

MIRANDA JULY



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- 8 Conversation between
Miranda July and
Julia Bryan-Wilson

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For Lindy and Rich

CONVERSATION BETWEEN MIRANDA JULY AND JULIA BRYAN-WILSON

Miranda and I met in 1996 when we were both living in Portland, Oregon. I was cocurating a video show at the warehouse of the queercore music label Candy Ass Records. Miranda had come to spread the word about her newly hatched feminist video chain letter. But when Miranda saw me seated on the ground madly trying to assemble my overly ambitious xeroxed catalogues for the show, she sat right down and started gluing.

It sounds too dramatic to write that this act changed the directions of both of our lives, but our friendship, which started that instant, was definitely transformative. I comanaged Joanie 4 Jackie with Miranda for about two years, and together we applied for grants and hosted screenings where breakfast cereal was served as the refreshment. I encouraged her to take her fiction seriously (she later dedicated her first book of short stories to me), and she pushed me to dig into my interests in the politics of amateur making and alternative forms of distribution (which much of my scholarship now focuses on).

In short, Miranda's art and my criticism have been coevolving for almost twenty-five years as a partial outgrowth of our friendship and shared passions. This conversation focuses on some of the broad themes that traverse her work in many media.

— Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Doris and Clarence Malo*
Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art, University
of California, Berkeley





Above: One of a series of collages July made in her twenties, with color-coded labels

Your parents are both authors and publishers, so you grew up surrounded by a world of books. Did you think of yourself as a writer from an early age? And how specifically did you feel authorized to claim that identity?

There were two people on very loud IBM Selectric typewriters most of the time. My brother and I needed to be quiet so they could think; that set the tone of our house and certainly placed that kind of work at the tippy top. Nothing was to disturb that. But a child doesn't really have access to the internal writing process. What impacted me on a more day-to-day level was that there was this publishing company in our house my entire childhood. All the practical logistics—sorting things by zip code, packaging books, collating mailers—were for most of the years not done on a computer, so it was pretty accessible to a child. My brother and I would do these jobs, and hence adult work wasn't abstract; it was made very doable and realistic from the beginning.

And your brother, Robin, also had his own sort of industry, right?

Right, my brother was a child woodworker; he began gluing sticks together to make log cabins and then he made me a dollhouse and eventually a two-story house in our backyard, as well as a bunch of really sophisticated furniture, riddled with secret compartments. I'm five years younger, so I helped him by sanding things, holding things that were being glued. And meanwhile I absorbed the idea that we could make anything—not just children's "art projects," but real, usable objects.

I think that dovetailed with DIY riot grrrl punk stuff. I always felt skeptical of the phrase "DIY" because I grew up in that ethos, so it wasn't exactly the most rebellious notion for me. Of course, you have to do it yourself! No one else is going to publish these books; they're all so weird. My parents' publishing company started out more or less as a fanzine, as this homemade, stapled literary magazine in the 1960s.

You're describing a dynamic between a collective/communal form of making, in which the labors can be very evident, and a solitary form of work that is more impenetrable from the outside.

Exactly, and in a way I've kept those both going. Also, my father archived everything. That's an influence that can be seen in this book. Our attic was filled with these boxes. I grew up thinking that was what you do, so I saved everything, too, starting from when I was a child. I have every costume, every piece of equipment I've ever used on stage, every draft. By the time I became cognizant that this was kind of a bizarre thing to be doing, it was like, well, why stop now?

One overarching theme in your work is how people who have power interface with people who don't have power. Sometimes that shifts in surprising ways over the course of a book or a movie or a performance. Some of the figures include children and doctors and scientists. What was it like for you—as a young person who did have some serious health problems—to delve into these situations of medicalization?

My eyes were always in pain, and I went through all these different treatments for it, but it was hard for anyone to figure out what was going on. And I grew up in a household filled with alternative health. I have this memory of my dad coming home with a big crystal and pressing it against my eyes and me thinking, *Is this real? I don't know*. But anyone who's struggled with a hard-to-diagnose condition knows the truth is very elusive and mutable; it changes depending on who's in charge.

Those early Kill Rock Stars recordings are so much about belief and disbelief, and who gets to speak from a place of authority. A young girl is one of the least able to do that.

And with this particular condition I couldn't open my eyes in light a lot of the time, so I remember, right around when we met in my early twenties, being a bit stuck on bad days.

My memories of that are very vivid—your eyes were bright red. There's no making that up. You could not be outside, you had to be inside with the curtains drawn. Once, when we were both visiting Berkeley, we had tea with your parents and your dad was narrating his own self-healing, including how a shaman had just pulled an ax out of his chest. There was an intense focus on *him* getting better, for nothing that seemed tangible.

[Laughs] Yeah, not comforting but I suppose he modeled a total dedication to one's vision ... and I got attention in other ways. Despite my eyes I was performing a lot at this time. There's a big eye exam in *Love Diamond* and it was kind of darkly funny ... which was a relief, to be in front of five hundred people performing it and making people laugh and understand, as opposed to being alone in my apartment in the dark. And I remember you so kindly tending to my eyes with cold spoons and our made-up treatments, measuring them, writing things down.

In *The Binet-Simon Test*, you make yourself into the doctor, switching your position or sharing the vulnerability across the subject positions, not having it rest only on the person being experimented upon.

Exactly.

Related to the shifting dynamic of power/powerlessness across your work is the desire to connect, and the profound sadness that happens when people fail to connect, or think they're connecting until the connection is revealed to be somewhat illusory. Yet you are someone who *does* make strong connections with friends and lovers, and I want to hear about the role of collaboration in your work. You are a solo artist but you're also someone who has worked many times in partnership.

Yes, I mean it was through my friendship with Jo [Fateman] that I really became an artist. There's a reason why I took the last name July—she didn't exactly name me, but she came up with the name and I seized it. We were collaborating on becoming artists and writers, and our fanzine, *Snarla*, was a huge part of that for both of us. Still, every single time I collaborate it seems incredibly novel, like a prison break or something. But you're right that it has happened consistently over my whole life—you and I worked on Big Miss Moviola very seriously together, as if it were a job. And I did *Learning to Love You More* with Harrell [Fletcher] for seven years ... but still, I think of writing as the core practice, and that's so alone.

Every movie is a collaboration and every large-scale performance or art piece is, too. Working with other people stretches across your whole career.

Right, I guess there's a perpetual back-and-forth between the discipline of writing alone and then the release of getting to be with other people. It feels like a cheat. *Ah! I get to have this? I get to have a body and live here on earth with others?!* Even a movie, which is so hard, feels like an elaborate ruse I concocted to get to leave my desk. And so on set I'm always a bit nervous, a bit socially anxious, but also easily delighted by what other people know. I am often getting to do something for the first time—make a sculpture, an app, a wall of cascading bubbles—and I have to figure out the methodology very quickly so I can guide it toward a specific and emotional expression. It's a kind of writing, but the beasts you're wrestling with are outside of your head. It's less precise, but ... I actually had a revelation about this with the last movie.

With *Kajillionaire*?

Yes. I've always thought that writing books was the most precise medium, the one I can express myself most clearly in, because I have total control. But what if the thing you are trying to express can't be created through effort—I mean, it often can't, right? There is some magical, accidental, or unconscious frisson that's necessary. Then it might follow that the most precise medium is the one that's going to create the most accidents and broken, jagged pieces that can only be organized with a sort of intuitive, exhaustive dream logic. Which is filmmaking.

Does this desire to be thrust into relation with other people relate to your emphasis on participation in your work? Often that participation has to do with complete strangers with whom you form temporary intimacies.

Perhaps everyone feels that there's the real world, and then there's *my* world. Of course, the real world is made of other people's interior lives, but it always seemed ideal if you could create a conduit for people to come into contact across these realms, to link their inner spaces.

You remember getting the first Big Miss Moviola tapes? Nothing was more exciting than a tape sent in by a real woman out there. This is all pre-Internet and it was like some sound barrier had been broken. I felt I could send that stranger's voice back out with great power, amplifying it by recirculating it. And Harrell and I did this too with *Learning to Love You More*. Maybe this goes back to my parents' publishing efforts, the idea of providing a service as opposed to just being an artist.

Was that the feeling when you became pen pals with the prisoner as a young teenager?

I may have told myself I was being helpful, but obviously it was a rebellious act. Although not a very effective one since it was completely in keeping with how I'd been raised. My dad read me *The Executioner's Song* as a child and there was a general sympathy, and maybe kinship, with questionable outsiders.

You foster extreme states, for yourself and sometimes for the audience, too, pushing toward discomfort and self-exposure. Let's say you're on tour for something physically demanding, like *Love Diamond* or *The Swan Tool*. You are staring right into the glare of the video projection, as well as doing things that are emotionally draining, revealing yourself again and again. To get up there and perform requires a *huge* energetic output. I see how it's about proving your strength, but it also does seem really hard. How do you navigate those extremities? How do you plan for the rigor of such performance or manage it afterward? Do you just collapse?

On a bodily level, there's nothing else I do that is as much of a high as performing. When I'm on the stage it's like now I can finally relax. Now I can really be myself because the stakes are right up there where I'm comfortable. The diciest part is coming up with a good idea to begin with. Once I have the idea I'm just so relieved that there's no amount of work or vulnerability that's too much. Some of these projects are really so obscure, like only a handful of people saw them, and yet they took years to make. But it's just a to-do list. You march your way through it and you're grateful to have a list, a process. All the existential anxiety is from the times when I haven't known what to do next. Literally walking around for days and months, trying to intuit what matters, what is mysterious, and be open to a flash of lightning. You can't go straight toward knowing what to do ... you have to forget about it, not despair but hold it in this very gentle way and continue on not knowing if it'll ever end, if you'll ever know the next step. That's the only truly hard part of any of this.

Even with this last movie I remember thinking, *Yeah, this is fucking hard*. I'm beyond exhausted, but this is still better than any given afternoon that has the still, ordinary emptiness where I don't know what to do and I'm online too much.

I was moved to read about Brandon, the young actor from *Me and You*, remembering you whispering symbols to him as he typed about pooping back and forth forever, essentially inventing a taboo, erotic sex act. It was obvious from his recollection how much you cared about him, as a person and as an actor. His performance was so much about how you tenderly elicited it and facilitated it. That that has become a legendary scene of risky and strange sensuality, and it is a bigger part of your whole worldview around perversion and raunchiness and sometimes outrageous sexualities.

Before I wrote those scenes I had just seen Agnes Varda's *Le Petit Amour*, a movie where there's this romance between Jane Birkin who's forty, and a fifteen-year-old boy, a classmate of her daughter's. I was so scandalized by this relationship, which in the movie is just very French, and sort of acceptable. I don't think she exactly got away with it, but I couldn't believe that the movie was even made. I thought, I'd like to take on that challenge of a romance between a child and adult that suggests that our definition of romantic love is different or wider than what has been described to us. As an artist, in fiction, you can do that—you can safely feel out things that are too potentially dangerous for real life. And I wanted to give some authority to the sexuality of children, on its own terms.

Actually, my friend Monet, who's in this book, we regularly "mated" when we were children, she was my first sexual experience and I remember it very clearly. So I knew that something exists before adult sexuality, a different language. In the movie it's pooping back and forth, the most intimate and forbidden act. After I wrote that scene I thought, *This is so negligible, it needs a logo, like a Nike swoosh, some kind of handle for people to grab on to.* That's what))<>((was for.

Sex is good territory artistically because you feel connected to your body when you're writing about it. Although when it's time to read some of these stories out loud in front of an audience, I often feel like I've gone too far. Sex carries too much weight and can overpower subtler things. I do try and be as free as I can when I'm writing and then cut it back before it comes out. Sometimes I don't cut enough, and I have to live with that.

I don't think you go too far. The fact that there are dozens of people who have tattoos of the computer symbols of pooping back and forth suggests that it has found a surprising relevance. Actually, the early drafts of *Me and You* had much more intense bodily stuff. Much of your work has a queer inflection, sometimes implicitly, as when a drastic age difference signals nonnormative or queer sexuality, and sometimes explicitly.

This probably makes more sense for people like you who've known me a long time and have seen me with both women and men. I always feel like I occupy a whole array of sexualities—I just want freedom. To a certain extent, I have that through my work. My work is a way to create more room, to enact some things that just can't happen at all, because they are impossible or too risqué or whatever.

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forever.

That connects to the artistic leap you take in your work where you attempt to inhabit or narrate from pretty different subject positions. I'm thinking of my favorite story in *No One Belongs Here More Than You* about two working-class older men, one of whom is Latino and one of whom is white. They end up having a romance that feels convincing and motivated. I hear what you're saying about how this is a way to keep your own sexuality in its multiplicity, but it also goes back to the question of strangers. Such work stems from profound curiosity about other people's lives and your lack of inhibition about trying to imagine their stories.

Yesterday I had a long Lyft ride, an hour across town, and I was talking on the phone about super-revealing, personal stuff. When I get to my destination, the elderly driver stops the car and says, "I wish I was deaf but I'm not." And I'm like, *Oh shit*. Then he says, "I was in a relationship for many years with a deaf man." So he did mean what I thought he meant initially, but then it took this odd literal turn. He said, "I was very in love with him and I moved here, I changed my whole life to be with him, and after a long time I discovered that he was cheating on me. I've never told anybody this. But your energy has filled this car..." His point was that we both had a guiding inner light and that we were gonna be OK. We blessed each other and wished each other well. I walked out of the car thinking, *Yes, I reach out to strangers, but it goes both ways*. There's just a porousness to life.

Does this sort of thing happen with all your ride-share drivers?

[Laughs] No, no. Oumarou is the only other one. I usually just put my headphones on immediately.

You worked with Oumarou Idrissa on an installation with curtains based on his social media habits and his story of coming to Los Angeles from Niger.

My friendship with Oumarou is one of those relationships that maybe couldn't have existed before smartphones because it began, right, through Uber, and then continued because we texted each other—an easy way to keep a thread alive when you don't have much common ground. From there we somehow got to the place where he was living in my studio for seven months.

And you made a piece with him, about him—*I'm the President, Baby*.

I don't know if this is clear, but the piece came *years* later. He really wanted his story told and I kept saying I can and I will, but it has to come about in some organic way, because I'm not a journalist. And then by the time I was asking him about collaborating it was really him doing me a favor. And I was relieved to have stumbled into a way to tell his story a little bit. We actually just started working on something else together, but it's too early to talk about that.

Your humor can be quite nuanced, and it serves many purposes in your work. Sometimes you are pushing at the edge of something uncomfortable and laughter is a way to break the tension. Sometimes it seems to come from a broader comedic impulse. Sometimes it can be physical, even slapstick.

Anyone who's gone through something truly tragic and horrible knows that there are jokes in that emergency waiting room. That's when sometimes the funniest things are said. Something in you is just like, *Well fucking fuck! If this is what life is like, then there's no rules! I can say anything.* If I'm writing from a place of total fear or panic I have to turn the corner somehow. Comedy kind of bypasses the conscious mind, opens you up. You know how I can always catch an orange?

I'm not sure I know that.

Right, I guess this is more with Mike. He'll throw an orange at me and as long as I'm not paying attention, I can always catch it, whereas of course I'm a terrible athlete. I couldn't catch a ball to save my life in a sporting situation. That is to say that there's something about humor that skips the normal organization of thoughts, of thought to speech. There's some relationship to the unconscious—you can't belabor humor.

Speaking of the unconscious, what is the role for you of non-textual abstraction? You use colors and biomorphic shapes as surrogate signs for desire or attachment or energy. I'm thinking of *Nest of Tens* and your early dot sticker collages on found photos. It feels hard to talk about, but that's the point of abstraction—it allows you to signify things without putting them into words.

There's a whole channel or undernetting of the world that language doesn't apply to. It's spirituality or energy or just unspeakable things—things that have happened that aren't yet able to be articulated.

Of course, you're always struggling to find words for those things, and that's a lifelong quest. But I also think it's OK to be dumb about it because these things are dumb in the sense that they are not intellectual. For a while, I would use these flat, colored shapes as placeholders for those things and make them look cartoony because I didn't want them to point toward sophistication. I even had those in an early draft of *Me and You*.

In *The Future* I did it with the T-shirt that could move by itself. When my character first does that dance in it, I thought, *Another colored shape*. She's at a point that's beyond language. The shapes reappear as the bubbles in *Kajillionaire*. With movies or things that exist in a commercial setting, any way you can get abstraction in there that makes sense is meaningful. It is different from doing it in a performance setting where the whole thing could be abstract and no one would bat an eye.

The headdress in *Eleven Heavy Things*, the dots in *Me and You*—the use of abstract shapes became a kind of visual signature.

This is sort of embarrassing, but I think it also represented, in a really clunky way, art. I didn't go to art school and I didn't know much about art until around the time when I met you. Obviously, I knew art existed, but I didn't know anyone who knew about it and it was a revelation to me. With *Eleven Heavy Things*, I thought, *Now I'm in the Venice Biennale and I should make some Art*. Some of those sculptures, like the pink shape, it's almost like the art that Daffy Duck might see in a museum in a comic book.

Can we talk about the theme of money, which is related to labor, but also to class, to privilege, and to a lack of privilege? Money functions in its usual way as abstracted value, but you also disrupt those flows through various anti-capitalist propositions.

I think my brother and I have this fundamental confusion about money and class; probably most people do. It wasn't that my family was so poor, but my parents didn't participate in materialism in many of the ways that matter to a child and meanwhile my dad had a particular kind of anxiety that I think made him do some slightly odd things vis-à-vis money. He would probably describe them differently but I thought of them as tricks or scams. I felt we were always getting away with something.

In the mid-1990s you somehow had Roseanne Barr's FedEx number and used it for years to ship things for Big Miss Moviola. Once there was some clip of her on TV looking terrified and you joked, "She finally got the FedEx bill."

The moment I left home I approached the world with a thief's mind-set. I've been thinking about this a lot because of *Kajillionaire*. It's not that my parents were petty criminals like the parents in that movie—not at all—but my dad's anxiety created a ripple effect. Like when my mom and I went shopping, which was thrift-store shopping, if my dad heard the shopping bags crinkling we'd be in trouble for buying stuff. So she would give the bags to me and I'd hide the clothes in the backyard and put the shopping bags in the bottom of the outside garbage can. Then, after everyone went to bed, I'd bring the clothes into the house and sneak them into our closets. I guess this is the opposite of stealing, but it's sneaky. I think what I initially took from all this was an ethos of scams and stealing, but that eventually matured into a more law-abiding sense that I could get by in the margins through constant self-invention. Which has served me well.

Money is alive and mutable in its meaning, but also it's nothing at all. It's full of feelings for everybody, full of anxiety and longing. It's like sex that way. There's no one who doesn't have a strong reaction to it. I have a lot of recent work that has to do with money as a material, as in the charity shop. In *New Society* we create currency.

It's power, condensed. It's work, condensed. It's inequality, condensed. So much of your work is about exchange and transaction, and money crystallizes all these issues.

Probably for everyone, money is this malformed little beast. Who is doing money perfectly? I'm imagining men putting twenties in the peep show. That's how much a full-nude show would cost, the baseline amount that opened the curtain. Then I'm thinking about the weird things I sometimes still have to do to get money for different art projects. You can make art about it, but you're also living it, and it directly impacts the work you're able to make.

I'm always surprised how much you still have to hustle. This has to do with the devaluation of women's art, but also your multiplicity, I think. People are already nervous about investing in someone who might be two things, a mother and an artist, and then you increase that nervousness by being four or five things—no matter that you so consistently follow through at a very high level.

And hustle only gets you so far, you need a few breaks. Of course, so many people have helped me along the way. But the people who really *challenged* me, who said, *I see you and raise you*, were women; women gatekeepers, such as Kristy Edmunds, Michelle Satter, Dede Gardner ... these people took a risk, put money and themselves on the line. It's only really happened a few times, to be honest, just enough.

Right, most people think of *Me and You* as your breakout, but *Love Diamond* [commissioned by Kristy Edmunds] felt like a wild leap at the time. After *Me and You*, what was it like to transition back to your other forms?

Well, once you've made a movie that's gone all over the world, you feel how few people see a given performance. And now the audience was filled with people who'd seen the movie and who wanted to see the girl from it. That threw me.

At that point a few things happened. I thought, *Why do performance?* What is the thing that it can do that movies and books can't? To me it has to do with these particular people being there, together, on this particular night. *We're all here in this theater right now.* If you could get at that, it would be worth the trouble. So I went deep into real audience participation—anything that could make it feel like it could only have happened this way once, tonight.

The other thing is I started to think, *What are ways you could perform without being there?* I was sick of my actual body having to be there for anything to happen. I included the window shade for *The Thing Quarterly* in this book even though it's a tiny project I did for other people. You pull down this shade and it says, "If this shade is down, I'm not who you think I am." It's a small act of performance. So small, so unambitious in a way, but I liked it for those reasons. That led to *The Hallway* and *Eleven Heavy Things*. Those were all the same sort of thing. I thought of them as performances, but the viewers were the performers and I just set up the circumstances for them.

One other reason why I wanted to include the window shade and a few other little projects is not because I think every little thing I do is so fascinating, but because not everything important happens at a grand scale. Sometimes, with lower stakes, you might allow yourself to think more loosely, you might have a newer idea, than you would with your next movie or book.

In those projects you step out and have the audience complete the situation. But in *New Society* you put yourself back in the center of the arena, so to speak. It was a dramatic recentralization of you as the main figure.

The thing that always bugged me was that the only reason the audience is participating is because I asked them to—it seemed like there should be a deeper motivation. I never was satisfied with the conceptual framework of these performances even though I liked what they engendered.

Then I had an invitation from the San Francisco Film Festival. They wanted to know if I would do something for just two hundred people, I think maybe it was for their donors or something. I said no, I was busy with my novel. But I took a moment to think about what you could do with two hundred people that you couldn't do with a larger audience, and that's when I had the idea that you could ask those two hundred people to form a new society. And then you could do that with them in the theater, over the course of the performance. Ah! Finally, that's a reason.

Let's talk about how, as a woman artist, you have embraced technology. *The Amateurist*, *Big Miss Moviola*, *Learning to Love You More*, *We Think Alone*, *I'm the President*, *Baby*—technology is both a theoretical subject and also a genre. Sometimes the work anticipates technological developments. *Eleven Heavy Things* was made for people to take and share pictures of themselves, but Instagram didn't really exist yet. Maybe it's similar to money, in that technology can be about exchange as well as alienation? You have done very advanced things with technology, like the app *Somebody*, actual engineering feats.

There's something off-putting about technology. It seems not for me, not for a woman, not for an artist, or not for a dreamy person. That's the challenge of it. With *Learning to Love You More*, Harrell and I felt it was almost funny, making a website where you uploaded *art*, since uploading was brand new and just for, like, work documents.

It feels lucky to have straddled these two eras, the analog and the digital. What an interesting transition to have lived through. When you hear of some old woman and read, "In her lifetime cars were invented. She went to school in a horse and buggy," you imagine that woman being really bewildered. You almost feel bad for her. But actually, that's probably not right. That woman may have been in a great position to see the car for what it really was and wasn't, and approach it with noncompliance. As opposed to me who just accepts cars. There is some kind of torque made available by this position of being this age in this year. It's a built-in question mark in our lives.

Looking at your entire career, it is clear that you are a new media artist. That's a box you could comfortably check.

But I don't!