

# The Pickup Artist

It's panties and a little panting at a new P.S. 1 -show



Courtesy Leslie Tonkonow/Artworks + Projects

## Laurel Nakadate: 'Only the Lonely'

MOMA P.S.1  
22-25 Jackson Avenue,  
Long Island City  
718-784-2084, ps1.org  
Through August 8

### BY R.C. BAKER

As a performance artist who puts her scantily clad body front and center—sometimes precariously so—Laurel Nakadate pokes a sharp stick into the Male Gaze. Since her twenties, she has co-starred in her own photographs and videos, improvising roles with men she has found lurking around truck stops, gas stations, or on Craigslist. Generally middle-aged, in varying combinations of overweight, balding, and/or lacking dental insurance, these strangers must have thought they'd died and gone to heaven when the nubile young artist showed up at their hovels looking to discuss lecherous fantasies.

In one vignette from the 2006 video *Beg for Your Life*, a pert Nakadate (b. 1975) sits on the floor with an older gent who tells her, through tin cans connected by a string, that he'd like to "take a curling iron and stick it up your ass." Another segment features a bearded man with a massive gut who performs as if he's escaped from

a James Whale horror film, pretending to knock her out and then running his hands over her face, declaiming, "Oh, a masterpiece has been done. Come! Come! View the masterpiece as you have promised for me! View! Do you love me now?"

During an interview while the show was being installed, I asked Nakadate about some of the real risks she has taken in such performance pieces. "I made the majority of this work at a very specific time of my life, when, if an artist is lucky, they're very naïve and brave," she replied, adding, "I'm very proud of having been naïve and brave, because it's authentic."

Authentic as anything can be in our media-drenched age, that is: Some of the men seem in on the joke, giggling as she holds a toy gun to their heads; others come across as hopelessly excited, such as the auteur who wiggles his ample rump to illustrate how he wants her to perform for his camera.

In *Lessons 1-10* (2002), a bespectacled fellow makes feeble sketches of Nakadate, one pose revealing her panties under a Girl Scout uniform, an homage to the prurience of Balthus's prepubescent girls. Here, though, the script is inverted, with the nymphet directing the action, knowledge that is crucial to our perception of the artist's work.

## Art

### Dirty pictures: *Lucky Tiger #1*, 2009

But even if you saw these videos cold, you'd probably still feel the grrrl power, partly because the deck is stacked with Nakadate's good looks, in contrast to her scraggly co-stars. And she conveys a command of her roles that the men—who range from hesitation about what they've signed up for with this crazy chick to an overweening eagerness to run with their fantasies—can't quite match. Captivating performances arise in *Happy Birthday* (2000), in which she asked strange men in New Haven (she received an MFA from Yale) to take her home for pretend

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parties complete with cake and candles. The hosts sing "Happy Birthday" with varying levels of gusto; afterward, one of them finishes his slice and says, "Maybe I'll have another piece. Is that all right?"

This topsy-turvy innocence—the fetching girl luring the perv with offers of any variety of sweets—gives her best work a primal charge. The wickedly titled

*Trouble Ahead, Trouble Behind* features shots of flimsy underwear snapping in snowy wind just before Nakadate releases each garment from a speeding train. The performance lingers beyond the bleak images, as you wonder what someone innocently stumbling upon these snarled panties in the wilderness might imagine, and whether those scenes would be different in a man's head than in a woman's.

The fraught landscape of flesh, power, vulnerability, and sex—where the brain takes a backseat to spine, gut, and loins—is well-suited to the handheld/existing-light aesthetic Nakadate brings to shabby motel rooms, gloomy truck stops, and the other seedy backdrops of her performances (though her compositions are not always immune to the fish-eye bluntness that is the curse of our point-and-shoot epoch).

Her work also gathers punch from her liberal use of pop music, as when she employs Springsteen's "Devils and Dust" in *Exorcism 3 (Dancing in the Desert for Britney)*. In this nearly seven-minute video, a TV broadcasting Britney Spears's tabloid travails illuminates Nakadate's face as if she were a maiden gazing at a candle in a Georges de La Tour painting. She murmurs an indistinct incantation before the scene shifts to Utah's Salt Flats, where, in a bikini top and cut-off shorts, she begins a writhing dance as the Boss's gravelly voice intones, "Well, I dreamed of you last night/In a field of mud and bone." In discussing this particular piece, Nakadate said she felt that Britney needed someone to watch over her, adding that as a 10-year-old she'd heard grown-ups listening to Springsteen and remembers thinking, "This is a guy who can save the day." The dissonance between a girlish yearning to rescue a self-destructing idol and libidinous dancing to a blue-collar hero's grim lyrics creates an alluring, pagan vibe.

Recently, Nakadate has directed two feature-length films with amateur actors. Her second, *The Wolf Knife* (2010), could benefit from severe cutting: Powerful images of an empty pool lit at night or a degenerate teacher trapping a former student within the rectangle of an open bed frame can't overcome lethargic pacing. Too many listless shots of young bodies blunt the narrative tension between teen BFFs. But the lovely desolation in a scene of a blonde sprawled across the backseat of a moving car, streetlights rolling over her in rectangular waves, is nicely echoed in Nakadate's series of large photos, *365 Days: A Catalogue of Tears*, in which she photographed herself crying on each day of 2010.

In the end, it's Nakadate's 2009 photo series *Lucky Tiger* that lingers. She distributed small photos of herself in pin-up poses to a group of men whose hands were covered with ink, their smudged fingerprints like paw marks over her face, breasts, and thighs. There's nothing naïve here, just raw desire, which, welcomed or spurned, transcendent or violent, remains the singular, irreducible fact of human existence.