



NEWS

PROFILING YULIA MAHR: ARTIST, STORYTELLER AND QUIET REVOLUTIONARY

BY CHRISTINA DONOGHUE ON 29 APRIL 2024

Artist Yulia Mahr's latest Berlin show *Unbecoming* creates a tightrope of references that form beauty in places we least expect. Art and culture editor Christina Donoghue met with the artist at her studio to find out more.

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The more we can communicate through dance, through song, through art, the richer we are, the better we are and the more stable we are. - Yulia Mahr

Last month, I was lucky to meet with artist (and artist patron) Yulia Mahr at her studio in Oxfordshire. I only needed a couple of minutes chatting with Mahr to make the boldly assured realisation she's probably one of the most humble working artists I've ever known or had the pleasure of meeting. Warm, kind, curious, and not to mention, incredibly modest, Mahr is armed with the kind of aura that puts you at total ease in her presence. Truth be told, I can't help but feel totally in awe of Mahr, a feeling the artist eagerly reflects right back at me.

'Being here has had an incredibly profound impact on everything I've done...you can't help but be totally in awe of what you see out there', she tells me. 'Here' being SRM (Studio Richter Mahr), a minimalist complex-style space she co-founded with her husband (musician Max Richter) five years ago, transforming it from an abandoned Alpaca farm into a place rooted in nurturing creativity while encouraging artistic growth and reflection. 'There' being the 31 acres of woodland that surround SRM. 'This is the first thing I show everybody who comes here', Mahr holds up a photo of what looks like a disused animal warehouse barn, pointing to the exact location I'm standing in now. 'This is what we were contended with, and as soon as we visited the space, we just knew it was what we'd been looking for all this time'.



Yulia Mahr studio by Lorenzo Zandri

The real reason I've travelled to SRM - aside from witnessing the incredible space for myself - is to find out more about Mahr's latest exhibition *Unbecoming*, a show that seeks beauty in the cycles of impermanence, which opened to the public at [Wehrmuehle](#) gallery in Berlin this weekend. Unearthing beauty from mother nature's more gnarly qualities is what anchors the individual themes in *Unbecoming* together, presenting a study of the ethereal and the unsightly as inseparable facets of the human condition to create a tightrope of references that form beauty in places we least expect. 'We fixate on a very small amount of time in our journey but actually, the real beauty of it, is our whole journey and the cycles, our life cycles within it', Mahr observes. 'The whole death, life, transfiguration, babies being born... it's profoundly important for me that it's recognised as something beautiful, and I really mean the whole process, not just certain parts of it. But, most people think of it as 'unbecoming'. So, actually, it's *becoming*; It was very important for me to play on that word. It really does encapsulate everything that I'm talking about; I find the decay in these utterly beautiful.'

As for *becoming*, the show taking place in Berlin is just as important to Mahr as the artwork involved. 'We had been living in Edinburgh before and then we moved to Berlin but the kids were still small and so Berlin is the place where we formed our identity as a unit', she clarifies, adding: 'For me personally, it was also important that I was going back to middle Europe - where I'm from - with this show. Berlin always gave me a space to be myself so I'm excited to take my work there, a lot of the photographs in the show were actually shot there, so there's this overarching common thread'.



'About Sarah', Yulia Mahr



Yulia Mahr in the studio by Marie Sutter

It takes an enormous amount of time to be able to say something to the world that counts. - Yulia Mahr

Marking a significant change of direction in Mahr's artistic journey from all things she's committed to previously (she tells me she used to mainly collaborate with her husband to create visuals for his albums in their early years as a couple), the exhibition collates varying women's stories of bearing the scars of childbirth - including the artist's own - and presents them through layered and repeated figuration as scarred bodies, decaying matter, and lifeless animals contrast with moments of birth and life. At the heart of *Unbecoming* are stories of struggle and strength, vulnerability and resilience; tales that have led Mahr to turn inwards and reach into the depths of herself before resurfacing with a set of themes that are underpinned by, what the press release earnestly notes as 'the rhythmic ebbs and flows of the natural world.' 'It's not easy to go into the depths of yourself, you know. It's unbelievably uncomfortable, and because of this, I almost see it as "my mission", a sort of quiet revolution' Mahr affirms. 'Every morning, I come in here and that's my one guiding principle; that I should be as raw and honest as I can be and talk about things that I can never talk about in a normal conversation.'

Another intrinsically important theme to the show is time, or rather, the lack thereof: 'When you look at the works' Mahr begins, 'there's nothing that gives away the period they're made in, and that's very deliberate.' Upon researching SRM, back before I met with Mahr, I read there was an overwhelmingly noticeable lack of clocks in the studio space, something I was keen to observe for myself. And, in all three hours I spent at the studio, I can honestly put my hand on my heart to say I found none - an intentional move from Mahr and Richter that helps them to foster a supportive artistic environment without time constraints - a reportedly famous hindrance to creativity for many. However, this keen emphasis on refusing to accept time is something Mahr's co-founded studio space shares with her individual work in *Unbecoming*.



Yulia Mahr's Studio. Image by Marie Sutter

'I wanted to do a series about the changes that our bodies go through', Mahr attests. 'Sarah has had a lot of surgery' [Mahr points to a portrait of an unidentifiable woman], 'a double mastectomy, back surgeries, you name it. And of course, her body has changed with time but what this particular camera picks up, isn't the scars or the changes bound by time but the lifeblood. So, in a way, it's a series about that, rather than about her scars', she determines. 'I was adamant I didn't want to root the show in a specific era. I didn't want to make these photographs easily identifiable or as observations either recorded in 2024 or 10/15 years ago, it doesn't matter to me because all these subjects are universal in their beauty.' It's at this point, Mahr swings me around and points me in the direction of a different photograph - one that's slightly obscured in its image. 'So, this is me: you're looking at me', Mahr exclaims. 'I took this photo 15 years ago after the birth of mine and Max's first child and I felt so incredibly manhandled and so divorced from my body and so I took this series about myself and then, unintentionally, left it for 15 years. As it degraded, and the colours and the pigmentation faded, I also changed. And my body's changed. And it was really about reclaiming myself and trying to own my body again. I'm not this kind of person anymore but this series for me was a really important thing to do and I did reclaim myself through doing it, hence why I'm now showing it. Another thing I'll say is to be able to say something to the world that counts, takes an enormous amount of time. Otherwise, it's just the surface stuff. Time really is so valuable, and that's what I have here. All this work has come from that stillness and time and having direct contact with the work... it allows you to access openness in a way that you wouldn't normally get the opportunity to have.'

Asking who Mahr was before leads to a sort of question mark and an answer that's as winding as her own working process but for the sake of having a better understanding of everything, we start at the beginning. 'When I came to this country as a young child, I couldn't speak English', the Hungarian-born artist reveals. 'It was the 1970s and they hadn't figured out how to integrate foreigners, really. I was the only child at my school who didn't speak English and so I spent a couple of years in this dreamy silent space', she pauses for a moment. 'When you've gone through something like that, it resonates throughout your life, you know, that sticks for a really long time and it even becomes subconscious in the sense that you don't realise that's what has happened to you or you've absorbed it, acknowledged it and moved on or whatever. But actually, you're still living it unless you open it up. What I went through was a very traumatic thing and that experience totally silences you. In the long run, it's helped me to become warm and honest now. So, it's been an incredible journey, really.'



Yulia Mahr's studio by Lorenzo Zandri

It's in this dreaminess that Mahr talks about that I can see why her work possesses the hazy quality that it does: one that refuses to be bound by the notion of time and makes everything look as though it's been submerged underwater, a conscious decision for the artist. 'I also wanted these works to feel like they were underwater', confirms Mahr. 'So, the original photos had a bit of that but as with all of these marks... these aren't the originals, these are rephotographed versions of what happened to the original images, but all these marks are the marks of time on the emulsion of the photograph. I also wanted them to have a very painterly effect, so I've tried to use ink in a way that mirrors not how a photographer would use ink, but painter would use paint. If you go close, you can see all the markings and that's very deliberate on my part, these works are photographed and photographed and rephotographed.'

Moving to England at a time when foreigners weren't as welcome as they are now is just one of the many setbacks that has faced Mahr as an artist and as a human being. 'Our reasoning for starting SRM is because, in truth, it took us so long to make just a single penny', Mahr states frankly. 'I mean, Max had released so many albums, we'd done so many art projects and we were still walking to interviews because we didn't have the money. It was awful and people think, "You've got an album out", "You've got a film out" - whatever it is you've done always seems to equate to "You've made it" - and you haven't at all. You have to make your money and we've got three kids and we remember it was so painful for so long, so we really do remember what it was like.' It's that very real experience and knowledge of remembering how tough the creative industry can be when you're starting out that has led to the founding of SRM - not just as a space for the two people whose names make up the studio itself - but for other artists as well, housing a sort of continuous artist residency programme with Richter and Mahr at the helm.



Yulia Mahr's Studio at SRM. Image by Marie Sutter

'What we're really looking for is people who have already got something under their belt. You know, they've proven themselves, they've done their projects and now they need that continued steam, under the guidance of support', realises Mahr. However, SRM isn't your standard one-size-fits-all 'we'll help you for one week, ask you to produce something, then you're off on your own' type of residency, there's a freshly cultivated uniqueness to the way it runs which undeniably sets it apart from other mentorship programmes. 'We don't require anybody to produce anything', reveals Mahr. 'We don't even ask for a proposal. If you come and want to sit in the hut for two weeks and read a book, you can do just that. It's really about understanding what creativity needs and everybody's creative process looks different. Sometimes, you just need to sit with a cup of coffee and stare out the window; we want people to just come and be and It's about having the space and time to just be. That's why, even in my own case, some of my work has been a 15-year-long process... but it feels perfect to me that it's taken that long. I have time and space in abundance here and it's really changed my life.'

If I've learnt one thing from Mahr, it's that great art doesn't just come from talent alone, it's about having access to the right resources and knowing the right people. 'I'm one of those people that really believes in art', Mahr establishes. 'I think it's fundamental to us and I think it's a fundamental mode of communication and actually verbal communication has such limits on it and so the more we can communicate in other ways - through dance, through song, through art - the richer we are, the better we are, the more stable we are.'

Unbecoming by Yulia Mahr is on show at Wehrmuehle gallery in Berlin until 26 May.



Yulia Mahr