

Yulia Mahr – interview: ‘My work is more akin to poetry. It’s a moment of sensory storytelling’

Mahr’s work incorporates film, photography and installation with a rich language of layering, collaging and photographic experimentation. She discusses her artistic evolutions, her explorations of the female body as a ‘site of complexity’ and the studio space she and her husband, Max Richter, have built in Oxford to support musicians, artists and writers



Yulia Mahr at Studio Richter Mahr. Courtesy of Artist.

by VERONICA SIMPSON

Born in Hungary, into a family of film-makers, translators and architects, Yulia Mahr grew up in a warm, creative community. But at seven, she moved to the UK with her mother. The shock, she has said, induced “a kind of muteness”, two years in which she barely spoke, but “lived in my imagination”.

After studying politics, history and visual anthropology at the London School of Economics, Mahr spent 10 years as a theatre director, three of them with the radical Arts Threshold, a youth theatre built into a church hall in west London, set up by the visionary teacher, photographer and writer, Brian Astbury, founder of Cape Town’s legendary Space Theatre, South Africa’s first racially diverse theatre company. For Mahr, this was pivotal: an art practice that was plural, political and resourceful was born. Here, she also met the composer Max Richter, giving him his first musical commission. They went on to become creative and life partners, working together on major, immersive musical events such as *Sleep and Voices*, for which Mahr made haunting and meditative films collaging found and original imagery.

Mahr’s visual imagination and artistry have since gained increasing recognition, in a practice that includes photography, film and installation. She is fascinated by the female body as a “site of complexity”. As she says here: “There may be softness, there may be beauty, but it’s a site of power struggles and invasions – all those things as well.” Her work explores ideals of contemporary beauty and motherhood, along with issues of memory, identity, displacement and belonging. Recent solo shows include *Unbecoming* at Wehrmühle Biesenthal, Berlin (2024).



This former Alpaca shed now houses a spacious recording studio with views onto the landscape at the rear. Photo: Veronica Simpson.

Having spent 10 years in Berlin in the 00s, raising three children, she returned to the UK in 2019 for what Mahr describes as “the third big gesture” (after *Sleep and Voices*) to convert a dilapidated alpaca farm into an elegantly minimalist modern home and studio complex in the Oxfordshire countryside. Studio Richter Mahr (SRM) comprises state-of-the-art composing, studio and recording spaces, with the intention of providing valuable creative support not just for Mahr and Richter but for other artists and musicians. Set in 31 acres (12.5 hectares) of semi-wild countryside, it has been designed to the highest standards of sustainability in terms of construction, materials and energy usage, with light-filled rooms and a neutral palette to foster an atmosphere of rest and inspiration. In a way, it recreates that creative community Mahr treasured in her youth, but with the purpose of inspiring musicians, artists and writers to keep the flame of creativity burning in an era of great anxiety and dwindling arts funding. She has described it as: “A manifesto, a living breathing piece of art, that is talking about how we view the world and what we want to see in it.”

Studio visited Studio Richter Mahr and spoke with Mahr in person, in December 2024.

Veronica Simpson: I'm fascinated by the decade you spent at the start of your career as a theatre director, making storytelling alchemy out of words, visuals and music. How do you think that informs your work as a visual artist.

Yulia Mahr: I think it's across everything I do. It also taught me what I didn't want to do, and why I needed to have a more personal, singular practice. After years of doing that kind of work, I had a moment about five or six years ago when I just thought: "This is all very well, but why am I not talking about my story? Why do I never talk about anything personal?" I realised that the changes I'd gone through when I was little were deeply traumatic for me and that trauma silences.

VS: That experience of migration?

YM: Displacement, yes. I realised I had just shut down that bit of me. And that's when I realised I have to change everything. I have to make it a very singular practice that is open to my personal experience and completely change the way I do things.

VS: What were the first pieces to emerge?

YM: The very first thing that led to that is this work (The Blues). This is a picture of me, taken immediately after the birth of my third child. I felt so completely manhandled, so lost as a woman. I felt like I was at the service of babies, and I needed an act of repossession. I was also annoyed at all the nudes in art, and it all came together in one thing. I took these photos of myself. And I was always really interested in time, so I left them outdoors, so the sunshine is what bleached them to this colour – though these are not the prints, they are photographs of the prints. I was very interested in the work of the secessionists, in the idea of photography as almost like paint, and the solarisation process. At the time, there was a part of me that couldn't ever think about showing them. But then there came that moment, about five years ago, when I was going through a tumultuous period in my life, and I thought: "Yes: this is the first gesture. Like a great big "fuck you!" It speaks to that filmic background. It's large and it's taking space. It says: "Here I am! I'm upright. I'm not lying down." The colour is almost like underwater, like drowning. It felt like the perfect moment for this series.



*Yulia Mahr. In You | See Me, 2024. Textile installation, variable dimensions, min 2m high.
Installation view, Unbecoming. Wehrmuehle, 2024. Courtesy of Studio Richter Mahr.*

VS: That's interesting, because it resonates with the very welcome political and cultural shift of the last four years, where women have finally been invited into this contemporary arts space, on their own terms.

YM: I didn't yet feel that then. I felt it was the lowest point I could remember, in terms of the sexism and misogyny that I personally experienced. It felt to me like the doors were very closed to me. I think the doors aren't closed now. And that's the miracle of what's happened, with all these wonderful women – Lauren Elkin, Katy Hessel, Jennifer Higgie – taking up the cause of female artists. There has been a massive change. And I feel I can do something now that five or six years ago would have been totally closed to me.

But the changes are still quite superficial. There's still a long way to go. The really deep stuff hasn't changed yet. And there will be a reaction against this at some point. But I feel very steely about how we navigate that.



Yulia Mahr. About Sarah I, 2024. Lens based work on Somerset paper, 150 x 200 cm. Courtesy of Artist.

VS: Your work feels as if it shows the scars. The series About Sarah (2019-23) has such a sense of vulnerability and bruising in the networks of veins that show through. I recognise something very profound and visceral in them. How did you create these effects?

YM: In about 2014/15, I had re-embraced my background in anthropology. Social science is very interesting to me. When living in Berlin, I went back to do a masters in visual anthropology and subsequently taught visual anthropology. In 2014-15, I started to look at military-grade thermal cameras and using them to look at the human body in a different way. I wanted to use them as a force for communication and contact rather than alienation ... Before Covid, I started to work with a model called Sarah. We talked a lot about the scars women carry and our feelings about our body as we age and our standards of beauty and how do we live the complexity of our bodies? There may be softness, there may be beauty, but it's a site of power struggles and invasions – all those things as well. I think that comes through in a lot of the work. What I love about the camera is the fact that you see underneath the skin.



Yulia Mahr. About Sarah II, 2023. Lens based work on Somerset paper, 150 x 200 cm. Installation view, Unbecoming. Wehrmuehle, 2024. Photo: Angela Simi.

VS: So those lines are actually veins?

YM: Yes, the dark is heat and the white is cold. What it asks you to do is forget all the visual codes that you have and put them to one side. You're right to read those shadows as bruises but they're not, they're heat patches. It doesn't pick up on the surface scars, it picks up on what's going on underneath.



Yulia Mahr: Unbecoming. Installation view, Wehrmuehle, 2024. Photo: Angela Simi.

VS: It's a sensory storytelling.

YM: Exactly. My work I think is more akin to poetry. It's a moment ... of sensory storytelling.

VS: What is your relationship with the idea of beauty. You are celebrating the female gaze with honesty and vulnerability, but there is still beauty here.

YM: I'm not frightened of beauty, and I think a lot of people are. A lot of artists are. I think we've been trained – even now – to be suspicious of beauty, to see it as commercial. And I actually I'm not afraid of it. I am happy to embrace it if I feel that it's part of what I want to say.



Yulia Mahr. The Quiet Uncertainty of Stone VIII, 2024. Hand finished editions, marble pigment on lens-based print, 76.2 x 76.2 cm. Unbecoming. Installation view, Wehrmuehle, 2024. Photo: Angela Simi.

VS: There is a power to it, to draw you in: the lines, the forms, the curves are innately seductive. And through that beauty you can bring people closer to a potentially darker place, an uncomfortable place.

YM: That's exactly it, 100%. I do play on classicism. Some people find them too much - I had some reactions to the work in my Berlin show ... the whole gamut from people who just adore them and want to sit in front of them to people who find them too creepy and have to leave the room.

I find that OK too. I'm glad to have that gamut of reactions. I felt happy to be engaging in conversations with people about these things. That particular show was very much about the female gaze. But the entirety of my work isn't necessarily only about that. It was just a very necessary turning point in my life, and I will always return to this subject matter.

VS: Talk me through some of the other themes you are working with.

YM: I'm very interested in questioning museum display. It comes from that thing about representation: who gets the right to talk? Who gets the right to display? Especially coming from my immigrant background, I felt really outside the system, and really silenced by that being outside it.

Obviously, this piece with the embalmed foetuses is about that. When I first came across these embalmed foetuses in museums, I was suddenly aware not just of the display but also their historical acquisition, which is often so awful and morally corrupt – some of them had been torn from people's wombs, from female criminals, and some had been taken after women died. And there were museum visitors snapping away with their iPhones and not really thinking twice about what was going on here. I wanted to make a memorial for these babies. They're all Victorian. I wanted to recognise that it's not possible to right the wrong. It's not saying, don't go to these museums, it's just saying, let's think about what we're looking at and how it got there. And for me too. I stole these photos in a way. So, it's calling into question my act as well. It's about questioning museum display, questioning consent.



Yulia Mahr: Unbecoming. Installation view, Wehrmuehle, 2024. Photo: Angela Simi.

VS: I'd like to talk to you about your film work. From what I have seen, there is a real sense of spaciousness combined with rich layering. And I love the broad range of sources that you deploy, using found images as well as original ones.

YM: I come from this background where, thanks to my family, I was saturated in film to an extent – they were film-makers, translators, architects. I left Hungary as a child, so I was no longer in the midst of that. However, it was this rich, fertile background knowledge I was born into.

I never wanted to be a commercial film director, to work in Hollywood or anything like that. I was interested in using film alternatively at the edges of something. So I started to investigate all sorts of things. I was fascinated with people getting up and doing something more spontaneous with film. That somehow merged with a feeling of real annoyance about the environmental impact of film. I decided: no more new shooting of film. How about I delve into what's there, whether it was things I got from a flea market or from a film stock. I was interested in reusing things that had already had a different person behind their creation. That came in useful during Covid because we had to shut down. I was supposed to do this big film for Voices, and then Max was late delivering it, and it got pushed. And Covid happened, and we completely shut down. At that point, I started to use the skill set I'd developed. To say, OK, let me make something out of things that already exist. And I was really happy doing that, though it's not really part of what I'm doing any more.

VS: During Covid you were also shaping this new Richter Mahr Studios project, which is a huge endeavour. It seems you started with a very clear idea of what you wanted. Where did those inspirations come from?

YM: Yes, my grandfather was a Bauhaus architect, Tibor Weiner. He was also a town planner. He died before I was born, but I was surrounded by pictures of him and his activities in my childhood, and that was deeply influential. I became fascinated by artistic communities and, as I grew up, I did a lot of research into places like Black Mountain College and Kala Bhavana (Institute of Fine Arts, in Shantiniketan, Bengal), a contemporary to Bauhaus, established by Rabindranath Tagore. For both places, it was important to be sited in nature. So that was very important to me, this idea that artistic communities really thrive when they're outside of an urban centre. When we set out to build this place, I had a lot of overarching ideas about how a building should function and the look of the building. We had a lot of constraints, we inherited a planning application that we could change but not completely. But we were able to still make something of that.



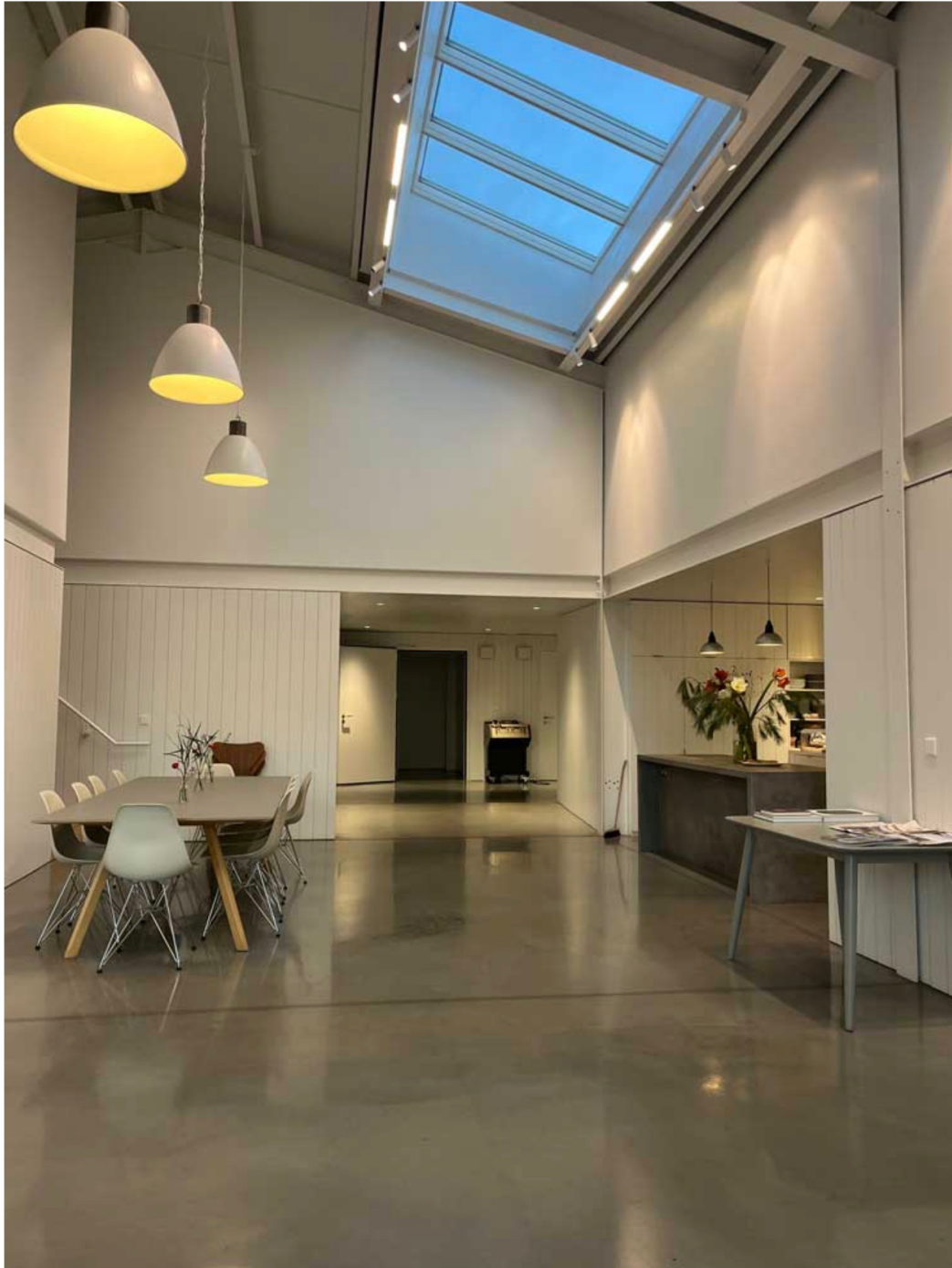
Studio Richter Mahr. Photo: Veronica Simpson.

VS: Were you looking specifically for an agricultural building?

YM: Yes, we wanted something on this scale: high ceilings, big windows, lots of space around it. We've got 31 acres of woodland. The idea is that people can go out and just walk – you can walk for 40 minutes and not meet anyone. We spent a long time looking for such a place.

VS: How did you find this place?

YM: It was a funny one. A sale had fallen through. Nobody was interested in it. We were approached by an estate agent who had shown us other places. Nobody knew what to do with this weird little building on the edge of this triangle of land. But Max and I thought, yes, this is what we'd like. And because we built it during Covid, we also put in a lot of things we might not have otherwise put in. The air gets changed every 14 minutes. But there are other things we had long-term planned: we run off solar. Not completely but mostly. To run a recording studio this size takes an awful lot of power. But there are all sorts of things built into the infrastructure of the building to allow it to function as it does. We're practically off grid, apart from water. We put back into the grid. We grow our own vegetables on site, with the help of Wendy, our gardener. I think it's just a great thing for community, to eat together. The fact that we're fully organic. We look after soil biodiversity. It's all been very thought out. And because of Covid we were able to think about it maybe more than we'd have been able to do otherwise.



Studio Richter Mahr opens onto a welcoming foyer and shared eating space. Photo: Veronica Simpson.

Luckily, we bought it in 2019. And because of (the anticipated disruption in supplies caused by) Brexit, we pre-bought materials. And because we have this philosophy of localism as paramount, we worked with local architects and local builders.

Everyone was local. So, when everything shut down, there was a brief period of shutdown, but then everyone could carry on working – there were only four to five people on site. So we got to build it over Covid. We opened it as Covid restrictions were lifting, in April 2021. That's more than three and a half years now.

It's interesting. It takes quite a long time to live in a building, to work out what works and what doesn't, but everything we set out for the building to do it does. We can have three or four types of projects going on here at the same time and it still doesn't feel crowded. That was the whole point, to have this airy feel. Space for people to think, not to feel rushed, and to be able to stop and pause if they wanted to, have a coffee. And the building manages it. So, I'm delighted.



Yulia Mahr studio at Studio Richter Mahr. Courtesy Christian Cassiel.

VS: Was this white-walls, minimalist aesthetic important?

YM: That was the philosophy. Normally, especially with a recording studio, you have flashing lights blinking at you everywhere, and an airless little chamber with no natural light. We tried to do the opposite of that, to hide everything possible, keep everything quite minimal. And to keep the palette quite low impact. Minimalism gets a bad rap these days, but I don't think you could have a building with more detailing in it for the work that goes on here. It gets filled with people and ideas.

VS: How many artists or musicians do you have working here? What's the minimum or maximum?

YM: We're very relaxed. Nothing is prescribed. I think that's why people enjoy their time so much. But the whole point for us was to have people at a very particular point in their careers, who have already "made it" – with a couple of albums or books under their belts – so everyone thinks they must be making a living. But what we know, having gone through it, is that they are often not making a living. We want people who have proven themselves to be dedicated at what they do, who need support, and nobody is supporting them.

It's been a lifelong interest for me. I've always wanted to do it, if we could. But we took a lot longer to get the money together. I think it is a political statement in a way too. It's definitely a flag in the sand. And it came out of thinking about the way we're descending into this algorithmic hatred of each other and how can we counteract that. You can counteract it if you're able, by small gestures of positive action. It doesn't mean this is perfect, we're striving. It's a statement, a manifesto with a small "m". We're trying to envisage better futures. If lots of people envisage better futures, we will get to something better.



Yulia Mahr portrait. Photo: Marie Sutter.

So, when a model comes in, I will sometimes ask them to take a bath or wash their hands in cold water, or whatever I need to emphasise certain patterns in their body. The camera itself was not made for photography. When you press the shutter, it takes about 40 seconds before the shutter closes. And it has got only two fixed lenses.

VS: It feels very much like an analogue image. But it's the opposite.

YM: I deliberately print them on a certain type of paper, and I put them at a certain size and work very carefully on the grade (of paper) so that it becomes almost like a charcoal drawing. I initially print them very small, because that's the only size you can print them out. Then I rework the ones I like over and over to enlarge them. It's all presented really large because I want to take up space.

VS: They do, they occupy the space beautifully. I like that they show components within the person, and as for other works such as *The Quiet Uncertainty of Stone (2024)*, photographing these classical female statues, there are vital elements missing. There's a sense simultaneously of beauty and ruin.

YM: Yes, and again I think that comes from my background in anthropology. Anthropology took a very sensorial turn when I was interested in it. It became interested in this thing called "thick description". It's all about texture, density of descriptions. It's all about senses apart from the visual sense. I like that. And I brought that into my work. Although it's very visually heavy, I'm trying always to give more depth so that people have a visceral reaction to it. When I showed the series of portraits of embalmed fetuses (*Untitled, 2023-24*) the floor was covered in dried flowers, called baby's breath, so the floor had quite a strong smell. I'm trying to bypass only the eyes. It comes back to theatre too.