

FUTURE SO BRIGHT

Miranda July on fresh beginnings, her latest film and accidentally going home with criminals.

WORDS ANNE FULLERTON

For the first time in half an hour, Miranda July looks worried. Pen poised above paper, her pale eyes are even rounder than usual. I have just asked her to draw a self-portrait. "I'm warning you, it won't be very good," she says, before doodling a pretty decent texta likeness of herself. "I think that because I do a lot of different things, people expect me to be able to do everything," she says. The problem is, there's little evidence to the contrary.

July writes; she's published three books and regularly contributes to magazines like *The New Yorker*. She directs; her first feature won the Caméra d'Or at Cannes. She makes art; both visual and performance pieces. What separates her from the other hyphenated careerists is, indeed, that she is very good at all of it.

In the flesh, she looks exactly as you expect. The perfectly white skin, the halo of ringlets, the impeccable, idiosyncratic dress sense. Today she's wearing a fuchsia lipstick the same shade as her tights but it's still the eyes you notice first. The ones that don't so much reveal her soul as make you feel like she's staring directly into your subconscious, which is the exactly the sensation you get from her art.

The Future, her second feature and the one she's here to promote, is quietly terrifying (July has described it as her "version of a horror movie"). That's because for all its surrealism – the crawling shirt, the talking moon, the supernatural powers – there's nothing unreal about what it represents. The title may not address 'you' directly, as with many of her other projects, but the characters' fears resonate in a way that's too familiar to be entirely funny. "I always thought I'd be smarter," says one. "I thought we'd be rich."

"I was interested in people in their mid-thirties who were newly recognising that life is finite and who are having a new experience of time," explains July. "Also the idea of forsaking yourself, and your own soul, and who you love. Is that really possible and what happens when you do that? I went through a lot of very intense relationship things during that time [while writing the script], including getting married, but also, before that, a very abrupt break-up. I remember thinking during that break-up that this was a feeling I wanted to get across in a movie. That ultimately became the scene where one character stops time.

That was me trying to capture this very, almost violent feeling." In the film, characters Jason (Hamish Linklater) and Sophie (July) have 30 days in which to realise their aspirations before the arrival of Paw-Paw, the special-needs cat they're adopting, and with him, the finality of adulthood.

Given July makes such deeply personal work, it was important that she recreate the intimacy of a real couple. "During one rehearsal I locked us [myself and Hamish] in a closet in my house with food and I told him to bring his favourite music and I brought mine," she says. "We brought our photo albums and just stayed in there kind of telling each other about our whole lives. We came out not as I'd hoped – not as, like, one – but closer."

Other characters were simply plucked from real life. July met the man who plays the eccentric, elderly Joe while working on a side project in which she interviewed and photographed people she met through the PennySaver classifieds in their homes. "He had these cards that he had made for his wife that are kind of dirty, and those are in the movie too," she says. "At one point I wanted to put all of the people I met [through that project] in the movie. For the most part, no one was ever what I expected and



Miranda July as Sophie in *The Future*.





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everyone was pretty inspiring." But of course, there's always an exception to the rule.

"One man that I met seemed pretty normal at first, but as we talked, he had more and more weird stories. He started referring to a personal problem that he had, then he said, 'Can you read between the lines?' I was like, 'Not at all, what are you talking about?' He said this problem was why he didn't have a girlfriend and then he lifted his pants leg and there was a house arrest bracelet! I was already a little nervous but then I had to go into overdrive with being completely normal. I had that survivor's feeling of 'I don't want him to know that I'm freaking out!'"

The project, and the confessions it elicited, are typical of July's work, which is both intimate and universal, focusing on the personal to tap into some other collective experience. Even the animated shirt in *The Future* is based on the director's own security blanket, a yellow tee that's folded safely upstairs in her hotel room. While her critics find the fixation on the individual self-indulgent, the reality isn't that July is obsessed with herself, she's just obsessed with connecting to people. The thing is, that often, the best way of doing that is by offering something of yourself.

Does she ever worry about divulging too much? "I think most writer-directors do," she says. "What's more common is that you then hire some charismatic person to play the part of you and you're somewhat protected", though she's careful to stress that nothing in the film is true in any narrative sense. Do people she knows ever recognise themselves in her work? "No, not really," she says, before adding with smile, "Except maybe me." ✪

The Future is out 17 November, 2011. To check out Miranda July's self-portrait and video interview head to yenmag.net.