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Teens lead the way forward in 'No Go Backs'



Still photo from Stanya Kahn's 2020 short film "No Go Backs," shot on Super 16mm film. Courtesy of the Wexner Center for the Arts

Stanya Kahn's quietly gorgeous, contemplative short film is now premiering in the Wexner Center galleries

About a year and a half after Los Angeles filmmaker Stanya Kahn finished her fast-paced, experimental 2017 documentary, "Stand in the Stream," she found herself at a friend's house in the Eastern Sierra mountains, staring out a window, watching the snow fall. And in that moment, the vision for her next film flooded her mind all at once.

Earlier that night Kahn had been lying in bed, aimlessly browsing Twitter on her phone and getting angrier and angrier with each scroll. Then she came upon a clip of congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. "She was describing elements of the Green New Deal and concerns about young people, and she was being very pointed and clear and intense. And it was a tiny salve on the mounting fury I was feeling," Kahn said recently by phone from California. "I shut off the phone, and I was lying there looking out the window, thinking about young people needing to abandon so much of what they have had to inherit in order to figure out a new way to be in the world."

As Kahn thought more about this new generation's abandonment of old ideas, she began having visions of kids leaving the city and heading into the wild. "That allegorical shift happened almost instantaneously, probably because I was half asleep and sort of groggy," she said. "The idea space just started translating into a more poetic, physical image."

It just so happened a friend had recently told her about a house in the Eastern Sierra mountains near Mono Lake that was available to artists. She called and reserved the house and quickly began working on a film for Lucy Zimmerman, associate curator of exhibitions at the Wexner Center, who hoped to have something from Kahn for the Wex's 2020 winter season. The resulting short film, "No Go Backs," is now premiering in the Wexner Center galleries and will remain on view through April 26.

The contemplative film, which features no dialogue, follows two teenage boys as they leave Los Angeles on their bicycles and head for the mountains, traversing arid deserts and dramatic, snow-capped peaks. Kahn shot "No Go Backs" on Super 16mm film using a Wex-loaned camera ("I wanted to record the earth on analog material," she said), and throughout most of the 33-minute film, she used a long lens to shoot from a distance. "We never really feel like we're entering into the kids' space too much," she said. "I wanted to leave a sense of autonomy for them."

The two main characters aren't mere actors; Lenny Dodge-Kahn is Kahn's son, and Elijah Parks is his next-door neighbor. The pair were born three weeks apart and have known each other their entire lives, and that real-life friendship leads to a natural, uncontrived onscreen chemistry. "A common thread in a lot of my work is there's usually some element of realness that might be interwoven with or embedded inside a fictive narrative structure," Kahn said. "A lot of times we'd get to a location and I would let them think we were still setting up, and I would start shooting because that was a good way to get them candidly in their elements. And so there are a lot of shots of them not even really knowing they were being filmed and just doing what they do, which usually involves throwing rocks and kicking things."

The pair's teenage-ness is central to the film as the characters navigate the world as not quite kids but not quite adults, either. "There's this way in which these teenagers are so smart, and then also these other ways in which they're still kids and they make dumb decisions, like eating junk food, or playing in the snow and not thinking, 'Oh, then we're going to be wet and the sun's going to go down and then we're going to be really cold," Kahn said. "It's also an apt metaphor for some of the concepts about how all of us — not just their generation — have to figure out a new way forward. And we partly know and we partly don't know how to do that."

With no dialogue, the score and music for "No Go Backs" took on greater importance. "I wanted the sound to feel real-ish," she said. "I didn't want it to be completely naturalistic. I wanted it to be like a psychological space that felt related to being in the natural world, but also could be the sounds inside someone's head — almost like remnant sounds of the industrial world, and the ways that sometimes the hum of a machine also can sound like a breeze."

For the music, Kahn drew inspiration from Brian Eno, particularly his 1975 album Another Green World. "It's one of those records that really moved me when I was a teenager in a way that I couldn't quite put my finger on. It made me a little uncomfortable, but also I loved it so much. It was so dreamy," said Kahn, who used Eno tracks "In Dark Trees" and "Somber Reptiles" in the film. "Some of the instrumentation and chords and notes that are in both of those [songs] I used to make a lot of the other music. … You don't realize you've been kind of floating in an Eno universe until the Eno [songs] come on and you're like, 'Wait, have we been hearing this through the whole film?'"

But Kahn didn't merely incorporate music from her own youth. Her son and his friends listen to a lot of hip-hop, and so does she, "There are a few tiny samples in there that are very brief, and some of them are even slowed down a bit. The kids will know immediately, and I put them in as signals to their generation," Kahn said. "So there will be lots of adults who will have no idea, 'Oh, that's "Or, 'That's Lil Peep.' But the kids will know."