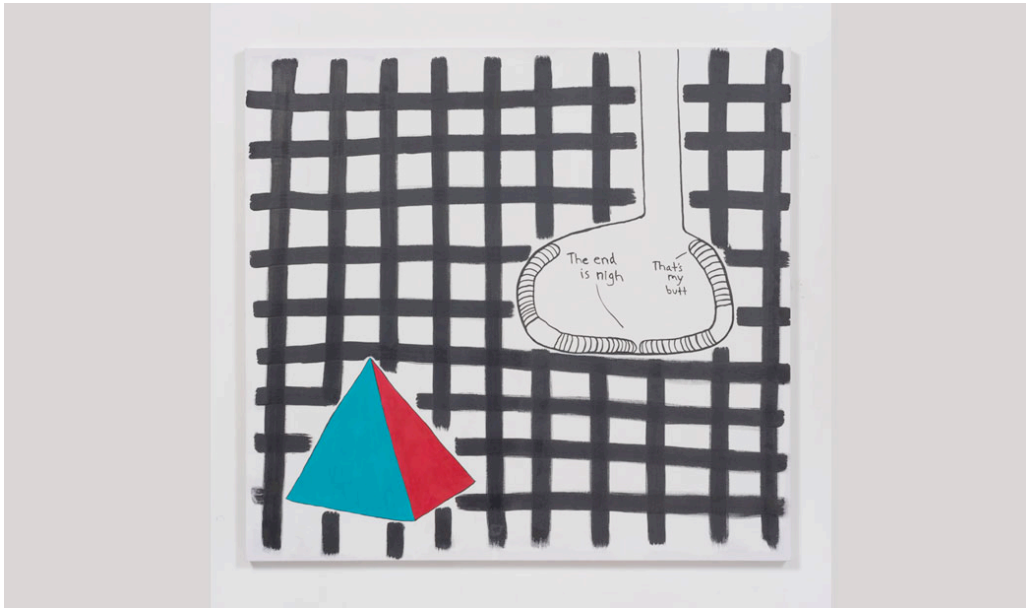


## The Apocalypse Is Hilarious: Stanya Kahn's Bleak Laughter at Marlborough Chelsea



When I visited Stanya Kahn in advance of her solo show, “Die Laughing,” on view at Marlborough Chelsea through October 17, two art handlers were maneuvering a large painting of a dick-covered witch through the space. Rendered in a style that owes as much to “The New Yorker” as David Shrigley, the figure seems perplexed by the multiple phalluses that have sprouted all over her body. “Did it work?” an unseen interrogator asks. “Yes and no,” the witch replies. It’s a one-liner in many ways, but for Kahn a joke is always more complex than that. “Did she cast a spell to end patriarchy by getting rid of all the dicks?” she pondered. “Or did she cast a spell to have a dick? It’s about power: where it lies and where we get it.” A similar multivalent weirdness lurks behind even the most lighthearted cartoons and drawings in the exhibition: A depiction of a snake semipathetically attempting to chug a can of beer becomes a chance for empathy, in Kahn’s mind, if not outright existential terror. “Parallel to my video practice is this drawing practice, which stems more out of writing,” the artist said. “It’s a quick way to visually work out jokes — ideas about agency, pathos, anxiety, or distress.”

The paintings and works on paper in “Die Laughing” constellate around “Don’t Go Back to Sleep,” a partially improvised, nearly feature-length film shot in never-occupied luxury housing developments in Kansas City, Missouri. Kahn, who lives in Los Angeles, had become fascinated by similar real-estate phenomena in her native city in the midst of the economic crisis. “I started breaking into some of those houses and shooting in them,” she said. “There were brushed-steel refrigerators, marble countertops, ovens, but no carpets. And they were empty for years.” The nonprofit Grand Arts in Kansas City offered her the opportunity to expand these nascent ideas into a proper film, and secured proper permissions so that the police wouldn’t show up. Kahn cast an ensemble of nonprofessionals, deciding — unusually for her practice — not to act in the film herself.

“Don’t Go Back to Sleep” is hard to explain. The plot, if that’s even the right word, involves a group of nurses or doctors who have taken refuge in deserted houses in the midst of a major apocalyptic event. Occasionally someone new arrives, injured, and is subjected to inept, grotesque surgery. Despite all this, no one seems overly concerned about the future, indulging in dance parties and make-out sessions. Mostly what people do is talk — about obese migrating birds, or the horror of milk, or the existence of aliens. Many critics have likened the film’s tone to that of strangers-picked-to-live-in-a-house reality shows like “The Real World.” Kahn accepts the comparison, though she didn’t have such programs in mind during filming. “If you have an unscripted situation in a particular environment, that’s partly how you end up shooting — you follow people, you go to where there’s action,” she said. “I wanted to explore an ensemble improvisation inside a contained domestic environment, but with this sense of impending danger and precariousness.

What kinds of dialogue and feelings might emerge inside that accumulation of pressure?”

One thing conspicuously missing from the film is contemporary technology. This is an offline world, although many of the characters spend time on their cell phones arguing circuitously with unidentified customer-service representatives. The absence of the Web is notable, considering that the project Kahn was working on before “Don’t Go Back to Sleep” was precisely about the ways in which faceless strangers interact in the digital realm. That sprawling video, shot on phones, Go-Pros, and other lo-fi cameras, continues to evolve. “A lot of what I’d been shooting was taking place online, in chat rooms: video chat, Chat Roulette,” she explained. “Then I lost interest in the Internet. I thought, ‘You’ve been investigating whether connection or agency happens in online spaces. But what you’re still most interested in is connection and agency live, IRL, with actual people.’ So I thought, ‘If I can get an ensemble of real people and put them into these rooms in architectural spaces, it’s very much like what I was trying to investigate in Internet space. But it’s in bodies, and it’s embodied.’”

It’s important to note that, despite these conceptual underpinnings, “Don’t Go Back to Sleep” is obsessively, eminently watchable: perversely smart, a tangle of oddness, angst, and humor. It is, in short, *entertaining*, which often seems like a dirty word in the art world. “Capitalist consumer culture has given us plenty of reason to question what seems recognizable as entertainment,” Kahn admitted. “And thank goodness for artists who break out of that space. But we’re really suckled on commercial narrative. You can’t totally expunge it from your psyche. I come from live performance. I’ve had the experience of being onstage in a room with people, and if you’re losing them, it feels *bad*. You have to keep recalibrating the energy to stay connected. I bring that experience with me to video making: I want the viewer to come along on the journey with me.”