

Mahoro Seward, 'Miu Miu's Collaboration With Turner Prize-Winner Helen Marten Is The Highlight Of Art Basel Paris'

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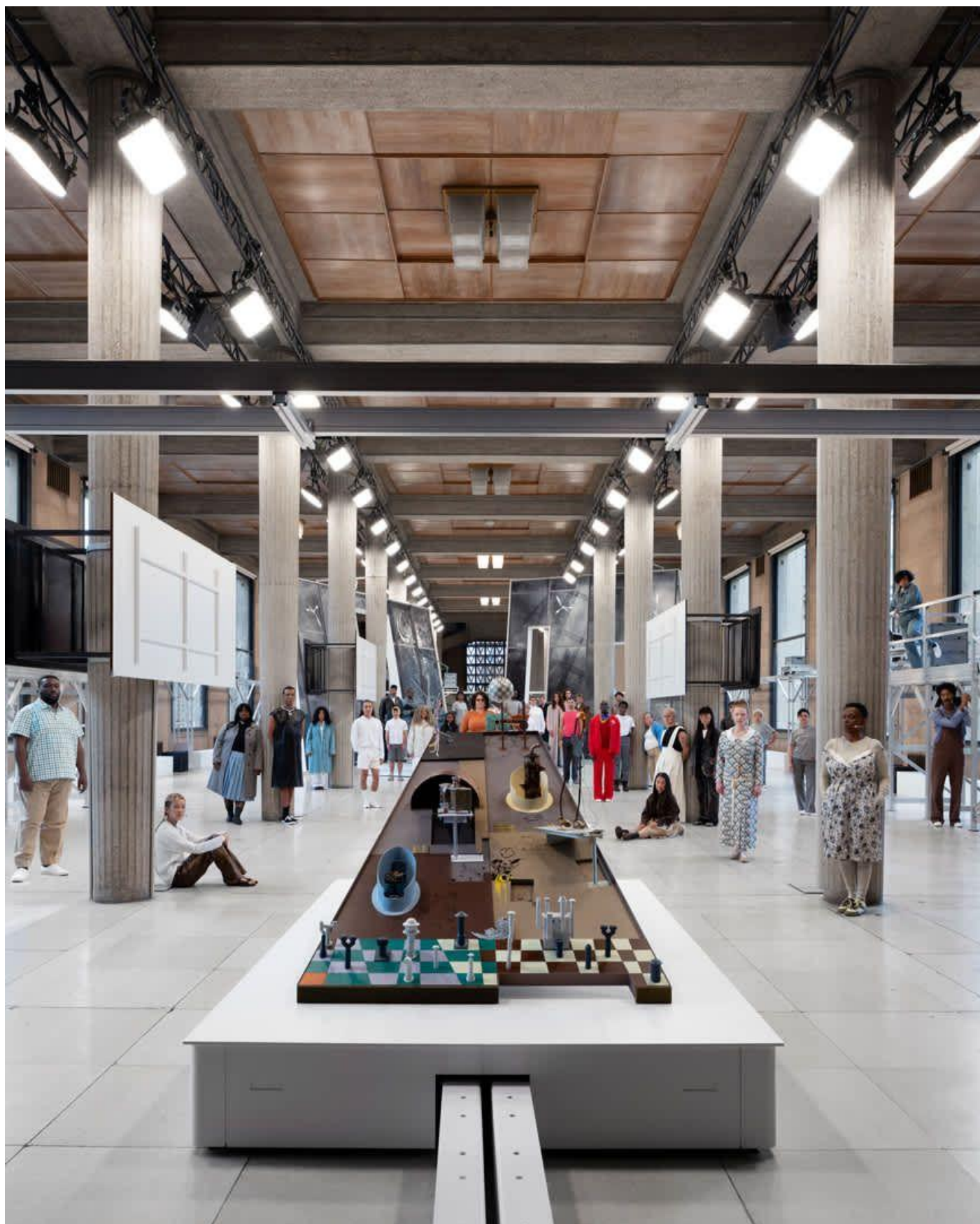
Miu Miu's Collaboration With Turner Prize-Winner Helen Marten Is The Highlight Of Art Basel Paris

BY MAHORO SEWARD 24 October 2025

When developing the characters in *Ulysses*, James Joyce famously built out their lives with granular precision, conceptualising even fleeting passersby with complex inner worlds. Their looks, temperaments, memories; the peculiar dynamics of their relationships: each figure was conceived of as an autonomous, fully-embodied individual, caught within turn-of-the-century Dublin's urban churn. Right now in Paris, Helen Marten's *30 Blizzards*. – the Turner Prize-winning British artist's very own epic, if you will – has a similar air to it.

Enter the Palais d'Iéna – a Rationalist marvel of a building which houses the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council) between now and Sunday and you'll discover a scene that invites a curious unpacking. A line of five sprawling sculptures – exacting compositions of sofa cushions, scrawled drawings on paper, bent brass sheets, surrealist chessboards, milk cartons, wine-stained corks, pebbles perched on bits of bar – runs through the room, “interrupted” by a wall-flanked stage. Installed along this procession, a series of screens, intermittently broadcasting videos of surreal, dreamscape vistas and uneasy interior spaces – seemingly shaped by human presence, but absent of it – backdropped by stirring monologues reflecting on themes spanning wide-eyed innocence, carnal desire and the experience of loss. And then, throughout the space, a total of 30 figures in characterful looks linger – at times, they're dispersed, gazing forlornly out of the windows onto the Eiffel Tower, or surveying the space from staircase platforms next to an industrial track that circles around the room; at others, they convene on the stage and along the central line, interacting through speech and song.





Courtesy of Miu Miu.

There's a *lot* to take in here in Marten's latest work, a project presented by Miu Miu in its capacity as the official sponsor of Art Basel Paris's public programme. Developed in collaboration with Italian theatre and opera director Fabio Cherstich and British composer and electronic music producer Beatrice Dillon, it's perhaps best approached as a conceptually, narratively and spatially fragmented opera. It is, after all, centred on a libretto penned by Marten; there are characters, there is song, there is a stage.

Listening to these characters' extemporisations, seeing them holding curious props and weaving around the vast installation, you're struck by a sense of depth and texture that's tough to place. "There are 30 forms, each occupying either an archetype, a physical character, a weather character or an animalistic character," Marten explains. "They're almost like atomised slivers of a world that we recognise, but can't necessarily geographically locate. There's something that everyone can relate to." The Builder, The Fox, The Mother; Magic, The Baker, The Dog: each is its own "blizzard", a simmering vignette of human experience and temperament. Each also carries their own prop, plucked from grey plastic crates that circulate on the track – whimsical concrete metaphors for their character's spirit. For The Dentist, black leather gloves; for The Dog, several pink balls.





Courtesy of Miu Miu.

Astoundingly – especially in light of the work’s dizzying scope and complexity – *30 Blizzards*. marks the first time that Marten is working with performance. While she’s long harboured ambitions of writing text to be sung, the step was prompted by an invitation from the Fondazione Prada, with the performance component as a stipulation of the commission. “It was a very wide remit, and performance is also something I’m very unfamiliar with,” the artist says. Then again, while the introduction of thinking, feeling bodies into her precisely articulated universe of objects is new, it’s a pretty natural development of her practice. “Paradoxically, so much in my work speaks of the relationship to the body – to the hand, to the mouth – through language,” she says. Indeed, language – and specifically writing – has always been at the core of Marten’s practice, *The Boiled in Between*, her 2021 novel, is testament to that. Beyond the classical sense, though, her drawings, paintings and sculptural works have always been underpinned by systematic logics that are analogues of how verbal languages convey meaning. In her work, objects and images are arranged according to formal grammars, rules that are simultaneously adhered to and defiantly broken to give form to thought and feeling.

“More than visual inspiration, it was Helen’s use of language – fragmented, suggestive, non-linear – that shaped our dramaturgy,” writes Fabio Cherstich in *30 Blizzards*.’s director’s notes. “Words in *30 Blizzards*. are not scripts to be memorised but scores to be inhabited – spoken, sung, fractured. Voice becomes rhythm, breath, atmosphere. Meaning arises not from clarity, but from density, instability, tension.”

While Helen Marten’s latest work is ineffably complex, in all its confounding, non-linear glory, what strikes is how knowable it feels. Much like how, in previous works, Marten has drawn acute, almost confronting attention to the thingliness of particular objects and materials – creating relationships and juxtapositions that make you *feel* the slight stickiness of a rubber surface, for example, with visceral intensity – here, she achieves a similar result, twanging at an embodied, carnal understanding of life experiences that language never quite manages to give form to. For all its seeming trickiness, *30 Blizzards*. is disarmingly direct in what it evokes and communicates. And yet, finding the words to illustrate quite what it is that you understand about it is almost a moot exercise. While this may be an exhibition that takes language as a conceptual architecture, its success lies in its ability to evade the grasp of the very tools it deploys.



Courtesy of Miu Miu.