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Mayer explores online identity, control at UMFA

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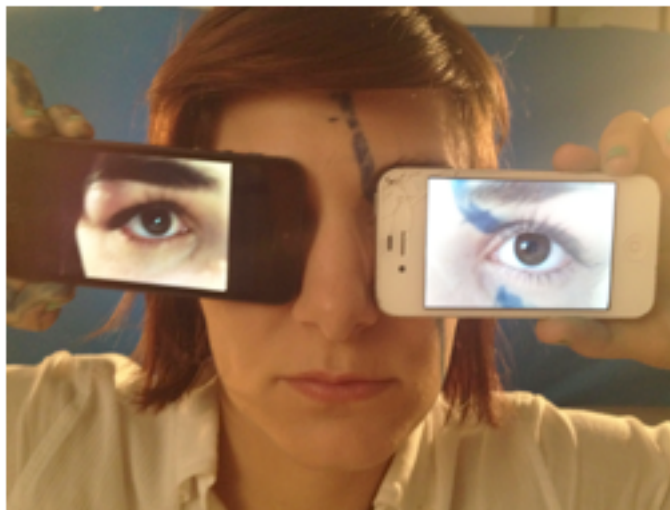


Photo courtesy of UMFA

Technology is society's prosthetic limb. To many, it is an extension of the body. Like the opposable thumb, technology is a crucial part of human gestures and actions. In the hyperbolic and metaphorical sense, mankind would die without cell phones, iPads, laptops and the Internet.

Perplexed and fascinated with the juxtaposition of a real-life presence and an online identity, artist Jillian Mayer works to investigate the pros and cons of technology and how it affects the physical world.

"Here, we have this separated you. You have you and your physical life, and then you have your very much edited, controlled and hyperlinked online self," Mayer said.

Today, Mayer will speak as the ninth artist in the Utah Museum of Fine Arts' "Salt" series. Alongside Whitney Tassie, UMFA curator of modern and contemporary art, Mayer will discuss what makes an online identity.

"This concept of finding and building your identity on a virtual format is brand new to us as a society, though it's completely embedded in the younger generations," Tassie said.

Mayer has explored this concept on a variety of levels. Through video and multimedia, the filmmaker and artist has compiled an exhibit to mirror the entity of an online presence. Titled "Salt 9," the showcase includes a green screen floor and a collage of videos and 3D art.

One piece explores the existence of the soul. When synthetic objects look realistically human, they cause observers to react with repulsion, and therefore fall into the range of uncanny valley. Mayer believes the soulless objects create this eerie phenomenon. To test this, she compiled a sculpture of her face using an online website and 3D printer.

Dubbed “Faceoff,” the figure represents the physical features of Mayer but lacks her personality. It is difficult to look at a representation of a real person without having an inexplicable creepy feeling.

To Mayer, the experience of creating a computer mold of her face was bizarre. The computer took three images and compressed them into a 3D graph.

“It takes three angles to get your face,” Mayer said.

Because the gallery focuses on the Internet, Mayer partnered with a few friends to create a website called Selfeed.com, which is a site that sifts through Instagram to capture selfie pictures. The selfies are then temporarily flashed on the website’s page. Selfeed.com will be on display at “Salt 9.”

“It’s this constant and overbearing surplus of real-time selfie uploads. The website doesn’t save. It’s not piling the images. They vanish. It is a temporary home for all Instagram selfies. To all be gathered collectively, but individually. They are all there together, but they are all alone,” Mayer said.

To Tassie and Mayer, Selfeed.com is a mechanism to prove there is a lack of control in the online environment. People can select the images they upload on Facebook or Instagram but can’t control where the photos end up.

“There is a sense of control. That we feel we control our presence online, and I think Jillian’s show raises some questions about that,” Tassie said.