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Still from *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee* (2006)

CULTURAL KARAOKE

by Ben Davis

Nikki S. Lee's hour-long film, *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee*, which debuted earlier this month at the Museum of Modern Art and is set to have its West Coast premiere at L.A.'s Hammer Museum in January 2007, is not so much an extension of the themes of her previous projects as it is a kind of gentle corrective to them.

The Korean-born Lee (b. 1970) became famous, of course, for a series of photo works that she started making while she was still in school at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. For these "Projects," she disguised herself as a typical member of different communities -- senior citizens, adult dancers, lesbians and rural Ohioans, for instance -- and took snaps of herself with other members of these groups.

She followed this up with her "Parts" series, for which she photographed herself in various leisure settings with a male companion cropped out of the picture, allowing the viewer to guess at the details of the relationship from her different looks, clothes and accessories. Though offering a less catchy hook, these works strove to widen her themes beyond the gimmick of her "Projects."

Her new film, shot in 2004 and 2005 as she was finishing up the last of her "Parts," would seem to take up some of the same ideas. It starts as a kind of documentary by Nikki S. Lee about Nikki S. Lee, with the artist posed demurely in front of a shelf of books, musing about her second persona, a slightly more outgoing type we see hobnobbing at various arts events. The film then cuts between segments with these two different selves as Lee socializes with her collectors, visits art openings and globetrots to Mexico City, New York, Seoul, Venice and other international locales.

Lee's past work was best described as a likable, late-late-model version of '80s "phototheory" art, and no review of it was complete without referencing its evocation of the complexities of identity theory. In reality, however, Lee's work is theoretically quite flimsy: The idea propagated by her "Projects," that you can somehow compare categories like "senior citizen" and "adult dancer," let alone "lesbian" and "rural Ohioan," would be C material in any high school sociology project. It represents a simplified, cardboard picture of social reality, not an exploration of its richness.

A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee does feature its share of *Postmodernism for Dummies* moments, in the form of lots of soundtrack musings about who the "real" Nikki S. Lee is. On the other hand, the film applies a mild irony to all this via its clear indication that the intellectual Nikki is just as much a construction as the social butterfly (one hopes the scene in which Lee's New York dealer Leslie Tonkonow explains helpfully to her artist, "You're basically a conceptual artist," is intended as satire.)

What saves the film is not its "arty" self-reflexive moments, but its straight-ahead documentary value. The extension of Lee's shtick into the moving image has the effect of playing against the idea that she



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is a seamless cultural chameleon, highlighting those aspects of human finitude that tie us to one persona against our will -- in this case, Lee's hesitant English and characteristic body language. The switch between the "two Nikkis" in the film comes to seem not like a radical split-personality, but like the kind of gear-shifting we all experience in our professional lives, as we are tossed from one audience to another.

Another constant in the movie is Lee's appealingly understated, everywoman sense of humor -- in a funny bit, we see Nikki at a Yvonne Force Villareal loft party, confronted by a fan who enters the frame, praises her effusively, then just as quickly ditches her, leaving her looking awkward. The cumulative effect of the film is that the mutable self that Lee has become famous for illustrating is depicted as the logical product of a certain posturing type of art world, full of self-marketing and disingenuousness.

Nothing we see in this "conceptual documentary" is any more mysterious than the normal rounds of a professional artist: There's Nikki at an opening in Germany, dealing with a problem with the printing of her photographs; there's Nikki being interviewed, in intellectual persona, by RoseLee Goldberg about the performative nature of her work; there's Nikki doing an "Asian doll"-themed photo shoot for the *New York Times* in Paris; and there's Nikki at a lecture in Santa Fe, explaining to the crowd why she favors a "boring esthetic."

This "boring esthetic" gets a workout in the film's climax, a long tracking shot in which the camera follows Lee from behind as she enters the Armory Show, walks all the way down the length of the pier, past endless booths to Leslie Tonkonow's stand, where she drops off an envelope then turns around and is followed all the way back out of the fair, retracing the same path. Again, the spirit is professional, a kind of insider's joke for anyone who has experienced the Sisyphean journey up the pier, as well as another gesture that mocks art's high-falutin' sense of purpose.

But finally, *A.K.A.*'s iconic images are not these, but Lee's encounters with her Long Island collectors, as she goes looking for the perfect wedding dress for the staged Jewish nuptials in her 2005 "Parts" entry, *The Wedding*. Here we meet extravagantly made-up infants and "Long Island's Hottest Husband," and we watch Lee try on a variety of overblown wedding fashions (from the same person who designed for Princess Di, one of her hosts enthuses) -- all amid walls decked with high-priced contemporary photo art, from Vik Muniz pastiches to Lee's own staged shots. At one point, a woman even shows Lee a stockpile of art works, stacked together on the floor with green Post-it notes affixed -- her son has been marking the ones he doesn't like.

These scenes are the heart of the film. They give you a sense that Lee's work may be less about the craggy regions of post-Marxist identity theory, and more about shopping and trying on different outfits. Playing up the self-mocking narcissism of her practice, *A.K.A. Nikki S. Lee* makes it out to be a kind of intellectual and cultural karaoke. This may deflate her oeuvre a little bit, but it has the virtue of more accurately accounting for its resonance, and so giving it, maybe, more of a future. For an artist who likes to try on different roles, it makes Lee her own best critic.

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