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The Family





Stanya Kahn
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Stanya Kahn's first solo show in Berlin opened just after the US election, which ended up forming the unhappy but apposite context for the video projection *Don't Go Back to Sleep* (2014), hand-drawn animations on wall-mounted monitors and a selection of works on canvas. Alexander Scrimgeour asked the artist some questions about the exhibition and the relationships of politics and art.

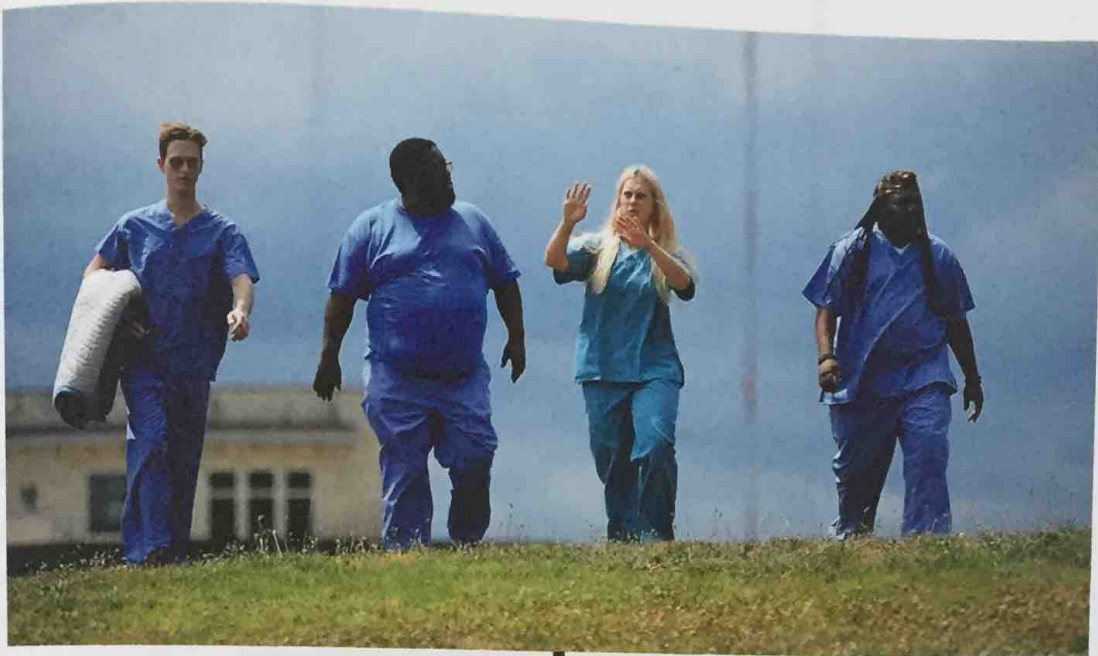
The backdrop of Don't Go Back to Sleep gives the sense of an ongoing disaster. The central image (or metaphor) of the film is a group of (kind-of) medical staff in a luxury housing development, where the wounded tend the wounded. Would you describe that as a proposal about strategies of survival, or strategies of resistance?

I might say "effort at" instead of "proposal for", but yes, both. We see a lot of collaboration with strangers under pressure, implementing action without hierarchy, foregrounding

the group over the individual, responding to the moment at hand, shared leadership from a shared base. I am most interested in strategies of resistance that have at their core a commitment to survival for the lowest common denominator (and not survival of the most powerful, as in this vile Trump administration: an entire apparatus coordinated to ensure the survival of the white 1% at the horrifying, life-threatening expense of others, literally Others). While many understand that survival *depends* on resistance, the denial of this is, I suppose, part of the travesty of neoliberalism and the resulting rise of neofascism.

Is the kind of care and support the people in the film give each other – creating and maintaining spaces for trust, intimacy, camaraderie and sharing, whether through conversations about spilt milk, remembered dreams, or simply dancing together – also a way of demonstrating an idea of what art can do?

Sure, the scenarios you mention can be related to art, to the alchemy of wildness and direction, poetics and intent, intuition and insight that go into making and viewing art. Art is full of languages and difference; it can say things rhetoric can't. We need this variety of modes for communicating and



Stanya Kahn
 Don't Go Back To Sleep, 2014
 Video with stereo sound, HD, 74 min.



Links / Left:
 Stanya Kahn, Landscape 2, 2016
 Oil on canvas, 150 x 108 cm

for *knowing*. But I was thinking more about the reality of connecting. How this requires a combination of spontaneous structure, agreements, and risk, a willingness to linger in an unknown, in the prenegotiated space of immediacy. And it's not all rosy and magical. There's the argument in the basement; the focused young Latina being followed around by the scattered, chatty white guy; the unhinged single mother alone, possibly losing it – these are important to ideas about community, fallibilities and problematics. There's a scene in which we see two African American men talking on a balcony and we cannot hear their conversation through the glass. This was an intentional shot meant to provide a moment of autonomy, self-determination – a nod to the idea that there can be solidarity and mutual respect in coalition without pressing for sameness or even transparency. There will be things not everyone can understand, things not everyone needs to know or be a part of.

With an eye also to the pictures and animations in the show, how can humor be a resource for the future?

Humor has always been a coping mechanism for me, and a means for connecting. Humor is related to the body, in the

Stanya Kahn
 Orange Birds/Psychic Space, 2016
 Ink, oil, flashe, and gesso on canvas, 100 x 135 cm



ways comedy is made and how it's received. Humor is one tactic among others in the work that parallels my thinking about the tools we need not just as artists but as citizens. For example, improvisation in my videos is, among other things, a willingness to respond to the world, honestly and at a moment's notice, with action. Similarly, painting and drawing are visceral for me: physical, impulsive, psychological, and dreamy all at once. They make it possible to combine the psyche, the intellect, and emotional states with formalities in order that one be heard and recognized, but also felt. And both (or all of it, sound too) offer viewers experiences of otherworldliness and of agency, a moment in which something else is possible. I'm invested in that, all round. Not in a didactic way, but in an experiential way. I'm not sure that art can be overtly politically effective. I think activism is more effective with regard to social change. But I think these small acts in art, e.g. humor, sensuality, complexity, inject us with electricity – sparking our agency and boosting our power directly through the body and, by proxy, the mind. It's ok if that sounds cheesy: it's totally true.