

The poet's painter: Apolonia Sokol at The Pill

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"Dina" (2016), "Salome" (2017), "Bonnie - Cennie" (2017), shown in that order.

The oil paintings of Apolonia Sokol will color the air behind the Golden Horn shorefront in Balat at The Pill exhibition one of Istanbul's freshest, young contemporary galleries Until July 31. "I have trouble sleeping, but she said she loved me" is her first solo show in Turkey

The toxic fumes of turpentine rose through Sokol's nostrils as she exhaled smoke from the last of her countless cigarettes. She was going crazy, and needed a break. Outside the door to the vast, working theater where she lived, the streets of Paris tempted to embalm her in its open-air museum. Her art was then a heavily concentrated chaos of densely overlapping transparent layers, as she looked through metaphysical lattice works of oil, painting on painting. That changed when a fire burst and she lost her home and her work. She covered a burnt canvas in ashen gray, and began figurative portraiture, a craft that remains her signature.

As she stepped out into the breezy air along the Seine, the poet Lale Müldür passed into her field of vision, famous for her shock of citrus hair and impulsive candor, and for the peerless verse that echoes in the neo-folk music of Yeni Türkü and the French painting of Colette Deble. Her social circles introduced Sokol to a bearded merrymaker named Boysan, who, three years after his passing, recaptured her inspiration for a new painting now in the works in Istanbul, a city fast becoming her second home. She has since stayed well past her opening at The Pill to work in a new studio and pursue her first love: oil painting.

Unibrowed and ravishing, Sokol is as passionate in the merging of her oils with intimates as she is whip-smart on the course of art history, with a special eye on feminist painters like the Baroque master Artemisia Gentileschi, who survived torture and rape before succeeding, beyond centuries of patriarchal neglect, to enjoy an unrivaled legacy. All of her figures are of people she's found, loved, and chased. The exhibition title, "I have trouble sleeping, but she said she loved me" is from a line in a poem by her fiancé, the French-Bedouin poet and artist Azzedine Saleck. For her largest piece on display at The Pill, "La Nuit" (2018), Saleck is portrayed lovelorn, as she directly quotes the "The Night" by the 19th century Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler. Its common motifs see the artist's self-portrait in repetition, lying on a geometry of beds and limbs with jealous partners and many lovers. Hodler himself referenced an earlier painting, "The Nightmare" by Henry Fuseli, the Swiss-English painter who lived as the Enlightenment peaked.

The artist and her history

Referring to other painters from the past is the painter's vocabulary. I work like that a lot. I think every painter does. Turks say that every language has a personality. Painting also has personality. Painting is also a personality," said Sokol, as she lit up the bold whitewash at The Pill, telling stories as bewitching as her works with an infectious, irresistible energy. "I use the models that inspire me. If you paint someone, you paint someone that you love. It can be love at first sight. In art history, painters who have models in their studio love them, or get married to them even."

The Pill's founding gallerist Suela Cennet curated "I have trouble sleeping, but she said she loved me" with a potent touch. Opened in 2016, the space beams so brightly that Sokol was compelled to fix and complete her most recent works under its powerful lighting. Its longest wall is decked with seven figures: "Dina" (2016), "Salome" (2017), "Bonnie - Cennie" (2017), "Anouk" (2018), "Ines" (2018), "Odessa" (2018), "Nout" (2018). The women subjects are pictured against contrasting, geometric backgrounds that range from darker to lighter shades as they increasingly recline until finally, "Nout" bends over backwards.

Sokol's body-positive, multiracial canvases inject a welcome influx of worldly, pluralist liberalism into the Istanbul scene, a quality that Cennet has advanced with her keen ear on the ground while often in Paris. Her last show "Tapestry from an Asteroid" with Raphael Barontini, for example, similarly captured the realism that Hodler crafted, and that the 19th century French painter Gustave Courbet later led. Sokol, following a kindred path beside Parallelism, adapted a detail from his "Le Sommeil" for her piece, "Anouk".

"Personally, I think I'm very organic. When it comes to painting, I try to do something that is open and fluid. Then I change it suddenly. Even the bodies that I paint are not sensual. It's not a love scene, because the bodies are geometrical. They're harsh, not like real women, but manikin dolls. That's my psyche. It's a metaphysical space. It's not actual life," said Sokol, citing the visual style of the 20th century Italian artist and writer Giorgio de Chirico. "For painters to talk about their paintings is complicated. There's the whole personal story, aspects, colors, but the most important thing is tension, between the elements, colors, and techniques. It's all about the relationship between the elements in a piece that makes for good work."

After hosting the cosmopolitan wanderings of Lale Müldür at her legendary theater home in Paris, she also put up such international luminaries as Oksana Shachko, an icon painter and feminist leader. Despite celebrating her common Eastern European culture as the daughter of Poles, she discovered that it is among Turks where she has felt most warmly embraced by fellow creatives. After years of friendship, Müldür attended her May 25 opening at The Pill in high style, eccentric as ever as she spontaneously joined locals for Ramadan breakfast outside the gallery in the smoggy patches of green that divide the inner-city thruway along the Golden Horn.

"The artists and poets of the Turkish, Istanbul scene invited me to come five years ago for a month. Suela didn't have the gallery yet, but she was with a gallery in Paris. When she finally opened The Pill, she asked to work with me. It made sense. It was love at first sight. At the opening, Lale took me by the hand, talked about the paintings and conceived a poem. Maybe we'll do a book together," said Sokol, whose fascination for Turkey, especially its underground art and cultural expression, has only grown on her more and more. "There are two shows that I'm really proud of; this one, and the one I did in Copenhagen [in 2016, titled "Sabbath" at Andersen's Contemporary]. I'll keep working with these galleries. Choosing a gallery is like marriage. You have to understand each other. Suela and The Pill want my work to exist. She will fight for it."

The person and the paint

"I always knew I was a painter. When I was a child I made drawings and sold them on the street. When I was sixteen I escaped from home and went to the school of Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf. It's a school for German painting. I was not in the school because I was too young but I was hanging out there, painting with the students," said Sokol, as she points to her work "Bonnie - Cennie" and reveals the model as her best friend in the shape of an hourglass, as a reference to the painting "Silvana Cenni" by the early 20th century Italian artist Felice Casorati. "The texture of oil itself is pigment. It's not like acrylic, or synthetics. Oil paint is made with all natural elements so the pigment constantly reacts with the atmosphere. This is why we keep oil paintings for so long, in museums and so on. There is a whole story on the medium itself and time. There is a physical attraction to these colors. It's so strong. Look!" ■

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