

**Katherina OLSCHBAUR**

*LVH Art,*

*LVH Art in Conversation with Rising Star Katherina Olschbaur*

*%041 %2020*

INTERVIEWS

# LVH ART IN CONVERSATION WITH RISING STAR KATHERINA OLSCHBAUR

WORDS BY LVH ART

The Los Angeles based artist Katherina Olschbaur conjures seductive canvases of Surrealist resonance. Her paintings linger between abstraction and figuration to conceive an unprecedented image orgy of feminine bodies, horned beasts and fetish garments; where her animalistic figures revel in beauty and brutality as to examine the polarities that give our existence meaning.



Portrait of Katherina Olschbaur. Photo: Eric Minh Swenson.

Using the body as a site of repressed desire, Katherina Olschbaur illuminates her own narratives regarding gender, power and sexuality, revealing a new understanding of female body language that questions, disrupts and dismantles the stereotypes and prejudices perpetuated by society's ongoing expectations on women. Hence, in a spree of delicate hues and radiant shades, Olschbaur's work explores the violence of power dynamics within a patriarchal order, subverting the status quo in both contemporary art and contemporary culture by drawing together mythology, religion and art historical references.

*"As a woman, you are always multiple personalities; you learn how to live in the world: to adapt, to define, to give, to take, and to demand." - Katherina Olschbaur*

Born in Austria in 1983, Olschbaur studied painting at the University of Applied Arts in Vienna, lived for one year in London and spent four months in Tel Aviv. In 2017 she had her first solo show in Los Angeles and has since divided her time between the comfort of her home country in the sophisticated European capital of Vienna and the erotic Babylon that is the scandalous city of LA, where she is represented by Nicodim Gallery; a powerful cultural contrast sure to provoke a thoughtful reaction, in Olschbaur's case, a great creative output of infinite possibilities that brings to her studio exponential success, and a very sensual allure.

**LVH:** Given all the different places you have lived in and all the cultures you have encountered, how do you feel this upbringing has influenced your career as an artist? What have you taken from each?

**KO:** I left my home after seventeen. I had this hunger to educate myself; I wanted to challenge myself, and everything seemed too limiting for me. I wanted to learn to live amongst a wider history of artists, writers, and musicians. Mentally, I placed myself in their world. I spent years living a very bohemian life. I was always a serious painter. I had local collectors and friends buying my work, but it took a long time for me to get my finances to a place where I could leave. For a long time, I couldn't afford a really good studio, so I took accepted grants that allowed me to work for a couple of months in different places.



Katherina Olschbaur *The Rebel Angels*, 2020. 200x200 cm. Oil on Linen. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.

Vienna is a place full of secrets; it was never a place of safety for me. My time there, while formative and nourishing, eventually made me feel creatively asphyxiated. The culture is so rich in terms of literature, theatre, language, culture, and radical criticism; however, it is an inherently heterogeneous culture. It suppresses much of its diversity and potential. This suppression can get very self-destructive. It can be extremely draining to see how closed off the culture is to progress and inclusion, especially in the new nationalist and conservative trends. Leaving Vienna helped me connect with certain aspects of Austrian culture in a less draining way. I have found that to be Austrian is to have a more melancholic take on history and the present time as well as to have a sense for beauty, for criticism, and a penchant for the night.

**LVH:** You currently live and work between Vienna and LA, do you have a studio in each of these cities? Do you go to one for inspiration and to another one for action? Could you walk us through your creative process?

**KO:** I am now mostly based in Los Angeles where I have my studio. I love it here. I take a lot of inspiration from the color, light, and specific atmosphere. I learned a lot being in this city this year: amidst a civil rights movement, COVID-19, and the threat of fires. I have Vienna on my mind—somehow stored in my memory and whole personality—but I am not there very often in person.

My relocation to Los Angeles was the most important thing that I ever did for my art. I had to completely reinvent my work. In this city, I realized the importance of color for my work. I became more confident—possibly because I took such a big step. Los Angeles has also given me and my work ideas of the dirty Babylon, superficiality, the closeness between paradise and its failure, neon of the night, vastness, and emptiness.

My painting is excessively research based. I had different stages in developing my oeuvre; at some point, I wanted to unlearn everything. This process, of learning and unlearning, solidified my understanding of what I do. Drawing helps me to memorize, play, confront, and erase. When I paint, I first need to forget everything again. I think in terms of color, space, and volume, and I impose narrative on top of these elements. I have always been interested in theatrical light within painting—a cold light, like in expressionist stages or a film noir—as well as expressive brush work.



Katherina Olschbaur, *Ecstasy*, 2019. Oil on linen. 200 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.

**LVH:** You identify yourself as a female artist. Is this an empowering circumstance or has it ever been a challenge?

**KO:** There is a lot of focus now on being a female artist. This can be a double-edged sword. You are elevated in terms of interest at this moment, but you are being put into a sub-category. It definitely has been a challenge—especially in Austria, but the challenge persists in the U.S. People don't automatically trust in your capabilities in that way that they would if you were a man. I take a lot of strength from this particular obstacle, however. As a woman, you don't have the security of a single personality; you are always multiple personalities; you learn how to live in the world: to adapt, to define, to give, to take, and to demand. However, because I am white, I am very aware of the fact that I have certain privileges.

**LVH:** Your art has been frequently associated with feminism and Surrealism, in particular Freudian theory, how do these philosophies combine and nurture each other?

**KO:** I like to play them out against each other.

**LVH:** You often use religious and art historical references, how do you employ these symbols and what is it that you are trying to illuminate, or, correct, in doing so?

**KO:** To me, religious imagery has more than one meaning. My father was a pastor, so there is a familiarity to the motifs of religion; instinctually, however, I am very critical of any form of institution or authority. Religious paintings grapple with themes that I also engage with: desire, disbelief, doubt, and sensuality. I am also interested in hierarchies and devotion, authority and rebellion, or generally the internal struggles of good and evil that one often sees play out in religious narrative. Baroque, mannerist, or renaissance paintings unlock something for me, visually, for the way I handle paint. It has to do with visual fullness, volume, light, and a sense of anti-gravity in the the figures. I build compositions intuitively—looking at a few sources at the same time, listening to music and rhythms, and building color and atmosphere in layers. I want these elements to talk to each other.



Katherina Olschbaur, *Sub Red*, 2019. Oil on linen. 200 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.



**LVH:** What are your main artistic influences?

**KO:** El Greco, Dürer, Tintoretto, Maria Lassnig, Miriam Cahn, German macho painting, Baroque, Renaissance, mannerist paintings, religious paintings, costumes, Futurism, theatricality, night dancers and film noir.

**LVH:** What are you reading right now?

**KO:** Virginie Despentes King Kong Theory, David Wojnarowicz Close to the knives, Octavia Butler, Assata Shakur Diaries, Albrecht Dürer Diaries.

**LVH:** Could you tell us more about your recent shows, and how one led to the other, how is your practice developing?

**KO:** In *Horses* (2018) and *Divine Hermaphrodite* (2019) I placed hybrids of human, animal, and object in a wide and open space of color. In my museum *Show Dirty Elements* at the Contemporary Arts Center Gallery, UC Irvine (2020), I introduced religious imagery and faces on my figures for the first time. There were also themes of fetish, desire, and a dynamic challenging of the human figure in relation to power, the earth, and the sky. In *Tortured Ecstasies*, I am pushing forward some of these ideas and including small formats again. I think the compositions became more complex and my control of color got stronger. I'm always learning as I go.

**LVH:** Where did you spend the lockdown? Was it a fruitful experience or how did it make you feel?

**KO:** I spent the lockdown in Los Angeles. My studio building was closed for more than two months, so I had to work from the kitchen area of our one room apartment. Eventually, a dear friend generously gave me her unused studio to work in. It was a challenge at first, but it helped me develop a stronger formal language for the small canvases. It was illuminating to focus on the work in isolation and make sure that it was something that really felt true to what I intended.



Katherina Olschbaur, *Nudes by the beach*, 2018. Oil on canvas. 200 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.

**LVH:** What is your opinion on the art world going digital? Do you like to see your artworks in online shows?

**KO:** It bores me to see shows online. IG, however, has become our reality. The art world hasn't created anything new in this sense. The most common way that we encounter art now is through reproduced images. Sensually this mode of viewing is very thin. We have to memorize or imagine materiality. I do find it exciting to have access to different art around the world and a new audience for your own work, but I like to build a context or narrative within a real space. I also like to work with mistakes that don't exist in these perfectly rendered spaces. The virtual space does have the potential to open experimental new doors, however.

**LVH:** Any upcoming projects you would like to tell us about.

**KO:** I have a solo exhibition coming up in May at Union Pacific gallery, London; and my work will be shown at a group show in Ramp Gallery, London, opening the 26th of November. My next solo at Nicodim Gallery will happen in December of 2021. I also have an upcoming two person show that hasn't been announced yet and some projects coming up in Japan.



Katherina Olschbaur, *Into the Open*, 2019. Oil on linen. Diptych 200 x 350 cm. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery.