

Iris Häussler – Invented Biographies

Etty Yaniv ArtSpiel

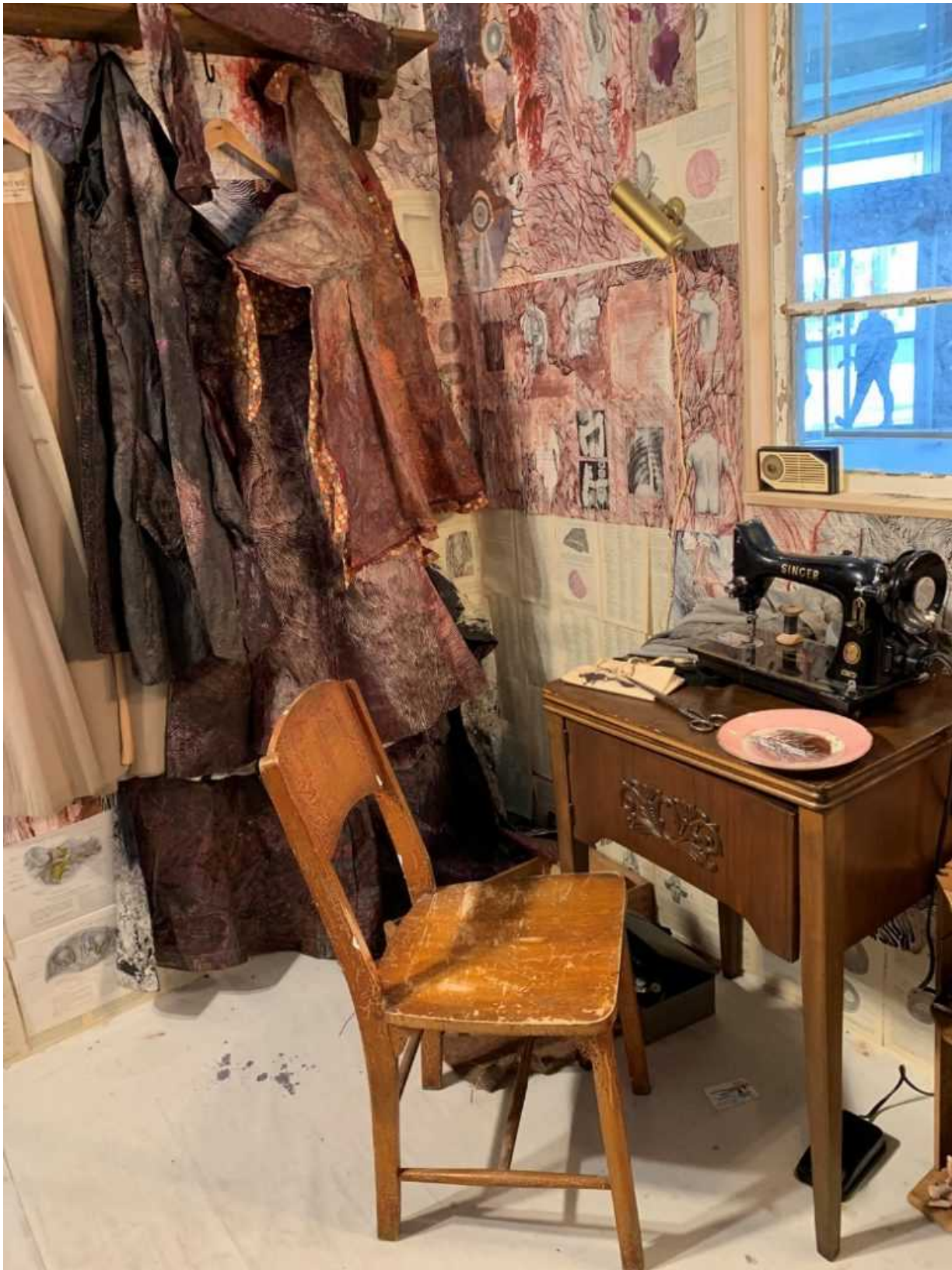


Iris Häussler, Apartment 5

Throughout her multi-faceted installations, the German-born Canadian based artist [Iris Häussler](#) has been slipping in and out of multiple characters. Her invented underdog protagonists live through diverse historical periods and traverse vast geographies. Häussler's rigorous installations transform any categorization. They are placed between life and art, coalescing multi-disciplinary collaborations including performance, literature, and richly layered visual vocabularies such as drawing, installation and sculpture. The visitor is invited to experience an individual's life within a specific context of place and history, to decipher the clues from the artifacts and materials throughout installations that reflect on fiction, history and the meaning of a creative identity.

Earlier this year, I discovered *Apartment 5*, Iris Häussler's deeply moving installation at the NYC Armory's Platform Presentation, presented by [Daniel Faria Gallery](#) and [John Michael Kohler Art Center](#). It consisted of a small studio where old sewing equipment, garment remnants, and dressmaker dummies appeared both painfully alive and frozen, as if the seamstress has just been disrupted, her chair by the sewing machine pushed back in a hurry. The walls were pinned with reddish skin-like wallpaper made of collaged anatomy books pages, all filled with dense linear drawings and watercolor – vulnerable, obsessive, visceral, driven by unrelenting imagination, and so very human. Underscored with trauma and resilience, this stirring sense of human presence makes Häussler's installations outstanding and memorable.

Iris Häussler has showed her work extensively in museums world-wide and has recently exhibited her *Sophie La Rosière Project* at [PSM gallery](#) in Berlin in a solo exhibition. She shares with Art Spiel some background on what brought her to art, her multi layered process and ideas behind *Apartment 5* and other installation projects.



Iris Häussler, Apartment 5, photo by Etty Yaniv

AS: What would you like to share about your background?

Iris Häussler: I was raised in a small town in the south of Germany in a family of nine: two sisters, a brother, mother, father, grandmother, grandaunt & a live-in maid. Every one of the adults had experienced WWII. My father was a veterinarian and my mother had studied pharmacy.

I was raised with little attention, no expectations, no corrections. Art wasn't present in our life – no music, no art, no theatre. Today I perceive my growing-up situation as rather lucky, as it provided freedom to explore, to play on my own, to try things without being supervised, most of the time not even being witnessed. I see now that where guidance and parenting was missing, I somehow got by inventing my own worlds, and they were my realities. I dare to say that this prepared me for “thinking out of the box”, for better or for worse.

AS: What brought you to art and your unique practice?

Iris Häussler: Well I wasn't denied creative play as a child. So, I did, using materials around me, found objects, natural materials. I later went to the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, training as a sculptor, but you must imagine it was a very free concept of training: just playing freely, obsessively, without given themes or assignments.

My practice to create fictitious legacies developed from trying to portray people, thinking about objects we carry and care for as relevant to our individual human expression. Soon that got me into creating complete surroundings – apartments of imagined people, where objects offer a way to decode a person's mind and emotions. Over time my installations became more elaborate, and more people got involved in the creation and presentation process. By now I love working with museums-teams, with historians and other experts together to create site-specific works that do not “colonize” a place but are connecting with the historic, geographical and social conditions around it.

AS: You showed [Apartment 4 at John Michael Kohler Arts Center](#) in the summer this year. Please tell me about the genesis and exhibition.

Iris Häussler: *Apartment 4* grew out of a show I had before at the JMKAC, where the work of two fictitious women artists of the early 20th century were shown. Florence Hasard is one of them, and as she developed in my mind and work, the curator Karen Patterson created the opportunity to create for Florence her “own space” and exhibit her work. Along with the Chipstone Foundation we collaborated on a period-room apartment set in a historic mansion in Milwaukee, where in the back-room Florence had retreated to living with the demons she could not get rid of, creating her own world and oeuvre. The exhibition shows the rooms she worked at day as a seamstress and saw visitors, and the crammed backspace with her creations and her detritus she successfully hid from the public till it was discovered upon her disappearance in 1942.



Iris Häussler, , Apartment 4: *Iris Häussler*, and The Chipstone Foundation installation view at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, 2018, photo courtesy of the artist and John Michael Kohler Arts Center

AS: I first experienced your work at the Armory, *Apartment 5*, Florence Hasard's recently discovered late body of work. What is the relationship between Apartments 4 and 5? Can you elaborate on your thought process?

Iris Häussler: *Apartment 5* makes Florence reappear in New York in 1942. So, she had moved, at the age of 60, to Brooklyn. Of course, there is a story and trigger behind this move, but in short what we encounter in *Apartment 5* is her small tenement studio frozen in time. She had by then collected anatomy books, drawing thin, dense lines with watercolor over thousands of pages, collaging them together to build a wallpaper in that room. Standing there and turning around, the patterns and colors could appear as if landscapes of flesh, muscles and veins. So, when we remember that in her studio in Milwaukee she painted stripes and lines and organ-like forms onto the inside of dresses and coats, so to speak transforming her "second skin" – clothing, in *Apartment 5* she alters the immediate architecture to be associated with the notion of a "third skin".

So what was I thinking doing this? Well, mostly I was working in the studio and it just developed this way. Of course, in my process I oscillate between studio-work, research and "writing the story". *Apartment 5* is a result of this process in close collaboration with the exhibition teams and Daniel Faria, my gallerist.

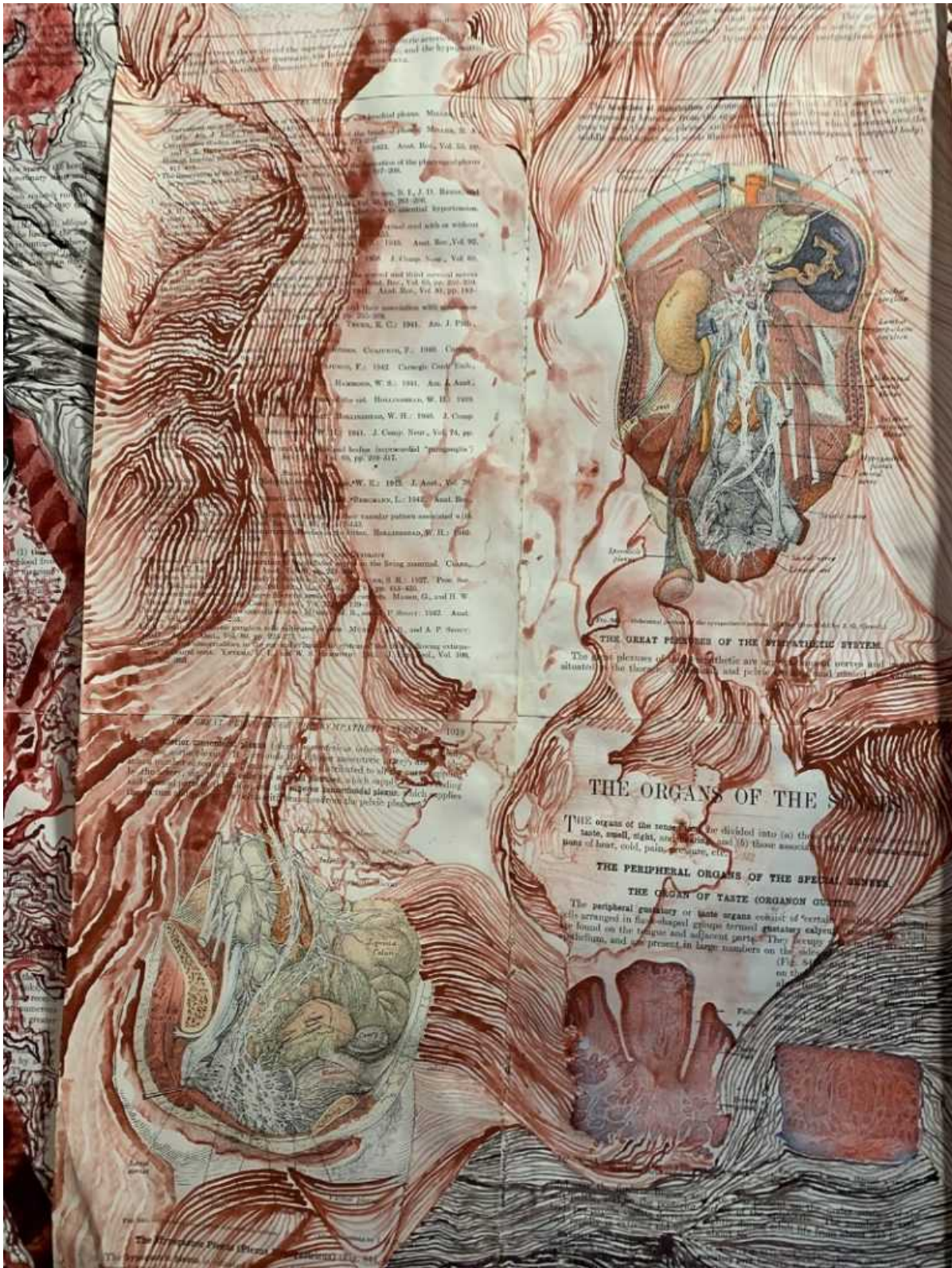


Iris Häussler, Apartment 5, photo by Etty Yaniv

AS: I was deeply moved by your drawings in *Apartment 5* – what can you tell me about your drawing process?

Iris Häussler: Slipping into Florence Hasard's mind and shoes, I collected Anatomy books from the 1930's and started drawing lines with a super thin brush (just some hairs) over the writings, circling the illustrations and connecting them to each other, over uncounted hours creating patterns that made the printed text less or not at all visible. I collaged these pages into bigger sheets, and on-site at the Armory I pinned these sheets onto the walls seamlessly, using fixing pins that visually appeared like acupuncture needles.

While I was "working on her behalf", I felt her helplessness and desperation during her time as a nurse in the military hospital during WWI. The vulnerability of the human body was so central and unavoidable in her life, as were her encounters with young men suffering and dying. While she would herself later suffer what we now would call "a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder", she probably found solace and relief in her meditative drawing practice.



Iris Häussler, Apartment 5, photo by Etty Yaniv

AS: What can you tell me about *The Joseph Wagenbach Foundation*?

Iris Häussler: [The Joseph Wagenbach Foundation](#) is “the fictitious foundation of a fictitious artist”. [The Wagenbach Foundation](#) manages Joseph Wagenbach’s artistic legacy and its mandate includes research into his biography, archiving of his works, creation of a digital inventory, organization and curation of national and international shows of his work, and the dissemination of information about his artwork. The Foundation also issues limited edition prints of select drawings and bronze casts of his original sculptures.

AS: Your work seems to involve extensive research as well a wide array of other participants. Can you tell me about your process? Please give some examples of projects.

Iris Häussler: Well, when I am invited to develop a project for a museum, I am interested in the museum’s history, the town or city around it, how it is embedded in the social communities that surround it, who the audiences are.

I am not interested in colonizing their space with an Iris Häussler work, but rather want to develop something “with them”. In this phase curators often connect me with local historians and community-engaged people, who then often introduce me to people and spaces close-by that host artefacts, stories and research I might be interested in. All the while I can often feel that “a character” is emerging in my mind – and this way “an inner conversation” might start that I carry with him/her/them. From there on, a project gains momentum and very probably will keep me well busy when I am back in my studio.



Iris Häussler, Apartment 5, photo courtesy of Daniel Faria Gallery

AS: Where do you see your work in context of visual art and literature?

Iris Häussler: Visitors sometimes come out of my installations saying it felt like “a novel in three dimensions” or like “walking through someone’s mind”. I think yes there is a connection, and right now I am actually embarking on exploring the literary side a bit more.

AS: Your projects are complex, richly layered, and wonderfully open-ended. Still, would you be able to talk about some themes / ideas / processes that are particularly important for you?

Iris Häussler: I think my work is highly informed by the works of German artist Joseph Beuys.

Over the past three decades my artistic work has focused on the creation of legacy projects and the creation of fictitious characters. I believe in creativity as something not only occurring in the arts, but at any place at any time in any context by anyone. My protagonists are basically all underdogs, they often come from underprivileged families, they experienced trauma and they all have things in common: creativity and resilience. Their stories – when discovered – are perceived via the power of imagination.

Having said that, I think topics like vulnerability, resilience, creativity, and obsession are red threads in my works.



Iris Häussler, Apartment 5 , photo courtesy of Daniel Faria Gallery