

**Stanya Kahn's "A Cave Walks into a Bar"**

SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS, Los Angeles

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By Sohrab Mohebbi

-Today my horoscope said the road to hell is paved with good intentions; does that mean that you are barking up the wrong tree?

- I think it's more like you are pissing in the playground.

From *Arms are Overrated*, Stanya Kahn, 2012

It is unclear where the impulse lies, but one often hears sporadic muted sounds of laughter in museums, galleries, and lecture rooms, implying that the laugher "gets" the point and meaning has reached its destination. That sudden moment of clarity when everything is resolved and the curtains of obscurities are lifted from perception is accompanied by a chuckle. One might say it is not the funniness of the joke, but the joy of "getting-it" that makes one laugh. Stanya Kahn's recent work (all 2012) on view at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects hints at the vulgar economics of jokes as proxies for exchange.

*Arms are Overrated* chronicles a day in the life of two crumbled pieces of paper in a common dudes-hanging-out situation—although the identities of the characters are left ambiguous. They visit the Old Zoo at Griffith Park with its horror movie monsters, go to a cemetery, get into a car crash and kill a biker, and drink Bud Light by a hot tub. All the while, they provide non-stop commentary, never hesitating to speak their minds, an impulse that Kahn had previously described as a Kaufmanesque "desire to empty yourself out and put anything you want in that space," a loosened form of speech possible under the conditions of precarity as two crumbled pieces of paper. Kahn does not offer us many hints in reading the works metaphorically; but if the paper puppets' horoscope were taken from Marx's *Capital*, vol I, then maybe the flimsy physics of the two characters would give form to the new unstable global conditions of labor. While smoking a cigarette, most of one of the puppets burns and it/s/he asks: "Have I any face left?"

In *Lookin Good, Feelin Good*, dressed in a penis costume, Kahn walks around the Highland Park neighborhood of Los Angeles, stopping by a local "Wienerschnitzel" joint to get a hot dog. This footage is interspersed with video of her performing in a standup comedy setting in the same costume filmed in the artist's studio. Similar to other pieces by the artist, the video brings together a collage of low-fidelity music video, screwball sketches, and absurd theater strategies. The video is accompanied by Kahn's cover of an old Sean-nós song, singing "soldier, soldier, will you marry me now/with a hey, with a ho, to the sound of a drum." The character seemingly makes no claims to reclaiming a position of power by "being a dick," but rather displaces that position by anthropomorphizing it—guys wave at her from rooftops and high-five her on the street—and making it affable—children take her for a fish, a burrito, a shark and a rocket. In the standup footage, the performer embodies the "cock joke" genre, and, having covered the premise of the jokes in her costume, opens up the space to talk about what triggers them.

Also included in the show is *Hey Yo Nobody's Home*, a story of a ninja and his seal, and a three-headed wolf and a baby seal, wandering in the desolate, post-apocalyptic landscape of an obsolete sci-fi vision of the future. Together with Kahn's glo-fi rendition of the folk song by the same name, the piece alternates between a music video, science fiction, and a docudrama in which the mother seal reunites with the baby seal and the lone ninja continues his journey. Similar to *Arms are Overrated*, the characters are part of the lumpenproletariat of stuff, fruits of wasted labor-power of "guys with arms [who] just keep on working all the time," in the words of one of the crumbled pieces of paper. Here the battery-powered crab, wind-up robot, 99-cent store souvenirs, and commodities with almost zero exchange value provide the wildlife of the landscape pictured in the video.

Alongside the videos, the exhibition includes four groups of drawings where the works in each group are loosely interrelated. They picture maritime species, rocks, turds, penises, cell phones, and some characters from the videos, often engaged in conversations, some of which are featured in a collection of short animations on a flatscreen monitor. There is a hammerhead shark wearing a t-shirt that says, "Fuck with my pussy, not my head."

In *Author as Producer*, Walter Benjamin famously wrote, “Convulsion of the diaphragm usually provides better opportunities for thought than convulsions of the soul.” In Kahn’s work, jokes are vessels that stand for the alienating formal agreement between the work and the viewer through which the work is translated. As such, irony extends beyond a solely coping mechanism—that gives meaning to an otherwise desperate situation—and further operates as a decoy for the process of exchange. Kahn uses the inherent qualities of the joke as a candid, instant linguistic tool. The work invites the viewer to participate in the labor of meaning production and the possibility of recasting a situation: negotiating, in fact, that which at first seems impossible or unacceptable.

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