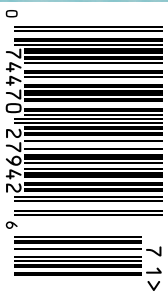


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BOOKLIST

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Paradise Lost

Peter Granser's
Coney Island
in all its faded glory
By AVIS CARDELLA



CONEY ISLAND IS A MYTHICAL PLACE, a seaside amusement park, summertime utopia that has been chronicled in innumerable photographs over the decades. Bet you can't say you haven't seen Weegee's famous cheek-to-jowl, people-packed shoreline shot, or Lisette Model's obese bather in the black maillot or Bruce Davidson's glamorous, primping gang members.

In addition to being a significant part of photographic history, Coney Island plays very heavily in my personal memory picture book. I was born and grew up in Brooklyn, and many a sweltering New York summer of my childhood was spent on the Island's sandy beaches and rickety rides. In a battered shoebox in one closet or another I know I have a blurry black-and-white snapshot of my brother and me riding the fabulously nauseating Cyclone roller coaster.

This in mind, it was with great anticipation that I greeted photographer Peter Granser's new monograph, *Coney Island*. I was familiar with some of Granser's work, most notably 2003's *Sun City*, a keenly observed reportage on America's first city built solely as a retirement community, and was hoping that this new volume would carry the same weight. I'm happy to report that *Coney Island* does not disappoint.

But Granser's Coney Island is no longer Weegee's, nor Davidson's, nor even my own idealized childhood version. The 72 color photographs in this volume were taken between the years 2000 and 2005, and as writer and critic Vicki Goldberg points out in the book's well-researched introduction titled "The Democratic Paradise," the past five years bear witness to this one-time wonderland in the throes of transition. Over the years, Coney Island has morphed from being an "Electric Eden" met with worldwide awe and fascination, to a crowded populist escape, to a derelict, crime-ridden no-man's land.

Granser captures today's Coney Island and its inhabitants and visitors in a state of flux, as somewhat saved from the brink of ruin—the Cyclone now has "landmark" status, a ball park has been erected and crime rates are down—but still woefully distant from its former glory. His portraits hone in on the local characters and their various masquerades and personas: geriatric cowboys, extravagant mermaids, tattooed and oiled aging body-builders. His landscapes depict a gray sky that's trying hard to be blue, a shoreline riddled with beer cans and watermelon rinds, and two girls riding a Tilt-a-Whirl that looks strangely motionless. In fact, almost every image has a trapped-in-amber quality, a stillness that reminds me of the amusement park's once popular wax museum.

The British photographer Martin Parr, well known for his humorous social reportage, has clearly been an influence here. (Granser has said that he switched from shooting black-and-white to color after meeting Parr in 1997.) But where Parr is like a heat-seeking missile, targeting consumer culture's foibles with no holds barred, Granser's is a quieter approach. As he did with *Sun City*, Granser, an Austrian who now lives in Germany, observes the cul-



Tilt-a-Whirl, 2000. From *Coney Island*, by Peter Granser

ture of Coney Island with a foreigner's careful precision and reverence. He doesn't want to get it wrong. And he doesn't. He takes aim but lets his subjects' humanity take over. The resulting images are poignant, sad, comical, nostalgic, melancholy, absurd and peculiarly charming.

Coney Island may only be a small strip of land, but it has almost always had greater relevance as a metaphor for the optimistic American Dream. This perhaps is what has attracted photographers over the years, and this is what Granser has trained his camera on: everything that happens when that dream gets interpreted, distorted, destroyed or resurrected, rises and falls and rises again, like the human spirit, like the shoreline, and very much like an amusement park ride itself.

Coney Island. Photographs by Peter Granser. Introduction by Vicki Goldberg. Hatje Cantz, Ostfildern, 2006. Designed by Stapelberg & Fritz, Stuttgart. Printed by Cantz'sche Druckerei. Photo-illustrated paper over boards. 100 pp., 72 color plates, 11 x 11 \$50.00