

ARTFORUM

19 May 2014
by Summer Guthery

Stanya Kahn
SUSANNE VIELMETTER LOS ANGELES PROJECTS
6006 Washington Boulevard
April 19–May 24

In “Don’t Go Back to Sleep,” Stanya Kahn’s third exhibition with this gallery, trauma and its evasions take center stage. Comprised of paintings, works on paper, and her first feature-length video, the show builds on a practice that balances the tragicomic with a morbid sensibility. It also signals that Kahn is delving deeper into the calamitous. Darkly comic drawings in the first two rooms depict partying witches and skeletons alongside bored and disaffected looking young women wearing T-shirts emblazoned with slacker slogans like NO WAY and KEEP ON KEEPIN’ ON. The works evoke an unsettled cool, a dull malaise lightly masking a foreboding fatalism.



Stanya Kahn, *Don't Go Back To Sleep*, 2014, HD video with stereo sound, 74 minutes.

The film, *Don't Go Back to Sleep*, 2014, was shot primarily in a Kansas City subdivision of empty tract homes; a desolate landscape gives a sense of the postapocalyptic. A group of doctors and nurses wanders through abandoned homes, preparing for and treating an unexplained illness with which they seem also afflicted, with their bandaged limbs. They clean instruments, eat sandwiches, dress wounds, confide fears, and interpret dreams—throughout, the conversation is ominously lethargic in tone. Kahn and musician Keith Wood’s interludes of ambient soundscape, stoner rock, and metal propel the narrative in a way that the characters can’t muster themselves.

Steeped in the stultifying numbness that comes in the face of tragedy, Kahn’s characters are absurdly resigned to their work and gory injuries, content to share their armchair musings as the world falls away. Their internalized shock and guilt rise to the surface, oozing out of dirty bandages. The video’s unnamed menace is obscure enough to allow it to stand in for any number of overwhelming and unseen forces, from environmental threats to economic instability to the simple day to day.