

FLORIDA WEEKLY HOME

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woman curled up in a refrigerator, reading a book. and bustier, A woman in gas mask rising from the waters off Cape Romano near Marco Island. You never know what you're just going to see you look at when a Mila Bridger photograph.

"I dream of them," the artist says of her images. "I've got a very vivid imagination, I guess." She refers to her photographs as "vomiting from my brain."

Ms. Bridger's work is well known in Southwest Florida. She's been featured in Naples Illustrated, Gulf + Main and was one of Gulfshore Life magazine's 2015 40 Under 40 Award recipients.





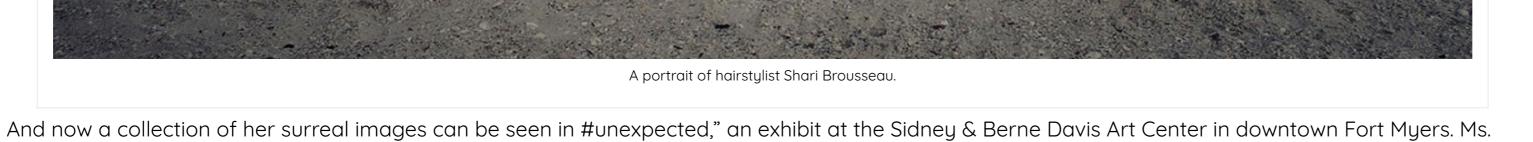
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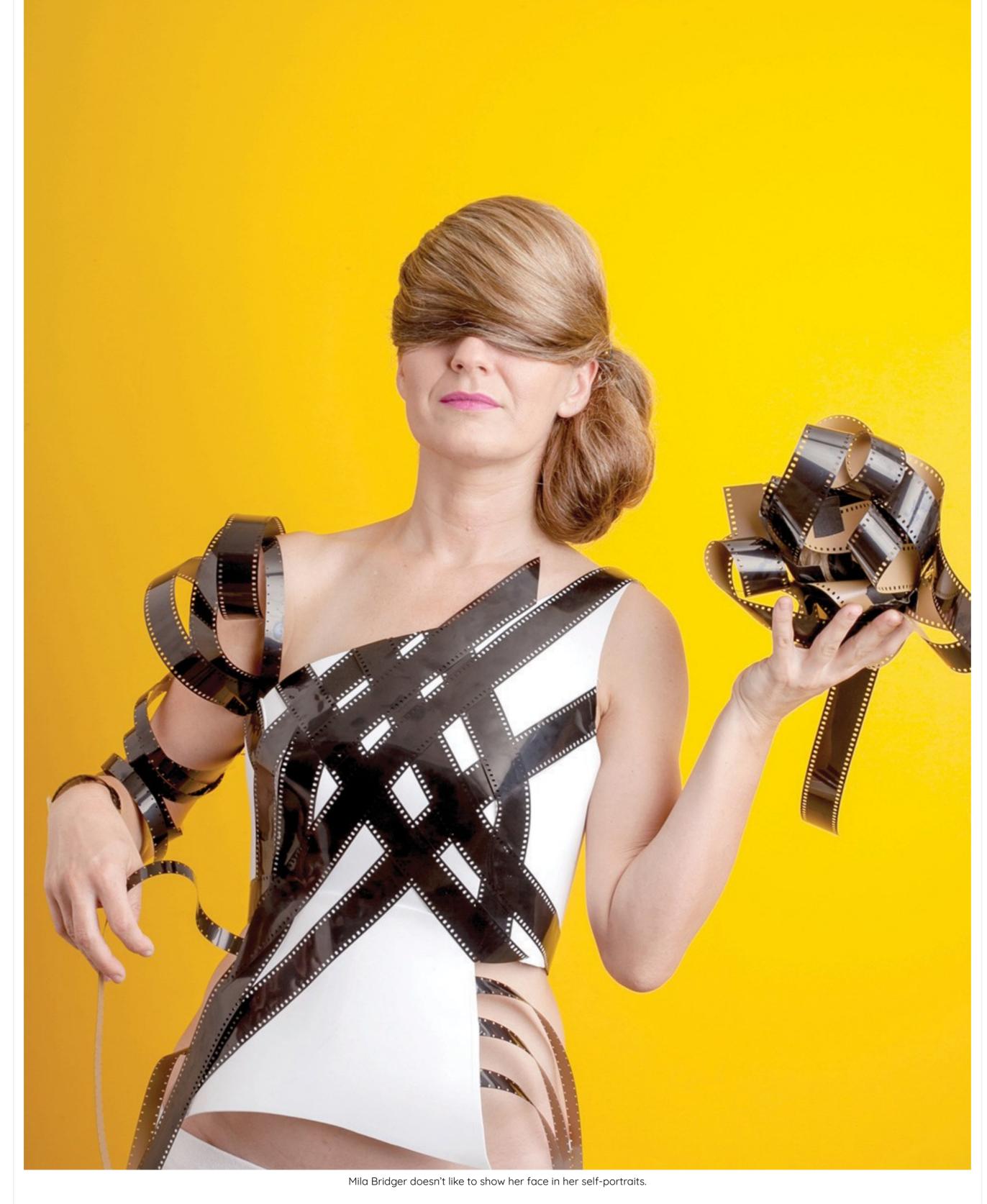


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"I don't know how Mila does it, but her mind is so wildly open to new ideas. She is inspired daily by things," says friend and fan Annette Trossbach, founder and producing artistic director of Laboratory Theater of Florida. "To be an artist, so often, is to be a vessel, just to let the ideas flow. But when you've got bills to pay and a fridge to stock and checkbooks to balance, it can be tough not to get caught up in mundane, concrete, material things."

Bridger will discuss her work during a closing party for the exhibit from 6-8 p.m. Tuesday, July 26.

The photographs are indeed unexpected; the show is a journey through Ms. Bridger's funhouse brain and imagination.



Last season, Ms. Bridger shot nude portraits of the cast of Lab Theater's "Calendar Girls," a group of women in their 40s to just-on-the-cusp of 80. Just like the characters they portrayed in the play, the local actors posed for a calendar, their private parts cleverly covered by items such as giant cupcakes and broccoli.

Ms. Bridger donated her time and talent, and the calendars were sold to raise money for Partners for Breast Cancer Care. "The girls were amazing. It was so much fun," she says about the calendar project. "They were raising money, so that was beautiful."



Always outside the box

The word "conventional" does not seem to be in Ms. Bridger's vocabulary. Her portraits are fresh, unusual, something out of a fantasy or a dream.

For example, she painted two legs of her sofa blue. It looked so good she decided to paint half her apartment cobalt blue as well, including all the furniture.



That part of her apartment works as a backdrop for an on-going series of portraits of creative people — dancers, writers, painters — who call Southwest Florida home. "I try to bring their personality and what they do to the photo," she says. "I always try to shoot them in a little surreal setting, but always showing who they are."

One portrait of fashion designer and painter Mariapia Malerba shows the woman dressed in flowing white against a blue background.

"She is amazing when it comes to designing clothes," Ms. Bridger says. "When I have my crazy ideas, I know who to ask."

For example, she asked for Ms. Malerba's help when she made a portrait of a woman who writes the annual Naples Scout Guide. "I wanted the woman to wear a dress made up of her books," she says, so she asked Ms. Malerba to create a long giant skirt and top out of the guide's pages.



It's this out-of-the-box thinking that makes Ms. Bridger's photographs so visually compelling.

Her self-portrait promoting "#unexpected" shows her wearing a sweater with the image of a Boston terrier on the front. Ms. Bridger's long blonde hair is

combed forward, wrapping and swirling around her face, covering all her features Sia-like.

"I don't like showing my face," she says.

#### Early beginnings

Ms. Bridger began taking photographs when she was a young girl growing up in Poland.

Her father, a nuclear physicist, took photos as a hobby, and her mother was in charge of the modern art section of the Museum Okregowe in Koszalin.

But it was her grandfather, she says, who gave her her first camera and built her a darkroom.

"I didn't know anything about chemicals, so my mother signed me up for (photography) classes," she says. "And that's where my love of photography started."

She still takes black-and-white photographs with the 35-mm camera her grandfather gave her, but just as a hobby. Professionally, she now uses a medium-format digital camera.

She visited the U.S. for the first time in 2001, and then "came to stay" in 2010.

She loves Florida, especially Florida in the summer.

"I've always loved the warm weather," she says. "That's what makes me happy. I like the sun. I lived in Canada, I lived in Poland, I always suffered from the cold. I love summer. I love living and working where it's warm."

#### Wild, not domesticated

Included in the "#unexpected" exhibit are three photos from Ms. Bridger's series of self-portraits in the kitchen. She calls it her "Domesticated" series.

"I'm not domesticated at all. That's the irony of that," she says. "I am so not domesticated. If you come to my apartment and you open my oven, you find books there. I just utilize space in the kitchen. I don't cook, I have no idea how to do that. I have issues in the kitchen.

"The kitchen is such a surreal place for me. I don't treat (it) as a cooking space." Instead, it's where she and her friends sit and drink wine. "Or, it's another place to take photos and get creative," she says. "I don't treat my kitchen as most people do.

"My friends will come and open the fridge and start throwing out the food," she says. "It's fuzzy and yellow and green and fun colors.

"I call it vintage food."

Seeing all those colors and textures set off the creative synapses in her brain, setting off an idea for a new series.

"Photographs of 10-month-old food — that's coming," she promises. "That's still in my head."

One image in the "Domesticated" series shows Ms. Bridger seated inside the refrigerator, reading a book, a glass of wine in one hand and a number of empty wine bottles on the floor. Another shows her kneeling on her kitchen floor, her head in the oven. In the third, she perches in the sink, mischievously licking a dish.

"When you look at the photos, you think, what the hell is domesticated?," she says. "Who puts their head in the oven and just sits there? And who sits in the sink?

"That's the best thing of being an adult: I can just do it." |

'#unexpected'

>> What: Mila Bridger photography exhibition

>> Where: The Sidney & Berne Davis Art Center, Fort Myers

>> When: Through July 26

>> Hours: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday

>> Meet the artist: Art Talk Tuesday and "#unexpected" closing party, 6-8 p.m. July 26

>> Cost: Suggested donation, \$5

>> Info: 333-1933 or <u>sbdac.com</u>

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