

Shahryar Nashat

Blood Most Precious

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Roma

Istituto Svizzero

Category

Art, Exhibition

Blood Most Precious is Shahryar Nashat's first major solo exhibition in Rome, for which he has produced two new works: a sculpture and a video. The exhibition explores the symbolism of the body, blood and bodily fluids, interweaving reflections on life, death and artistic creation.

The artist investigates the meaning of these elements, ranging between historical and contemporary references. For the exhibition, Shahryar transforms the spaces of Villa Maraini with subtle interventions through light and colored filters on the windows.

His work is developed through sculpture, video and installations, questioning the boundary between the physical body and its digital representations. Shahryar combines traditional mediums, such as marble sculpture, with digital ones to explore the body as a symbol of suffering, resistance and transformation, continually questioning its fragility.

The use of synthetic materials-such as resin, acrylic and fibers-along with the presence of sound and moving images, accentuates the sense of transience and decay, prompting the audience to reflect on the uninterrupted cycle of life, death and creation. The installations offer an immersive experience that engages the viewers, inviting them to confront their own physicality and vulnerability through the language of art.

Video is also a central medium in Shahryar's practice, used to explore desire, intimacy and the distance between bodily experience and its virtual representation. Two large LED screens project images sourced from the internet, spanning from social to pornographic websites, questioning the relationship between an erotic gaze and a more clinical one. The two video works pose questions about how bodies are represented, consumed and transformed in the contemporary landscape, amplifying the vulnerability that pervades our physical and digital experiences.

Shahryar Nashat is a visual artist. He has had solo shows at MASI Lugano (2024); The Art Institute of Chicago (2023); The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago with Bruce Hainley (2023); Museum of Modern Art, New York (2020); Swiss Institute, New York (2019); Kunsthalle Basel (2017); Portikus, Frankfurt (2016); Schinkel Pavillon, Berlin (with Adam Linder, 2016). He shows with Rodeo Gallery, (London / Piraeus), David Kordansky Gallery, (Los Angeles / New York) and Gladstone Gallery, (New York / Brussels).

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Blood Most Precious

Shahryar Nashat

Blood Most Precious is the title of Shahryar Nashat's first major institutional solo exhibition in Rome. For this exhibition, he establishes visual and conceptual connections between the significance of blood, the representation of bodies and bodily fluids, the cycles of life and death, and the act of artistic creation itself. Since the 13th century, artists in Italy, and later across Europe, were interested in lifelike representations of blood. Writing in Rome, the Christian scholar Aegidius Romanus reflected on the role of blood in human reproduction and humoral pathology (the ancient theory of disease centred on bodily fluids), drawing on ancient texts by Aristotle and Plato, finding parallels with the creative process. Blood carried profound significance in the Middle Ages, weaving through medical, religious, philosophical, and artistic discourses.

The subtle transformation in how we perceive the exhibition space initiates the experience of *Blood Most Precious*. One part of the exhibition rooms is bathed in a rather cool light, while another glows with sunlight softened through magenta colour foils. In the first large hall and in the small, boudoir-like room, a pale carpet overlays the wooden parquet. These interventions lend the prominent turn-of-the-century architecture an almost timeless quality, creating a display for Shahryar's sculptures and video works.

Blood, or rather the question of its representability, alongside its iconographic significance, are linked in the sculpture *Hustler_04.JPEG*, encountered in the first exhibition room. Positioned at a level between my chest and eyes, a fleshy ribcage (is it human? Animal? Something beyond?) faces me, glistening with a red, blood-like gloss. Shahryar works with acrylic medium gel, applying it as a shiny, moist layer over the digital print to evoke the appearance of bodily fluids or secretions. I find myself recalling medieval depictions of the crucified Christ—ribs visible beneath a gaunt ribcage, bleeding stigmata—that I encountered during my research. In medieval imagery, blood trickling or flowing from these wounds underscores both the body's mortality and the promise of eternal life. In the Catholic Eucharist, Christ's blood is consumed, while bloodletting was a common medical practice used to balance the humours. Artists painted blood in myriad shades and states of coagulation. In humoral pathology, blood is described as hot and moist. Shahryar's blood feels slippery, perhaps damp. And warm.

The marble sculpture in the same room—*Hustler_23.JPEG*—also takes up the challenge of depicting bodies or objects more broadly. Shahryar, deeply attuned to art history, frequently incorporates traditional techniques and materials. Marble, a centuries-old medium for representing the human form, is omnipresent in the streets, churches, and palazzi of Rome. But *Hustler_23.JPEG* also acknowledges a digitally modelled version of itself, perhaps leaving its status as an original uncertain. Shahryar conceives his sculptural works on the computer, drawing inspiration from digital forming processes. The marble in this exhibition traces back to a sculpture he developed for his 2020 exhibition at MoMA. Meanwhile, these works in the first room form part of a broader series that reflects on human social relationships. Here, the hustler embodies a solitary figure, intent on self-preservation; elsewhere in the exhibition, we encounter the lover and the boyfriend.

Bleeding Precious in the next space is a new work created for the exhibition. An opaque liquid pulses through pink acrylic resin and fiberglass channels, the flow and splash filling the room, underscored by the sound of a human sob, a swallow or a moan. *Bleeding Precious* alludes to cycles: the cycle of blood within us, the cycle of life and death, of life and survival. The meat that I consume, digest, and expel. For Shahryar, this installation also reflects on the processes of artistic creation: something liquid creates volume. An idea takes shape. The creative process as the imagining of something that does not yet have a form, shape, or materiality. In the 13th century, Aegidius Romanus likened the potential of semen—then understood as an altered state of blood (transformed through digestion)—to the potential of artistic imagination, connecting human reproduction with the creative act.

In the adjoining, small exhibition room, Shahryar creates a surreal atmosphere with light and carpet, evoking an almost digital realm. Here, the three imposing sculptures—*Boyfriend_14.JPEG*, *Boyfriend_15.JPEG*, and *Boyfriend_16.JPEG*—offer a curious blend of carnality or corporeality and minimalist forms, reminiscent of Italian Futurist sculptures that evoke a sense of movement. With the boyfriend, he introduces another figure linked to social interaction (in this case, trust and loyalty, says Shahryar). Once again, the titles hint at the forms' digital origins. Shahryar's fascination with digital representation suggests that the boyfriend might also exist in some parallel digital space (as a 3D model?)

An animated avatar?), and is constantly reimagined in an idealised version of himself. *Hustler_05.JPEG*, who somehow overlooks the space, emphasizes the fleshy nature of bodies.

The sculptures in the hallway evoke raw cuts of meat. Since 2019, Shahryar has been developing his *Bone Out* series, crafted from synthetic resin and oil paint. Associations with the contemporary meat industry inevitably arise, alongside echoes from art history. I think of a recent encounter with a still life by Italian painter Felice Boselli (1650-1732) depicting large slabs of meat hanging in a butcher's shop. At the same time, Shahryar's works draw me back to an awareness of my own body—where blood flows, yet remains transient and mortal. Desire and decay. Fascination and disgust. In one of my conversations with Shahryar, we touch on Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection. The French philosopher describes the abject as that which triggers disgust or aversion in us (for example, carrion, pus, corpses) and thus disrupts our sense of bodily integrity and selfhood, confronting us with our fears. "These body fluids [...], this shit", Kristeva writes, "are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death." Bodily fluids are intensely present in *Blood Most Precious*.

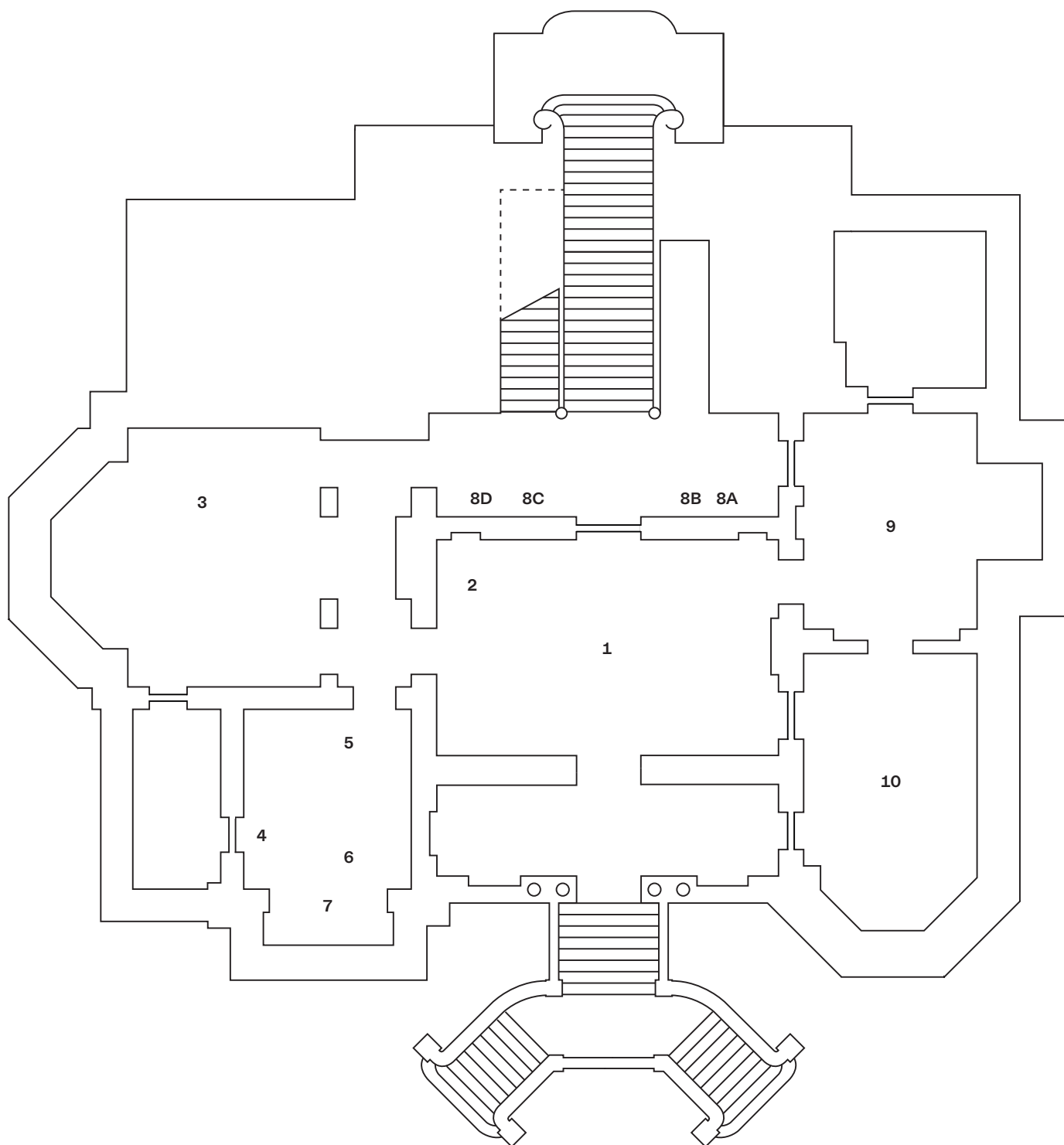
In the right wing, the images and sound of the video *Lover_00.JPEG* and the new video work *Lover's Companion* fill the exhibition spaces. The filters on the windows bathe the rooms in a magenta light that merges with the glow of the two large LED screens. *Lover_00.JPEG* incorporates images Shahryar sourced from YouTube, TikTok or pornographic websites—images typically consumed on the glossy screens of our smartphones or computers. The relationship with the figure of the lover is of a sexual nature, with saliva, another bodily fluid, embodying desire. Shahryar also draws inspiration from Vito Acconci's performance series, *4 Saliva Studies* from 1971, in which the Italoamerican artist declares saliva—and the natural bodily process of its production—to be an artistic act. In the first part of *Lover_00.JPEG*, human bodies appear both oversized and overtly present, yet simultaneously detached, absent, digital. In a sense, they are perhaps also fake—their sexual interaction staged for the camera's eye. In the second part of the video work, the focus shifts from the sexually charged images of the 'lovers' to the interior of the body. Here, sex is linked to clinical examination; physical intimacy intermingles with bodily processes. The images come from the digestive tract, the place in the human body where medieval belief held

that blood and other human body fluids (especially sperm, breast milk, and menstrual blood) were generated.

Lover_00.JPEG enters into a kind of visual dialogue with *Lover's Companion*, whose title also hints at a form of social relationship. In this new work, as well, Shahryar uses found footage to craft a visual narrative about growth and decay, life and death. While *Lover_00.JPEG* zooms into the intimate micro-dynamics of connections, *Lover's Companion* zooms out—encompassing all forms of life, power structures, and social relationships. Some of the images flash by quickly others are more static, colours are distorted: a blooming flower, a bee pollinating the flower (as part of the sexual reproduction of seed plants). Two boys spitting on each other—a contrast to the sensual connotations of saliva in the other video. The scene echoes a text by Jean Genet, where the French author transforms the trauma of being spat on into a fantasy of a rose blooming from the spit. Further, a priest who administers the Eucharist (placing the host, the body of Christ, into a believer's mouth with his fingers), alongside microscopic medical images of saliva and a blood transfusion. Shahryar connects his exploration of blood and other bodily fluids to the present day. The 'precious blood', so significant in the religious, artistic, and medical discourses of the Middle Ages and central to shaping perceptions of the human body, remains deeply layered with meaning in contemporary contexts. After COVID, before other pandemics, and still in the shadow of AIDS, blood and other bodily fluids continue to pose risks to both our physical and psychological integrity. Simultaneously, bloody conflicts and wars play out on the glowing screens of our devices—omnipresent and yet distanced, much like sexualised and other mediated images. The two video works share a soundscape of occasional sharp, almost whipping electronic beats and rapid rhythms. Standing between the two LED walls, I turn my head back and forth. As a unique cascade of images and associations unfolds before my eyes, the pulsing baseline lets me feel the blood surging through my body, threading through my veins.

Gioia Dal Molin, November 2024

Bibliographic references: Julia Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection," in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 3.



1
Hustler_04.JPEG, 2024
Acrylic gel and ink on paper
in display structure
164 × 50 × 50 cm
Courtesy Sylvia Kouvali,
London/Piraeus

2
Hustler_23.JPEG, 2024
Marble
48 × 64 × 91 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul; Sylvia Kouvali,
London/Piraeus and David
Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles/New York

3
Bleeding Precious, 2024
Acrylic resin, fiber glass,
water, pigment, water pump
mechanism, steel
180 × 600 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul; Sylvia Kouvali,
London/Piraeus

4
Boyfriend_14.JPEG, 2022
Polyester resin, fiberglass,
acrylic paint
57 × 190 × 123 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul

5
Boyfriend_15.JPEG, 2022
Polyester resin, fiber glass,
acrylic paint
60 × 214 × 116 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul

6
Boyfriend_16.JPEG, 2022
Polyester resin, fiber glass,
acrylic paint
57 × 190 × 123 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul

7
Hustler_05.JPEG, 2024
Acrylic gel and ink on paper
in display structure
164 × 50 × 50 cm
Courtesy of Sylvia Kouvali,
London/Piraeus

8A
Bone Out, 2024
Synthetic polymer resin,
oil paint
90 × 30 × 18 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul; Sylvia Kouvali,
London/Piraeus and David
Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles/New York

8B
Bone Out, 2024
Synthetic polymer resin,
oil paint
90 × 30 × 18 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul; Sylvia Kouvali,
London/Piraeus and David
Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles/New York

8C
Bone Out, 2024
Synthetic polymer resin,
oil paint
90 × 30 × 18 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul; Sylvia Kouvali,
London/Piraeus and David
Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles/New York

8D
Bone Out, 2024
Synthetic polymer resin,
oil paint
90 × 30 × 18 cm
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul; Sylvia Kouvali,
London/Piraeus and David
Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles/New York

9
Lover_00.JPEG, 2024
HD video on LED wall,
colour, stereo sound
5'55"
With music by Steffen Martin
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul; Sylvia Kouvali,
London/Piraeus and David
Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles/New York

10
Lover's Companion, 2024
HD video on LED wall,
colour, stereo sound
5'55"
With music by Steffen Martin
Research Advisor:
Antoine Idier
Courtesy of Gladstone
Gallery, New York/Brussels/
Seoul; Sylvia Kouvali,
London/Piraeus and David
Kordansky Gallery,
Los Angeles/New York

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