

Pisces don't drown

SAGG

Napoli

Napoli



SAGG Napoli: Bodies, Machines, and the Erotics of Art

By Allison Grimaldi Donahue

SAGG Napoli's work follows a unique genealogy that is completely of her own making. For such a southern, female, playfully tongue-and-cheek, political but not polemic artist it is jarring to realize Sagg Napoli is bringing up such complex and difficult questions in her work, questions that many Italian artists run away from in the hopes of being subsumed into a larger form of 'Europeanness.' Her taking up this discussion of often brushed aside internal colonialism found within Italy itself is daring, singular, controversial – and mostly because she forces Italian culture to confront an uncomfortable part of itself, the exuberant part, the Mediterranean part. Sagg Napoli embraces this complexity, owns it, and in a particularly feminine and feminist way.

Her latest exhibition '*Pisces don't drown*' (8 July – 1 September 2022) at Champ Lacombe is both a culmination of and a progression from her previous work. The body is always at the center, her body certainly, but human bodies as a whole, the body as a social and political entity, a site of identity and agency and above all, potential. My first encounters with SAGG's work were on Instagram through her memes and videos. Few artists are able to use this medium with such intelligence and joy, and with such a political consciousness. SAGG takes the tools that all users have at their disposal but makes something much more interesting and profound than what one typically finds on the platform – her art, because it is so personal and exists firstly with her body, has an immediacy that fully functions on social media. Like most social media users SAGG Napoli posts images of herself, but they are removed from her personal identity, what one sees visiting @sagg_napoli is a persona, a new archetype for the 'southern woman.' It is also a kind of gymnasium for her to test out ideas and conversations she might like to have in more formal settings. On Instagram there are posts of her jumping into the sea, posts of her colorful flashy acrylic nails, posts of her shaking her ass in front of the camera and in front of her nonna, her grandmother. And maybe it is here, with her nonna, that one finds the way into a much deeper research and reading of the works. SAGG Napoli's nonna is game for everything it seems, at ninety-nine years old she participates in videos and photos, both irreverent and serious, reflecting a backbone for humor and for feminism in SAGG herself. There are also posts celebrating the women in her family, in support of Palestine, advocating for the destigmatization of mental health issues. To find all of this besides those shaking asses and jet-skis might seem surprising, but isn't that just what SAGG is telling us?

The abilities and the potential of this southern woman shouldn't be such a surprise or rather one shouldn't have to think one part of her excludes the other from existing. In her 1971 essay '*La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale*' [*The clitoridean woman and the vaginal woman*] Carla Lonzi speaks of a woman who frees herself, sexuality and socially, from man and his needs, this 'clitoridean woman' creates a self that is outside of the dialectic with man, is engaged in a new form of autonomous self-building. Lonzi writes, 'The clitoral woman represents everything that is authentic and inauthentic of the female world that has detached itself from visceralism with men. One version has authentically claimed herself; the other, by estranging herself has simulated the goals of man on the level of pleasure and sought man's goals on a cultural and social level.' SAGG Napoli is part of this first category, this category of woman who has freed herself, taken control of her own pleasure outside the authority and regulations of male oriented culture and pleasure. Her latest work is testament to this autonomy in both body and art.

Watching SAGG take up the bow and arrow, in art and in sport (and blurring the difference between the two) is both moving and impressive. To see the canvas pierced recalls histories of painting and performance. There are Fontana's canvases, holes and cuts lacerating the artistic surfaces, interfering with and changing the notion of the space of painting. But these are very masculine penetrations, and their aggression is distant from SAGG Napoli's work which holds such elegance and precision. In 1961, Nikki de Saint Phalle, another bold, uncompromising, feminist artist made a name for herself with her 'shooting paintings.' De Saint Phalle would shoot bullets and containers of colored liquid she had attached to her sculptural paintings. The colors would burst across the works. People would line up to see this woman with a gun performing a violent and rebellious act. She took possession and control of the form, confusing the acts of creation and destruction.

¹ And this term woman, to be clear, is not necessarily tied to a particular biology. Lonzi is advocating for an anti-patriarchal sexual liberation that distances itself from the cis-het norms of phallogentrism.

² Lonzi, Carla. "La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale." *Rivolta Femminile*. 1971. 85. Translation my own.

This action, this movement and emphasis on gesture is present in SAGG Napoli's work as well. Sagg is a performer first who moves in and out of different media in what might be an attempt at mastery but seems most clearly to be a way of knowing herself, finding and creating a self that she decides upon. Other recent works of SAGG's include her series of photos and captions that tell a story over a sequence of images – reminiscent of 'fotoromanzi,' or photo-novels, that were popular in the 1970s in the Mediterranean and Latin America. These novels have traditionally been a female form of expression, a kind of telenovela on paper meant to entertain housewives who might not have the time or formal education to read something more serious. Other female artists have played with this form, particularly Nicole Gravier's 1976-1980 *Photoromans: Mythes & Clichés* in which the artist plays with the stereotypes the form offers to women: waiting for a man to call, languidly lying around the house, gazing at herself in the mirror; while writing semi-political messages in the captions. Sagg Napoli takes this further, subverting the daily activities a woman in one of these stories might be expected to do. Here one sees Sagg on a motorbike posing and driving as a man looks on, impressed, jealous, longingly and languidly. In another image she is behind the wheel of a Ferrari cruising like a professional driver. She is in control, not necessarily of the vehicle or of the means, but of herself.

SAGG Napoli's southern aesthetic focuses on elements of Italian culture that are usually perceived as trashy, low-class, unrefined. Looking at some of her sculptures, her jewelry, her nails, I'm reminded of Paul Thek's 1963 painting *Untitled (Woman with Pearl and Ruby Necklace)*. Thek spent years in southern Italy and embraced many cultural and aesthetic elements of the places he lived. In this painting, a replicating image of a woman holding her pearls over her full breasts and playing with the jewels in her long nails, her likeness unfolds across the canvas in grays and reds – there is power in her possession. Women's mouths and necklaces, hands and jewels are all key images in Thek's work. Susan Sontag's 1963 essay '*Against Interpretation*' is dedicated to Paul Thek, the essay in which she advocates for an 'erotics of art.' It is no coincidence that she was thinking of Thek when she wrote these words; and this concept also applies to SAGG Napoli. She doesn't solicit an intellectual reaction to her work (not firstly at least) but an emotional reaction, a connection that comes from feelings and experience.

This connection to experience and erotics in art roots Sagg Napoli firmly in place, in Napoli and in the south of Italy. In a contemporary art context in which emotion too often comes second, SAGG's works beg for an immediate response. Instinct and desire take their rightful position at the forefront. Rather than engaging in a dialectic with the north or with patriarchal paradigms of art, SAGG demands that viewers shift their logic. In *Neapolitan Chronicles*, Anna Maria Ortese writes, 'In the region of the far South where the sun shines brightest, a secret ministry exists for the defense of nature from reason: a maternal genius of limitless power to whose perpetual and jealous care the sleeping populations of the place are entrusted. If this defense were to slacken for only a moment, if the cool, gentle voices of human reason were to get through to nature, it would be destroyed...'³ It isn't that Sagg refuses modernity, it is that her version of modernity and the world itself contain space for something else, a different reality.

In her new video work, *Pisces Don't Drown* (2022), SAGG drives sports cars, powers jet-skis, commands a boat – the female body is in control of the machine. But this isn't a militant act, it is play, joy, movement. Watching this latest film I can't help but think of Salvatore Scarpitta in conversation with Carla Lonzi in her 1969 book *Self-portrait* – he practically only talks about cars and speed, he talks about Italian cars versus American cars. For Scarpitta, an Italian-American, race cars were something that united these two elements of his identity, the Italian values of tradition and craftsmanship meeting the American values of speed and ingenuity. Sure, SAGG is full-on Italian, or Italian-Londonese at most, but her relationship with Italian identity touches on the diaspora and plays with stereotypes that have been amplified through Italian immigration over the 20th century, particularly in North America. Her obsessions point to a playfulness and exuberance in often-shamed aspects of Italian culture. Italians often like to point out how Italian-Americans have created a bastardized culture, a caricature of real Italianità – SAGG Napoli forces one to question if this is, in fact, true. Might Italians be better off admitting (embracing) the over-the-top elements of their culture, facing the facts. In this culture of 'too much' there is magic that can work to undo some of the restrictions placed on women, placed on sexuality, placed on art.

7 RUE
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³ Ortese, Anna Maria. *Neapolitan Chronicles*. trans. Ann Goldstein and Jenny McPhee. New Vessel Press. 2018. 168.

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SAGG Napoli
Pisces don't drown, 2022
Color Video, sound/ Video couleur, sonore
5 minutes 09

<https://vimeo.com/732073735>

Password: ChampLacombe

Edition of 5, plus 1 AP



SAGG Napoli
Only Monument I Wanna Feel, 2019
Steel Metal, car paint, spray paint, vinyl print
Dimension Variable
Edition of 3, plus 1 AP



SAGG Napoli
Pisces don't drown, 2022
Target 120 cm diameter, wooden support 200 cm height
Resin, wood, metal
3 unique works



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SAGG Napoli

Pisces don't drown, 2022

Target 120 cm diameter, wooden support 200 cm height

Resin, wood, metal

3 unique works









Only
Present
in
a
Seed







SAGG Napoli

Only Monument I Wanna Feel, 2019

Part of "Radical Self Love" group show curated by Nicoletta Lambertucci, Sophie Tappeiner Gallery, Vienna

Steel metal, car paint, spray pain, vinyl print

Dimension Variable

Edition of 3, plus 1 AP





SAGG Napoli

Pisces don't drown, 2022

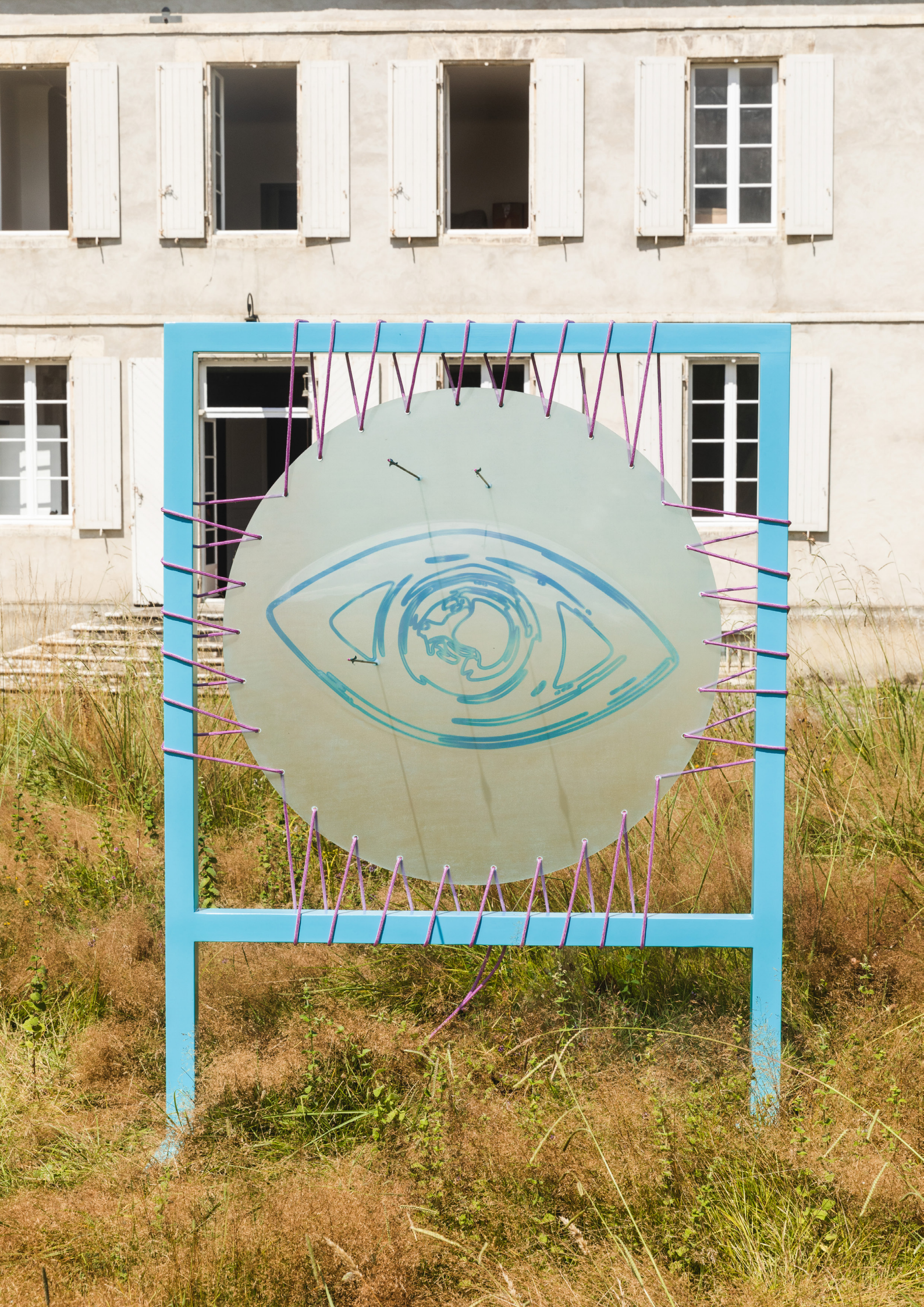
Performance

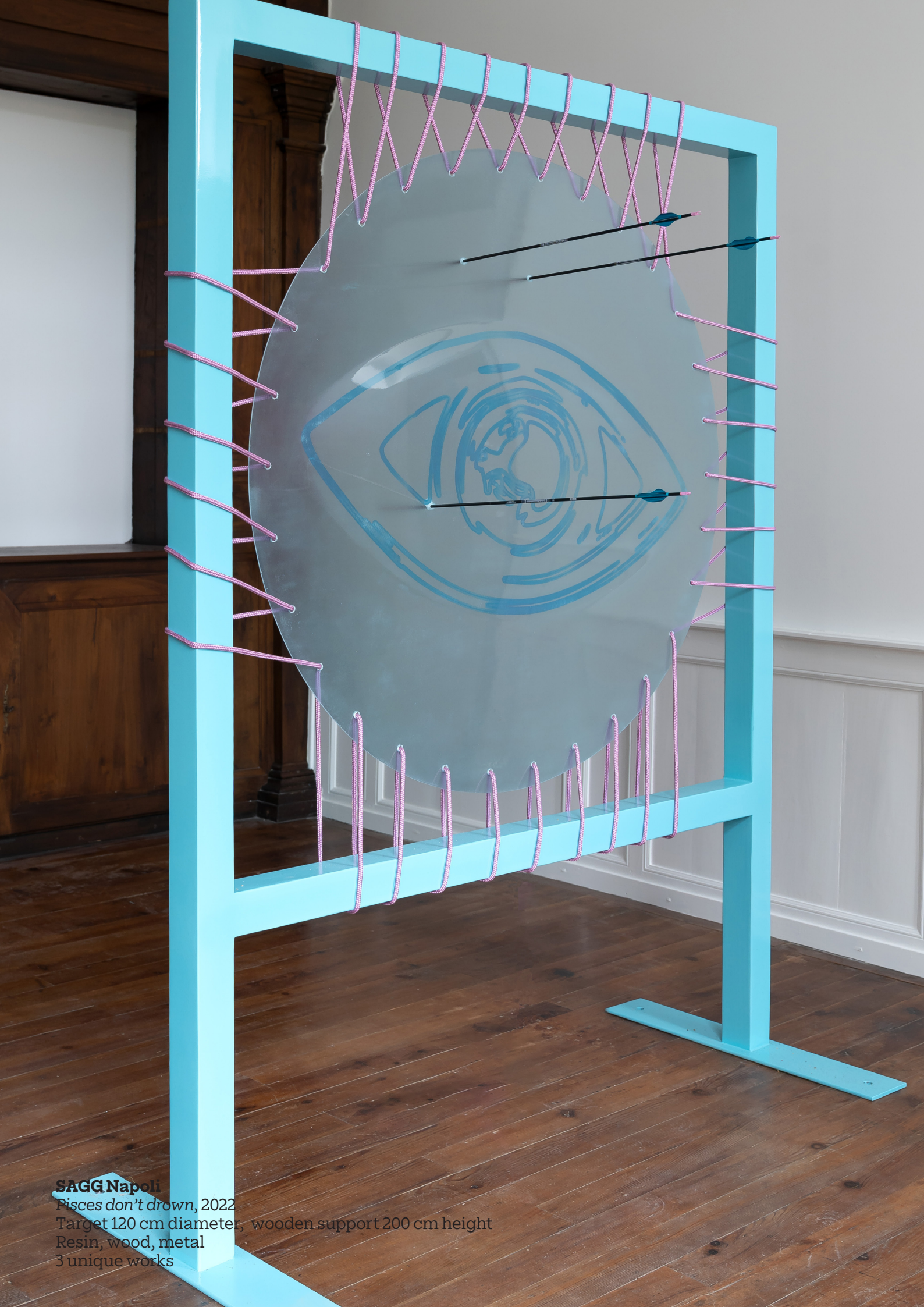
July 8, Arranguisse, 611 Chemin de Languissen, Sainte Marie de Gosse 40390











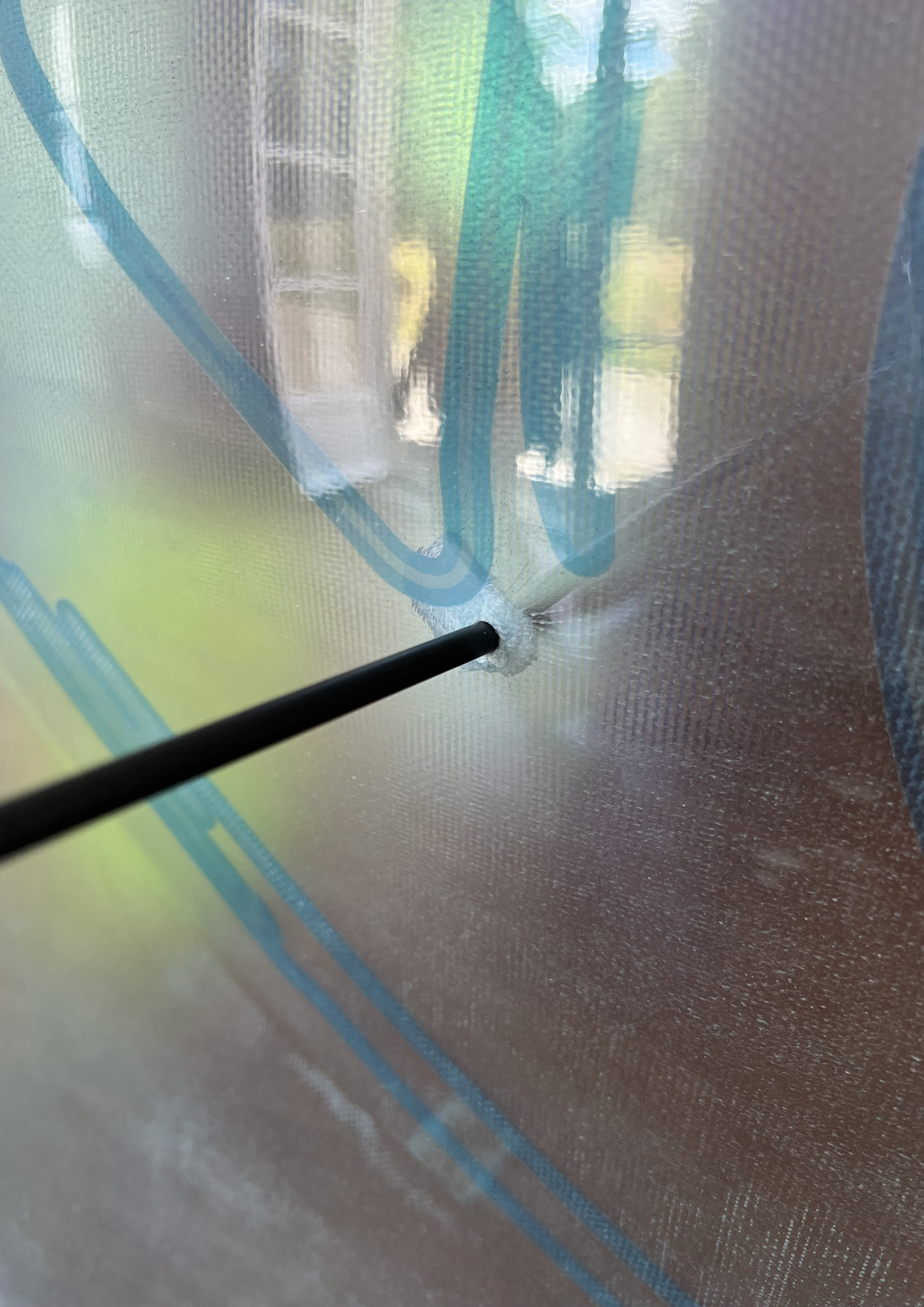
SAGG Napoli

Pisces don't drown, 2022

Target 120 cm diameter, wooden support 200 cm height

Resin, wood, metal

3 unique works



CHAMP LACOMBE

SAGG_NAPOLI

Sofia A. Ginevra Gianni

Born 1991, Naples, Italy.
Lives and works in Napoli.

Education:

2011-14 BA (Hons) Fine Art Photography, Camberwell College of the Arts, London, UK

Selected Solo Exhibitions:

- 2018 *Pride and Prejudice: new practices of dignity*, Departement OBECNOŚCI, Museum of Modern Art Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland
Fake things are flamable - e cos favz s'appiccn, Like a little Disaster, Polignano a Mare, Italy
- 2017 *Si na buji pi cose lisc e o'smalt ngopp all'ogn - You're a lie with smooth thighs and painted nails*, Jupiter Woods, London, UK

Selected Group Exhibitions and performance:

- 2022 *Pisces don't drown*, Galerie Champ Lacombe, Biarritz, France
Basel Social Club, Basel, Switzerland
- 2021 *Performance & The City*, curated by Claudia Santeroni and Maria Marizia Minelli, ArtVerona, Verona, Italy
Drama, Import Export Gallery, Warsaw, Poland
- 2020 *Only Monument I Wanna Feel*, Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna, Austria
- 2019 *Vendi Napoli e poi muori*, Galleria Fondi, Napoli, Italy
Selbstbildnis, Soci t , Berlin, Germany
Radical self love, curated by Nicoletta Lambertucci as part of Curated by Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna, Austria
All small things, curated by Margherita Castiglioni, Milan, Italy
Unbothered and moisturised, screening and performance, Eaton Workshop, Hong Kong
- 2017 *Blade Bunner*, Sprint Independent Publishing Fair, Milan, Italy
Mirrors, curated by Margherita Castiglioni and Alessandro Buganza, Milan, Italy
- 2016 *BRZ5, FARE*, curated by Francesco Urbano Ragazzi, Frigoriferi Milanesi, Milan, Italy
Quadriennale di Roma, as part of Momentum Journal, Palazzo delle Esposizioni, Roma
In one's own time, proposed by Contantin Thun, Emalin, Napoli, Italy
The Shift, Eight years of FlatTimeHouse, Flat Time House, London, UK
- 2015 *Les pieds poudr s*, two person show with Kyle Thurman, Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna
TREATYoSELF, as part of FlatTimeHouse group, Bloc, Projects, Sheffield, UK
Tara has no rooms inside, curated by Rosanna Puyol, London, UK

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Residency and award:

2020 Finalist for the AFFAsin visual Arts, The Arts Foundation
Flat Time House research award

2015 Artist residency at Pitch, Unilever, UK

Talk:

2019 *Frieze summit*, Art+Fashion : who's world is this?, The Royal Academy of Arts, London,

Selected Article:

2021 Gli artisti di Napoli, Vogue Italy
Chi è Sagg, l'artista napoletana che unisce sesso femminismo e meme, I-D Italy

2019 SAGG_NAPOLI and Sylvie MacMillan spell it for you, Vogue Italy

2018 Artist and meme queen SAGG_NAPOLI is a walking homage to Naples, Dazed Digital
Mafia to nie hasztag, Vogue Poland
From Naples to Warsaw : SAGG_NAPOLI on show at the Polish Museum of Modern Art,
Domus

2017 SAGG Napoli « You're a lie with smooth thighs and painted nails » at Jupiter Woods,
London, Mousse Magazine
SAGG Napoli *Jupiter Woods / Londra*, Flash Art Italy
Farsi le unghie nei quartieri spagnoli di Napoli, I-D Italy

2016 La pelle di napoli: incontriamo l'artista italiana sofia ginevra gianni, I-D Italy

SAGG NAPOLI's work uses narration as a tool to examine a complex socio-political knot: that of the South, its historical traces and geo-political entanglements. Placing the body within a specific time and context, she reflects on notions of productivity, self-control and achievement.

Taking Naples, the city of her birth, as a starting point, the artist narrates the specific history of the city: one of domination, and of struggle, liable to absorb and react to foreign models. Through a practice of critical observation and auto-biographical, intimate immersion, SAGG Napoli's works (which take the form of video, performance, print and sculptures) piece together fragments of a complex reality. The body – and bodywork – becomes a tool for personal as well as political action.

SAGG Napoli (acronym for Sofia Ginevra Gianni, b.1991, Naples), a graduate of Camberwell College of Arts in London, is an Artist and professional Archer, competing on a National level.

She has exhibited widely across Europe with solo exhibitions including: *Pride and Prejudice: new practices of dignity*, Departament Obecności, Museum of Modern Art Warsaw (2018); *Fake Things are Flammable*, Polignano a Mare (2018); *Si na bugij pi cosc lisc e o smalt ngopp all'ogn* (You're a lie with smooth thighs and painted nails), Jupiter Woods, London (2017). Group exhibitions include: *Too Much (Too Little Too Late)*, SAGG Napoli, Nora Turato, Jeanne Tullen, Adam Christensen, Glasgow International, 2021; *Radical Self Love*, Sophie Tappeiner, Vienna (2019); *All Small Things*, Milan (2019); *Unbothered and Moisturised*, Eaton Workshop, Hong Kong (2019); *Blade Runner*, Sprint independent publishing fair, Milan (2017).