

Art and design

Why Loris Gréaud and Willem Dafoe made a film few will see

Sculpt is a commentary on the art market which will only be screened for one person at a time at LACMA. Getting it talked about is better than getting it on Netflix, says the museum's director

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Willem Dafoe and Loris Gréaud: red menace. Photograph: Loris Gréaud

From Tuesday, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art will screen *Sculpt*, a \$1.5m feature film by the 38-year-old French artist **Loris Gréaud**. It will be shown at Lacma's Bing theater, an auditorium that normally seats 600 people, but with an almighty caveat: Gréaud has requested that all of the seats be removed except for one, which will sit in the centre of the space, forlorn and exposed. The film, which is about two hours long, will be shown between four and six times a day. Viewers will be invited to watch it alone.

Exactly what they will watch is yet to be fully determined. Gréaud is making four versions of *Sculpt*, each similar in narrative arc but different in pacing, script and sequence of events. All versions follow a central character, a manic collector played by **Willem Dafoe**, whose voice, deep and hurried, anxiously permeates the film throughout. Dafoe is in the business of collecting moments of human value - anticipation, beauty, obsession, anger - and he amasses them like an art collector might accumulate paintings. Soon, collecting them is not enough. Wild-eyed, he descends into a dark, dystopian black market to make good with shady dealers from whom he commissions the production of replicas, which he then plans to sell on, presumably for a tidy profit.



The plot is a not-so-subtle observation of the contemporary art market, which Gréaud laments as being driven by high-net-worth individuals who are becoming at once collectors, producers and gallerists. It is not meant as a critique, Gréaud insists; nor is it based on any specific personal experience. Rather, “it is a mimicry,” he explains, “pushed a little into the world of social science fiction.”

It is also more than a little conceptual. Commissioned and part-funded by Lacma, *Sculpt* took 30 months to produce and features sprawling sequences shot on seven of the earth’s eight continents. One scene was filmed in [Hang son Doong](#), a largely inaccessible cave in central Vietnam; another was shot at a voodoo temple in New Orleans (more on which later). There are turns by the actor [Michael Lonsdale](#), the model and Yves Saint Laurent muse [Betty Catroux](#), and Charlotte Rampling, a regular Gréaud collaborator, who here plays a character called Grumpy Bear. Music is supplied by the avant garde art collective [the Residents](#), who also appear in the film, in hair-raising masks. When I met Gréaud in July to discuss the project, he had yet to reveal two additional characters, one of whom he described as “a very well-known French actor”. He was unsure whether or not to include them in the final edits. Parts of the trailer, which has amassed over 680,000 views on YouTube and is as ambiguous a teaser as you will likely ever witness, have already been cut from the finished article.

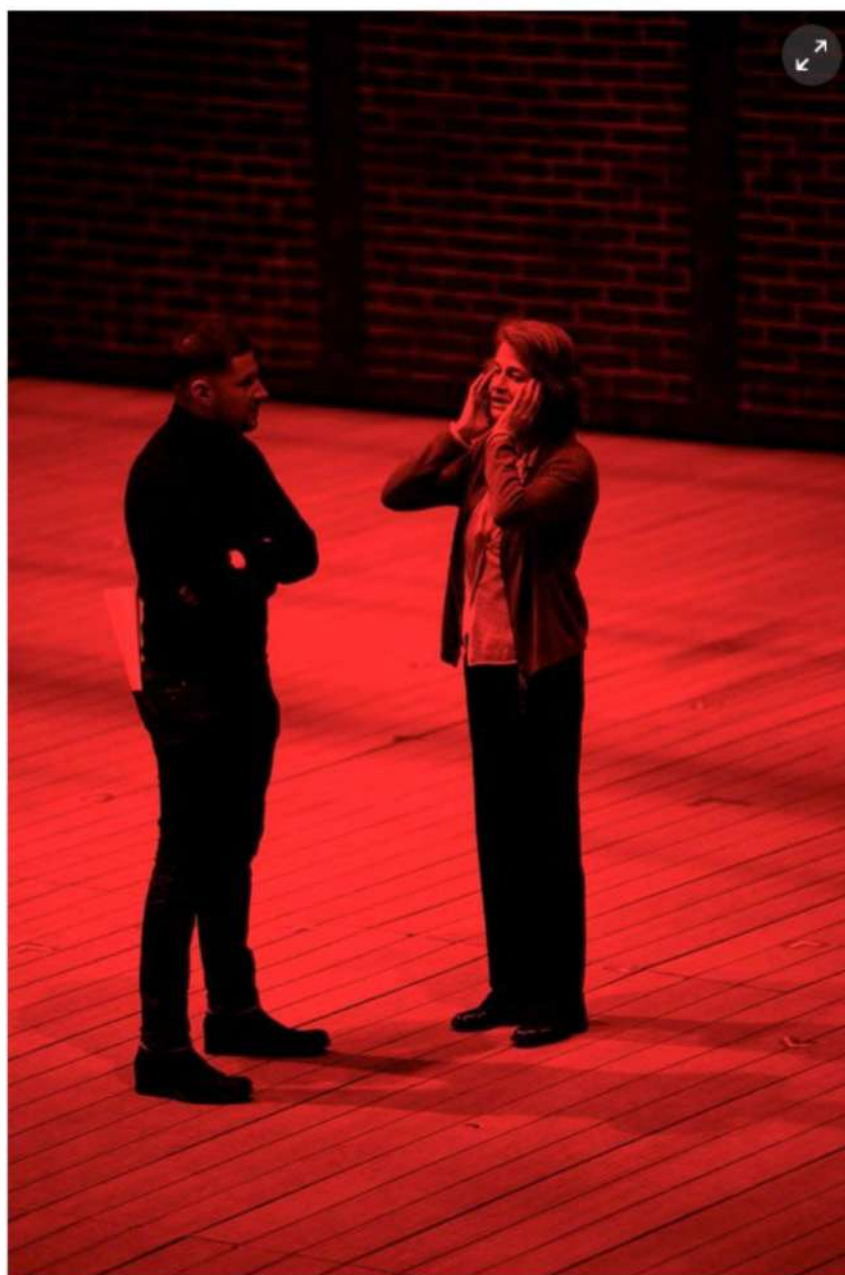


Charlotte Ramping as Grumpy Bear. Gréaud describes his film as 'dematerialised social sculpture'. Photograph: Nickolas Lorieux/Gréaudstudio

Well, probably. I have not seen the film, and neither, when I met him, had Gréaud - not fully. (It was being colour-edited at the time. The film is tinted blood red throughout.) In fact, very few people will see it, at least initially. Lacma pulls in over a million visitors annually, but, because only one person will be permitted to see the film at a time, fewer than 500 people are likely to see *Sculpt* when it is screened at the museum. Viewers will be chosen via a lottery-like system that will reset every day, and they will watch the film for free. Gréaud has requested that press and staff viewings be restricted, to a degree that even Lacma's director, [Michael Govan](#), will be asked to stand in line. The film will not go on general release in the US. Neither will it be screened around the world, despite significant offers from major distributors. When its stint at Lacma ends, the film's one and only set of master reels will be shipped to that temple in New Orleans, where it will sit, unprotected, in a public space that is filled with skulls and snakes. Did I mention how much it cost to make?

Why all the misdirection? For Gréaud, it is both part of the fun of the work and its major component. He considers the film to be one segment of a larger idea - *Sculpt*, the concept - which he describes as a "dematerialised social sculpture". Much of the project centres on the blurring of the space between fact and fiction, truth and conjecture, and the film plays mischievously in the ambiguous pockets between the two. When, in one sequence, Gréaud captures the voodoo temple's high priestess cursing a roll of film, viewers are led to wonder whether it is the one currently being projected. (That turns out to be the case.)

Talking to Gréaud about the project can become disorientating, but he has a knack for convincing people - with a salesman's charm and the confidence of having previously followed through on similarly ambitious projects - to subscribe to and believe in his audacious plans and ideas. The Residents, who rarely collaborate beyond their own collective, decided to participate because they were “intrigued by the project's calculated unknowns”. Rampling calls the film “an experience” that is to be “integrated and not necessarily analysed”. Dafoe, who initially turned the project down, until Gréaud flew halfway across the world and arrived one morning on his doorstep to explain the concept over coffee, believes Sculpt to be “an ambitious experiment”.



Charlotte Rampling on the set of Sculpt. Photograph: Nicolas Lorieux

This willingness to generate and sustain high-profile support might be one of Gréaud's defining talents. (He is not the only artist to do this: the Italian film-maker [Francesco Vezzoli](#) has shown similar powers of persuasion; Natalie Portman, Michelle Williams and Helen Mirren are all collaborators.) But so, too, is his ability to hold his nerve. In 2006, at the Frieze art fair, he installed sculptures so small you couldn't see them, forcing collectors into questioning whether they actually existed (before parting with significant sums of money). He has created a book whose words are invisible, a body of exhibition work that was destroyed (by performers, at the artist's request) on opening night. Gréaud's work taunts and challenges. But is it showmanship, or conceptual daring?

Govan describes the project as containing "a kind of surreal absurdity, but with a point". Though a crucial part of his job entails getting the general public to engage with art, he believes that it matters little that few people will see the film at Lacma. Word of mouth, he argues, is more important for the success and longevity of the project than the number of people who actually see it. The idea, Govan believes, is for the artwork to live on in a collective memory, rather than on Netflix. "He is playing with the truth," Govan says, "and the way that we know things ... In a modern medium, he is making something that is instantly lost."

In fact, the film will not be lost entirely. Gréaud is currently engineering a kind of second life for the work. During the Lacma screenings, dealers will hand out bootleg copies of the film on DVD, almost ridiculing the idea of having to queue for a one-on-one encounter. (When Gréaud and I met, he had yet to let Lacma know of this decision.) Beyond the museum, the artist has employed a network of hackers to distribute incomplete sections of the film on to the dark net, where, again, they will be accessible for free. Parts of the feature will also be screened in select theatres around the world - in London, San Francisco, Paris - although they will be shown at very late notice and at inaccessible times. Viewers who don't see the film at Lacma might still be able to see it, although it's unlikely they'll see the whole thing in one place and in one go, leading to complicated and imprecise discussion among viewers. Facts will be hard to come by, Gréaud thinks, and in their place fictitious elements will evolve.

"It's a simple mechanism," Gréaud said during our conversation in July. "When you take something and make it rare, you create desire, and slight frustration." It is those emotions that Gréaud is hoping to tap into; feelings that are familiar among players in the art market. "It could become a phenomenon," he says. Then again, it might not.