

ARTSY

Miami Artist Jillian Mayer Is Laughing All the Way to the Singularity

Artsy Editorial

By

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Portrait of Jillian Mayer by Gesi Schilling for Artsy.

When I set up an interview with Miami artist [Jillian Mayer](#), it felt especially fitting to arrange a studio visit via Skype, given her art: [post-internet](#) (for the most part). However, when we connected last Monday, she explained that she wasn't at her studio after all—she doesn't have wireless internet there. This anecdote turns out to be an appropriate metaphor for the aesthetic space that Mayer dwells in as an artist. "I play a lot with the tension between physical and digital existence," she tells me.

In lieu of a virtual walkthrough of her workspace, Mayer sent me a melange of JPEGs—some completed works, others in process. One pictures her in blacked-out goggles and a snorkel, a nod to a new direction her art is taking; another showed her Chihuahua, Shivers, a consistent wellspring of inspiration for the artist. As we speak, Mayer is in the midst of a flurry of

exhibitions and projects; in the coming weeks and months she'll feature in gallery shows in Miami and Raleigh, North Carolina; group exhibitions at MOCA North Miami and Mexico City's Centro de Cultura Digital; and she'll unveil a billboard commission with LAX ART.



Jillian Mayer, *Scenic Jogging* (2010). Courtesy of the artist.

Mayer's work teeters between the physical and the digital, much in the same way that life itself increasingly hurtles towards some version of the Singularity—a theory popularized by Ray Kurzweil that predicts the differences between humans and computing machines will be indistinguishable. Rather than taking a solely utopian or dystopian approach, Mayer is interested in the present, the messy imperfections of technology; her work leads one to wonder what the future will *really* look like. “Tech is still super clumsy,” she says during our conversation, “and I actually really like it that way.”

In her work, Mayer often collaborates with Borscht Corp., the collective of artists and filmmakers based in Miami that she helps run. A prime example is her 2010 video [Scenic Jogging](#) (which was shown at the [Guggenheim](#) in 2010); the work depicts the artist running down a Wynwood street, trying to keep up with a fast-moving projection of various scenic desktop backgrounds.



Stills from Jillian Mayer's *I Am Your Grandma* (2011). Courtesy of the artist.

Humor (perhaps of a stoner, cybernetic sort), might be the tonal cornerstone of Mayer's oeuvre. Her work spans and contorts video, object, installation, and painting, and often includes herself, or rather, her selves. She channels heartfelt sentiment but usually blends it with mockery and absurdity, in a way that is wry and smartly freaky. Employing equal parts dystopian parody and real sincerity, she probes the question of how technology is increasingly integrated into our lives.

Her most popular work, clocking almost 3.5 million YouTube views, is [I Am Your Grandma](#) (2011). Part music video and all performance, Mayer delivers a message to her unborn granddaughter by assuming an assortment of mutant characters—a pastiche that will presumably either terrify her future progeny, or make her laugh aplenty. Or both. (Or perhaps her response would be “Ugh, that’s so early 2000s”—before she’s able to appreciate its historical significance.)



Jillian Mayer, *Cloud Swing* installation at Locust Projects. Photo by Zach Balber. Courtesy of the artist.

For “[salt 9: Jillian Mayer](#)” at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts in 2014, the artist included *Giving Birth to Myself* (2011), a video showing a woman giving birth. Filmed by her father, the woman is in fact Mayer’s mother giving birth to the artist, but Mayer transplanted her own face onto her mom’s, so that she’s birthing herself. This warped work acts like many of her pieces—connecting reality with a twisted version of the future, with Mayer as the guide.

Given these works that she’s known for, I’m surprised to learn that as of late, when she’s not doing video or internet works, Mayer has been “secretly” painting. Recently, her subject matter includes images of a female figure on her computer overlooking beautiful landscapes, or point-of-view shots of a woman (modeled after herself) planted in front of a screen.

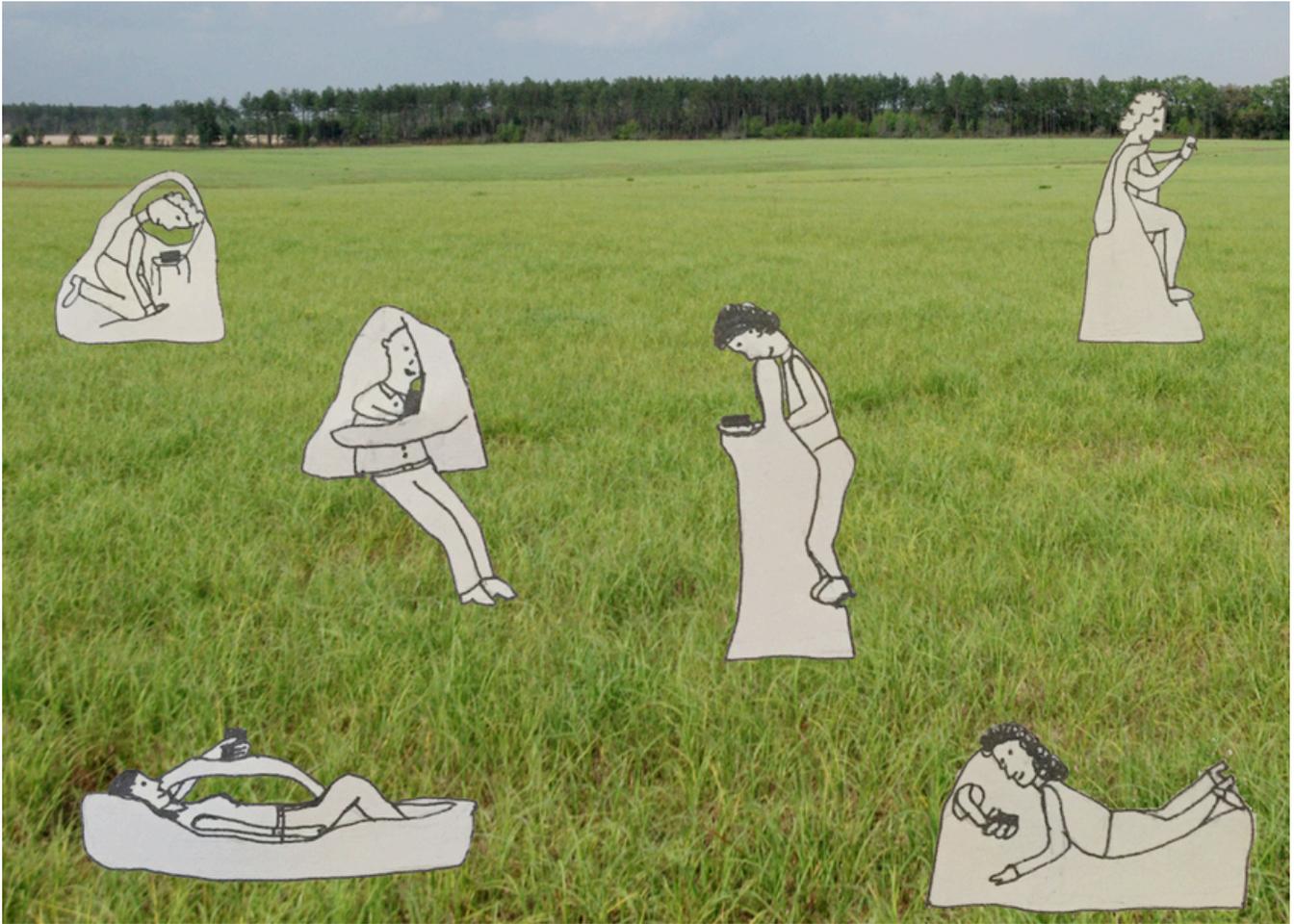


Jillian Mayer, *CURRENT* (2016). Photo by Gesi Schilling, courtesy of the artist.

Despite the form it takes, Mayer’s art retains an un-ironic sensitivity to human experience. “My work has to do with the really emotional side of tech,” she says, “how the internet and technology affect us and our identity, our experience and what we think of everything.” This has likely resulted from a lifetime of sentimental engagements with art. One of her earliest memories, she tells me, is of a painting from her house while growing up. “We had this painting of a girl on a dock,” she explains. “It was gifted to my older sister when she was born, and I thought that that was quite beautiful, that this material item was going to be a part of her life journey; that someone can decide you own a piece of art before you’re even alive.”

Mayer’s more recent works also upend the notion that virtual reality is something that’s coming and not yet a guiding principle of reality itself. In a performance earlier this week titled *CURRENT* (2016) for the annual poetry festival O, Miami, she led a “guided meditation session” at the pool of The Standard Spa. In a mimicry of both sensory deprivation and virtual reality, participants floated on pool noodles with their heads submerged in the water while wearing blacked-out swimming goggles, while a site-specific sound piece pumped through the pool’s underwater speakers. “It’s this communal space but it’s

an isolated practice,” she tells me of the performance. “It could be a parallel with the online experience, where everyone is together but alone.”



Jillian Mayer, Slumpie Collection. Courtesy of the artist.

Her newest exhibition, a two-person show with Susan Lee-Chun that opens at David Castillo Gallery on April 14th, explores the physical structures that enable access to digital dimensions. She’ll show her new series, titled “Slumpies” (2016)—“sculptures that the human body can rest on when online,” she says. “You know how you get tired when you’re out in public, how you just like to tune out for a minute and hang out on your phone? What if there was an art piece that supported that?”

The “Slumpies,” however, serve more purpose than Mayer lets on. They are cutesy, delightful works of design, but also critiques of the tech objects of leisure found in Brookstone stores and SkyMall magazines—her two main inspirations for the works. “A sculpture’s job is to help you,” she proposes. Indeed, these works of art are meant to edge you along towards oneness with the internet, but they also become part of you in the process.



Still from Jillian Mayer's *Day Off* (2016). Courtesy of the artist.

Also included in the show is a series of videos titled “Day Off” (2016). One shows a man wearing an Oculus Rift headset, fighting off enemies with a giant knife in hand. Another features the artist, also in a headset, falling out of a garbage can—ecstatic with the virtual world she’s experiencing. It seems that though Mayer wants us to watch as people engage in this kind of bizarre virtual behavior; she really wants us to think about our own bizarre selves.

Mayer’s works, though cheeky, effectively shake with the realization that the body is a thing that experiences life, a thing that breaks down while the world around it goes on. And while the digital realm offers promise, it continues to both benefit and fail us. “I often think about the body and the head, and if they really need each other anymore,” Mayer offers. “With notions of the technical Singularity being mentioned in everyday conversations, does it really matter if the body decays?”

—Rob Goyanes

“Susan Lee-Chun & Jillian Mayer” is on view at David Castillo Gallery, Miami, April 14–May 31, 2016.