

Benning, Sadie. *Flat is Beautiful*, PAJ #71: A Journal of Performance and Art, May 2002, print.



Taylor, the skate-boarder, in Sadie Benning's *Flat is Beautiful* (1998).
Photo: Courtesy of the artist.

Flat is Beautiful (1998)

Sadie Benning

I've always loved to draw, always been a doodler. I used to draw to calm down as a kid. When I was in the 6th grade with my dad in New York I made stenciled graffiti drawings, put them on large buttons which were pins, and sold them on the street. I always drew, even before I had access to the camera. I came back to drawing recently when using modern technology. Malfunctioning equipment—that fragile electronic component—can really make you want to use a pencil. I started to draw a lot again while working on *Flat is Beautiful*. The technology wasn't very advanced (I was working on Sony Hi 8 editing decks). It was very slow. While waiting for the reel-to-reel deck to edit I would draw.

When I made *Flat is Beautiful*, I was interested in the age of 9–10, that in-between moment before you develop, that time period before girls have breasts, when things between boys and girls are much more equal, when your bodies are very similar. It's a “pre-gendered” world, a beautiful time. I wanted to make a story with a little kid at this age but not with a kid's real face—I didn't want to give acting directions or end up with a child actor's expressions. Using masks was a way to allow people to project their own feelings or experiences onto fixed expressions (I was influenced by Chantal Akerman's actors who are somewhat “stoic” or distant). I drew 20 masks for the film. They started as tiny drawings but I blew them up on a Xerox machine and glued them onto cardboard to give an effect of three dimensions.

The drawing of Taylor, the central character in the film, was done before the film was made. It was my first drawing of this kind, and eventually the head in this drawing became the mask worn by the child who played Taylor. The other drawing included here is a camcorder with the silhouette of a person sticking inside and outside the camera at the same time—a doodle I made while editing *Flat is Beautiful*.