one to enter the murky, confusing, hallucinogenic world of the unconscious.

Building on her Night Journey Series, in which she employed scientific methods to research and recreate her own dreams, she worked on the series in 2006, Unconscious Memory. Using mythic characters and incongruous objects, the artist's newest works delve into the fantastic and seduce the viewer with unmoored phantom-like tableaux. These new iris prints conjure childhood imaginings, fairy tales and nightmares alike.

Susan kae Grant is an artist whose work is as substantive as it is visually arresting. She has a vigorous studio practice where she continually presses herself to make work that is spring-loaded and surprising. She puts her entire body and mind into the process. Aside from her studio work, she maintains a full teaching schedule at Texas Woman's University, is on the staff at the International Center of Photography where she teaches workshops twice a year and is active with the Society for Photographic Education. She was the artist selected to conceive the design for the Parkland DART station, Dallas, Texas to be completed in 2011.

Nancy Whitnack