



# nina glaser

**W**hy are you so morbid and unhappy?" viewers at Nina Glaser's early exhibitions in San Francisco demanded to know.

"I got a lot of honest anger in those days," Glaser says now in a soft voice. "I told those people what the photographs meant to me and asked them to look at the work again"

The more outspoken people called her at home in a rage. "One man vented his fury at length and in detail. But by the end of the conversation he had invited me to lunch and bought a photo. It was intended as a gift for photographer Ruth Bernhart, but he kept it for himself," Glaser recalls.

By Susan Harrow

The body of her work, with the exception of two, have no titles — a deliberate statement on Glaser's part, not just an oversight. "People bring their experience and sense of themselves to what they see," she says. "When I showed my work to my parents, my father, who is kind of a disgruntled man, said, 'How could you say you're happy when you're taking pictures like this?' When I showed them to my mother, she said, 'Oh, Nina, I'm so happy for you. When I look at these, I see birth and life and joy.'"

Glaser, 36, who has no formal education beyond high school (unless you count Israeli army) never picked up a camera until she was 26. "One day I just began seeing things in a different way and I wanted to capture it. I feel the work is much greater than I am and the reward is that I get to experience it."



She began by taking pictures with the feel of one-shot movies. As her work developed her images and repertoire expanded to include people at many different stages of life and death. Her models could be anyone, anytime, anyplace. They are purposely set in the land of feelings that has no formal boundaries, no sharp edges, no instantly recognizable context. "It's about the human experience at its core. We all basically want the same thing — outside of time, geography, culture. I'm working in an area that is taboo — emotions."

Although consistent in image, 10 years of taking photographs chronicle different periods in Glaser's life. The early photos are more harsh and symbolic. Rope, plastic garbage bags and body casts play a strong role in establishing a mood. Post-apocalyptic images of devastation and rejuvenation shot in crypts, burnt buildings and sewers bring suffering into brilliant focus. In the past several months her work in Mexico tends toward the lyrical. Dance, nature and statues are soft and smooth elements complementing the dark, untroubled skin of the people.

The unusual props, though, are consistent. Fish line, a naked woman's prone torso in an elegant S-shape. A crown of chicken feet graces her bald head. A small child handles a snake twice her size with the ease of a charmer. Never superfluous, these objects illuminate something before unknown in the models and viewer alike.

During the dreamy and imaginative part of her childhood she spent hours enthralled in one of her mother's books of early Italian masters. "I went back to that book over and over again. It was my favorite. I think my work is influenced by that. It's gestural, theatrical. This book had stories, and fantastic lighting, swans, and cherubs flying."

Although both parents were artistic, and encouraged her, Glaser didn't

find a real focus to her talents until much later in life. At 20 she moved to the United States and felt that same idyllic safety lost from childhood. She began photographing her friends, many of whom were involved in the arts. As AIDS began affecting the artistic community and several of her friends died, Glaser began posing people with the virus in postures of mourning and death as part of the healing process for both herself and her dying friends.

"I'm documenting their passage," she

says. "I allow them to express parts of themselves they're not allowed to express. They can put flowers on their own bodies, let others grieve or mourn for them." In a sense, through the photographic experience, they can become acquainted with their own passage through life to death.

Even though much of Glaser's work is haunting and personal, there is joy and playfulness in her photography as well. The night before or the morning of a shoot Glaser plans a series of sketches, which keeps her organized

