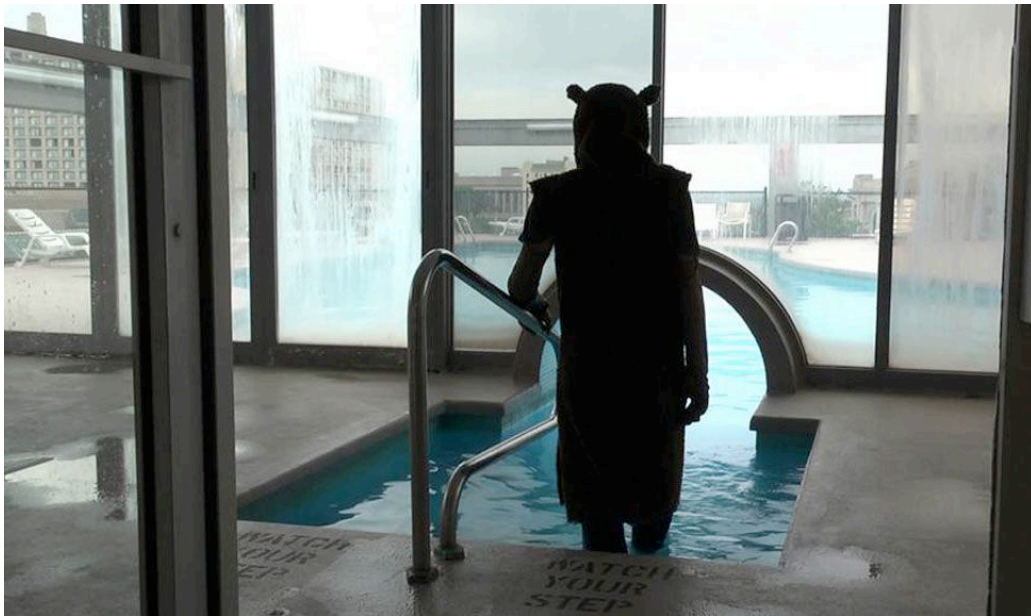


Waking Up to Stanya Kahn's Oddly Moving Drama



Ever wonder what it would look like if Harmony Korine directed an episode of Adult Swim's "Children's Hospital" with a script co-written by George Saunders and Ben Marcus? Stanya Kahn's beguiling, disturbing, moving film "Don't Go Back to Sleep" might give you an inkling.

The 74-minute experimental feature screens at Brooklyn Academy of Music on December 12 as part of the "Migrating Forms" festival. There's a narrative, however elliptical: A group of humans are holed up in a house that does not belong to them. They're all wearing hospital scrubs. It seems as if we might be in the post-apocalyptic mode — there are no signs of life other than our protagonists and some rabbits and deer in the surrounding fields. The group spends their time engaged in noodling philosophical discussions of corn farming, motherhood, and the existence of aliens; they occasionally perform bloody, hapless surgeries on each other. Every now and then one of them dies, the body rolled up in a moving blanket and carted outside, where an arcane series of genuflections marks their burial.

While the existence portrayed on screen doesn't come close to anything familiar, it can read as a bizarro rendition of "The Real World": The true story of seven strangers picked to live in a house, in the midst of an existential meltdown. They chug vodka, make out, booty-dance to James Brown. A series of scenes in a bathroom take the place of that MTV reality show's "confessional booth," as various protagonists spill secrets and life stories to a girl who appears to be slowly dying in a bathtub.

"Don't Go Back to Sleep" wavers between comedy and pathos. Someone is relaying a dream about their "epic battle" against an enormous beaver; someone else is breaking down in tears. Everything is made strange by the stunning, ominous soundtrack, courtesy of the director and Keith Wood. Toward the end of the film the group lies down on the carpeted floor, their bodies forming the spokes of a wheel as they gruffly chant. Are we in Heaven's Gate territory? What's with the bottles of milk, the esoteric yogic poses, the dude in a bearsuit riding his bicycle around the suburban wastelands? "Don't Go Back to Sleep" takes its title from a fragment of poetry by Rumi ("People are going back and forth across the doorsill, where the two worlds touch. The door is round and open. Don't go back to sleep!") While the prevailing mood is dreamlike, Kahn's film is much more than oddball slapstick; it does indeed seem to impart something slippery, unnerving, and unnameable about the way we live now. The work concludes with a long shot of a sunset, with fourth-wall-breaking text running along the bottom of the screen expressing the director's appreciation for her cast and collaborators. "I hope that this piece makes us feel more connected," she writes, "Even though it's kind of bleak and not as funny as usual."