

ARTSY

Art

# In Portraits of Her Friends, and a New Documentary, Apolonia Sokol Turns Her Life into Art

Maxwell Rabb

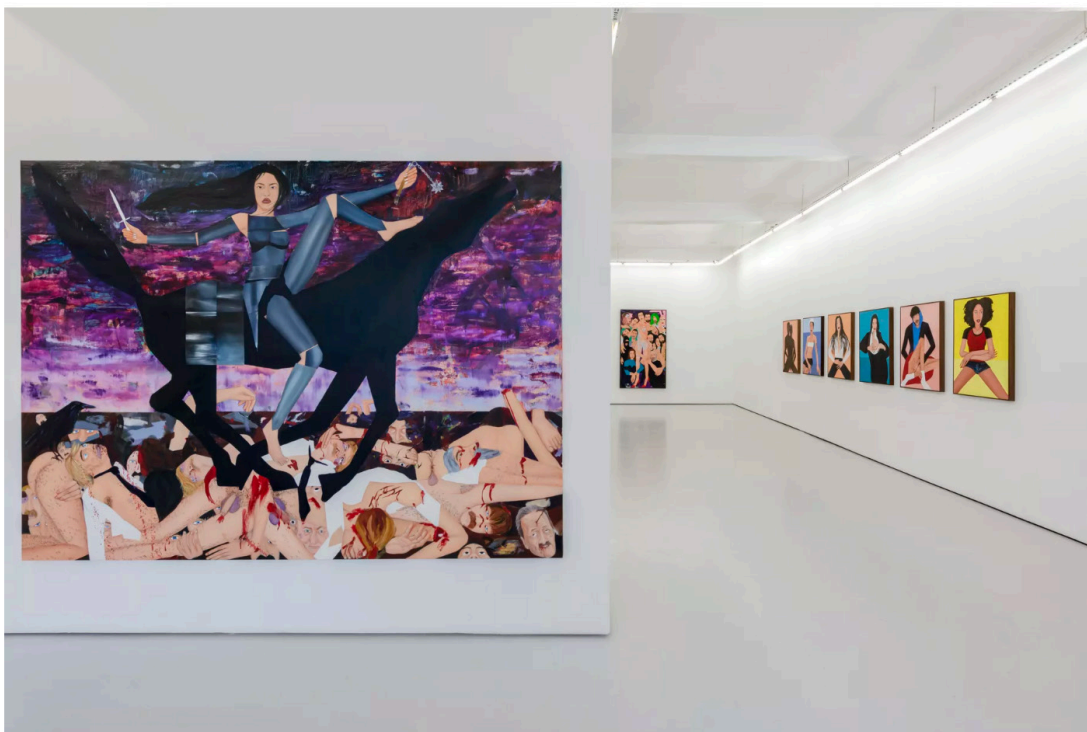


Portrait of Apolonia Sokol by Suela J. Cennet. Courtesy of THE PILL®.

“I don’t believe there’s a difference between my personal being and my work,” Apolonia Sokol told Artsy before a recent screening of *Apolonia, Apolonia*, a new documentary film spanning 13 years of the French artist’s life directed by her friend, Danish director Léa Glob. The film intimately chronicles Sokol’s artistic and personal growth—evidence, in itself, of her belief that art develops alongside life. Reflecting on the period documented by the movie, she added, “The paintings get better, and the thoughts, the philosophy, and everything gets sharper. That’s a natural thing.”

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This year marks a pivotal moment in Sokol's career, with the release of *Apolonia, Apolonia*, and her first solo museum exhibition at the Arken Museum in Ishøj, Denmark, on view until February 4, 2024. Sokol's figurative paintings are an extension of her life — a method of self-reflection and documentation. She explores themes such as the female experience, desire, and societal expectations expressed through her own memories. In her paintings, such as the group portrait *Boysan with friends* (2022), Sokol often depicts friends, lovers, and collaborators together, documenting her alternative, chosen family — a context similar to the family structure she was raised in.



Apolonia Sokol, installation view of "You Better Paint Me" at THE PILL®, 2022. Courtesy of THE PILL®.

Born in 1988, Sokol grew up around artists amid the culturally diverse backdrop of Paris's Château Rouge neighborhood. Here, her parents ran Lavoir Moderne Parisien, an experimental theater where art was a part of her everyday life. This theater played a crucial role in shaping her understanding of art, teaching her that it could be a profound tool for comprehending the human condition. She learned to paint among the diverse ensemble of artists who would pass through the local theater—a foundational experience among her parents' community that helps her to this day. "Over the last few years, I got to define my [artist] statement and understand that I could use my art as not only a language but also a weapon. It has power in it," Sokol said.

Though Sokol spent part of her childhood in Denmark, she later returned to Paris to live in Lavoir Moderne Parisien once again. Here, Sokol crossed paths with Glob and Oksana Shachko, the Ukrainian founder of the Femen Movement and another main protagonist of *Apolonia, Apolonia*. Glob began filming Sokol—then only 21—in 2009 as part of a school project. She captured the early stages of Sokol's artistic exploration, marking the beginning of an enduring collaboration and friendship between Glob, Shachko, and Sokol.



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Apolonia Sokol  
*LE PRINTEMPS [Spring]* Linda, Nicolas, Raya, Dustin, Simone, Nirina, Claude, Bella, Dourane, 2020  
THE PILL®  
Sold

From there, the documentary traverses Sokol's entire career, offering a vulnerable and transparent look inside the life of a struggling artist, defined by Sokol's resilience. After graduating from École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, Sokol traveled to the United States, where she ended up sponsored by art collector and dealer Stefan Simchowicz. Under Simchowicz's approach to art dealing, she produced 10 paintings per month. In the documentary, Glob wryly critiques his methods in a voiceover, pointing out, "Why only buy the art when it's so much cheaper to buy the artist?"

"It's only men telling me what to do," Sokol told Artsy, reflecting on patrons, critics, and art teachers featured in the film. "Every single time. But this is the society we live in, right? There is this constant glass ceiling, and I try to keep on going."

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Today, Sokol creates art to directly challenge patriarchal norms, a stance prompted by her experience in Los Angeles. These experiences inspire a feminist upheaval in her new work, especially notable in her reinterpretation of Sandro Botticelli's *Primavera* (ca. 1470). Her work *LE PRINTEMPS [Spring] Linda, Nicolas, Raya, Dustin, Simone, Nirina, Claude, Bella, Dourane* (2020) is a deliberate response to trans-exclusionary perspectives, featuring a group of nine trans and cisgender women together. Sokol's work reimagines Botticelli's narrative of fertility and consent by empowering each figure with an assertive, confident stance, celebrating the autonomy and diversity of all women.



Portrait of Apolonia Sokol. Photo by Suela J. Cennet. Courtesy of THE PILL®.

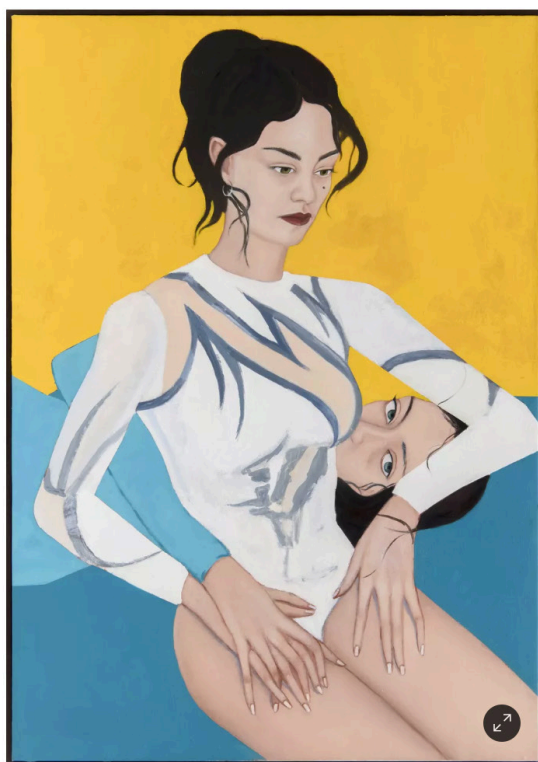
“The only thing I could do was paint: Some people are activists. I’m a painter, so I painted,” Sokol said. “[*LE PRINTEMPS*] became a political piece because there are so few representations of trans women that are in this position of empowerment....[They are] strong, looking you straight in the eyes and not being represented as something deviant.”

Sokol attributes her artistic evolution — one where her work engages in meaningful dialogue — to Shachko’s death in 2018. Shachko’s legacy of activism influenced Sokol’s approach, encouraging her to use her art as a dynamic platform for social commentary and change.

“After she passed, I understood what she wanted, that I was supposed to use my art as a vessel and not just paint things,” said Sokol. “[Paintings] that actually communicate with the world.”



Apolonia Sokol  
*DINA AS LEDA (& THE SAWN)*, 2020  
THE PILL®



Apolonia Sokol  
*LENA & MELO*, 2020  
THE PILL®



These paintings, like *Oksana Shachko* and *MILKA II* (both 2022), are evidence of her nuanced exploration of internal and external perception: The figures' eyes are portrayed as gateways to understanding the self. Through these works, she reflects on her understanding of identity and self-awareness, once again bridging the gap between art and experience.

Once Glob stopped filming in 2022, Sokol started coming to terms with her own self-perception. For over a decade, the artist lived a documented life — cataloged and framed by Glob's camera lens. Her portraits have become more personal, as she has turned more introspective, away from the public gaze. This year, Sokol landed in Pablo Picasso's old studio in Paris — an ironic turn for the artist attempting to challenge the canon. She didn't mince words when talking about the Spanish Cubist, saying: "I spit on his grave."

Meanwhile, Sokol's current show at the Arken is a childhood dream fulfilled. "This museum is so special because it opened in 1996 — the year I arrived in Denmark," Sokol said. "I used to go all the time with my mother. When I was a kid, I thought, 'Wow, one day, I'll be an artist, and maybe I'll show there,' and now I am." ■