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Getting to know Jillian Mayer

The acrobatic, filmmaking artist can't stop, won't stop.

by Colleen Dougher

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Jillian Mayer (left) will open her new show Saturday.

During a phone interview to discuss *Family Matters*, her upcoming show at [David Castillo Gallery](#), [Jillian Mayer](#) is drinking tea and trying to wake up. It's 2:30 p.m.

“We were shooting till 7 in the morning,” she explains in a raspy tone. “My voice is gonna sound like I’ve been in a nightclub or something.”

That Mayer has time to talk at all is surprising given all that she’s juggling. In addition to preparing for her first solo exhibition, she’s directing *Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke*, a short film about former 2 Live Crew rapper **Luther Campbell**. She’s also preparing for a group exhibition at Fabric Workshop Museum in Philadelphia and will make a film this summer based on [Mrs. Ms.](#), a Miami Light Project-commissioned musical she premiered last year. Working under the stage name **Yoma**, she performs aerial acrobatics while suspended from a strip of fabric in nightclubs such as Mansion. In November, she and [her teacup Chihuahua Shivers](#) will begin hosting **Fanimaltastic**, a conceptual talk show about people and their pets at [De La Cruz Collection Contemporary Art Space](#) in Miami.

This past October, the **Guggenheim Museum** in New York included Mayer’s video [“Scenic Jogging”](#) in the exhibition [YouTube Play: A Biennial of Creative Video](#). The show featured 25 works culled from 23,000 submissions and treated the artists like stars. After videographers were dispatched to Miami to make a short film about Mayer, she was flown to New York for a bash that was more

comparable to the Video Music Awards than an art show.

The 79-second video that captured the attention of Guggenheim curators and racked up 58,000 YouTube page views depicts Mayer running down a dark Miami street, trying to keep up with images of trees, fields and clouds that are rapidly moving along the walls and fences beside her. In reality, the projected images are screensavers designed to comfort cubicle dwellers who would probably rather be outdoors than basking in the glow of their computer screens.

While the video got much attention, it's just a part of Mayer's work as a whole. *Family Matters* presents a large overview of her art, which includes sculpture, drawings, photography, video and performance pieces that explore gender roles, relationships and reality vs. virtual reality.

These themes may sound heavy, but Mayer, who earned her BFA from Florida International University and is one of 13 artists represented by David Castillo Gallery, also enjoys making papier-mâché animal heads and videos in which cakes dance, a puppy is the perfect soulmate and a feline bartender quietly listens to a patron's tale of woe. In these endeavors, she takes her inspiration from 1980s cartoons and her dog.

Mayer's sense of adventure comes across in her art. *Family Matters* will include two installations — one set in a dining room with a table and fake fireplace and the other depicting a front lawn. Each set will include two performers who don't really perform. "They're basically trapped in the scene," Mayer explains. "In the same way that you can divorce your family but generally can't leave them and are stuck with them for a while, they're stuck in those household scenarios. They're slumped over and awake but they're not talking and are barely moving. They're just there."

Mayer says the show is about "the search for identity in the absence of guidance." The exhibition also will include works from [Getting To Know You](#), an ongoing series of cut-out and painted boards, and photographs that depict people creating illusions with them. The boards are reminiscent of those face-through-the-hole boards people stand behind for photographs at carnivals, but instead of faces on bodies, legs may protrude from the bottom of a colorful board that resembles a parachute or a body emerging from what looks like a boulder, giving the appearance that the person's head is crushed underneath it.

Mayer started the series after seeing black-and-white photographs of 1960s performances she says depicted something awesome yet mysterious, making the viewer wish they were there in much the same way children long to be someone else. "I always wished I had other family members or I was that person on TV or I was that character or had those parents, just the general kid-delusion stuff," Mayer says. "When your life sucks, it's like, 'Man, I just wish I was that person. That life is great!'"

Even as her solo show opens, Mayer is gearing up for the April 23 premiere of *Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke*, a [Borscht Film Festival](#)-commissioned collaboration with [Rakontur Films](#) and Campbell. It's one of 13 projects in which artists and directors have teamed with local musicians to make short, music-inspired narratives about Miami.

Mayer describes *Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke* as a modern Miami adaptation of [La Jetée](#), a 1962 French film depicted entirely in photographs. In Mayer's film, told through her installations, Campbell realizes his dream of becoming Miami's mayor and then becomes the lone, unharmed survivor of a nuclear meltdown at Turkey Point that transforms the city into "a radioactive wasteland filled with mutants."

Family Matters will open 6-9 p.m. Saturday and run through May 7 at David Castillo Gallery, 2234 N.W. Second Ave., in Miami. Call 305-573-8110 or visit Davidcastillogallery.com. Life and Freaky Times of Uncle Luke will premiere April 23 at Borscht 7 Film Festival at the Adrienne Arsht Center for the Performing Arts, 1300 Biscayne Blvd., in Miami. Call 305-949-6722 or visit Borscht.info.

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