

FT WEEKEND

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In person

Video artist Laurel Nakadate has always been fascinated by strangers. She speaks to (and photographs) Griselda Murray Brown

I am standing on a cliff edge, the sound of the sea behind me, waiting for Laurel Nakadate to take my photograph. It's a dark night in Margate on England's south coast and I can barely make out Nakadate's slim shape behind the tripod. When I see a flash, she tells me, I must stay still and not blink for half a minute; a long exposure is required to capture the night sky.

I've known Nakadate for two days – two days longer than the other people waiting to be photographed. They're an unlikely group of local teenagers and passers-by, journalists and gallery staff from the recently opened Turner Contemporary museum perched above us. The pictures will become the latest in Nakadate's *Star Portraits* series of strangers shot under the starry skies of Arizona, Colorado, upstate New York, California and now Margate. Many of the subjects are young women; they look variously defiant, beautiful and awkward – vulnerable in the bright flash.

Nakadate is fascinated by strangers, particularly by those we might call loners. As a graduate student at Yale, she chose to live in "single occupancy" apartment blocks: there she met single men who would invite her into their apartments. She would agree, on the condition she film their time together.

The resulting videos feature uncomfortable role-plays: a pretend birthday party, a stilted dance-off to Britney Spears' "Oops!... I Did It Again" and a life drawing session. They are about sexual power – and it always resides with Nakadate. The men, awkward bachelors in baggy underpants, fidget and gawk in her presence. Even when she is the subject – the life model, for example – she signals her control with a mere glance at the camera.

"I'm like his muse," she says, when I ask her about the life drawing scenario, "but the muse has the power. From the beginning, it was important to me to speak about art history and the history of women's bodies in art."



Born in 1975, Nakadate grew up in small-town Iowa in an artistic family. Eloquent and polite, it's at first hard to reconcile the panty-clad girl of those videos with the woman in front of me when we meet at the Zabludowicz Collection in London: her first UK solo show has just opened there, spanning more than a decade of work. Her early videos divided critics in the US: some called her brave, others exploitative. Nakadate describes her work as feminist. It interests her that many people were uncomfortable with what she saw as "a young half-Asian girl taking power. It forced them to come to terms with how they felt about themselves and the images they consumed."

But stronger, perhaps, than her feminist principles is her fascination with human relationships. The accusation that she was exploiting the men in her videos still baffles her. "Just because I was a young girl going into the rooms and lives of single older men, it didn't mean we couldn't be friends. For me, it was about trying to forge connections with them."

From those men to the young women in her ongoing *Star Portraits*, Nakadate's art is



Portraiture Top and left: stills from 'Stay the Same Never Change' (2009); above: Laurel Nakadate in New York
Sarah Trigg

about real people. Having come from what she calls "a strict documentary background", graduating from Yale's MFA photography programme in 2001, her work since has mixed fact with fiction. Her feature films, *Stay the Same Never Change* (2009) and *The Wolf Knife* (2010), star non-actors; in the former, the female teenage leads were filmed in their homes in Kansas City, wearing their own clothes but speaking scripted lines. Although she lives in New York, Nakadate favours "backwater" places in her work – unlovely car parks, scrubby deserts and quiet midwestern suburbs. So it was fitting that, on the evening of the Margate photoshoot, *Stay the Same* was screened at the Turner Contemporary for its current exhibition, *Nothing in the World but Youth* – Margate's fading lustre echoing Kansas City's post-industrial barrenness. (The film is viewable in the exhibition's "Teenage Wildlife Videothèque".)

The most memorable collision of art and life in Nakadate's work is in the video she made in Manhattan on the morning of September 11 2001. She had moved to New York's East Village just three weeks before;

that morning, "the only thing I could think of was making a video. It was the only thing that would make me feel more in control when there was absolutely no control." In the piece, she stands on her rooftop in a Girl Scout uniform, silent and teary-eyed, the Twin Towers half-engulfed in smoke behind her. For Nakadate, that video was "proof that the one consistent thing in my life is the ability to make work... [so] that I did not crumble completely." Again and again in her work, semi-fictional narratives emerge from real situations: it is through them that she makes sense of the world.

Nakadate is at the centre of her art yet strangely hidden. The men in her videos reveal more of themselves – their desires and fears – than she ever does, despite her near-nakedness. And although she calls the *Star Portraits* "an intimate performance with a stranger" – "I'm standing with that person one-on-one in the dark: that's a performance for me" – it is the stranger, not the artist, who is exposed. But there is one exception: every day of 2010 Nakadate photographed herself crying and the resulting 365 images were blown up and shown in her largest solo exhibition to date, *Only the Lonely* at MoMA PSI in New York, which opened in January.

"It's actually very difficult for me even to stand in there," admits Nakadate, signaling through the door to the rooms devoted to *365 Days*. "In the early videos it was very much a character I had created," she continues, "but the *365 Days* performance, it's me – my body, my tears, my environment. It was a performance, yes, but it also really happened. I did force myself into a place of sadness every single day."

For *Star Portraits*, Nakadate is back behind the camera. Those pictures "feel like a formal departure but not an emotional one". They are still about strangers and the play between vulnerability and trust, yet her decision to foreground a woman alone – rather than engaged in a game of sexual power – gives the work a new honesty. The portraits are not afraid of complexity, hovering between optimism and the conviction that we are all alone. "They capture a moment of discovery or transformation or terror," Nakadate smiles. "I think allowing someone to be that special is important."

'Laurel Nakadate', Zabludowicz Collection, London, until December 11, www.zabludowiczcollection.com/london
'Nothing in the World but Youth', Turner Contemporary, Margate, UK until January 8. www.turnercontemporary.org