



*Iris channeling the ancient art of hair-whipping to realign her chakras*

# *The Soothsayings of Tris*

I N T E R V I E W

AN  
WITH

MARIA GUTA AND LAUREN HURET

FOR

*GLOBAL ALLSTARS*



The complexity of human behavior is shaped by our need to either lead or be led. Value is determined by figures whose opinions and teachings are considered to be supreme, usually because of their connection to the divine. But ideology these days is complicated, as the age-old promise of eternity in the afterlife now shares space with the allure of infinity for the living. Celebrities and influencers have trumped the prophets and the gurus, with billions of followers entranced by their perpetual beauty and wealth.

*The Soothsayings of Iris*, created in 2020 by artists Lauren Huret and Maria Guta, is a film that examines the topic of influence in the digital age. Through the employment of Vogue's "73 Questions" rapid-fire interview format, the fictional character Iris, who is a mystical influencer living in Switzerland, gives a tour of her home while answering questions ranging from basic interests to esoteric craft. The organic interior forms of her home mirror the minimalist aesthetic of Kim Kardashian's house and recall the architectural practices of Anthroposophy's founder Rudolf Steiner. The conversation between the interviewer and Iris strategically alludes to the problems of extreme wealth and rampant poverty that exist as concurrent realities, as well as the dangers of blind faith. The fascinating yet precarious culture of "Tech-Mysticism" perpetuates a cult of personality behind the screen to build an economy based solely on a person's image as their brand.

Here, Lauren Huret and Maria Guta reflect on the sustained relevance of their film four years after it was made, and the ongoing presence of Iris as a conceptual simulation.

<https://runnerdetroit.run>

**Ashley Cook:** I learned while watching your presentation about *The Soothsayings of Iris* for Swissnex that you met at an art opening in San Francisco despite having lived only a few kilometers away from each other in Switzerland at the time. What brought you both to California and what year was it that you met?

**Maria Guta:** It was fate! :) It all happened in July 2019, during my second-ever trip to the USA, just a few months after my first visit earlier that year. It was also my first time in California—finally! I was participating in a group show at Swissnex San Francisco, and Lauren came to the opening (I'll let her share more about that). We clicked pretty quickly, and we decided to hang out again while I was still in town. A few days later, we went on a road trip through Silicon Valley, and somewhere between Google HQ, the Apple campus, and a trance festival, we realized this was the start of a beautiful friendship :).

**Lauren Huret:** Yes, at that time I was supposed to do something at Swissnex San Francisco for the following year (the exhibition was scheduled for June 2020, I believe - it was all canceled, of course), and it just so happens that my partner is from the region, and we were there at the time. I loved the video Maria was showing, and the director told me the artist was there. I went up to Maria and told her I loved her work. We soon realized that we had a lot of interests and things in common too. In particular, I found Maria's early years in communist Bucharest fascinating.





*Iris reconnecting with her third eye and the cosmos on a very exclusive Swiss retreat*

<https://runnerdetroit.run>

**A:** Maria, your experience growing up in Romania under the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceaușescu has certainly influenced your view of mass followings in the case of either religious leaders or celebrities. Much of your previous work has centered around persona and the use of media as an instrument to achieve power. Lauren, can you touch on your interests in this topic, and where you believe it may stem from?

**M:** That's an interesting perspective, and it's funny that I hadn't really thought of it that way—but it makes total sense. I was very young when Ceaușescu's regime fell, so I didn't fully understand the political realities or the oppressive nature of the dictatorship at the time. Instead, I often escaped into movies—especially American ones—which were mostly forbidden but circulated on contraband VHS tapes. There's a nice documentary, *Chuck Norris vs. Communism*, that captures a bit of what this experience was like. Watching those poor-quality copies of Hollywood films felt like traveling into another world. They represented “the other side” for us—a promised land of freedom, choice, and capitalism, the complete opposite of what we were living in Romania. I guess we were hungry for anything beyond our restricted reality, and this craving extended to everything—consumerism, culture, and other kinds of idols.

**M:** We were captivated by anything we saw on the screen that we weren't supposed to, and I think that shaped a lot of our worldview and aspirations. At the time, I wasn't aware of the immense soft power American culture had over us, but it was massive. People with access to VHS players, which were rare, would host movie nights for friends and neighbors. It was almost like a community event, a shared escape from state-controlled media, which only broadcasted propaganda or heavily censored content. I particularly remember an evening when my parents and I visited friends down the street who had a VCR, and the whole night was planned around watching Michael Jackson's *Thriller* music video.

My fascination with movies was also fed by my parents' own passion for cinema. Some of the first books I was really into were a movie dictionary and a history of Hollywood. I was completely hypnotized by these books, and began reenacting characters from the films or the pages I knew by heart, imagining myself as someone else, somewhere else. I wanted to be like the people on the screen, to step into the lives they lived. Each of those characters seemed so different from the women around me at the time, and I found myself drawn to those stereotypes, wanting to step into their shoes, even if just for a moment.

It was only much later, as I began to critically reflect on these experiences, that I started to question where this fascination came from and why it had such a strong hold on me. This has definitely influenced my work on persona and the use of media as a tool of power.

**L:** I've always been very interested in all types of beliefs and any system based on beliefs, faiths, ideas, ideals... I think it comes from the fact that I moved to the Caribbean when I was 9. Coming from a white, atheist and materialistic family, where religious

beliefs were swept aside by a strange system of thought inherited from Marx (that famous "opium of the people", which ultimately looks down on religious beliefs and faith), my arrival in the Caribbean simply confronted me with my own beliefs (of all kinds) and introduced me to a whole host of others, which I found much more exhilarating. Hearing my classmates talk about spirits and possessions, while attending a Catholic school, greatly nourished my childhood imagination. For me, reality was suddenly transformed into a vast field of supernatural images, occult and fertile tales, spells and miracles: magical worlds were no longer imaginary worlds, but suddenly became more tangible, more incarnate and poetic.

I also have a growing interest in power figures, who are often problematic, abusive and disturbing. It's at this point of contact that realities merge with fictions now: our political figures are so absurd and demented that they become highly implausible in the end.

**A:** For the film, together, you focus on this new culture that you call "Tech-Mysticism" in an attempt to shine light on new-age philosophies adopted by social media personalities and celebrities. Do you feel like these people are using concepts of healing and enlightenment as a way to gain followers, likening them to cult leaders throughout history?

**M:** I definitely see a parallel between how social media personalities and celebrities today totally fall for healing and enlightenment like

concepts, and the influence cult leaders had throughout history. The fascination that "guru-like" figures manifest on people is not new. In our current culture, with its strong focus on self-improvement and the "be your best self" mantra, there's a hyper sensitivity to ideas of healing, transformation, and personal growth. We are constantly pushed to look inside ourselves and scrutinize our psyche, though this often remains at a superficial level as we aim to get closer to impossible ideals of absurd perfection.

This probably creates a perfect environment for figures who present themselves as guides or healers to thrive, and who easily gain massive numbers of followers. With the revival of New Age concepts, especially in the digital age, people are increasingly drawn to these figures, sometimes without even questioning why they follow them. Social media definitely amplifies this effect, making it easier to cultivate followers, almost in the same way that cults have operated in the past. I guess we can see similar patterns in how people search for answers and meaning, and look up to individuals who promise the key to enlightenment or self-fulfillment, often with little to zero critical reflection. Like a modern iteration of an age-old phenomenon.



*Maria Gutierrez & Lauren Huret attending the Pet Gala in 2021*

**L:** In our video, we wanted to parody to the extreme what we call “media bewitchment”, which is often mentioned in our work. Because we have a natural tendency to “adhere” to images, we’re bewitched by them. Even if we criticize them, if we manage to distance ourselves from them, these images are part of our worlds. They construct our realities in a certain way.

**A:** It seems to be quite relevant that this film was created during the most challenging months of the Covid-19 Pandemic. This was a time when people were isolated, resorting to the Internet as their only source of connection, support and information. It has been said that Paris Hilton is the first influencer, inventing the concept of the self as a brand with her catchphrase “That’s Hot” and her reality TV show with Nicole Richie, *The Simple Life*, airing from 2003-2005. Twenty years have gone by since then, and so many new people have utilized TV and Social Media to build careers around themselves and their lifestyles, but how do you think the pandemic in particular influenced the trajectory of this phenomenon?

**L:** Thanks! Looking back, it’s true that we produced this video in the midst of the pandemic, which was actually quite complicated. I have the feeling that all the phenomena provoked by the pandemic (fear, withdrawal, forced confinement, etc.) may have accelerated this “adhesion” to images. Personally, my relationship with spaces has also changed. As we could no longer enjoy more spacious spaces (e.g. more stadiums, gatherings, sports halls etc.), more beautiful spaces (more restaurants, museums etc.), I watched videos and photographs of the interiors of the rich and famous with fascination and envy. Vogue’s “73 questions” series, on which the video format is based, had become daily consumption. What made us laugh with Maria was the supposed spontaneity of these videos, when in fact everything is very scripted, very curated, there’s a team of probably 30 people on site, the celebrities interviewed are ultra-prepared and with full make-up on, nice clothes and so on. The videos are made to look like there’s only one person, the one asking the questions, and the point of view means that we ourselves have the impression of entering these spaces of

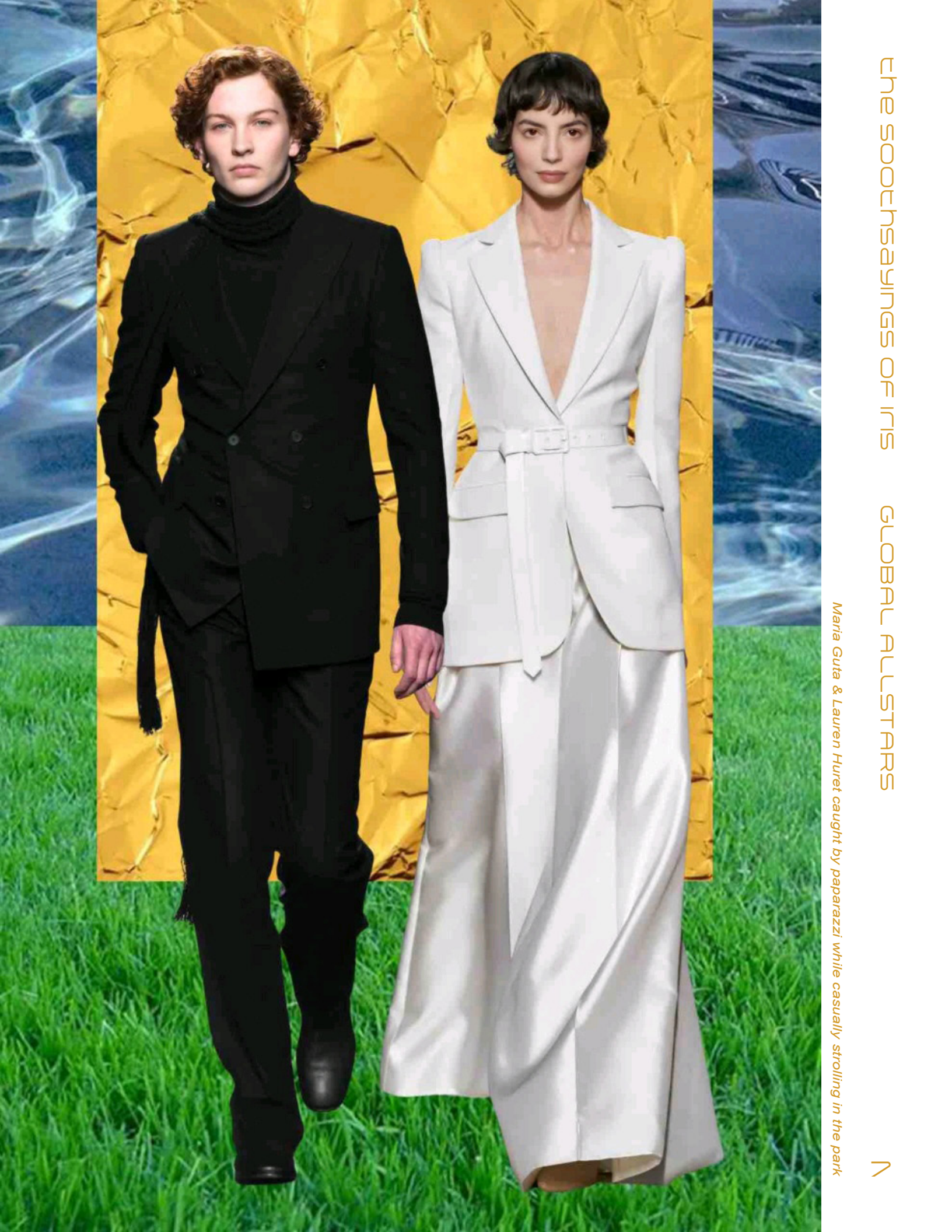
extreme luxury, as the star looks into the eye of the camera. All these different layers of image construction fed us to make *The Soothsayings of Iris*.

To come back to the notion of influencer, which was born with the emergence of interactive social media, I just think it’s a new word to talk about people who have more visibility and power than others, as they have for millennia in all our societies. What has changed is the speed of information exchange, the multiplicity of media, the scales, the possibilities of interacting... I think.

**M:** I feel like the pandemic really accelerated the influencer phenomenon, as it brought everything and everyone even more in front and/or behind their screens. Being confined to our personal spaces, we had to adapt our lives around various online platforms—whether it was for communicating, shopping, learning, working out, flirting, traveling. The screen was a portal for connecting with others or simply escaping, and it naturally became our main source of information and entertainment. So it made sense that a whole new wave of influencers emerged during this time, as they seized the opportunity and realized the on-line audience was larger and hungrier than ever.

I think it was also during the pandemic that TikTok had a major breakthrough, opening up whole new levels and niches for influencers and content creators and allowing people to develop new skills and even build careers in ways we hadn’t really seen before.

I find it interesting how the pandemic added a new layer to the way we perform our online identities, pushing pretty much everyone to take self-curation a step further. With everything suddenly happening through a screen more than ever, our image had to be permanently crafted for an audience, whether that audience was our work colleagues, our students, our parents, a tax counselor or an actual public. This shift meant that everything could be more controlled and curated, very “scripted” as Lauren also mentioned above. In a way, it felt like we were all (finally! :) ) on TV.



the soothsayers of iris

GLOBAL ALLSTARS

*Maria Guta & Lauren Huret caught by paparazzi while casually strolling in the park*

N

**A:** Because it's a parody, there is a comedic aspect to your film. Aside from acting as a platform from which to mock or critique the digital-era dogmas and their mystical dealers, what is the objective of Iris as a sustained performative character?

**L:** I'd say that Iris is there to make us doubt everything. She's a trickster, an anomaly, a joke, a fiction, a fraud, a manipulation, our doll, our puppet... we can make her do lots of absurd things and say lots of monstrous things. It's a channel through which we can "vomit", atone for what we see on a daily basis, what we find silly, but also funny. To create her, we drew on a whole host of personalities... from Kanye West and Kim Kardashian to the Maharishi guru and Rudolf Steiner. We also wanted Iris to be able to appear at different times, on different media... to be like a computer virus, bouncing from platform to platform. She's our little prophet, influenced by McLuhan's theories, among others.

**M:** I think Lauren's answer sums it up quite nicely, I particularly like the comparison to a computer virus :). Iris acts as this vehicle to explore the awkwardness and problematic aspects of different viral formats, as well as the deep impact of their instant global reach. She's supposedly famous, a guru who believes in everything from reincarnation and algorithmic finance to extraterrestrial life and capitalism. Her contradictory nature allows us to highlight how easily conflicting ideas are spread in today's world and how easily we suck in these ideas without much critical reflection. Iris allows us to re-appropriate certain imposed media forms, challenging the "media bewitchment" we're under. To use another metaphor and to close the circle, I would say Iris served at times as our Trojan horse penetrating these same platforms and formats we aim to analyze and critique.

**A:** *The Soothsayings of Iris* is the first collaboration between you. Can you talk about how this piece influenced later collaborations you have worked on together?

**L:** I think we worked really well together on this video: everything went very quickly, we bounced ideas off each other and wrote the dialogues easily. Probably also because our fields of research were very rich and we knew very early on the direction in which we wanted to go. Our individual roles were also defined very naturally. We still managed to make a short film on a very limited budget. We did really well, I'd say. That's how I experienced it!

**M:** I'd say this project was where we collaborated best. It was right after the first wave of strict Covid confinement, so we were eager to be back doing things irl! "The Soothsaying of Iris" focused on topics we were both passionate about, and like Lauren mentioned, everything flowed naturally. I think it was a key moment that shaped the way we would exchange ideas later on too—whether through a Google doc, phone calls, or while working together in our studios. We never "officially" discussed a working method, it just kind of developed organically. I guess this project showed us our strengths as a duo, though we also learned about our flaws while working on later projects.

Some trivia: occasionally, we loved indulging in sushi lunch breaks while brainstorming or working together, and we bonded over (usually longer than planned) trips to thrift stores for props or inspiration (but mostly for sheer pleasure). These became important habits throughout our four years of collaboration, and some great ideas or even key elements of our projects came out of these trips (like THE BABY :)).

This is also maybe a good time to share that we've recently decided to put our collaboration on hold. So, at the moment, we're no longer an artist duo, but our friendship is still rock solid—just like a glass of whiskey on the rocks in the perfectly manicured hands of a businesswoman from a '90s blockbuster ;).





THE SOOTHSAIINGS OF IRIS

GLOBAL ALLSTARS



*Maria Gula & Lauren Huret attending the Men Gala in 2022*



I sent my soul through the invisible,

*Video still from "The Soothsayings of Iris", Maria Guta & Lauren Huret, 2020*

## ***The Soothsayings of Iris***

Credits:

**Camera:** Raphaël Piguet

**Camera Assistant:** Gabriel Balagué

**Music and Sound Production:** FlexFab

**Color Grading:** Léon Orlandi

**Editing:** Maria Guta, Lauren Huret,

Raphaël Piguet, Baptiste Jehan

**Costume and Set Design:** Maria Guta & Lauren Huret

**Accessories:** Worn

**WATCH THE FILM HERE:**

**[vimeo.com/768965886](https://vimeo.com/768965886)**

**Lauren Huret:**

<http://www.laurenhuret.com/>

**Maria Guta:**

<https://mariaguta.com/>

<https://runnerdetroit.run>

**GLOBAL ALLSTARS**

