

Fanzine

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MIGRATING FORMS FESTIVAL



A common conception about non-narrative filmmakers is that they prefer to spend time alone. We assume that because they avoid outside influences and market expectations—in some cases, even those of the academy—they create work that is viewed and understood by a limited audience. But the spirit of the sixth annual Migrating Forms festival, held at BAM in New York City, would seem to prove otherwise. Made up of an incestuous group of offerings from the art world and the independent film scene, the event has made a name for itself as the most adventurous moving image festival on the East Coast, with programs that are typically unclassifiable or doggedly specific in relation to the larger cultural conversation. Taking place December 10 – 18, it deliberately steers attention away from everything else being talked about in film culture right now, and we're better off for it.

Among this year's impressive selection are two features, *Here's To The Future!* and *Don't Go Back to Sleep*, that emphasize a communal mentality over everything else—"hangout" movies lacking a single protagonist nor an overtly guiding hand. They are limited to few locations, and primarily take place in domestic spaces, which are crowded and left messy. Both films use non-professional actors, and portray communities that may or may not really exist. They present visions of an uncertain future, comic and tragic in equal measure.

Video artist Stanya Kahn's first feature, *Don't Go Back to Sleep*, envisions the end of the world from a series of empty parking lots and luxury housing developments in Kansas City. Some type of plague has made humanity scarce, save for a group of doctors, who have been left to figure out how to proceed—but they are all taking this responsibility in stride. Clad in scrubs, some of them casually swig a bottle of tequila while performing surgeries on the wounded. Others hang out on the porch or in the garden, talking to themselves or to each other, providing snatches of conversation about Hume, motherhood, monotheism, the color magenta, and the aesthetics of spilled milk. There is a lone figure, a man in a beaver costume, who

bikes and skulks around the barren landscape. “We can’t be the only thing in the galaxy. We’re too stupid,” says a doctor.

The doctors become each other’s patients (and lovers). When death strikes one at random, they drag the corpse into the parking lot and leave it there. In the evening, they throw a dance party, shaking ass to James Brown, Parliament, “Let It Whip.” The beaver-guy falls asleep on an abandoned couch in a field and dreams of his own dancers, who suddenly wake up a few feet away from him. He offers them food and limited hospitality. He wakes up again.

The title derives from a Rumi quatrain, “the doorsill where the two worlds touch,” and Kahn’s film unfolds as a series of elusive thresholds. An opening montage shows close-ups of corners and walls around the house, set to a marching drum-and-xylophone score by Kahn and Keith Wood, which vaguely resembles the theme from *Halloween*. In its original press release, Kahn claims that the dialogue was largely improvised, and that the actors in the film were “strangers to her.” Are they playing characters, or merely themselves in dress-up? The tragedy of the situation is always overlaid with a sense of humor and abandon—as the doctors speak on cell phones to mysterious authorities, Kahn shows us multiple conversations occurring in adjacent rooms, further obscuring causality and order. The film is as fun to watch as it must have been to make.

Based in Los Angeles, Kahn has had a long-standing interest in urban landscapes and personal injury. One of her previous videos, *It’s Cool, I’m Good*, features Kahn as a bandaged figure walking around the city on crutches, giving an improvised commentary on what might really have happened to her. The figures in *Sleep* don’t make excuses for their actions; they’re content to be where they are, even as their bodies and health waste away. It’s a strangely affirmative vision of the apocalypse. Kahn closes the film with a statement confirming her intention to feel less alone in creating art, despite the fact that we are still very much terrified singular bodies. At least in creation, we can belong to something else:

I shot this sunset in real time/We had to sit really still/and be really quiet/I could let it run. Like we’re here together./But it’s forty minutes./I could speed it up/So many great people worked on this film./I feel less alone./I mean I still mostly feel alone but who doesn’t boohoo./I hope this piece helps us feel more connected./Even though it’s kind of bleak/And not as funny as usual/Here we are.