

Giulia Essayad stages and transforms her own body, seeking to challenge the mechanisms of commodification that shape our relationship to desire within a society where advertising is omnipresent. Continuing her exploration of the relation between self-representation and inner life, she has transformed the Espace Projet gallery into an immersive installation that weaves together DIY technology, digital images and personal memories.

For over fifteen years, the artist has continually returned to the self-portrait — a genre she began exploring as a teenager through drawing, and which she continues to pursue by subverting the commercial aesthetic of lightboxes. Recently, she has focused on the invisible aspects of the body: emotions, pain, pleasure, as well as the stereotypes associated with expressing these states of consciousness. For *Other Planes*, she also draws inspiration from mystical poetry, guided by the conviction that at the heart of all things lies an impenetrable mystery.

Having grown up in Lausanne, the artist reconnects here with a place filled with memories, one she used to hang out in when the MCBA was still an industrial wasteland. The exhibition unfolds as a journey imbued with the ambivalent feeling of longing, caught between nostalgia and aspiration, between what has been and what remains elusive.

Giulia Essayad (*1992) is the recipient of the 9th Prix Gustave Buchet. She lives and works in Geneva.



Pierre-Henri Foulon

You were born and raised in Lausanne. The part of the city where the site of Plateforme 10 is located has changed a lot over the past fifteen years. What personal connection do you have to this place?

You decided to modify the architecture of the Espace Projet gallery in order to encourage visitors to follow a specific path. Through this gesture, we see a reflection on the relationship between power and architecture, which appears in different aspects of your work, particularly in your approach to installation.

Giulia Essayad

I grew up five minutes from this spot. Before the museum was built, there were train tracks and sheds here. I liked this landscape; it felt open, surreal, and mine. As a teenager, I used to sit here and smoke with friends. There's meaning in showing my work here now because of the overlapping loops in time and space. To be corny, that kid would be proud and exhilarated to see the show today. I decided to embrace this full-circle, coming-of-age moment by collaborating with my teenage self. Some of the drawings and paintings I made 15 years ago are displayed as magnets in the show. I also recreated them as digital collages.

All architecture exerts power over the body. The museum comes with its own language and speaks to the bodies that enter it. I think it says, "Everything in here is important. It's deliberate. It holds meaning. Heighten your perceptions; everything in here is potentially a symbol, a portal." In that space, you are invited to approach the objects as metaphors, mirrors, and labyrinths. In that sense, it's a temple. As a child, I felt very religious in museums.

Of course, this is double-edged: institutions exist to perpetuate themselves at any cost. Their longevity and stability are what make them institutions. To achieve this, compromises of all kinds are made, some less forgivable than others. They are pedestals whose stability is made up of compromises.

The opportunity to orchestrate a space that people will experience with all their senses is a responsibility that I take very seriously. But I'm also at war with the pedestal. And to highlight this, I wanted to mess it up, to emulate less solemn spaces: liminal, third spaces. Transitional and transactional spaces. I made the maze into a loop. I was interested in creating a sequence.

By organizing the space in successive sequences, you guide the visitor through a journey where the works are revealed gradually rather than all at once. How does storytelling influence the way you conceive an exhibition?

If I only have a wall to display my work, I will often show a sequence, like a video or a triptych. I'm interested in primers: the first thing we see primes us for the next; how we decide to link the first two frames how we receive the third, etc.

A story is more likely to deliver something crunchy, nourishing and satisfying for the mind, I think. We make anything and everything into stories, I think it's how we understand everything. We are narrative junkies, so whether I sequence the show or not, it will be read like a story.

The way you structure your work in cycles also ties into this idea.

It started as a joke. When I was working on blue skin and identity, I called that my "Blue Period." Now that I'm looking inward, I'm in my "Rose Period." Maybe next I'll move on from the Picasso puns.

The exhibition features elements that are characteristic of your aesthetic vocabulary, notably the lightboxes created by altering images of your own body. At the same time, it carries a kind of adolescent romanticism, as if it were both a reflection on things past and the beginning of a new chapter.

For over 15 years, I've returned to self-portraits, a genre that is so violent and powerful and which, like all representation, transforms what it depicts. Both the object and the subject are transformed. Extracting images that represent "me" forces "me" to escape toward something else.

Recently, I've focused on the invisible aspects of the body: emotions, thoughts, pain, pleasure, and the tropes surrounding the expression of these unseen yet very real phenomena. In this exhibition, I focus on different states of consciousness, such as ineffable and unspeakable experiences like traumatic amnesia and dissociation, as well as spiritual epiphanies. These are all

very concrete experiences with their own weight, texture, and flow. I'm trying to pierce through the alienating feeling that comes with being unable to communicate effectively around these things. And you're right; it's a reckoning because I feel like I'm exhausting the self-portrait genre, and perhaps after this, I'll create something else for a while.

You primarily use your own body as the starting point for the images in your work. What does digital manipulation allow you to explore or express in terms of self-representation?

Using my own body as material has the advantage that I only have to respect my own boundaries. I rarely use other models. I consider my work to be violent—not only the objects themselves, but also how they circulate—and putting anyone else through this is complicated.

Your work also connects to a broader history of representing non-normative bodies, and the violence these bodies have historically endured in society. Such bodies have been both marginalized and fetishized. You incorporate elements drawn from the world of fetishism, which—particularly within underground culture—encompasses a wide range of practices and expressions tied to sexuality and identity. Is this, for you, a way of reclaiming that history?

This is a difficult question to answer, primarily due to the language. A fetish is a sacred object that can concentrate and hold divine forces. The racist history of the term itself is illuminating. However, I'm trying to use different words to describe the varied processes you're referring to. One's body can be objectified, tokenized, romanticized, idolized... All of these words point to the idea that a living being is reduced to an inanimate, simplified symbol. What can be done with a symbol ranges from destructive and cruel, to incredibly liberating. I hope it's evident in my work that I engage with self-objectification towards liberation. The thing about a powerful symbol or image is that it cannot be destroyed, deleted, or ignored. However, its meaning can change.

Words like "fat," "feminine," "Arab," and "queer" have nothing to do with my body; they refer to concepts that exist outside of it. Identity is non-consensual; it is done to us.

The widespread use of social media has transformed our relationship to our own image, how we present it, and, by extension, to desire. The boundaries of intimacy have also shifted—sexuality is now exposed, and at times virtually monetized. This marks a major evolution in how we relate to the body.

In your work, there is a constant dialogue between highly produced, digitally crafted images and a DIY aspect in the materials or installations that showcase them. What draws you to this tension?

Ann Hirsch¹, whose work addresses these issues compellingly, says, “When we put our bodies online, we are in direct dialogue with porn.” Porn and advertising are part of us; we are cyborgs, and this is part of the programming. Everything has changed; I will never know what brains were like before pornography, advertising, or the Internet.

Thinking of sculpture as a language in which materials of various origins and degrees of finishing intersect reminds me of the texture of the world around me, where mass-produced clothing is worn by singular bodies and fruit decomposes on an IKEA plate. I’m not a fan of mysterious materiality where the main question is, “What is this made of?” Such objects cast me out, and I am not interested in the guessing game of what lies beyond the opaque surface. This makes me think of the monolith in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, minimal sculpture and white men who take up space but give nothing in return. I am attracted to porous objects that start a reaction inside me, allowing me to see the hands, machines, Photoshop brushes at work. The object is open and reveals information about the material world we share. I find this exciting and valuable. Don’t hide your hand. Even my digital images are super crafty. In other words, you don’t need to become an expert at something to use it.

¹ Ann Hirsch (born in Baltimore in 1985) is an artist who uses the Internet and social media to explore various representations of sexuality and erotic self-documentation, with a creative approach to feminist issues.

The topic of hybridity, and its ambiguous relationship with monstrosity, is central to your practice. Within the art field of the past thirty years, I'm thinking of pioneers like Matthew Barney, who investigated this thoroughly in his *Cremaster Cycle* (1994–2002). Is this something you have looked at or drawn inspiration from?

The experimental work of Virginia Woolf in literature, or the poetry of R.M. Rilke—seemingly quite distant from your practice—are nevertheless important sources of inspiration for you. How do you relate to literature and language more broadly?

Yes, *Cremaster Cycle* and *Drawing Restraint*, of course. Also, the video installations by Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch. Closer to us, the way Bunny Rogers addresses themes of nostalgia and trauma, or how Amalia Ulman uses social media.

I started writing before I began making drawings or sculptures. As a child and teenager, I retreated into books. I loved the translations of poems by Vladimir Mayakovsky, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Emily Dickinson. I also loved Jean Genet. I find it so reassuring when texts can cross an age and still convey meaning. So much of what we are and experience feels impossible to communicate. Poetry holds the possibility of transmission, and immortality. Since language is closely related to thought, we can enclose what we gather from life in a few lines and send it off down centuries. And translation is like executing someone's recipe with one's own ingredients; it's so intimate and human.

A major inspiration for the show is the Gnostic poem *The Thunder, Perfect Mind*², in which the divine uses paradox in nearly every line to describe herself. Another inspiration has been creation riddles, a medieval literary form that describes the whole of creation through an enigma, as a refusal to contain or count nature. I'm touched by the idea that, when we reach the core of anything, we discover a riddle. Good poems and books are like this to me.

² Gnosticism refers to a collection of religious movements that emerged during the 2nd and 3rd centuries within the Roman Empire, characterized by a shared doctrine asserting that knowledge (in Greek: gnōsis) of the mysteries of humanity, the divine, and the world—acquired through esoteric teaching and an initiatory experience leading to progressive revelation—is both possible and necessary for the salvation of the soul after death. Written in Coptic, *The Thunder, Perfect Mind* contains the revelation of the “Intellect” in the form of a goddess who embodies all opposing qualities within herself.

Continuing with the theme of language, the titles of your works almost sound like slogans. Is it no longer possible to consider language today without acknowledging the influence of advertising on it?

The exhibition features a sound piece created in collaboration with Nelson Schaub. Collaboration holds a central place in your practice.

Advertising is how we are spoken to, and how we increasingly express ourselves. I would argue that it is our shared language and culture. One of my research points for the show was: can we advertize embodiment, sovereignty, presence? Can this language, crafted to bypass our conscious intellect and implant desires and opinions, be reclaimed to transmit something else? Poetically, I am interested in affirmations. They are incorruptible one-liners: no matter how corrosive or self-hating the mind, the benevolent power of a sentence like “I am lovable because I exist” never fades as long as the words are kept in that order. This is why I chose to use a tape of affirmations by Louise Hay³ in the video *I AM ALL THAT I CAN BE (PLANET)*. Hay invented this form of self-talk to offset the mind’s default settings, which constantly produce worry, judgment, and guilt.

As you may have noticed throughout the making of this exhibition, I’m quite independent in my creative process. And yet, almost all my works have a collaborative aspect. Neige Sanchez took nearly all the photographs used in these pieces. We produced them with the spirit of a stock image library: a thousand shots a day against a white background. Leonid Kotelnikov came to see me at C2C in Turin, insisting on filming me with his thermal camera, which we eventually did in Geneva.

³ Louise Hay (1926–2007) was an American author of self-help books.

Nelson is a dear friend with magical creativity—we've been collaborating on music for several years now. Together, we share a taste for ambient loops and glitchy textures⁴, which we use to sculpt the space sensitively. I'd like to incorporate voices as well—we'll see how that goes. What also connects Nelson and me is our enjoyment in bringing goofiness, even a touch of the absurd, into the most serious and solemn contexts—as a kind of lube.

⁴ In computing, a glitch refers to a brief and unexpected malfunction in an electronic system or software, often perceived as a temporary error or flaw. It can be used creatively to produce visual or sound works that explore the limits of technology and the aesthetics of error.