

Arts & Culture

The Female Body is More than What's Portrayed: Apolonia Sokol

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We talk to Apolonia Sokol right after her first solo exhibition at The Pill. Sokol's emotional and melancholy approach proves that the female body is more than what's portrayed or misinterpreted. We're very excited to take a step closer to Sokol's creative process in which she portrays women not as sexual objects but as people she identifies with.

How did it all begin? What led you to interact with the female body?

I have always been painting. Since my childhood, I was convinced I was going to be a painter. I promised myself I would never stop. Painting is a strong commitment, both physically and spiritually. Art has not been and still isn't always accessible to women. If one looks at the Western history of art, women have been portrayed mainly as sexual objects or allegoric symbols from a man's point of view. There is a striking quote by John Berger which I find accurate: "You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting 'Vanity'; thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure." Being a woman myself, I paint women not as "female bodies" or as sexual objects but more as people I identify with. I have painted a lot of semi-nudes for my current show (at The Pill in Istanbul), but if you look deeply into the figures, they are not sexual or even sensual. They all have a disturbing strangeness to them, and they are definitely melancholic. I still use these Western symbols and allegories that are important to my culture but I'm appropriating them in these figures.

How do you choose your models? Do you reflect their identities in your work?

There is no rule or system to inspiration. I use the people I meet, or the ones I love as models. Sometimes it can happen as love at first sight, or I seek the one that inspires me. Their identity and what they symbolize in society is my concern. As an artist, I show the world I live in even if it's not necessarily my goal. All the painters are using their beloved ones as models, sometimes they even sleep with them or get married to them, so they can paint them better. There is no dichotomy between art and private life. Alice Neel is a good example for that, but so is Carravaggio, Matisse or Rembrandt.



"Being woman myself, I paint women not as 'female bodies' or as sexual objects but more as people I identify with."

As we've seen in your portraits, you take women out of social stereotypes and physically set them free. How would you define the modern woman?

Thank you for that observation. I do not think I'm setting my models free as I paint them. It's more the opposite – I lock them in a closed time and space which is mine. My models are strong personalities to begin with. I believe in the emancipation of every being. We fail when we separate the beings in casts or categories. Feminism should go hand in hand with anti-racist movements. In Europe, there is a sad tendency to discriminate non-whites as a post-colonial habit. Our economic structure is still based on the exploitation of other continents, and anyone that is not looking European is being discriminated against. We should free ourselves from that kind of phenomenon. As a matter of fact, I find it extremely exiting to be working with a Turkish gallery. I believe that by being a part of an international structure and its economy, one can actively make a change.

The figures in your paintings have bodies that dare to be timeless and spaceless in their pursuit of freedom; it's as if they are from another world. How would you define this "ideal" place you're in?

Oil-paintings are free of time as the medium itself survives through the centuries. The people I paint are in a synthetic space, unrecognizable decor, closed interiors made of colorful and geometrical forms. It would be a metaphysical space as in de Chirico for instance. The spaces have no horizon, they are not going anywhere because we are in a mental space, a private landscape.



When turning the models whose portraits you draw into inanimate figures, you also enable society to reinterpret bodies in an empathetic and passionate way. Aren't you afraid of this loss of animateness?

There is definitely a paradox in the act of painting with oil, and the time we live in today. Oil is an old medium. It needs stability and years to mature. The image the painter produces is unique while today's lifestyle is going fast, and we consume images. I believe my models are contemporary figures. The ones I get inspired by are emancipated, they are fruits of the mixed-race.

What do you care about when you choose the colors in your portraits? How do you create these compositions?

I usually refer to other paintings through art history. Painting is a language. It's stimulating to practice its vocabulary that way. The colors are really intuitive. It's difficult for a painter to talk about your work and your practice because the way of making it is coming from the stomach. It's physical, sometimes predatory.

You'll have your first solo exhibition in Istanbul. Can you tell us about how you found a space here as an artist?

A few years ago, I was walking around the streets of Paris and I saw a group of beautiful strangers. Among these young Turkish men, there was Lale Müldür, an absolute queen. We immediately became friends and they all stayed at my house. Living with Lale was an enormous source of inspiration. She has been showing me ways of poetry. Kaan and Franz were making a film about her, and it was a pure moment of art. After they left, I rejoined them in Istanbul and stayed there for a month during the Taksim manifestations in 2013. Istanbul has been in my heart ever since. Later I have met Suela Cennet, the gallery founder. She has been looking at my work for quite a long time waiting for it to evolve, and guiding me through the years. I was very excited about her project of opening a new space in Istanbul and the idea of coming back to this city. As a matter of fact, I have been exciting in different countries discovering the art world and its different scenes. It has been exciting, but also a dangerous way of living. Few structures truly respect the artists and I have been often in complicated situations of unpleasant compromising. I believe in the ways of working with The Pill, as the gallery owner is herself is a young, serious and ambitious woman.



How did you prepare for this exhibition? Can you talk about how you choose which works to display?

The main piece of the show is called "The Night," (La nuit in French). A group of people are laying down; some of them are sleeping and others aren't. But they are all nude under their black blankets. It could be a scene after an orgy or something extremely sensual, but it isn't. It's a melancholic scene where the bodies are assembled but alone. I think it's full of mystery. It's like "The Nightmare" by Fuseli or "La nuit" by Hodler, a magnificent tiny piece at Musée d'Orsay.

How would you define your paintings to someone who's never seen them?

I would say come to the show...

Which city recently excited you the most in terms of its art scene?

I have no idea, but for now, I want to discover Istanbul more deeply. I decided to stay here for a month or more.

What's next for you?

My next show is a group show in an art center called CRAC. It's very exciting, curated by a young woman named Tara Londi, with great artists such as Celia Hempton, Elsa Sahal, Tschabalala Self and others. I love these group shows where I get to meet a lot of different female artists of my generation.