

Net Work

Artist **Jillian Mayer** contemplates the effects of digital culture with sincerity and satire.

BY TIFFANY JOW



Installation view of "Past Skin," on view at MoMA PS1 through September 10.

It's easy to judge Jillian Mayer: a thirty-something artist whose primary subject is the Internet, her work smacks of a millennial sensibility, but unlike a BuzzFeed headline, there's more to her than meets the eye.

Mayer embraces digital culture—YouTube videos, selfies, textese—as a means to investigate how technology affects our identity and environment. "I've always been obsessed with artifice and reality," she says. "A linked network where everyone can participate is a very beautiful, complex proxy for our physical world." Her work casually alters between physical and digital realms, foregoing dystopian or utopian narratives to look at what's happening now through a mock-serious lens. Using installation, film, sculpture and painting, Mayer considers the consequences of a tech-centric world. And because her work often requires viewer participation, she invites you to think about it, too.

Sometimes Mayer watches others: her video series *Day Off* (2016) depicts escapades of VR headset-wearing protagonists, including a barely clothed man fighting bad guys with a knife. Other times, Mayer is the star: for *I am Your Grandma*

(2011), a DIY costume-clad Mayer delivers a message to her unborn grandchild in a video diary that's been viewed nearly four million times. She also conducts interactive performances. At last year's O, Miami Poetry Festival, participants donned blacked-out goggles while floating around the Standard Spa pool—a parallel to the online experience, where everyone does weird things together but alone.

"Jillian makes you part of the conversation," says Miami gallerist David Castillo, who's worked with Mayer since 2009. "Rather than telling you what the right version of something is, you get to decide for yourself."

Institutions have taken note. The Guggenheim, Pérez Art Museum and Locust Projects, among others, have presented her work. Films Mayer produces with Borscht Corp, an artists' collective she helps run, frequent SXSW and Sundance. Her *Slumpies*—crude rainbow-hued sculptures made for lounging while using a smartphone—will feature at MoMA PS1 throughout the summer. "They're surrogates for your spine that also act as a stage," Mayer explains. The cheeky creations resound with a ridiculousness she often exploits, hinting at the

absurdity of our tech-entrenched lives.

Growing up in tourist-heavy Florida, Mayer understood the art of presentation from an early age. She first accessed the Internet as a teenager, pretending to be other people (usually older boys) in chat rooms. Her big break came just after graduating, when she was commissioned by the Miami Light Project's Here and Now program for an experimental theater piece, where she married her Chihuahua, Shivers. Ever the performer, Mayer deftly uses marketing tactics—including shock value, sex and hyperbole—to her advantage. "The ancillary platforms that surround an object or idea make it exist in a more fully rendered way," she says. In her websites and videos, like a YouTube makeup tutorial on how to avert facial recognition cameras, Mayer accordingly acts as a guide, ushering in uncanny possibilities.

Ironically, it is authenticity that ties her work together. Beyond a method of critique, Mayer's quest to understand the internet stems from a nagging desire to understand how it's changing her. "Jillian puts it all out there, no filter," Castillo says. "That's what makes her work so compelling: it's a natural extension of herself."