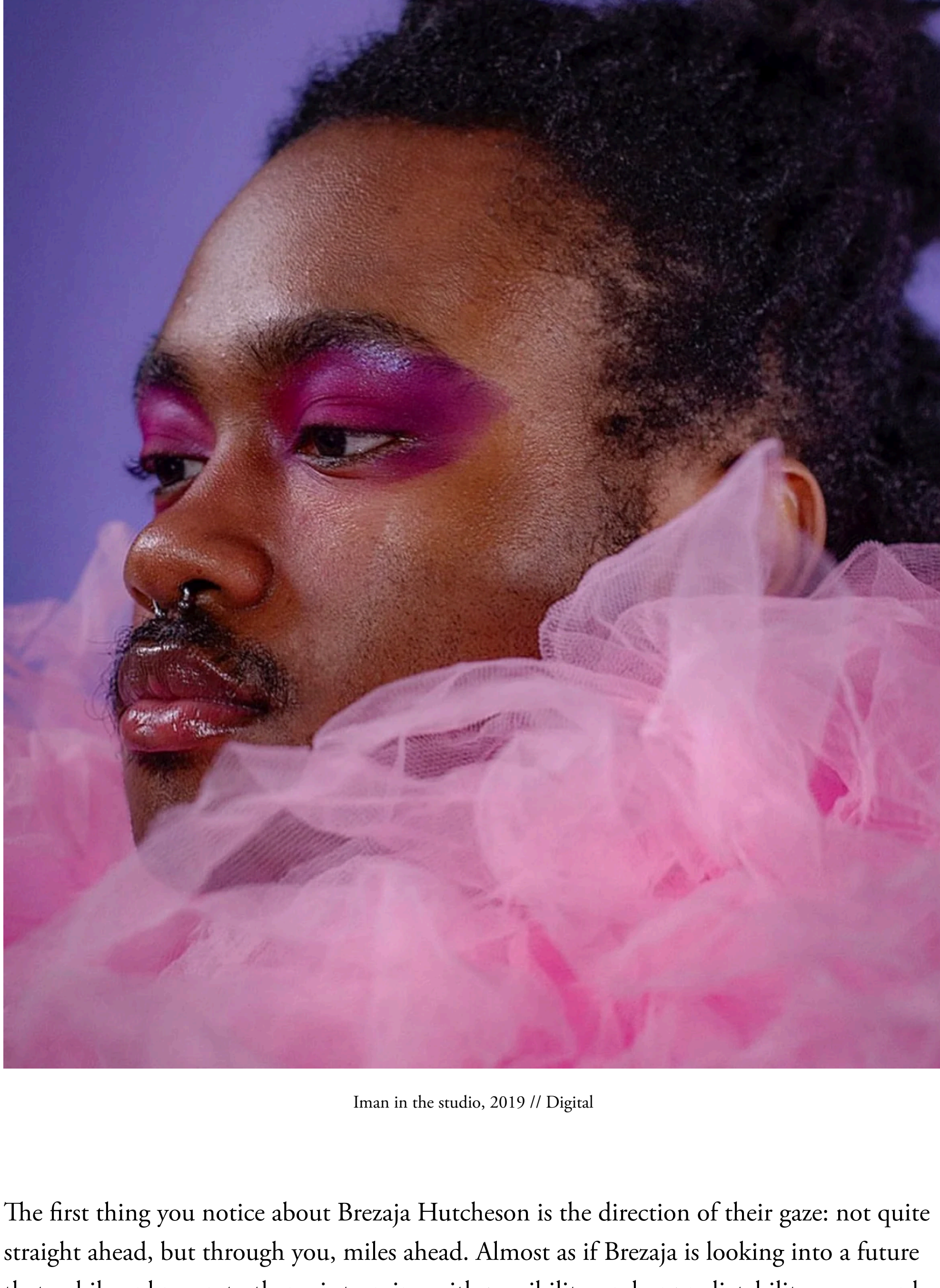


Michaëla Keil · Dec 21, 2021 · 7 min read



Brezaja Hutcheson and the Trouble of Describing Art

In their words, they choose to “kind of let my art speak for myself to describe who I am to people if I might be too shy to say it upfront.”



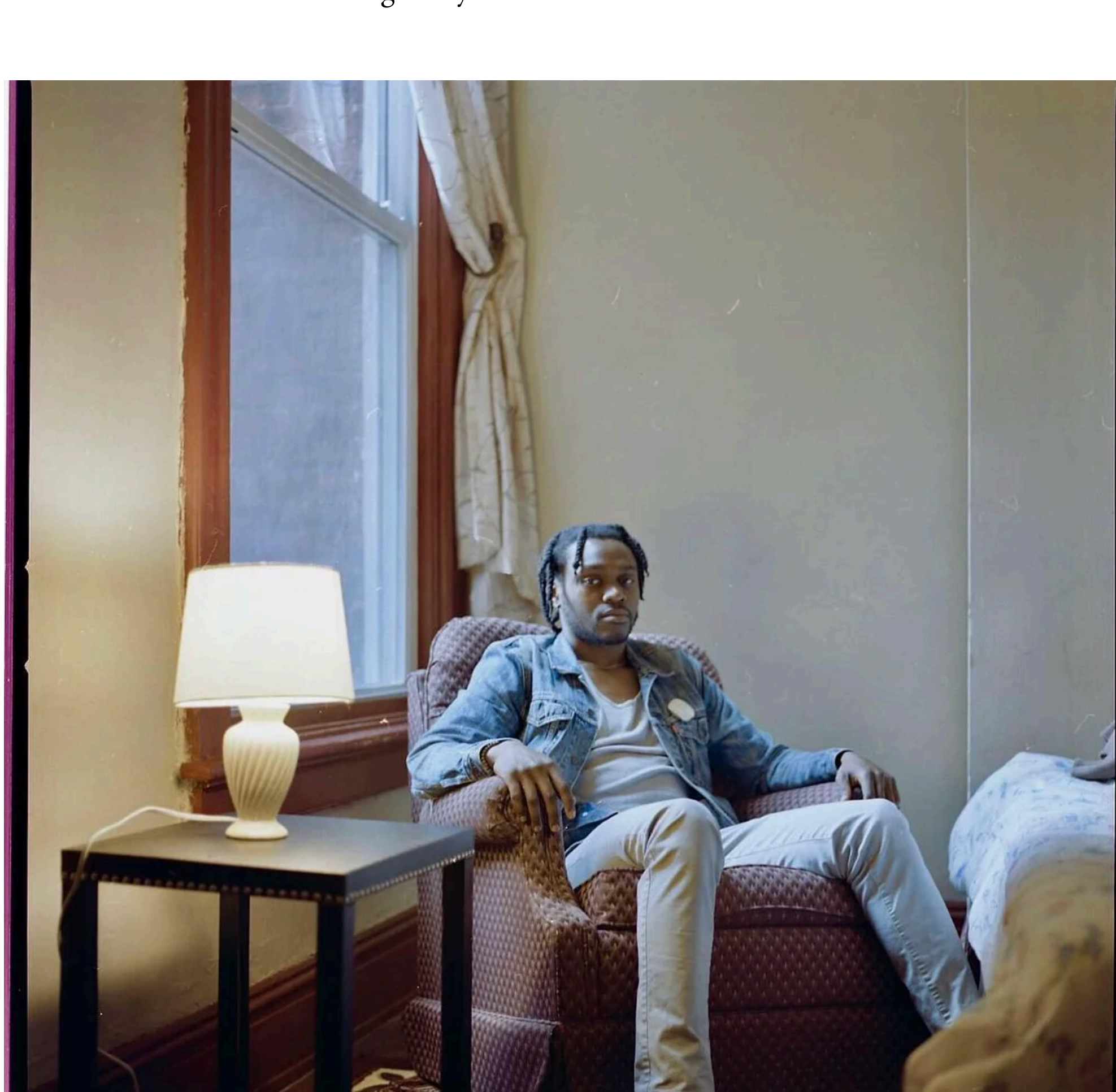
Iman in the studio, 2019 // Digital

The first thing you notice about Brezaja Hutcheson is the direction of their gaze: not quite straight ahead, but through you, miles ahead. Almost as if Brezaja is looking into a future that, while unknown to them, is teeming with possibility, and unpredictability — a word that has woven its way into their life and their art.

It follows, then, that one of their most memorable photos is a medium-format photograph, taken the first time they had ever used a medium-format camera. With film photography, and the lack of a screen to preview the image, or the ease of taking hundreds of shots, they had no idea what to expect. It is a picture of their brother, sitting in a chair in an AirBnB, hands just slightly more in focus than the rest of the image. The subtle shift in focus draws the eye to the way his hand rests on the arm of an otherwise unremarkable chair, in an unadorned room, now made grandiose and throne-like by the manner in which he was captured through Brezaja’s eye for portraiture. The experience of crafting the image is what makes it stand out: “I had to teach myself essentially how to work a camera, how to expose, meter, all of that, so I just went for it.”

The unpredictability of their first experience with medium-format film bled into other forms of photography. Film photography of all kinds became one of their preferred formats, eventually lending itself to 16mm film videos. Now, as a multifaceted artist who is queer, black, and nonbinary, they translate how they’re feeling into whichever medium works best — drawing and painting included — and curiously approach the unpredictability of life.

Their current dilemma? Finding a way to describe their art.



Jared, 2019 // 120mm film

With their first exhibition currently on view at Beeler Gallery in Columbus, OH, Brezaja is just beginning to make their mark in the art world, though they’ve been working towards being a recognized artist for a while. Their Instagram has served as a public gallery space since they started their technical art education at Montclair High School in Montclair, NJ. Upon commencement from high school in 2016, they went to Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) where they earned a BFA from the Department of Photography and Film. Since graduating from VCU in 2020, the 24-year-old has been based in Paterson with their cousin. Even so, Brezaja is never entirely settled in one spot. They take frequent trips to visit friends, family, new places, and will often join their brother on photography excursions as part of what they call being a nomad.

One of their oldest friends, Asia, explained that first experiences, such as visiting new places, is “a lot of who they are.” The two grew up together in Montclair, NJ, meeting in preschool and cementing their friendship by freshman year of highschool. “They’re one of my soulmates, for sure,” Asia said. She explained how she is inspired by Brezaja’s talent, but more importantly by how they’ve never been afraid to be themselves — personally and creatively.

Their [Instagram](#) bio says “I do what I want,” which is true, but not in the way an angst-filled teenager would mean it. No, they mean it as a mantra of breaking barriers of the self — a concerted effort to, in their words, “stop gatekeeping” themselves and their art and make the art they want to make.

Some time ago, we went on a walk together during a snowy afternoon and talked as they shot some photos. It was one of their preferred ways of engaging in their art: being involved in the land and experiencing as much as they were creating. “A lot of the work that I make, especially filmmaking, the experience is heavily tied to just me shooting.” They explained that they would hike, explore, and would purposefully go to locations, not knowing what to expect, leaning into the experience and the emotions that came with it.

It follows, then, that one of their sustained interests is in land. As a nomad, they have captured many lands, and are connected with people spread far and wide — it’s how they came to work on a wedding photoshoot in Costa Rica, got an exhibition in Columbus, experienced familial roots in North Carolina, while hailing from New Jersey, and staying in close contact with their best friends in Chicago, Virginia, New York, and Montclair.

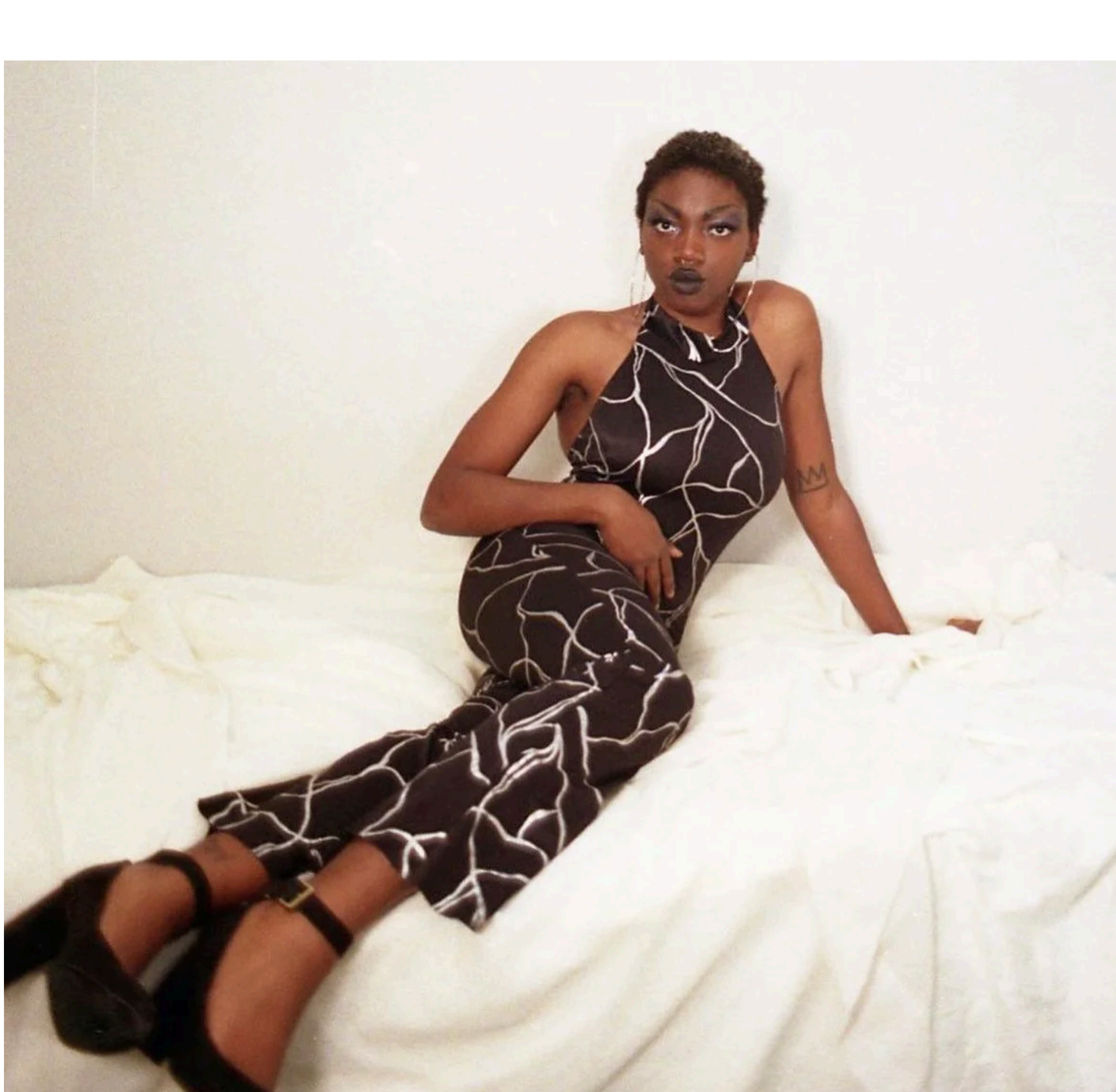
Byron, one of their friends from college, described Brezaja’s focus on the experience of a place as part of their ability to begin their art from an introspective place. Yes, they can be inspired by the land itself, but it’s the reflections on space and place and how it affects *them* that draws Brezaja to whatever subject they’re working with.

As part of this introspective art, Brezaja makes use of themselves as a subject often. They explained that they use self-portraiture to meditate on what they’re feeling in the moment and show that to audiences. It’s a concentrated effort, as Brezaja elaborated on the process of it, to practice vulnerability and let the art speak for itself. In one way, Asia feels, the way they take pictures of themselves is the way they want to be seen and the way they want to see themselves.

Many of these self-portraits came from an experimental era. During their sophomore and junior years at VCU, they would rent lights from the school and experiment with different photos, aiming to “communicate a subject or theme about my identity or myself.”

In one photo series, entitled “[After the Ball](#),” Brezaja posed for themselves for a series of photographs. They had just come from a drag ball show, were still in drag makeup, and were wearing a jumpsuit. To them, it was a fun moment to capture, one that fit into their tendency to use self-portraiture to capture “moments where I’m feeling a certain way or if I want to show a certain side of myself.” It’s an enticing photo series, mixing classical romantic poses and props with angles that render a sense of power unto the lens.

In their words, they choose to “kind of let my art speak for myself to describe who I am to people if I might be too shy to say it upfront.”

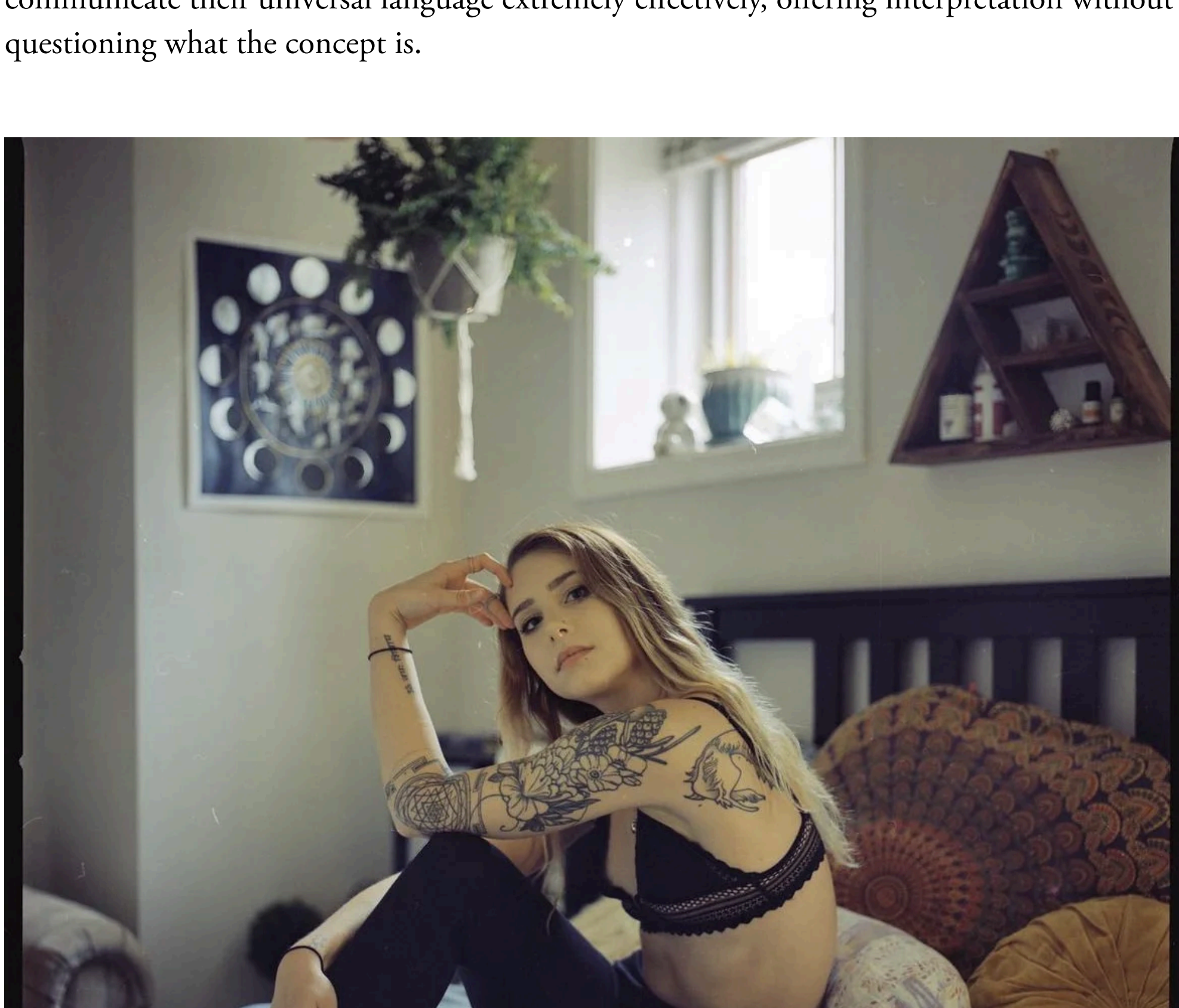


After the Ball, 2019 // Film

It’s what Byron relates as part of the flux of being a nonbinary person. “You never really know what side you’re on, like where you fall on the spectrum, you’re always trying to figure it out and it changes as time goes by and as contexts change.” They watched Brezaja let their guard down over the past few years, and in terms of their gender identity, said that “they really transformed and come into their own in a lot of ways.” Byron described watching their friend begin to assert their identity and gender and standing up for themselves. “I learned a lot of things about gender from them,” Byron said.

In the spring of 2020, Brezaja underwent top surgery, Byron and Asia both remember the moment as both a major risk, but a hugely freeing and beautiful one. “It was an immediate shift for them,” Byron reflected, a note of pride in their voice as they thought of their friend.

Bringing themselves into their art felt natural, and easy. “My identity is pretty much a direct parallel to my work in that it’s multifaceted,” Brezaja said. As a queer, Black, nonbinary artist, there are many identities they work within, making a singular description evasive. In trying to describe their friend’s identity and artistry, Asia and Byron both used a slew of words. Among them were: dream-like, visceral, just removed from reality, ethereal, and otherworldly. Asia reflected on the first time they saw the photo captioned “[Summer, a true angel](#)” on Brezaja’s Instagram. “It’s more sensory,” she said of Brezaja’s photography. The photo of Summer drew her in because of “the way they pay attention to lighting and everything makes it feel so centered I think. Almost as if whatever’s in the picture, you’re looking directly at it. There’s no second-guessing what it is.” Brezaja, in this sense, is able to communicate their universal language extremely effectively, offering interpretation without questioning what the concept is.



Summer //

It was this clear vision that helped Brezaja land their first gallery exhibition in Columbus, OH. The exhibit, entitled “[i know it’s the end & i am full of beauty](#)” is a multimedia experience held by Beeler Gallery. The exhibition explores queerness through landscape and temporality using short clips captured on 16mm film, photography, and dirt, in a collaboration with sculpture artist Maria Joranko.

All of the footage Brezaja shot for the show was taken on land they were experiencing for the first time. They worked collaboratively with the curator who used a custom DJ mix to bridge the two artists into one. For Brezaja, it brings the two artists’ work in conversation with each other, a conversation about finding solace and safe spaces as a queer person. The sounds, visuals, and physicality of the space bring to mind another word to add to the expanding definition of their art: sensory.

For their friends, the show marked another turning point. Asia proclaimed that, for Brezaja as an artist, “It’s only up from here.”

As for who they are, both personally and as an artist, they still aren’t entirely sure. Taking a long pause to reflect, it’s the process of it that they identify most with. In essence, they will continue to approach life with a curiosity, and a willingness to dive in, saying, “Whenever I take a chance and I don’t really know how the outcome is going to affect me or if it’s going to turn out well at all, it’s usually something really big and groundbreaking for me, and I learn something.”

As they said goodbye during their interview, I realized that Brezaja’s inspired gaze had not once wavered.

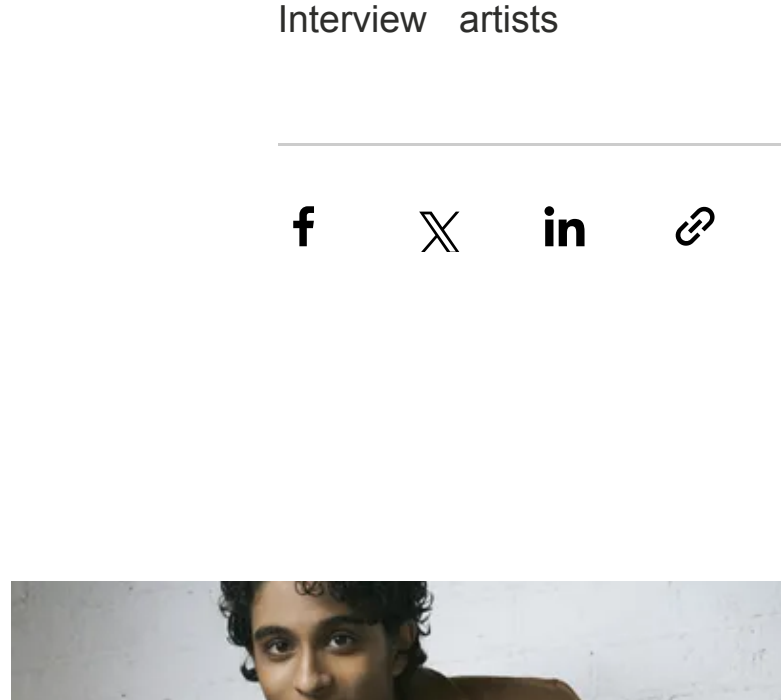
People Brezaja wanted to include as notable influences on their life: their brothers Cameron and Jared, friends Asia, Corrine, Byron, Iman, Summer, and their friend Reg, the curator of “i know this is ending & i am full of beauty,” which is on view at Beeler Gallery until January 22, 2022.

You can follow Brezaja on their [Instagram](#) and their [website](#).

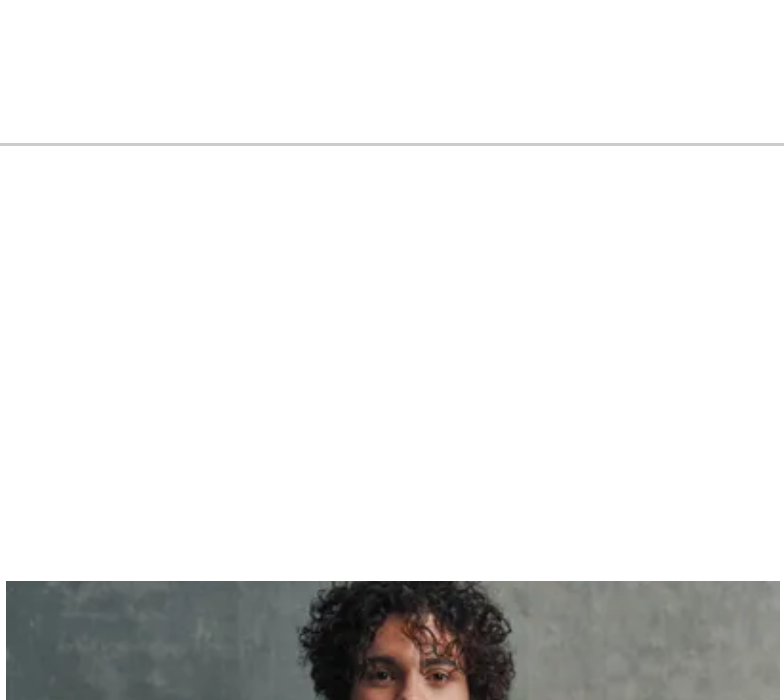
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