

▼ Culture

Body Horror

Dallas actor Jason Habibi reflects on his artistic journey and making a horror short film that critiques the cult of image perfection.

BY PRESTON BARTA

Physical perfection is a dangerous illusion. Chasing it can carve hollow spaces into a person's identity, leaving them desperate for the next digital hit of validation. This dark descent sits at the bleeding heart of "Looksmaxxing," a new body horror short film tearing across social media feeds.

Looksmaxxing, a term that originated on mid-2010s incel forums has emerged into the mainstream, mostly by way of hyper-masculine TikTokers who will go to extreme lengths to maximize their attractiveness. Controversial techniques to achieve the peak masculine form include cosmetic surgery, anabolic steroids and appetite suppressants. With over 1.4 million views and massive engagement online, the film holds a terrifying mirror up to an internet subculture obsessed with extreme cosmetic upgrades and jawline myths.

One of the stars at the center of the viral short is North Texas-based Jerry Habibi. The 29-year-old first-generation Iranian-American actor, producer and music artist operates far from the manicured lawns of Hollywood. Instead, he orchestrates his rising career from his home in Dallas-Fort Worth. After a breakout role in the acclaimed 2023 Sundance hit "The Persian Version," Habibi is now making waves alongside Sunny Suljic ("Mid90s") in a project that proves you do not need a Los Angeles zip code to capture the global zeitgeist.

Staring Down the Mirror

Directed and produced by Elan Alexander, "Looksmaxxing" follows a dopamine-depleted young man who joins an online forum promising a better life through physical perfection, only to spiral down a path of destruction. It's a razor-sharp commentary on modern insecurities, wrapped in a visceral body horror package.

The internet response has been electric—the teaser trailer generated massive buzz, drawing comparisons to Coralie Fargeat's "The Substance." The film's subject—named after the real-life online subculture that preaches "before-and-after" miracles—has drawn national headlines and no shortage of angry comment threads. Critics call the real-world movement toxic, a breeding ground for insecurity and self-harm. Some see it simply as modern self-improvement, while others argue it's a black hole of harmful



Shima Neamati

Dallas-born actor Jerry Habibi stars as the bold spirit behind "Looksmaxxing," a body-horror short film.

comparison and digital dysmorphia, particularly for vulnerable young men bombarded by unrealistic ideals, peer pressure and monetized body shame.

For Habibi, the theme of physical transformation hits close to home.

"I started puberty at like 14 and had the face of a 14 and 30-year-old at the same time," Habibi says to the *Observer*. He jokes that he was participating in "looksmaxxing" before it had a dark internet label. "I feel like I was doing looksmaxxing stuff in the form of a face massage, and I've been going to the gym since the third grade."

But his involvement in the short film goes far beyond acting. Habibi acted as a second unit producer, rolling up his sleeves to bring the grim digital world to life.

"The footage you're seeing—the webcam and digital camera stuff—that was all literally shot from my room," he reveals. He also handled his own dubbing from his home studio and his relationship with the prominent independent source FilmUpdates drove a marketing push on X.

Finding Solitude in the Suburbs

Dallas pulses with a quiet, sprawling creative energy. While it might not boast the immediate cinematic prestige of New York or Los Angeles, it builds resilient artists. Habibi understands this perfectly. He spent his formative years moving across North Texas, calling Allen, Plano and Frisco home. His childhood came with profound early tragedy—he lost his father just a month before his first birthday. Growing up, he navigated the vast Texas landscape with a sharp sense of observation. Today, he embraces the space the suburbs provide.

"Most of my friends don't live in Dallas anymore," Habibi says. "I feel like I have a lot of time to myself to work on my craft and be in solitude."

That solitude breeds a distinct kind of Texas hustle.

"Dallas throws out a lot of good artists and actors," he says, pointing to massive local exports like Post Malone and Demi Lovato. "People from Dallas can get their hands into more things."

Shattering the Scarcity Mindset

If there's one thing Habibi despises about the entertainment industry, it's the pervasive sense of panic. He looks at former Disney Channel stars from his early acting schools who expected the corporate machine to do the heavy lifting, only to burn out when the machine stopped moving.

"I think actors don't understand that they possess the ability to do their own press or be able to say, 'I can act' or 'I'm an actor-producer,'" he observes.

Furthermore, he actively fights against the fierce, competitive jealousy that ruins so many creative communities.

"A lot of actors have this scarcity mindset. It always has to be about me, me, me."

Habibi operates on a different frequency. He wants to champion and elevate the projects he works on. By throwing his weight behind indie projects like "Looksmaxxing" and leaning into grassroots social media marketing, he bypasses the traditional gatekeepers completely.

Habibi is a testament to the power of staying grounded. He proves that you can help run a viral marketing campaign, star alongside industry heavyweights and produce cutting-edge body horror—all while remaining fiercely loyal to your roots.

Hollywood might be obsessed with the next big aesthetic upgrade, but Habibi knows the real secret to longevity: You do not need to max out your looks to capture the world's attention. You just need a strong voice, a quiet room to work and the relentless drive to build something true to yourself.

"Looksmaxxing" premiered on Tuesday, April 28, in Los Angeles. Habibi is hopeful for a local debut at a Dallas-area film festival in the near future.

▼ ACTIVISM

ART ACTIVATED

ARTISTS JACKIE CLAUDET MITTERER AND CASSIE STEWART USE ART AND COMPASSION TO FUEL THE RIO VALLEY RELIEF PROJECT, BRINGING HOPE AND HELP TO DALLAS.

BY PRESTON BARTA

Compassion does not wait for perfect conditions. It does not pause for bureaucratic gridlock, nor does it ask for permission to act. It simply looks at the human condition and decides to intervene. In Dallas, this relentless brand of empathy has a name, a pulse and a vibrant color palette, largely thanks to the Rio Valley Relief Project and the two dynamic women steering its course: Jackie Claudet Mitterer and Cassie Stewart.

Together, they operate at the delicate intersection of human suffering and creative resilience. Their work is a testament to the idea that helping others is not just a logistical challenge, but an art form. By bridging the gap between those who need shelter, food or a welcoming hand, and a city eager to give, Mitterer and Stewart are proving that unity is built one quiet act of kindness at a time.

A Mission Rooted in Nimble Compassion

The Rio Valley Relief Project began as a response to acute human crises, providing support to refugees, asylum seekers and other displaced families arriving in the area. Over time, it has evolved into a sustainable force for community care. The organization thrives on its ability to adapt. Whether they are stocking food pantries or setting up apartments for new arrivals, the goal remains fiercely simple.

"It's helping people feel connected enough to care and then giving them a way to help," Mitterer explains to the *Observer*. "We're good about looking at the human needs in front of us and shifting and pivoting where we need to."

Stewart, whose background in the school system deeply informs her approach to the project, echoes this sentiment. The focus is always on the families and the tangible realities they face daily.

"A lot of it comes from staying close to the families that we serve," Stewart says. "I can lean into that community and the partnerships and the creative thinkers around me, and that's usually where the most resourceful solutions come from for me, for us."

Weathering the Political Storm

Providing relief in Texas is rarely just about logistics. It's inherently tied to the shifting sands of border policies and political climates. Both women acknowledge the hurdles that come with their chosen path, yet they refuse to let changing laws paralyze their mission.

"Some of the policies over the past several years have made the work harder," Stewart admits. She notes that the shifting landscape "has increased suffering for families that we care about, but the need doesn't go away."

Even as migration patterns fluctuate, the requirement for human dignity remains constant.

"Policies change," Stewart says. "And now we're finding ourselves in a different situation where people are coming. It's slowed dramatically."

To combat this, the duo focuses on building long-term infrastructure rather than just applying temporary bandages.

"We're beginning to be more intentional about creating consistent support systems, especially in schools and with families, so that what we're doing isn't just reactive but lasting," Stewart says. "We've both worked in the school system, so we feel a draw to that as well and have connections there."

The Canvas of Service

For Mitterer, the drive to serve is woven into her DNA, inextricably linked to her own family history and her life as a creator. She views her artistic endeavors and her humanitarian work as two sides of the same coin.

"My way to connect is through service," she says. "I am a daughter of immigrants. I am the

granddaughter of immigrants to so many places. There is migration in my story forever."

Service, she admits with a refreshing dose of honesty, is mutually beneficial.

"In my case it keeps me centered. My head is a trip. My soul is happy. Art and service center me. My mother, she and I will say it is self-serving. Give the good, the good part of myself."

This profound connection to the human experience spills over into how they view everyday interactions. You do not need a grand platform to make a difference. Mitterer believes deeply in the micro-moments of empathy.

"Just do one kind of kindness and dignity comes in even when somebody is begging on the street... In my own exercise, when I see people begging, I try to stop and make eye contact. That is enough."

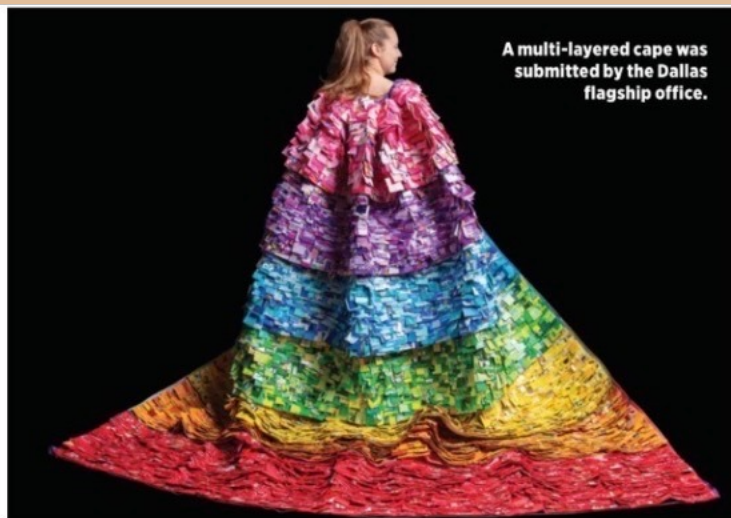
She emphasizes that formal structures are secondary to action.

"You don't need to have an organization and do a 501(c)(3). It doesn't need to be a perfect setting to be a helper. You just do something, invite a cup of tea, make a phone call, ask about how their day is going."

Dallas: A Unifying Backdrop

The Rio Valley Relief Project does not exist in a vacuum. It draws its lifeblood from the generous, creative spirit of Dallas. Both women see the city not just as a location, but as an active participant in their work.

"Dallas is aware and values the creativity in people," Mitterer notes. "Dallas is perfect for that. There is so much to do and there is interest and it is a unifier."



A multi-layered cape was submitted by the Dallas flagship office.

Courtesy of HKS

When they call on the community, the community answers.

"When we were setting up apartments, it's amazing what people will gather for us. We get to be in the space where we see people show up, and it's really great," Mitterer says warmly. "You see the loop full of artists, mural artists...It is becoming a scene. We can just be whoever we want and the way we want and be genuine...Dallas is fantastic in that way."

Blooming with Purpose

Art and activism will collide beautifully this spring. From May 7-10, Mitterer brings her

vision to Dallas Market Hall for The Other Art Fair. Situated at Booth #2, her exhibition, *The Flower Shop*, is an immersive experience designed to provoke thought, offer hope and fund the very pantries the Rio Valley Relief Project stocks.

"The theme is like a flower shop," she explains, describing the intricate layers of her display. "When you see, you see something and then if you keep watching, there are messages behind the glass all over and there are messages of hope and dissent...I choose beauty and color instead of anger."

Her art directly fuels her activism.

"Now I sell stuff and it helps fund our work for pantries. And it's a full circle, and I'm super happy about it."

At the fair, she will dedicate a specific section to this mission.

"In the work that I'm showing there, there will be one wall that is called art with purpose...And anything that comes from that will go through our work at the Rio Valley Relief Project."

One of the standout pieces funding this cause is the "15th Texan Airlift Squadron." A stunning 40" x 30" mosaic over acrylics, the piece depicts pelicans in vibrant flight. Through sweeping purple wings and hidden messages of empathy, the artwork serves as a reminder of the resilience living within the community. Buyers of the original piece or its prints will directly support the Relief Project's ongoing efforts.

The Beauty of Action

Through the Rio Valley Relief Project, Stewart and Mitterer remind us that service is not a rigid obligation. It's a fluid, evolving practice of human connection. Whether they are coordinating resources for a disadvantaged school, setting up a living room for a displaced family or pressing vibrant mosaic tiles onto a canvas, they are building a masterpiece of community care.

The Other Art Fair will take place from May 7 to May 10, 2026, at Dallas Market Hall, located at 2503 Market Center Blvd, North Hall. Tickets start at just \$20, with pricing varying by the day, and can be purchased directly on the Other Art Fair's official website.