

Polaroids from “Stay the Same Never Change”

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by Emil Robinson

The act of looking is brave. Especially if you look at things you can't handle. I think that most people do not look. If you're really paying attention you could have your heart broken twelve times a day. Most of the time we aren't looking

Words spoken by Laurel Nakadate in an interview with the online publication The Rumpus from 2009

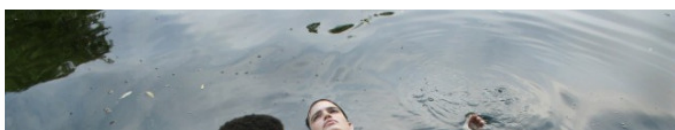
Polaroids from Stay the Same Never Change is currently on view in the Art Academy of Cincinnati's Convergys gallery. The show is comprised of seven mini series of Polaroid photographs. Each series is named for one or two teenage girls who are the main characters. Each group has between 8-24 images. The works are mounted behind plexiglass and aluminum at a height that requires the viewer to crouch or lean down to see the works up close. This decision to physically activate the viewer is a nice touch on the part of artist and professor Emily Hanako Momohara, who designed the installation. The Polaroids were culled from many taken while the artist Laurel Nakadate was working on her first feature length film Stay the Same Never Change, 2009. The film follows a group of listless teenage women as they navigate their lives in Kansas City. As in past projects, Nakadate utilized amateur actors and shot much of the footage in the girls' real homes.

There are multiple ways to read the work of artist Laurel Nakadate. Her work has been described as narcissistic and fashionably disordered. Past projects have seen her filming herself in lingerie with lonely single men, faking her own death, and documenting herself crying 365 days in a year. Yet in these projects, as with the work on view, her ability and willingness to uncover our deepest and most private thoughts, reveals that her chief interest is in the human need for intimacy. She holds a mirror up to the strange mythologies we create in our own minds when we seek love and approval. Her work is innovative, brave, and emotionally provocative.

Self-absorption is clearly at work in the faces of the girls in the show. The girls spend their time half-present because they are doing so much to recreate the way they think things should be. The fact that Nakadate walks the line between reality/staged in her filmmaking only helps to solidify this liminal world. The characters in Stay the Same Never Change alternate between girl and woman, shimmering and vibrating like mirages of the sexuality they present but struggle to understand and use. All that surrounds them is myth. The parents, friends, houses, and objects they interact with are only important because of their roles as foils for the girls and their inability to create real intimacy. Nothing in the images reflects a comfortable and predictable existence. In the place of real intimacy the girls fumble through ritualistic role-playing and awkward social encounters. The best images in the show teeter within the worlds of erotica, innocence, and games. From the series “Julie”, the depictions of Julie and her pillow depicting a man's torso are cuttngly disturbing. We see her lying with the pillow in vaguely coital and post coital postures. Some images like the one of Becky Or Brooke From the series “Becky and Brooke” that depicts a girl in a strangely empty room playfully pulling a white curtain to encircle her head like a wedding veil, are gentle in their content, and provide extra depth to the realism.

Nakadate is also well aware of the harmful popular ideas surrounding female adolescence. The title of her film seems to affirm this. The teenage girls are led to believe that they are at their most beautiful and seductive in their nubile state. The problem is that they have no idea how to express their feelings. They are caught between what they are told they are and how they really feel in the fantasies they create to fulfill their cultural expectations. This inertia is especially clear in images like the one depicting Julie on the hood of a red car, her lipstick the same scarlet shade as the car. She lies on the hood like she is pinned there. One of the Polaroids from the series “Tate” depicts a bikini-clad girl floating on her back while swimming. Her legs and arms drift lazily. She is almost too beautiful to look at, lost in her imagination while her young pale body is held buoyant atop the dark water. Yet, something bad appears imminent as the two older men who are her bathing companions surround her, one with his hand appearing to apply a downward pressure onto her. Is this just a game among friends?

Oddly, full-blown consummation of the dread filled scenarios we are presented with would not attach more tension to these works. Each viewer is able to complete the narrative with his or her own capacity to imagine morally bankrupt scenarios. In this way we are betrayed by our own imaginations and life experiences. We also confuse desire and instinct, ritual and mythmaking in our own quest for intimacy. We all create heaven and hell in the privacy of our minds. Nakadate invites us into our own fantasies and makes us sit waiting for consummation, but it is the waiting and wanting that makes us human.





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