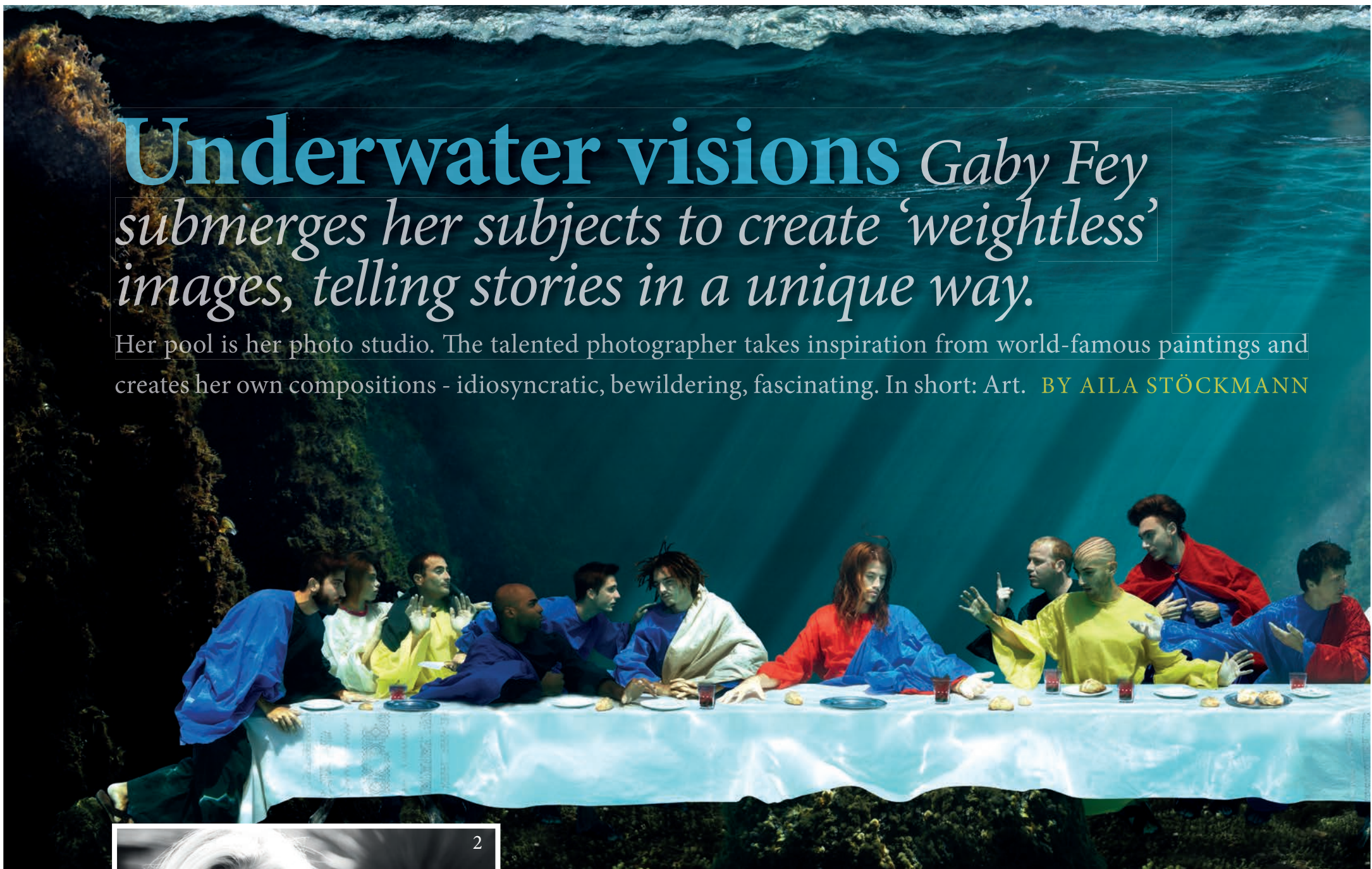


# Underwater visions

*Gaby Fey submerges her subjects to create 'weightless' images, telling stories in a unique way.*

Her pool is her photo studio. The talented photographer takes inspiration from world-famous paintings and creates her own compositions - idiosyncratic, bewildering, fascinating. In short: Art. **BY AILA STÖCKMANN**



**D**readlocks, drifting robes, a breaking wave: details like this show that something is not quite right about this picture of 13 men sitting at a long table. The subject is one of the most famous in the entire history of art: Leonardo da Vinci's 'Last Supper'. The difference here is that Jesus and his disciples are men from the 21st century, and they are seated underwater. To be more accurate, they are sitting in Gaby Fey's private pool.

The entire composition is not a painting but a photograph - created in Carqueiranne, near Hyères. The Cologne-based artist composes her works in her second home in Provence.

As a young woman during the 70s and 80s, Gaby Fey earned her living as a model, working for well-known labels and at the same time learning about what makes the fashion and adver-

tising worlds tick. In the 90s she swapped sides and started to make a name for herself in the industry as a photographer.

She eventually came to specialise in underwater photography, six years ago. This wasn't purely by chance; rather it was the almost-inevitable outcome of a number of factors coming together in her life. The now 57-year old is a keen diver, and the clear, species-rich Mediterranean has been right on her doorstep for more than 20 years. She also has a swimming pool in the garden of her home in the Var. Another important element is the famous 'luminous' light of southern France, which in the same way it used to draw painters to the region, now also inspires photographers. Add to this a spirit of adventure, as well as creativity and passion - Gaby Fey possesses all of this in abundance - which becomes clear when she bubbles over with excitement as she talks of her recent projects.

At the beginning of her photography career she started taking photos of people underwater, such as models for advertising campaigns but also private individuals looking for a special memory. She created striking images of weightless, floating bodies, sometimes in the sea and sometimes in her own pool: Photos that would not work on land.

But contract work such as that tends to be the exception these days for Gaby Fey. The photographer has turned away from the advertising and modelling industry, gaining more freedom in the process. However, her pieces now take much longer to complete.

Her most noted work to date, the aforementioned 'Last Supper' (La Cène), currently hangs above the altar in the St. Pancras church in Cologne.

"It takes me six months to complete a work like the 'Last Supper,'" said Gaby. The photograph, shielded by acrylic glass, stands out not only because of its size (four metres by two metres) and weight (150 kg), but also because of its composition. In contrast to her portraits - one click, one picture - the 'Last Supper' is constructed from numerous images that were individually shot.

"I photographed everything in the piece underwater, even the smallest details. That was very important to me," said Gaby. The 13 young men - surfers from the area - took it in turns to dive into the pool with the photographer; each around 20 times until she had the perfect shot, in the right pose. Each session took one to two minutes - or for as long as either the model or photographer could hold their breath. The table and props were carefully weighted down and shot separately. As with the actors, it was essential to get the right perspective. The final step was to piece all the elements together to form a harmonious scene. Naturally, all of that was done on a computer. With help from her assistant, Gaby Fey cuts and repositions each individual element of the pictures. It's rather like doing a jigsaw puzzle that takes months to complete.

"The creativity flows within me here in France," said Gaby with a beaming smile. She spends the summer months in the south





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and carries out her underwater projects during this time. The finishing touches on the computer can be done during the less sunny periods back home in the Rhineland. But she also still takes pictures now and then when she is in Germany, hiring a local pool for pictures to be taken underwater.

Whether it's a portrait with some fish, some newlyweds or a collage of dozens of swimming mermaids, all the underwater photos taken by Gaby Fey have a sense of total weightlessness and tranquillity, as well as a unique vibrancy that is impossible to capture in the dry form.

Gaby sells her large-format art projects in limited runs. They can also be seen at international exhibitions, with one planned in the South of France.

The photographer is always a tad melancholy at this time of the year, as she leaves her second home in Carqueiranne for Germany. Her luggage contains some of the elements of her latest project: 'Le Radeau de la Méduse' (The Raft of the Medusa) - a work modelled on the huge oil painting by the Romantic artist Théodore Géricault from 1818/19 that hangs in the Louvre.

Gaby Fey will of course relocate the scenery underwater. She built the raft herself out of old wood grown in Provence and anchored it in the sea with heavy stones. She also again hired young surfers from the area as models. They stand, hang and lie on top and next to each other, appearing wretched and despairing. Castaways...



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1) 'La Cène', shot in photographer Gaby Fey's pool 2) Gaby Fey has had a residence in the Var for many years 3) Botticelli's 'Birth of Venus', staged underwater by Fey 4) 'Ame' (soul) hangs in the church of St Pancras in Cologne. It shows the different facets of human beings 5) 'Prêt à Pêcher' is one of the un-commissioned photos by Fey, which the artist spontaneously produced - Photos: Gaby Fey





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