

FLAUNT



SARAH MEYOHAS. "SILVER SPECULATION" (2018). CHROMOGENIC PRINT. 40 X 60 INCHES.
Photo: COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

SARAH MEYOHAS
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How could one describe "cloud of petals"? Staggering in scope, this sprawling, indexical project from 26-year-old artist Sarah Meyohas marries the disparate realms of ephemeral nature and digitized reality. Employing sculpture, artificial intelligence, algorithmic processing, film, performance, photography, and virtual reality (to name a few), the artwork serves as a conversation between the organic, the digital, and the synthetic. "I had been thinking about petals and pixels, petals turning into pixels. I wanted to make 'big data out of rose petals, because 'big data' was the next thing I wanted to tackle in my investigations of value," Meyohas tells me on a crackly phone call, sounding chipper even though she's just stepped off a transatlantic flight to London. Based in NYC, Meyohas took the trip for an artificial intelligence conference called CogX, where a film element from "Cloud of Petals," which serves as a sort of overview of the project, will be screened.

While studying finance as an undergraduate at UPenn, Meyohas made the bold decision to forego the financial security of hedge funds and Wall Street to pursue a career as an artist. She gravitated towards photography, in part out of necessity due to the limitations imposed on her by a cramped dorm room. "I couldn't get things messy, so photography was a very accessible medium given how basic it is. It was a really good way in." With inspiration from Terry Atkins, a professor-turned-mentor, she garnered the confidence to pursue her MFA at Yale.

Even after rejecting the possibility of a left-brained career path, she remained interested in mathematics, markets, and economics as her artistic career blossomed. In 2015, Meyohas launched one of her first projects: "BitchCoin," a digital currency à la BitCoin. As defined by her website, a BitchCoin is "backed by the photography of Sarah Meyohas at a fixed exchange rate of 1 BitchCoin to 25 square inches of photographic print. This rate of exchange will not change, even if the value of the photography increases. As the work changes in value over time, so will the relative value of BitchCoin." The images that serve as the fixed asset in this currency are called "Speculations," beautiful works of art

in their own right that evoke a telescoping futurity through mirrored repetitions of flowers, bodies, and smoke. Meyohas elaborates, “You can claim that artists are turning themselves into brands, but this is taking it a step further, taking something to an extreme. By making oneself into a currency, essentially an option, people are taking a bet on you.”



SARAH MEYOHAS. “BABY’S BREATH SPECULATION” (2018). CHROMOGENIC PRINT. 40 X 60 INCHES.

In “Cloud of Petals,” Meyohas continues to explore the question of value, this time in relation to big data and the subjectivity of beauty. The central image of “Cloud of Petals” takes place in a huge hall in an abandoned Bell Labs facility outside of Holmdel, New Jersey. Sixteen men are stationed at small tables, meticulously pulling apart 10,000 roses to separate the petals and decisively placing the ones they deem most beautiful underneath a camera to be captured and recorded into a data set. The setting is an important aspect of the piece—the Bell Labs facility is where information theory was, in large part, developed, and where the foundation for our modern telecommunications networks was established.

It’s a resonant space for Meyohas’s investigations of what it means for something like a rose—a natural object, imbued by humanity with connotations of romance, serving as a syrupy symbol for love throughout our culture—to be dismantled, subjected to an evaluating male gaze (Meyohas purposefully enlisted men to do the work), photographed, archived. The camera lens transmits the images of petals to the computer, where machine-learning software encodes the petals’ characteristics. These data points are then used to generate new petals, displayed in her virtual reality installation.

As a highly commercialized and selectively engineered product, the beauty we associate with roses is inseparable from their value as consumer products. Meyohas explains, “Roses are not natural. They are artificial. We have bred roses into all of these different colors, all of these different shapes...they can be grown anywhere in the world, they are super commercial—but that’s their power over us. It’s our desire that is embedded into their genetic code.” For this reason, the rose serves as a useful symbol for “beauty” writ large. “The reason I latched on to beauty is because it is the ultimate outpost of human subjectivity. Beauty is the most subjective thing—there is beauty in the grotesque, in ugliness; the natural or the digital. You can find beauty in almost anything.”

“Cloud of Petals” is a work that poses more questions than it answers. Is beauty preserved, heightened, or damaged through this process of archiving and data transfer? Beauty is, in some sense, enhanced through her digitization of rose petals, their colors deliciously bursting through the projected images. There is a delicate beauty embedded in the shots of Meyohas carefully balancing the bodies of dead flies on factory wire. But her work also challenges beauty. Is the beauty of a rose reducible to an algorithm? Can we digitize and archive the infinite variety of nature?



SARAH MEYOHAS. "CLOUD OF PETALS FILM STILL #55" (2017). 16MM FILM.

While many may see the growing infiltration of technology as developing a quasi-dystopian reality, Meyohas offers a more optimistic perspective. "What the digital offers is another type of sublime, in sheer volume. One-hundred thousand images of roses can be generated . . . It's a kind of vastness that leads to the void." Her fascination with technology and its effects on the art world compelled her to open the Meyohas Gallery in her home of NYC in 2015. It's a project space that has since showcased emerging artists who are similarly interested in the omnipresence of digital technology, and who are not afraid to integrate it into their work.

"Technology is becoming an increasingly political issue, since it's so deeply embedded in everything," Meyohas posits. The question of value comes up again as she discusses the potential obsolescence of human labor in an age of computer intelligence. When asked if this has led her to the beginnings of any new projects, she admits, "I'm in a little bit of a rut. It's a bit deflating coming out of such a big project—and I'm not totally done. I would love to show "Cloud of Petals" in another city." Without missing a beat, she energetically divulges her latest fascination: computer chips and their immense processing power. "Scientists who operate today—sure they observe, they accumulate data; but then by using deep learning they can get to conclusions that are statistically accurate without understanding the underlying reasons. So is that still science? Have we increased human understanding? We have a program that can do something and spit out an answer, but do we understand it? Do we even need to understand it? Are some things just beyond our understanding? And all of this, this shift—which is a pretty amazing shift in terms of how human thinking goes—is a result of processing power of chips and computer systems." She may say she's in a rut, but the ever-expanding digital void of modern culture doesn't intimidate her. What may seem to us like unfathomable infinitude is simply fertile grounds of inspiration for Meyohas.