

VIRTUAL BEAUTY



23 July – 28 September 2025
Somerset House (Terrace Rooms)
Pay what you can

- Somerset House's summer exhibition – as part of its special 25th birthday programme – explores how digital culture and technologies have shaped definitions of beauty and human identity today.
- Interactive installations and thought-provoking works from over 20 international artists.
- Pioneering works on display by **ORLAN** and **Amalia Ulman** highlight how the digital infiltrates the material world in two performance art pieces.
- **Minnie Atairu**, **Ben Cullen Williams** and **Isamaya Ffrench** investigate artificial intelligence's perception of beauty by using machine learning and generative software to create visually striking portraits.
- Constructing alternate identities beyond human boundaries in the form of avatars are spotlighted by artists including **Harriet Davey**, **Frederik Heyman** and **Andrew Thomas Huang**, whose series of avatars of singer Björk originally debuted at Somerset House for the 2016 show **Björk Digital**.

Somerset House celebrates its 25th birthday in 2025 and its role as London's home of cultural innovators by delivering a programme that offers alternative perspectives and challenges conventions during its milestone year. **Virtual Beauty**, an exhibition exploring the impact of digital technologies on definitions of beauty today offers an original approach to a key issue of our time. Curated by **Gonzalo Herrero Delicado**, **Mathilde Friis** and **Bunny Kinney**, *Virtual Beauty* raises questions around gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and identity in the post-internet era, featuring over 20 compelling works from international artists working across sculpture, photography, installation and video.

From social media filters and artificial intelligence to biometrics and dating apps, the works by emerging and established artists presented in *Virtual Beauty* examine how we are more self-aware and calculated in the way we present ourselves publicly than ever before. A new generation has come of age that has only lived in a world where the idea of digital self-curation is a part of their everyday lives. Crossing between the virtual and physical, the exhibition highlights how questions of beauty are inherent to the proliferation of portable devices and screens on which people look at themselves every day and share these altered, enhanced, or filtered identities with the world. These curated identities exist beyond the boundaries of traditional media and explore how individuals can reclaim and empower themselves. *Virtual Beauty* reconsiders who holds the power to define conventions of beauty today and the very definition of human identity.

*"On our 25th birthday, we are very pleased to be presenting such a timely and relatable exhibition during our summer season. **Virtual Beauty** takes an in-depth look at the complex relationship between digital technologies and the aesthetics of beauty. The artists and designers included propose highly original and unexpected takes on the subject, asking us to reconsider how we see ourselves and each other both online and IRL."*

- **Dr Cliff Lauson**, Director of Exhibitions at Somerset House

Contributing artists announced so far include **Anan Fries**, **Andrew Thomas Huang**, **Angelfire**, **Amalia Ulman**, **Aleksander Nærbø**, **Ben Cullen Williams** and **Isamaya Ffrench**, **Bunny Kinney**, **Frederik Heyman**, **Harriet Davey**, **Hyungkoo Lee**, **Ines Alpha**, **Minne Atairu**, **ORLAN** and **Qualeasha Wood**.

EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

Virtual Beauty interrogates the impact of technology beyond the digital realm to explore its influence on physical bodies. Pioneering works include **ORLAN**'s pre-social media performance *Omniprésence* (1993), in which the artist live-streamed her facial aesthetic surgery to challenge western beauty ideals, and **Amalia Ulman**'s iconic series *Excellences & Perfections*, questioning the authenticity of social media platforms. **Anan Fries** further investigates the representation of the body through her work, challenging the social conventions around heteronormative pregnancy by reconsidering the womb as a fashionable and commercial bag in *Ecto Bag* (2024).

Virtual Beauty highlights the different technologies at play in shaping the digital landscape and its consequence on identity. **Qualeasha Wood**'s tapestries combine cybernetic and analogue processes that explore race, sexuality and gender as they relate to the black femme body, and **Minnie Atairu** offers a critical approach to the portrayal of black identity and bias in images generated using data trained AI-powered algorithms. Notions of identity are further explored by Korean artist **Hyungkoo Lee** in his distorted human portrait, a work challenging self-perception and responding to standardised definitions of beauty. The effects of body dysmorphia and male beauty standards are investigated by **Aleksander Nærbø** through the lens of online dating culture, and **Ben Cullen Williams** and **Isamaya Ffrench** showcase work that uses machine learning and generative software to create altered portraits, raising questions about artificial intelligence's perception of beauty.

The possibilities afforded by technology in constructing alternative identities beyond human boundaries are spotlighted within **Ines Alpha**'s interactive installation delving into the concept of 'virtual makeup' and cyborgs, and works by **Harriet Davey** and **Angelfire** explore the proliferation of alternative virtual identities in digital spaces through avatars. **Andrew Thomas Huang**'s series *Björk Virtual Avatars* (2016) returns to Somerset House after debuting for the 2016 show *Björk Digital*, presenting a series of other-worldly avatars of the singer. *Virtual Beauty* concludes with **Frederik Heyman**'s powerful *Virtual Embalming* (2018), prompting reflection on how individuals wish to be remembered in the digital realm after death, through three examples of virtual shrines.

The exhibition, a project initiated by HEK (House of Electronic Arts, Basel), is co-curated by Gonzalo Herrero Delicado, Mathilde Friis, Bunny Kinney and supported by Claire Catterall, Senior Curator at Somerset House.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Dates: 23 July – 28 September 2025

Website: <http://www.somersethouse.org.uk/whats-on/virtual-beauty>

Link to images:

<https://www.dropbox.com/scl/fo/7wvmrws7o15qdgjuqx03/AA5EQIADxt5JxYguwNJ0OL4?rlkey=gia7pbx9fu5h47cgp9nsh7a2v&st=mnsawi9q&dl=0>

Press enquiries, please contact: press@somersethouse.org.uk / erica.davletov@somersethouse.org.uk

Image credit: Hyungkoo Lee. *Altering Facial Features with WH5* (2010). Courtesy of the artist.

Address: Somerset House, Strand, London, WC2R 1LA

Transport: Underground: Temple, Embankment / Rail: Charing Cross, Waterloo, Blackfriars

Website: <https://www.somersethouse.org.uk/>

Somerset House Facebook: www.facebook.com/Somersethouse

Somerset House Twitter (X): @SomersetHouse

Somerset House Instagram: @SomersetHouse

Somerset House TikTok: @SomersetHouse

ABOUT SOMERSET HOUSE*Step Inside, Think Outside*

As the home of cultural innovators, Somerset House is a site of origination, with a cultural programme offering alternative perspectives on the biggest issues of our time. In 2025, Somerset House celebrates its 25th birthday, marking its extraordinary transformation to one of London's best loved cultural spaces and home to one of the largest creative communities in the UK. To mark this milestone, there will be a special year of artistic innovation featuring genre-defying exhibitions, new commissions and events bringing audiences closer to the range of cross-disciplinary work from our unrivalled resident creative community, cementing Somerset House as a leading international arts destination.

From our historic site in the heart of London, we work globally across art, creativity, business, and non-profit, nurturing new talent, methods and technologies. Our resident community of creative enterprises, arts organisations, artists and makers, makes us a centre of ideas, with most of our programme home-grown. We sit at the meeting point of artistic and social innovation, bringing worlds and minds together to create surprising and often magical results. Our spirit of constant curiosity and counter perspective is integral to our history and key to our future.

<https://www.somersetthouse.org.uk/>

ABOUT VIRTUAL BEAUTY CURATORS**GONZALO HERRERO DELICADO**

Gonzalo is a London-based independent curator, educator, and architect whose work examines the impact of the climate crisis and digital technologies on the world through design, architecture, and art practices. He is an Associate Lecturer at Central Saint Martins and the Royal College of Art and is currently curating the Digital section of Art Dubai 2025. Before that, he served as Director of the Ecocity World Summit 2023 held at the Barbican, and a Design Fellow at the University of Cambridge. From 2016 to 2021, he was the Curator of the Architecture Programme at the Royal Academy of Arts in London where he curated exhibitions such as Eco-Visionaries (2019-2020) and the series Invisible Landscapes (2018-2019) among many others. Gonzalo has held curatorial positions at the Design Museum and the Architecture Foundation in London. His extensive curatorial portfolio includes exhibitions and projects for Serpentine, HEK, Museum of the Future, Mies van der Rohe Foundation, and Arquia Foundation. He has co-edited three books Archipelagic Void (Serpentine/Koenig, 2024), Conversations on a Planet in a State of Emergency (RA, 2019) and Fear and Love: Reactions to a Complex World (Phaidon, 2016).

MATHILDE FRIIS

Mathilde is a visual anthropologist and PhD candidate at Northumbria University. Her research and work explore issues around sexuality, feminism and gender. Her recent curatorial projects include the group exhibitions Purity & Danger (2024) at Guts Projects and Working Girls! (2024) at Gallery 46, both in London, explored the intersections of art, sex work, labour, and the market. Additional projects include the solo presentation Sketches by Isabella Benshimol (2024) and the group show Oops...Something Went Wrong (2021) in collaboration with Goldsmiths University. Previously, Mathilde worked at Gagosian, London. She holds an MA in Social Anthropology from the University of Edinburgh and an MA in Arts & Cultural Management from King's College London.

BUNNY KINNEY

Bunny is a British-Canadian filmmaker, creative director, and consultant. At present, he is the creative director of arts and culture film platform NOWNESS, leading teams in London, Hong Kong, and Shanghai. Formerly the Editorial Director of Dazed Media, he launched the print magazine and platform project Dazed Beauty in 2018. Before joining Dazed Media, Kinney worked at fashion magazine i-D starting in 2014. A graduate of the creative writing Masters programme at the University of Oxford, as well as School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London, where he received an MA in Cultural Studies and Critical Theory, Kinney's work explores key themes of youth identity, gender and sexuality as it can be understood within the broader field of communication. He co-curated the Lore of Loverboy exhibition at Somerset House in 2024. He lives and works in London.