

Art Review: Stanya Kahn – No Go Backs



Stanya Kahn No Go Backs (Still images) © 2020 Stanya Kahn. Super 16mm transferred to 2k video, 33 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles. Made with support from the Film/Video Studio at the Wexner Center for the Arts.

Galleries and museums are closed; here in Columbus, across the country and around the world. They have become yet another entry on the ever-growing list of things we can't do and places we can't go. That's a good thing in its heartbreaking way, as it's clear now that we shouldn't be gathering or interacting. We shouldn't be exposing one another to unnecessary risks. We shouldn't be out.

But just because museums and galleries are physically inaccessible, that doesn't mean we can't think about art, engage with it and learn from it. Nearly every museum and cultural institution has adopted systems to connect people with art and collections through virtual tours, blog posts, streaming events and other forms of online content.

Similarly, those who write about art can still write about art, even if it's about work that people can't currently go see.

Such is the case with Stanya Kahn's short, meditative film, *No Go Backs*. In what now looks like a very prescient work, Kahn offers a vaguely post-apocalyptic vision of Los Angeles and the mountains that surround it. It is a world without dialog and inhabited solely by teens and tweens. As the film unfolds a narrative of sorts takes shape. Backpacks are hastily packed. Two teenage boys traverse an urban landscape (whether they're running from something or to something is never explained). As they continue their journey, the landscape slowly transforms from concrete to open grassland and then to an epic wilderness. Civilization eventually recedes and the earth's natural landscape takes center stage.

George Inness' The Lackawanna Valley comes to mind as a suitable bookend to Kahn's film. In *No Go Backs* the nascent industrialization of North America that Inness documented nearly two centuries ago sputters to its sad conclusion on the opposite coast. We've come full-circle as nature, previously on the defensive, reasserts itself and human intervention diminishes (See also: Ochs, Phil *The World Began in Eden and Ended in Los Angeles*).

As for our two teenage protagonists, they explore, improvise and invent. They also eat junk food, break things and make questionable decisions. At a micro level, *No Go Backs* functions as a tightly compressed coming-of-age tale featuring two resilient teens. In 33 short minutes, the impulsiveness of youth gives way to a longer view, one that recognizes the twin concepts of consequence and future. The image of thoughtless and self-absorbed teens evaporates in instances of genuine care and compassion. Of course, every coming-of-age tale is similarly anchored to the premise that the protagonists must come-of-age, that circumstances (usually tragic and always involving a nearly impossible set of responsibilities) have forced their hand.



Stanya Kahn | *No Go Backs* (Still images) © 2020 Stanya Kahn

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No Go Backs is no different. Without citing specifics, Kahn makes clear that something has gone terribly wrong in the world. In this world, these young adults (and others like them) are the ones who will be left to grow up quickly and pick up the pieces.

Which brings us to now. Sheltering in place. Distancing. Looking out on empty streets, malls, schools and museums. Coming to grips with a world we cannot manage while continuing to cede decisions to those who arguably got us here in the first place. For Kahn though, there's reason to hope. *No Go Backs* ends with a nod toward possibilities. It ends with the suggestion that these young people can carve out a future. Who knows? Maybe we'll get a chance to see that. It should be clear at some point that we can't go back.

Until then, I like to imagine *No Go Backs* playing on an endless loop in an empty gallery at the Wexner Center; staff having left in such a hurry that the projector was left on.

There, in that dark and empty space, Kahn's young heroes (yes, let's drop the pretense and call them heroes) navigate their broad landscape and begin to rebuild their broken world, always looking forward, again and again and again.

More information on Stanya Kahn's *No Go Backs* can be found here: wexarts.org.