
OCEAN DRIVE^{BETA}

Everything You Need to Know About Artist Jillian Mayer

By Hunter Braithwaite | June 29, 2015



Be it an absurd message to her eventual grandchildren or faux nude selfies, it's hard not to watch for what rising Miami art star Jillian Mayer will do next.

Jillian Mayer's first computer was on the bedroom floor, squeezed in a nook next to her bed. She remembers spending long hours basking in its light, her body folded over in some parody of prayer. "The computer is your shrine," she says. "Think of the halo, Byzantine gold leaf—it's now the glow of the screen." But don't expect egg tempera and mosaic. Mayer's art is more Nickelodeon than

Nicodemus. Using homemade props, Kid Pix colors, and the fonts, fades, and feel of predawn QVC infomercials, her work camps in an uncanny valley, a place just familiar enough to bring about some serious introspection as to how we should live in a world teetering above a digital abyss. And while you can find it on YouTube, or in David Castillo Gallery, her art is just as likely to be projected on the exterior of the Guggenheim, screened at Sundance, and confused with pornography on the streets of Montreal.

According to Wikipedia, Jillian Mayer was born in 1986. With her dark brown hair, sly smile, and an armful of Chihuahua named Shivers, she's quick to point out that the year is incorrect but shows no interest in updating her bio, nor in providing her real birthday. "On every social media, I'm a different age," she says, her nonchalance echoing into the chasm between the lived world and its digital record. She will admit that she was born in Fort Lauderdale. Her parents divorced when she was 1; her childhood was spent shuttling between Broward and Miami-Dade Counties. It's not difficult to find the antecedents of a career in the arts in these early years. Her father, an optometrist, enrolled her in art camps. Her mother taught public speaking at the University of Miami and accent reduction classes at the Coconut Grove Playhouse—laying the groundwork for the artist's ease behind and in front of the camera. Later, Mayer visited her sister out in Los Angeles, scoring a gig as a production assistant on an LA Fitness commercial shoot. "That's how I got on set for the first time." She remembers being amazed by all of the moving parts, how a set resembles a little city.

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Still, she didn't see herself doing that kind of work. "I assumed I would end up working in fashion because I was unaware of the actual art world. I didn't realize that one could be a contemporary artist." By the time she graduated from FIU in 2007 with a concentration in fiber and installation, she had more of an idea. An internship at Locust Projects introduced her to Miami's art scene, which she explored by attending talks at the Bas Fisher Invitational, assisting artists like Susan Lee-Chun, and—of course—by making her own work. A major boost occurred in 2009 when she was commissioned by the Miami Light Project for Here & Now, a program that gives South Florida artists a commission fee, free rehearsal space, technical assistance, and professional development. "The people who support artists before they have any accolades are the most important," she says.

Mayer's work frustrates linear thinking. To begin with, at any given time she's engaged with numerous projects. "I feel like I'm constantly in a cluster," she says. Of those projects, it's difficult to say when something is completed. "I don't think my works are very cut-and-dry or finished, ever. When I travel to a collector's home and see a work, it's like another extension of the piece." And while her work is indelibly hers, it is often developed in collaboration, usually with the Miami-based film collective Borscht Corp.

By the time of this writing, her *I Am Your Grandma* video, an at once warm, spooky, and comic message to her unborn grandchild (whom she might never meet), had garnered exactly 3,070,673 views on YouTube. Taking into account multiple viewings (I claim several) and the fact that she knew some people before making the video, it's safe to say that for 3 million people, the young artist first appears as a specter of her future decline. Produced with Borscht on a budget consisting solely of pizza, the short film is a study in meme psychology, a Gatling gun of edits and costume changes so manic that it makes a Super Bowl commercial appear positively Tolstoyan. In it, Mayer sings, "There was a time I was aware that one day I'd be dead." But with over 3 million views, who really dies?

The piece broke new ground for Mayer. By that point, she had already entered both video production (her short *Scenic Jogging*—also Borscht produced—was shown at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, as part of “YouTube Play. A Biennial of Creative Video”) and Miami’s gallery scene. In fact, her first solo show at the David Castillo Gallery in Wynwood had closed the day before *Grandma* went live on May 8, 2011. The video could be purchased as part of an edition of five from Castillo or seen online for free. To some, this seems counterintuitive, and Mayer concedes that “it takes a certain type of collector to collect video work,” but it’s not that much of a departure. “Many famous artworks become posters that are sold at the mall. It doesn’t make the original worth any less,” she says. But *Grandma* was important for two other reasons. For one, there was the sheer scale of consumption. It is not unheard of for millions of people to find themselves in front of the same work of art. (Think a troop of selfie-stick-wielding tourists battling for a prime view of the *Mona Lisa*.) “It makes you think about the amount of people that consume content,” Mayer says of the first million hits. “It’s always nice to make something that resonates with many different groups for many different reasons.” Not only did the piece ping through the worlds of contemporary art and popular culture, it has been remade more than 100 times by other YouTube users, as messages to their own progeny.

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It also introduced her to someone who would become a close friend and mentor. At the time, writer and curator Sylvie Fortin was the editor-in-chief of *Art Papers*, an Atlanta-based bimonthly magazine. A publication with an international presence and strong ties to the region, *Art Papers* was an ideal megaphone for a young artist coming out of Florida. When Fortin discovered Mayer’s work, she put her on the cover. They have been close ever since.

Grandma is pure Borscht—precision masquerading as DIY irreverence, humor cut with pathos. “Lucas [Leyva] and I have a lot of visual meeting points. We have very different artistic backgrounds but a similar sense of humor,” says Mayer, speaking about one of Borscht’s founders and her longtime creative partner. “We strive to make unique imagery. We’re not film students; we don’t have film degrees. We’ve navigated these waters ourselves and figured it out as we went.”



Performers swing into a video projection of a computer-enhanced blue sky in the artist's 2013 installation Swing Space

Mayer has worked closely with Leyva on numerous projects—take *Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke*, in which the 2 Live Crew frontman was cast in an absurd reimagining of Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (a short film about time travel). The film premiered at Sundance in 2012 and was screened at more than 30 film festivals that year, including SXSW. Currently, they're developing a series of shorts for MTV—a “sur-reality show about growing up in Miami,” called *No Seasons*, after a Jacuzzi Boys song. It was her collaborations with Borscht that first caught the eye of Chana Budgazad Sheldon, the executive director of Locust Projects (a not-for-profit exhibition space for contemporary visual artists). Sheldon became taken by the openness and fluidity of Mayer's work, how she's able to link different mediums “to represent a generation of people who live technology.”

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Mayer's solo exhibition at Locust, “Precipice/ PostModem,” opened to a crowd on May 11, 2013. The show addressed the anxiety and excitement of the information age. The works, like the themes, were both digitally rooted and stubbornly physical.

Viewers entered the main gallery through a sealed chamber in which confetti meant to mimic computer pixels swirled around the body. A set of swings were mounted into the ceiling; viewers pendulated into what could be a Windows 95-era screen saver. Two Roombas zipped underfoot, shuttling iPads bearing an avatar of Mayer's face.

The next year, Mayer's face would appear in a very different context. Fortin had recently left *Art Papers* and taken a position directing the Montreal Biennale, which was being organized around ideas of the future; Mayer was an obvious choice. Together, they worked to develop Mayer's most controversial yet universal piece—*400 Nudes*.



Mayer's short video Scenic Jogging, 2010, was shown at "YouTube play. A Biennial of Creative Video" at New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Mayer downloaded 400 nude selfies from around the Internet, Photoshopped her face onto the bodies, and recirculated the images back into the world in two different ways. Digital files were tagged with a variety of search terms ("revenge porn," "revenge selfie," but also "Jillian Mayer") and uploaded to 400nudes.com, a website created for the occasion. She also printed 200,000 images on card stock that were displayed on a rack in Montreal's Contemporary Art Museum and distributed throughout the city. When asked about how this piece encapsulated Mayer's evolution as an artist, Fortin says that it's a matter of confidence. "She always had the intelligence and the awareness of what mattered, of things shifting culturally. Now she has the courage." The piece debates sexual politics and rights of representation and privacy in an era defined by the lack thereof, but looks to the history of the nude—ourselves, in our most basic state.

"I'm aware that words like these encompass everything," Mayer says, "but these are the things that I think about—the state of identity, the state of existence." And increasingly, we exist online.