

# You better paint me<sup>1</sup>

The people that Apolonia Sokol paints – often other artists, most of them close to her, sometimes on the contrary of the figures she wishes to confront<sup>2</sup>, in any case individuals with whom she still maintains a form of direct relationship – fix almost irrevocably the spectator of the painting. They watch us lay eyes on them, but not only: it is also Apolonia Sokol who represents herself thus in hollow, looked at whilst painting them<sup>3</sup>. She does not abstract herself, quite the contrary, from the play of power that is the gaze, according to a classic tradition in painting especially in the genre of portraiture.

Apolonia paints those who have not been, or merely, represented in the history of Western painting. She paints scenes of childbirth, and others relating to abortion. She paints racialized and/or queer bodies. She departs from her own experience of the shortcomings of the history of painting, of all the iconographies that have been lacking to her and that she undertakes to contribute to bringing into existence. In doing so, she never paints generic bodies but people whose first names are indicated by the titles of the paintings, and who often take an active part in their own representation.

On the canvases, clues reflect these interpersonal relationships maintained by the painter with her models, conversations that influenced the brush: in the painting *Le Printemps* for example, the centrality of Simone Thiébaud testifies to her active participation in the composition. From another model of the same painting<sup>4</sup>, Apolonia reported the wish of the model – which she respected – to be painted on the left side of the painting. This painting endeavors in fact to respond to that of Botticelli, to its complex iconography having to do with rape (of Flora by Zéphyr), heterosexual marriage (that of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici with Semiramis Appriani) and pregnancy (of Venus), by a representation featuring on the contrary “women [trans and non-binary, whom the artist qualifies as] capable of giving birth to themselves”.

Thus Linda, Nicola, Raya, Dustin, Nirina, Claude, Bella and Dourane frame Simone, who passing one forearm over the other in a strange and almost manneristic gesture lets whoever can decipher it know that she has chosen to be represented at the time of taking her hormonal treatment.

Apolonia is sometimes criticized for appropriating subjects, bodies that are not hers. It seems that her painting problematizes the notion of ally<sup>5</sup> regularly invoked in struggles. As researcher Sara

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<sup>1</sup> "You better paint me cause I'm a big girl" ("You better paint me, because I'm a fat woman", translation of the author): formula of Isabelle, friend and model of the artist, reported by Apolonia Sokol during our July 2021 interview at her studio at the Villa Medici, Rome. All the quotes from the artist that follow are taken from the same interview.

<sup>2</sup> I am thinking here of Marguerite Stern, former FEMEN and emblematic figure of the exclusion of trans people in the name of feminism, painted by Apolonia in *La Nef des fous* (2021) then *Les Vertus* (working title, 2022) by taking up the composition of the *Judith and Holofernes* of Artemisia Gentileschi (1614-1620).

<sup>3</sup> Even if, as the art historian Nathalie Delbard points out in an article taken from her essay *Le Strabisme du tableau. Essay on the divergent gazes of the portrait, 2019*: "Deducing from the place of the painted eyes any truth of the moment of doing remains somewhat risky." In <https://theconversation.com/bonnes-feuilles-le-strabisme-du-tableau-148746>

<sup>4</sup> Nicola Lecourt Mansion, painted in *Le Printemps. Linda, Nicolas, Raya, Dustin, Simone, Nirina, Claude, Bella, Dourane* (2019-2020) and *La Nave des Folles* (2021).

<sup>5</sup> Is considered an ally "A person who belongs to the dominant group or to the majority and who works to put an end to oppressions in his personal or professional life, by mobilizing for and with oppressed populations. I use here the definition established by Sklaerenn Le Gallo and Mélanie Millette in the article "Positioning oneself as researchers through the prism of intersectional struggles: decentralizing the notion of ally to take into account the people concerned", *Gender, sexuality & society* [Online], 22 | Fall 2019, online December 16, 2019, accessed January 28, 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/gss/6006>; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/gss.6006>

DeTurk points out, identification with certain processes of marginalization through one's own social identities and personal relationships plays an important role<sup>6</sup>: in addition to the friendly circle of Apolonia mentioned above, the artist's mother "is someone who fled, a political refugee [she says]. I come from a diaspora, I speak four languages, it creates empathy. »

The question posed by this category of ally is that of a potential capture of the speech of people in a minority situation by people in a dominant situation, who place themselves in the position of speaking for – this is one of the issues raised by Gayatri Spivak in her work and by her fundamental text *Can the subaltern speak?*<sup>7</sup>. Confronting the problems of positionality highlighted by Spivak, the philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff "aims to privilege speaking to, speaking with. For Alcoff, this strategy promotes dialogue in order to avoid the possibilities of mis-representation and/or epistemic imperialism. Because [if] speaking for contributes to the reaffirmation of its own authority and its own privileges, and more generally of imperialist discourse, [...] speaking with and speaking to could [on the contrary] make it possible to reduce these pitfalls<sup>8</sup>." As such, that Apolonia Sokol is above all a portrait painter, that all her painting - even the very large formats with collective compositions - stems from this practice of portraiture of those around her and from taking into account the agency of each in her own representation makes her a nartist of *painting with* and *painting for*.

Sokol navigates in painting by responding to needs, her own but also those of the people around her – you better paint me –, to their common anger. Her painting is violent as are the silences of an androcentric<sup>9</sup> Western art history against which she positions herself.

Apolonia Sokol is a character, in every sense of the word: in her way of portraying herself in life as in her own paintings, which she sometimes inhabits through a practice of self-portraiture, sometimes by representing herself in the guise of a goat or boar<sup>10</sup> alongside a model friend.

Another way she has of bringing her relationships, her intimacy into her painting is to invite painter friends to four hands – most recently with François Boiron, with Simon Martin. Here again, even more than in the cases mentioned above, we can speak of co-development.

Within the body of works, a small painting stands out<sup>11</sup>. At first by its format, smaller and vertical than the portraits which all proceed from a similar composition; and because of what it represents: it shows three characters in a very tight frame, three women gathered around a demonstration sign on which we can read "if you don't like foreigners, you shouldn't have colonized us. »

Here the format caught my attention because it seems to me to indicate to whoever is looking at it how the image was created: these 35 x 45 centimeters indicate the verticality of smartphone photos, the image taken on the spot. From there, we can imagine that this canvas, unlike the portraits and the large formats, could not have been the subject of a co-elaboration with the models - we can imagine it because the artist judges important to let us know, because of her attention to positionality. Indeed, this painting is quite faithfully inspired by a photograph taken by Apolonia during the second demonstration organized at the initiative of Justice for Adama in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, in June 2020 Place de la République in Paris. The composition of Apolonia, by adding a section of wood between the central figure and the one on the right, both documents the demands of

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<sup>6</sup> Sara DeTurk, "Allies in Action: The Communicative Experiences of People Who Challenge Social Injustice on Behalf of Others", *Communication Quarterly*, 59, 5, 2011, pp. 569-590. DOI: 10.1080/01463373.2011.614209

<sup>7</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the subaltern speak?*, 1988. New French translation by Jérôme Vidal under the title *Les subalternes peut-elles parler?*, Paris, Amsterdam edition, 2020. The essay

philosophy uses the concept of subordinate, borrowed from the philosopher Antonio Gramsci, distinguishing it from the terms "dominated" or "oppressed" which do not refer to a radical exclusion from the sphere of representation. In doing so, Spivak questions the unthought of the French philosophers Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze, and criticizes their discourse on the Other and on subordinates.

<sup>8</sup> Sklaerenn Le Gallo and Mélanie Millette, *ibid*.

<sup>9</sup> Androcentrism is the term for a way of thinking, conscious or not, of looking at the world from the point of view of male human beings.

<sup>10</sup> *The boar with Claude-Emmanuelle (2020) and the goat with Lux Miranda (2022)*.

<sup>11</sup> *If you don't like foreigners, you shouldn't have colonized us, 2022*.

the demonstrators (by this slogan which it transcribes) and introduces a dialogue with the iconography of the crucifixion<sup>12</sup>. Yet this double gesture of recording reality and 'steering up' the history of art, in what the first has of humility and the second of recklessness, characterizes the whole ambition of Apolonia's painting.

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<sup>12</sup> *The figure of Christ is often framed by those of the good and the bad thief, represented as here just behind and a little below the central figure.*