

Monster Chetwynd Zuul

ROMA Villa Maraini Via Ludovisi 48 00187 Roma +39 06 420421 roma@istitutsvizzero.it

MILANO Via Vecchio Politecnico 3 20121 Milano +39 02 76016118 milano@istitutsvizzero.it

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The exhibition *Zuul* by Monster Chetwynd, at Istituto Svizzero in Milan, emerges from an intriguing misunderstanding that becomes a starting point for exploring the artist's imagination.

Always fascinated by the connections between fantasy, architecture, and cinema, Monster Chetwynd initially draws inspiration from the 1916 film *Intolerance*, mistakenly associating the grand Babylonian set with the tradition of Italian artisans. In her mind, these artisans would have also contributed to the creation of the Coppedè neighbourhood in Rome. This misunderstanding reflects her creative process, where erroneous interpretations and surprising connections are integral to her artistic language.

The exhibition's title, *Zuul*, references the character from the film *Ghostbusters* (1984). Through this figure, Chetwynd explores themes such as destruction, transformation, and the potential for alternative visions of the future. *Zuul* thus symbolizes a rebellious force capable of overturning conventional structures and values, inviting viewers to reflect on otherworldly realms and unexplored possibilities.

The displayed sculptures—three versions of *Zuul*—are crafted from materials such as fabric, cardboard, painted paper, and latex, transforming the exhibition space into a realm where reality and fiction blur.

Visitors are immersed in a surreal universe where Monster Chetwynd's works blend elements of pop culture, art history, and speculative thought. Additionally, the inclusion of visual research materials within the exhibition provides insight into the artist's methodological process, characterized by surprising juxtapositions and associations.

During the opening, the exhibition space and the sculptures are animated with a performance, involving the artist herself and 10 performers, inviting the visitors to become part of the intriguing and imaginative universe of Monster Chetwynd.

Monster Chetwynd (b. 1973, London) lives and works in Zurich. She earned a MA Painting, Royal College of Art, London (2004), prior to that, she obtained a BA in Fine Art, Slade School of Art/UCL, London (2000), and a BA in Social Anthropology and History, UCL (1995). Known for her exuberant and fun performance pieces, featuring handmade costumes, props, and sets, Monster Chetwynd was honoured with a Swiss Art Award (2024). The artist describes her work as 'impatiently made', often re-using materials that are easy to process and to use by the many performers she invites to participate, emphasizing the notion of collective development that informs much of the artist's work.

Monster Chetwynd Zuul

The exhibition at Istituto Svizzero in Milan actually begins with a misunderstanding. Last spring in Zurich, while her cat Eyelash sits on my lap, Monster Chetwynd tells me about her longstanding fascination with the film set from D.W. Griffith's 1916 film *Intolerance*. In her mind's eye, the craftsmen and architects who built the fantastic Babylonian set were Italian. She imagines them returning to Italy afterwards to develop the Coppedè district in Rome, known for its eclectic villas and fountains. This is the same neighbourhood that served as the backdrop for Dario Argento's 1980 horror film *Inferno*.

However, as it turns out, the set designers were not Italian architects, and the Coppedè neighbourhood was designed by Gino Coppedè, who likely never set foot in Hollywood. As Eyelash moves to the table, Monster and I share a good laugh about this fabulous misunderstanding. In Monster's world, mistakes, confusion, unexpected connections, and the false conclusions of our imagination all play an important role. The exhibition title *Zuul* refers to a character from *Ghostbusters*—another film I must admit I've yet to see. Perhaps that's for the best, as imagination plays a key role here as well. Zuul and the world of *Ghostbusters* take shape in my mind during the many conversations I have with Monster. Zuul also took form in Monster's Zurich studio. In the photos she sends me by email, Zuul stares out as a green figure with bared teeth. In my imagination, Zuul is massive and reeks of sulphur. In the large exhibition room, we encounter three versions of Zuul. Fantasy (translated from ancient Greek as 'dream face'—which I find quite fitting as I regard Zuul's green visage) is central to Monster's world. She grew up immersed in the creation of fictional worlds, with her mother, Luciana Arrighi, the Oscar-winning Australian-Italian set designer. In Monster's performances, sculptures, and films, she crafts dreamlike, sometimes nightmarish, glamorous, or grotesque worlds, revealing hellish depths and dark abysses for us to explore. As visitors to the *Zuul* exhibition, we wander through fantastical architectures that reach the high walls of the exhibition space, surrounded by large sculptures made of fabric, cardboard, painted paper, and latex. We become part of this world—both physically and through our own imagination.

Before studying art, Monster (who at the time was called not Monster but Alalia, Spartacus or maybe even Marvin Gaye) studied ancient history and social

anthropology. Her references are drawn from these fields, as well as from art and cultural history, films, literature, popular culture, and feminist theory. She is interested in unexpected juxtapositions, contradictions, and speculative ideas. The fabulous misunderstanding—or rather the speculative proximity—of Babylon and Coppedè was the starting point for Monster's extensive research into utopian, fantastical architecture. This research spans built examples (like Ernest Flagg's Singer Building in New York, completed in 1908 and demolished in 1969, as well as the set designs for *Ghostbusters* and *Intolerance*); imagined architecture (like the fantastical drawings of American architect and artist Lebbeus Woods); and architecture in paintings (like the surreal landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich). Monster finds visual material and ideas in her own overflowing archive of images and references, along with research she conducted at the Department of Architecture library at ETH Zurich. These architectures, rendered in black and white and greatly enlarged, reappear in the exhibition space. Incidentally, the Centro Svizzero where the exhibition is housed was Milan's tallest building in the 1950s—a fact that adds a further touch of the fantastical.

And what does Zuul have to do with all this? Zuul from *Ghostbusters*, who in English is referred to with she/her pronouns and can take on a female form (portrayed by Sigourney Weaver as Dana Barrett in the 1984 film). Zuul, who has been created in multiple versions in Monster's Zurich studio and travels with her in her suitcase to Milan. Zuul—the demigoddess and gatekeeper who opens a portal to another world and seeks to destroy the human world alongside Gozer the Destroyer. As Monster explains to me via WhatsApp, Zuul also personifies an anti-bourgeois, anti-conventional attitude. Zuul is a beast that defies societal customs and values, smashing things to pieces. Monster's fascination with Zuul, *Ghostbusters*, and other “random mainstream movies”, as she calls them, along with their characters (like Halle Berry in *Catwoman*, 2004) is fuelled by the fact that these films and their characters often comment on the world in which they were created, while also conveying deeper, theoretical meaning. Zuul, who shatters the capitalist world, is a child of the 1980s—a decade marked by unchecked globalisation, rising financial markets, and the growing power of large corporations. In the context of architecture, too, Zuul is a figure of destruction, a force that lingers over both real and imagined architectures.

The erection of new buildings often requires the demolition of old ones. As new, fantastical, utopian ideas emerge, conventional structures must give way. Sometimes these ideas are too bold, not (yet) in step with the present. This is true for both architecture and other ideas that transform society. Revolutions, when successful, upend the established order. In the second exhibition room, the showcases and the fanzine produced by Monster provide insight into the scope and intricacies of her research. Fantastical architectures and immaterial spaces (such as cyberspace) overlap and permeate built environments—the visual material on display in the showcases shows us these intersections. The buildings depicted cannot always be clearly identified as existing in fantasy or reality, and Monster plays with this ambiguity. Caspar David Friedrich’s romanticism (“the romance has to stay in,” she laughs) merges with the temple from *Ghostbusters*. Architectural fantasies (and other fantasies) push forward new developments, creating alternatives and visions—for the future. Zuul and other fantastical figures come to life during the exhibition’s opening evening. Accompanied by 10 performers (Monster has been working with many of them for years), the artist activates the large exhibition space. The glittering costumes worn by the performers were sourced from a shop in Zurich’s Langstrasse district (where sex workers and the night-life crowd cross paths). Monster was drawn to the shop because of its name: Aelita Fashion. Yet another film—*Aelita: Queen of Mars*—from 1924 tells the story of a Soviet engineer who travels to Mars and falls in love with Queen Aelita. When Monster asked the shopkeeper if the name was inspired by the film, she rolled her eyes and replied, “Of course not; it’s a literary reference—the book by Aleksey Tolstoy.” They’ve meanwhile become friends, and Monster is her best customer.

Gioia Dal Molin, September 2024

Performance

“An Evening with Gozer The Destroyer”

Performers

Blanket, Lucca Süß, Vyvyan Stewardson, Vanessa Nadja Benz, Paul Kindersley, Aina Rea Aliotta, Raquel Arias, Azur, Jacob, Ladina Whitehead, Chiara Salmini, Monster Chetwynd

Film Crew

Oscar Oldershaw, Joseph Campbell, Ruby Cedar

Music

Jack Brennan

Wallpaper Digital Layout

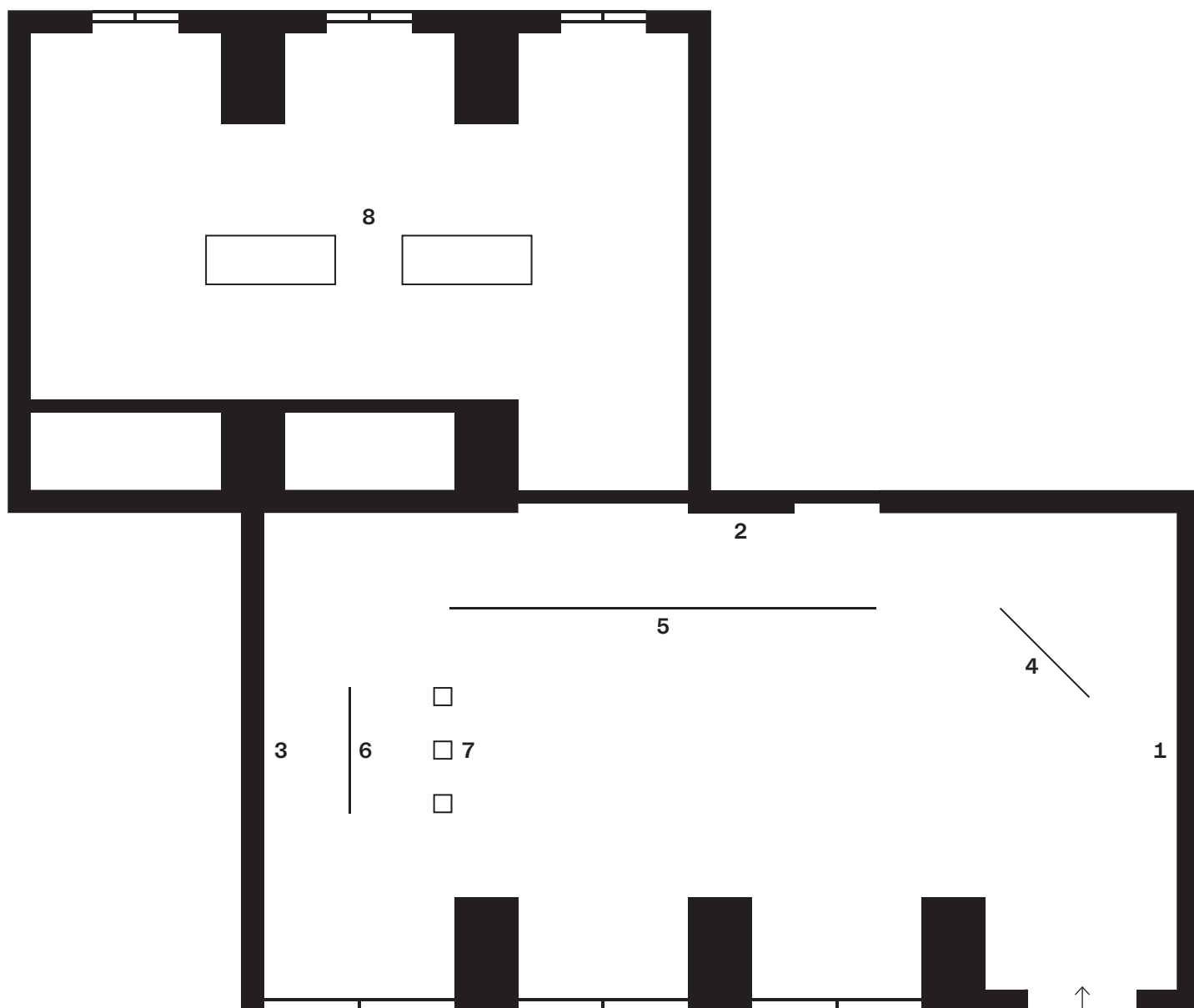
Lukas Ryffel

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The artist thanks

Gioia Dal Molin, Claudia Buraschi, Laura & Luigi, Maurane, Mariuccia Casadio, LeoDragon Chetwynd



1
Caspar David Friedrich (2024)
 Wallpaper,
 6,10 × 6,14 m

2
Ghostbusters 1984 (2024)
 Wallpaper,
 6,10 × 6,14 m

3
Singer Building (2024)
 Wallpaper,
 6,10 × 6,14 m

4
Karl Friedrich Schinkel (2024)
 Movable sculpture,
 Photocopies on cardboard,
 380 × 186 cm

5
Wenzel August Hablik (2024)
 Movable sculpture,
 Photocopies on cardboard,
 570 × 295

6
Ghostbusters 1984 (2024)
 Movable sculpture,
 Photocopies on cardboard,
 279 × 291 cm

7
 Sculptures, fabric, cardboard,
 painted paper, and latex

8
Research vitrines (2024)
 Various materials