

STANYA KAHN

OPENING
SOON Stanya
Kahn's solo
exhibition at
Marlborough
Chelsea,
New York,
Sept. 11-Oct.17.

Interview by Tracy Jeanne Rosenthal
Portrait by Jay Hanna

TRACY JEANNE
ROSENTHAL is
a writer based in
Los Angeles. See
Contributors page.

IN THE STUDIO



“DID IT WORK?” a voice interjects from a window. “Yes and no,” a witch replies, looking down at her body, now covered in protruding cocks. On large panels shocked with primary colors, Kahn draws a recurring cast of worms and witches who parry setups and punch lines. In *Yes and No* (2014), humor casts its spell before the brain can catch up: is this a phallic exorcism or a genital heist?

I laughed my way into Sanya Kahn’s Los Angeles studio with some professional guilt about the kind of enchantment my laughter already revealed. Good jokes do this: hijack their context and make spectators complicit. Kahn’s drawings parallel her decade-long video practice (she was a Guggenheim fellow in film and video in 2012) and also resonate with her early performance work, honed in New York in the 1990s. Kahn’s videos share a methodology and a rich affective soup. Often, she embodies some recently maimed or interminably ill harlequin traversing a mostly hostile world. Addressing the camera in monologues meticulously constructed from jump cuts, her characters deliver swift and cringeworthy LOLs with a *Weltschmerz* hangover, or as its hair-of-the-dog antidote. Freud theorized that humor’s function is release. But, as Kahn knows, humor is just as easily a trap.

In *It’s Cool, I’m Good* (2010), Kahn appears bandaged beyond gender but keeps on in an environment that’s just as damaged. Cruising, by turns, on crutches or a motorcycle, from L.A.’s fast-food joints to its aqueducts, she wraps her busted lips around a Wiener-schnitzel, expounds on the “efficiency” of animals, and tries to score a Craigslist hookup: “Tell them I just got plastic surgery, so like, I’m about to be really hot.” In *Can’t Swallow It, Can’t Spit It Out* (2006), a collaboration with Harry Dodge (a percipient kook and video artist with whom Kahn has worked for years), Kahn sports a Viking dress and a bloody nose. Joining a cameraman on a hunt for a newsworthy sequel to the Rodney King beating, her character, the Valkyrie, recounts with equal seriousness memories of her childhood and of neutered creatures cavorting in hell. In *Kathy* (2009), Kahn takes a personal turn, aiming the camera at her own best friend, whose job as a social worker seems as gruesome as her recent abdominal abscess. And in *Don’t Go Back to Sleep* (2014), Kahn tracks a band of nurses in scrubs holed up in abandoned condos as they offer their philosophies on the pursuit of happiness while getting drunk, performing surgery and becoming patients themselves.

That Kahn can make us want to stay suspended in all this ailing abjection is a form of sorcery that has humor at its source. At some point in our three-hour conversation, over the sounds of an eager crow and the neighbors’ kids, Kahn tells me that *Beldonna* leaves can enhance your dreams or poison your enemies. Maybe we’ve lived in L.A. too long, but I’d like to put magic back on comedy’s table. What’s the difference between witchcraft and entertainment? What’s the difference between a witch and a healer? “Do you need a doctor?” the voice from the window offers in another drawing, *That witch can’t be stopped* (2014). “I am a doctor,” the witch replies, peering down at her crotch.

TRACY JEANNE ROSENTHAL At the end of your latest video, *Don’t Go Back to Sleep*, you use subtitles to directly address your audience and the expectations we have about humor

in your work. It’s one of the only videos you’re not in. A group of nurses squat in dreary, pre-fab condos during some kind of apocalypse, narrating their own inevitable demise. But at the end you write: “So many great people worked on this film. I feel less alone. I mean I still feel mostly alone but who doesn’t, boohoo. I hope this piece makes us feel more connected, even though it’s kind of bleak and not as funny as usual.” How do you deal with this expectation of humor? How do you use it?

STANYA KAHN Early on, as a young performer, I realized, in the terror of standing in front of people, that when I improvised a joke a connection was made. Suddenly we were on the same team. Then I could go on with the rest of my material, which wasn’t always funny—it was sad or weird or poetic or all of those things. But the joke equalized us; it let the audience know the artist wasn’t taking herself too seriously, wasn’t placing herself above them. But she was still in charge.

I’ve never broken the fourth wall in that way before, but at the end of *Don’t Go Back to Sleep*, I felt the tone was a bit too neat and self-serious. I needed to break that. First, because I’m probably uncomfortable with things that are too serious. But it’s also a small Brechtian gesture. Sometimes I use humor as deflection. At the same time, I was thinking that the heaviness in this piece exists no matter what. It’s a gallows humor.

ROSENTHAL That reminds me of a scene in *Kathy*. Your best friend talks about her life, her mother, dealing with a recent botched C-section. At one point, she remembers arguing with her therapist about laughing through their sessions, telling her, “I know you think my humor is a defense mechanism, but actually I’ve moved through all that and I’m in the place where I just need to laugh now.” Her point is that we’re not supposed to look past the humor and get to the real thing . . .

KAHN The humor is the real thing. In *Kathy* all of that was fully manifest: the way humor becomes a syntax, a form of communication that’s integral to our experience. It’s not a veneer or a device. Kathy and I have been close friends for 20 years, and I knew that’s how our relationship functions. In that piece, I tried to foreground the places where there is little separation between perceiving pain and perceiving funny. They’re inside each other.

When you have a traumatic experience, what you understood to be a stable set of references gets interrupted, upended or disorganized. Shock breaks reason. So do humor and joking, at least the kind that I tend toward. When humor is doing its best work, it is speaking what’s not supposed to be spoken, pointing toward that which has no form or shape, or naming what isn’t supposed to be named. There’s a parallel sort of structure in that both trauma and humor undo meaning—and make new meaning.

ROSENTHAL I see your humor as a mediator between something verbal, like wit, and something physical, like slapstick. In the middle, you have screwball, which is about the relationship between language and the body.

KAHN For 15 years I only did live shows, and all of that work was extremely physical. It was very much physical comedy, but I performed mostly in alternative black-box theaters like



Stanya Kahn:
*Don't Go Back to
Sleep*, 2014, video,
74 minutes.

Images this
article courtesy
Susanne Vielmetter
Los Angeles
Projects.



*It's Cool, I'm
Good*, 2010,
video, approx.
35½ minutes.



— DID IT WORK?



— YES
AND
NO

Performance Space 122. I went through a bit of an identity crisis around venue. I felt my work was too weird for theater, too wordy for dance, too serious for comedy clubs. At that time, mainly in the '90s, art hated bodies and dance and performance. We were really locked out of that world. I think that relates to a trickiness around the art world's recent crush on comedy. In some ways, I wanna say, if there are artworks that are funny, great, let them be what they are, and let comedy just be comedy.

ROSENTHAL Right, art and comedy has become an increasingly popular curatorial conceit. But is humor an end in itself? Or is it a device to get somewhere else? In *Don't Go Back to Sleep*, one of the nurses calls humans "leaky bags of filth," which is funny, but it's also an actual claim about being. In *It's Cool, I'm Good*, the central character is covered in bandages, and tells jokes to the camera while seemingly just trying to survive the toxic L.A. landscape of polluted beaches and fast-food restaurants.

KAHN I have no problem with saying my work is funny—at least I hope it is. But the truth is, I don't ever see the work as just funny. Sure, the witch in *Yes and No* is funny, but maybe she cut off all your dicks. That's not so funny.

In *It's Cool, I'm Good*, I say, "When they cut off my feet, will you save my toes, 'cause I wanna make necklaces out of my toe bones, I'll make you one too." That's a perfect example of being inside distress and being able to project out of it at the same time. This represents a core conceptual project in the work as well as a resilience that keeps me alive. It surges me just enough above my depression that I can take another step forward and put that foot on the ground—no pun intended. That line and many from that piece came directly from an ex-boyfriend I had who was dying, who eventually died of AIDS. He was in denial for so long; when he really got sick he was found on his kitchen floor. He'd been there for three days and one of his legs had gotten severely sunburned and the skin had melted onto the kitchen floor. That was his entrance to care. It was super gross, but we were able to joke about it. I get down to the hospital, and I say, "What's going on?" and he goes, strapped to tubes, all drugged out, super fucked up, "It's just a really bad sunburn."

ROSENTHAL Your character in *It's Cool, I'm Good* says it's a sunburn, but we never really know what the source of her suffering is. She also says it's a shark bite.

KAHN Yeah. And herpes. Viewers don't know if the character is dying or recovering. I was interested in keeping us in that uncertainty. So much of the material in that piece comes from and is about precarity, places where fear and persistence meet, the productive anxiety generated in the moment when things can either fail or become viable. And maybe both.

ROSENTHAL I think of Beckett's "I can't go on, I'll go on" as a good description of what your characters are up to: this cast of the unruly sick, just going on.

KAHN The "unruly sick"—that's really at the core of everything I've made. When you're damaged, you are unruly. When you're sick, you are unruly. I think you have to be a little unruly in order to puncture what could become stasis or apathy or chronic indecision in this world, where it's not easy to locate where we have agency. And I think that performers are sick

There is little separation between perceiving pain and perceiving funny. They're inside each other.



The Ballad of Crappy and Scapole, 1999, performance; at Performance Space 122, New York. Photo Donna Ann McAdams.

and unruly. *It's Cool, I'm Good* is a perfect example of the way in which the performer is narcissistic and self-serving while also being selfless and vulnerable. I think to be a performer you have to be willing to be vulnerable. To say, "Hey, give me your attention." And then you have to be so generous to rise to that attention. That comes back to the body too. The way you handle energy and move energy. Performers are also spell casters, handling information in altered states, transforming energy. Which is also why it makes sense for me to draw witches.

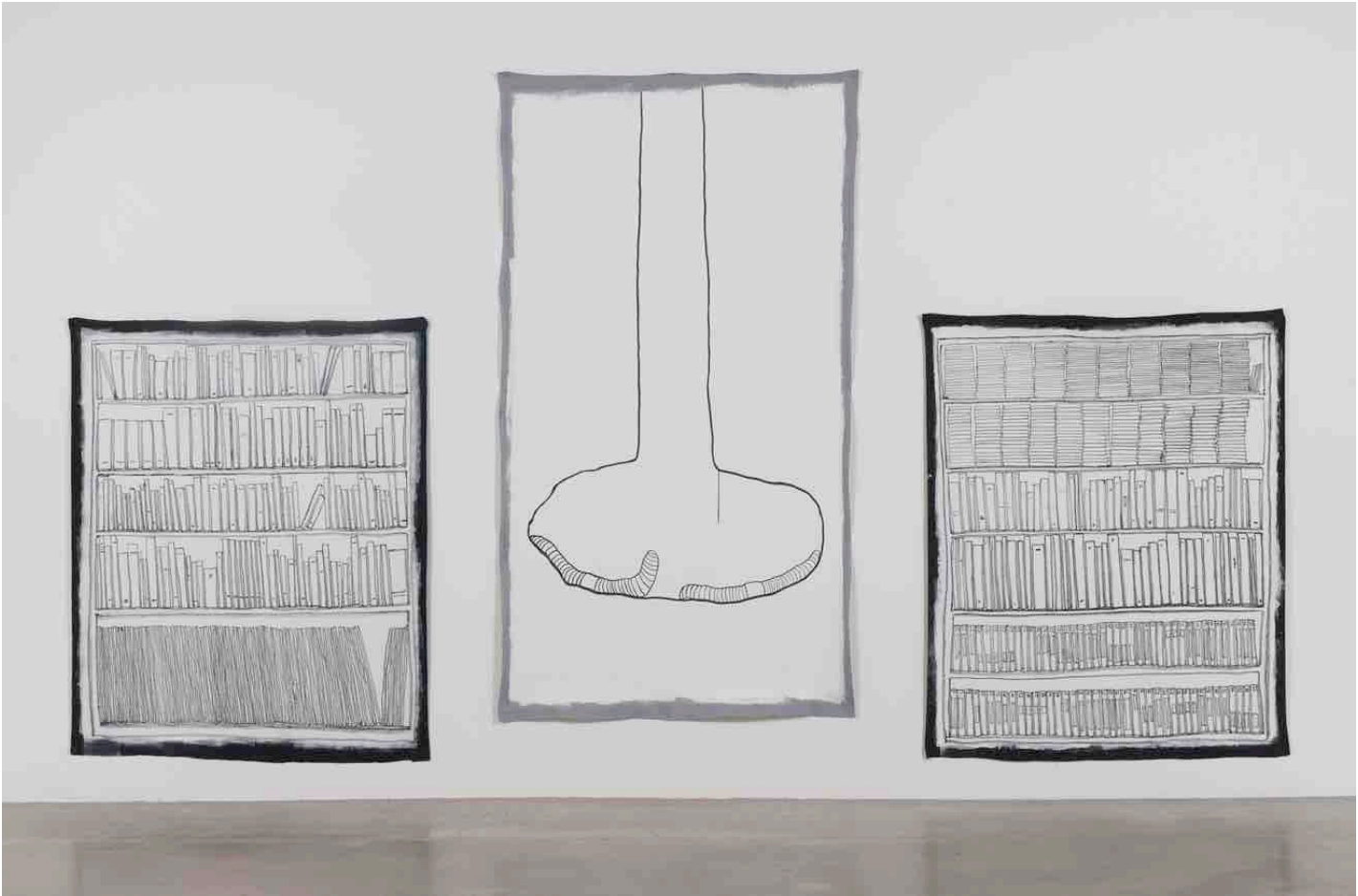
ROSENTHAL What role does entertainment play in this relationship with your audience?

KAHN That's a deep and difficult question. I'm supposed to say: "Oh no, it's not entertainment." Entertainment—poor thing—has suffered, through a (valuable) Marxist critique. It's associated with the spectacle, with alienated labor, with the dissociation of the viewer from their bodies, as if it's an empty spell-casting, an easy, fluffy place. But I do value entertainment in connecting with an audience.

Some of the tropes of entertainment I have consciously moved away from are the ways that women's bodies are used

Opposite, *Yes and No*, 2014, gesso, acrylic and ink on canvas, 75¾ by 54½ inches.

Following spread, view of Kahn's exhibition, 2014, at Susanne Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, showing (left to right) *Bookshelf I*, oil, pastel and gesso on canvas; *Worms*, ink and gesso on canvas; and *Bookshelf II*, oil, pastel and gesso on canvas; all 2014. Photo Robert Wedemeyer.



and perceived—through masking and disfiguring. It's easy to envy men, who don't have to think about that.

ROSENTHAL But then you wouldn't have access to the witty, alternative knowledge of being a woman in the world.

KAHN Any marginalized standing comes with a perspective that's other than the status quo. From when you're tiny, the world doesn't listen to you or treats you like what you're saying doesn't make sense. So you have to come up with other ways of perceiving yourself and perceiving reality, and expressing it.

ROSENTHAL Does this affect how you position the viewer in relation to your videos? In *It's Cool, I'm Good*, there's a nurse who functions like a proxy for the audience. Sometimes the nurse appears on-screen, helping you angle a straw or pull on your pants; but then your character also speaks to the nurse while speaking into the camera directly, saying things like, "You seem really thoughtful," or "You're totally hot." In *Can't Swallow It*, your character also addresses the camera, accusing us of being a pervert hiding in the bushes.

KAHN The way that the relationship between viewer and performer is structured comes very much from a place of kinship, camaraderie. When I show these videos in a gallery, I often give viewers Lazy Boy chairs. Most of my characters are a certain type—an everyman. They may be eccentric, but they're not powerful.

ROSENTHAL As the Valkyrie in *Can't Swallow It*, you loiter around the entrance to a hospital with a bloody nose, wearing a Viking dress, carrying a big foam wedge of cheese. Maybe she's homeless—

KAHN Maybe—

ROSENTHAL Maybe from another world—

KAHN Exactly. Lois, a character from an early work I did with Harry Dodge, is also a sort of nobody in this way. A nobody-slash-loser. Of course, I don't see them as losers; I'm borrowing that from the press. Critics say, "Oh, those rambling losers." And I'm like, "Thanks, guys. I actually see them as eccentric clairvoyants, innovative thinkers. And PS, I'm not rambling. A lot of those scripts are written—they just seem off the cuff. Sure, some of them are pure improvisation, but that's from 20 years of training in improv!"

ROSENTHAL How can it be rambling with that many jump cuts?

KAHN You try rambling like that! But I hope the viewer is identifying with that part of themselves. The part that is unruly, searching awkwardly out loud, that exists in a real, plain, mundane space. But the line where that becomes poetic is a blurry one. That's me trying to say this could be you. I'm with you.

In the drawings, too, I'm going back to that lowly person, the everyman, the place with not much power. I have the characters speak and joke around because if they are lowly beings we can assume that difficulty comes along with that. And I'm most interested in what is spoken out of difficulty.

ROSENTHAL At one point in *Can't Swallow It*, the Valkyrie is sitting in front of an office building in down-

town L.A. and says, "I wonder what kind of things they do in front of this kind of stuff." This seems like an excellent summary of how the action in your videos is integrated with infrastructure and architecture.

KAHN Many of my characters are spending time out in the open or in public spaces, moving through space. In some of the projects, I had no locations, and I didn't want to shoot in my studio, so out and about is where we'd go. When I started *Don't Go Back to Sleep*, I was sneaking into these homes and condos that had never been occupied and had been left empty for years. They had appliances and marble countertops, but no one was living there. I wanted to experiment with what it would be like to finally go indoors, to see what it's like to be contained in a domestic environment, with the subtext of being in a housing crash. Those spaces are almost like the outsides in the other pieces.

ROSENTHAL In *Can't Swallow It*, the Valkyrie says the outside of the hospital doesn't look like a hospital, it looks like a condo—

KAHN And in *Don't Go Back to Sleep*, here we are with nurses in the condos. I'm seeing built space as a brain space, too, using architecture and landscapes as stand-ins for psychological space and states of mind. Those aren't separable to me. The social and cultural and political are not separate to me from everything that's personal. But that's really different from saying the personal is political, which implies that the subject is first. And I barely believe in the subject.

ROSENTHAL In a past interview, you compared your characters to Looney Tunes characters. You've made animations as well, like *For the Birds* [2013], in which an Acme Boulder rolls over the feathered protagonists.

KAHN Daffy Duck is a quintessential performer because he has persistence. He's relentlessly brutalized by both Bugs and Elmer; he really gets hurt a lot. But he persists and persists and persists. And is witty while he does it.

ROSENTHAL There are numerous references to the process of art-making in your works. In *Arms Are Overrated* [2012], one of the paper puppets says, "You know, what we need here—

KAHN —"is a statue, a lady wearing a towel, you know, no arms?"

ROSENTHAL Yes! And in *Winner* [2002], a piece you did with Harry Dodge while at Bard College, you're showing sculptures out of the back of your car, and the cameraman doesn't give a shit. Are these meant to suggest some cheek about persisting in an art-world context?

KAHN There's always someone in the work who's offering creative insights, who's willing to be in a poetic relation to the world—maybe that's where some self-consciousness about being an artist comes in. Or the cheek is that I keep making the work I want to make.

ROSENTHAL I was about to use a pretentious word for "body of work"—

KAHN Oeuvre? It always sounds funny to say. It's like, "Urvh." "Urvhr." "What?" "Move Over!" "What?" "Nothing, I said move over." ○



Stanya Kahn and
Harry Dodge:
*Can't Swallow It,
Can't Spit It Out*,
2006, video,
26 minutes.



*Arms Are
Overrated*, 2012,
video, approx.
13½ minutes.