

Julia Scher: American Landscape March 7–April 13, 2024

Ortuzar Projects is pleased to present *American Landscape*, the gallery's second exhibition with Cologne-based artist Julia Scher (b. 1954, Hollywood, CA). The exhibition features works made over the past four decades centered around the gallery-scaled installation, *Security By Julia XLV*, alongside new marble sculptures and previously un-exhibited paintings from the 1980s.

For over forty years, Scher has explored the relationship between surveillance, authority and exhibitionism through performance, video, installation, sculpture and painting. *American Landscape* presents the multivalent production of an artist whose work often intervenes in the “surveillance architecture” of a given site—the systems, whether infrastructural or psychological, through which behavior is monitored and controlled. While often literally capturing and depicting a landscape, surveillance technologies have become so pervasive over the course of Scher’s career that they have become fundamental to, and constitutive of, the larger landscape in which we live.

Restaged at Ortuzar Projects for the first time since 2002, *Security By Julia XLV* is imbued with a sense of anxiety characteristic of the years following the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York. The immersive environment requires visitors to enter and exit via spiraling corridors constructed out of chainlink fences. The structure physically confines participants while live cameras monitor their movements and display them on closed-circuit televisions, which also display the work being battered and destroyed by performers. The sense of anticipation is heightened through flashing red lights, whirling ceiling fans evocative of helicopter blades and audio of a soothing yet authoritative feminine voice declaring, “This is not a test site, this is a battle with security.” While this foreboding, militaristic mood matched the tense political fallout of the emergent “war on terror,” it was also prophetic of the new paradigm of pervasive paramilitary surveillance that emerged from the turmoil of the early aughts. The last twenty years have seen the atrocities of confinement writ large—whether at Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, the refugee camps at national borders, or the weaponization of political prisoners—and the work’s allusion to a panoptic “cage” is received with a different awareness today.

Scher’s paintings from the 1980s mark her early interest in the intersection of the landscape, technology and the body. During her graduate studies at the University of Minnesota, Scher depicted the Sierra Mountains of her native Southern California and the flat vistas of the Midwest in monumental canvases. She illustrated the human land use of these geographies through painterly meditations that point to her own identification with such sites. For example, in *Old Water Site* (1981) a mountain valley and pond are erotically rendered as an abstract depiction of the intertwined bodyscape of her and her partner. *Bruised in the Water* (1984) features two figures tethered together by a bar that pierces their sides. In a series of related photographs, Scher documents pipelines moving across and penetrating the land. Scher recalls not only looking deeper into the landscape but also the human body, using the land to represent post- humanist ideas of technologies merging with the flesh.

Concurrently in the 1980s, Scher began a small business installing security systems under the name Safe and Secure Productions, through which she began installing security architecture—door locks, window grills and surveillance cameras—for a mostly-female clientele. She was drawn to surveillance because it made her feel connected to family and peers while she was, in her words, “perched at a far corner of the U.S.”

In recent years, Scher has turned to the most classical of sculptural materials, marble, to actualize human/animal hybrids. Since 2005, the artist has modeled dogs (dobermans, pitbulls) with human features; their alert poses and inter-species breeding symbolic of their domestication and their status as highly trained, elite service and security dogs. For *American Landscape*, new greyhound sculptures sit alongside white marble owls with necks turned varying degrees. According to the artist, their qualities are permutations of a real owl, a human, a cat, and a pre-existing owl sculpture that sits atop the P.S. 110 Florence Nightingale elementary school in Lower Manhattan, viewable from the Williamsburg Bridge. Owls are hunters with 3-D “binocular” eyes and night vision, and their sculptural likenesses are often perched high within a landscape to scare away rodents and smaller birds. As symbols of wisdom and watchfulness, their biological properties are of particular interest to Scher, serving as metaphors for ostensibly benevolent surveillance technologies and their more ominous usages. As in her early paintings, the non-human becomes a cypher through which to see ourselves.

Julia Scher (b. 1954, Hollywood, California) lives and works in Cologne, Germany. Recent solo exhibitions of her work include *Julia Scher: Maximum Security Society*, Kunsthalle Zürich and Abteiberg Museum, Mönchengladbach, Germany (2022–2023); *Wonderland*, Maison Populaire, Montreuil, France (2022); *Planet Greyhound*, Kunsthalle Gießen, Gießen, Germany (2022); and *Julia Scher*, MAMCO, Geneva (2021). Her work has been featured in institutional survey exhibitions including *Day Jobs*, Blanton Museum of Art, Austin and Cantor Arts Center, Stanford, California (2023–2024); *Signals: How Video Transformed the World*, Museum of Modern Art, New York (2023); *Art in the Age of the Internet: 1989 to Today*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston (2018); *The Condition of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery and American Fine Arts, Co.* (1983–2004), Hessel Museum of Art, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York (2018); and NYC 1993: *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*, New Museum, New York (2013). Scher has taught at institutions including Columbia University; Harvard University; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton; the University of California, Los Angeles; the University of Southern California; and the Academy of Media Arts, Cologne. Her work is in the permanent collections of public institutions including the Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts; Centre Pompidou, Paris; Ludwig Museum, Cologne; MAMCO, Geneva; and Le Consortium, Dijon, among others.