
Photograph **Suki Dhanda**

Dancing with strangers

As a lonely student, Laurel Nakadate started engaging with the random men who talked to her. Then she made tense, unsettling films of their encounters. We sent Eleanor Morgan to meet the provocative performance artist

"A girl can change the world, or she can implode": Laurel Nakadate photographed at the Zabudowicz Collection





Private dancer: (clockwise from top left) *365 Days: a Catalogue of Tears* (2011); *Exorcism* (2009) and two stills from *Oops!* (2000)

Men just started talking to me. That's how it all began. I had moved from Boston to New Haven to study photography at Yale. In Boston, no one talks to you. You're invisible. Now suddenly everyone was talking to me, and I found it fascinating. Men started approaching me randomly in innocuous places, like parking lots or grocery stores and, normally, as a woman, you'd just walk away politely. But I decided to engage with them. Sure, I said, we can hang out.

I told them I was an artist and asked them if they wanted to make something with me. They all said yes and we'd go back to their apartments – either then or another day – and act something out.”

Blimey, so which was the first video?

It was called *Happy Birthday* – it was 2000.

I turned up at a guy's house in a party dress with a cake and we celebrated my – fake – birthday. He sang to me, and we ate the cake together. He had probably never celebrated someone else's birthday before, or even his own – he lived alone and had never married or had children.

I went on to make several other videos with men I didn't know. There was *Oops!*, where I went to men's apartments and danced with them to Britney Spears playing from a Hello Kitty boombox.

Most of the men danced with me. Later I made a video called *Lessons 1-10*, in which I filmed myself posing as a life model in my underwear, with men drawing me. People have found the videos uncomfortable. That's

OK, although they are supposed to be funny, too. Come on, two people who don't know each other in a tiny room, trying to have a birthday party? That's tragic and hilarious.

Those early encounters were as much

about my desire to connect with strangers as the strangers' desire to connect with me. I was alone in this new place, with no real friends. The fact that I engaged with the men under the premise of art created, to an extent, a level playing field: everyone was taking

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a risk. Although you can never level the playing field when a man and woman are in the same room. It's not possible.

I grew up in the Midwest, which shaped my expectations of the world. To make



"Although there's no sexual contact in any of my work, it would be ridiculous of me to say that some of it isn't about sex": Nakadate in London last week

the kind of work I do – which hopes for a beautiful thing out of an encounter with a perfect stranger – I have to be an optimist, I have to be trusting in humankind. My home town was in the middle of nowhere. It created an odd dichotomy of knowing everyone, yet having a screaming desire to get out and experience the world, experience something giant and real.

Growing up I was part of one of only three Asian-American families in our area; I didn't feel like anyone around me, so have no comprehension of only hanging out with people the same as me. I've always felt vulnerable and that has given me, I think, a kind of meeting point with the strangers I encounter.

Did people question what you were doing?

Yeah. 'You're a young girl,' they'd say. 'Why are you toying with these weird old men?' But those men were my friends. The videos question people's judgements about who should be friends with who. I think that's important.

I undertook my first project (*Girls' School*) when I was an undergrad student at the Museum School in Boston. It was a straightforward photographic documentary, shot on 35mm, of college girls doing everyday things, and it was the

start of my other fascination: girls becoming women, navigating the next steps of their lives. There's a lot of power and energy at that point – a girl can change the world, or she can implode. Many young women have said they identify with my work or feel empowered by it because I'm not portraying a naive woman or some vapid teen character; I'm looking back at the camera and saying: I know that you know that I know.

Does this play a part in your video series, *Good Morning Sunshine*, where you filmed young actresses waking up in bed? Where you tell them they are beautiful and ask them to remove some of their clothes?

Yes. They were all girls about to enter a new stage in their lives, which excited me. But it was also the product of looking at those men's websites where you can pay to tell a girl what to do – you know, take her clothes off on camera. The guys say things like: 'Oh sweetheart, you look so beautiful today. Why don't you show me your panties?' I wanted to know what it would mean to have a woman walking another woman through that. Would it be maternal when I told the girls how pretty they were and asked to see what was under their pants? Would it be manipulative in the same way that those men's websites are?

After that series a guy who ran one of those websites got in touch. He said: 'Would you like to come and be one of my girls?' It's not surprising, but it's fascinating to me how his mind went there immediately. He didn't think: 'Oh, she's deconstructing the notions behind these manipulated encounters' He just saw a girl who would potentially take her clothes off! I have folders of emails from guys like him; I thought about turning them into a piece, but I'd have to get releases signed. And I can't imagine some guy agreeing to be the dip-shit in my artwork.

Although there's no sexual contact in any of my work, it would be ridiculous of me to say that some of it isn't about sex. Take *Lessons 1-10*, when I posed as a life model in my underwear. Of course people will argue that life drawing, and the dancing in *Oops!*, are sexual. I'd be fantastically naive to assume an absence of eroticism from the men (some of whom I only met once, some of whom I've been friends with for over a decade) across the board, but every single one was different. I couldn't say who felt what – it was never

apparent to me at the time, and it's important for people to realise that.

That must have been intense work to be making in your early 20s...

Of course. But I never felt threatened or in any danger. Although more than 90% of those videos don't involve any touching at all, when you watch them there is a nascent sexuality there. They exist in the realm of

anticipation – often the most powerful aspect of sex. But there is no sexual contact. And I was never exploiting anyone's loneliness or unmet desires. I did exit interviews with some of the men after the films, and all of them said they were so

happy to be part of it; one said that it was the greatest experience of his life.

It comes down to people believing that fleeting encounters aren't valid. But they are. Ephemeral moments can be some of the most significant memories someone can have. ■

Laurel Nakadate's work is showing at the Zabłudowicz Collection, London NW5 (zabludowiczcollection.com).

*To see exclusive clips from her film *Wolf Knife*, go to observer.co.uk/art*

It was intense work to be making in my early 20s, but I never felt in danger