

► The foundation of **Isabelle Wenzel's** body-first practice is heavily coloured by two past lives – as a trained acrobat and a professional skateboarder. For the last 15 years, the German artist has been performing for the camera, employing an intuitive and light-hearted approach to speak about the universal experience of inhabiting a body

► Words by **George H King**

CURTAIN CALL

Page 70: *Model 1*, 2011. Page 76: *Neon 1*, 2022.
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Wearing a tailored two-piece suit – black, paired with shimmering metallic heels – German artist Isabelle Wenzel performs a hands-free headstand for the camera. Locked into position, legs wavering slightly apart, floating fingers poised in the vicinity of trouser pockets. Only the collapsed folds of her drooping jacket, its sheeny lining now on show, point to the magic of this physical feat. Through a trademark blend of fearlessness and enviable core strength, it is a gravity-defying act made effortless.

While there is much to ponder in this bodily sculpture – the mystery of a daring motion frozen in time by the camera's flash – the artist's identity remains well-hidden. Throughout the fleeting performance, Wenzel's head is lodged firmly in a plastic bucket, denying us access to the contours of personal expression we might otherwise seek. This same motif threads its way through many of her images. At times her face is obscured by hair, hidden behind contorted limbs, draped under fabric, or buried – literally – beneath the sand.

Past writings on Wenzel's work have often assumed the lens of feminism as a means to interpret this particular visual device. By accentuating traditional signifiers of femininity – transforming herself into something ornamental, fleshy, sculptural, fashionable – one interpretation is that Wenzel is poking fun at misogynistic perceptions of a woman's societal role or value. While the artist welcomes the projections that her open-ended photographs invite, these analyses diverge some way from her intentions. Working intuitively and with a light-hearted touch, she aspires to speak first and foremost about the universal experience of inhabiting a body. "It's just about the joy of that form – I'm in love with that," she says.

In images like the aforementioned *Bucket IV* [page 77], there's also an underlying sense of humorous rebellion – an instinctive pushback against contemporary expectations that artists should be serious, sombre, or should grapple only with heavy social issues. "Being headless also reflects how my ideas often come along through movement, and not so much through thinking with my mind," she explains. "The centre for my creative thinking



is the intelligence of the body itself, so it's a metaphor for the way so many things are viewed in relation to the capacity of the brain. I really believe in the intelligence of feelings, of emotions, of the body."

Past performance

The foundations of Wenzel's body-first artistic practice, which has moved in new directions in recent years, are coloured by two past lives – as a trained acrobat and as a professional skateboarder, both before the age of 20. "As a kid I was always super physical, and everything circled around movement," she recalls. "My parents, of course, recognised that early on; I think I was about three when I told them I wanted to be an acrobat. I did a lot of handstands and flick-flacks and so on... I often had my legs next to my head. I was very snake-human-like."

Wenzel's unusual strength and flexibility were noticed soon enough. A colleague of her mother recommended circus school as an outlet for her boundless energy. There she honed her skills on high-wires and precarious balance boards, as well as in contortion, under the tutelage of a professional Russian acrobat. This period also brought about an introduction to performing, for a live audience before any camera's lens. While the influence of this time is evidenced in her work today, a shift occurred when Wenzel's family relocated to Munich. Aged 13 and working under a new coach, she questioned the reality of a professional acrobatic future: "I thought: this looks tough, is this really something I'm aiming for?"

Nerve and tenacity would come in handy for the career in skateboarding that followed. Wenzel quickly rose to the highest levels of the sport, kickflipping and tricking her way forward until battle scars began to take their toll. At 20, a competition-induced knee injury resulted in a series of operations, which in turn brought on a newfound vulnerability. "I lost that childish view on the world that nothing could ever happen to me. It was gone... and I decided I wasn't going back because you need to have a very particular kind of fearless mindset. I didn't want to run after something I'd already gained."



Amid the uncertainty of surgery and recovery, Wenzel cobbled together an application for a design programme at the Bielefeld University of Applied Sciences. Studying her portfolio, admissions officers instead steered her towards photography, noticing the quality of the images she had submitted. "I thought, why not? Sounds easy," she laughs. "I figured I could do anything while everything else was on hold." Wenzel's interest in the body inspired early photographic experiments with portraiture and nudes – but she soon became unsettled by the power dynamics between maker and subject, opting to turn the lens on herself for the first time. She rarely looked back, and a move to Amsterdam's Gerrit Rietveld Academie lent further clarity to her creative choices.

A solo show

"I thought photographing myself was quite a narcissistic act at first, so I never really dared to show too much," she says. "I tried to hide my face so as to make the image purely about the body – about how it can articulate something sculptural or a performative moment. In Amsterdam I became much more aware of my process, of this encounter between me and the camera." Freeing herself from a reliance on models also relieved the pesky burden of coordinating appointments, sending emails, making phone calls. "I hated having to organise all that stuff," she concedes. "Working alone was so liberating, I could just get up and start – if I had an idea, I can just do it."

Even in isolation, a day in Wenzel's Wuppertal studio is rarely a quiet affair. She describes the "meditative" qualities of a repetitive dance she performs, hurrying back-and-forth between tripod and frame, setting the self-release and striking pose after impossible pose until satisfied with the results. It is a rhythmic, trance-like ritual, accompanied by a tried-and-tested playlist as a backing track – which returns to complement the post-production process, pulling her once more into the same creative headspace. "I also like to turn around this power balance of who is in charge, of who is the photographer," she adds. "In my case, there's just a camera clicking. So, for me, how the body performs is really what creates the image."



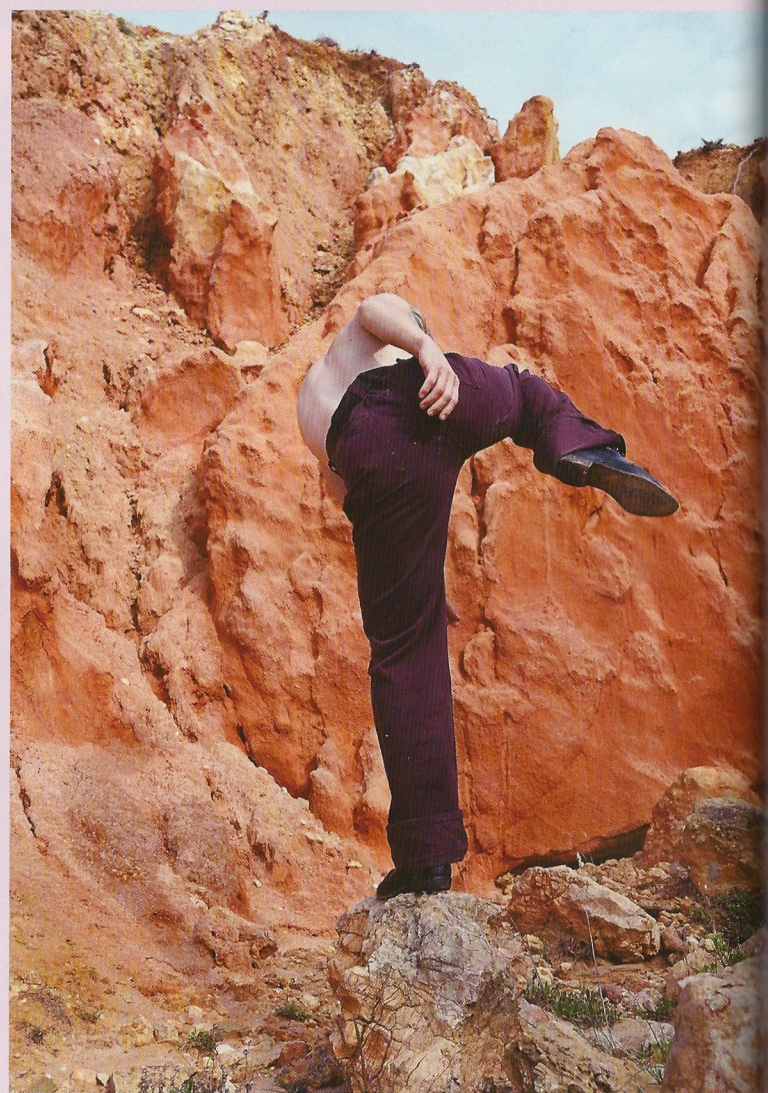
With her appreciation for the model's role in image-making, coupled with the signature features of her bold and vibrant language, Wenzel has increasingly become a darling of the fashion industry. In flowing fabrics and fresh takes on the body's expressive form, fashion offers a new outlet for a relatively unchanged visual approach. For luxury brands like Hermès, Wenzel captures herself in bespoke garments from the latest collections, and turns out playful editorials for a range of magazines. Throughout pandemic lockdowns, when elaborate international productions and their associated congregations of stylists, make-up artists and models were a no-go, the value of Wenzel's one-woman show became yet clearer for her clients. "They'd just send me things and I would produce," she says.

Occasionally, assistance is needed. Wenzel's partner often assumes the role of photographer to meet the fast-paced demands of editorial work, for which multiple looks must be shot in a day. The nature of these collaborations – which Wenzel herself sought out after isolating periods of lockdown – turns up a series of its own questions about authorship. "Sometimes I'm purely the photographer, purely the performer, purely the director. I like not having to play the same role all the time... this idea of becoming an ensemble. I wish we could move beyond the obsession with individual authorship," she muses. "Do we always need to delineate the work of the artist from the model or the stylist?"

Authorship, as well as our relationship with technology, is further explored in Wenzel's recent forays into film. *Automatia*, a duet with a drone, depicts the artist in a series of lunar-looking landscapes, echoing the frequencies of the flying eye above her with every careful motion. Tasked with operating the drone, Wenzel's partner was again involved, but the question of gaze is further muddled – is it man or machine who does the looking? Unveiled in 2022 at Amsterdam's Galerie Bart alongside a parallel live performance, Wenzel's transition between crystallised snapshots and durational experiences points to an intriguing juncture in her career, grappling two media intertwined.

"At the beginning it was all about the game of making an image, but performance has become more and more important to me," she reflects. "My thinking has started to change; I'm often thinking about specific moments when you need a live performance. Maybe instances where what you want to show is more sensitive. A live performance is a social encounter, you're always there with other bodies, other people. But you're often alone with a photograph – it's just about you and your ideas, your projections and fantasies." **BJP**

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