

Art

Reviews



Masters Of None

Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn

★★★★★

Elizabeth Dee Gallery,
through Aug 2 (see Chelsea)

An artist duo puts the id in idiocracy. By **Howard Halle**

I'd missed Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn's debut at Elizabeth Dee Gallery in 2006, which is why the work of this Los Angeles-based duo was such a surprise to me at this year's Whitney Biennial. In a show that was otherwise meh, their video, a sort of lo-fi tour de horizon of L.A. titled *Can't Swallow It, Can't Spit It Out*, was a true standout. In it, Dodge and Kahn excavated the psychological terrain beneath Tinseltown's urban landscape and found, not surprisingly, that the place was a psychotic mess. Judging by their latest exhibition, so is the rest of the country.

Dodge and Kahn offer up a quartet of videos, three of which (*I See You Man*, *Nature Demo* and 2006's *Masters of None*) run around

ten minutes long; the show's centerpiece, *All Together Now*, clocks in at just under 27 minutes. Taken together, the pieces are as insightful a look at Bush's America as anything I've seen in the past eight years. Not that the works are overtly political: They're too surreal and caught up in their own nuttiness for that. But in its own way each paints a portrait of a body politic that's all but brain-dead—if not completely headless. In *Masters of None* and *All Together Now*, this last punch line is telegraphed quite literally, as both offer images of groups of people wearing hoods over their noggins like hostages in a Hezbollah video, or prisoners at Abu Ghraib. Dodge and Kahn take the irony that both sides of the War on Terror have adopted this device, and leverage it into a symbol for the post-9/11 state of mind—which, as they apparently see it, is a tabula rasa, as if the shock wave of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers wiped away all critical thought in the home of the brave.

Masters of None focuses on what's evidently a suburban family wearing orange jumpsuits and bright pink sacks over their heads, each with a different, crudely drawn expression, from happy face to sad. They do everyday things, like squirting each other with hoses in the backyard, or mashing food into their "mouths" while watching a

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python devour its prey on television. At one point, a female member of the clan leads everyone in a game of charades. None of the others get the clues she's signalling, and soon, her frustration grows until she finally collapses on the floor dead (we know this because after a quick edit, her cartoon eyes become Xs). She's then

carried outside and solemnly buried under a pile of leaves.

This narrative, if you can call it that, is conveyed wordlessly; the soundtrack is filled with mumbles and grunts and voices distorted electronically beyond all recognition. The far more elliptical *All Together Now* is similarly "silent": It begins with Kahn at the scene of what we can only presume is murder, since she's covered in gore; as the video concludes, she's naked in a pond, scrubbing blood off her bruised body. In between, her character takes a long strange trip that might be in flashback—or not. Once again we see a family, or maybe it's two families, it's hard to tell. One group, relaxing at what seems to be a spa, is covered in grime and dressed in matching purple pants and shirts (like Kahn, in fact). The other group seems to be in an unfinished basement or attic; they wear hoods and busy themselves, filling small sacks with dirt, or breaking up furniture or checking surveillance imagery on a laptop. These activities seem pointless and nefarious in equal measure: Imagine the Three Stooges in a bomb factory, or members of Heaven's Gate running a supremely inept bed and breakfast.

Kahn drifts in and out of such scenes and others, including a clam bake at the beach with a pair of kids, and an afternoon of pulling weeds from an abandoned highway. Both point to a peculiar leitmotif that seems to occur in all of Dodge and Kahn's work—the environment's total indifference to man. This subtext becomes text in *Nature Demo*, which follows two would-be survivalists (Dodge and Kahn) as they bumble around the woods and natter endlessly about building a "windblock" (a word that gets repeated like a mantra), without ever managing to do so; the best they can come up with is a sad, site-specific driftwood sculpture. *I See You Man* features Kahn at ocean's edge, dancing into the water while shouting "I see you man!" and "I'm going to vote for you!" before ending with "I feel like I found what I was looking for."

Would that we all had. But, as this work suggests, we're permanently trapped in an imperial idiocracy. If you think real change is coming this November, this show just might disabuse you of that notion. ■