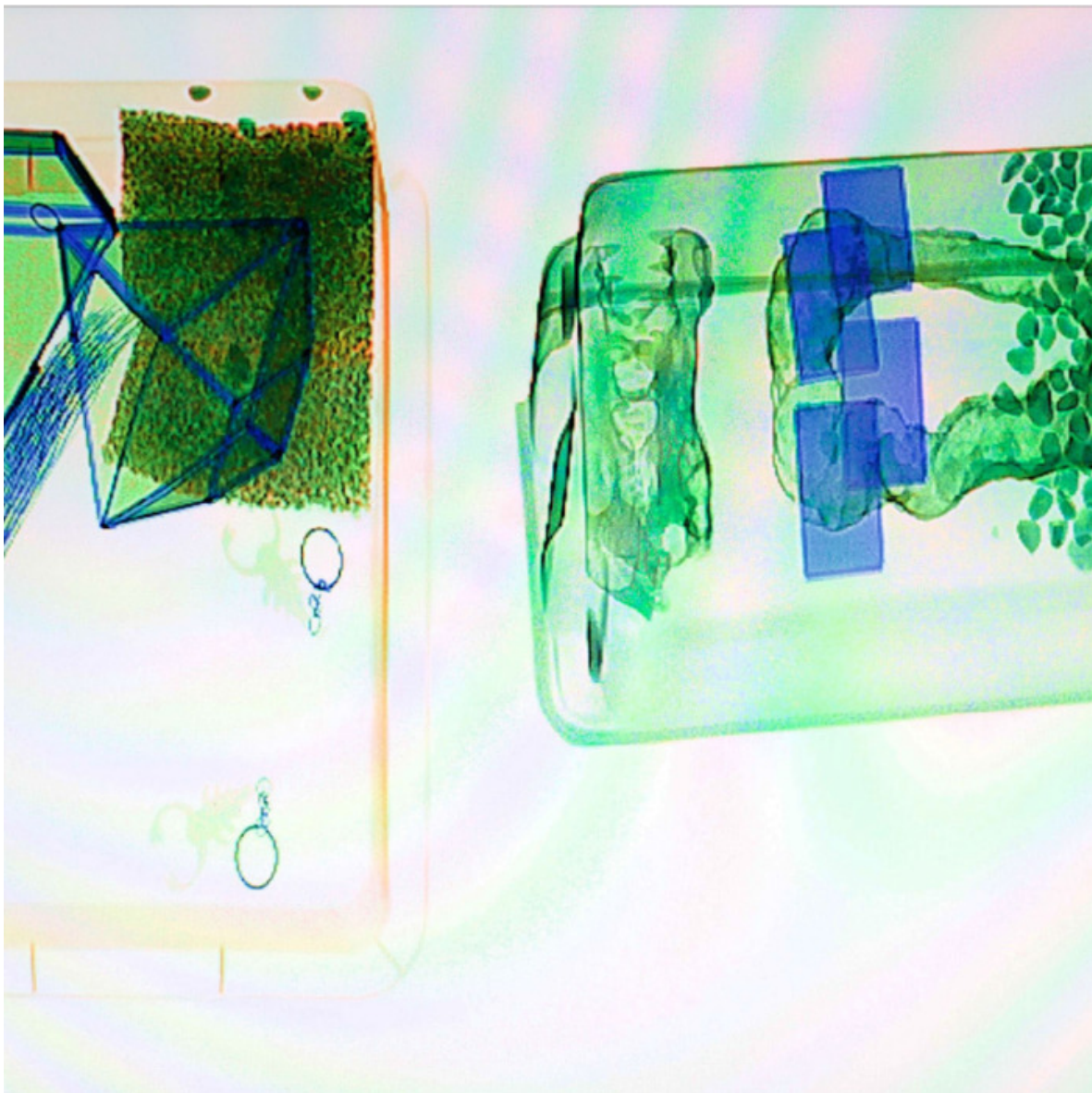


VULTURE

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Jillian Mayer Makes Pretty Art From Airport Scanners

By Whitney Mallett



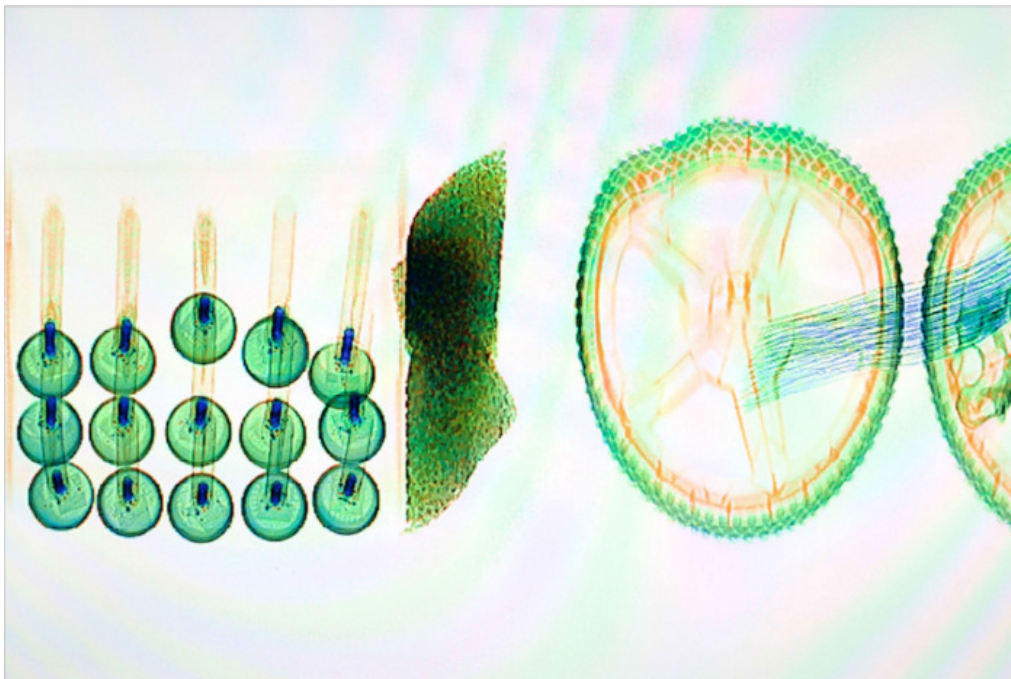
Jillian Mayer, *Terminal 6*: Digital Print from X-Ray Scan. Photo: Courtesy David Castillo Gallery

How do those airport scanners make you feel? Anxious. Stressed. Annoyed that you have to take out all your tiny bottles of shampoo. Mad at the person in front of you who seems to be completely clueless and confused about basic TSA techno-surveillance procedures *you'd think we'd all be used to by now*.

“I always get flagged,” artist Jillian Mayer admits. “I have a large sculpture practice so I’m always bringing items of confusion from country to country, trying to explain why I have so many rubber gloves. Saying that I’m an artist gives me an excuse for weird items that otherwise might seem like they’re one-third of an explosive.”

With her new series *Still Life Scans* (2018), a public commission for the Miami International Airport, Mayer got access to the scanners we all dread to make art. “I thought if I could approach them as aesthetic generators rather than just privacy invaders, I could usher a different emotional response.”

The Miami-based artist is no stranger to exploring our experiences living under surveillance. *Makeup Tutorial – How to Hide from Cameras* (2013) gave YouTube users advice to subvert face recognition algorithms, and *Impressions* (2016), a series of billboards installed in New York, L.A., and Miami, made its focus biometrics and the way images of human bodies can be tracked and quantified. *Still Life Scans* is Mayer’s latest addition to a body of work that spans video, sculpture, and performance, interrogating our relationship to technology.

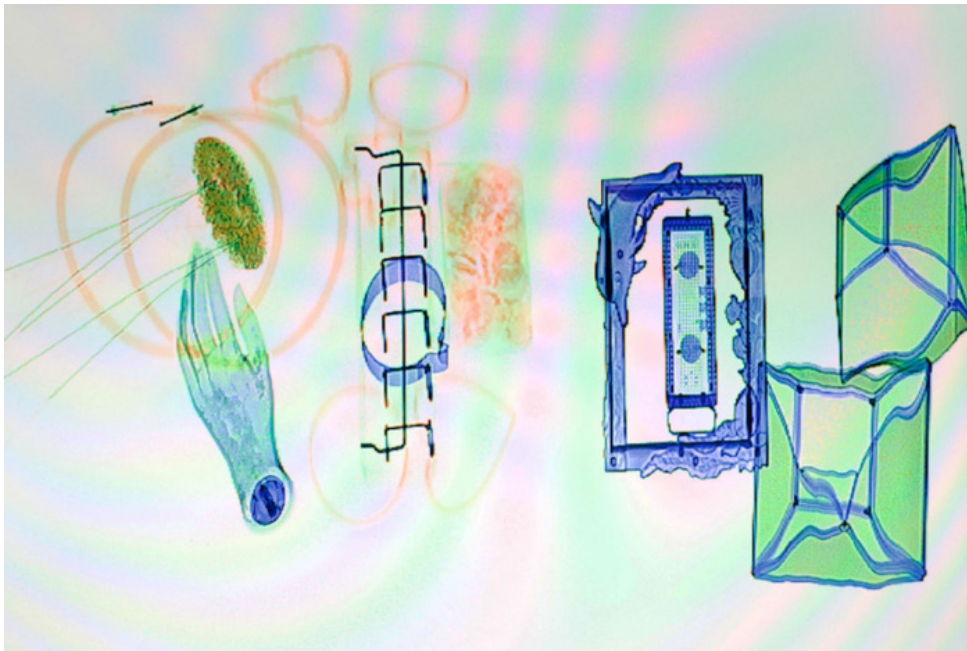


Jillian Mayer, *Terminal 5*: Digital Print from X-Ray Scan. Photo: Courtesy David Castillo Gallery

Birdseed, solar powered lights, handcuffs, and an LED belt buckle are some of the materials Mayer brought to the airport to create the photos. “I was given a few restrictions,” she notes. “No liquids and no weapons.” The airport’s public-art program

set her up using the baggage scanners at one of the airport's employee entrances — using the scanners at a TSA security checkpoint was too complicated. “I had two hours to use the scanners before a shift change,” explains Mayer. “There was this one guy who worked the machine sending things backwards and forwards. And I brought a friend who helped me photograph the screen.”

Mayer quickly learned a few things. Metal was the most visible on the scanner. Fabric hardly shows up if at all. But the most interesting discovery? “The calm beauty of ring pops,” she says speaking of the candy crystal jewelry. It sounds like it was a bizarre shift for the guy working the scanner who Mayer kept asking what he thought of the images they were making. “I was like, ‘Don’t you think this is beautiful?’ and he’s just like, ‘Whaaat!’”



Jillian Mayer, *Terminal 3*: Digital Print from X-Ray Scan. Photo: Courtesy David Castillo Gallery

Working with the scanners on this project has changed how Mayer packs. Now she's conscious of how she's adapting her behavior to be more legible to an algorithm. “I'm talking to the machine more when I pack. It's like how Siri trains you to speak in a way she can understand. These are all different ways that we adapt to live more in symbiosis with the machines that rule our physical world.”

Mayer acknowledges that the infrastructure monitoring us is often too pervasive to avoid and too well-funded to change, but she's interested in how we make creative adaptations to maneuver within it, hacking the system's tools to create unintended joy and beauty. “I think it'd be nice to pack a bag in a gradient from metals to organics to inorganics,” she says.