

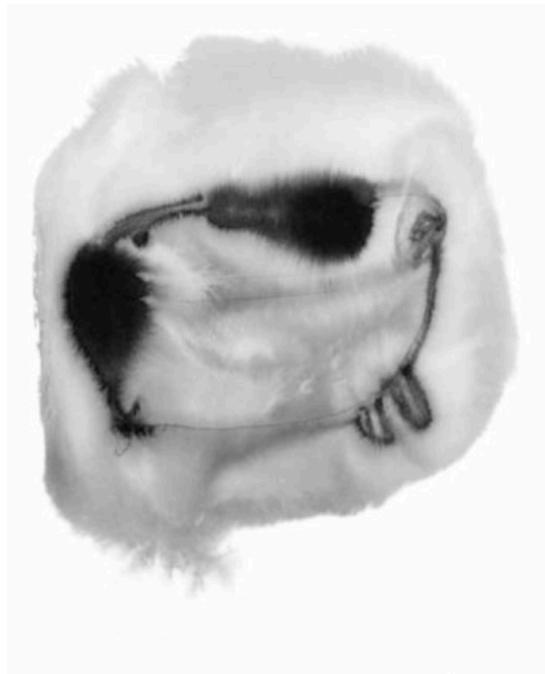
# Art in America

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## Q+A: Alexandra Grant and Keanu Reeves Collaborate, Happily

by Ken Miller

Los Angeles-based painter, sculptor and conceptual artist Alexandra Grant has a



I DRAW A HOT  
SORROW BATH

well-established history of imaginative collaborations, whether working with artist Edgar Arceneaux, director of the Watts House Project, to erect a massive sculpture in the midst of that downtrodden neighborhood, or creating paintings and sound pieces with Pig Iron Theater company director Dan Rothenberg and poet Michael Joyce for an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Her latest collaboration takes the form of a book, *Ode to Happiness* (Steidl), full of simple ink-on-paper illustrations accompanying poetic text from a surprising source: her friend, the actor Keanu Reeves. Which prompted the obvious question...

KEN MILLER: Keanu?

ALEXANDRA GRANT: Yes.

MILLER: Why arrange this material as an artists' book, as opposed to a monograph of your paintings and sculptures?

GRANT: Artists' books play a very different role than monographs: they're not archives of past works, but works of art on their own. Artists' books have what [this book's publisher] Gerhard Steidl keeps referring to as "haptic" qualities—they engage the sense of touch as well as the eyes [and] they feel good in the hand, and this allows the reader to complete the book with their own experience of it.

MILLER: What were the origins of this book?

GRANT: Ode to Happiness was an unplanned project. One night, sitting with a mutual friend, Keanu wrote the poem and then sent it on to me. At first, I didn't know what Ode to Happiness was—it took me about six months to sort out that it wasn't meant to be a drawing or a painting but a book, and that I wanted to come up with images that matched the power and humor of the text. I had to learn to be funny again in my work, you know, to give myself permission to be able to draw a “misery room” that was a box with an un-smiley face. Then, just as the text had been a gift to me, the book was a surprise for Keanu. I hid the original [version] inside a large photo book from the 1970s, with a bright green cover with the words “The British Scene” printed on it.

MILLER: Do you consider Ode to Happiness a collaboration?

GRANT: Yes. The voice in the book is very much Keanu's and the images are very much mine. But Keanu and I are each interested in every detail of the projects we work on. For example, I hand-stitched the original book with black thread and Keanu loved it, so the Steidl version had to have black thread.

MILLER: You work with the writer Michael Joyce to generate your pieces. Can you explain a bit how this collaboration works?

GRANT: I've worked with Michael since 2003. I'll come up with a theme, say, for my most recent show, “Bodies,” and I'll say, “Michael, I want to make a series that examines the sense of touch as a way of representing the body.” And we discuss possible ideas: the experience of the female body, creation myths, romantic love, etc. Then Michael creates a series of poems. With these in hand, my work can begin in the studio.

MILLER: You have described your work as setting off an “ideal conversation” with the viewer. What do you mean by that? Aren't all paintings and books monologues?

GRANT: I'm asked all the time why I don't write the texts for my work. I'm not interested in painting my interior monologue—by 4 pm in the studio, the words going through my head have something to do with chocolate or wanting to go home and watch a movie. The writers I work with all, in one way or another, inspire me with their ability to keep language alive. This raises the bar for me in the studio—I have to, in some way, interpret and honor the spirit of their words. So the “ideal conversation” is with the people I collaborate with, whether they are there in the studio or not, and this passion is what radiates through the work to the audience. This is the magic of art, really: that you can imbue a thing with a certain energy and then the thing communicates when you're not there.

MILLER: Your aesthetic has generally remained consistent, despite working in a variety of mediums, including painting and sculpture as well as wallpaper and neon pieces. Do you see Ode to Happiness as a radical departure from your earlier work?

GRANT: My intention, in everything I do, is to find an honest solution to the creative problem at hand. With Ode to Happiness, the text begged for an authentic and new response, and I struggled to find a [visual] language that was honest to the text. So

yes, the collaboration with Keanu has affected my work, and I am extremely grateful for that.

MILLER: Do you think this book is sad?

GRANT: I've seen people laugh and cry after looking at it, so clearly Ode to Happiness reflects what people bring to it.

