

Making Space

At David Castillo gallery in Miami, artist Jillian Mayer explores the unpredictability of the future and how we process it, from new technology to doomsday preppers.

Words by Adriana Blidaru

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Jillian Mayer, *Silla*, 2024. Image courtesy of the artist.

Jillian Mayer has spent much of her career preparing for the end of the world. She has researched preppers and survivalists, studied how people adapt to catastrophe, and spent a year building a bunker in the back of a 20-foot mobile trailer that doubled as an artist residency in the Florida Keys in 2021. Then someone stole it. For the artist, the theft clarified the absurdity at the center of preparation: Even if you can anticipate disaster, accumulate knowledge, and construct a shelter, the world can still come at you from an angle you failed to imagine.

This tension between control and contingency has been a driver in Mayer's practice for nearly two decades. Across film, sculpture, performance, furniture, jewelry, glass, and public art, she examines the strange accommodations people make to inhabit systems that were not necessarily designed for their survival. For her latest exhibition, "Placeholder Future," at David Castillo gallery in Miami, Mayer traces her concerns for the state of the world to the technology at the forefront—its novel uses as well as its inevitable obsolescence. Her short film on view, *How to Disappear*, 2026, instructs the viewer how to destroy their digital footprint. While an aluminum chair, *Silla*, 2024, sees the lightweight iPhone material repurposed as a piece of sci-fi furniture.



Still from *How to Disappear*, 2026. Image courtesy of the artist.

This do-it-yourself approach to futurism can be traced back to Mayer's early work with Borscht Corp., a Miami-based artist-run film collective that she began collaborating with in the late 2000s after answering an open call. She was drawn to filmmaking's intensity, and to the way a completed film could preserve the energy of its process. "It was the art and the archive of it simultaneously," she says. The conditions of Borscht Corp.'s production were rarely elegant. They jumped fences, drifted rental cars without stunt drivers, hired off-duty police officers to simulate official permission, and treated Walmart as a prop house with a generous return policy. As Mayer puts it: "The art getting made was the priority." That period taught her to cultivate the audacity required to move an idea into the world.



Jillian Mayer, *My phone died meet me here*, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

Eventually, Mayer shot a small video, *Scenic Jogging*, which was selected for "YouTube Play," a 2010 online-video biennial exhibition at the Guggenheim in New York, and was subsequently screened at its museums in Bilbao, Berlin, and Venice. A little over a minute long, the film features the artist on a run outside at night in front of a projection of the type of nature imagery typical of screensavers. For her 2013 video, *How To Hide From Cameras*, she presented an anti-surveillance makeup tutorial. From there, her practice expanded beyond the screen, but it never settled into a single medium. In late 2019, at Nebraska's Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts, she staged a sculptural installation that questioned art's role in the face of natural disaster. Her series "Slumpies," 2016–ongoing, suggests the posture of digital life through abstract sculptural forms designed to support human bodies—including her largest sculpture to date, *Pergola Spolia*, 2025, displayed within the Baker Museum's garden in Naples, Florida.



Jillian Mayer, *Pergola Spolia*, 2025. Image courtesy of the artist.

That same interest in instability extends beyond Mayer's studio. City State, her artist-led space also in Miami, contains studios, workshops, a gallery, flexible rooms, and a sculpture garden. Founded by Mayer three years ago and run with photographer Rose Marie Cromwell, it emerged from the absence of creative spaces in the city that are not prescribed by hotel chains or boards removed from the act of making. Mayer does not romanticize the site's permanence. She has increasingly turned away from fantasies of controlling the future and toward the question of what is possible in the present moment.



Jillian Mayer. Image courtesy of the artist.

Today, as she prepares for her opening at David Castillo, Mayer is considering what can be protected without pretending it can be secured. For the artist, Miami, where she still lives, remains more than a backdrop: It is the material and psychological condition through which her work has developed. She describes the city as a place that perhaps was never supposed to exist, built through canals, concrete, and sustained acts of denial against water. Marble façades cover rotting wood and ruined drywall. Tropical beauty coexists with infrastructural failure. The city, she says, "might be laughing at you, not with you."

"Jillian Mayer: Placeholder Future" is on view from September 3 through October 1, 2026, at David Castillo at 25 NE 39th St, Miami, FL 33137.