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Sarah Meyohas wears her own clothing throughout
Photo: Meghan Marin

SARAH MEYOHAS'S TECH ART EXPLORES THE MECHANICS OF PERCEPTION

BY JULIA HALPERIN
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Before sunrise, Sarah Meyohas approached a towering building on the University of Pennsylvania campus. Her companion wore nothing but stilettos and a trench coat. Once they confirmed they were alone, the trench coat came off—and Meyohas pulled out her camera and started clicking.

“Ah, my first brush with virality,” the artist recalls on a recent afternoon at her Chinatown studio in Manhattan. When she staged that guerrilla photo shoot back in 2013, she was a student at Wharton Business School. She sold the images online for \$5 each as part of a project she called *Businessnude*. Almost nobody bought them, but the website got a *lot* of hits.

Ten years and an MFA from Yale later, Meyohas, 32, has become one of the most prominent young creatives bridging the worlds of art and technology. On May 16, she'll open a solo show with her new gallery, Marianne Boesky, in New York (through June 17). Although the art is now more expensive, the tools more complex, and the stakes considerably higher, Meyohas remains interested in many of the ideas that sparked that cheeky undergraduate experiment. How do we exchange and consume information? Why do we value what we value? And what happens when you stick a woman somewhere she's not supposed to be?

Meyohas, who splits her time between New York and London, originally planned to work for a hedge fund after graduation (her father is a prominent French corporate lawyer and her three half-brothers are private-equity executives). She decided to apply to art school at the urging of several professors. The poet Kenneth Goldsmith, who taught her experimental writing, told her he “shed a million tears at the thought of her becoming a stockbroker.”



Sarah Meyohas, *Interference #18*, 2023
Photo: Lance Brewer

Many of Meyohas's most talked-about projects draw on her background in business (she briefly also moonlit as a venture partner for the firm Spark Capital). For *Stock Performance* (2016), she day traded from the floor of 303 Gallery and drew a black line on a canvas whenever she moved the price of a stock. In 2015, she turned herself into a commodity with Bitchcoin, a blockchain-verified currency that predated Ethereum. Collectors were invited to exchange the coins for a physical artwork or hold onto them as a long-term investment in Meyohas's career.

Her latest body of work has less conceptual sleight-of-hand but even more technical wizardry. For the show at Marianne Boesky, she created sculptures out of holograms and diffraction gratings. (The latter is a device used to manipulate light that is often employed in spectroscopy and telecommunications.) Meyohas—whose red bob and wide-set eyes make her resemble a Millennial Shirley Temple—spent months trying to convince the grating manufacturer to work with an artist. “I had to show them I was willing to pay,” she explains. “They don’t want their time to be wasted.”

Raised by her mother and grandmother in New York City, Meyohas grew up attending back-to-back children's tours at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney every weekend. (Lunch was hard-boiled eggs in the back of a cab.) But she didn't doodle as a child or even take an art class until college. Instead, she expressed her creativity in other ways. “When we threw out our old printer, I took the guts out of it and pulled all the wires out,” she recalls. “I thought it looked so cool, I put it on my wall.”

That same investigative impulse—to take things apart and see how they work—is now evident in her small, industrial studio, which is bisected by plastic sheeting. On one side, the space looks like a typical office: desks, computers for Meyohas and her two studio assistants, books. On the other, it's pure middle-school science classroom. There's a whiteboard, folding plastic tables, and beakers with mysterious contents on the windowsill.

She explains that she has been trying to find a way to work with ferrofluid, a magnetic liquid originally developed by NASA. Her initial idea was to use magnets to draw an image with the inky substance, but “staining is a problem,” she says with a sigh.

She sits down at the table and removes a diffraction grating from its plastic case. It's a glass slide the size of a bathroom tile. As she tilts it back and forth, the color changes from red to green to purple. “It's magical to me that this slight movement of my finger has totally changed the color,” she says.

But there's a trick: the glass slide is not *actually* any of those colors. Instead, we are experiencing what is known as structural color—the same phenomenon that makes opals and peacock feathers change hue based on the angle of the viewer and the light hitting the surface. As Meyohas puts it, "it's a subjective experience of color."

It took more than a year of experimentation, and \$75,000 of her own money, to create the brilliantly technicolor grating now in Meyohas's hands. Each groove, about 100 times thinner than a human hair, unites to create an image of a three-breasted woman. Meyohas likes the juxtaposition between the timelessness of the female form and the sophistication of the medium. Like her earlier work, it "inserts a body in a system it's not meant to be in," she says.

Originally, Meyohas wanted the slide to stand alone as an artwork, but she found that most people were uncomfortable handling the object directly. Instead, she'll hang a series of them at different angles from the gallery's ceiling. Imagine looking at an ancient Greek frieze on mushrooms, and you have a pretty good idea of what to expect. "We're all used to being glued to a glass screen," Meyohas says. "I'm showing you glass that has an optical quality that is unlike your screen."

From the stock market to the crypto sphere to academia, Meyohas has always been interested in how our perception of the world shapes what we value. The perception of doubt can torpedo a stock price, while the perception of a university determines the value of a graduate's diploma. Now, she's going deeper: She's exploring the mechanics of perception itself.