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Interview: 'It's cool, I'm good' artist discusses first UK solo exhibition at Manchester's Cornerhouse

Ahead of her first UK solo exhibition at Cornerhouse's Abandon Normal Devices festival, artist Stanya Kahn talks to MM about being hot vs being funny, breaking the rules, and art as a political tool

By Sophia Rahman

There are a number of contemporary social and political influences in your work: How much do contemporary political and cultural affairs (such as gender equality, health insurance and foreign affairs etc) influence you when you create? In a sense I see identity and self as inextricable from social/political/cultural experience and context.

So while my work takes on these issues less directly, my own experiences as well as my concerns in the world always inform the work, and influence the way power and agency function in what I make.

Could you give us an idea of whom or what was inspiring you while you were laying down It's Cool, I'm Good? I was thinking about trauma and how it can sometimes give rise to new ways of perceiving and new language, in particular, a specific kind of humour.



FIRST SOLO EXHIBITION: Kahn at Cornerhouse

I was also thinking about the visual signs of destruction to a body referring to action and intensity.

I wanted to make a piece that started just after that intensity and see what kind of actions and language and attitudes emerged in the time just following whatever actions caused such severe injury.

When creating video work, how much do you deliberate over it from conception to the final rendering? Ha, I deliberate over all of it, a lot. But I also allow for improvisation and responding in the moment. So there's deliberation and impulse always interacting.

There is a sense of alienation in the themes of isolation and social norms in your work: do you find art important in troubling people's ideas of given norms? Or would that be reading too much into your use of humour? Yes, I think art in all its forms can trouble people's ideas about given norms and I hope my work does that. I like it when my own ideas are challenged.

I come from punk, from a cultural mind-set that's always been about opening things up, breaking rules, transgressing expectations, making new spaces, and that's exciting to me. Otherwise, what a bore, right?

It is liberating to see you - as a female in the public eye - display such an empowering lack of self-consciousness in the characters you portray in your video work - do you find people's responses to your characters positive? Have you found there is a gender divide at all? Thanks, that's good to hear. It's been a long, complex challenge to negotiate representations of femaleness as a performer.

People generally seem to appreciate the humour and the honesty of the performances. I hope the work makes openings in people's minds for reconsidering gender expectations. Men are far more accepted as jokers, and my work, even my live shows, has always tried to make some more gender neutral space where I could perform freely without the material being pinned down by gender.

Some guys I used to hang out with in New York, comedians, once said 'Hot chicks aren't funny' to me, and I thought, 'Oh good, they think I'm funny.' Then I thought, 'Oh no, they think I'm ugly,' Then I realised: 'What a f***ing trap. Are those really my only choices?'

The difference between your drawings and your video work is vast in terms of the scale of the different mediums - Could you explain what drives you to use the two disparate mediums. ie. When you chose to utilise one rather than the other and what you gain from both? The videos are the places where I make bigger worlds, where I can be more expansive, embodied, use sound, image, action, time, etc. They are the place where my ideas become fully kinetic.

The drawings are a place where I can 'write' in a sense, where I can work in a more intimate and immediate way, and where I work out timing differently: how much meaning can I pack into one line and one image with no moving time. It's a different challenge and it's liberating for me. It's more related to my writing practice.

It seems as though we see an aspect of Los Angeles through your work that is very different from what we have seen before, possibly through a lens of simultaneous emotional embeddedness and objectivity – Could you give us an insight into this? Hm, I'm not sure how objective it is, probably more subjective. It's certainly more intimate.

I shoot a lot in my neighbourhood, and I shoot a lot out in big open spaces like the deserts, also interstitial spaces between development and wilderness. LA is full of these weird undefined geographies. I often include them as psychological spaces, not always addressing LA per se.

But LA has this layered metaphorical potential because of the ways it seems made of surface upon surface upon surface. I mean that physically, geopolitically, culturally, socially, economically, and of course with regards to its role in producing so much mainstream 'culture'.

Are you looking forward to coming to Manchester? I am very much looking forward to my first visit to Manchester.

And finally - Is there anything else you'd like to tell us? I hope people will get more than just the humour and joking in the work. I mean, I hope it's funny, yeah, but also thought provoking, yucky, tender, surprising.

It's Cool, I'm Good opens on Friday June 22 until Sunday 16 September 2012.