

CULTURE

The First Feature Film From Martine Syms Is a Hazy, Alluring Send-Up of the Art World

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A scene from *The African Desperate* Courtesy of Dominica Inc

There's a certain kind of New York culture vulture who can distinguish a Rick Owens shopping bag from a standard brown tote. If you can spot the difference (and you carry the former), you might just occupy the same world as artist [Martine Syms](#)—or at least the one she's lovingly portraying in her debut feature film, *The African Desperate* (2022). In this film, Syms captures all the subtle signifiers of upper-middle-class-liberal art culture, from [Asai tops](#) to Rimowa suitcases. If you know, you *know*—and you're invited to the party.

The film depicts an MFA fine-arts student, Palace (Diamond Stingily), on the day of her graduation. The film opens with Palace undergoing her final exam, an interrogation by her painfully woke professors. Although she is undecided about attending the graduation party, Palace eventually goes after pressure from her friends (and a certain love interest), and we watch the night hilariously unfold.

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A scene from *The African Desperate* Courtesy of Dominica Inc

Stingily is also an artist and a close friend of Syms's, dating back to Syms's own days as a student. "She was actually in my first video, which I made during my MFA," Syms tells me. "I bought her a flight to New York. After the shoot, she told me not to buy the return ticket." The challenge Syms set for herself with *The African Desperate* was to capture upper-middle-class-liberal art-world culture. "Most films about the art world are pretty bad," she says, laughing, "or *inaccurate*. It felt like a funny challenge to me to get that tone exactly right." This comes easily to Syms, who is a renowned multidisciplinary artist, working across video, photography, sculpture, and more. She operates at the heart of the art world, with past solo exhibitions at MoMA in NYC and Sadie Coles HQ in London.

Taking inspiration from '90s-era coming-of-age films, the stock characters (think *The Breakfast Club*) have been updated to the art-school clichés of

today, in an environment where, ironically, everyone strives for originality. That's right—soft boi is definitely a social category now. It's a film about those unspoken visual signifiers, which can be the gateways to social mobility in this environment. Does your coat have the four white stitches on the back below the collar? You're in. These are codes that Syms's peers taught her at art school, and that time marked a cultural shift in her life that she also describes as a loss. However, the film is anything but sobering. In fact, since most of the film is set at a party, it's quite the opposite.



A scene from *The African Desperate* Courtesy of Dominica Inc

Palace reluctantly attends her MFA graduation party, and the rest of *The African Desperate* is a trip (literally—she smokes multiple blunts, with interludes of ketamine and cocaine). The party occurs in the school at night, with Palace drifting through makeshift art studios that look like theater sets. Throughout her drug-induced trip, she zones in and out of the absurdity of her surroundings. Syms describes this as “a feeling I’m very familiar with. I was thinking about observing different performances in art school, and it changes depending on whose studio or world you’re in,” she adds. “I wanted each character to switch up how they were acting. We’ve all had that experience—you change your performance if someone you’re attracted to walks into the room or someone you think is important. It’s something we all do, and I wanted to heighten this.”





Martine Syms Bennet Perez

Palace's destination is unclear, but the film reveals that she has already participated in the Venice Biennale. This is a point of contention for her professors, who partially resent her for her success and passive-aggressively reference Édouard Glissant, drop art jargon, and circumvent any discussion of race, ascribing to the neoliberal belief that "everyone here is the same." "The whole premise of grad school is that we're all on equal footing and deserve to be there," says Syms. "That's the biggest lie in art school that you have to pretend to participate in, the privilege bubble." Witty, sharp, and right on the mark, this is social commentary for the art world like we've never seen it before.

The African Desperate *is viewable online until February 14 through the [International Film Festival Rotterdam](#).*

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