

For This French Artist, Process Is a Passion

Lili Reynaud-Dewar challenges conventions through performances, videos and installations. She now has a show at a Paris museum and work in a Paris art fair.

By Rebecca Schmid

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“I am not partial to any particular medium,” said the artist Lili Reynaud-Dewar. “One could say that the only thing I don’t do is paint.”

This month, museum and fairgoers in Paris will have the opportunity to experience the French native in all her dimensions.

On Thursday, her first solo show in the French capital — titled “Hello, My Name Is Lili and We Are Many” — opens at the Palais de Tokyo, a contemporary art museum in the 16th Arrondissement. And from Friday through Sunday, visitors to Paris+ by Art Basel will have the opportunity to experience more than half a dozen lifelike aluminum casts of Ms. Reynaud-Dewar in seated positions, presented by the Vienna gallery Layr and her New York gallery, Clearing.

The artist, 47, touches upon the intimate and the public through performances, videos and installations, calling into question conventions around the body and power structures. In 2021, she received the prestigious Marcel Duchamp Prize in France and was featured in a group show at the Centre Pompidou. Recent exhibitions have included a group show at the Cité internationale des arts; “Lili Reynaud-Dewar: I Want All of the Above to Be the Sun” at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Montreal; and the installation “I invited men into my hotel room and asked them very personal questions about their lives” at Layr last year.

The videos from that installation — created by the artist with a small team at boutique hotels in Paris — will return at the Palais de Tokyo, accompanied by reproductions of the rooms themselves. “It’s an interesting location because there is an intimacy that is relative,” Ms. Reynaud-Dewar said of a hotel by phone from Grenoble, where she lives. “These are men whom I know very well, and I ask questions connected to masculinity, private property, how they fit into contemporary society.”



A still image from the video installation titled “I invited men into my hotel room and asked them very personal questions about their lives.” Via the artist and Layr Vienna

Ms. Reynaud-Dewar recreated the beds, night tables and more, together with a carpenter and seamstress, in “a rather obsessive fashion,” she said, reflecting on the idea that smaller hotels might not survive in the age of Airbnb, which she identifies as “a kind of false domesticity.” Viewers will have the opportunity to sit on the beds as they watch the interviews with the artist’s close friends and family members.

The first part of the show, which will be free to the public, will feature a series of 19 videos titled “Gruppo Petrolio.” The episodes — inspired by the filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini’s unfinished, posthumously published novel “Petrolio” — were created together with Ms. Reynaud-Dewar’s students in Geneva (where she teaches at the Haute École d’Art et de Design); Montpellier, France; and Bergen, Norw...

The protagonists explore such topics as the exploitation of resources and environmental destruction, and how art can address such questions. The videos are also a tribute to Mr. Pasolini and his detailed descriptions of how Italy was transformed by economic, industrial and capitalist imperatives, Ms. Reynaud-Dewar explained.

Improvisation was part of the creative process. When Covid restrictions ruined plans to shoot in Rome, she brought her students to Grenoble and explored local developments that shared parallels to some of the issues raised in “Petrolio.” Footage was also shot in Bergen and in Houston, where the artist chose to have her residency as part of the Marcel Duchamp Prize. She described the process as “collective writing” and sometimes “not knowing where we are going.”

“It’s a kind of video book,” she concluded, “which also allows for debates about the meaning of art.”

The exhibit will further include eight videos of Ms. Reynaud-Dewar dancing nude throughout the Palais de Tokyo (a signature of her museum shows for over a decade). More of a novelty for followers of the artist's work will be the reprinting of excerpts from her personal journal. Passages written over the course of two years as she prepared the exhibit will be presented in an oversize format that she compared to billboards, and yet the print will not always be large enough to read.

The pages “tell the story of the life of an artist — going out with my friends, the moments in which I am depressed, the books I read,” Ms. Reynaud-Dewar said. “Sometimes it is very uninteresting. What interests me is the relationship to artistic production.”



Detail from “Untitled (Winter 2022),” another aluminum cast of Ms. Reynaud-Dewar. Gruppo Petrolio/MO.CO. Montpellier contemporain/Pauline Rosen-Cros

At Paris+ by Art Basel, visitors will see Ms. Reynaud-Dewar as reconstructed in aluminum casts that she had produced at a foundry in Bulgaria. The series began when she was commissioned to create a sculpture for a public space in Montpellier, in 2019. Since then, she has regularly made a statue of herself sitting on the floor in a new position.

Each figure is created through a long process of her posing, motionless, for wax molds that are duplicated in aluminum and then soldered together. Her foundry of choice, the Marcof Studios in Sofia, is run by a woman and includes several female employees with whom Ms. Reynaud-Dewar works side by side.

“It’s a paradoxical position because I am at once the artist and the model,” she said. “It is very intense and also very physical.”

She compared the sculptures to her journal or videos of her dancing: “They mark different phases, the passage of time, the changing of my haircut, my clothing, my telephone.”

And yet, for Ms. Reynaud-Dewar, the autobiographical aspect of her work has universal connotations: “Within the autobiographical, I think there is something that encompasses other issues and speaks more broadly about an époque.”