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Nakadate videos enthrall and sadden

Exhibit showcases the discomforts of intimacy

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COURTESY LESLIE TONKONOW ARTWORKS + PROJECTS, NEW YORK

A print from Laurel Nakadate's video "Exorcism in January" (2009) from her exhibit "Say You Love Me."

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In her videos, Laurel Nakadate ventures where others may fear to tread: into the homes of strange, awkward, older men who try to pick her up in grocery stores and parking lots. Her exhibit at the Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts at Harvard is riveting, but also raw and hard to watch, as she explores the dynamics of intimacy and power in relationships.

“Laurel Nakadate: Say You Love Me” follows Nakadate’s 10-year retrospective at MoMA PS1 in New York, which closed in August. The earliest work here is the three-channel video “Happy Birthday,” made in 2000 when Nakadate was a graduate student at Yale. She invited middle-aged men who approached her in public to collaborate with her. She went to their homes with cakes, and asked them to sing “Happy Birthday” to her. In the videos, they try, bumbling and hurried, to please her. Their yearning and social awkwardness in the presence of an attractive young woman (Nakadate was born in 1975) is sweet and sad, but there’s also an edge of danger here - they’re afraid of her, and she’s a bit afraid of them, too.

The videos are shot on the fly, with no professional lighting, like something you would shoot with your cellphone and post on YouTube. The acting is equally amateurish, which adds to the discomfort; these scenes are not about the fictions they portray, but about the unlikely relationship between Nakadate and her collaborators.

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LAUREL NAKADATE: Say You Love Me

Carpenter Center for the Visual Arts, Harvard University, 24 Quincy St., Cambridge MA

Closing date:
through Dec. 22

For “Exorcism in January,” Nakadate called on a man she has worked with before to improvise exorcisms with her. “The chemical imbalance in my brain changed,” he ad-libs. “An exorcism might help.” As she coaxes out the spirits, he jerks around on his sagging, single bed. Later, Nakadate writhes in her tiny denim skirt and tank top as the man chants, “Go away, evil spirits, leave this woman!” The erotic undertones are wildly unnerving.

There are no men in “Good Morning Sunshine,” and Nakadate stays behind the camera the whole time, but her voice commands the three scenes. In each, she awakens a young woman, tells her how pretty she is, and prods her to undress. The artist here plays the predator, cooing but conniving. The power she has over the girls, and their compliance, eager or resistant, is visceral and disturbing to watch. Wall text reassures us that the video “stars three girls who were selected via an open casting call.”

Loneliness, and not sex, is at the core of Nakadate’s work. The longing, the gulfs between people, and the desire to scale the walls we build around ourselves manifest beautifully in her pseudo-erotic scenarios. There is inevitable comedy, as well. But mostly, they are sad.



CARPENTER CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

Felicity Nove's installation "The Time Floating Bodies Take to Light (Measurement of space in a fractal structured vacuum)" in the exhibit "Measure for Measure."

Sizing up perceptions

Harvard-based theoretical physicist Lisa Randall and artist Lia Halloran have organized "Measure for Measure," also at the Carpenter Center, which plumbs riddles of scale and perception. As long as it stays in the amusement park of visual perception, "Measure for Measure" is great fun.

For instance, Barbara Parment's dazzling "Redwood With Floating Pine Needles," an 11-foot-tall composite photo, exaggerates the eye's reading of the tree. The trunk swells to its thickest at eye level, then narrows on up into the sky. The image comprises scores of small prints the artist made with three cameras and seven lenses, close-up to wide-angle. The eye shifts and refocuses as it roams the tree, zooming in and out in dizzying ways.

Felicity Nove set out to create the illusion of an expanding form with her installation "The Time Floating Bodies Take to Light (Measurement of space in a fractal structured vacuum)." Dried, gorgeously fluid smears of poured paint on the wall and ceiling resemble supernovas exploding. The mirrors, set in one corner of the gallery, seem to push the imagery away; everything slides off their swollen lenses, making the installation and the gallery space seem infinite, and the onlooker very small.

"All About Scale," Susan Sironi's comic meditation on size and imagination, features a child-size easy chair surrounded by books on high shelves. For "Actual Size - A Self-Portrait in Four Parts," Sironi altered books such as "Alice in Wonderland," cutting the shape of her own feet, hands, and other body parts out of the pages. The result has the eye jumping deeper into the book, from one cut-out illustration to the next, in a surreal journey down the rabbit hole.

Scale wobbles in Katrina McElroy's "Migratory Micro-Rhythm," more than 2,000 video stills tailored into circles and mounted in undulating diamond patterns. She has chopped and shuffled whatever narrative there was in the video into tiny landscapes and fractured views of faces, which rhythmically grow and shrink along the wall. The format makes for a surprisingly emotional piece.

The issue of scale becomes social, and not visual, in "Let Them Eat Cupcakes (The Cupcake Project)," Elizabeth Tobias's installation, which had a performance component involving the distribution of cupcakes. It's a yellow tent with Chinese lanterns and beanbag chairs, and visitors have written on index cards about hunger and poverty in Los Angeles, where this was first staged. This is obviously a timely piece, with the Marie Antoinette reference in the title a curt nod to the 1 percent. But social and economic issues are of human proportions, out of place amid fractals, micro-rhythms, and even redwoods.

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