

Laurel Nakadate



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND LESLIE TONKONOW ARTWORKS + PROJECTS

A&C BIG PICTURE

Laurel Nakadate Eagerly Awaits Upcoming FotoFocus Lecture

BY STEVEN ROSEN

I haven't seen artist Laurel Nakadate's 2009 film *Stay the Same Never Change*, but some of the write-ups I found on the Internet did not initially make me believe I had missed much.

Shot at the Kansas City homes of actors she located via social media and casting calls, the scripted film offers — according to www.bombsite.com — “a loosely connected group of teenage girls inarticulately looking for love and doing a lot of wandering around town with moderately pissed-off looks on their faces.” Others wondered if the film was exploitive.

Nakadate, a celebrated New York-based photographer/videographer/filmmaker/performance artist, will deliver the FotoFocus Lecture 7 p.m. Oct. 24 at the Cincinnati Art Museum. She will be telling stories and showing slides about her work this century. (The talk is free; visit fotofocuscincinnati.org for details.)

Nakadate's FotoFocus-related show at Art Academy of Cincinnati through this month — *Polaroids from Stay the Same Never Change* — isn't exploitive at all. As installed by Emily Hanako Momohara, Art Academy assistant professor, it conveys empathy for its subjects and cloaks them in mystery.

Maybe the process of isolating the images from a film, thus freeze-framing them, removes them from their narrative baggage. And maybe then assembling those photographs in a way that implies but doesn't explicitly spell out a narrative thrust gives the viewer time to respond more contemplatively. As a result, the show is intriguing.

The exhibit actually could easily be overlooked. These Polaroids are small and their color has a you-get-what-you-get quality. They are posted in clusters that follow a horizontal line along three walls of the small first-floor gallery. Each cluster focuses on a different girl or girls.

These teen girls, rarely smiling or doing anything exceeding dramatic, seem to be living an everyday life. They share a bicycle on a street, hold a pillow-like doll that reminds one of Fabio, hang out with older boys (or men), float in a pond (with men holding them), look sleepy, attend an amusement park or a drive-in and lounge around the house. They seem to be real people whose lives have meaning, even if they don't know what

it is yet.

Nakadate, 36, is busy on a new project called *Star Portraits*, which will be part of her lecture here. Between finishing a Northeastern shoot at 1 a.m. and flying to Atlanta the next morning, she answered some questions I sent via email. “The Polaroids were shot while I was in production for *Stay the Same Never Change*,” she said. “I wanted to shoot Polaroids as well as regular film stills, because I feel that there is a similarity to the ways that adolescence and Polaroids both feel — fleeting, intimate and full of longing.”

“Because the Polaroids are still, they allow the viewer to create a new narrative about these girls,” she continued. “And I welcome that reincarnation for the work, independent from viewing the feature film. Still photographs have a life of their own, and I'm excited that these little Polaroids will have a chance to tell their story.”

Since completing that film, which was shown at Sundance Film Festival, Nakadate has completed another one, *The Wolf Knife*. It is also about teenage girls on a road trip. “We see the inside of hotel rooms along the way and the strangers they meet through chance encounters,” she said.

Her current project, *Star Portraits*, is considered by her gallery — Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects — an ongoing performance. She meets strangers at pre-arranged times in remote locations at night, her camera's flash being the first moment she sees them. They determine their own poses, dresses and props for the portrait.

Last year, she teamed with James Franco on a performance piece in which they participated in a séance with Tennessee Williams' spirit in order to get permission to restage the late playwright's *Glass Menagerie*.

“I think that piece was a lot of fun and I really loved working on it,” Nakadate said. “Now, James and I are working on a series of short videos that we are about halfway finished shooting. We've been going to locations where we create narratives on video that deal with historical events that happened on those sites. You'll have to stay tuned.”

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