

AGENDA, GENDER & SEXUALITY, TECHNOLOGY 2 WEEKS AGO

At Dover Street Market, Paris, Greek philosophy and surveillance technology illustrate queer bodies

by DALIA AL-DUJALI



Images © Yulia Mahr; Installation shots © Mouritz Peters

The Church of Our Becoming is Yulia Mahr's challenge to the binary – here, the artist discusses the body of work as well as her upcoming show at Compton Verney

"When we no longer take gender or identity as givens, that's when beauty happens," Yulia Mahr tells me. Her new series, *The Church of Our Becoming*, now installed at Dover Street Market Paris, reimagines the classical ideals of the human form through the unexpected intimacy of military thermal imaging. What began as a visceral reaction to the UK Supreme Court's ruling on the legal definition of "woman" has become a luminous challenge to centuries-old binaries inherited from Greek statuary. Across thirteen monumental portraits – trans, non-binary, cis, and fluid bodies alike – Mahr invites viewers to walk among heat-rendered figures that radiate equality, plurality, and the shared fact of being alive.

Our conversation also looks ahead to *Speaking in Dreams*, opening this October at Compton Verney's Capability Brown–designed chapel in the UK. Rooted in her Eastern European heritage, folklore, and the crow's urgent symbolism, the installation drifts between waking and dreaming to confront the paralysis of modern anxiety. It will launch a multi-year collaboration with Compton Verney, expanding Mahr's multidisciplinary practice, spanning photography, sculpture, and immersive installation and deepening her ongoing exploration of identity, ritual, and impermanence.

Dalia Al-Dujali: What were the motivations for *The Church of Our Becoming*?

Yulia Mahr: Two things really came together. The piece is an immediate and visceral reaction to the UK supreme court ruling on what defines "woman" and "sex." I had completely the opposite reaction to those celebrating the ruling. I felt dismayed by it. It seems honestly, to me, to be the past screaming at the future "no, keep everything like it used to be." As someone who has faced a lifetime of sexism, all I want to do is to open up the definition of womanhood, and to advocate for a broad acceptance of humans, rather than to close it down.



"Technology, while seemingly neutral, is never neutral, especially in the hands of humans with all our biases and the culturally ingrained stereotypes that we knowingly or unknowingly carry"

Once I coupled these thoughts with work that I had been doing investigating the enduring impact of Greek Statuary on the Western psyche, the project just flew. The history of Greek statuary (and the Roman reproductions which followed) is complex and it would be flattening to only point out those which conform to the dominating Classical Period – where men were portrayed as buff and women as passive and timid. Nevertheless, these are the binaries that have stuck with us and shaped a rather rigid western concept of beauty and worth.

I started to imagine a work which might challenge this binary, not through confrontation, but through intimacy. I wanted a story of rewriting, together and differently. A story of equality. A story of becoming.

DA: I'm very interested in the use of military or surveillance technology being subverted to portray queer bodies. Can you expand on this and speak to the role of surveillance and technology in the lives of queer, trans and non-binary communities?

YM: Technology, while seemingly neutral, is never neutral, especially in the hands of humans with all our biases and the culturally ingrained stereotypes that we knowingly or unknowingly carry. Medical and military technology and thermal imaging particularly is formed by biases towards normative (and let's face it almost exclusively heteronormative male) assumptions. There's been some interesting writing on this by Toby Beauchamp in his book *Going South* in relation to the trans community, where he writes about systems like ID checks, airport security and the like singling out trans and non-binary people "as threats" whose bodies don't match normative expectations. Cal Brink has written on fitness wearables and how they embody binaries and conventional metrics of progress. There's been similar work done on school surveillance programmes. It's clear that we have a severe misalignment between state-of-the-art tech and trans, non-binary and queer rights.

Military thermal technology is principally an instrument of dehumanising tendencies and is regularly used to identify people who are hiding or undercover via their heat signatures. I've been working with this technology since 2010. At the time I was involved in the world of social science, where I was investigating representation in lens based (film, photography) work. I started to use the technology myself artistically as part of an auto-ethnographic project on my own childhood migrations [which had been particularly traumatising for me]. I just loved the idea of subverting this awful tool of domination into something that could create a thing of beauty, commonality and compassion instead.



I adore the way these 'cameras' call into question everything we have been taught about how to read an image, compelling us to look again. And how in picking up heat patterns, rather than surface details, they allow us to look below the surface at our commonality. They're a perfect fit for this project. If these cameras are used to detect 'abnormal' bodies and to single them out as threats, then I thought, well, I can find a way to subvert this to instead celebrate and open up binary rigidity. In picking up heat over light, the camera roots my ideals of equality in science – the body as heat, as energy, as shared animal fact. In that radiance, we stand equal, and therefore I have also included cis women and men in the project – this is a series about all of us and my total conviction of the beauty of plurality.

DA: Tell me a bit about the link between Classical European sculptures and statues and your photos. Why is this connection important?

YM: Well, as I mentioned before, it was really one of the starting points for the whole series. I've been doing work on Greek statuary for a couple of years now, all the time fascinated by their enduring impact on Anglo and European notions of beauty. While any reading of Greek sculpture has to acknowledge its complexities and nuances, the idealised forms of the Classical Period – the heroic, virtuous, muscular male; the passive, beautiful, sensual female – continue to cast a long shadow on our collective imagination.

Artists have, in various ways, engaged with the dominance of Greek ideals before, but it remains an urgent conversation, especially so now as we return to an algorithmically induced obsession with 'ideal' and normative bodies. I'm using the thermal camera very deliberately to penetrate surface and superficial judgments. I'm also very deliberately breaking with Greek notions of balance, or contrapposto, or in fact leaning into these ideas to subvert them. And then of course the people I am portraying turn any notions of gender or female submission and passivity on their head.

I'm driven to take space for those who are otherwise marginalised. Each portrait stands at almost 3.5 m height – that's very deliberate from me – I want to put queer and trans bodies into public spaces, into a space they deserve. Additionally the Greeks saw monumentality as a sign of the divine and I love that for this work too. We are all part of the divine. The monumental no longer has to serve nationalism, masculinity, or control, but becoming, softness, multiplicity.



DA: Let's talk a bit about your upcoming show, *Speaking in Dreams*, at Compton Verney. Can you tell me about your interest in folklore and the natural world, and how this was translated into a project on dreaming?

I was born in an era and in a culture where dreams and folklore were still relevant. Hungary has one of the most symbolically rich and spiritually ambivalent folk traditions in Europe, where dreamworlds are saturated with longing, threat and metamorphosis. This has profoundly shaped my artistic life. Not nationalistically I hasten to add – so many folklore traditions have been co-opted for nationalism – but in an artistic sensibility and understanding of shared dreamworlds and non-literal texts.

Actually, throughout my whole childhood – but especially after my mother and I moved to the UK – I lived more in a dream world than the real world. I became semi mute for a couple of years, my dream world becoming a tool of self-preservation that allowed me to navigate a national and linguistic change that I found so utterly overwhelming and alienating.


What I like most about dreamtime is the liberation from goal orientated agendas. The relentless industrial agenda has diminished the value placed on non-linear and obviously 'productive' work and time. Dream time is such a rich explorative and revealing state.

DA: What modern anxieties exactly are you exploring?

YM: I wanted to start with that overwhelming anxiety that produces paralysis – where it's lost its roots in any one particular problem, but has bled out into a shuffling down. I feel that's happening across the board these days. How can it not when we are fed an endless stream of algorithmically induced clashing, pitting humans against humans. Crows – which appear in my piece – symbolise warning almost universally across folklore traditions. Their urgent call couldn't be louder.

The Church of Our Becoming runs until 24 August, 2025 at Dover Street Market, Paris. *Speaking in Dreams* opens in October 2025 at Compton Verney, Warwickshire.

TAGS: BLACK-AND-WHITE, COMPTON VERNEY, EXHIBITION, FASHION, FOLKLORE, FRANCE, HUNGARY, INSTALLATION, MAJ ROZTER, MUSEUM, WITHOUTOUD PARIS, GITE, SITE-SPECIFIC, THERMAL IMAGING, TRANS, TRANSGENDER



DALIA AL-DUJALI
Dalia Al-Dujali is the online editor of BJP and an Iraqi-British arts writer and producer based in London. Bylines include *The Guardian*, *Dazed*, *GQ Middle East*, *Wired*, *Present*, *Aperture*, *Almanac*, *It's Nice That*, *Huck*, *Elephant Art* and more. She's the founder of *The Road to Nowhere* magazine and the author of *Babylon, Albion*. You can pitch to her at dalia@1854-media.com

PREVIOUS ARTICLE
Balun Magazine NTI pays tribute to activists as spaces of resistance, memory and collective identity

NEXT ARTICLE
"We know about war photography, but what about peace photography?" In conversation with Dr Tiffany Farley

You May Also Like

- Unsettled Collective's inaugural publication explores the plurality of the Muslim experience
- The heart of the matter: Carrie Mae Weems on show at Galleria d'Italia
- "We know about war photography, but what about peace photography?" In conversation with Dr Tiffany Farley

Contact

Get in touch
Submit to editorial
Press enquiries
Advertising

Awards

Portrait of Humanity
Portrait of Britain
Female in Focus
OpenWalls
BJP International Photography Award
Decade of Change

About

About 1854
Our History
Authors
Write for us
Shop
Image Credits

1854 Media is a multi-award-winning digital media organisation with a global community including millions of photographers, arts lovers and international brands.

Our portfolio includes British Journal of Photography, the world's oldest photography title (est. 1854), and our awards are among the most viewed photographic exhibitions in history.

Stay Inspired

SIGN UP NOW

As a member of our community you'll receive the best in international contemporary photography direct to your inbox every Sunday.