



Photo by Lesley Lau

YULIA MAHR: “HOW DEEP IS THAT?”

BY EMMA ROBERTSON



Ms. Mahr, you seem to thrive on making your art exhibitions site-specific. How come?

I'm addicted to it! I think it might have something to do with my background in theater: creating these visual environments for people to come in and inhabit. There are artists who simply ship off their work and allow it to be hung in any way or next to anything, but the thought of that really makes me feel ill. I want to create a complete visual environment, and so I love working outside of a white cube context in that way. I love using your surroundings to speak to the art, you know, so that it's not just one piece, and that's the entirety of it, but for example, thinking about the way that light falls or the way the birds are squawking outside, the ornateness of a more unique space, that all plays into it. And I think it gives an enormous amount in terms of layers of meaning to anything you're doing. So I really love that way of working.

I loved the way the light interacted with your photography pieces at your *Unbecoming* show in Berlin, for example.

I'm really careful where I place things, because you're right that light is so important. It affects us subliminally; we don't even know we're being affected. But if we walk into a neon lit room, or if we're walking into something with natural light, we feel different and how that light falls and what it's highlighting, it seems essential to the piece itself.

“Those tiny connections are what makes things really glow, they invite you to come closer, to look more.”

That sounds like it might also come from your background in theater, working with spotlights and different effects.

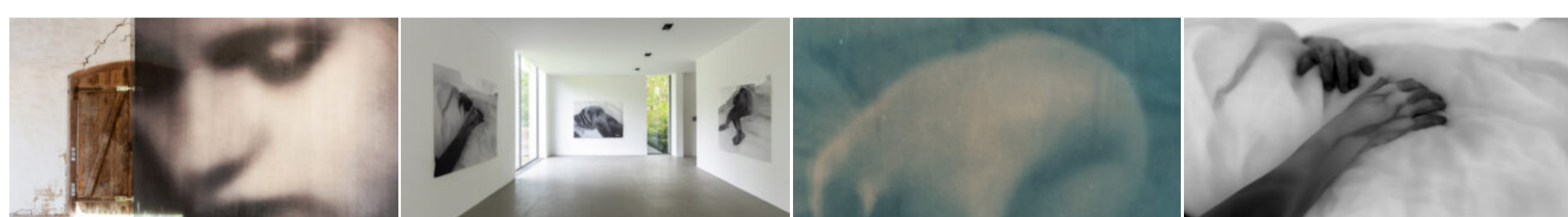
It could be, yes. And then when you're using film and photography, you're looking at light a lot, aren't you? Light becomes an incredibly important part of the conversation with whatever you're doing. But there's other elements as well. I hung a few pieces for *Unbecoming* outdoors, so light was crucial, but wind and nature were also factors. The photos I chose to hang outdoors were sort of studies of women in the background of photographs, women who aren't the main character, that I rephotographed many times. There's a kind of softness in the pieces that happens throughout that layering process, and then I blew these images up really large, and I hung them in a forest. And I hope that it gave those pieces a dignity and a remembrance, and an acknowledgement of these long-forgotten people that fit in and out of images.

The large format of those photos is really striking in that context, as well as for your self-portrait series, *The Blues*.

Absolutely, it ensures that people don't look away. And when I made *The Blues*, that was incredibly scary, to have that with photos of myself and my body. But I loved it and it's the only way I ever want to work from now on. I want to be saying, "Don't look away. Look! Just look and spend a long time looking, you know, sit down, spend time with this image." I think it can be really hard to take space with a lot of the work that I do, and it's just about the subject matters that I touch on, it can be hard to get space in museum contexts, and it's still really hard to command attention. I do love to make this really large work in order to say to people, "Here it is, don't look away. Give this space." I feel like it's such an amazing way to reach people, but it's also very vulnerable, very emotional work.

But then you also have tiny details in your exhibitions that are extremely poignant, like the little crows perched in the windows of the Compton Verney chapel — another site-specific installation called *Speaking in Dreams*.

That's true, I love to play with scale a lot. And in a way, these tiny pieces are doing the same thing. That crow in that chapel is one of my favorites, and it was just about this tiny moment, this tiny connection. And actually, how deep is that? Those tiny connections are what makes things really glow, they invite you to come closer, to look more.



OPEN GALLERY

Speaking in Dreams is just one part of your collaboration with Compton Verney chapel, right? You'll continue to make work that responds to different areas of the chapel and its grounds.

That's right, it's a multi-year project. I'm already working on the installation for next year, which will be on the grounds. I've been going to Compton Verney chapel for about 10 years, because we live close by to it. It was restored by architect Capability Brown, and I've just been going up there and sitting in that space... And because I've been visiting for 10 years or so, it completely informed the piece that I made, the colors of it, the textures of it, the tones. I really like art being undefined. I really like art to not always be about an end product, or the goal of selling. I love the fact that this chapel gave me the opportunity to make a piece that really is very open ended, about sitting in a space and really taking time to think. I think of it like a poem, and the building itself is part of the poem. Each individual piece within it is part of the poem. They speak to each other in different ways.

It reminds me almost of a woven tapestry, where all these different parts are coming together in a space to create something that's even greater than the piece on its own.

Absolutely. Each individual piece, each portrait has to work on it, by itself — but I'm rarely working on work like that. I'm working on it so that it speaks to other things, because I think it adds layers of meaning without having to work really hard for it. It just naturally does that. I'm really drawn to that way of working. I remember for my show *Unbecoming*, we'd set up one room with all these pictures of fetuses from museums around the world. And then I suddenly thought, "Wait." And I put another small picture outside of that room of a woman sort of closed up, and it just brought the whole piece to life. It meant so much more than it would have done without that tiny image commenting on the rest of the photos. I've started doing that a lot, it's like another view into the conversation.

Is space also an important for the process of art making, and not just the final product?

I think it's super important. My grandfather was a Bauhaus architect, he died before I was born, and he was never famous or anything like that, but I was surrounded as a child with pictures of him and the buildings he'd made and the cities he planned. So from that very young age, I began to understand about how our environment impacts us and how architecture can impact us, so I think that's fed into my work, and it's certainly fed into the studio that my partner and I have built, Studio Richter-Mahr, which is also a residency space for artists in Oxfordshire, England. We really carefully planned so that every room has a big picture looking out onto nature. So as you're working, you really feel what's going on outside, you're really in contact with the seasons. It's very minimal, because I feel intrinsically that as a creative person, you want your surroundings to be as minimal as possible, you almost need that thinking space. So we really were thinking a lot about: how does space impact creativity?

“It's bringing this feeling of unzipping yourself and opening yourself up and I think we need that in the world.”

Did you find an answer with the artists who have stayed with you?

Well, a lot of the artists say they've done more work here than they've ever done before. And I think that has to do with not being under pressure, because our residency program says you don't have to produce anything. You can just come and be. And I think that really moves work forward for them, and I think a lot of that has to do with the space and the environment, as well as the artistic community. It's stimulating. We get a lot from being around other human beings, but here, you can also be away from everything to create.

Has the space also made you more creative?

Not more creative, because I'm turbo creative anyway! If anything, I can be a bit too creative, I think. But certainly for my practice, it's changed quite a lot. I'm looking out that window every single day. We're really disciplined, we come to work at nine, we leave at six every day. We're working, we're watching the wildlife, watching the birds soaring... And that has really impacted me and how I work. It's changed everything for me, really. It's bringing this feeling of unzipping yourself and opening yourself up and I think we need that in the world.

It seems like you're interested in pushing your own boundaries, artistically.

This building pushes my boundaries, that's for sure. We're working really hard to make this studio space happen, and it really pushes both my partner and I in terms of what it takes from us. But I think we quite like leaping off cliffs... I think you've just got to be bold in that way.



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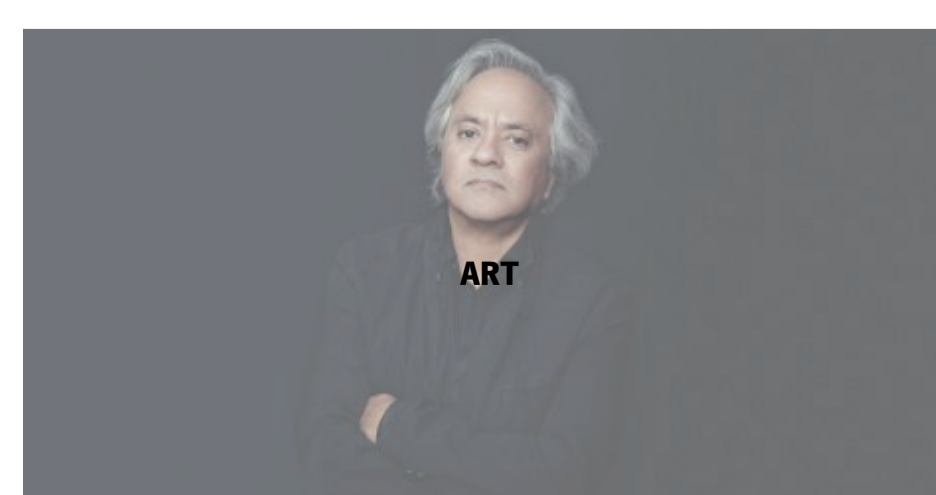


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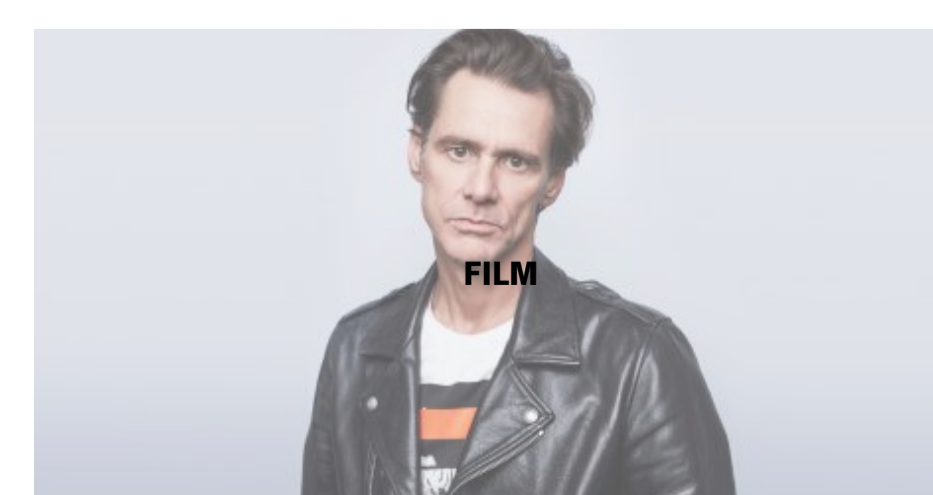
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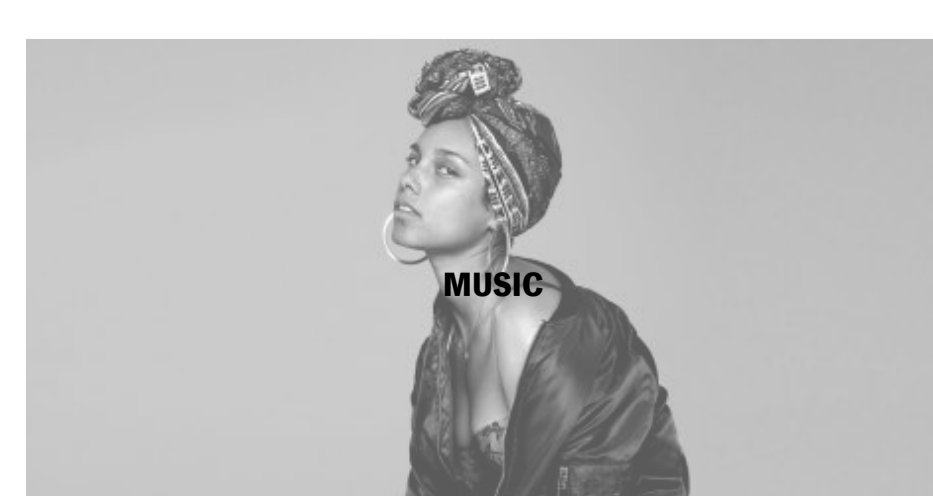
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