

Review: *Selfing Togetherment Naturally*

Whether we express ourselves through slogans on a t-shirt, music, or conversation, we are essentially tragically—often comically—groping in the dark, giving our best guess, clumsily trying to make connections with each other, with nature, and with ourselves. Fleeting or faulty, the mere attempt to make them can lead us to the most authentic and intimate moments life brings. Stanya Kahn's work here is full of restless encounters between people, desperately casual and casually serious. A point of exchange and perhaps transcendence, the body passes its attendant needs, emotions, traumas, and desires from one being to another like unregulated currency.



In her feature-length video on view, *Don't Go Back to Sleep* (2014), Kahn throws us into the aftermath of an unidentified disaster. Shot primarily on location in Kansas City, Missouri, the action centers on a team of surgeons behaving more like the Disorderlies than Dr. Quinn, and a roaming lone character in a bear costume whose style of adventuring conjures adolescent boyhood mischief. The surgeons work mostly in teams having stationed themselves in a few abandoned urban McMansions on the outskirts of town.

The urgency precipitated upon catastrophe has dissipated among the doctors. Instead they wait, banter, and bottle milk, a substance that seems to be critical to a recovery and in short supply. Occasionally they perform surgery, singing songs like "I've Been Working on the Railroad." While working inside the abdominal cavity of a patient only mildly anesthetized from a few swigs of mezcal, one doctor describes her surgical methodology to be "like popping a zit." What would normally be a doctor's primary professional function is secondary to their interactions with each other and how they cope with the passage of time. Post-surgery, the doctors and their patient hang out and relax on a big sectional couch. Unconcerned that the patient looks like the star of a remake of *Weekend at Bernie's*, the two doctors share stories from recurring dreams each looking to the other to validate their interpretation. It's the type of stupid yet resonant conversation that happens at 4am in the morning after everyone else has passed out from partying or fatigue.



Don't Go Back to Sleep is full of this signature airy, tossed-off dialogue that works by way of a thousand cuts. It achieves its full lacerating power through its diverse mostly non-actor cast and their affectless performances, a wide-ranging soundtrack in style and mood that includes a marching band rendition of the Halloween movie theme song, and quick cuts between interior and exterior shots that create an arrhythmic pacing jumping around with little regard for time or place. In one of the most mesmerizing scenes, three dancers in tight blue skirts shake to a percussive breakdown, the beaded fringe on their skirts swirling and shaking becoming a metaphor for the manic randomness felt in the wake of this undefined disaster. Their energy like breath through the tips of the fringe.

The drawings are lighter in both content and craft than the video. Kahn's sense of humor and plays on word and image are inversely proportionate to polish. All black and white with very few details or backgrounds they seem like sketches, character studies, notes on or fragments of larger ideas that get worked out elsewhere. In a series of portraits of women with t-shirts that read "Mayhem" or "Fuck shit up" the meek and placid expressions of the sitters explicitly betray the message on their shirt. This joke does not end at irony; instead it becomes tension and intrigue, a battle between, to quote from the best group of drawings in the show, "that witch is above" and "that witch is below."

