

A Surreal and Eerie Look at Los Angeles Over the Past Decade

In Stanya Kahn's earlier films, Los Angeles seems ready to spark a revolution at any moment. But in the newest adventure, the urban sprawl creeps into the inhabitants' states of mind, and everything languishes.



Stanya Kahn, "No Go Backs" (2020), video still, 16mm film transferred to 2k video (color, sound), 33:13 minutes (all images © 2020 Stanya Kahn, courtesy the artist and Vielmetter Los Angeles)

LOS ANGELES — In Stanya Kahn's newest film, *No Go Backs* (2020), two teenagers journey from sunbaked Los Angeles to the snowy Eastern Sierra Mountains. They take their mountain bikes across dry, concrete river beds and fiery poppy fields; they explore abandoned desert homes, and trespass into pristine, Airbnb-ready living rooms. The boys take an aimless path, the search for water their only driving momentum through the bleached, desaturated desert.

The Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA) presents a trio of Kahn's films in the exhibition Stanya Kahn: No Go Backs, which runs through January. In addition to the world premiere of *No Go Backs*, curator Jamillah James complements the film with *Stand in the Stream*, filmed between 2011 and 2017, and *It's Cool, I'm Good* (2010). The films capture Los Angeles

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throughout the last decade, a landscape that remains consistently familiar even as civil rights, climate change, and Kahn's personal relationships rapidly evolve.

Known primarily for her work in video, Kahn has used Los Angeles as a backdrop for at least a decade. Between her solo work and collaborations with Harry Dodge, Kahn has depicted the city as an eerie wasteland where people wander from boarded-up convenience stores to the blinding desert, all settings for her to reveal visceral discomforts and emotional trauma. She softens the subject matter with comedy, absurdity, and surrealism, often playing the role of the tramp, drifting from one slice of desert rat life to another.



Stanya Kahn, "No Go Backs" (2020), video still, 16mm film transferred to 2k video (color, sound), 33:13 minutes

All three films at the ICA dwell on injury, decay, and decline. In *It's Cool, I'm Good*, Kahn plays a protagonist recovering from a mysterious injury. Her head is completely covered in bandages and her hands, tightly bound in gauze, are clubs. Kahn hobbles to the beach, flies swarming her back, ready to feast. At a food stand, she tries to bite into a corn dog despite her lip being taped back and fragile teeth. She brushes off the state of her body with self-deprecating humor, "Do I look like the Invisible Man?"



Stanya Kahn, "It's Cool, I'm Good" (2010), video still, SD video (color, 5.1 sound), 35:25 minutes

Stand in the Stream is less irreverent and more gut-wrenching. Kahn documents her mother's last years alive, and over the six years of filming, her mother declines from a passionate storyteller to a gaunt figure in a hospice bed. An activist and union electrician, Kahn breaks up the film by kindling her mother's spirit of revolution, interspersing footage from the riots in Ferguson and of water protectors in Standing Rock, all juxtaposed against the Trump presidency.



Stanya Kahn, "Stand in the Stream" (2011-17), video still, HD digital video (color, sound), 60:50 minutes

But while *Stand in the Stream* and *It's Cool, I'm Good* operate with a sense of urgency, the teenagers in *No Go Backs* are ambivalent, restless, and bored. They take the scenic route, backfloat in a swimming hole, and laze against towering rock formations while watching a vulture glide in the air, searching for scraps. They live in a world without responsibility, awaiting future homes that are abandoned, scorched from forest fires. In Kahn's earlier films, Los Angeles seems static-charged, ready to spark into revolution or flames at any moment. But in the newest adventure, the insurmountable urban sprawl creeps into the inhabitants' states of mind, and everything languishes; there's too much ground to cover, too much time to kill, and not enough activity to spin into a distraction.



Stanya Kahn, "No Go Backs" (2020), video still, 16mm film transferred to 2k video (color, sound), 33:13 minutes

But Kahn's films are not without optimism. They show that building a community can stave off the malaise. Hope springs from a cluster of teenagers biking across the Los Angeles River, Kahn holding intimate conversations with strangers on the online platform Chatroulette, or her mummified body lumbering through the city asking passersby to help her pick up a corndog. In Kahn's world, we experience bleakness together, and that means we'll collectively discover joy.

Stanya Kahn: No Go Backs, curated by Jamillah James, continues at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (1717 E 7th St, Downtown, Los Angeles) through January 10, 2021. The museum is open by appointment.