

NEWSLETTER

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CONTEMPORARY JEWELLERY



Inside this issue:

IN THIS MONTH'S ISSUE, AS IN THE PREVIOUS ONE, I'M FOCUSING ON THE WORK OF A SINGLE ARTIST:

STEPHIE MORAWETZ. YOU CAN READ AN EXTENDED INTERVIEW, WHICH TOOK US OVER A MONTH TO COMPLETE. I TRULY ENJOYED ASKING THE QUESTIONS AND READING STEPHIE'S THOUGHT-PROVOKING AND HONEST RESPONSES. PLEASE VISIT HER WEBSITE AND SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILES TO SEE MORE OF HER WORK.

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Vica Gabor: *What inspired you to start rethinking the definition of luxury? Could you share a bit about your first project exploring this topic and the creative process behind it?*

Stephie Morawetz: Luxury is the embodiment of value and I was always fascinated by the concept of value. It is like a story or even a fairy tale, someone makes it up and if enough people believe in it it becomes reality. Take money for example: in the end it is just colourful paper. With my works I like to tell stories and build worlds around my pieces. And if enough people believe in my tales they become reality. I think it all started when I studied in Idar-Oberstein. In the town of gemstones we were expected to work with stones, so naturally we also studied them. I saw countless wonders. Stones and minerals that I couldn't have even imagined before. But even among this beauty there was a hierarchy. Some stones, although stunning, were considered "worth less" than others. And at the very top of this pyramid stood the diamond.



That made me wonder: who decided that this one stone is more valuable than all the others? I researched the diamonds and their history and found out that its value is based on a genius marketing concept. The diamond syndicate created its value and they made the whole world believe it. It is both scary and impressive to create a story so powerful that believing in it makes it become reality. If we can shape what is valuable, perhaps it is time for a new story. Where value is about sustainability instead of exploitation, humanity instead of systematic abuse, and critical consumption instead of blind consumerism. So I created my first story, the Plastone Universe. A parable on the diamond syndicate, with a fictitious future company that has the monopoly on the future stone called Plastone. A stone that grows out of our trash and becomes the most precious material of the future. If a company can change our cultural view, I believe we all can shape the world, maybe to something better.

VG: So, is this how Böhm Cooperative came to life? Who are these fictive characters: Hubert Böhm, Layla Böhm, and Elisabeth Popatnig?



Kim, Huda, Becky, Brooch/Cameo, Plastone (stone with plastic inclusions), plastic, steel, 2023.

SM: Yes, exactly. I wanted to show more about stones with my work than just using them. For me, my work includes not only physical objects, but also graphics, photography and words. I invented the characters to bring the story to life. To do so, all my characters have background stories, and the Böhm family also has a narrative timeline. All the names are taken from my family. To look at the future is to study the past, so it felt only natural to use my own heritage to build the story. Böhm is the maiden name of my mother, Popatnig of my grandmother. Elisabeth is my second name and Hubert is the name of my grandfather.



Layla Böhm and Elisabeth Popatnig, self-portrait, 2015.

Hubert Böhm is the tycoon of my fictive empire, the person who realised that crude oil would become a rare commodity and that plastic would also become a rare and valuable material. I chose a male character to allow for a future shift to exclusively female leading characters. Layla Böhm, the CEO, later inherits the company and runs it with an iron grip. Elisabeth Popatnig is the geologist who found the stone. I am currently working on another character, an eco-activist who fights against Böhm Corp. and their exploitation of the planet. With that, I can start a dialogue between them and make the story feel more alive.

This will help me explore more deeply the clash between two opposite sides: one built on control, resource exploitation, and the illusion of progress, and another calling for accountability, transparency, and respect for the planet. Through this tension, I want to reflect on real-world contradictions in the sustainability discourse: Can a system built on extraction ever truly become sustainable? Is greenwashing just a softer version of exploitation? Is luxury always built on exclusivity? The characters help me explore these grey areas, not in black and white, but through layered storytelling. And by embodying both sides, I can question myself too.

For my characters, I create all images myself using only makeup and costumes. I try to retouch as little as possible because I like to fully become these characters; it helps tell the story more realistically. I did the same for my other fictive world, the project Same Shit, where I became Queen Elizabeth II and Coco Chanel.



Same Shit II, earrings, Rabbit shit pearls (powered by the rabbits Tiffany, Harry and Winston), silver, stainless steel, 2023.

VG: *I find it fascinating how you incorporate photography into your work, particularly in your collection titled Same Shit. Could you share more about your experimentation with this body of work?*

SM: In my work, I think a lot about how capitalism shapes our sense of beauty and value. Reading *The Society of the Spectacle* by Guy Debord made me reflect on how deeply we crave the spectacular, the shiny, impressive surfaces that promise happiness or success. I began closely analyzing high jewellery advertisements, how they create desire by building entire dream worlds around a single object. These ads do not just sell jewellery; they sell a story of status, love, even eternity.

I wanted to turn that strategy around and use it in my own work, but in a way that exposes its absurdity. That is how my project *Same Shit* started. I created pearls from rabbit poop covered in mother of pearl, setting them in luxurious designs, then staging ad-like photos and campaigns around them. By using humor and a bit of provocation, I think it becomes easier for people to question what they believe is truly valuable. If I can make them smile first, maybe they will be more open to seeing the contradictions underneath. Often, no matter how glamorous the wrapping, inside it is all the same shit.



Reflections, ring, silver, zirconia, plastic bag, 2022.

VG: *Apart from those already mentioned, are there other aspects of everyday life or collective experience that have inspired you in your past work — or that you plan to explore through your artistic practice in the future?*

SM: Actually my inspiration comes from everyday life and mundane things. I believe that art is meant to be a reflection of our society, so I try to listen and look around me. Since my childhood I remember being encouraged to think about politics and ask questions. When my parents did not have an answer, I learned to find answers for myself, mostly through books. I love to read and the library is one of my favourite places. It is not only the books that fascinate me but also the mix of different people I meet there and what I can learn from them. I guess with my work I am still trying to find answers to questions I do not understand.



A Drop Of Black Gold, ring, silver, glass, silicon, crude oil, 2017.

Same Shit, necklace, bird shit pearls (from the Shenkar jewellery department), Rabbit shit pearls (powered by the rabbits Tiffany, Harry and Winston), gold plated brass, silver, stainless steel, Price-Tag Pearl Necklace, 2017.



At the moment, and also something I want to explore more in the future, is my own culture and heritage, all the rituals we still have or have already lost. I feel this is fading with the digital world and I wonder whether this is a natural process of evolution or a kind of imbalance.

As an Austrian I see how we have a mentality of sweeping uncomfortable truths under the rug rather than facing them. I think that is the wrong approach. If we started to confront these things, we could actually learn from them. Since I was a child I was told to neglect my heritage and all the symbols tied to it because they were associated with right wing politics. That made me wonder why. I researched and discovered it is actually often the opposite. For example the Dirndl, traditional Austrian dress, was worn as a silent act of resistance against the Nazi regime. This shows just how much power clothing and jewellery can have. Jewellery can actually be a tool of resilience.

As an artist I see it as my duty to reflect society. I believe we have the power to hold up a mirror of truth without offending people and through that we can truly make a change. There is a mantra that is always in my mind, a quote from a German punk band: "It is not your fault that the world is the way it is, it is only your fault if it stays that way."

VG: *I can completely relate to your feelings about cultural heritage. As a Hungarian, I also distanced myself from national symbols a long time ago.*

I'm really interested in the rituals you mentioned. Do you have any everyday rituals? I'd love to hear more about them—how they work, and why they're important to you.



The Morning After, brooch, cigarette ash, pillow case, make-up, steel, 2020.

SM: I never realized how many rituals there are in my life until I started researching this topic. Rituals seem to be a deeply human need. We practice religious rituals, but also rituals tied to weather and the seasons. These rituals seem to disappear with a society less connected to nature or religion.

I came to understand the importance of rituals while mourning my grandmother. It's a universal human practice that counting can help with grief. With my research I learned that nearly every culture has prayer beads. Continuously counting a necklace of beads gives a certain feeling of calm and peace. I created a work about mourning my grandmother, a performance with a prayer necklace made of ash beads. I'm not a religious person, but this ritual of counting helped me through the mourning process.

This made me realize how important rituals are. I have lots of rituals in my life and I give these now more value and thought. Each morning, for example, I take one hour with my coffee to write my daily tasks on a post-it note, because I can't manage more in a day than what fits on that small square.

In my family, we have a Sunday dinner at my grandmother's house. Even when I'm annoyed about traveling to the suburbs every week, I know how important it is to make the effort and value this time with my family. I also have a tradition of buying a graphic novel by a local artist from every place I travel. This is like the charm bracelet (Bettelarmband) I had as a child, where you collect a charm from each trip. Each graphic novel is like a charm for me, holding memories.

Of course, I'm most interested by the rituals connected to jewellery. From charm bracelets that grow with each milestone, to the rituals of wearing jewellery. I am fascinated by how many important roles jewellery has within rituals. For me jewellery has many functions, like holding memories, making a statement or giving you a certain feeling. I have a ring from a friend that makes me feel fancy, almost like armour. If I feel especially insecure or nervous, I have a ritual of putting on this ring and listening to Eye of the Tiger. It always reminds me of a scene from Persepolis. The woman in that film is, for me, the embodiment of fearlessness and power.



Cuerpo Floral, Collier, Hematin, gold plated (brass leaf), thread, iron, 2024.



Cuerpo Flora, portrait, model Eni Cani, 2024

VG: *I've noticed that the life of artists—especially Frida Kahlo—has had a deep impact on you. Could you tell me more about that collection: how it came about, and how you reflect on that body of work today?*

SM: Yes, that's true. In general, I love to look at the work of other artists. I believe that if jewellery wants to be taken seriously as an art field, we can't afford to completely ignore other art forms and live only in our own bubble. As an artist, I think it's essential to look left and right. My favourite artists change from time to time, it usually depends on which topic I'm working on or what body of work I'm most interested in at the moment. Right now, my two favourites are Valie Export and Cindy Sherman, which I think is quite visible in my work as I'm moving more and more towards performance and self-portraiture.

How my Frida Kahlo work originated is actually an interesting story. Back then, I was still doing my so-called "marathon." I decided to spend a year applying to every jewellery open call I could find. I wanted to challenge myself and see if I could adapt to all these different topics. Today I value this experience enormously. Even though there were moments when I was completely exhausted, I still enjoyed this marathon. It taught me to focus my research, stay open to every theme (even those I didn't personally agree with), and it showed me both my strengths and weaknesses.

So when the Frida Kahlo open call came up, I knew immediately that I wanted to be part of it, because I had a personal connection to her. My cousin grew up in Mexico and is Frida's biggest fan. She introduced me to Frida's work when I was still a teenager, and I fell in love with it back then. Later, when I had to research Frida again for this project, my blue eyed, almost naive view of her changed. I realized she wasn't exactly the feminist hero my teenage self wanted her to be. This project gave me a new, more nuanced view of Frida. I think I understand her better now; she feels more human to me. I see that her work is deeply about her suffering, and the strange beauty and pain within that. We can argue whether that's good or bad, I just wanted to show it through my piece, without judgment, just how I see it.

I think one of the beautiful things about jewellery is that you can make things physically feelable. I wanted people to feel the weight of Frida's pain, but also the beauty she found in it. That's why I chose the heaviness of hematite and gilded the beads so they would leave gold traces on the skin when worn. This makes the piece temporary: eventually, the gold will wear away, and only the heaviness of the pain will remain. That's Frida's life for me. I don't necessarily agree with it, but I deeply admire her dedication to turning her entire life into one complete artwork.

VG: *I see that you're participating in the COCKS and CUNTS exhibition. Could you share a bit about the work you'll be showing and the story behind it? I'm also curious—what drew you to this open call, and what direction did your research take at the beginning of the project?*

SM: In general, I am a big fan of Studio Wearhouse. I love how they curate exhibitions and the direction they're taking with their shows. I've known Yotam since I studied at Shenkar, and he is one of the most warm-hearted and open-minded people I know. I try to follow their projects closely, and that's how I came across the open call for this show.

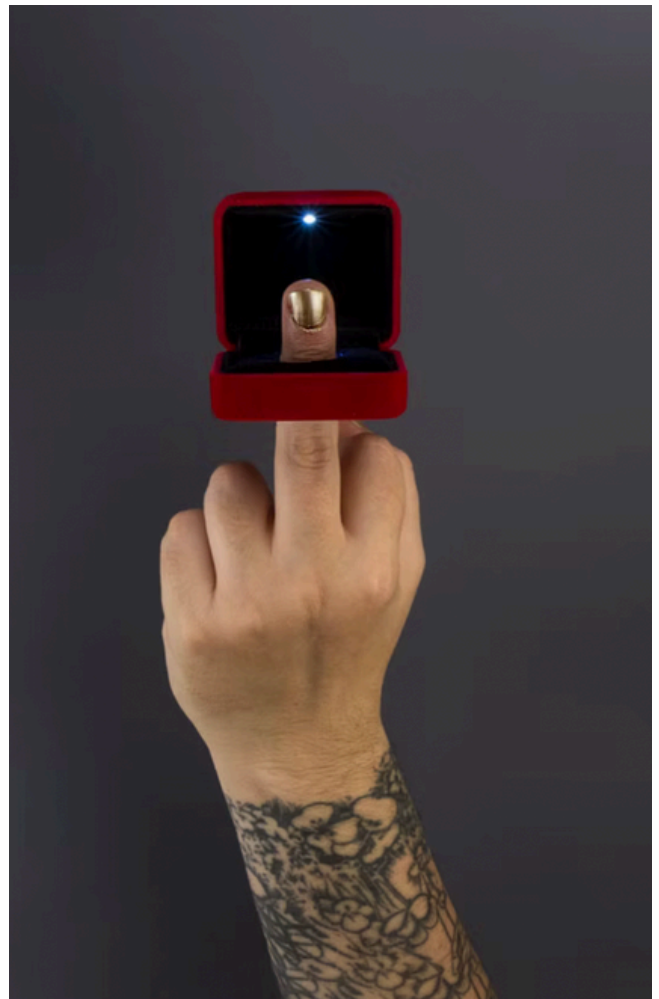
Back in 2016, when I was still studying at Shenkar in Tel Aviv, I came across a study that said most women have never looked at their own vulva. I found this shocking and couldn't understand the lack of curiosity about one's own body. I started asking around, both in Israel and at home, speaking with as many women from different cultures as I could. They confirmed what the study said, that most women had never looked. Society and media keep telling us it's not appropriate, or even shameful, to look at your own vulva. You might be called a slut, or hear that only lesbians do that. Something completely normal for men is seen as unthinkable for women.



Golden Look, vagina mirror, olive wood, mirror Perspex, Perspex, gold plated brass, 2017.

I wanted to change that. So I created a pocket mirror designed specifically to look at your own vulva. The mirror makes it easier physically, but it also turns the act of looking into a small ritual. It becomes something beautiful, dedicated to seeing something beautiful. Just a few months ago, I had this same conversation with a male friend. I told him about the mirror, and he asked, “Why would you want to look?” I replied, “Have you never looked at your penis?” He said, “Of course, but that’s normal.” That was exactly the point. It reminded me why this work is still so needed.

Then, almost like serendipity, Studio Warehouse posted the open call. I knew my work wasn’t exactly what they were asking for, but the topic is so important that I decided to apply anyway. I’m very happy that through this exhibition, there’s another chance to shed light on this subject and maybe convince a few more women that there is nothing shameful about their vulva.



VG: *What is your next project? Are you researching something at the moment?*

SM: Yes, I'm just at the beginning of researching a new project. It circles around Austrian culture and traditions, and how populist politics has started to use them for its own agenda. I've been watching with growing fear and frustration how the general mood across Europe is shifting. There is more fear, more hate. And so much of it is based on wrong ideas and a lack of education. In Austria, I see how right wing parties take ownership of things like folk symbols, rural aesthetics, even language, and turn them into tools to shape a version of Austrian identity that feels closed off, backwards-looking and, in many cases, aggressive.

But none of this actually belongs to them. These objects, songs, gestures, and customs. They are just as much mine. They are part of our shared culture. And I believe they can be read differently. What I'm trying to do is to shift what we have inherited. To take the structures and frameworks that already exist and give them new meaning. Something more generous, more equal. Something that includes instead of excludes. That leaves space for complexity and contradiction. That values people for who they are, not where they come from or how they look.

Right now I am still deep in research. I feel like I first need to understand what these cultural elements actually mean before I can start working with them. A lot of this knowledge was never really taught to us. Not in school, not in university. It almost feels like it was deliberately left out, as if culture and politics were two separate things. But they are not. And I want to understand how they are connected, and how we might be able to shift them from within.

I AM ALWAYS HAPPY TO HEAR YOUR
FEEDBACK! IF YOU HAVE IDEAS OR WOULD
LIKE TO HIGHLIGHT AN EVENT, BOOK, OR
ARTIST, PLEASE GET IN TOUCH AT
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