Into the Meta-verse

On the west coast of Sweden, artist Meta Isæus-Berlin has converted an old barn into her fantasy studio. There, after a quick dip in the ocean, she pulls from the depths of her own memory to intuitively create her celebrated works. We meet with the 60-year-old artist who, decades into her career, is having yet another moment.

Words by SASKIA NEUMAN *Photographs by* KRISTIAN BENGTSSON

Meta Isæus-Berlin loves water. Specifically, she loves to swim. For the Swedish artist, the epitome of self-indulgence is bathing in the sea off the west coast of Sweden several times a day. "I've spent my entire life there, in different stages," says Isæus-Berlin, who recently built a new studio on the Gåsevik peninsula, in Fiskebäckskil. Originally a fishing village, Fiskebäckskil evolved into a more developed shipping community during the great industrial expansion of the 19th century. These days, it's a popular summer retreat for city dwellers like Isæus-Berlin, who spends her autumn and winter months in Stockholm.

Isæus-Berlin, who has made a name for herself with her animal-heavy figurative paintings – hippos and dogs, koalas and swans – and soul-stirring installations, is not the first in her family to fall in love with the west coast. Her grandparents started going there in the late 1930s for one specific reason. "I had an aunt who played tennis – she played at Wimbledon," Isæus-Berlin says. "[Fiskebäckskil] had tennis courts so they decided to make this seaside town their home in the summer." (When herring dissipated in coastal Swedish towns, summer attractions like tennis courts and swimming docks were put in to attract tourists). In 2005, Isæus-Berlin and her businessman husband bought a west coast home of their own and, in 2021, they bought a nearby barn, which the artist converted into her "dream studio". "I even have a small dam and a pond," she says. "Anything is possible artistically. I might even build a kiln." Most importantly, the studio is just steps from the water. "I can take morning swims in complete privacy," she says.

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The home itself is a work in progress. "I'm always changing things around, moving things," Isæus-Berlin says. Floral patterned wallpaper adorns the bedroom walls, mirrored by the floral accents on bedside tables and rose-quilted bedspreads. While it does possess a certain coastal summer aesthetic, eclectic flourishes, not to mention a healthy display of the artist's own work (also installed outdoors), make the home singularly hers. Tie-dye draperies, turquoise tiling and a claw-foot bathtub add a dash of whimsy.

Growing up in central Stockholm, Isæus-Berlin's father was a painter while her mother worked as a stewardess for Scandinavian Airlines, back when the uniforms were designed by Dior and flying was glamorous. "Classic 1960s," says Isæus-Berlin. "My mother spoke four languages, and my father thought she was perfect." After studying to be a psychoanalyst, Isæus-Berlin's mother fell into the 1968 student revolution (a leftist uprising in which students occupied Stockholm University's Student Union Building in protest of the government) and divorced her father. The children – Isæus-Berlin has one brother – saw him every other weekend. "I really witnessed the aftermath of the '68 revolution from within, all the good and bad," she explains. She left high school early ("It was a waste of time") to follow in her father's footsteps and paint.

"I was disciplined," says Isæus-Berlin of those early days. "I painted from early in the morning to late at night, taking courses, and going to different painting schools." She dabbled in textiles, but it wasn't a good fit. Neither were graphics. When she was accepted into the painting department at the Royal Institute of Art, she started making sculptures instead. "I've always been good at pushing myself, evolving," she says. "I get bored easily and have always wanted to learn new things. The only thing I haven't tried is photography and film." Of her three children, two daughters and a son, two have followed in her footsteps. "Both my daughters are artists," Isæus-Berlin says, proudly. Dina is a painter and Valentine worked with installation before landing on photography and land art. Her son, meanwhile, inherited his father's entrepreneurial spirit, and is currently studying at Stockholm's Royal Institute of Technology. "We all have different methods of expressing ourselves, it's

Denim patchwork kimono made out of recycled trousers, €800, Oversized button-down shirt made out of recycled shirts, €300, Crocheted trousers in recycled home textiles, €250. All *Remake Sthlm*. Sneakers, €110. *New Balance*.

Oversized denim trenchcoat, €890. *Teurn Studios.*
Pleated dress, €774. *Sofia Corneskog Couture.*
Silver necklace, €490. *Maria Nilsdotter.*
Ring. *Talent's own.*

Knitted sweater,
Corduroy trousers. Both *Talent's own.*

wonderful," Isæus-Berlin says. Her home is one of free-flowing creativity and inspiration.

"I can create in every room," Isæus-Berlin boasts, half-joking, when asked if she has any routines to get into the mood to work. Truth be told it's slightly more complicated than that; finding inspiration is rarely straightforward. "I need the right amount of relaxation to be completely focused. It sets the tone, then I'm able to paint," she says.

The evening before she goes into the studio, she'll prepare breakfast, putting water in the coffeemaker. When she's in Stockholm, she'll wake up very early, take her two Bichon Bolognese dogs for a walk and then spin wool (she has her own sheep named Carmen) to get into the right state of mind to paint. In Fiskebäckskil, she'll walk through the small town, encountering other early-risers headed for their morning swim. Depending on the season she'll pick blueberries, listen to birds sing. Lastly, the artist takes a dip in the water. "I always have to flick the stinging jellyfish away, then I float in silence and look up at the sky," she says. "The dogs wait for me on the rocks." By the time she sits down at the canvas, her mind is blank, her mood slightly dreamy. "Just the way I like it, I'm both present and far away," she says. "Right then and there it feels as though I have the capacity to do anything."

Water finds its way into Isæus-Berlin's work, too. One of her seminal pieces, entitled 'Ett Vattenhem' ('A Home of Water'), is an installation depicting an entire house, furniture and all, totally flooded; a tableau of a just-occurred disaster. In her most recent solo exhibition, As I See It, at Stockholm gallery CFHILL, she presented several installations with water features, most notably a flooded dinner table on which only the utensils remained. With the absence of guests and food, the piece, entitled 'The Eternal Dinner', cut a haunting image.

Meanwhile, the accompanying paintings tugged on the viewer's heartstrings in an entirely different manner, taking on human emotions in the form of animals. One recurring animal was the koala. "The koala bear is a mythical creature, featured in children's stories, and has often been trivialised," says Isæus-Berlin. "I want to free it from the banal, give it weight and context through my work." The animals serve another purpose, operating as gateways to make her works more universal. "The koala, or any animal, becomes the portal into another realm," she says. "If I make a bronze sculpture with a person sleeping in a bed, then the entire work is about the person, if I put an animal in its place, then we're able to project whatever we want onto it, and all of a sudden the animal holds a different significance." Through these animals, the viewer can see whatever they need to see – even themselves.

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For Isæus-Berlin, painting has a rather established process. "I always start with a foundation on my canvas, a water-based paint, then I paint what I see in front of me, from my memory," she says. "It's always an original if it comes from me, from my bank of ideas, my vision." It's an intuitive process, in which the canvas – or, in the case of an installation, the room – tells the artist "exactly what I can do". While she used to approach exhibitions with a theme, recently she's been less rigid. "I needed to take a different route, explore the chaos, the madness of not everything being in order," she says. It takes bravery to veer away from the familiar, especially as an artist. "I needed to muster up the courage to show my animals, all these paintings, images that I have felt were forbidden for me to share beyond my studio," she says. And while her imagery derives from her own memory, Isæus-Berlin is constantly taking in cultural touchstones and anecdotes from her surroundings – streaming shows, listening to music and prodding those she comes into contact with for their stories. "My own memory is so important, but it also leads me to find new information, so in a sense I'm also using other people's memory," she says. As we chat, our conversation often derails as she becomes the interviewer, prodding me for information and analysis. "I get a lot of my inspiration from interactions, conversations with people," she says.

Isæus-Berlin's search for inspiration is wide-ranging and never-ending. "I love the opera, music of course, and looking at art, visiting museums," she says, name-checking Bach in particular. "I also get a real kick looking at what people are wearing, on the street but also in the theatre. I'm going to see *Sweeney Todd* next week, just to see the costumes." She has a penchant for Barbara Streisand films – she likes *Funny Girl* but her favourite is *Hello Dolly*. "I get so much energy from looking at Streisand," she says. "I am very into her way of being, her presence." Every year, she watches the BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice* – "the one with Colin Firth". "When he comes out of the water with his shirt on, it's so funny to me," she says. Any other obsessions? "Well, I love handbags," she says, before checking herself, "Can I mention that?" "Of course," I reply, having already noticed the navy leather Prada bag that she casually plopped down on the table at the beginning of our meeting. "My eyes always go directly to other people's handbags," she says. She changes bags often, with great precision depending on the event. "My interest really started when we started travelling to Barcelona, which in my opinion is handbag mecca. You find bags everywhere of course, New York is also a great place to find something special, but Barcelona really did it for me." She almost exclusively buys vintage, reserving certain pieces for special occasions. "I have this wonderful Chanel bag I only take out for parties," she says. "The first thing I did to celebrate my big solo exhibition at [prominent Stockholm art institution] Liljevalchs Konsthall was buy a bag – a Gucci. I know it's mad!"

Isæus-Berlin is certainly having a renaissance. It's almost as if she has found her voice again, or rather, just increased the volume. She has had an enviable career, finding success both in Sweden and abroad, exhibiting in biennials all over the globe. Recently, her solo exhibitions have come at a more rapid pace. "It is due to many things. Working with my new gallery has made an impact," she says, referring to CFHILL. "Its founder, Michael Storåkers, understands me; when I speak to him nothing is out of reach." This awakening has led to a surge of opportunities. She's currently preparing a work for a summer group exhibition at Galleri Arnstedt, in Båstad, a yearly occurrence that draws viewers from far and wide. I ask her what she's making and, in typical Isæus-Berlin fashion, the work could take several forms, one of which returns to her beloved muse. "I'm not sure yet – either two paintings, but I've been wanting to make a new fountain," she says. "I haven't made one of those in ages."

Patchwork jacket made from recycled textiles, €350. *Remake Sthlm*.
Button-down shirt, €189. *Bitte Kai Rand*.
Cargo trousers, €120. *Rains*.
Silver ring, €430. *Maria Nilsdotter*.
Sneakers, €355. *Rodebjer*.

Leather biker vest, €699. *Stand Studio.*
Patchwork jacket made from recycled textiles, €350. *Remake Sthlm.*
Oversized t-shirt, €25. *Weekday.*
Waterproof cargo trousers, €400. *Rains.*
Leather shoes, €169. *Dr. Martens.*

Suede fringe jacket, €799. *Stand Studio.*
Trousers. *Talent's own.*

EBO

Short sleeved shirt, €45. *Weekday*.
Long sleeved t-shirt,
Trousers. Both *talent's own*.

Denim jacket, €229. *Bitte Kai Rand*. Tunic top, €250. *Marimekko*.
Linen trousers, €159. *Twist & Tango*. Platform clogs, €460. *Filippa K*.

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