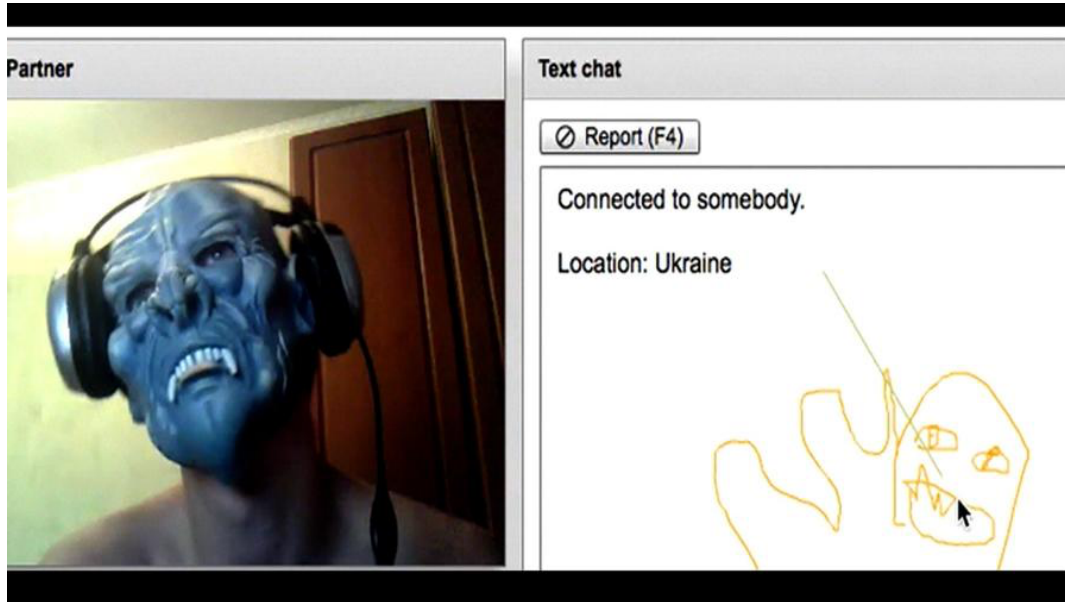


Los Angeles Times

4 May 2017
by Sharon Mizota

Review

Chat rooms, home movies, life, death: A tangled, touching video at Susanne Vielmetter



Stanya Kahn's video, "Stand in the Stream," is a big, messy, loving exploration of nothing less than life itself. The nearly hourlong montage, on view at the Susanne Vielmetter gallery, is constructed from Kahn's own video archives, assembled during the last six years. It is a mad swirl of footage: home movies, animals, video games, street protests, impish performances, chat rooms, stunning landscapes, online news. It captures the way life comes at you in a relentless onslaught.

There is, however, a method in the maelstrom. The narrative coalesces around the artist's mother, Sandra Kahn. The video dips into her past as an activist and chronicles her aging and eventual passing. Although much of the piece is preoccupied with death, what emerges overall is a raucous call to engage with life.

Images of Kahn's mother's library, which includes publications from the Black Panthers and '70s feminist movements, give way to recollections and recordings of protests against the Persian Gulf War and the more recent Black Lives Matter, Standing Rock and anti-Trump uprisings. This footage is often captured from online sources, accompanied by unruly streams of comments. The historical through-line lends the weight of decades of struggle to the ephemeral nature of Internet imagery.

It also reminds us of the easy interchange — some would say confusion — between real and virtual life. Kahn gleefully embraces the back-and-forth. We see her cruising Chatroulette, a site that randomly pairs users for webcam chats. She's wearing various monster masks, conversing (or not) with people all over the globe. Also recurring are images from a phone game featuring a skeleton. Although cute and cartoon-like, it presages the decline of Kahn's mother.

We get to know the artist's mother a little in candid interviews. In one, Sandra laments the mental deterioration her own mother experienced. Later, we see the mental deterioration that's happening to Sandra. Eventually, we see her burial: streams of earth cascading over an inert body. The rawness of this image, as it echoes the flood of imagery that has come before, is both moving and a little shocking. Kahn is unflinching in her drive to see and document life as it really unfolds.

Describing these few moments doesn't really do justice to this brave, complex work, but perhaps that's the point. All the individual moments don't signify as much on their own as they do when they're tangled together. "Stand in the Stream" exhorts us to jump into the endless torrent of challenges, joys, heartbreaks and triumphs that roll through a life. It also urges us to fight, like protesters standing strong against the fire hose.