RIZZUTOGALLERY
PALERMO - DÜSSELDORF

MORGAINE SCHÄFER

Morgaine Schäfer (1989, Wolfsburg, Lower Saxony. Lives and works in Düsseldorf)



Morgaine Schäfer was born in 1989 in Wolfsburg, Lower Saxony, Germany, to a Polish mother and a German father. Her dual cultural heritage - growing up in a newly reunified Germany, with Polish roots on her mother's side - constitutes the profound driving force behind her entire artistic practice. As she recounts in her conversation with Barbara HofmannJohnson: "As a child I had a latent feeling of being out of place. I sensed that my mother was torn between her present life and the one she had left behind." Schäfer's mother, originally from Poznań, moved from Poland to West Germany after meeting the artist's father, Bernd Werner Schäfer. During the 1970s and early 1980s, her father photographically documented family life with hundreds of 35 mm slides, creating an archive that would become, decades later, the raw material for his daughter's work. This visual heritage mainly depicts the artist's mother - newly arrived from Poland - in everyday moments, on journeys and in family scenes, as she found her bearings in a new country, a foreign language and a different culture. Schäfer's birthplace, Wolfsburg, is not an anecdotal detail: it is the historic home of Volkswagen and a place deeply marked by German automotive culture. This element resurfaces in some of her early series, particularly Autobahn A-Z, revealing an early attention to movement, geographical displacement and identity as connected to place.

Education

Morgaine Schäfer's academic path took place entirely at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, one of Europe's most prestigious institutions for photography and contemporary art, and a cradle of the so-called Düsseldorf School founded by Bernd and Hilla Becher and continued by Thomas Ruff, Thomas Struth, Candida Höfer and Andreas Gursky. 2010–2017 — Studied Fine Art (Photography) in the class of Professor Christopher Williams, a central figure in contemporary conceptual photography, known for his rigorous and analytical approach to the conditions of production and reception of the photographic image. 2017 — Obtained the title of Meisterschülerin under Christopher Williams, the Academy's highest academic distinction, reserved for its most promising students. 2016 — Received a DAAD language-study grant for Katowice, Poland, an experience that strengthened her connection with her Polish roots. Christopher Williams's influence on Schäfer's work is profound and recognisable: from her teacher, Schäfer inherits an attention to the material and medial conditions of the photographic image—the frame, the support, the viewing apparatus and the context of reception—but develops it in an intimate and autobiographical direction that is entirely her own.

Poetics

The foundational gesture in Morgaine Schäfer's work is re-framing. The artist does not take new photographs; she starts from a pre-existing family archive—the hundreds of 35 mm slides taken by her father—and subjects it to a process of reworking that is both analytical and poetic. This is neither restoration nor nostalgia: Schäfer does not seek to preserve the images of the past as they are, but transforms them into new objects, constructing what may be described as "a fabricated rather than inherited memory".

The Archive as Practice

Before being a method, Schäfer's practice is archival work. The artist recovered her father's slides from the family cellar and subjected them to a process of selection and categorisation—according to criteria such as boring/not boring, colours, people/no people and number of people in the image—creating her own system of organisation which, as Daria Bona observes, proceeds "in an archival manner". The abbreviation BWS, which gives its title to many of the works, is itself an archival code: the initials of her father's name transformed into a system of classification. This archival work is not a preamble but an integral part of the artistic practice: selecting, discarding, categorising and renaming are creative gestures just as much as photographing or printing. Schäfer is not only the heir to an archive, but its architect: she decides what enters and what remains outside, what is enlarged and what remains in the background, which images deserve a handwritten note and which speak for themselves.

Method and Series

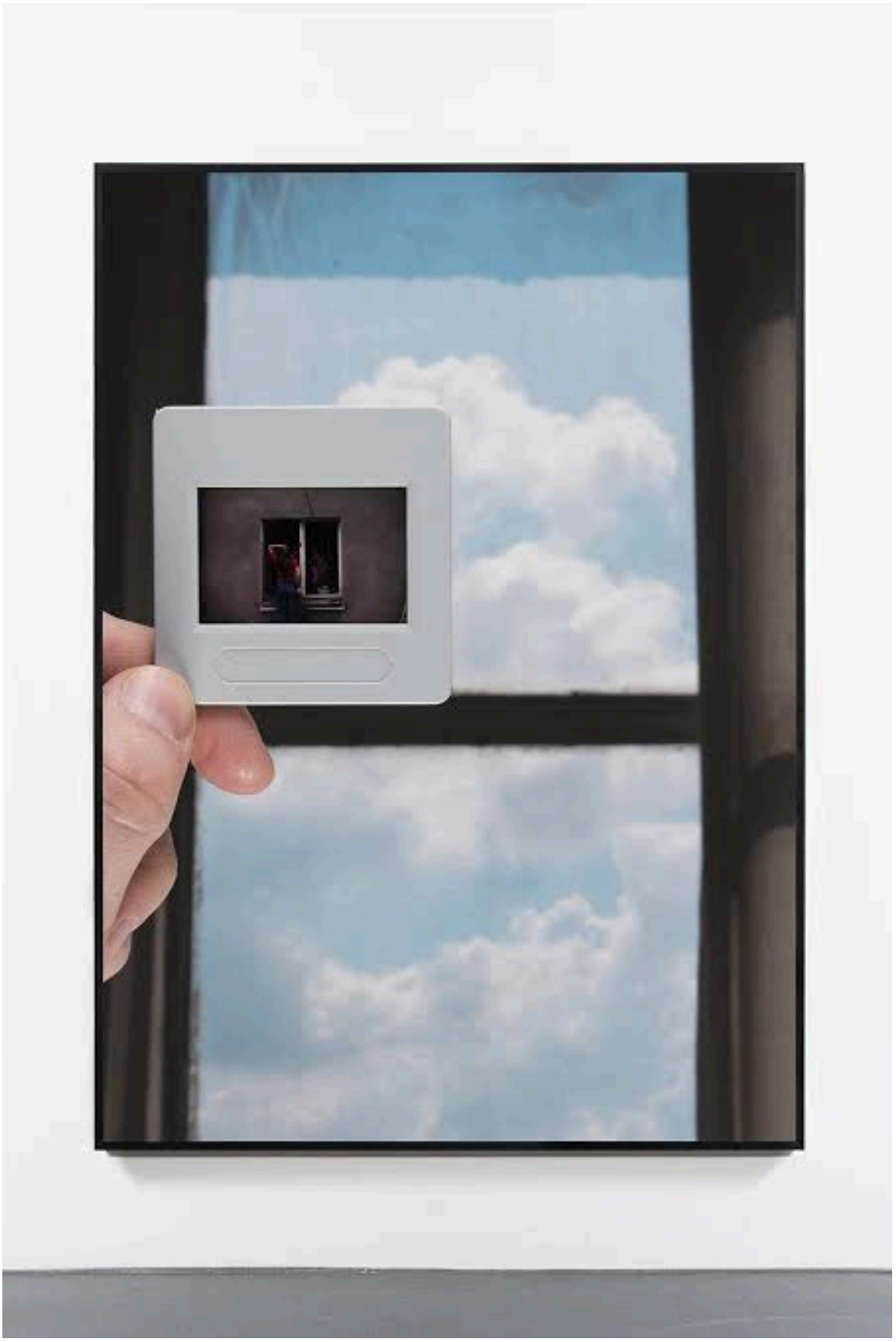
Schäfer's method is articulated through three fundamental gestures, each corresponding to a series or group of works.

1. Projection and Re-photography
The slides are projected or held against the light and re-photographed. The artist's hand holding the slide becomes a recurring motif—a gesture that is both affective (holding, preserving) and analytical (examining, framing). The BWS series, in which the abbreviation stands for Bernd Werner Schäfer, embodies this first gesture: each work shows a slide held in a hand against a background, creating an image within an image, a window within a window.

2. Enlargement and Decomposition
In the magnify BWS series, the artist isolates details from the original slides and enlarges them, often framing them through a smartphone screen. The frame is fragmented and recomposed as a multi-layered collage: we see enlargements on a screen framed by the black border of the phone. Various details of the images, as well as of the original support and frame, overlap. The artist's mother—photographed by her father as she walks through the city, shops or pauses at the entrance to the underground—is observed from a distance, apparently unaware that she is being photographed.

3. Explanation and Description

The explanatory series proceeds through triptychs: a slide on a paper background, the same image projected, and finally a handwritten note describing the scene. Here visual perception encounters textual description in a short circuit that calls both regimes into question: the image is not sufficient unto itself and needs words; words, in turn, cannot exhaust the image. This is Schäfer's most conceptual gesture, the point at which Christopher Williams's legacy - the interrogation of the codes and conventions governing the production and reception of images - is most evident.



BWS 1089 (Window), 2020. Inkjet print, 140 x 100 cm



magnify BWS 2116 (Fabric Shopping), 2020. Inkjet Print, 140 x 100 cm



explanatory BWS 1243 (On the Waterfront), 2018. Inkjet Print, triptychon, 50 x 40 cm (each)

Central Themes

Memory and Identity

Personal and family history become a lens through which to question collective memory. The father's slides are not only private recollections: they are documents of an era, of migration and of the condition of women in the second half of twentieth-century Germany. Schäfer transforms the particular into the universal without losing the intimate grain of the source material.

The Gaze and Voyeurism

Schäfer's work constructs a chain of gazes that problematises seeing: the father observing the mother through the viewfinder; Schäfer observing the father observing; the viewer observing everything through the works. As Daria Bona writes: "We look through the camera's viewfinder and automatically become voyeurs." Here it is primarily a male gaze that frames the female protagonist, while the artist, by taking up those images again, reflects on the power structures governing seeing and being seen.

Migration and Dual Belonging

The mother between Poland and Germany, and the artist herself between two worlds. The words Westen and wschód, which appear as cut-outs in the carpet in the installations, are emblems of this unresolved tension: one cannot be in the West and the East at the same time, yet Schäfer inhabits precisely that threshold. Her identity does not choose between the two belongings, but holds them together in a state of suspension.

Femininity and Social Roles

From the deaconesses - women who in the nineteenth century chose a life independent of marriage by entering religious communities - to the mother photographed in public spaces, Schäfer investigates the construction of female identity across generations. The Diakonissen series (2021), with its sculptural bonnets in different fabrics, offers an alternative female genealogy: women who, within the limits of their historical periods, found ways to construct an autonomous life.

The Photographic Medium

Schäfer's works are always also a reflection on photography itself—on its history, its conventions and its claim to truthfulness. As Daria Bona observes, quoting Susan Sontag: "Photographs are not windows offering a transparent view of the world as it is […] They create and confirm these myths and patterns"; a selective and transformed window onto reality, which is both the subject and the instrument of Schäfer's investigation.

Spatial and Installational Expansion

Schäfer's practice is not limited to the two-dimensional photographic print. Since her final Academy project, the artist has developed spatial installations in which photographs enter into dialogue with sculptural and architectural elements. The installation Westen – wschód (2017), awarded the Ehrenhof Prize, arranged skin-coloured curtains and photographic portraits in a space where the words "Westen" (German for "west") and "wschód" (Polish for "east") appeared cut into the carpet and oriented according to the actual cardinal directions. The Diakonissen installations (2021), with their deaconesses' bonnets, carry the research into threedimensional space with a sculptural component.

Le "Diakonissen"

Within Morgaine Schäfer's body of work the Diakonissen occupy a particularly important position. In a predominantly photographic production, this series represents the point at which her research reaches its greatest spatial and sculptural expansion, and the moment when her investigation into female identity - already central to her work - finds a plastic, tactile and three-dimensional form. No longer photographs of photographs, but objects occupying the viewer's real space, imposing a physical relationship before a visual one. The series emerged from a family discovery: Schäfer's great-aunt Karoline Meinecke - affectionately called "Aunt Lienchen" - had been a deaconess at the Henriettenstift in Hanover, one of northern Germany's most important deaconess institutions. Through family chronicles and archival research, Schäfer reconstructs not only her great-aunt's biography, but the entire social, symbolic and material universe of the deaconesses. As the artist explains in her dialogue with curator Barbara Hofmann-Johnson: "Since my father's parents died young, I know them only through his stories. There are especially many stories about one of my grandmother's favourite aunts. Aunt Lienchen, or Karoline Meinecke, was a deaconess." A little further on she says: "The pinboard shows a visual approach to the profession of a deaconess. What is a deaconess and why did women take up this profession or follow this vocation? What kind of lives did these women lead, and what advantages and limitations did they have? Why did my greataunts choose this path? And what was the condition of women and what opportunities did they have in their time?" These are the questions animating the Diakonissen, making the series much more than a family tribute: it is a critical investigation into the material conditions of female emancipation, its historical forms, limits and ambiguities.

Who Were the Deaconesses? A Historical Genealogy

To understand the importance of Schäfer's work, it is necessary to reconstruct, however briefly, the historical figure of the deaconess. From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, deaconesses entered Protestant communities of life and faith founded on the model of the Diakonissenanstalten established by the Lutheran pastor Theodor Fliedner in Kaiserswerth, near Düsseldorf, in 1836. These were female communities that combined religious life with professional training: deaconesses learned professions in nursing and the care of the elderly and children, and could work as pharmacists or administrators. They received a comprehensive education and enjoyed social

security, board and lodging, in exchange for celibacy and service. At a time when unmarried women were socially marginalised - without rights, without access to professions and economically dependent on fathers, brothers or husbands - the deaconess vocation offered a way out: an independent, dignified and socially recognised existence. The clothing itself was its sign: the dark dress, the white apron and, above all, the bonnet (Haube), which covered the hair for hygienic reasons but also had a powerful symbolic meaning. It indicated that these women were socially regarded as equivalent to married women. No longer unmarried daughters, but sisters - Schwestern - consecrated to a public role. As Schäfer remarks in her dialogue with Hofmann-Johnson: “Of course, these bonnets also have the simple hygienic function of covering the hair. But they also have a symbolic character: they are a sign that these women enjoyed equal social rights to married women.” The sentence closes on an intentionally ambiguous question: equal, yes - but at what price? The solo exhibition in which the Diakonissen were presented to the public was titled Schwestern, and was hosted by Galerie fiebach, minninger in Cologne from 3 September to 23 October 2021. The title is polysemous: it evokes both the religious community and the bond of blood and connection joining the artist to these forgotten ancestors. The exhibition included three large, coloured bonnets bearing the names of three deaconesses - Dorette, Hilde and Anna - whose life stories had affected or surprised the artist.

The Work: Sculptural Bonnets

The Diakonissen are large sculptural bonnets (Hauben) mounted on heads and metal supports. Inspired in form by early versions of the bonnets worn by the deaconesses of the Henriettenstift in Hanover, these objects appear as vertical sculptures that occupy space with a presence that is at once domestic and monumental.

Materials and Colours

The choice of fabrics is an integral part of the work’s meaning. Each bonnet is made from different materials, chosen to evoke - and at the same time problematise - social belonging. As reported by critical sources, “the different designs and fabrics reflect the strength and diversity” of the deaconesses. Schäfer uses materials such as satin to allude to the bourgeoisie, or latex in relation to prostitution, evoking the social class of the person wearing it, even though the act of wearing the bonnet symbolically erased class differences. The bonnets are mounted on steel and polystyrene structures that raise them to approximately 170–175 cm - the height of a standing person. Their dimensions are crucial: these are not objects to be viewed on a pedestal, but presences that share the scale of the human body, almost as figures in absentia, silhouettes emptied of their person yet filled with their memory.



Deaconess Dorette. Fabric, polystyrene and steel, 170 × 60 × 60 cm, 2021. Variable-dimensions bonnet mounted on head (50 × 40 × 20 cm) and support (163 × 50 × 50 cm).



Deaconess Marie (Henriettenstift Hanover). Fabric, steel and polystyrene, 175 × 35 × 35 cm, 2021.

Femininity and Social Roles

The central theme of the Diakonissen is the historical and social construction of female identity. “From the deaconesses - women who in the nineteenth century chose a life independent of marriage by entering religious communities - to the mother photographed in public spaces, Schäfer investigates the construction of female identity across generations. The Diakonissen series, with its sculptural bonnets in different fabrics, offers an alternative female genealogy: women who, within the limits of their historical periods, found ways to construct an autonomous life.” This is not an uncritical celebration: Schäfer highlights both the strength and the ambiguity of that choice. The question posed by the Diakonissen is not “How free were these women?” but rather: “What did it mean, for a woman in the nineteenth century, to be able to choose something in a world that offered her no possibility of choice?”

The Absent Body

The bonnets are empty objects. There is no face beneath the Haube, no body wearing it. The sculpture is simultaneously presence and absence: although the bonnet is enlarged to a monumental scale, its very form declares the absence of the person who should inhabit it. Schäfer transforms a garment - one of the most ephemeral and personal things - into a sculptural monument, but empties it, leaving the viewer to imagine the body, voice and life that once existed within it. This strategy has deep roots in the artist’s photographic work: in the BWS and magnify BWS series, Schäfer’s mother is always seen from a distance, through the filter of the slide, the viewfinder or the smartphone screen. There is never direct access to the female figure, who remains constantly mediated, framed and observed. The Diakonissen bring this distance into three-dimensional space: the sculpture does not close the distance, but makes it physical.

Archive and Memory

The Diakonissen also represent a turning point in Schäfer’s method, marking the transition from an inherited archive - the father’s slides - to an archive that has been actively sought out - the documents on the deaconesses, family chronicles and historical photographs of the Henriettenstift. No longer the involuntary domestic raw material of a photographer father, but an active, almost historiographical research conducted by the artist herself. In the dialogue with Hofmann-Johnson, the curator explicitly observes: “In the group of works mentioned as Diakonissen, within the analysis of female identity and socially determined female roles, you effectively carried out research in an archive in relation to the investigation of your family origins and created a cross-media work with archival material, conceptual maps, sketches and other elements.”

The Gaze and Voyeurism

The theme of the gaze - central to Schäfer’s entire practice - finds a new expression in the Diakonissen. In the photographic series, the chain of gazes was explicit: the father observing the mother through the viewfinder; Schäfer observing the father observing; the viewer observing everything through the works. With the Diakonissen, the gaze becomes a physical encounter: the

viewer no longer looks through a lens, but shares space with the object and measures its height, moving around it. It is a passage from optical voyeurism to phenomenological presence.

From Photography to Sculpture: A Necessary Transition

Westen – wschód

To understand the singularity of the Diakonissen in Schäfer's development, it is necessary to consider the context of her earlier production. Until 2020, the artist's work was predominantly two-dimensional, even when it incorporated installational elements. The series Westen – wschód (2017), her final Academy project, awarded the Ehrenhof Prize, arranged skincoloured curtains and photographic portraits in a space where the words "Westen" (west, in German) and "wschód" (east, in Polish) appeared cut into the carpet and oriented according to the actual cardinal directions. Yet the images remained at the heart of the installation. With the Diakonissen, Schäfer takes a more radical step: for the first time, the photographs move into the background - or, more precisely, migrate from the wall to the pinboard, becoming part of the research process rather than its outcome. What the viewer encounters are objects: fabric bonnets hanging from steel supports.



Westen – wschód, 2017. Typographic installation and curtains, 750 × 400 cm.

This transition was prepared by two bridge works: the installation A Touch of Light (2018), a digital print on chiffon measuring 280 × 700 cm that transformed a photograph into a semi-transparent spatial diaphragm; and the series gebunden (2021), screenprints on fabric that already explored the possibilities of the soft support. The Diakonissen complete this trajectory: what was image becomes volume, what was surface becomes space.



A Touch of Light, 2018. Digital print on chiffon, 280 x 700 cm

BIO

Education

2010–2017 — Fine Art (Photography) with Professor Christopher Williams, Akademiebrief, Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.
2017 — Meisterschülerin, Professor Christopher Williams, Kunstakademie Düsseldorf

Solo Exhibitions

2026 — Constructed Memory (with Martina Sauter), RizzutoGallery, Palermo.
2025 — Exhibition at Kjubh Kunstverein e.V., Cologne.
2024 — Through the looking glass, Städtische Galerie Regensburg, International Festival of Photographic Images.
2024 — Perspektiven, Galerie fiebach, minninger, Cologne.
2023 — Inside, Kunstverein Wolfsburg.
2023 — Through the looking glass, Museum für Photographie Braunschweig.
2022 — handle with care, Neuland, Bochum.
2022 — Okno [oko], Kunstverein Recklinghausen.
2021 — Schwestern, Galerie fiebach, minninger, Cologne.
2021 — New Positions, Art Cologne Fair.
2018 — hell, freundlich grüßend, Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf.
2018 — Berta, Baustelle Schaustelle, Essen.
2018 — A Touch Of Light, Galerie Fiebach Minninger, Cologne.
2015 — The Body In Perpetual Motion, Buchhandlung Walther König, Düsseldorf.
2013 — Morgaine Schäfer, das junge Museum, Bottrop.

Selected Group Exhibitions

2025 — Perspektivwechsel. Fotografinnen in Düsseldorf, Stadtmuseum Düsseldorf.
2025 — On Photography, Beton Box, Düsseldorf.
2025 — 21 x 21 Ruhrkunstmuseen auf dem Hügel, Villa Hügel, Essen.
2024 — Size Matters. Grösse in der Fotografie, Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf.
2024 — are you sure you want to delete this?, Kunsthaus NRW Kornelimünster, Aachen.
2024 — Lore #TLV, Artists' Studios Sadnoat Haomanim, Tel Aviv.
2023 — Art Düsseldorf, with Galerie fiebach, minninger.
2022 — At first sight. Neue Einblicke in die Sammlung, Kunsthalle Recklinghausen.
2021 — Sweet Lies. Fiktionen der Zugehörigkeit., Ludwig Forum Aachen.
2021 — Kunstpreis junger Westen, Kunsthalle Recklinghausen.
2021 — werden. From Michelangelo to, Tiroler Landesmuseum, Innsbruck, Austria.
2020 — SUBJEKT und OBJEKT. Foto Rhein Ruhr, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.
2020 — Stiftungspreis Fotokunst 2020, Kunstwerk Sammlung Klein, Eberdingen-Nussdorf.
2019 — Paris Photo, Galerie Dix9, Paris, France.
2019 — Next Generation — Aktuelle Fotografie made im Rheinland, Museum Morsbroich, Leverkusen.
2019 — memo, Setareh Gallery, Düsseldorf.
2019 — Moment, Achenbach/Hagemeier, Berlin.

2019 — Cecilia, sweetwater, Berlin.
2019 — you are here, Kölnisches Stadtmuseum, Cologne.
2018 — Arti — Auf den Punkt, Kunstverein Wolfsburg.
2017 — 71. Internationaler Bergischer Kunstpreis, Kunstmuseum Solingen.
2017 — Only Revolutions, Galerie Fiebach, Minninger, Cologne.
2017 — Genius Loci 5, Setareh Gallery, Düsseldorf.
2016 — I started saying no and began losing weight., Filmwerkstatt Düsseldorf.
2015 — Der Tiger und die Autobahn, Off Space Projekte, Bernkastel-Kues.
2014 — No Water, No Snacks, No Naps, f/Stopp Festival, Leipzig.
2014 — Deliciosa, Studio for Artistic Research, Düsseldorf.
2013 — No Electricity, No Gas, No Water, Baustelle Schaustelle, Essen.

Publications - Catalogues and Monographs

Through the looking glass, Museum für Photographie Braunschweig, edited by the museum, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König / König Books, 2023.
Okno — Window, Morgaine Schäfer, self-published, 2020.
Hell, freundlich grüßend, Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast, self-published, 2018.

Contributions to Edited Publications (selection)

A–Z Kunst in NRW 2000–2023, Kunsthaus NRW Kornelimünster, edited by the institution, 2024.
Size matters. Größe in der Fotografie, Museum Kunstpalast, edited by the museum, 2024.
Kunstpreis junger Westen, Kunsthalle Recklinghausen, edited by the institution, 2021.
SUBJEKT und OBJEKT, Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, edited by the institution, 2020.
Stiftungspreis Fotokunst 2020, Sammlung Klein, edited by the collection, 2020.
Next Generations, Museum Morsbroich, edited by the museum, 2019.
Förderpreis des Landes NRW, Ministerium für Kultur und Bildung, 2018.
71. Internationaler Bergischer Kunstpreis, Kunstmuseum Solingen, edited by the museum, 2017.
Genius Loci 5, Setareh Gallery, edited by the gallery, 2017.
A suspenseful picture, A sexy picture, A sickening picture, Studio for Propositional Cinema, edited by the studio, 2016.
Katalog 2, Williams Klasse, edited by the class, 2012.

Public Collections

Sammlung IKS PHOTO — Institut für Kunstdokumentation und Szenografie, Düsseldorf.

Awards and Grants

2022 — Junge Szene, Kunststiftung NRW.
2019–2021 — Studio grant, Kölnischer Kunstverein, Cologne.
2018 — Förderpreis des Landes NRW für Bildende Kunst.
2018 — Bronner Residency, Tel Aviv, six months, Kunststiftung NRW.
2017 — 71. Internationaler Bergischer Kunstpreis, Kunstmuseum Solingen.

2017 — Ehrenhof Preis, Stiftung Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf.
2016 — DAAD grant, Katowice, Poland.

Projects and Initiatives

2020–2024 — Artistic member, Kunstkommission Düsseldorf.
2018 — פנורמה | Panorama, Tel Aviv.
2017–2019 — Member of the curatorium of Simultanhalle e.V., Cologne.
2017 — Curator, “if the body is a temple and a body is a subject and a temple has walls — it becomes apparent that a temple is a body”, Moscow Museum of Modern Art.
2015 — Societé Infinie, founding member, temporary artistic association for art and debate, Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.
2013 — Sophisticated Lover, two-month project bar with rotating exhibitions and events.