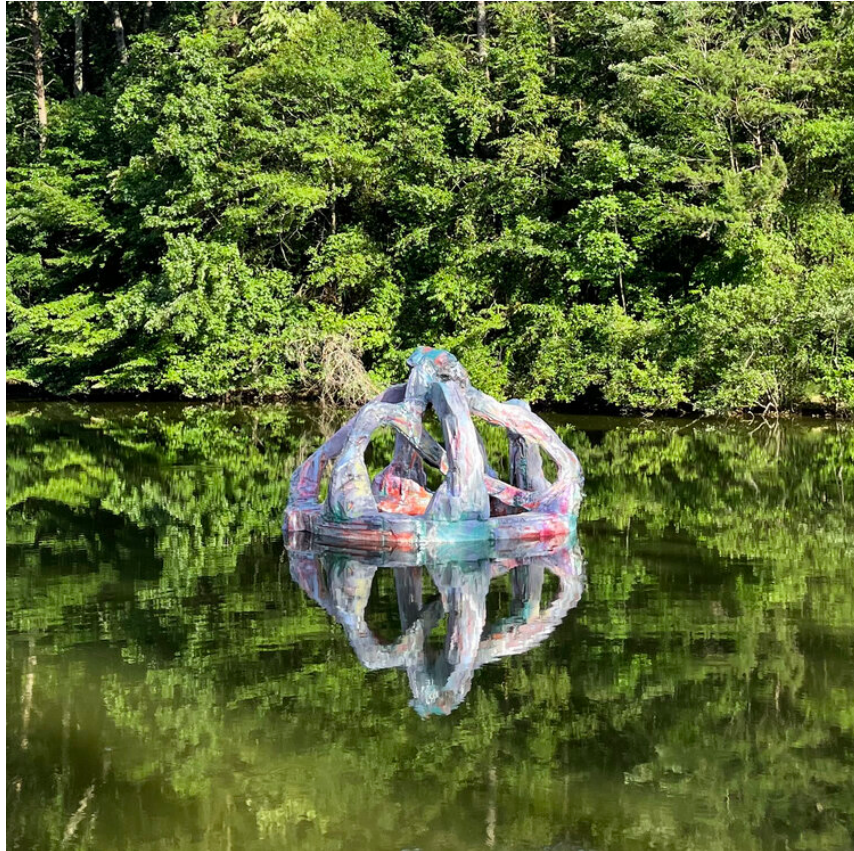


AUTRE

TOMORROW'S ANXIETIES: AN INTERVIEW OF JILLIAN MAYER

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Courtesy of SECCA and David Castillo Gallery
photograph by Maximilian Lecki

interview by Kelly Loudenberg

Jillian Mayer gets stuck in your head. I still find myself randomly humming the tune to her pop song, “Mega Mega Upload,” even though it’s been ten years since I first saw the video she made for it. Her short, catchy video “I am your Grandma” has a cult following on YouTube and TikTok and is so delightfully bizarre that it’s bound to be discovered by youngsters for decades to come. Her Slumpies, sculptural furniture designed to help people use their smartphones, are

found in airports by travelers who don't know her, only that her art helps them maintain comfort while staring into Instagram.

Her latest show, *TIMESHARE* at the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, likewise wedges its way into your psyche. It leaves me feeling unsettled, yet inspired. It feels urgent but timeless as it examines the impending collapse of society as climate change throws our functional-enough world into chaos and turmoil. Her in-progress mobile bunker recalls the highbrow living spaces of Buckminster Fuller and Andrea Zittel, but also elicits the vibe of the RVs and trailer parks—the most economical but low-brow living spaces of the American landscape.

Who's to say if the world ends, that you can't take a shower in a shiny resin tub, covered in shimmer and pastels, and thereby maintain a bit of the soul-affirming glamour of the pre-end-times era? Her floating sculptures—functional in a world where all the ice-caps have melted—could literally save lives. I've been to prepper school myself, but I prefer Jillian's whimsical, yet functional lo-fi take on how to survive with artistic flair once the shit hits the fan.

KELLY LOUDENBERG: Can you tell us about the art you're making now and what led up to the work in your traveling exhibition, *TIMESHARE*?

JILLIAN MAYER: I explore how technology affects our lives, bodies, and identities by processing how our physical world and bodies are impacted and reshaped by our participation in various landscapes. My work used to focus more on digital and social media technologies, but I have expanded that to any technology that helps us adapt to our future selves.

In the simplest terms, my artwork generally describes tomorrow's anxieties. I tend to look at contemporary issues, like internet existence for the past ten years and the looming ecological and infrastructural collapse of the last four years. I do offer solutions and environments, and often function as some type of a "host" in my work, trying to shed new ideas for adaptive living. I tend to make artwork that has a consistent thread, which models how to subvert capital-driven modes of technological innovation, calling into focus ideas of value, dependency, adaptation, and communication.

After years of making work, I've been thinking about the *real* future, not our current understanding of the future, but rather beyond that; beyond the sleek aluminum and titanium. I am more drawn to the dystopias that have the grass that creeps over your broken

solar-powered cars, the wild boars walking into your smart house with Siri telling them the hot weather, and rats festering in a pile of iPhones on your self-disinfecting, hypoallergenic sofa.

I work in a lot of different mediums simultaneously. Videos, sculptures, online experiences, photography, installations—they are all fair game. It's whatever will convey the idea and the serotonin boost best.



Courtesy of SECCA and David Castillo Gallery
photograph by Cliff Dossel

LOUDENBERG: Your show *TIMESHARE* and the floating *LAKE SCULPTURE* comes from a long history of you exploring survival and prepper cultures. Where did this come from?

MAYER: I am from Miami and it's one of the major cities that will be wiped out first by sea level rise. With our location and coastal nature, my life was defined by tropical storms and hurricanes. Floridians and many coastal residents are aware of the upcoming hurricane seasons as well as the predictions for our future based on weather patterns. We know the names of past hurricanes like former classmates we recall from school. We are familiar with cone-shaped predictions and color-coded emergency threats from nature. I grew up in South Florida with an immigrant father (by way of Cuba to Miami Beach) with most of his family

already murdered in the Holocaust. So, there were always plenty of idioms available to me as a child about making plans and the weather or god laughing in your face. I think there is a relentless humor in much of my work and general point of view.

LOUDENBERG: When did you become so obsessed with weather? Was it through making art?

MAYER: In 2019, Hurricane Irma was predicted to crush South Florida and it became a Mandatory Evacuation Zone. As I was moving lawn furniture inside and strapping things down, I took a hard look at my body of Slumpie Sculptures.

My sculptures often live outdoors and are pretty large. So, I sort of just ride it out when it comes to natural disasters making landfall with the capacity of destroying my physical works. I can talk all day about hurricane feelings but I am trying to answer your question. Instead of relocating my sculptures, I just tied them to a tree. My landlord told me to write my name and phone number on them in case they fly away and land a few blocks down the road. I realized due to their foam core, they are more likely to float than sink.

I started thinking about all the people with money who were able to prepare for upcoming disasters, able to leave the state to another location. Around that time, a study had been done that stated that 40% of Americans do not have an extra \$400.00 to cope with an emergency expense. As many South Floridians loaded up their gas tanks, boarded their homes, and filled up their cars with items from the store, I thought about all the people that just had to sit around and hope the storm would spare them.

I thought about all those who lived through Hurricane Andrew in 1992 and sat on their roofs waiting for FEMA to rescue them. I thought about the six feet of mud and salt water that made my childhood home unable to be entered. The roof provided safety, whether it was connected to a one hundred thousand dollar house or a \$4 million house. The value was in the chance for survival in desperate times.

It led me to considering how in times of emergency, something like a Louise Bourgeois “Spider”—a canonical history and worth around \$35 million—may save your life the same way that a broken down pickup truck can when the storm waters come flooding in. Value is in

opportunity and chance.

LOUDENBERG: Have you taken survivalist courses? If so, what are some things you learned? Can you start a fire without a match?

MAYER: I went to Prepper Camp in Fall of 2020 in North Carolina. I was recording my talks with people while I asked them about the core essence of being prepared. Aside from practical survivalist info and homesteading rituals, I learned a lot about their community. The coordinators yelled at me to stop recording because they thought I was a dubious person but I kept trying to let them know I am an artist just doing research. They asked me “what kind of art?” and I said “mostly abstract sculpture.” They didn’t mean to scare me, they are just protective over their community. The only iffy thing is it seemed to be a Trump-heavy crowd.

LOUDENBERG: Do you think the problem is now at a scale that it can't be addressed?

MAYER: Here is the part where I won't pretend to be an environmental scientist, because I am an artist. But I do boast being an optimist. No doubt, humans create massive problems everywhere we go (ex: space junk) but nature redesigns itself, mutates, and carries on for various organisms ... as it is the nature of nature.

I do tend to occupy a fatalistic nihilism position in my views. I think humans are on Earth until we are not. That might be from pollution leading to increased carbon loads and temperature issues, or a comet just smashing us to star bits.

Ultimately, humans are getting a chance at Earth. Earth will be around longer than humans. Earth will be fine and it's important not to get obsessed with an anthropocentric approach to existence. It is hard, and I get that, and I constantly have to check myself. But we are here, doing our silly human things, for a collection of decades, if we are lucky. Nonetheless, we are here for now and we, as the human race, try to figure out ways to survive. I am really happy I am alive and trying to make the most of it. Just wishing kindness and equality was in greater practice and I try to be a better human every day.

LOUDENBERG: Do you see humor and art as effective forms of change?

MAYER: Humor has always been an entry point for dialogue in my work and life. Hard and uncomfortable topics aren't usually inviting, so if I can use a joke or any other device to wedge

a beat and open up a conversation, I will. It's hard for us humans to face our mortality in a personal way. I do hope I die by way of mother Earth, rather than a car crash or something like that. I might be off topic.

LOUDENBERG: How and why do you choose your materials to construct your larger sculptures?

MAYER: I lean towards industrial materials that have associated functions. I describe my Slumpie sculptures as boats or surfboards in a material sense. Fiberglass, epoxy, foam. I get all of my foam donated and derail it from its single-use journey to the landfill. The foam I use was previously lining crates of boxes used for transporting art. I like that my artwork springs out of the circle of art detritus.

LOUDENBERG: What's Next?

MAYER: Also informed by preparedness and survival is a Mobile Bunker Artist Residency I have been building with friends called "LOW RES." Built from a converted twenty-foot trailer, the bunker is designed to be reliant on as few outside services as possible. It's a functional, off-grid, tiny home that feels like an art installation. Ideally, it is both a low-impact, off-grid artist residency and a mobile hub of anonymous, untraceable space for organizers and communities in need. The design of the structure draws inspiration from the tiny-house movement and survivalist bunkers.

To learn more about Jillian Mayer, follow her on instagram @jillian_mayer_

