



Peter Granser

FADED CHARM

Once upon a time it was the world's most famous amusement park. Now an effort is being made to rescue what is already beyond rescue. Peter Granser's Coney Island report, which received this year's Leica Oskar Barnack Award.

THIS IS WHERE they all wanted to go, this is where the denizens of New York would rendezvous. There was no other place in this megalopolis better suited to absorb the heterogeneous mass that is the city's unique melting pot. Here, for several decades, in the southern part of Brooklyn, where New York ends and the Atlantic begins, people could gaze in wonder at this mirror image of American society. "America", so Richard Le Gallienne, "created for itself a palace of illusions and populated it with all beasts of temptation, with every possible fabrication of a febrile fantasy, with all manner of marvels bred of a somnambulant spirit – and called it Coney Island."

Built at the end of the 19th century, Coney Island's Luna Park and Dreamland provided all the diversions, thrills and excitement an amusement park could offer. If we have an image of ourselves as today's fun-seeking society, it could well be that the roots of all that jittery leisure-time activity are to be found here, on Coney Island. Everything that was new and technically feasible appeared there, illuminated in bright neon. The roller coasters were still made of wood but the Wonderwheel, the big Ferris wheel, and the Parashute-Jump-Tower made the city dwellers go pale on an overdose of vertigo. On summer weekends the beach was crowded with thousands of people keen on using it as a stage for self-promotion. This was the place where Weegee took his picture of the bathing beach jam-packed with people – still in black-and-white.

And, in fact, it was this very Weegee and the pictures Bruce Gilden had taken of Coney Island in the Seventies that encouraged Peter Granser to document its present condition. The glitter has long vanished – Peter Granser found a "place of squalor, mercifully disguised by weeds and rust that feeds, no doubt, on its own transmogrified myth". The start of restoration work and the attempts by the City of New York to resurrect the area – recently people have become aware of the nostalgic charm that Coney Island can still radiate – remain an enigma. You can never be sure what's still going to be there next year, or what will have been torn down. Will another roller-coaster be dismantled, will Wonderwheel go on turning? Only the Jump Tower will be preserved as a landmark, like the Eiffel Tower, that's for certain. Granser directs his attention to the wounds, he sees nuances, looks behind the crumbling facades. There's Nathan's, New York's most popular burger grill, tirelessly advertising its products for more than 85 years. The army, on the

other hand, has long since closed down its sign-up shop for volunteers. Currently, there's Judge Joe Brown looking down at us from a billboard telling us to watch his TV show three times a week, otherwise we'll be found guilty. Coney Island, it appears, is still de rigueur for all the tourists, who lay siege to it equipped with rucksacks, and offers a place to escape to briefly for the dropouts and individualists. And the beach – given the right weather – is as crowded as ever. Only that the civilised world leaves behind its garbage by the hundredweight. For a few senior citizens, on the other hand, an opportunity to do a bit of beach-combing. You see, Coney Island still has something to offer the multitude, even if it does it quite differently today. Peter Granser finds all this cheap, brash and garish, setting against it, in an almost restrained manner, poetical pictures in soft colours. Allows himself be captivated by the morbid charm of by-gone days, but not without throwing an ironic glance at the present as well.

The photographer has experimented with this style several times. Peter Granser, who was born in Hanover in 1971 but has an Austrian passport, first came into contact with photography in 1991. His reports, at first on 35 mm film and in black-and-white, were a constant quest for the out-of-the-ordinary. First there were essays about a butlers' academy in London, or the manufacturing of cigars on Cuba. Granser had his international breakthrough with "Sun City", a work about a senior citizens' resort in California. The report, this time in colour and medium-sized format, was first published in Photo Technik International and immediately afterwards in the Stern magazine in 2001 (a book was published in 2003 by Benteli Verlag, Wabern/Bern). Peter Granser received several prizes and awards for "Sun City", including a third prize at the World Press Photo Award, a call to join the World Press Masterclass, the Discovery Award 2002 at the Rencontres d'Arles and a presentation at Visa pour l'Image in Perpignan. Another one of Granser's works, on Alzheimer's disease, which he presented in the World Press Masterclass, will be published in book-form by Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg, in autumn.

Hans-Eberhard Hess

Peter Granser lives in Stuttgart, is a member of the PocProject photographers' group (www.pocproject.com) and is represented by Galerie photonet in Wiesbaden (www.photonet.de) www.granser.de







