



Remapping Boundaries

March 14
through
May 4
1991

Artists Space

Like Nuruah, the San Diego-based videomakers Robert and Donald Kinney work with masquerade and the subversion of gender roles, using them to explore the doubling and indistinctness of personal and cultural identities—in particular, the kind of loss-of-self present in oppressively-close familial or love relationships. *Stephen* is the third installment of a trio of works by the Kinneys which locate gay subjectivity within popular literary and dramatic narratives. In their first joint video, *Talk to Me Like the Rain* (1989), the Kinney brothers, who are identical twins, play a pair of estranged lovers, restoring gay content to the closeted Tennessee Williams' text. In their subsequent collaboration—a faux-opulent production of Jean Genet's *The Maids*—the notoriously multi-layered play proves a dense battleground of artifice, paranoia and conflicted sexuality. The Kinney brothers play the two sisters Claire and Solange, whose own relationship deteriorates as they plot the death of "Madame."

Based loosely on a chapter from Thornton Wilder's *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, *Stephen* explores the claustrophobic relationship between two twins who are also lovers. The original Wilder novel is a meditation on the possibility of faith in the modern world; the Kinney's update blurs the identities between the two twins in its distanced, allegorical, and highly-fragmented narrative. Stylistically, their work explores gay subjectivity in a terrain where the borders between "popular," "subcultural" and "high art" influences have become all but invisible. The tale unfolds in a kind of middle American boyhood transplanted to suburban San Diego. Like the films of Sirk and Fassbinder, objects and decor constantly threaten to overpower the characters, as the setting suggests the contradictory values and beliefs that constrain and determine their lives. Surrounded by the domestic signifiers of pop consumer culture, religious iconography, Trix boxes, and art deco furnishings, the brothers' world is a minefield of conflicting ideologies. The Kinneys, who were raised as fundamentalist Christians in Iowa, use these objects to probe the fragments of their own conflicted cultural history.

As the plot develops, the interest of one twin in another man drives a wedge in their relationship; when he dies, that estrangement becomes permanent. Cryptically ending in a garish yellow-toned scene with the remaining twin crossing a bridge along a hyper-modern highway, the tape suggests the world's imperviousness to human desires. Alternately frivolous and serious, banal and allegorical, the tape indirectly explores how AIDS causes us to question our faith in science, society and even our own bodies. Unlike the long takes and static camera of the previous collaborations, *Stephen* combines fast-paced edits of images, music, and silence with an almost TV-melodrama feel. It maintains a claustrophobic sense of containment, as the characters move from one ideologically-defined world into another and the tape shifts aesthetics from camp to modernist. As Bob Kinney stated at a recent panel: "I think of my aesthetic as having

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by Liz Kotz