

“Laurel Nakadate” *artUS*, issue 27, Winter 2009

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[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Whenever I witness Laurel Nakadate's cheesecake antics, I feel like Humbert Humbert ogling the 12-year-old Delores Haze (aka Lolita) innocently sunbathing in her backyard. Long before thongs, string bikinis and tanning beds, my generation fabricated our own, which we defiantly wore while baking our oil-soaked bodies on the decks of our suburban bi-levels. Many critics consider Lolita a pervert's fictional fantasy as if Nabokov merely fused a twentysomething's ripening sexuality onto a teen's prepubescent build. Lolita has always struck me as real enough, an innocent provocateur full of passion, but lacking in intention. Nakadate's "Fever Dreams at the Crystal Motel," her first show at Leslie Tonkonow (through July 24), explores this space where desires run rampant, yet actions prove meaningless, because the consequences are out of grasp.

I'm kind of fascinated by the controversy surrounding Nakadate's videos and photographs. There are the claims that she manipulates her subjects or that she flaunts her petite figure. I myself have framed her work as a kind of community service, for which she entertains shut-ins who otherwise lack human engagement, most certainly the opportunity to play games with alluring gal pals. One point she makes that her work sidesteps is that "everyone is acting." This notion is the key to understanding her work's artfulness. Alternatively viewing her work as "documentary" positions her as the director and everyone else as her eager subjects, obliged to perform for the camera. So long as everyone is an actor, everyone holds a stake in the work's outcome. Consider the video *Good Morning Sunshine* (all work 2009), whereby three pajama-clad adults, who look only slightly older than Lolita, strip down to their skivvies at Nakadate's beckoning. If everyone is an actor, then the gals know where this is going and are performing their own version of innocence lost. If no one is an actor and all are random pals Nakadate spontaneously awoke with her camera, then all have been duped into a striptease for our benefit. The more real her pseudo-docs feel, the more her work ruffles our feathers.

Just as one meets new dates at parties or work, she has met most of her male co-actors casually on the street, and considers some of them good friends. Another point that gets overlooked is that she has worked with one of her male playmates for ten years, ever since she was a Yale graduate student in search of community beyond school. One senses the genuine relationship underlying all the "acting" in *Fever Dream*, when long-term collaborator Barry ties her up on the floor and then asks, "I'm not treating you inhumanely, am I?" Whether this comment is spontaneous or scripted, his character cares what viewers out there think. He's no lackadaisical Lolita. With *Exorcism in January*, they seem to be having real fun: chanting, shaking rattles and crying out prayers, in their mutual efforts to exorcise some spirit. Some of her videos, such as *Try to See It My Way*, which features people acting as though they're experiencing an exorcism, are apparently the outcomes of actual workshops.

I can imagine her critics finding *Little Exorcisms*, for which she flashes her top out a train window, or *Exorcism 3 (Dancing in the Desert for Britney)* for which she mostly dances, just plain silly. However, if one adds up all the time spent posing for mirrors, eyeing oneself with alluring faces and caressing one's body, her behavior is all too normal to be dismissed. Nakadate's video camera functions as her mirror, and then ours as we recall

past adventures at the mirror. Finally, one can't help but view her camera as her security guard. So long as the camera is rolling, she can safely play with anyone, anywhere, since the camera will capture unsolicited acts. No wonder she considers her most risky project to be the *Lucky Tiger* series of C-prints, for which she passed around snaps on a craigslist.com date with three guys who refused to be videotaped, but agreed to handle her cheesecake photographs with fingers covered in fingerprint ink--generating traces for sure, though not so explicit as her trusty security cam.

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