



# Drunk Artists and Steamy Shower Rooms: AVERY SINGER

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Is it possible to make painting radical?  
AVERY SINGER asked herself this question early  
in her evolution as an artist.

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BY  
Kathy Noble

In the story of Singer's evolution, painting was not an active choice—although her parents, Janet Kusmierski and Greg Singer, are both painters, so painting has existed subliminally in her life from the moment she was conceived. Painting came to Singer as an accidental revolution, when, fresh out of art school and wondering what to do with herself, she made a black-and-white painting from a SketchUp model she had created using an air-brush. Prior to this, as a student at the Cooper Union in New York, she'd undertaken sculptural experiments of sorts, utilizing the architecture lab computers to create three-dimensional models and frequenting the woodworking shop to craft wooden maquettes to analyze space and form.

Singer's early paintings laugh a little at their subject matter—sometimes with a roar, other times with a wry smile. She gently mocks her protagonists as they perform clichés of art world rituals and pose using Modernist compositional tropes, sometimes specifically referencing artworks by her predecessors such as Chris Burden, Rachel Harrison, and Jack Smith. *Sad Woman Projecting Libidinal Thoughts* (2014) depicts a reclining female nude constructed from flat planes of black, white, and gray. Her hair, formed from geometric slabs, flops pathetically over her face, her bent legs open wide as if waiting patiently for someone to pay attention to her vagina and bring her back to life. These paintings could be described as stock images, a kind of trompe l'oeil of the twentieth-century avant-garde—symbols of gatherings, gestures, and poses once tied to utopia and progress, and of the supposedly unhindered space of artistic creativity as a site of freedom.

Singer was curious to further develop these early experiments with a hand-held airbrush with a mechanical airbrush. After investigating making her own airbrush robot, she discovered a company that paints advertisements onto vehicles in Switzerland using an industrial airbrush printer and went to work there for a month to create abstract paintings for the entrance of her 2016 exhibition *Sailor* at Secession in Vienna. Different forms of technological automation have since enabled Singer to further her quest to strip away evidence of the artist's hand. This urge—which arguably began with Andy Warhol's screenprints and has more recently been rethought by artists such as Albert Oehlen in his computer paintings, and Laura Owens in her endless reimaginings of what the construction of a painting might be—drives Singer's ongoing experimentation with machinery and digital tools. For example, a SketchUp model she creates is passed to a 3D animator, who gives texture and depth to the fascia of her figures, objects, and spaces. The 3D image is then printed using an industrial spray-painting machine, creating a base to which Singer adds numerous layers using other techniques.

*Days of the Weak (Computer Pain)* is a series of paintings created using these methods—mostly spheres and squares situated in the modelling grids of a computer program—that Singer originally created for the 2018 exhibition *Days are Dogs* by Camille Henrot at Palais de Tokyo, Paris, and were later shown at Gavin Brown's enterprise in New York as part of Singer's solo exhibition. The latter show included new painted renderings of a series of virtual rooms housing what read as abstracted faces, alongside several other new works. The first, entitled *Kundry* (2018), depicts a monstrous, hot-pink figure—part anthropomorphic machine, part winged goddess—sitting on a chair holding a trident, clearly embodying her namesake, the mythical wild woman in Richard Wagner's last opera, *Parsifal* (1882). In stark

contrast to these gridded virtual realms, *Calder (Saturday Night)* (2017) portrays a lifelike version of Singer's brother, Calder Singer, wearing maroon shorts, white sport socks, a white vest, and a cap with "POLICE" written across it, leaning back in a chair and smoking. On closer inspection this seemingly straightforward composition contains a number of complexly constructed reflections of the room he sits in: on a glass, a bottle, and an intricately detailed homage to the glass ball in *Varnitas with Violin and Glass Ball* (1628) by Pieter Claes that rests on the wooden floor in the middle of the painting—a crystal ball for Calder's visions.

Singer's first self-portrait—entitled *Self Portrait (Summer 2018)* (2018) and displayed next to *Calder (Saturday Night)* at the 2019 Venice Biennale—was created for a collaborative exhibition at Miguel Abreu Gallery in New York in 2018, conceived with artists and painters Alexander Carver and Pieter Schoolwerth. Entitled *Bubble Revision*—the name for a notation in AutoCAD that identifies a need for design correction—the exhibition was a parodic critique of the design choices made when cultural and public space requirements are interwoven with real estate demands in situations such as the Hudson Yards in New York. The trio produced a detailed 3D virtual video of what Singer described as an "open-air toilet pavilion"—a beautifully rendered construction of shiny vistas sitting in a landscape reminiscent of the undulating landscape of desert, forest, and mountains in the West Coast of the United States—as the inspirational fulcrum for their paintings. While considering the tiled surfaces and water systems of a bathroom, Singer was inspired by the rendering of light in Dutch golden age still lifes depicting pristine objects that seemingly emanate from the canvas—for example the light falling onto a glass goblet, refracting through the liquid inside to hit the glass and once more shine luminously. To conjure this effect of light passing through water, Singer created a group of paintings to appear as if viewed through the steamy glass of a shower door—thus Singer's re-creation of the experience of light passing through the droplets of condensation became a metaphor for painting itself. The self-portrait began with a simple photo taken in her studio, but to create the desired sensation of translucent steam and light was a complex process. Singer first printed the photograph as under-paint, using the separate layers of a Photoshop file to create depth of field. Once Singer had printed it, however, she realized that the color was weak, the painting unfinished. Using liquid rubber, a material frequently used by airbrush enthusiasts, she doodled all over the canvas. The rubber allowed her to quite literally make marks in the same way one might with a finger on the shower glass. To complete the process she sprayed the surface with a fine mist of watered-down white paint, then peeled off the rubber. Finally, she created a layer of foggy glass by hand using spray bottles. Singer stands in the center of the painting, a soft-focus apparition floating behind the steamy screen, pointing out at the viewer as if to anoint them.

The flavor of twentieth-century bohemianism evoked in Singer's early work—from the Paris cafés of the 1900s to the New York lofts of 1960s—is a cliché riddled with false nostalgia. The economic reality of most cities, and the vast architectural changes that have transpired as a product of late-capitalist economics (obliquely referenced in the exhibition *Bubble Revision*) mean that to live in the places in which bohemia once existed requires artists to make money via the market or a day job. The concept of freedom underpins the tenets of Western capitalist society in order

to emphasize the individual over the group; yet in reality this concept is a mirage we futilely chase and that rarely, if ever, materializes. Singer's work might not appear overtly political nor offering blunt social critique, and moreover why should it? It does, however, use the materials, methods, and context of its construction to intervene in and question the role of the artist and the freedom of thought that this role can—in the right circumstances—still allow.

Freedom of thought is essential to being any kind of artist. As a teenager I was drawn to art because it represented a fantasy of freedom. I was, however, forbidden from going to art school, so instead I studied the history of art. I was a reluctant student, barely able to assimilate the rigid academic languages and structures during my undergraduate degree, and only finding my feet during a graduate degree because I finally realized that if I were to do anything of any interest to anyone at all, I had to stop trying to please the people in power and find my own voice. I have since attempted to do this in varying ways, in curatorial positions and as a writer, yet most of the time my ideas are filtered through the systems of an institution—be it the organization I work for or the magazine I am writing for—to be edited, massaged, manipulated, and pressured, both visibly and invisibly, to absorb the voices of others, often resulting in a kind of wonky Las Vegas-like replica of the original thought. Yet every now and then a pure, unadulterated note is released from within these structures.

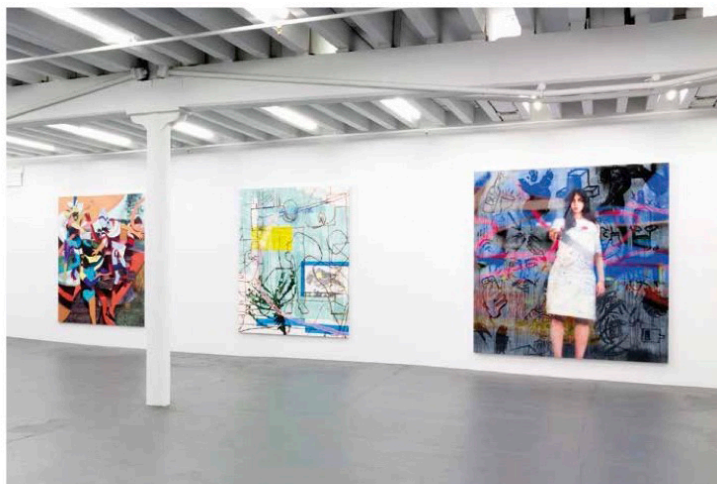
Singer's approach to painting, and more widely to the project of being an artist—in particular what it means to have agency within the cultural conditions and systems of late-capitalist life—embodies these contradictory experiences of complicity, by using elements of the structures and symbols of the system in order to retain freedom. Singer corrals the languages, tools, and processes of painting, using mechanical techniques and digital technologies, to analyze its position within the institutions of artistic and cultural power. Her work functions equally as the surfaces of the systems that built it—a replica of a replica of a replica, exercised via different technologies to hone its muscles—and as her own singular expression of the profound abilities of painting.

EVERY SINGER's iconographically complex airbrush paintings combine early twentieth century aesthetics, 3D Computer modeling, cinematic pictorial space, and abstractions familiar to us from the digital world. Her compositions address light and space in the digital age. Investigating painting through the layering of visual data and painterly techniques, she translates the limitless space and the illusion of depth from 3D modeling software into the analogue realm of the canvas.

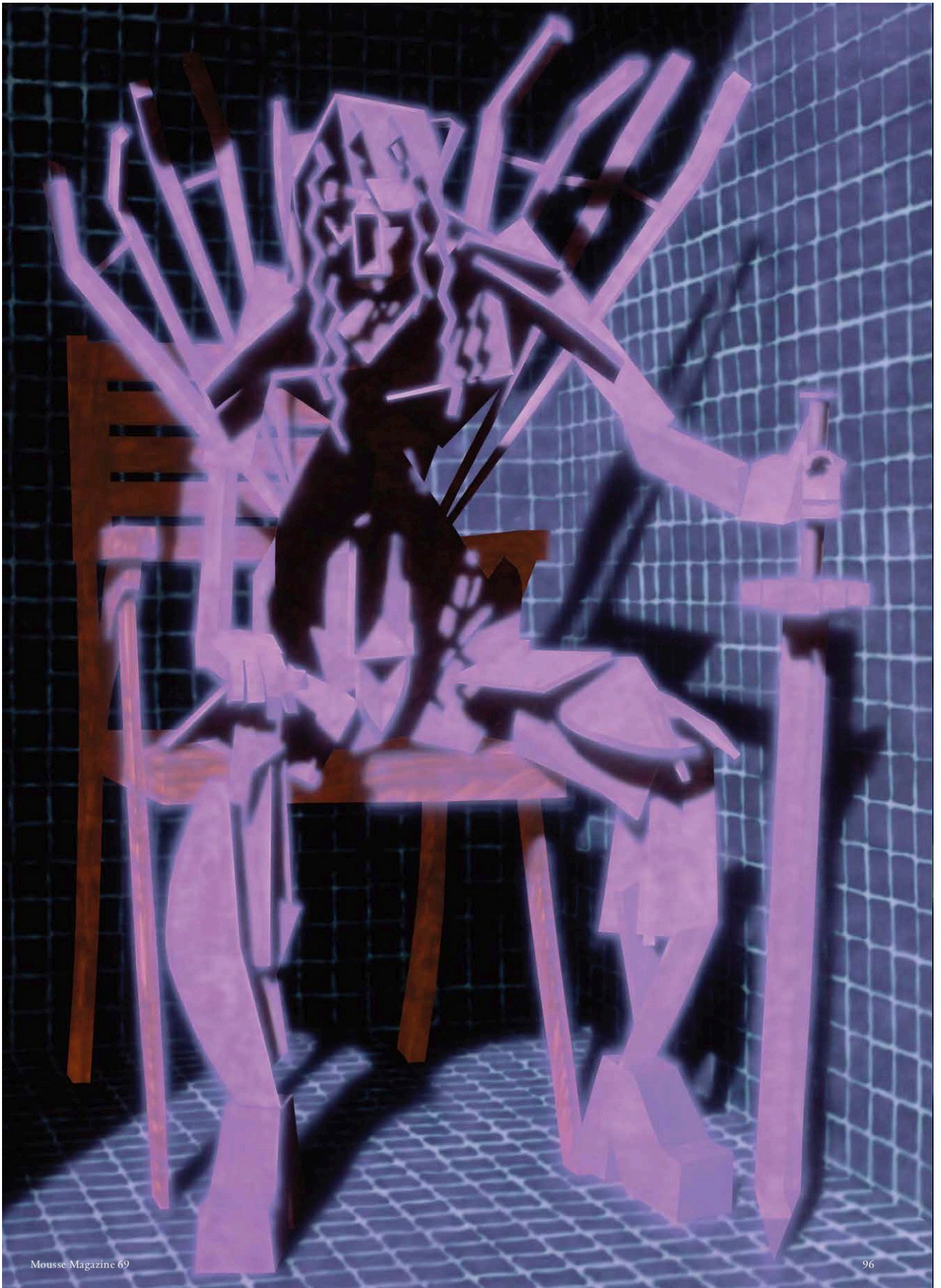
Avery Singer, born in 1987, attended Cooper Union, New York (2005-2010) and Städelschule, Frankfurt am Main (2008). Avery Singer lives and works in New York. Following her first solo exhibition at Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin in 2013 solo exhibitions of her work have taken place at Schultze Projects Commission, Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne (2017); Secession, Vienna (2016); Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (2016); Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin (2015); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2015); Art Basel Statements, Basel (2015); Kunsthalle Zürich, Zürich (2014). Singer has participated the 58<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition of La Biennale Di Venezia 2019, Venice and in exhibitions at Folkwang Museum, Essen (2019); Sprengel Museum, Hannover (2019); Hammer Museum, Los Angeles (2019); Minneapolis Institute of Art (2019); Centre Pompidou-Metz (2018); Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler, Berlin (2018); Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York (2018); Galerie Neu and MD 72, Berlin (2018); Schinkel Pavillion, Berlin (2018); ICA Boston (2018); ICA Miami (2018); Les Abattoirs, Toulouse (2017); Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio (2017); Fundación Arte, Buenos Aires (2016); Whitney Museum of American Art, New York (2016); S.M.A.K, Ghent (2016); Museum Ludwig, Cologne (2016); the New Museum's Triennial, New York (2015); Hessel Museum of Art, CCS Bard, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY (2015); the 13<sup>th</sup> Biennale de Lyon, Lyon, France (2015); Glasgow International (2014); Fridericianum, Kassel (2013).

Avery Singer's work is in the collections of the Alex Katz Foundation; Aishti Foundation, Beirut; Art Institute of Chicago; Bass Museum, Miami Beach; Boros Collection, Berlin; Burger Collection, Hong Kong; Buxton Contemporary, Melbourne; Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Cleveland Museum of Art; Danjuma Collection, Great Britain; Domus Collection, USA; Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin; Fundacion Arte, Buenos Aires; Fundacion March, Madrid; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Hirschhorn Museum, New York; Kistefosmusem, Norway; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Minneapolis Institute of Art; MoMA Museum of Modern Art, New York; Monsoon Art Collection, London; Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Museum Of Contemporary Art Chicago; Museum Sander, Darmstadt; Ovitz Family Collection, Beverly Hills; PCP Collection, Taiwan; Ringier Collection, Zurich; Samdani Foundation, Bangladesh; Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing; Sprengel Collection, Hannover; Sammlung Sander, Darmstadt; Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Tate Modern, London; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Tiroche DeLeon Collection, Jaffa; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Yuz Museum, Shanghai; Zabudowicz Collection, London.

KATHY NOBLE is Senior Curator and Manager of Curatorial Affairs at Performa, New York, where she leads the program, including the citywide biennial, public program, and other research and projects. For Performa 19, 1–24 November 2019, she is curating new commissions with Ed Atkins, Kia LaBeija, Cecilia Bengolea and Michèle Lamy, Paul Pfeiffer, Yvonne Rainer, Bunny Rogers, and Samson Young, amongst others. Kathy was previously Curator (Interdisciplinary) at Tate Modern; Head of Exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary; and Curator of the inaugural Art Night London.



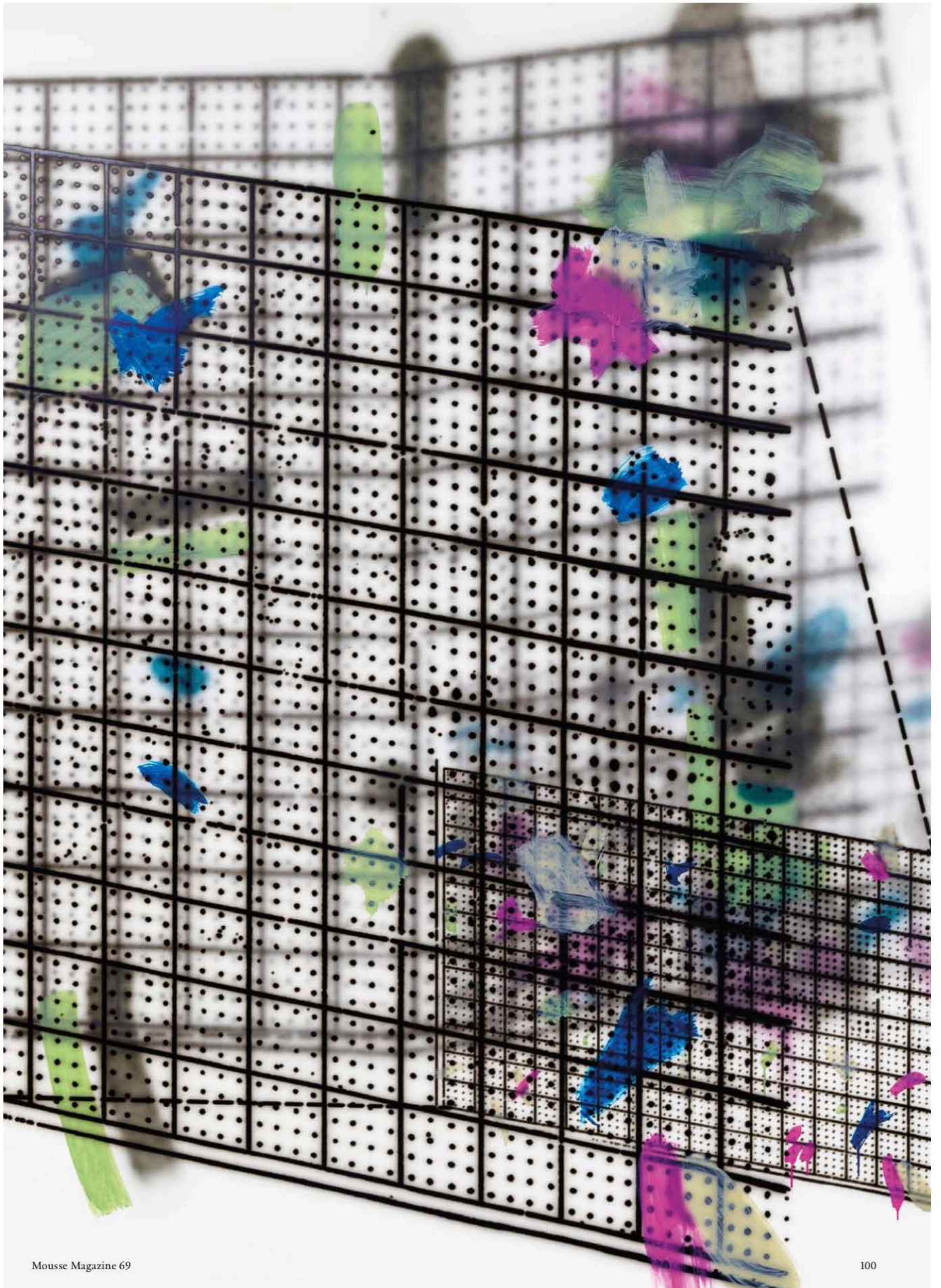
*Self-portrait (summer 2018)*, 2018. *Bubble Revision* installation view at Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York, 2018. Courtesy: Private Collection, New York. Photo: Stephen Faught





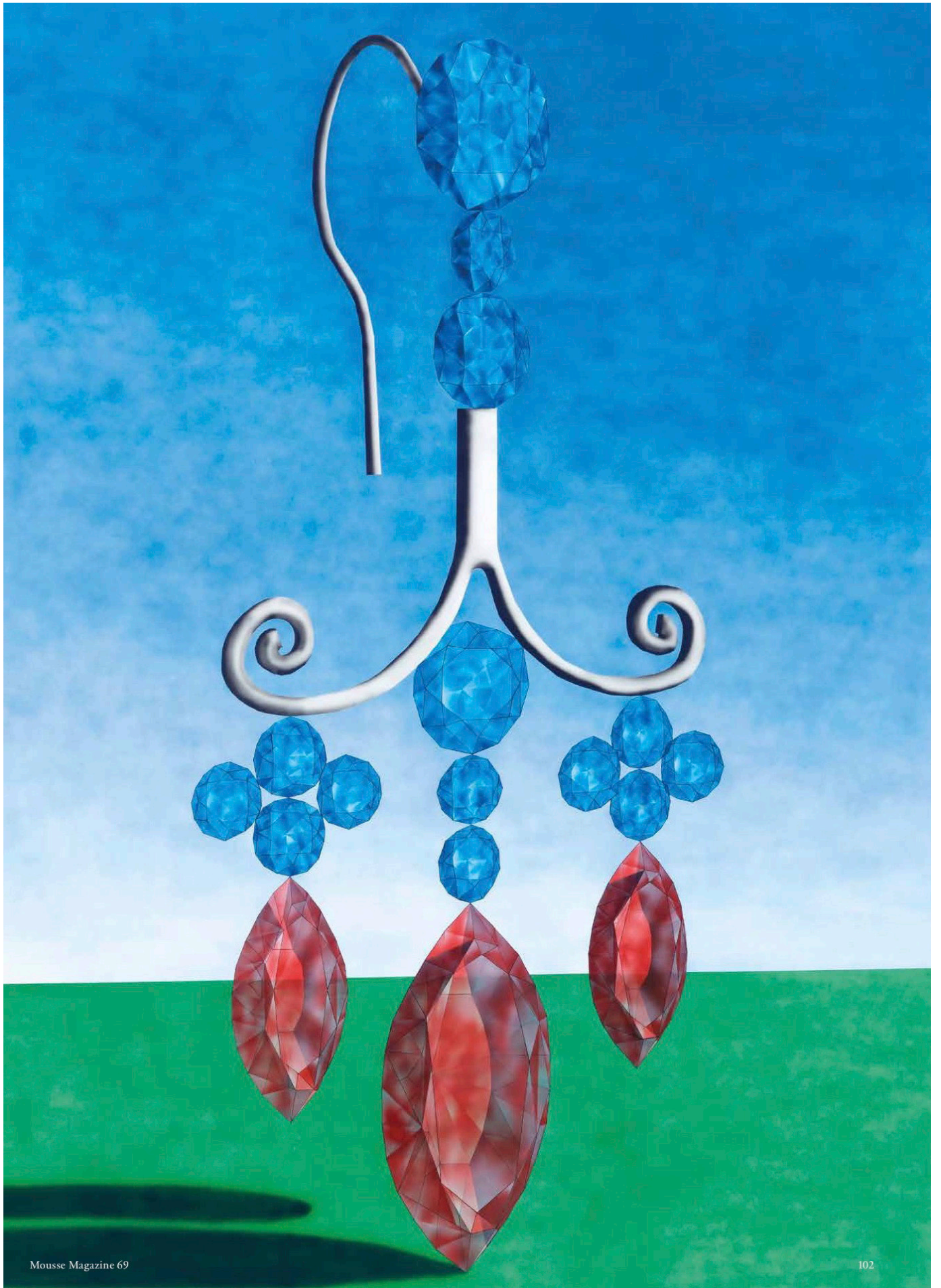
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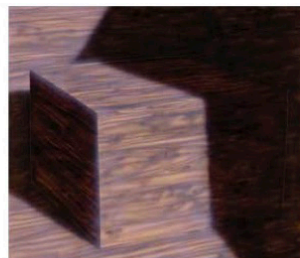




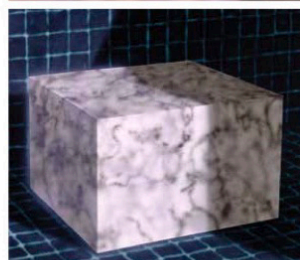




- 92 *Self-portrait (summer 2018)* (detail), 2018. Courtesy: Private Collection, New York.  
Photo: Lance Brewer
- 96 *Kundry* (detail), 2018. Courtesy: Fundación Arte, Buenos Aires.  
Photo: Lance Brewer
- 97 *Untitled (Monday)* (detail), 2017. Courtesy: Alex Katz Foundation.  
Photo: Thomas Mueller
- 98 *Calder (Saturday Night)* (detail), 2017. Courtesy: Private Collection, Amsterdam.  
Photo: Thomas Mueller
- 99 *Untitled* (detail), 2019. Courtesy: Private Collection, New York.  
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- 100 *Untitled* (detail), 2016. Courtesy: Private Collection.  
Photo: Sophie Thun
- 101 *Untitled (Tuesday)* (detail), 2017. Courtesy: Sifang Art Museum, Nanjing.  
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Photo: Thomas Mueller



*Untitled*, 2018. Courtesy: Private Collection.  
Photo: Lance Brewer



*Untitled*, 2018. Courtesy: Private Collection.  
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*Untitled*, 2018. Courtesy: Bass Museum,  
Miami Beach. Photo: Lance Brewer