



Art Monthly 359: September 2012

Stanya Kahn: It's Cool, I'm Good

Allsop, Laura, Art Monthly

Cornerhouse Manchester 23 June to 16 September

The title of LA-based video and performance artist Stanya Kahn's first solo exhibition in the UK sets the tone for much of the work on show: laid-back LA-speak deflecting and concealing difficult questions. Her videos foreground some of the coping mechanisms people regularly deploy to deal with trauma, humour being chief among them. Against a visual and performative language culled from music videos, reality TV, absurdist theatre and stand-up comedy is a host of - usually female - protagonists, including the delightfully guileless Kahn herself, as well as toys and puppets.



It's Cool, I'm Good, 2010, is the first video the viewer encounters. In it, Kahn appears horribly injured, her face a bruised and bloody mess, with bandaged feet, hands and head. We don't know what trauma she has suffered and she changes her story throughout, saying at first that she has suffered terrible sunburn, then herpes, that she got her head 'stuck in a pickle jar' and finally that she was attacked by a shark in a surfing accident. Whatever calamity she has suffered, she navigates the sunny LA landscape (which couldn't be more different from Manchester's) like a demented Pollyanna, telling her carers a selection of bad jokes, things she finds interesting about animals, news items about ecological issues and her own experiences. In rare moments of heartbreaking awareness - like when she says she is likely to lose her fingers to gangrene - her immediate reflex is to tell a dumb-blonde joke. Music video sequences, local news footage and cartoons, all frenetically cut together, shield her crippled raconteur from having to divulge what is wrong. Other traumas are equally visible but not enumerated. At one point she visits a swampy beach littered with dead fish and we are unsure if this is the result of an ecological disaster. But whatever is the matter - both on the macro and micro level - hers is a captivating, if desperate, positivity.

Coping strategies are further explored in *Kathy*, 2009, a video whose subject is the artist's best friend. Kathy deals with her difficult mother, her complicated C-section and her job at a home for troubled women with humour that only barely conceals her anger at her mother or her anxieties about shielding her own children from trauma. Kathy is all edges but exudes strength. Yet her ability to find the funny side always relates to things that have happened in the past. It is perhaps only in the retelling of events that comedy can be found. In *Sandra*, 2009, the artist's mother prepares for death by instructing Kahn on the eco-friendly method of burial she wants, fixating on the minutiae of the procedure, and producing some very funny exchanges with her daughter. Laughing at hardship, and specifically the absurdity of it, is a mark of resilience that all these women share. It is a quality not shared, however, by Kellie, the subject of a new commission, *Who do think you are*, 2012. An entrepreneur Kahn met through Craigslist, Kellie is full of wise words about being in control of your destiny, how you should never feel sorry for yourself and how you must fight to get the best from life, which for her means financial success. She wears her glib therapy-speak like armour and trades off the trauma of having breast cancer

with the plus of being able to have a boob job. Who do you think you are pokes at the brittle carapace of our identities and the mythmaking that goes into building an identity. The ease with which all these women speak to the camera is indicative of the pervasiveness of confessional, so-called 'reality' TV but also of how their brand of disarming openness and apparent self-awareness is in fact a form of self-protection.

The jokes continue in Kahn's most recent body of work, which includes cartoonish drawings of animals, turds and zombies delivering one-liners. Her latest videos, though carrying on the themes of trauma and resilience, show a move from the more documentary-style format of Kathy and Sandra to filmic narratives. Hey ho, Nobody's Home, 2012, which follows plastic toys and mini-robots traversing a treacherous landscape, is like an epic, wordless Toy Story, while Arms are overrated, 2012, about two paper puppets trying to survive in spite of their physical frailty in a kind of buddy-movie pastiche, and Happy song for you, 2011, a portrait of the absurd and the frail in nature, are spotted with images and sequences from horror movies.

Kahn's is a jolly - if spiked - world, one whose surface positivity only partially conceals the mess beneath. Alluring and painfully self-aware, her work finds humour in pain, even if it cannot always keep the latter at bay.

LAURA ALLSOP is a critic based in London.