

Katherina OLSCHBAUR

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*Katherina Olschbaur uses Aesthetic Ambiguity to Reinterpret the Mythic Tale of Venus and Adonis
in Live Flesh at Nicodim Gallery*

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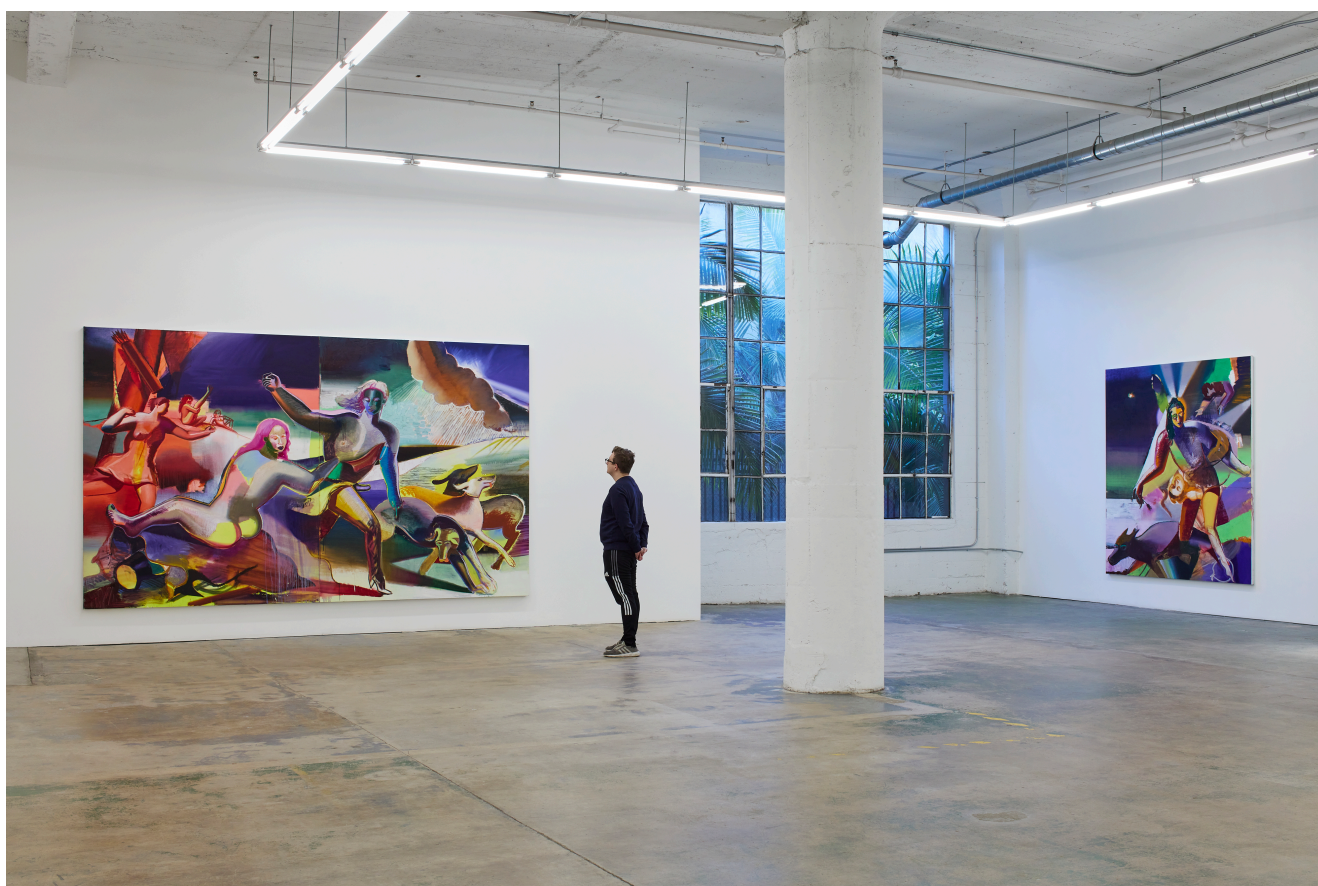
MENU



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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

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Installation view of Live Flesh at Nicodim Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles.

Photography by Lee Tyler Thompson.

Katherina Olschbaur: *Live Flesh*

Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles

December 16, 2021 through February 4, 2022

By LITA BARRIE, January 2022

Katherina Olschbaur's electrifying paintings in *Live Flesh* riff off Titian's classical paintings of Venus and Adonis. The Venetian Renaissance painter was so obsessed with this mythical tale from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that he made thirty versions to explore *poésie* because he considered them to be the visual equivalents of poetry. For Olschbaur, this myth of unrequited love is viewed from multiple perspectives. In her hands, the myth becomes a vehicle for re-interpretation, and she focuses on contradictions using the tension between opposites to create a push/pull movement that makes her paintings come alive.

Olschbaur creates aesthetic ambiguity by playing with contradictions that recognize the Other in ourselves in order to transition past identity politics. In her paintings, everything contains its opposite, because there is no singular way of viewing anything. A singular viewpoint is an outdated male dominated perspective on life - and art. Olschbaur also goes beyond the concept of difference because everything in her paintings is diffused. The fragmented bodies are in the process of dissolution, merging into one another instead of being set apart from their surroundings, because nothing is ever just one thing in Olschbaur's paintings.

Young Hermaphrodite (2021) is the embodiment of sexual confidence that comes from having access to both male and female powers - with a penis and a feminine face.



Katherina Olschbaur, Young Hermaphrodite, 2021, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles. Photography by Lee Tyler Thompson.

The paintings' body flesh is alive with pulsing energy that oscillates between passion and violence, paradise and horror, sorrow and pain. Olschbaur's figures are surrounded by shadowy, atmospheric expanses of dazzling colors; this creates a diffuse aura around figurative elements which dissolve into abstract backgrounds with subtle color gradations and tonalities. There is no clear separation between figuration and abstraction, and the viewer is left to use their imagination to make sense of these visual puzzles.

In *After Venus and Adonis (Live Flesh)* (2021), Olschbaur portrays Adonis as a transgender figure with effeminate qualities who is passive, while Venus is both robustly feminine and masculine as the stronger, muscular aggressor, disrupting the traditional gender hierarchy from art history. Venus' neon combination of hot pink hair, dazzling skin tones and bright yellow buttocks proclaims her passion, while Adonis' metallic skin tones subtly convey his coolness. Yet, Venus takes command of the chase by holding Adonis back, even though he wants to retreat. Venus looks directly at the viewer - unlike Titian's Venus who gazed longingly at Adonis - because as long as she is present in the moment, this neverending story is unresolved. Olschbaur plays with these multiple gazes so that we can see things through different pairs of eyes simultaneously: Venus is no longer a passive object for male consumption; instead, she owns her own sexual power, either by feasting her eyes on Adonis as the prey for her carnal desire or by looking directly out of the canvas at the viewer with a defiant "fuck you" attitude.

Even the animals are observers, but Olschbaur paints her own eyes into them, so they look directly out of the paintings at the viewer. The background angels - which are often surprisingly erotic in art history - are turned into trans figures who may be guides or projections, and they even appear with avatars which are created digitally for our imagination. In *Angels and Avatars* (2021), they are depicted as transfigurations and imaginative transformations which can be experienced in a very intimate or erotic way.



Katherina Olschbaur, Angels and Avatars, 2021, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles. Photography by Lee Tyler Thompson.

The Austrian born, Los Angeles-based artist studied painting and experimental animation, in Vienna at the University of Applied Arts. When I spoke with Olschbaur, she explained that the sense of time in her work is inspired by film. She calls her paintings “closed envelopes of time” which we can “play back and repeat,” emphasizing that “painting is never a still medium, because we go back to it again and it changes.” Her use of light and shadow is also cinematic, as central figures emanate their own light from within, while less important characters fade into the shadows. Olschbaur’s adventurous approach to painting techniques also draws on her deep understanding of art history - from Renaissance and Baroque painters, to German neo-expressionist “bad boys,” to pioneer feminist painters like Miriam Cahn and Maria Lassnig whose artistic vocabularies resurface and recede in her paintings. At the same time, Olschbaur adds a humorous twist by throwing in a surprise element from her life or her attraction to glam things, which include updo hairstyles from 1960s girl groups like the Ronettes to historic Viennese costumes which reveal a queer sensibility. In her studio, she surrounds herself with source images - from books she opens, to photos she takes, to her copious drawings - because she is attracted to different things simultaneously and loves to “obfuscate what is autobiographic and what is mythic.”

Before she begins a painting, Olschbaur experiments with numerous drawings, as she strives for “a conversation between line elements and different spaces” to create “precision through impression.” Then, once she moves to canvas, her sensuous use of color is heightened by building layers of paint using brushes with different widths or bits of wood and plastic, and these different textural qualities create a feeling of fluidity. After Olschbaur achieves smoothness, she improvises further by adding dry strokes with the leftover colors on her palette, in order to play with weight and weightlessness. Olschbaur removes and adds paint at different speeds and with varying pressures to create a rhythmic quality, orchestrated much like a musical composition.



Katherina Olschbaur, Picnic of Two Suns, 2021, oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles. Photography by Lee Tyler Thompson.

The centerpiece of this exhibition, *Picnic of Two Suns* (2021), is painted in radiant colors of destruction, and references Miriam Cahn’s horrifically beautiful paintings of bombs, because the second sun in this work is an atomic bomb. The main figure is transgender and looks at us reflectively in a powerful reminder of human destructiveness which can loom

in the background of the most euphoric, paradisaal scene. As an Austrian, Olschbaur is acutely aware of a dark, fascist undercurrent which is part of her national history, but as a transplant, she can also embrace the openness of L.A., and experience having more than one cultural identity.

The aesthetic ambiguity of Olschbaur's paintings captures the zeitgeist of the 2020s because there are no fixed meanings anymore - only unanswerable questions which lead to further questions. She also combines multiple subjective perspectives to allow us to see many possibilities simultaneously. Olschbaur is part of a generation of highly skilled millennial artists (including Christina Quarles and Ilana Savdie) who have abandoned the aesthetic of the explicit to make ambiguity the aesthetic of our time. **WM**