

**Martine Syms**  
*She Mad: Season One*  
12.11.2021 – 19.1.2022

**BERGEN  
KUNSTHALL**

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Martine Syms, born 1988 in Los Angeles, has emerged in recent years as one of the defining artists of her generation. Her work combines in-depth research on the history of mass media with humour and sharp social commentary using film, photography, installation, performance and writing. The exhibition at Bergen Kunsthall presents the artist's work for the first time to a broader audience in Scandinavia. Within a specifically developed architectural installation, viewers are invited into an immersive presentation of Syms' ongoing project *She Mad* (2015–present); a series of video works in the form of an imagined television series.

Martine Syms explores how mass media shapes and frames identity and culture. The works in the exhibition summarise the artist's ongoing themes of the production of identity and the power of desires through the character's relationships to technology, intimacy, and self-realisation. Drawing from early cinema, television, the

internet, social media, and ambient footage produced by phones and surveillance, Syms addresses the ways in which representations of Black identity and gender appear in the public imagination.

A central theme in this exhibition is "Saturn Returns" – the moment in horoscopic astrology when the planet Saturn returns to the same position that it occupied at the moment of a person's birth. The influence of the Saturn Return is considered to start in the person's late twenties, notably the age of 27. Psychologically, the first Saturn return is the time when one has reached full adulthood and must face sobering realities and fears.

*The exhibition is produced in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), Chicago, where the exhibition will open summer 2022. A new publication will be produced in collaboration between Bergen Kunsthall and MCA Chicago.*

## She Mad

The episodic project *She Mad* takes the form of an experimental television series in which each episode takes on a new format. The episodes revolve around a protagonist also named Martine—an overachieving, stoner graphic designer who lives in Hollywood and wishes she were an important artist.

In *She Mad* the artist explores the role of television and social media for contemporary identities. The series is part of an ongoing conceptual project which Syms initiated in 2015 with the work *Pilot for a Show about Nowhere*. In its early stages, the project took the form of a semi-autobiographical account of Syms' own life as a young Black woman trying to "make it" as an artist. The

## Installation

The exhibition at Bergen Kunsthall is built up around an architectural installation, consisting of a purple metal grid construction which zig zags through the four aligned galleries. Syms' signature purple, used repeatedly by the artist in different projects and exhibitions, evokes a Black feminist tradition. The choice of colour is a reference to both Alice Walker's 1982 novel *The Colour Purple* and manifold meanings within the women's movement as well as the LGBTQIA community.

The grid wall creates multiple vantage points for viewing the films, as well as demarcating and re-structuring the original exhibition architecture in a tightly controlled spatial choreography. Screens in various configurations – a video wall, multi-screen displays and portrait-format screens that are often used for announcements and advertising in public space – are integrated or attached to the structure, presenting five different episodes of *She Mad*. Unlike most film and video-based exhibitions, the

## Photographs

In addition to the five video works, the exhibition is saturated by photographic imagery. Included in the exhibition is both a series of framed photographs and a large selection of images cycling on the exhibition monitors when the videos are not playing. The images, selected from a pool of photographs from Syms' large image archive, "play" in random order similar to advertising slides on screens in public space.

The photographic prints are from a series taken over the past year, presenting a stream of fragmentary views accumulated from disparate moments in time. The images are close-ups of everyday scenes and the diaristic quality of these photographs is continued in the interstitial image series presented on the video monitors. In her photography work, Syms extends her examination of the contempo-

research for *She Mad* forms a large part of Syms' work to date, investigating the formation of Black subjectivities in both the viewing as well as the making of American television. Her project investigates how the consumption and the production of images are linked in creating and performing identities. *She Mad* is a way to think about topics such as surveillance, visibility, and the gap between reality and its representation. These topics also re-appear in Syms' recent podcast series "Mirror with a Memory," which she hosted for the Carnegie Museum of Art. This series explored similar questions through conversations with artists and thinkers, discussing the role of photography and artificial intelligence in technology such as facial recognition software.

different works are not playing simultaneously. Instead, the films are programmed to follow a randomised sequence, playing only one episode at a time. The viewing experience is choreographed or controlled by the artist, prompting viewers to move between the four different galleries in an unpredictable order as the episodes play in different rooms. Syms frequently employs such strategies in her exhibition making, creating cinematic installations that expand beyond the single screen or surface towards a fragmented and active use of space. The physical movement of the viewer prompted by this architecture has been seen as enhancing the reality depicted in the work by some commentators: "(...) requiring a near-constant movement, a situation that annoys not unlike the multitasking of contemporary life" (Lori Waxman, in *4Columns*, 4 January 2019); the bodily movement "perhaps alludes to the severe conditions that Black Americans endured as forced migrants throughout the 20th century" (Amarie Gipson, *Artnews*, 8 January 2019).

rary vernacular, which is both distinctly personal and universally familiar. In many of the images, it is difficult to determine if the scene has been staged or if it was taken in the moment by the artist.

Syms' photographs, as well as her films, are made with various recording devices, from handheld cameras to smartphones. The shift of the camera's perspective in her work highlights how much we are surrounded by recording devices and how present cameras are in our lives through phones, surveillance systems, personal computers, or hidden dashboard cameras. This results in a surveillance effect, underlining the everyday realism of the scenes and creating a dynamic exchange between watching, being watched, and being unseen.

## Gallery 2

**The Non-Hero** (4 min., 2021) is the latest episode of *She Mad*, produced specifically for the exhibition at Bergen Kunsthall. In this episode, the character Martine “pulls back the curtain on her battle with depression and suicidal ideation during her rocket ride to art super stardom.” The story is told through a series of brief clips, modelled after the popular *My Life Story* videos by the American rapper Lil Nas X, published on the social media platform TikTok. “In 2017 I became the first [in] my family to get into MoMA,” reads the caption of the first video, which appears to show Martine early in her career as an MFA student, during which exhibited at MoMA. “During this time I was depressed, had no friends and... my second mother, two of my aunts, and two of my cousins all passed. basically everyone i grew up with :( I started going to the doctor a lot in fear that I would die soon...” Lil Nas X initially used social media extensively for low-budget promotion with his signature selfie videos. Later, he became more personal in the shared content, and also came out publicly as queer through social networks. With this work, Syms builds on the potential of social media to create mediated versions of ourselves, to

## Gallery 1

**Bitch Zone** (11 min., 2020) is a recent video work, first shown earlier this year at the Glasgow International biennial, presented on a large LED mesh screen. In this episode, an innocuous comment triggers a flashback to

## Gallery 3

The episode **Laughing Gas** (7 min., 2016) draws on early cinema, specifically the 1907 silent film of the same name by Edwin Porter that is one of the earliest examples of a Black female actress, Bertha Regustus, performing an independent role on-screen. The work uses Porter’s film as a starting point for constructing a history of representation that extends into the present. Referring to a variety

## Gallery 4

**Pilot for a Show about Nowhere** (24 min., 2015) is the first episode in the series. With this pilot episode, Syms examines the politics of television viewership, incorporating footage from various sources to create a multi-vocal narrative. It tells a semi-autobiographical account of Syms’ own life as a young Black woman in the format of a sitcom, merging dead-pan jokes about TV culture with a video essay-like narrative on the history of commercial

put ourselves in a story, but also reminds us of the fact that our stories are always told within the limits of existing formats and narratives *The Non-Hero* will be released in several parts throughout the exhibition period, mimicking the gradually developing structure of TikTok stories.

A second portrait screen features Syms’ **Intro to Threat Modeling** (5 min., 2017). The work deals with the connections of digital and psychological space, told through email exchanges, screengrabs, and an avatar; highlighting the effects of surveillance on subjectivity. The title refers to the risk analysis of systems named “threat modelling,” which maps a system’s vulnerabilities to maximise its security. Rather than mapping a network’s vulnerabilities, this video explores the artist’s own weak spots and internal negative thoughts, what she calls her “shame space.” Syms’ personified threat model explores themes of privacy, visibility and vulnerability in our increasingly technological world, charting “the way in which Black identity is constantly being shaped through the experience of surveillance, and how technology mediates perceptions of race.”

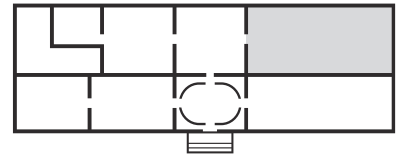
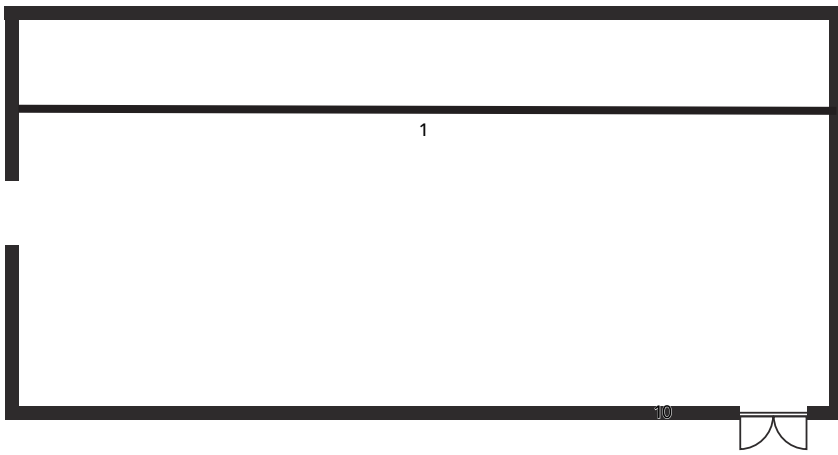
the summer of 2000, taking the protagonist back to memories of an empowerment programme for teenage girls founded by supermodel and business mogul Tyra Banks.

of visual forms and styles that reflect the evolution of cinematic tendencies into recent forms such as television, the Internet, and “ambient” footage produced by surveillance and body cams, *Laughing Gas* addresses the ways in which subjects and subjectivities have developed within and throughout the history of moving images.

television and its assumed target audiences.

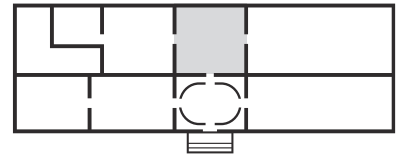
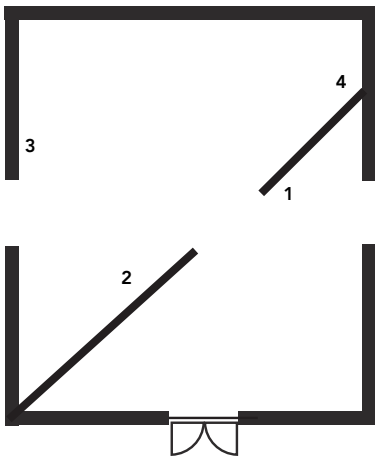
It is a sitcom pilot, but does not resemble conventional television. Rather, the work is an essay on the portrayal of Black American identity via the history of the sitcom. In the video, Martine’s own experiences are mixed with details of popular culture to imagine a new narrative of selfhood.





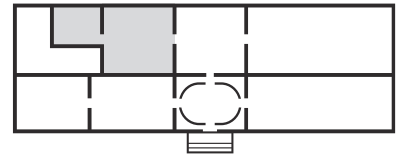
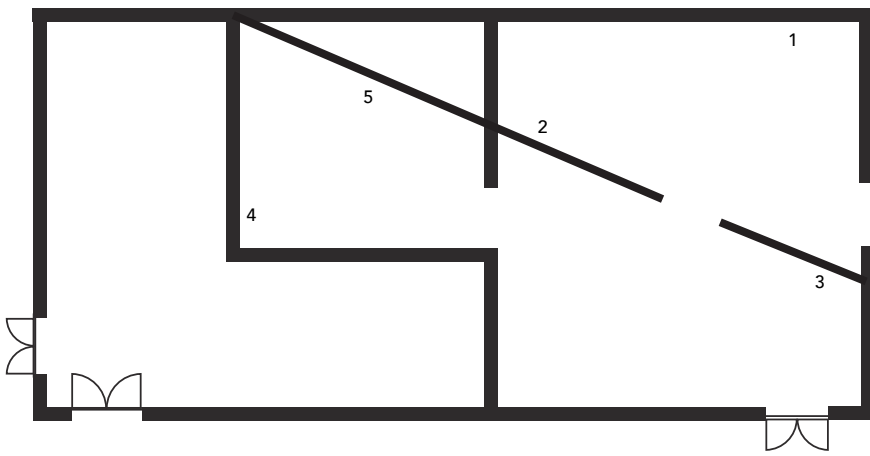
## Gallery I

- 1 *Bitch Zone*, 2020  
Digital video  
Colour, sound  
11 min  
LED-screen from Sadie Coles  
HQ, London  
Courtesy of the artist, Bridget  
Donahue, New York, and Sadie  
Coles HQ, London



## Gallery II

- 1 *The Non-Hero*, 2021  
Digital video  
Colour, sound  
4 min. (Four episodes, 1 min. each)
- 2 *Intro to Threat Modeling*, 2019  
Digital video  
Colour, sound  
5 min.  
Courtesy of the artist, Bridget Donahue, New York, and Sadie Coles HQ, London
- 3 *Happy Earth Day from Mom & Dad*, 2021  
Archival pigment print  
62.87 x 84.14 x 3.81 cm  
1/1 ed. + 1 AP  
Collection Spencer Young, New York
- 4 *Oh, that was such a fun day!*, 2021  
Archival pigment print  
62.87 x 84.14 x 3.81 cm  
1/1 ed. + 1 AP  
Bridget Donahue, New York



## Gallery III, Sal IV

- 1 *I miss the kids*, 2021  
Archival pigment print  
62.87 x 84.14 x 3.81 cm  
1/1 ed. + I AP  
Bridget Donahue, New York
- 2 *Laughing Gas*, 2016  
Four-channel video installation  
Colour, sound  
7 min.  
Courtesy of the artist, Bridget Donahue, New York, and Sadie Coles HQ, London
- 3 *Panny Cotta is Over if You Want It*, 2021  
Archival pigment print  
62.87 x 84.14 x 3.81 cm  
1/1 ed. + I AP  
Bridget Donahue, New York
- 4 *Still Life with Flowers*, 2021  
Archival pigment print  
62.87 x 84.14 x 3.81 cm  
1/1 ed. + I AP  
Collection of Morgan and Simon Newfield
- 5 *Pilot for a Show about Nowhere*, 2015  
Two-channel video installation  
Colour, sound  
24 min.  
Courtesy of the artist, Bridget Donahue, New York, and Sadie Coles HQ, London

## Events

### Tours

For Families Every Sunday 13:00  
Every Sunday 14:00

### Plattform

**Gry Rustad & Timotheus Vermeulen**  
Sat 13 Nov 14:00 Free

### Martine Syms

**Incense Sweaters & Ice, 2017**  
Tue 11 Jan 18:00  
Venue: Cinemateket i Bergen  
Screening in collaboration with  
Cinemateket i Bergen

### Curated by

Axel Wieder (director)  
Steinar Sekkingstad (curator)

### Staff

Nora-Swantje Almes (curator  
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Åsne Eldøy (tours and tech.),  
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Thea Haug (members),  
Sarah Jost (tech),  
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Marie Lahn-Johannessen (cleaner),  
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Marthe Serck-Hansen (events),  
Jonas Skarmark (technical producer)  
Henrik Skauge (tech.),  
Synne Syslak (events),  
Tale Elida Giacotti Søilen (tickets),  
Fergus Tibbs (tech),  
Jonette Vindenes (finance and  
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Magnus Vedå Wibe (tech),  
Eric Alvin Wangel (gallery manager),  
Stein-Inge Århus (head of comm.)

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