

SIRENS CALL

Director Miri Ian Gossing, Lina Sieckmann

Germany, Netherlands | 2025
121 min. | English

Screenplay Miri Ian Gossing, Lina Sieckmann. **Cinematography** Christian Kochmann. **Editing** Christoph Bargfrede. **Music** Simon Waskow. **Sound Design** Robert Kroos. **Sound** Felix Bartke. **Producers** Miri Ian Gossing, Lina Sieckmann, Mehmet Akif Büyükalay, Claus Herzog-Reichel. **Executive Producer** Claus Herzog-Reichel. **Co-Producers** Nadine Bemelmans, Floor Krooi, Elbe Stevens. **Production companies** filmfaust (Köln, Germany), Schalten und Walten (Köln, Germany), ZDF Das kleine Fernsehspiel (aus #3286 Doppler). **With** Gina Rønning, Moth Rønning-Bötel, Rei Spider Barnes, Jason Bötel, Mark Ginsberg, Amethyst Twilight, Yl'uria Watersong, Thandiwe Curtis-Gibson, Fredrick H. Zal.

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Synopsis

Miri Ian Gossing and Lina Sieckmann's feature-length debut takes a deep dive into the merfolk subculture on the trail of siren Una. Una leads a nomadic existence in the post-modern reality of a drying-out planet and the film glides along with her – through performance and genre elements, through fiction and documentary. "I'm part human, I recognize that, but I'm not full." Una's search for herself and kindred spirits leads her to American diners, shimmering hotel rooms and on a road trip with the young Moth. Trump's USA looms forth from the car radio. The two of them end up with other merpeople in Portland, a group equally concerned with activism and self-care who have wrested the ancient vision of existence as hybrid beings away from the clutches of consumerist culture. In loving, cool, queer, feminist, technoid and sensual fashion, Gossing / Sieckmann show people who have chosen a life outside the demands of a standardised present. Stylistically brilliant and ingenious in how it transcends the boundaries between genres, **SIRENS CALL** is an experimental arena for new forms of life and being. (Fabian Tietke)

Miri Ian Gossing and Lina Sieckmann have collaborated as an artist and director duo since 2012. They have created a distinctive body of 16mm films blending documentary imagery, fiction and found footage that have garnered numerous accolades, including a German Short Film Award and the Wim Wenders Grant. Their artistic research explores themes of hauntology, traumatised landscapes and queer sensibilities. Since 2019, they have curated the Blonde Cobra – Festival for Queer and Experimental Cinema in Cologne. Gossing and Sieckmann live and work in Cologne, Germany, and Portland, Oregon, USA.

Films: 2014: Sonntag, Büscherhöfchen 2 / Sunday, Buescherhoefchen 2 (installation, short film). 2015: Desert Miracles (short film). 2016: Ocean Hill Drive (short film). 2017: One Hour Real (short film). 2019: Souvenir (short film). 2025: SIRENS CALL.

Directors' Statement

Fluid Transformations

A curious quest for post-human identity, survival and belonging

We grew up in the same rural small town in Germany in the early 90s. A skatepark, a gas station, a church, a supermarket, acres of woods and corn fields and the last bus running at 7pm – ever since, the boredom that came with it has sparked our imagination. The TV felt like a window to another world where magical things could happen; the series and films we were bingeing on presented the US as a promised land of pop culture and myth. We grew up with tales of American suburbia, Disney-like leisure architecture, the ghosts of horror movies and prom nights. Our ambivalent fascination for showtime moments and shiny surfaces, and the broken dreams behind them, grew steadily.

In 2017, we learned online about a subculture of people in Portland, Oregon, who identified as mer-folk. They claimed to not only dress up as sirens in silicone tails, but really to experience being sirens as an identity in their everyday life. After first meeting 'Una the mermaid' in Portland – a prison psychologist and trauma advocate in her everyday life – we instantly felt a very special connection. Una and her collective had long been incorporating the things we had envisioned for our figure: a siren with interdisciplinary wisdom, connecting human, nature and machine while trying to form new ways of being with each other and the world.

"We're all playing a character in a script, but very few of us get to write their own story." In the case of the main character of **SIRENS CALL**, Una, the story is no longer about female self-sacrifice or the romantic fulfilling of the conventional mermaid narratives we know. In our film, Una is dealing with sheer survival as a hybrid being in a fragmented world on the brink of collapse. Her human body is dysfunctional; breathing on land becomes increasingly difficult. "I was drying out from the inside": a present day mermaid figure acting as a seis-mograph for the future state of the human condition.

With **SIRENS CALL**, the notion that film can serve as a form of playful experimentation has been integral to us from the outset. From the opening scene, which presents a laboratory setting, to the studio environment and our open interview questions to Una, in this film, we strive to reveal the conditions of the production itself. In this way, **SIRENS CALL**, like its characters, embodies a hybrid nature, roaming between documentary and fiction, situational insights and narrative exploration. Consequently, we chose to move away from classical dramatic structure and focus on a fluid style inspired by Japanese kishotenketsu, where there are no definitive climaxes, but, much like waves, a more fluid narrative style.

Una invites us on a journey across the United States, from the radiant megacities of the Mojave Desert to the small-town swamps of Florida. The water beings they encounter have turned into Disney-esque caricatures of themselves – trapped behind thick glass walls, ex-posed to the greedy gazes of the crowd, moving from peepshow to freak show. As a restless being without a biography, Una wanders through a world that has become alienating, one where the very act of breathing has turned into a commodity: welcome to the BREATHE Bar.

Una's existence is liminal – they are neither fully fish nor fully human, neither woman nor man, but something else that lies in between. Their journey is one of resistance, survival, and constant transformation, reflecting in various ways the transformative processes we must undergo as individuals and as a society to survive in a post-human world.

It is only when Una meets Moth, a non-binary teenager, during a night-time encounter in a Walmart parking lot, that their fate begins to change. Together, they embark on a quest to find a community of other mer-folk in Portland.

Here, the film's style gradually shifts towards documentary. We meet other queer oceanic beings who politically organise, swim, celebrate and lead their everyday lives. For a time, Una seems to have found their place. Yet, the question of who they are in this world soon catches up with them. Where does their body originate from and can they possibly over-come it? Are their supposed biography and trauma a fixed narrative or can they embrace their trans identity?

Our films often explore themes of longing, constructed feelings, and the surfaces that influence our desires – both in private and political contexts. We focus on the magic that lies between illusion and reality, capturing the 'not-quite-achieved', the slightly deviant. It is these specific motifs that we continually explore in our work – themes that find us: the house, the village, the nuclear family, biography, romantic relationships, representations of the everyday and the architectures of desire. Often, these motifs seem haunted by something or someone. Something that quietly announces itself, appears and then disappears, yet always remains intangible. The same is true in **SIRENS CALL**.

The duality of fascination and doubt reflects our curiosity about the relationship between appearance, truth and (self-)assertion. The boundaries between alternative lifestyles, holistic spiritual values and neoliberal self-improvement efforts are fluid here since nobody really seems to manage to escape these confines.

For us, filmmaking provides the ideal medium to question possible utopias and allows us to explore these ideas throughout the research and shooting process. Created by a small crew of no more than five people and filmed on Super 16, **SIRENS CALL**, as a collaborative process, also challenges our hierarchies, production processes and interactions with the protagonists.

Ultimately, the film is not just 121 minutes on screen, but also represents a seven-year artistic journey – a tapestry of encounters, relationships and experiences that have shaped us during this time and transformed us in multiple ways. In that way, Una's quest is also our own quest.

An act of desire, wish fulfilment, and resistance at once.

Miri Ian Gossing & Lina Sieckmann

Interview

Opening Up to Other Conceptions

Miri Ian Gossing and Lina Sieckmann talk to Irina Bondas and Fabian Tietke about the delicate balance between documentary film and fiction

Irina Bondas: I'd like to start with a question about the relationship between documentary and fiction in your film. Your film is a staged feature film, but at the same time this community really exists. What kind of community is this or what kind of movement is this?

Miri Ian Gossing: I think what is exciting about the film is that a relatively large part is documentary in nature – even if you can't see that in our film afterwards due to the formal decisions we made. In general, in fact, we no longer believe in these genre divisions and we find it exciting to break boundaries and to raise these questions. At the start of the project, we were lucky to receive the Wim Wenders Stipend and could begin working on the film with two months of research. We had had a few places roughly in mind since finding out that there is a big merfolk subculture in the US. We met Una on this trip and visited a lot of locations throughout the US. I think you can still feel in the film that locations are often a starting point for our work as artists. In fact, there are no locations in our film which do not also exist outside the film, except for maybe the film set laboratory at the beginning. Even the 'blue room' is a tanning salon/wellness centre that really exists, even if it looks like it is from another planet.

Fabian Tietke: Do I understand correctly that you met the rest of the merfolk through Una?

Lina Sieckmann: Right. That added another dimension to the topic. Una and the merfolk pod are a group in Portland that we stuck to because we realised that although this whole cultural phenomenon and these places exist elsewhere, this special group simply had a lot more that interested us artistically.

MG: I was fascinated by the way that this group, in which everyone is so different, still belongs together and that they unite their different topics and strengths. At the same time, we quickly felt that they all have a deeper, ongoing connection to the mythological character of their 'merfona' and don't view it as cosplay or dress-up. Each person has their own agency within the community. We found it especially exciting that, aside from performing together, they are also connected through activism. We were interested in these different dimensions, because we are also dealing with activism and post-human theory. And all at once you have these people and they simply 'embody' this. Of course, that is always more exciting than just thinking theoretically.

FT: To ask the most obvious question: SIRENS CALL is your first feature-length film. How was the transition?

LS: It was completely different than the short films. In our shorts, we didn't work much with people – at least not visibly on-screen. There were the spaces, there was the staging, and there was the off-screen narration assembled from different sources. That was the delicate balance so that the films were often constructed as the memory of an unreliable narrator. Now, in **SIRENS CALL**, however, it was an entire group of 'merfolk'. We spent quite a lot of time on location and built relationships over the six years that made the collective work on the film possible. Plus, a feature film of course also needs a certain dramatic form over two hours. That was rather new to us. What story do we want to tell? Do we even want to tell a story? Or do we want to shed light on a process, or different poles, during which something unfolds?

MG: At first, we felt a certain pressure. In the case of a feature film, there is the expectation that it needs to lead somewhere.

But then I said to myself, no, we don't want and don't need to fulfil that expectation. We'll keep thinking about it now as ten short films to take the pressure off and to open possibilities and find new forms ourselves. And this approach has slightly been maintained. There is a small remnant: The chapter structure through which we gave ourselves reminders and which guides us through the film. It was a relief to free ourselves from the dramatic rigour of narrative cinema. Formally, we tried a lot out: At some points, we had the confidence simply to enter a party situation with 18 people and then we would also stage a dialogue within classical standards. I think tons of aspects of our older work flows into this one too. There are a lot of very slow sequences with voice-over and pure setting. We both come from fine arts and have photography backgrounds, that's why we conceive of cinema first visually and not as narrative. We're interested in transcendental movies and slow cinema, but combined with moments of pop and a desire to break styles too. We ask ourselves: What can images actually generate together? How can we tell stories on a purely visual level?

IB: To come back again to the relationship between documentary and fiction: When I think about the protagonist's road trip and the many rituals along the way, the questions comes up for me of how much of that is in fact scripted, invented by you two? How much of it is already there from the movement or the protagonist? So how did you work that out together, or did you not?

MG: We are specifically interested in the relationship between finding and inventing, documentary and fiction. For me, there are three characters in the film: Gina as a human, her 'mersona' Una, and the fictional siren character that we added, the one who goes on the trip. The starting point was documentary and it kept developing towards fiction, with our discussions with Una playing a big role there. Interestingly, the film would sometimes refer to her real life. At some point, I said to her: 'Sometimes you talk as though you were an Atlantic oracle. Maybe we'll do an oracle scene about the future of the earth. What do you think?' And she said: 'Yeah, during the pandemic, I started giving oracle readings.' So there were moments when life and the film intermeshed, also because it was ultimately an eight year process that we went through together. In this period, we spent multiple months in Portland each year. The actual filming was, however, a slow process, also because we shot a lot on 16mm.

LS: In earlier works, we also dealt with the relationship between authenticity and fiction and it was exciting to meet Gina/Una of all people, because she is also, in principle, a kind of performance artist. So the topic of staging is already part of her character. When we met her for the first time in Portland in 2017, she said to us: 'That's when I'm in costume', meaning the human outfit which she also wears in everyday life for her job as a prison psychologist. We simply found this self-image that she lives out – being something other than a human – very interesting. It was clear that the point was not to psychologise, but instead to follow this self-assertiveness, engage with it.

MG: In fact, both of us are very theoretical people and start with a lot of concepts and thoughts in the back of our minds. But when we shoot, we try to let go of that and search intuitively. To find an emotional entry point, to be present. That's why we enjoy ourselves conceptually in the edit and try again to find a new structure in all the footage. In the case of this film, that was very challenging. We had 72 hours of footage and we edited for 18 months to tease out the inherent structure so that the film doesn't completely fall apart and, at the same time, still has a meandering movement.

FT: Can you say a bit more about the process of working a structure out of the footage? Were there in-between steps?

MG: In the beginning, there was a moment of collecting and opening up to this viewpoint on the world. In general, in our films

we are often interested in what comes out of an individual's fate and connects us all, where it is maybe also about a metaphor, an image for something, or a deeper, universal topic. The first year, we were just very open, in the second we already had a clearer idea what might still happen, and in the third we considered what we had already shot and what we could still add. As a final step, we looked at all the footage in the edit suite and built associative paths from one moment to the next. An approximate vision of where it should go was of course implicit from the get-go. A play between control and letting go.

LS: The film is based on a delicate balance between authenticity, documentary film, and fiction. A pure documentary wouldn't have been enough for us, pure fiction too. For a while, the share of fiction – because we were initially busy with teasing out a kind of dramatic structure – was relatively high. But it was clear to us from the start that the film clearly needed the documentary source and antipode and we wanted to position ourselves too. Right at the beginning, you see the scene in the laboratory setting, that is, the film as experimental set-up, we thought that was a good way to reveal that we think of whole thing more as a questioning and experimental set-up and that between the person asking and the person answering, there is also a particular relationship which developed over time.

MG: And what do we want from these categories anyway? Fiction and reality and documentary and fiction film? How do they work and what means do they actually use? And also maybe to deconstruct this or look at it with a queer gaze – we didn't want to choose a dramatic form that works with the classic, ecstatic climax, but instead also take hybridity seriously in the form. We thought about how we can construct a film that also moves in waves and again and again chooses another perspective on the same topic. With a protagonist who more or less crosses four different genres. It starts as a sci-fi movie, it turns into a road movie, then it turns into a documentation of a subculture, and at the end it could almost be described as a melodrama. There is this Japanese dramatic structure, 'kishōtenketsu', which we also know from Studio Ghibli films, for example, where the storytelling has no necessity and no causality, that is, that one thing must follow the other and each path must be explained, but instead it's more of a felt, situational, associative...maybe also an intuitive truth that we followed.

IB: Why these four genres specifically? Is that something that was specified for you through the development or was it also something that you wanted to bring in from the start?

MG: It's always both. We think very clearly beforehand about what the structure could be which we would find exciting. If we can reach it is another question. You have to consider that we mainly shot everything with four to six people. So there's no massive lighting crew, there's no 30 person set. We were in all the locations with this small crew, lived together and shot for over six months. It was made with a super low budget, which means a lot of things are due to the moment and that we had to work in a very free or experimental manner.

LS: There are still a few 'off' moments in a lot of spots. I really noticed them again myself when we worked on those spots with the sound designer. There is often a moment of self-irony and humour there. The entire topic of course contains the wish to be something else, to fit in somewhere, to push against boundaries. I think it is always in a way the assertiveness of form or genre that appeals to us, too, and then it's not quite realised. And quoting sci-fi or the alien metaphor simply presented itself to us.

MG: We also found it exciting how you can't escape it. We find genres exciting, precisely in relation to American society, because we realised that emotional reality and memory here are often already somehow fictionalised. People there sometimes talk in a particular manner and the way they say things often reminds me of a movie and how a movie wants to trigger a

certain feeling. The memory of movies talks there, in their stories and memories. We grew up in a small town in Germany and were very strongly socialised on American films because we were 90s TV kids. And of course this is also part of our unconscious and has an influence.

FT: I'd like to jump in here. You've said a lot about the people, and rightly so, but what I also find really great in the film are, for example, the interiors. How much set design was there?

MG: None of the costumes or locations are staged, but as they were found.

LS: The apartment is also Una's real apartment. That was also a huge stroke of luck for us, just like the costumes and hair. We didn't have to worry about any of it. MG: The house she lives in is on Hayden Island. It's a rather rough part of Portland, outside the city.

IB: In the middle of your film is this long merfolk sequence, which is set apart from the rest of the film and in which this community and every single person is celebrated and shines. During this sequence, I really had to think about concepts like post-humanism and different authors like Octavia Butler, Le Guin, and Donna Haraway. For you two, is there a kind of utopian idea to be found in this community? A future society in this apocalyptic, post-apocalyptic world?

MG: Actually, I would put it just like that. I would say it's a search for it. Our film asks the question of how we – individually or collectively – want to live, but also how we can still live at all in the world's ecological and political situation. The film poses very existential and painful topics too. We tried to reproduce the society and times in which we live through an almost constant stream of media input, which infiltrates all of Una's attempts to 'feel safe.' In reality, it's always running parallel to life and colliding with it. I find this ambivalent gaze very, very important so that we don't always stay solely in a critical mode, but also try to ask ourselves questions about elective families, positive and negative ideas about society, how we can think, live, love, whatever differently.

LS: For many, it's also an emancipatory moment. There's growing social inequality, real conditions are a major strain for a lot of our friends and acquaintances in the US – anyone without a net won't be saved by society. We've heard about this for a long time and we also have the feeling that it is getting worse and worse. That was also something about Una that fascinated us: The idea and necessity of community building is much stronger there, that's part of it and it has a notion that is deeply emancipatory and involves solidarity, and which really impressed us.

IB: Above all, when you think about how you began working on the film in 2017, during the term of the former US president who will soon be president again...

MG: Those are all things that got inscribed, including the extreme time around the election in the US in 2020 and 2024. This time can be seen in the film in the documentary footage of the protests. Now that the film is done, I keep thinking about collective, political traumas as moments of 'alienation', meaning how does a person actually feel in a traumatised body and how does an oppressive society inscribe itself in our bodies? Topics like immunity and dealing with illness. Why do we as a society have this fascination for myths, mythical creatures, for aliens and mermaids? How the merfolk are always changing their shape and despite repression and the most difficult life circumstances somehow stay fluid, activist, lively, and playful is also very strong proof for me of the utopian potential of queerness and being trans in the world. I find that very touching and empowering.

IB: That means we can soon learn a lot from them or, in fact, have already learned a lot.

MG: Yeah, now already too. I have the feeling that we will in any case be dealing for a long time with many of the topics the merfolk talk about. In this sense: Staying with the trouble!