

Girl Power for a New Century

Friends, colleagues, artists, and activists. Apolonia Sokol creates radical forms of resistance through portrait painting.



Apolonia Sokol, *La Guerre – Hae Na as Nemesis*, 2022. Courtesy: The artist and The Pill.

Many will be familiar with the Franco-Polish painter Apolonia Sokol by way of the simultaneously intimate and grand documentary film portrait *Apolonia, Apolonia* from early 2023. The Danish documentarian Lea Glob has followed the artist for thirteen years, right from her young years as a student at Beaux-Arts de Paris to her major exhibitions abroad. In Sokol's case, work and identity are inextricably intertwined as she immerses herself in her practice as a portrait painter with a wildly proliferating and purposeful intensity. And she holds true to her approach even when the art industry shows its most merciless side, for example, in the less-than-glittering part of Los Angeles where market forces are paramount and a young female artist is considered just another commodity.

Sokol's practice has not changed direction since the documentary, but her portraits of family, friends, and fellow artists have become more powerful and technically refined in recent years. The development is evident in a number of paintings in Sokol's first institutional solo exhibition at Arken. These paintings take a fresh look at art history through a critical deconstruction. For example, the pietà motif is recreated in the large and beautiful altarpiece *The Cure* (2023).

In the centre of this triptych is Sokol herself, naked and with her body bent backwards, seemingly weightless. The fields of colour are uniform and cool, and the image creates no illusion of depth. Sokol's gaze is directed at the viewer, observant and alert. She lies in the lap of three women, and like the Virgin Mary in the pietà, the care and tenderness emanating from the women appears almost as a healing force. But contrary to the biblical narrative, here we find a break away from divine order. In Sokol's work, Christ is not the only one who can heal the ills of the world – so too can a strong feminine energy and care from a healing collective.

The theme is echoed in the other images on the altarpiece. A Black man lies on a bed surrounded by four angels in smocks and sneakers. Two of the angels each have a brush in a small bowl. Are they rewriting history? If so, for whom? More than anything, the scene is reminiscent of a contemporary version of the spiritual motifs of fifteenth-century Renaissance paintings. But in Sokol's mythology the theme is didactic, hinting at a political and social revolution for those whose stories have not always been part of the larger narrative.

The combination of the familiar yet at the same time unknown is what makes Sokol's idiom so interesting. A rebellion against the establishment is in full swing in the large-scale painting *The War* (2022), a dynamic image vibrant with electric badass girl power – and anger. A victorious Joan of Arc-like woman clad in armour sits on a black horse with one leg raised towards the animal's neck. In one hand, she carries a knife; the other holds a morning star. Below her is a battlefield of bloodied white men, severed penises, limbs, and heads.

Has she acted on impulse, propelled by emotion? Or is she waging war? Amidst all the chaos, shades of purple appear in the background, iridescent and light, giving the image a sense of calm. A battle has just ended, but we sense that the fight is not fully over.



Apolonia Sokol, *Dina*, 2022, *Oksana Shachko*, 2022, *Inés & Nino*, 2022. Courtesy: The artist and The Pill.

The exhibition also shows several of Sokol's more classic portraits painted using simplified surfaces and lines. Isolated splashes of colour in garish orange, brown, azure, and yellow harmonise in these unpretentious renderings of Sokol's models, who include close friends; people from minoritised and queer communities as well as from artistic and activist circles. She clearly takes an intersectional approach to her work, and there is an obvious awareness of highlighting bodies that are, for example, non-binary, transgender, and racialised. The works offer various ways in which the structural inequality among minoritised groups in society can be conceptualised. These are difficult political realities, and Sokol successfully paints them with precision and great love for her subjects.

The portraits in the exhibition are tender and intimate, but can also come across as a little too delectable at times. The subjects are all very beautiful and slim, and I would like to have seen bodies that represent a more diverse aesthetic. It makes it all feel little unresolved, which is a shame given that the pictures do in fact contain so many bold stories and varied perspectives. Sokol challenges painting and uses the

Press Review
Kunstkritikk, Claudine Zia, October 2023

medium as a form of resistance to articulate experiences, both personal and political, in an aesthetically seductive and powerful language that refuses to be assimilated.



Apolonia Sokol, *Le Cauchemar (d'après Füssli)*, 2018. Courtesy: The artist and The P.I.I.L.