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Are You High on Quix? In Laura Parnes' Fake Gated Community, This Drug is All the Rage

By Catherine Wagley

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"These people don't have friends, Angel. They have interests, and don't you forget it," Tanya tells her co-conspirator Angel in the opening sequence of artist [Laura Parnes'](#) new film *County Down*. Angel, the precocious, rebel-genius played by Stephanie Vella, has just designed a pink hallucinogenic called Quix, packaged in baby

bottles and distributed to other teens in their posh gated

community. Her popularity has skyrocketed, especially since all the adults in the neighborhood seem to be going slowly mad and anxiety among teens is at a high point. "Right now, it's in their *interests* to respect us," Tanya adds.

County Down, feature-length and animated using rotoscoping, a technique that turns live action into cartoon, is screening now at [LAX Art](#) in Culver City amidst paraphernalia from its making, and it's set to be released as a series of webisodes once the LAX show closes.

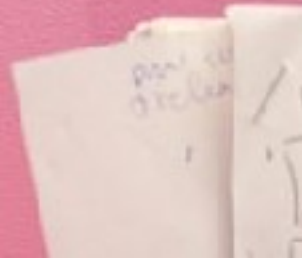
The whole thing is very '90s -- it looks like a video game informed by rave culture, anime, McMansions, and Clinton-era oblivion. Its protagonist, Angel, could be a composite of a slightly snazzed-up Daria from MTV and Christina Ricci's Wendy from *The Ice Storm* -- she's different, dark, sassy, smart and maybe dangerous. She has heavy blue eye makeup, a vintage schoolgirl wardrobe, and she's in over her head.

"It's embarrassing how long I've been working on this," says Brooklyn-based Parnes, who wrote the treatment in 2001, after Christine Vachon from Killer Films, who produced Todd Hayne's *Poison* and more recently HBO's *Mildred Pierce*, encouraged her to do so. That was just before the September 11 attack, and plans stagnated after patriotism surged and wars started. "It was not a good time," Parnes says.

She turned her efforts toward video installations like *The Only Ones Left*, in which a mafia boss who looks like he works on Capitol Hill kills his own men and, at one point, says what George W. Bush said about not letting foreign aid influence tactics in Afghanistan: "At some point, we may be the only ones left. That's okay with me. We are America."

Parnes also made *Blood and Guts in High School*, an interpretation of Kathy Acker's 1978 novel by the same name, in which a punk heroine endures sexual abuse by her cosmopolitan father, joins a New York gang, is nearly forced into prostitution, then dies of cancer. That film explored the desire to rebel, and how difficult it is to do so when you're born into a permissive, sometimes nihilistic social enclave.

County Down deals with that same difficulty and features latchkey kids trying to live out "the traditional, romantic idea of the teenager" even though the adults around them have never stopped misbehaving. Parnes staged a reading of it in



Stills and notes for County Down

Courtesy the artist

2009, at the same time *Blood and Guts* was screening at Participant Inc. in New York. Her audience recognized the County Down's milieu -- the jocks, punks, smart alocs and tomboys --, and laughed. "If they're laughing, I have to make this," Parnes thought.

She spent three years, from 2009 until now, casting familiar New York

performance artists like Kate Valk of the Wooster Group and Jim Fletcher, filming whenever she could get everyone together and editing mostly on her own. But *County Down's* long delay has probably been a good thing.

"It's hard to make a piece about the time that you live in," says Parnes. She tried it when she made *No is Yes* in 1998, in which two girls kill and mutilate a counter culture rock star. People couldn't zoom out enough to take in the film's implications -- that the '90s mainstream had devoured the underground. But now, in 2012, it's been twenty years since the Clinton campaign latched onto the "it's the economy, stupid" and pinned early-90s recession on George H.W. It's been sixteen years since Alan Greenspan described the mid-90s stock market bubble as "irrational exuberance" and Alanis Morissette defined irony as "life's funny way of sneaking up on you...when you think everything's gone wrong and everything blows up in your face." All that feels like it's of an era we've lived through and moved well past, which means Parnes' film revisits a world far enough away that its ominousness is understandable.

"Destruction is the one principle in the world we can count on," Angel says, two-thirds of the way through Parnes' film. "That and Quix." Parnes initially called the drug Triple X, but then xXx the



Courtesy the artist

Paraphernalia from Laura Parnes' "County Down"

movie came out. She tried calling it Tsunami instead, but then the devastating tsunami hit Japan. Quix had none of that baggage. "It's like instant sweetness or something," Angel gushes in *County Down*. "It sounds like immediate gratification," says Parnes.

The film ends when most adults have died or lost

their minds completely -- one woman tries to devour her own son's leg -- and even Angel's friends have begun to crawl around delusionally, due to the dwindling supply of Quix. In the last scene, men in white jumpsuits and face-masks lead Angel and Tanya from their gated enclave into the wider world. We hear Angel's voice, coming at us from the future, nostalgic for her moment of disastrous, youthful free reign: "Everything's different now and I know that's a good thing, but, sometimes I wish I could go back to that time, when I was really a part of something."

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