

BOMB

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INTERVIEW

Julia Scher by Ksenia M. Soboleva

Installations that engage with systems of surveillance.



Julia Scher, *Security By Julia XLV*, 2002, fencing, ceiling fans, monitors, video switchers, speakers, light fixtures, amplifiers, DVD players, surveillance cameras, latex and signage, five-channel video, audio and lighting, 9 minutes, 22 seconds, dimensions variable. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York City. © Julia Scher.

Somewhat of a prophet, Julia Scher has been exploring for over four decades the looming proliferation of surveillance technologies. Scher's early fascination with technology arose from its promise to provide a feeling of safety, and the artist even ran a small business, Safe and Secure Productions, installing security systems in the mid-1980s. After moving to New York City in 1986 and immersing herself in the queer community, Scher started to dig deeper into the psychological effects of surveillance. While still holding on to the potential of safety, the artist also began investigating the ways in which surveillance technology could be abused by dominant power structures and employed as a tool of control, which is something we are witnessing palpably in our current times. Working across video installation, sculpture, and performance, Scher explores the seductive tension between private and public, watcher and watched, safety and danger. At [Ortuzar Projects](#), the artist is restaging *Security By Julia XLV*, which was first exhibited at Andrea Rosen Gallery in 2002. Featuring chain-link fences, live cameras, and archival footage from the 2002 exhibition, this multimedia installation invites the audience to contemplate the architecture of surveillance, both within and beyond technology.

Ksenia M. Soboleva

You started by exploring surveillance as something that could lead to increased safety. I read somewhere that you first picked up a recording device when you suspected your neighbor of abusing his daughter. How did your relationship to technology as a potential provider of safety shift over time when realizing that it's also a controlling mechanism used to enforce existing patriarchal power structures?

Julia Scher

Yes, I did not want to confront the guy, so I used a tape recorder, which was a portable technology that could capture fleeting moments of the girl's sounds. This was in 1983. It was very sensitive; I wanted to save someone from the threatening grip of a man and to explore the dangerous and unsafe.

I was working in an aerobics studio as a cleaning lady, and I brought my first video camera into the studio and started filming. No one seemed to mind because they were used to me and felt comfortable. Then the cleaning job turned into an electrical repairs job and security stuff: door locks, window grills, burglar bars, gratings. Later, I became interested in the poetic qualities of these technologies.

KMS

One of the first texts I read in grad school was Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. I was completely fascinated by this idea that we are constantly performing as actors in other people's lives. I feel that even without surveillance technology I am constantly observed by the people around me. I'm curious to hear your thoughts about the act of surveillance by individuals versus technological devices?

JS

We feel the necessity to defend who we think we are versus other people's projections on us. Surveillance has always been there. I'm sure that over time there will be new neologisms and new vocabularies to help pick up the slack of things we once thought were separate but now we find are interconnected.



Julia Scher, *Bruised in the Water*, 1984, acrylic on canvas, diptych, 90 × 108 inches. Photo by Timothy Doyon. Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York City. © Julia Scher.

KMS

As technology is increasingly controlled by extremely wealthy people wielding their power, such as Elon Musk, do you find yourself still hopeful for the ways in which technology can offer solutions?

JS

I have to be. I used to say: the robots are coming. As AI permeates every corner of life and is becoming its own life-form, why not get involved in trying to turn it into something good before it all goes to shit? The notion of threat and danger is omnipresent, though; that's not something that's gone away with technology. Our ability to hurt each other has only grown. I'm particularly concerned that so much of the highest technology is based around appearances: what data appears like, what a surface appears like, what a person appears like. It's all structured around identity.

“The ACT UP installation at the New Museum in 1987 was extremely important to me, and of course the pink triangle of the World War II camps.”

— Julia Scher

KMS

Much of your work explores being watched both as a threatening and as a seductive experience. Mary Kelly once wrote that the field of vision is inherently one of desire. While the trapping effect that a surveilled space can produce is certainly unwelcome for most, there are also situations in which entrapment and confinement are desired. Your use of materials that invoke BDSM and queer culture, such as latex, particularly speak to this. How has your queer identity informed your work?

JS

By going against the power and cult of surveillance around being with queer friends; by holding on to our identity in spite of machines trying to strip it away. I use a lot of pink in my work, which arises from queer recognition, identity, and desire. I knew Karl Knapper, who founded Queer Nation, in the late 1980s. The ACT UP installation at the New Museum in 1987 was extremely important to me, and of course the pink triangle of the World War II camps. At the same time, the pink connotes an innocence, a

safety. When I did a performance installation at the Clit Club in the 1980s, everyone was wearing pink uniforms. The performance included putting a live endoscope inside a vagina, and it was videotaped. Somehow the FBI found out about it, and they thought it was interstate transportation of pornography, which was a federal crime. The FBI was fishing for people who might be related to someone who interrupted with hardcore porn the national TV broadcast of a cooking show. I had nothing to do with that. But the FBI was looking at people who had edited at a particular place in

Manhattan, and I had in fact edited there. So they came to my loft. Funnily enough, I was taping an artwork entitled *The X-File Shoot* at the same time, so I asked them if they wanted to be in it. Anyway, they confiscated my surveillance equipment while I was going to get "interviewed" at the FBI building downtown. In the end, they wanted me to screen the video that I brought to show them. They were thinking, Aha, hardcore porn! When I informed them that it was actually a cervix they were looking at, they said, "Thanks, you can go now."



Installation view of *Julia Scher: American Landscape*, 2024, Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo by Dario Lasagni. Courtesy of the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York City. © Julia Scher.

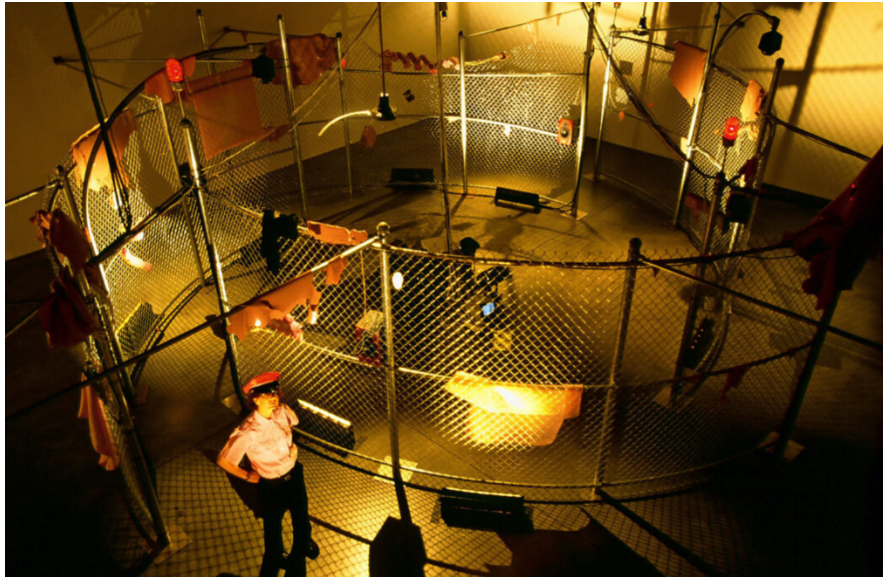
KMS

I was intrigued to discover that you were trained as a landscape painter. One could argue that painting is just another recording device; there is as much potential for interpretation and fictions in security footage as there is in oil on canvas. What are the ways in which your painting practice connects to your work on surveillance?

JS

The first time I ever set foot in a museum was in 1968 at the new Los Angeles County Museum of Art. I was fourteen years old and had begged my parents to take us. We saw paintings from the USSR, and I fell in love. I liked finding things hidden in the landscapes. J. M. W. Turner watercolors depicting moments after a rainstorm have the same colors as early surveillance screens. I also like this element of time and repetition, the incantatory ability to repeat a landscape over and over again with variation.

I used to go in the mountains a lot, and I photographed the landscapes, and I'd paint or draw them. I also used to go out with an old Graphlex camera in the early '80s and shoot toxic landscapes, even though I was walking in toxic shit and going through fences to get to the toxic stuff. I fell in love with skiing early on, but my parents wouldn't let me go because it was a lot of money and they liked to keep us prisoners at home. But I had this fascination with the strong light and strong forces of nature that I didn't know. It was unfamiliar. I think the interest in landscape painting is just an early love and appreciation of people who could transport you to other places.



Installation view (picturing Julia Scher) of *Security By Julia XLV: Security Landscapes*, 2002. Andrea Rosen Gallery. © Julia Scher.

KMS

Your project at Ortuzar is revisiting *Security By Julia XLV*, which premiered at Andrea Rosen in 2002. How has the work changed since then? If anything, of course, the audiences have changed. How do you think it will resonate with people today versus in 2002?

JS

Today, no situation is too big for surveillance, and we constantly have our machines on. Back in those days, I was mainly interested in showing how those technologies worked in the way that you see people unpacking things on TikTok and Instagram. I wanted to show what the connections were, why images looked a certain way, where the cameras were. It was about trying to resist the system that tried to take your image without your permission. The work is very abstract. There are no prisoners in the middle; it's not like a Suzanne Lacy work where you can act to help make a better world. It's a poetic landscape where you can walk in and out unencumbered.

[Julia Scher: American Landscape](#) is on view at *Ortuzar Projects in New York City* until April 13.

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