

Katherina OLSCHBAUR

*Contemporary Art Review.la,
Katherina Olschbaur at Nicodim Gallery*

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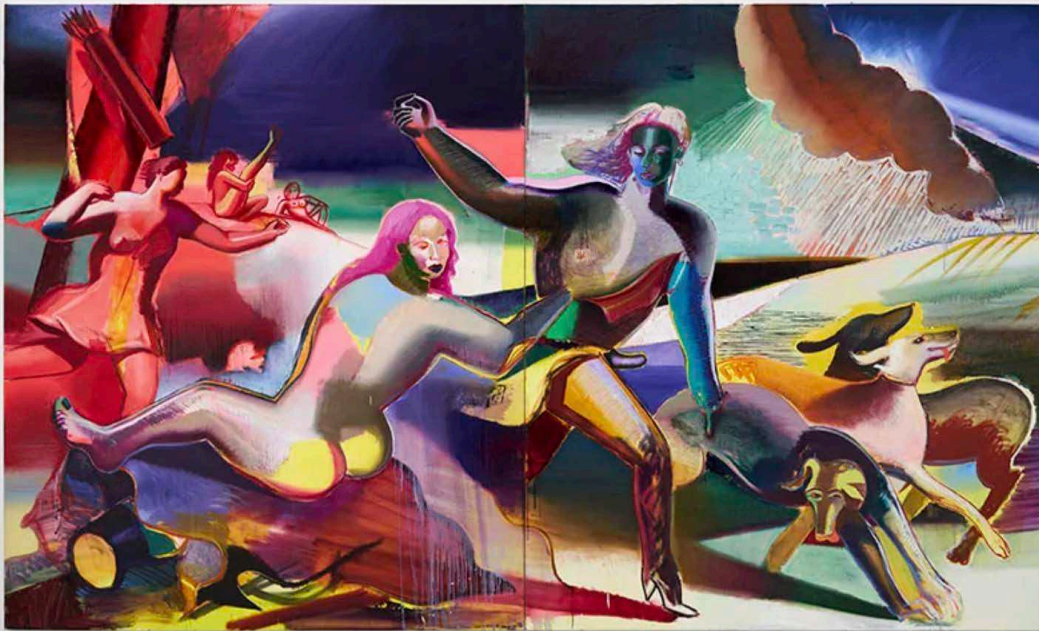
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Katherina Olschbaur at Nicodim Gallery

March 23, 2022
Text by Lindsay Preston Zappas

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Katherina Olschbaur, *After Venus and Adonis (Live Flesh)* (2021). Oil on linen, 94 x 156.5 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery. Photo: Lee Tyler Thompson.

Among other historical archetypes, Katherina Olschbaur's recent solo exhibition at Nicodim Gallery, *Live Flesh*, took Greek mythology as a starting point, giving the show a traditional flare. That ancient Greek myths prevail as relevant cultural touchstones is confounding and yet somehow grounding. As Charlotte Higgins writes in *Greek Myths: A New Retelling*, these myths "remain true for us because they... deal, in short, in the hard, basic facts of the human condition."¹ In spite of our modern advances in tech, culture, and politics, the human condition has more or less endured since Sophocles. We live, we love, we die.

Despite her allegiances to these old, tried and true narratives, Olschbaur's paintings diverge, finding their footing in the creative liberties, sidesteps, and playful reinterpretations that the artist takes—places in which she veers from the classics. With radiant strokes, bold gradients, and a gestural and joyous approach to figuration, Olschbaur transforms Greek gods and art historical subjects, adding shocks of lime green to cheeks and shimmering ruby eyeshadow to lids. The characters mutate, taking on new personas, as they time travel to preen next to notable figures from other eras and histories—Greek myths and Renaissance-era compositions merge and nod to art history's canon. And while the paintings exude a reverence for the religious, art, and cultural histories they crib, they also unabashedly reject history's stuffy approach to gender and sexuality, offering instead an unshackled mashup that queers the past in order to imagine a more fluid future.

The titular work in the exhibition, a large diptych titled *After Venus and Adonis (Live Flesh)* (all works 2021), references the story of the two fated lovers. In the myth, Adonis is a total hottie and Venus (the goddess of love) helplessly falls in love with him. Some tellings cast the two as consensual lovers (see Ovid), while others describe Venus as an unrelenting and aggressive pursuer (as in Shakespeare's later version). Eventually, Venus has a premonition of Adonis being killed by a boar while hunting, and this death-by-swine comes to pass. Distraught, Venus curses love for all humankind—"Sorrow on love hereafter shall attend," Shakespeare

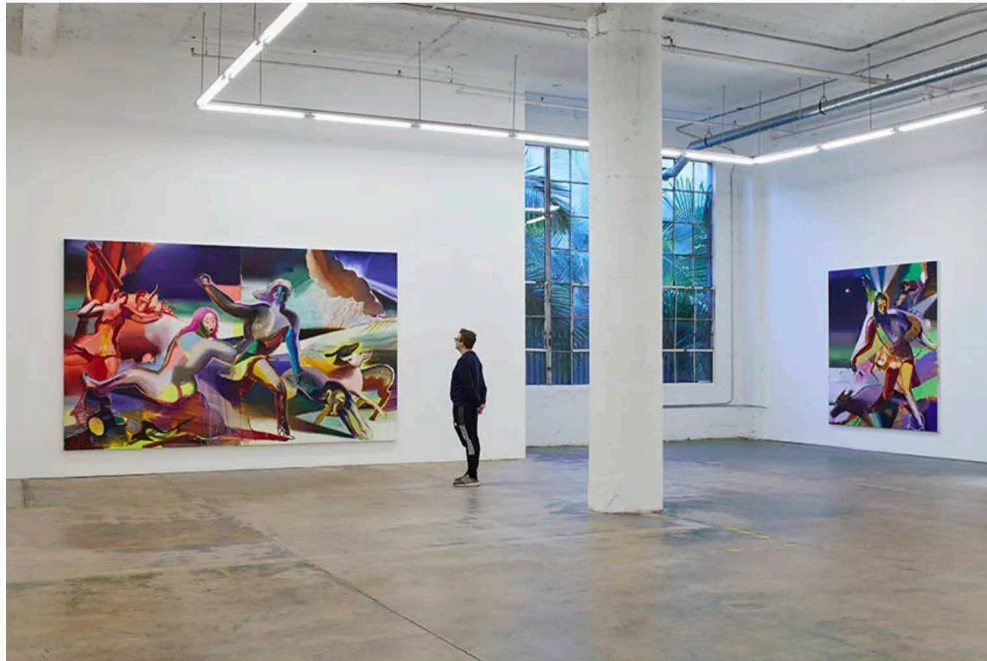
dramatically penned.² By flipping Ovid's story of mutual desire to one about unrequited desire, Shakespeare overtly played with gender norms and conventions—Venus' depiction as the aggressive pursuer certainly precluded any demure, passive gender performance.³ Olschbaur leans into this fluidity. Her painting borrows from Titian's famous composition of the two: Venus is seated centrally, back to the viewer, attempting to forcibly grab a young Adonis, who charges forth, dogs in tow, ready to hunt. Yet in Olschbaur's version, both Venus and Adonis are given strong, broad backs and rounded, Léger-esque limbs. While Adonis' penis sprouts from his loincloth, Olschbaur's embellishments—his heavily contoured face, earrings, luscious, flowing locks, and high, arching stilettos—present a more femme version of our muse.

This playful disruption carried throughout the exhibition as Olschbaur sprinkled in some Renaissance-era Catholicism—an errant angel wing here, a beam of heavenly light there. In addition to Titian, Olschbaur swipes compositions (and sometimes titles) from Vermeer's *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (1665) and Botticelli's *Venus* (1485–1486), incorporating preening poses that recall Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. Version O)* (1911) or Manet's *Olympia* (1865). Yet the paintings sample so loosely that the emergent cast of characters blur and devolve into wholly new and imagined forms. In *Angels and Avatars*, a feminine face sprouts from the central figure's groin, eyes closed in ecstasy—perhaps an imagined Venus whose passion burned so hot that her body physically fused with that of her lover. In *Sub Red*, loosely painted figures without fully formed bodies tumble down from a red sky, arms akimbo, as two saints (gods? humans?) restrain a central figure by their head and wings. The figure kneels on all fours in submission, their glistening purple legs dissolving into stubs that melt into the rich brown dirt. Their wings are clipped behind them—perhaps a cautionary tale of godly smite? *Picnic of Two Suns* gets a bit more bacchanalian. In the orgiastic scene, several figures lean back, legs splayed in pleasure, while others pour wine, perform sword tricks, or generally gyrate in the background. A figure dips their head back as they apparently receive fellatio from a gaggle of geese. While this kind of rollicking sexual spree occasions art history, it has historically been married to a kind of Protestant warning, as in Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights* (1503–1515). Olschbaur liberates her characters, freeing them from both rigid gender identities and moral admonition, unmarred and uninhibited in the face of Pharisaic histories.

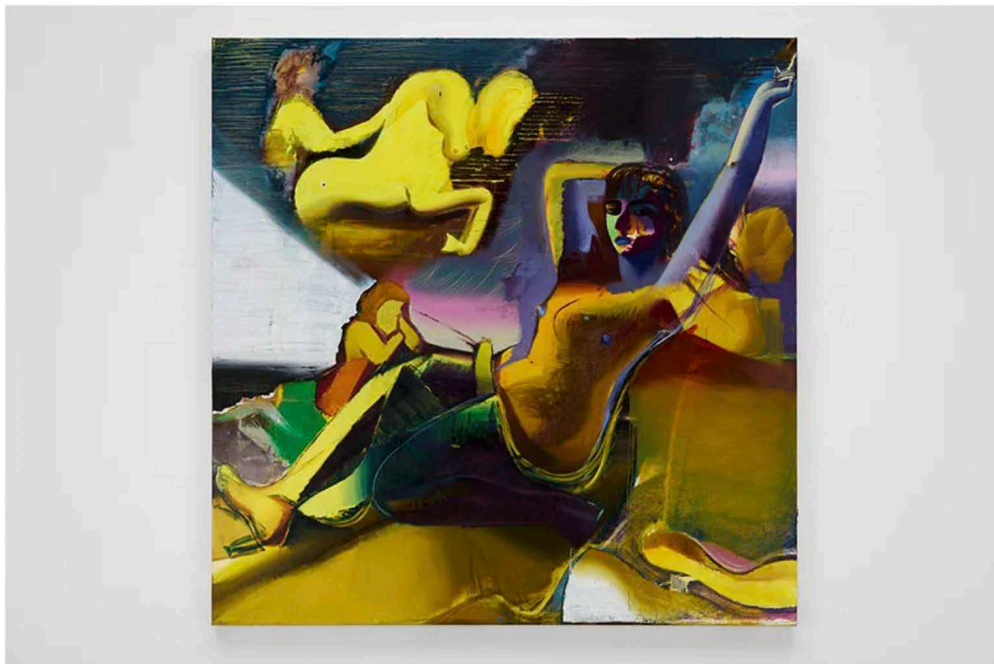
Like her references, Olschbaur's painterly style is a kind of mash-up—sampling from cubism's fragmentation, futurism's movement, and AbEx's bold colors and bravado. And, though many of her paintings include horizon lines, other spaces feel oddly pinched and pulled. In *Young Hermaphrodite*, a reclining nude figure lounges, touting both breasts and penis. Around them, mustard fields of color create loose perspectival space, while a harsh white light casts angularly in the background, defining the horizon line and creating a visual focal point around the figure's genitals. These kinds of painterly tricks recall the old masters, and there is a sincerity in the way that Olschbaur implements them even as she subverts the hallowed imagery of the classics—traditional compositional cues are enforced while her playful colors and gradients provide an almost digitized flatness.

While it's enjoyable to spot the references in Olschbaur's paintings—a little Picasso here, a Greek goddess there—it's more enlightening to see where her narratives diverge. Enacting classic themes while making over old stories via her revised characters, the artist invites us into a liberated, gender-fluid landscape. *Gravitation* gives form to an important undercurrent to the exhibition: that updating tradition often imposes anxiety on the old guard, and reinvention is never without pushback. In the painting, a central figure (a kind of kinky riff on Lady Liberty, bare-chested, hairy, and adorned with shimmering lids and lips, leather gloves, and pumps) strides forward, angels convening around the crown of their head. A small, knee-high female figure painted with a flat white body and a cartoonish, worried look attempts to hold back the warrior, perhaps afraid of what lies ahead. This paper-cut-out-of-a-woman might be the old guard, the moralistic rule follower attempting to constrain the stronger, freer heroine. Yet our hero simply closes their eyes, pats the small woman on the head, and charges ahead and into the unbound future.

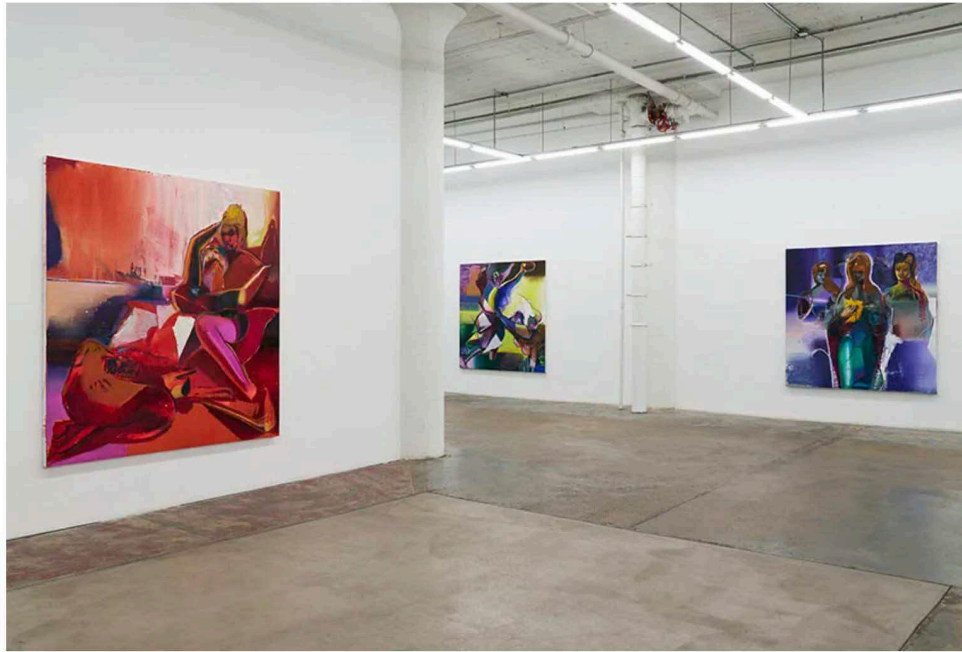
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1. Charlotte Higgins, *Greek Myths: A New Retelling* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2021), 2. ↵
 2. William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, eds. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, Rebecca Niles (Washington, D.C.: Folger Shakespeare Library, n.d.), accessed January 17, 2022, <https://shakespeare.folger.edu/shakespeares-works/venus-and-adonis/the-poem/#Ven-1159>. ↵
 3. Madhavi Menon, *The woman's part: desire and sexuality*, *The Week*, November 8, 2015. <https://www.theweek.in/columns/guest-columns/desire-and-sexuality.html>. ↵



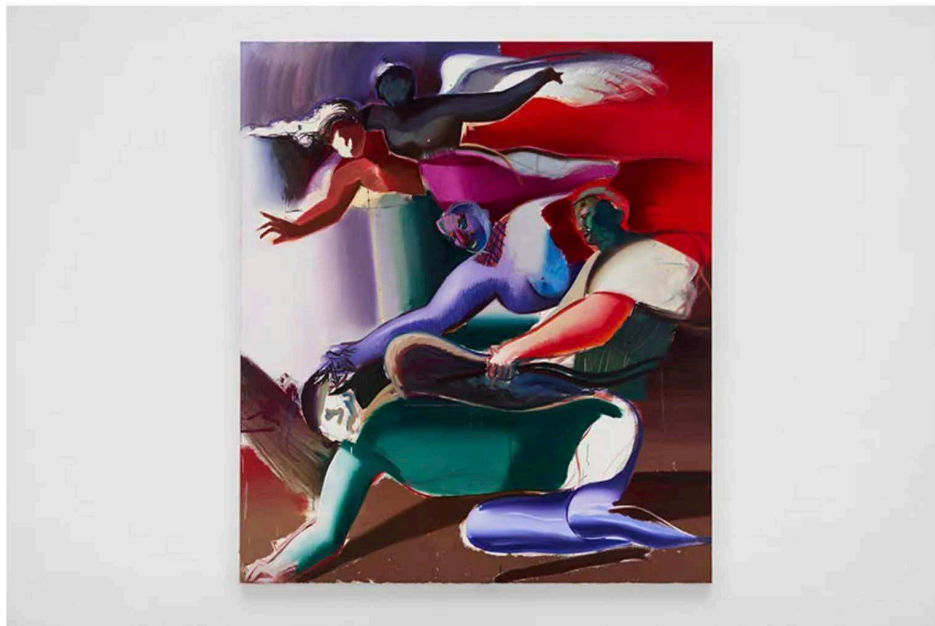
Katherina Olschbaur, *Live Flesh* (installation view) (2022). Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery. Photo: Lee Tyler Thompson.



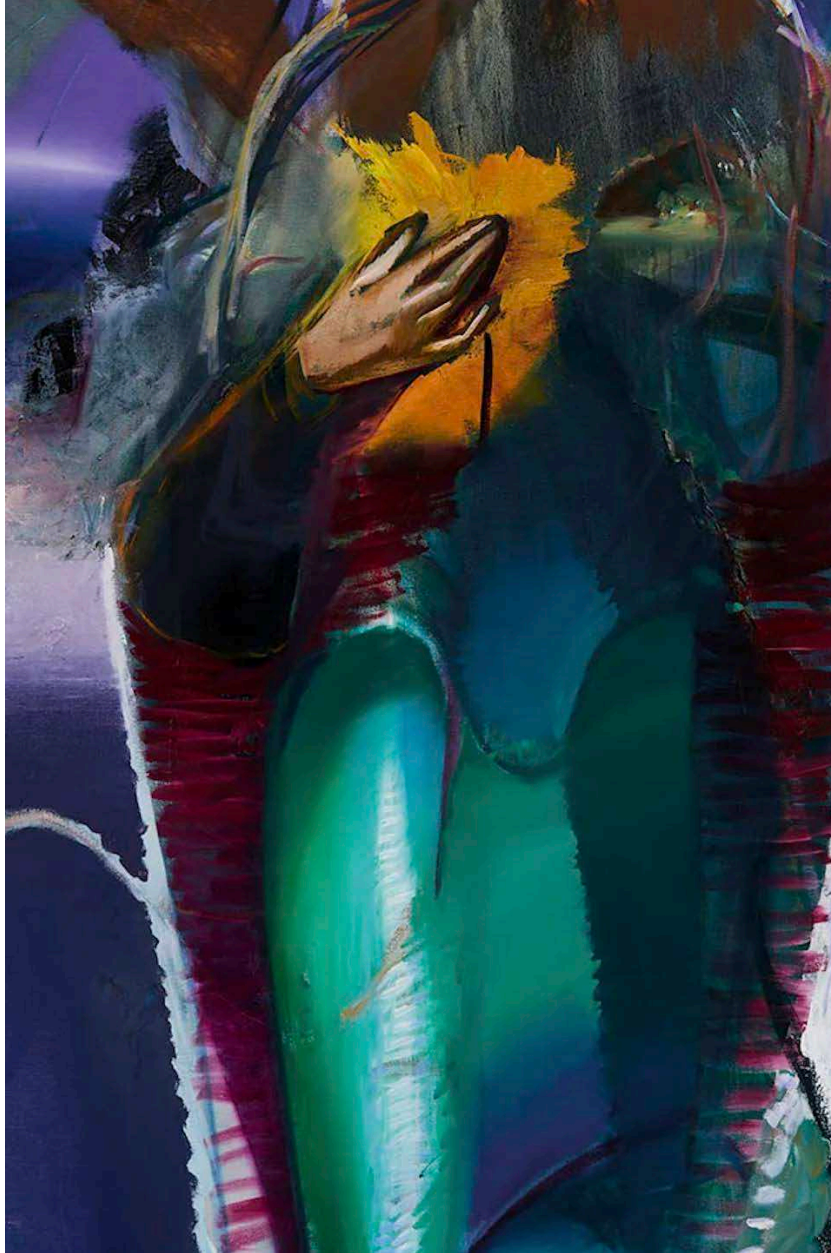
Katherina Olschbaur, *Young Hermaphrodite* (2021). Oil on canvas, 78.75 x 78.75 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery. Photo: Lee Tyler Thompson.



Katherina Olschbaur, *Live Flesh* (installation view) (2022). Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery. Photo: Lee Tyler Thompson.



Katherina Olschbaur, *Sub Red* (2021). Oil on canvas, 94.5 x 78.75 x 2 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Nicodim Gallery. Photo: Lee Tyler Thompson.



Katherina Olschbaur, *Karyatide*
(detail) (2021). Image courtesy of
the artist and Nicodim Gallery.
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