

Nick Hackworth, 'Out of the Ordinary', The Evening Standard, 1 February 2007

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# Out of the ordinary

## EXHIBITION

**Margaret Salmon**

Whitechapel Gallery

★★★★☆

Nick Hackworth

**T**ECHNOLOGY creates new mediums for expression, but the essential subject matter of human culture endures. Following her success in the inaugural MaxMara Art Prize for women artists, Margaret Salmon presents three pieces in this show. In a different decade, perhaps, this young, London-based American's drive to depict the lives of ordinary people might have spurred her to canvas and a gentle social realism. Instead, she uses an old hand-held Bolex camera to make 16mm films.

Ninna Nanna, a triptych of grainy, black-and-white films lasting 10 minutes, shot in Italy last year and funded with money from the prize, is presented in the main gallery. Each film presents a day in the life of an Italian mother. A softly sung Florentine lullaby, *Ninna Nanna Fiorentina*, provides their soothing and melancholy soundtrack.

This gently depressive element pervades the work as the women spend much of the day in the dark, sunlight creeping in only through gaps in curtains. Two of them wear only nightclothes, surrendering every personal concern to the rhythms of childcare. Though in constant contact with their babies, they are shown here isolated and alone. It's hard not to feel a kind of pity for this rawly instinctive love that is not always reciprocated.

Two previous works, *Peggy*, from 2003, and *PS*, from 2002, prove *Ninna Nanna* is no fluke. *Peggy* follows an elderly American woman going about her daily chores. A hoarsely sung version of *Amazing Grace* provides an evocative accompaniment. The theme is perhaps the repetition inherent in life.

*PS* is a portrait of a dysfunctional couple. Distantly recorded arguments are replayed to footage of an elderly man, possibly in a semi-rural American setting, weeding his garden. The owner of the female voice never appears. The man, as most of the subjects in Salmon's films, is alone.

The videos are intelligently edited, the music well chosen, and driving all these creative decisions is clearly, an acute insight into the lives and nature of her subjects that would shine through no matter what medium she chose.



**A day in the life:** *Ninna Nanna* records the everyday routines of three Italian mothers

● Until 11 February (020 7522 7888; [www.whitechapel.org](http://www.whitechapel.org)).