

# Art & Museums

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## Eye spy

Julia Scher's work foresaw our world of privacy invasion. By *Paul Laster*  
Photographs by *Hollis Johnson*

**AT A MOMENT** when our lives are tracked and sold as data, Julia Scher's installations from the late 1980s to the mid-2000s seem especially prescient. Combining CCTV footage with sculptural elements (a four-poster bed, a guard-dog statue), Scher's pieces probe the proliferation of surveillance systems that dress invasions of privacy in the sheep's clothing of security. Born in Hollywood and currently living in Cologne, Germany, Scher now returns to the U.S. for her first NYC show in 15 years, held at Ortuzar Projects, where she discusses her work and its sometimes confessional qualities.

**Have you always been interested in surveillance?**

Actually, I started out as a landscape painter.

**What made you change?**

It started in art school, when I saw a photo by Susan Meiselas from El Salvador's civil war. It showed a hillside firing range covered by targets with silhouettes of torsos. So, I

began to paint people framed inside those same shapes. After a while, they began to remind me of TV monitors, so I switched mediums.

**One of your earlier videos, *Discipline Masters*, from 1988, is just you addressing the camera about your childhood. It's not really about surveillance, is it?**

It's still related because surveillance is about exposure, about letting things out that you've been hiding. It's a confession.

**You talk about your abusive parents in the video.**

Yes, living with them was like being in prison.

**Was it traumatic to revisit those memories?**

No, I loved doing it. I thought of it as theater. But I also knew watching it would be torturous, especially at its original 11-hour running time. I didn't show it until 2003, and when I finally did, after editing it to almost four hours, I was frankly shocked that people wanted to see it.



**“Surveillance is about exposure, about letting things out that you’ve been hiding.”**



*Masters of Discipline*

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**Was everything in it true? Your dad really was an alcoholic cross-dresser?**

Yes! You can’t make this stuff up. But the idea was to find words to deal with it—how to talk about it and make it into art.

**Let’s talk about another piece: *Mama Bed*. It’s a four-poster bed loaded with cameras and screens—with a whip placed on the mattress. What’s that about?**

Sexuality: Beds are places of reproduction, of regeneration and birth, after all. But it’s also part of an ensemble that includes *Papa Bed* and *Baby Bed*, so it relates to Goldilocks and the Three Bears and the questions the story raises about strength, size, watchfulness and choice.

**You have a new sound piece in which you direct viewers through the exhibition as a form of control. You also talk about making promises—you’ve even titled the show “American Promises.” What do you mean?**

I suppose it means that, despite everything, people from far away still want to immigrate to America, largely because of what they see on TV. They feel compelled to come here, but it’s a paradox, because it’s their choice. A promise isn’t a command.

→ “Julia Scher: American Promises” is at Ortuzar Projects through July 26 ([ortuzarprojects.com](http://ortuzarprojects.com)).