

ARTFORUM

Laurel Nakadate

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Laurel Nakadate has a way with discomfort. The eight videos on view in her latest show find the artist impinging on the intimate, lived spaces of others, then drawing on the tension that ensues. Her subjects are maladroit and marginalized; more often than not they are unattractive middle-aged men who live alone. Entering their kitchens and living rooms, Nakadate stages scenarios that range from the ordinary (a birthday party) to the eccentric (an exorcism). Faced with her impromptu actions, some of the men remain reticent, as if trying to gauge the polite response; others break character, as in *Beg for Your Life*, 2006, where her titular command is met with giddy laughter. Nakadate's work unsettles the lines between exploitation and compassion, and its occasional comic edge fails to annul the anxiety that ensues. *Exorcism in January*, 2009, captures Barry (a frequent star) gazing into the camera with watery eyes. When he speaks of his depression, his words, even if fed, inspire genuine pathos. The scene is difficult to square with the following shot of Barry writhing on a bare mattress, as Nakadate enjoins him to alternately shake, pull, and lick out his evil spirits.



Laurel Nakadate, *Exorcism 3 (Dancing in the Desert for Britney)*, 2009, still from an HD and digital video, 6 minutes 40 seconds.

Spanning the first decade of Nakadate's production, the show covers now familiar thematic terrain. As in her recent MoMA PS1 survey, isolation and vulnerability are the orders of the day. Marked by power dichotomies and failed connections, the portrait of social life that results is bleak. In *Darkest Evening of the Year*, 2009, a sequence of suburban homes adorned with Christmas lights appear on screen while, in voice-over, a man pretends to arrange casual sex on the phone. Such dissonance taps into the callousness that subtends American culture—a recurring motif that *Exorcism 3 (Dancing in the Desert for Britney)*, 2009, with its close-up of Nakadate crying alongside paparazzi footage of Britney Spears, condenses. Who merits empathy and who deserves blame are here pointed, though ultimately unanswerable, questions.

— Courtney Fiske

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