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*APOLONIA SOKOL*



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Using the art of portraiture as a tool of political empowerment, Apolonia Sokol's figurative paintings introduce portraiture and autofiction into scenes inspired by canonical works from art history and contemporary issues around feminism and queer identity. Reflecting on gendered representation throughout history and body politics, her paintings often depict her friends, lovers and collaborators as icons of radical subjectivity, bound together by alternative kinships, surrounding, protecting and elevating each other. Sokol's paintings are characterized by her close relationships and intimacy with the models she paints, at times also inviting painter friends to work collaboratively.

Distinctive for their flat, painterly style and striking colors that the artist creates herself using natural pigments, Sokol's paintings often present a 1:1 scale. They position the subject's eyes in direct confrontation with the viewer's gaze, evoking a repossession of their own identities and stories, conveying simultaneously a sense of boundary and its transgression, of strength through vulnerability. Positioned in open perspectives and unusually flat, often interior spaces, the figures seem to respond to the space of the painting with their extended, elongated and angled limbs.

Through her iconographic engagement with art historical canon and her choice of subjects such as childbirth, abortion, public demonstrations, and racialized and/or queer bodies, Sokol seeks to witness and affect the present while revealing the blindspots of Western painting and troubling male-centric histories of art and their omissions. Her painting "Le Printemps" (2020) for example, stages a group of trans and non-binary women in response to Boticelli's painting of the same title, operating an inversion of its iconography to complexify questions around marriage, rape and pregnancy from a queer perspective. In another example, "The Cure" (2023), which borrows the form of an altarpiece, the artist depicts scenes from her studio centering on her artistic collaborators as purveyors of care and the process of painting as one of healing; while she references Villeneuve-lès-Avignon's "Pietà" but replaces the central figure with a self-portrait, activating the history of hysteria in relation to the female body.

Apolonia Sokol (b. 1988, Paris) lives and works in Paris, France.

A French figurative painter of Danish and Polish descent, Sokol graduated from the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris in 2015 and moved first to New York where she worked in Dan Colen's studio, then to Los Angeles where she found a community of artists to exchange around figurative painting.

Her inaugural institutional solo exhibition is held at Arken Museum in 2023, preceded by "You Better Paint Me\*" and "I Had Trouble Sleeping, But She Said She Loved Me..." at THE PILL (Istanbul, 2022 & 2018); "Attic", a duo presentation with Walker Evans, Sebastien Ricou (Brussels, 2016) and "Process Is Desire", whitcher projects (Los Angeles, 2016). Her work has been exhibited in several institutional group shows such as "Immortelle", MO.CO Panacee (Montpellier, 2023); "Entre tes yeux et les images que j'y vois\* (A Sentimental Choice)", Fondation Pernod Ricard (Paris, 2022), "L'ami-e modèle" (Commissioned by Yvon Lambert Foundation), Viva Villa, MUCEM (Marseille, 2022); "Women Painting Women", Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth (Texas, 2022); "Women and Change", ARKEN Museum for Modern Art (Copenhagen, 2022); "She - Classicità", Polana Institute (Warsaw, 2021); "Conversation Piece | Part VII Towards Narragonia", Fondazione Memmo, (Rome, 2021); "ECCO", Villa Médicis (Rome, 2021); "Tainted Love II", (Villa Arson, Nice, 2019) and "En Forme de Vertige", Révélation Emerige Prize, Villa Emerige (Paris, 2017).

In 2020, Apolonia Sokol was the laureate of the prestigious Academy of France and became one of the residents of Villa Medici for 2020-2021. In 2023 the HBO produced documentary "Apolonia, Apolonia" directed by Léa Glob which follows Sokol's life and career over a decade had a sweeping run at film festivals across the globe, including Best Feature Length documentary at IDFA, Best Documentary at Hong Kong International Film Festival and Best Nordic Documentary at Goteborg Film Festival among many others. Sokol teaches at the Fine Arts Academy of Caen, Esam.



## APOLONIA SOKOL

1988, Paris.

Lives and works in Paris

### Education

2015 MFA École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts de Paris, FR

### Solo Exhibitions

- 2024 *The False Rose of Jericho*, with Zahna Siham Benamor, Overgaden, Copenhagen, DK
- 2023 *Apolonia Sokol*, ARKEN Museum of Contemporary Art, Copenhagen, DK
- 2022 *You Better Paint Me\**, THE PILL, Istanbul, TR
- 2021 *La Nave dei Folli (The ship of Fools)*, The Digital Space of the Community, ARCO E-EXHIBITIONS
- 2018 THE PILL Pop Up, Brussels, BE
- I Had Trouble Sleeping*, But She Said She Loved Me..., THE PILL, Istanbul, TR
- 2016 *Heartbreak Hotel*, Dutko Gallery, Paris, FR
- Sabbath*, Andersen's Contemporary, Copenhagen, Denmark, DK
- Walker Evans / Apolonia Sokol*, Attic, Sebastien Ricou, Brussels, BE
- Process Is Desire*, cur. Isabelle Le Normand, Whitcher projects, LA, USA

### Group Exhibitions

- 2024 Bozar, Brussels, BE (Upcoming)
- 2023 *Lentos Featured Artist Crossing Europe 2023: Valie Export*, Lentos Kunstmuseum, Linz, AU
- Immortelle*, cur. Anya Harrison, MO.CO Panacee, Montpellier, FR
- 2022 *L'ami-e modèle* (Commission de la Fondation Yvon Lambert), Viva Villa, MUCEM, Marseille, FR
- Entre tes yeux et les images que j'y vois\** (A Sentimental Choice), Fondation Pernod Ricard, Paris, FR
- Women Painting Women*, Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Texas, USA
- Women and Change*, ARKEN Museum for Modern Art, Copenhagen, DK
- AS IF IT COULDN'T*, THE PILL, Istanbul, TR
- 2021 *She - Classicità*, Polana Institute, Varsovie, PL
- Conversation Piece | Part VII Towards Narragonia*, Fondazione Memmo, Rome, IT
- ECCO, Villa Médicis, Rome, IT
- 2020 *Conversation Piece*, Part VII, Towards Narragonia, Fondazione Memmo, Rome, IT
- Possessed*, MO.CO, Montpellier, FR
- 2019 *Tainted Love II*, cur. Yann Chevalier, Villa Arson, Nice, FR
- Mais pas du tout, c'est platement figuratif ! Toi tu es spirituelle mon amour*, cur. Anael Pigeat & Sophie Vigourous, Galerie Jousse Entreprise, Paris, FR
- 2018 *Mademoiselle*, cur. Tara Londi, CRAC, Sète, FR
- Salle de Pas-Perdus*, cur. Michel François & Richard Venlet, Le Doc, Paris, FR

*One Long Changing Body*, Carlier-Gebauer, Berlin, DE

*I Am What I Am*, cur. Julie Crenn, Ici gallery, Paris, FR

*J'aime*, cur. Marion Bataillard, Galerie Henri Chartier, Lyon, FR

*Tainted Love*, cur. Yann Chevallier, Confort Moderne, Poitiers, FR

2017 *En Forme de Vertige*, cur. Gaël Charbau, Prix Révélation Emerige, Villa Emerige, Paris, FR

*Surreal House*, THE PILL, Istanbul, TR

*Peindre dit-elle #2*, cur. Julie Crenn, Anabelle Teneze and Amélie Lavin, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dole, FR

*Quatrième Sexe*, cur. Marie Maertens, Galerie Le Coeur, Paris, FR

2016 *Toute Première Fois*, cur. Francesca Napolie & Armelle Leturcq, 22 Visconti, Paris, FR

*Matin Midi Soir*, Honoré Visconti, Paris, FR

*Berlin Est*, GAD Paris-Belleville, Paris, FR

*Ravi*, cur. Xavier Mary, Liege, BE

2015 *Collection Type #3*, GAD Grand Local, Paris, FR

*Yes to All*, Treize, Paris, FR

*Life Ain't Fair #2*, Galerie Arnaud Deschin, Paris, FR

*Life Ain't Fair*, Galerie Arnaud Deschin, Tourtour, FR

*Selective Memories*, Griffin Gallery, London, UK

### Awards & Residencies

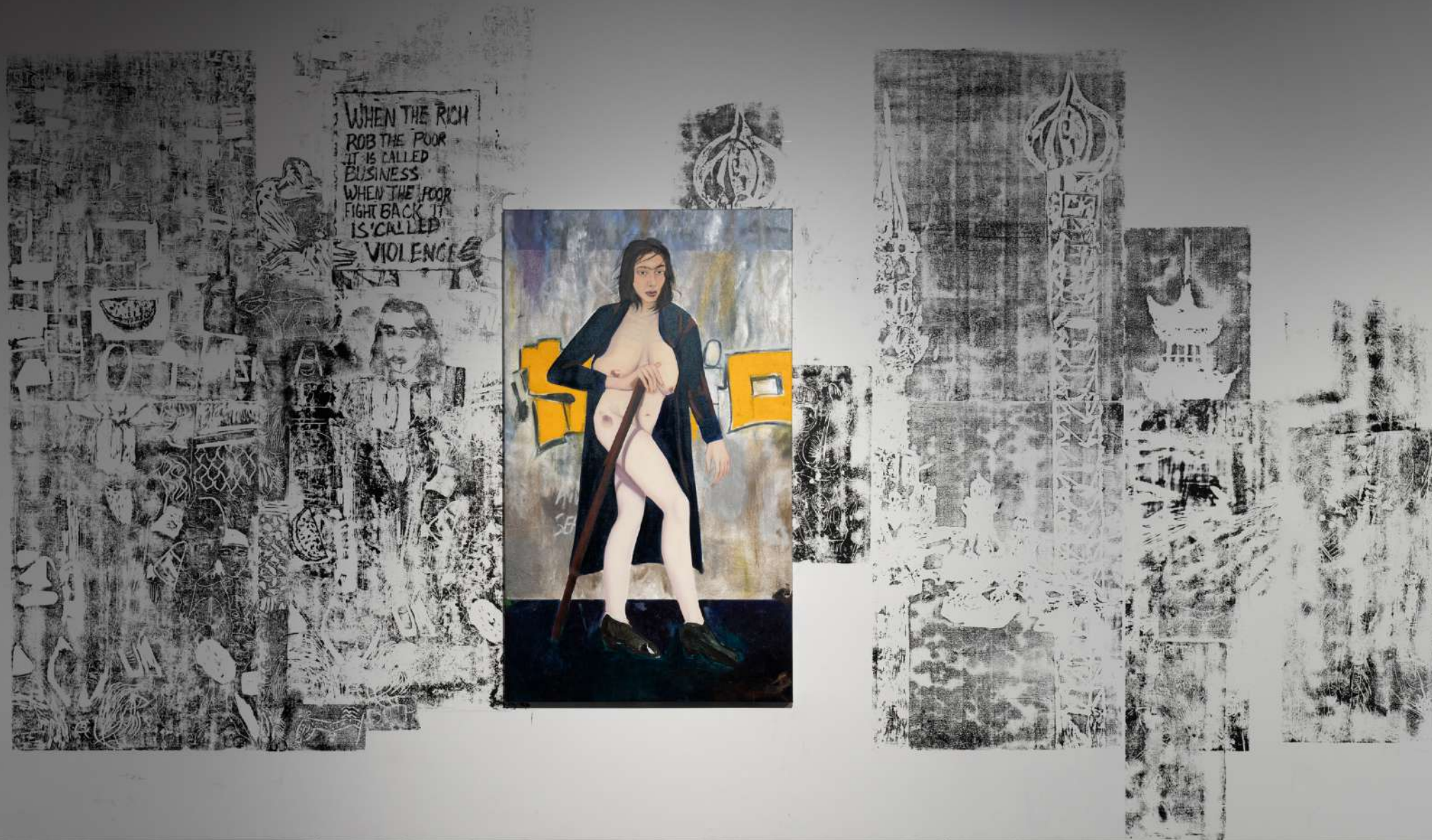
2020 Académie de France à Rome, Résidence Villa Medici

### Films

- 2022 *Apolonia, Apolonia*, directed by Lea Glob
- Best Film Award, Festival IDFA, Amsterdam
- Best Documentary Award at Sofia Film Festival
- Grand Prix of Artdocfest at Riga Film Festival
- Best Nordic Documentary Award at Göteborg Film Festival
- Politiken:dox Award at CPH:DOX
- Shortlisted for Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Feature Documentary

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*WORKS AND EXHIBITIONS*

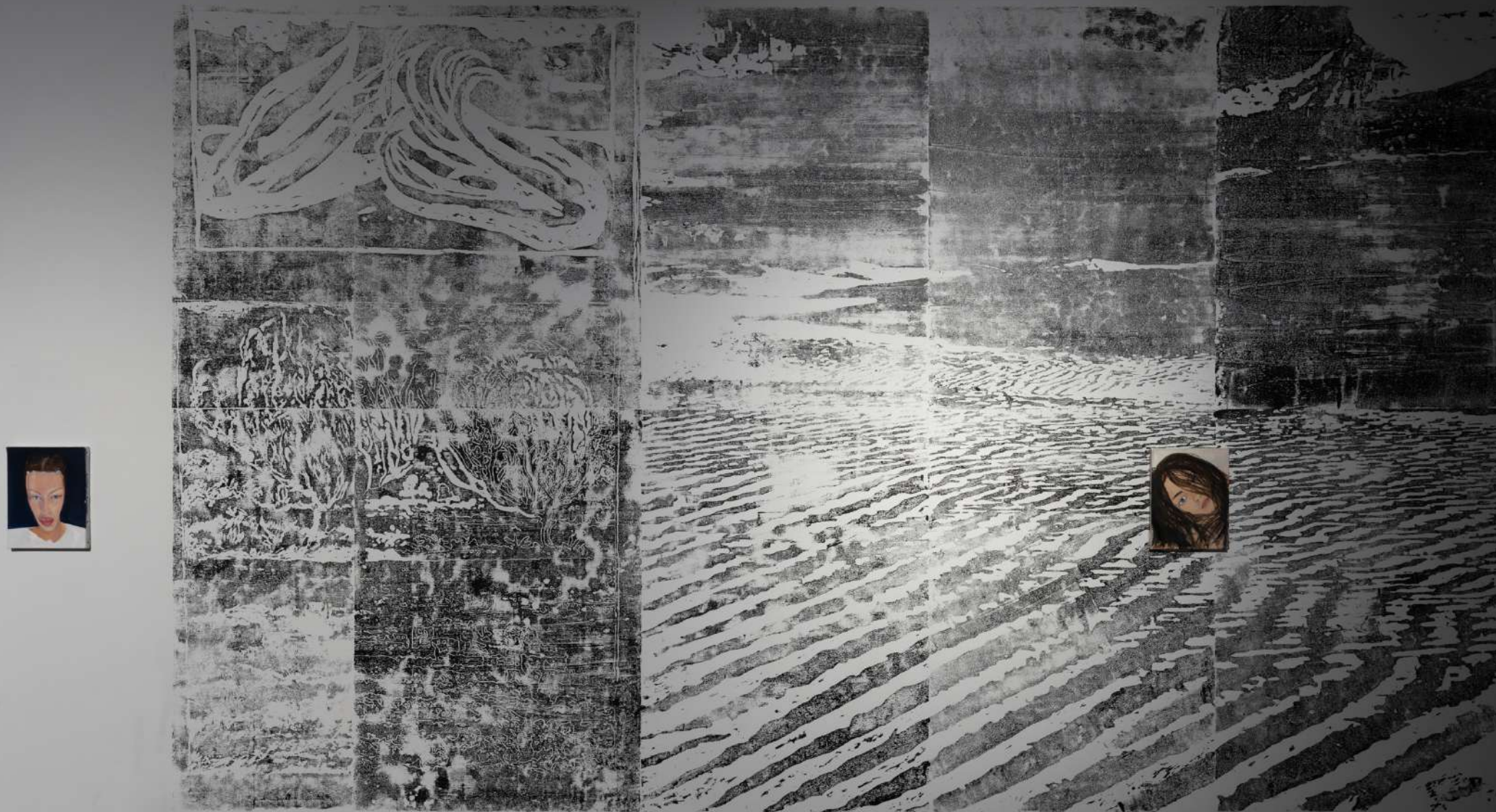




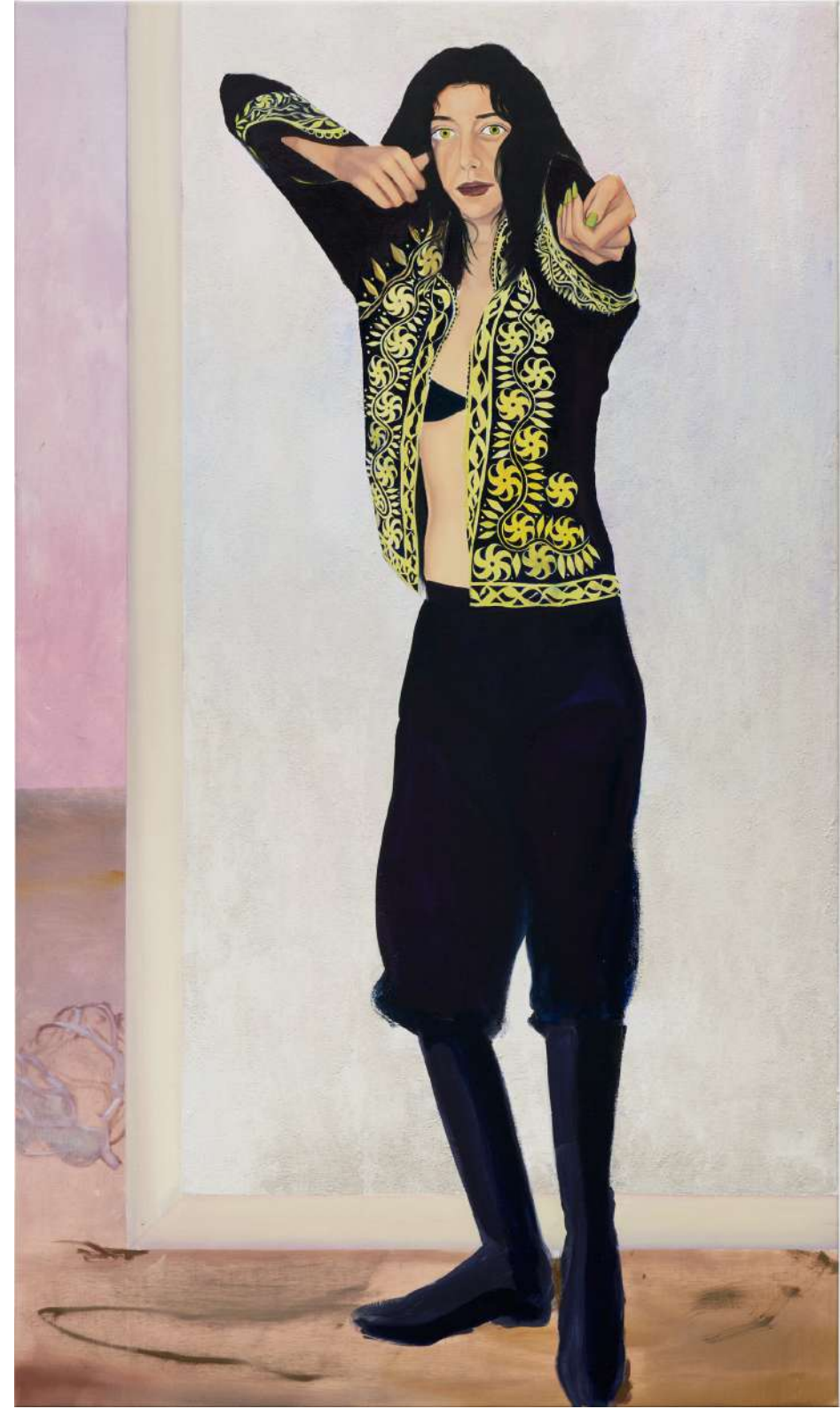


Apolonia Sokol  
*Claude-Emmanuelle as Venus*, 2024  
Oil and mica crystal on canvas  
195 x 114 cm





Apolonia Sokol  
*Zahna Siham Benamor as a Barbar*, 2024  
Oil and mica crystal on canvas  
195 x 114 cm





# APOLONIA SOKOL

## STYNDEN I NUTIDEN

Apolonia Sokol (b. 1985) i Frankrig er portretkunstner. Hun maler ikke bare portrætter af mennesker, men også portrætter af politiske, kulturelle og sociale. Hun skaber portrætter, som hun selv har været udsat for. De handler om identitet og om at være synlig i en verden, hvor identitet er blevet et spørgsmål om overlevelse.

## PORTRETTETS MAGT

Den moderne portrætterende kunstner har altid været et spørgsmål om magt. Apolonia Sokol portrætterer dem, som hun selv har været udsat for. Hun skaber portrætter, som hun selv har været udsat for. De handler om identitet og om at være synlig i en verden, hvor identitet er blevet et spørgsmål om overlevelse.

## ÅR TILBAG I HISTORIEN

Apolonia Sokol maler ikke kun portrætter af mennesker, men også portrætter af politiske, kulturelle og sociale. Hun skaber portrætter, som hun selv har været udsat for. De handler om identitet og om at være synlig i en verden, hvor identitet er blevet et spørgsmål om overlevelse.

Sokol har været på tværs af mange forskellige kulturer og sprog. Hun har været udsat for mange forskellige oplevelser, som hun nu maler i sine portrætter.

## DOCUMENTARY FILM

Hun har lavet dokumentariske film om mennesker, som hun selv har været udsat for. Hun har lavet film om mennesker, som hun selv har været udsat for. De handler om identitet og om at være synlig i en verden, hvor identitet er blevet et spørgsmål om overlevelse.

## VOICES OF THE PRESENT

Apolonia Sokol (b. 1985) in France is a portrait painter. She paints not only portraits of people, but also portraits of political, cultural, and social. She creates portraits that she herself has experienced. They are about identity and about being visible in a world where identity has become a question of survival.

## THE POWER OF PORTRAITURE

The modern portrait painter has always been a question of power. Apolonia Sokol portraits those who she herself has experienced. She creates portraits that she herself has experienced. They are about identity and about being visible in a world where identity has become a question of survival.

## ACROSS HISTORY

Apolonia Sokol paints not only portraits of people, but also portraits of political, cultural, and social. She creates portraits that she herself has experienced. They are about identity and about being visible in a world where identity has become a question of survival.

Sokol has been across many different cultures and languages. She has experienced many different things, which she now paints in her portraits.

## DOCUMENTARY FILM

She has made documentary films about people who she herself has experienced. She has made films about people who she herself has experienced. They are about identity and about being visible in a world where identity has become a question of survival.





## APOLONIA SOKOL

**THE NIGHT OF THE HUNTER**  
1987, oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm. The painting depicts a dark, surreal scene with figures in a landscape.

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Apolonia Sokol  
*La Guerre - Hae Na as Nemesis*, 2022  
Oil on linen  
270 x 200 cm





Emblematic of Apolonia Sokol's commitment to using the art of portraiture as a tool of political empowerment and the iconography of the art history canon *La Guerre*, *Hae Na as Nemesis* pays tribute to Douanier Rousseau and his painting *La Guerre* (1894). Rousseau created this work in response to the violent events of the Fourmies Massacre on May 1, 1891.

Touched by the violence of the Fourmies events and inspired by a printed caricature of the Russian tsar on horseback, Rousseau chose to paint the figure of a native woman as a mythical war goddess on a monstrous horse, galloping over a heap of human bodies in a dark landscape. By activating both this painting and the historical context that spawned it, Apolonia Sokol reinterprets *La Guerre* by adopting pictorial strategies that reposition the iconography within contemporary political and feminist struggles through biographical elements. In reference to her own biographical journey, she adopts Joan of Arc's horse, copied from a Danish bronze statue designed as a gift for France. On the horse, we see the artist's friend, Laura Hae Na, a social justice activist based in Denmark, portrayed as Nemesis, the goddess of rightful vengeance.

She is seen trampling a heap of human bodies consisting of white-collar workers, referring to today's dispossessed masses, and public figures known for their anti-feminist and racist speeches or past sexual assaults against minors. With these iconographic inversions, the struggle becomes a contemporary and intersectional one that connects feminism, queer politics, and labor, while establishing a direct genealogy between the social movements of 1791 and today's social justice movements that occupy the streets.









Apolonia Sokol  
*Lulu Nuti*, 2022  
Oil on canvas  
92 x 65 cm

Lulu Nuti is an Italian sculptor friend of Apolonia Sokol who portrayed Nuti's hands in blue after a photograph of the sculptor taken on the day of her father's death when she decided to paint a memorial for him in ultramarine blue. Also, Sokol calls attention to the history of ultramarine originating from the gemstone lapis lazuli by applying it to Nuti's hands. In the past, red and pink were masculine colors and blue was the feminine color, this changed due to commercial reasons in the 1940s to sell lipsticks etc.

In 2019, a story illuminating the forgotten history of female scribes took place as the body of a nun who lived around 997 to 1162, was found buried at a women's monastery in Dalheim, Germany. A rare blue pigment, ultramarine, was discovered in her fossilized plaque. It was a pigment that a millennium ago could only have come from lapis lazuli originating in a single region of Afghanistan and was once worth its weight in gold. Lapis lazuli was mainly used to give the Virgin Mary's robes their striking color in centuries of artwork and it was forbidden to use the color in decoration. Nun's teeth being covered in this color meant that she could only have been a scribe or painter of medieval manuscripts. This story also mentions the origins of the color lapis lazuli, also known as the Yves Klein blue.

Klein is an artist Sokol considers as misogynistic and regrettably today, he still has a wrongfully attributed ownership of this very color. Yves Klein claiming the ownership of the color ultramarine and the color becoming à la mode due to him resulted in counterfeit and synthetic versions of the color appear, making the most exclusive and expensive color of all time the least expensive and the most widespread.





SI VOUS N'AI<sup>M</sup>EZ  
PAS LES "ETRANGERS"  
IL FALLAIT PAS NOUS  
COLONISER

*Tu vois les retombées??*



Apolonia Sokol  
*Si Vous N'Aimez Pas Les Etrangers*, 2022  
Oil on canvas  
92 x 65 cm



Emblematic of Sokol's iconographic engagement with public demonstrations and bodies marked by race, *Si Vous N'Aimez Pas Les Étrangers Il Fallait Pas Nous Coloniser* is inspired by a photograph taken by Apolonia Sokol during a protest for Adama Traoré, a black Frenchman who died in police custody after being apprehended by the police. His death triggered prolonged riots and protests against police brutality in France.

The three women of color depicted in the painting are gathered under a banner, two of them staring directly at the viewer, while more than half of the painting's surface is occupied by the poignant textual message that both recalls and disrupts the terms of otherness in Western societies: "If you don't like foreigners, you shouldn't have colonized us." Through the interplay of gazes, the women seem to reclaim the projected otherness imposed on them, while reminding the viewer of the historical and enduring transgression of borders that is colonialism, as a root cause of the conflict.

The message, coupled with the gazes of the two women, shifts the terms of causality from a mere offense to a generalized institutional denial. By choosing to paint this moment from a public demonstration, Sokol embeds both her painting and the act of painting itself in a collective experience of action against violence, and in the history of current political struggles, seeking to bear witness and impact the present while revealing the blind spots of pictorial representation.

The painting was part of the exhibition "Ce à quoi nous tenons" during the 2022 edition of the ¡Viva Villa! biennial at Villa Medici.



Apolonia Sokol  
*The Cure*, 2023  
Oil on canvas  
200 x 114 cm; 200 x 240 cm; 200 x 114 cm





A free standing ensemble of paintings borrowing the form of an altarpiece, *The Cure* presents two sides composed of three panels each. Characteristic of Sokol's approach to painting as a storytelling device and operating as an allegory on multiple levels, the piece presents an exterior in celestial gray and silver white tones in reference to the protective and healing power of spiritual figures and angels. In contrast, the interior panels painted in vibrant colors offer interpretations of allegorical scenes which elevate the autobiographical into the realm of the sacred and the mythological.

The outside panels, conceived as a protective shell, depict scenes from the artist's studio representing her collaborators and friends as purveyors of care, and the process of painting as one of healing. On the central and the left side panels we see the artist's assistants, long time friends, interns and students, gathered in collaboration and healing around a black body.

On the right side panel, a self-portrait of the artist is seen carrying a painting's frame. Here we are faced with an interplay of gazes, the mystery of the frame turned over, forbidding us to see the image while the painter's gaze confronts the viewer directly, stressing a boundary and simultaneously transgressing another one. The inside panels present dramatic scenes in vibrant colors. Here, Sokol references major works of art historical canon as much as her own oeuvre.

The central piece is a reinterpretation of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon's "Pietà" where the artist replaces the central figure with a self-portrait, activating the history of hysteria in relation to the female body. The three figures surrounding her are familiar from her past paintings: Anouk, Ines and Lux. The right panel is an homage to Manet's

*Luncheon on the Grass*: by inverting its terms of nudity, Sokol denudes all the figures that are standing, while the only sitting figure is clothed, so as standing naked under the sun becomes a way of reappropriating the queer body. The third scene on the left depicts a recent public demonstration in Paris against racial violence where the main female figure stands as a symbol against white silence and calls for alliance. With this scene, the interior panels show collective action and public demonstration as activities of care and cure: what is revealed is also healed.



















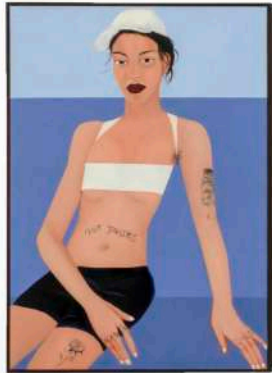
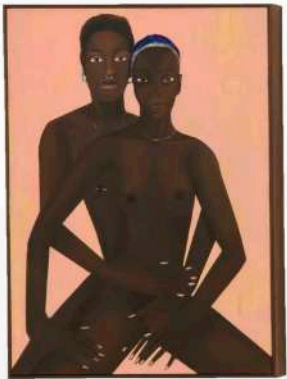
Apolonia Sokol  
*Ines & Nino*, 2022  
Oil on canvas  
92 x 65 cm



The portrait of a mother and her newborn, *Inès and Nino*, depicts a breastfeeding scene. In continuity of Sokol's insistence on painting people with whom she maintains a direct relationship—friendship, romantic love, creative collaboration, or other forms of intimacy—it is the portrait of her childhood friend, also an artist, Inès Di Folco, who gave birth to her first child, held in her arms at the age of 20—almost a child herself.

In contrast to Sokol's usual portraits where the fixed gaze of the figure confronts the viewer, here, the focus is on the intimacy between the mother and the child, expressed through the mother's enveloping gaze directed towards the child in her arms. The choice of translucent white for her clothing, reflected in the vascular lines on her breast and nails, echoes the breast milk: while breastfeeding defines humanity as mammals, beliefs and representations surrounding it change based on social, political, and religious contexts, turning it into a taboo or elevating it to an exalted ideal.

Considered together with another portrait of Inès di Folco from 2022, painted just after an abortion she chose to undergo, the painting reveals Sokol's poignant and unapologetic perspective on motherhood, sexuality, and taboo in a world where motherhood as an ideal is exalted through countless paintings of the Virgin and Child or representations of blissful breastfeeding scenes in art history, while mothers—the women themselves—are often sidelined, objectified, and/or fetishized. Sokol thus exposes the inherent contradictions in all cultures regarding the assumed equivalence between femininity and motherhood, particularly around breastfeeding.





Apolonia Sokol  
*Inès Di Folco*, 2022  
Oil on canvas  
92 x 65 cm



Apolonia Sokol takes her own experiences and observations of the gaps in art history as a starting point to paint individuals and scenes that have either been omitted from Western art history or whose representations have been reduced to a marginalized or objectified status.

Scenes of childbirth, breastfeeding, or those related to abortion are the ones she chooses to bring into existence in all their complexity. In doing so, she paints individuals she knows personally, whose first names are evident in the titles of the works, and who actively participate in defining the terms of their own representation.

Inès di Folco is a painter and childhood friend of the artist. In contrast to another portrait, "Inès et Nino" in this painting, she is alone, and her arms are positioned as if she were holding a baby, but this is not the case. This simple gesture, highlighting an absence, refers to an abortion she had just undergone before posing. The historical moment of the painting activates the context of the rising restrictions surrounding abortion procedures in Eastern Europe, especially in Poland, where Sokol is originally from, and where protests against new measures limiting abortion freedom were organized at the time.





Apolonia Sokol  
*Vertus*, 2022  
 Oil on linen  
 328 x 148.5 cm



Inspired by the *Seven Virtues* of Sandro Botticelli on display at the Uffizi Gallery of Florence, Apolonia Sokol represents five virtues of her own. The work is based on the study the artist has made on Artemisia Gentileschi during her stay at the Villa Médicis in Rome.

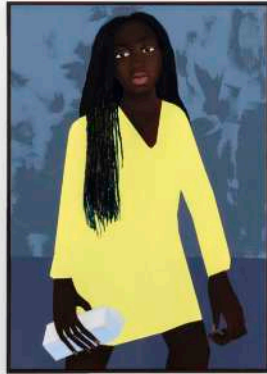
An artist who is rarely revealed in the history of art, Artemisia Gentileschi who lost her mother whilst being born, is the daughter of a great painter. Her father, scared to lose his daughter too, kept her locked in the castle, beginning Artemisia's career as painter as she starts copying his father's work while living in confinement. Around the age of 16, Artemisia convinced her father to let her study painting properly and joined the studio of Agostino Tassi who then raped her for a period until it led to a trial and the trial led to a dark period of torture and humiliation for the artist. In Judith Slaying Holofernes, her most well-known painting, 3 readings of the painting are possible. Firstly, we see the biblical scene as it is. Secondly, it refers to artists' own vengeance, representing the slaying of Tassi by two Artemisia's. Lastly, it represents childbirth, a concept which was taboo in 17th century Italy.

In *Les Vertus*, Apolonia Sokol represents her five virtues as tarot cards. Commencing with *The Birth*, as the first card referencing the original Judith Slaying Holofernes with the artist herself times two reenacting the childbirth scene. The second card *The Sorcerer* is a portrait of New Orleans based painter Isabelle Alicia Baptista narrating esoterism whom Sokol is revisiting as a subject. Depicted as a Madonna, Isabelle Alicia Baptista chose all the objects in her scene from the books (Jambalaya - The Natural Woman's Book of Personal Charms and Practical Rituals) and the glass of water in the front plan to tarot cards and her own painting in the background.

The third card is *The Fluidity*, portraying the gender-fluid artist Dina El Kaisy Frimuth with their feet in water and with a chest bandage.

The fourth card *Hysteria*, focuses on the etymology of the word hysteria which derives from the word uterus. In the 19th century, hysteria was considered a physical illness which exists only in women. It is assumed that the basis for diagnosis operated under the belief that women are predisposed to mental and behavioral conditions; an interpretation of sex-related differences in stress responses. Suggesting that hysteria can only be cured from the uterus, Jean-Martin Charcot blazed the trail for the rape of many women in The Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris to cure them. This is also how the first vibrator was invented. The public would buy tickets to see women cured from hysteria. Different poses were applied to women to position their uteri correctly, the most famous among them known as the pose of hysteria resembling the bridge pose and the Pietà, turning the vulva up, towards the zenith. As a reappropriative twist, Sokol chose to depict the pose of hysteria from the front. The bowl of blood in front serves as an offering portraying the sacrifice and suffering of women and refers to abortion via the pill.

Finally, as the fifth and the last card, Sokol presents *The Execution*, referring again to Judith Slaying Holofernes, depicting this time the enemy of the artist/embodiment of a certain exclusive feminism that the artist is standing up against.









*Le Printemps* refers to Sandro Botticelli's painting of the same title, one of the most controversial and iconic paintings of its time. Due to mysteries surrounding its history, *Spring* is frequently interpreted in reference to *The Birth of Venus*, and Apolonia Sokol keeps this reference in her appropriation and reinterpretation of the painting.

According to art historian Aby Warburg, Botticelli painted two versions of Venus: the celestial Venus (Birth of Venus, 1484-1486) and the earthly Venus (The Spring, 1478-1482); thought to be representing different stages of pregnancy. As such, Botticelli's both paintings are an ode to fertility. In contrast, Sokol's painting stages a group of trans and non-binary women depicted in different stages of their transition, operating an inversion of the painting's iconography to complexify questions around marriage and pregnancy from a queer perspective.

Sokol reimagines fertility, and the act of birth is equated with gender transition as all the figures in the painting are thought of as icons of radical subjectivity, giving birth to themselves, bound together by alternative kinships, surrounding, protecting and elevating each other. The piece is addressing gender fluidity and empowerment within the representation, adopting Renaissance iconography and inverting its terms to find political meaning in the present.

Characteristic of Sokol's approach to painting as a storytelling device and operating as an allegory on multiple levels, *Le Printemps*, through vibrant colors, offers an interpretation of an allegorical scene which elevates the autobiographical into the realm of the sacred and the mythological. As can be seen in many of her other paintings, the celestial background is depicted in shades of purple, with glimpses of blue and red, referencing these colors' traditional

associations with gender divisions where purple, as a blend of the two primaries, stands for nonbinary attitudes to gender and sexuality.

As opposed to Botticelli's *Spring* where only two of the figures' eyes meet the viewers', in Sokol's work, all of the figures' eyes are positioned in direct confrontatn with the viewer's gaze, evoking a repossession of their own identities and stories, conveying simultaneously a sense of boundary and its transgression, of strength through vulnerability. The painting is also emblematic of Sokol's process and methodology: the models are people who she personally knows – her friends, lovers, allies and acquaintances, and who actively participate in defining the terms of their own representation by choosing how they pose.

APOLONIA SOKOL

*I had trouble sleeping.*

*But she said she loved me.*

May 28 - July 31, 2018













THE PILL®

*TEXTS AND CATALOGS*

Apolonia Sokol does not take images lightly, she knows the weight with which the three great monotheisms and their sacred texts have weighed them down. The Bible, the oldest, is not tender on the subject: twenty-three thousand men, we read in Exodus, were put to death for having allowed themselves to sacrifice to the golden calf.

The divine tax on figure worship was high, and the injunction was clear: “You shall not make a graven image, nor any figure of all that is in heaven above, and on earth below, nor of all that in the waters under the earth” (Exodus, chapter XX, verse 4).

Jewish art is therefore essentially aniconic, even if there are rare exceptions here and there, which date back to the first centuries of the Christian era, particularly in North Africa. The Muslim tradition will largely resume the condemnation of the sin of pride which consists in figuring what one cannot give life - with a very unequal severity however, according to the times and the regions, and we know many figurative miniatures ancient in the lands of Islam that we now call India, Iran or Turkey. But the Gospels do not convey this spiritual distrust: images of the life of Christ therefore began to spread in Christian communities from the fourth century, without any particular problem or specific theological justification. There was no need for it, until the power of the Church overshadowed the Byzantine emperors (even if they were Christians) and the image of Christ appeared on coins and on the walls of palaces instead of that of the sovereign. If we simplify in broad strokes, but without deviating too much from the truth, the Iconomachy, which violently opposed the partisans of figures (iconodules) to their iconoclastic adversaries, and which began in Constantinople in the 8th century, is only secondarily a theological debate: it was, with certainty, at the beginning a strict conflict of power. At a time when the images likely to be seen by everyone were those that passed from hand to hand during commercial transactions, or adorned prestigious buildings, it was essential to have control of them: the master could only be the one who is the image dominated, in number and in symbolic power.

The stakes of reforming iconoclasm at the beginning of the 16th century — they are far too complex for us to dwell on them here — were quite similar.

The political powers therefore always tried, even long after the extinction of the Byzantine quarrels, to keep control of the popular images of wide circulation, from the most monumental figures to the seemingly most harmless representations. The French Revolution, quick to track down to the daily habits of individuals newly promoted citizens any trace of the monarchical system, of the Catholic Church and of regional particularities (think of the abandonment of the Gregorian calendar, the adoption of the metric system throughout the territory, to the establishment of decimal clocks, to the substitution of the franc for the pound in the monetary system, etc. ...) has even gone so far as, very seriously, to look into the centuries-old iconography simple card game. In a world that was tearing itself away from feudalism, it seemed, logically, inappropriate that, on the gaming tables, the kings always prevailed over the queens, and that both always outclassed the jacks.

The draftsman Jean-Démosthène Dugourc and the merchant Urbain Jaume registered in 1793 - the year of the Terror - a patent for “new maps of the Republic” which deserves to be looked at closely for a moment, so much does it resonate with the contemporary debates on the dismantling of hierarchical systems perceived as untouchable. The “cards of the Republic” retained the four families of hearts, clubs, spades and diamonds, but substituted the Aces with the Laws, supreme values, for the Kings with winged figures (close to angels and therefore relatively indeterminate as to sex) called Geniuses, to Queens the images of Liberties, to Jacks the representation of Equalities. Each card included additional symbolic indications, which would also be interesting to study in detail, even if, overloading the emblem with information useless to the game itself, they probably contributed to the failure of the project of an imagery renewed fun (the revolutionary calendar and the decimal clocks have had little more success): one of the Freedoms is the Freedom of worship, it is associated with the value of Fraternity and takes on the features of a young woman who holds tightly together the Talmud, the Koran and the Gospels; Among the Equalities, there is the Equality of colors, associated with Courage and represented by a Black armed with a rifle.

Apolonia Sokol very early on had the intuition that much more was hidden in the iconography of the cards than the current use of these small cardboards would suggest: still a student at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, she had attempted portraits in the form of tarot cards, borrowing both from the symbols - so present in the minds of the surrealists - of the divinatory game, and from the double figures

of the ordinary game, since it was possible to turn the paintings vertically . It is therefore in the strict continuity of her work that she proposes, for her exhibition in Istanbul (on the sites of the ancient Byzantium of iconoclasts and iconodules - but we will not follow this thread, that it would be long and risky to draw) a polyptych entitled *The Virtues*, which gives one of the keys to its universe and is presented without much ambiguity as a “hand” of five cards (the rule, belote or poker) deployed facing to the viewer. If the term “polyptych” is a little abusive (the canvas is partitioned into five, not painted on five articulated panels), the identification of the image of each of the “Virtues” with a playing card is on the other hand fully legitimate: proportions close to a tarot card, stylized figures with little modeling almost filling the frame, very marked emblematic character, even if the emblem sometimes remains mysterious.

The images on the left and on the right are obviously inspired by the Judith decapitating Holofernes painted by Artemisia Gentileschi in 1620, of which they provide in a way two different interpretations: on the left, Apolonia Sokol highlights the very great similarity already noticed by historians, and especially female art historians, between the decapitation scene seen by Gentileschi and a childbirth scene, on the right it rather illustrates the hypothesis that the figure of Holofernes is that of Agostino Tassi , tutor of Artemisia Gentileschi, but also her rapist. In both cases, it is the feminine power that is exalted, that of giving life, on the left, that of taking it back, on the right.

Adjoining the two tributes to Artemisia Gentileschi, if the eye moves towards the center of the painting, two other “real allegories” (they are inspired by existing characters) of the force seen from the feminine side. On the right, if we always place ourselves in the position of the spectator, a kind of *Origin of the World* revisited a century and a half after Courbet: a woman in an acrobatic posture that can be identified with the famous “hysterical arc” whose Charcot popularized the imagery, exhibiting a vulva high, like a face, above a container filled with blood - one could look at it as containing the blood of menstruation, but the artist specifies that it is the blood from an abortion: in any event, female blood, in a sacrificial cup. On the left, from the same point of view, a singular character, his nose shod in butterfly glasses like starlets wore in Hollywood in the 1950s, is surrounded by the signs of his function: a glass of water intended to absorb the spells ‘we throw you, cabalistic book. She is a witch — and an artist: on the wall, a self-portrait represents her holding in her hand... a deck of cards!!! In the center, Apolonia Sokol has chosen to make a majestic figure appear whose

bandaged chest and feet dipping in clear water indicate what is now called gender fluidity: her hand is very skillfully painted “outside frame” (in other words outside the imposed standards), and the bright red of his clothing is enriched, unsurprisingly, by the complementary color — green — of the background against which he stands out.

Almost all of the canvases that will surround the polyptych are also forms of cards: all of the Queens, including a transgender Queen inspired by the mermaid of the Danish sculptor Niels Jacobsen, who caresses a fish (and who should not be confused with the mermaid d'Erikssen, brand image of the port of Copenhagen), a melancholic Queen, partially demarcated from the allegory of Inconstancy by Abraham Janssens, and a Queen Mother, if one dares to say, which evokes realistic motherhood painted by Sironi in 1916 (as if to repent of the futuristic paintings that had shattered the world, in images, before it shattered for good in the horror of war).

Quotations are never gratuitous with Apolonia Sokol, and in no way should they be seen as a scholarly or formalist subterfuge: she only borrows from the past archetypes that are still active, lurking deep in our imaginations. The artist Queen therefore has hands as disproportionate to her body as those of Michelangelo's David. Capable of defeating all Goliaths, they are lapis lazuli blue (and it is the real pigment that is used here - it was once so precious that Italian Renaissance painters meticulously billed their patrons for its use), not ultramarine such as those of Yves Klein (Apolonia Sokol refers to the discovery in 2019, in Germany, of a thousand-year-old body whose teeth contained lapis lazuli: that of a woman painter — no other reason presence of blue pigment in a dentition than the regular passage of a smoothed brush between two lips — alas forever anonymous). The militant Queen (we will recognize a portrait of the young Oksana Shachko, the Ukrainian activist who killed herself in 2018 in Paris, and whom Apolonia Sokol had collected on her arrival in France) poses with her legs apart, hands firmly leaning on the thighs, very exactly in the posture of authority that Ingres had highlighted in his portrait of Monsieur Bertin, omnipotent head of the press at the beginning of the 19th century, and that the feminists of the 21st century rather jokingly call the “manspreading (in essence: “the fact of spreading out like a guy”) in reference to “mansplaining” (which in English designates the strong propensity of men to always explain to their female interlocutors what the latter already know). The modest obligation which was imposed on the women to sit with their legs oblique and close together



prevented them, basically, quite simply from occupying the space which was due to them: the simple position of Oksana Shachko appears as a gesture of claim, certainly immediately decipherable by activists, but also well documented in the history of painting...

Many emblematic poses listed in treatises for the use of artists, many gestures that it is up to us today to decipher in the paintings of yesteryear, come to us, as we know, from the theatre, street processions, popular culture — the sign language used, for example, by workers at the port of Naples to make themselves understood by the thousands of sailors of different origins who paraded there each month. It is a class artifice that has drawn a boundary between scholarly iconography and popular iconography, between the major arts and the minor arts. Apolonia Sokol knows all the registers, despises none and mixes them with impressive erudition and remarkable inventiveness: she offers us, in painting, a universe where majesty is an attribute of the excluded, where jacks fight back, where the Queens always prevail over the Kings, because Jokers with a fluid and impertinent identity, alternately sad or happy but always agile, come to disturb the game. To put it in a nutshell, she tries less to change the world than to reshuffle the cards which are its reduced model: anyone who, like her, recognizes the power of images at its fair value will understand that her gesture, turned towards the future but in no way forgetful of the past, is even more singular than it seems.

*You Better Paint Me*  
Victorine Grataloup

The people that Apolonia Sokol paints – often other artists, most of them close to her, sometimes on the contrary of the figures she wishes to confront, in any case individuals with whom she still maintains a form of direct relationship – fix almost irrevocably the spectator of the painting. They watch us lay eyes on them, but not only: it is also Apolonia Sokol who represents herself thus in hollow, looked at whilst painting them. She does not abstract herself, quite the contrary, from the play of power that is the gaze, according to a classic tradition in painting especially in the genre of portraiture.

Apolonia paints those who have not been, or merely, represented in the history of Western painting. She paints scenes of childbirth, and others relating to abortion. She paints racialized and/or queer bodies. She departs from her own experience of the shortcomings of the history of painting, of all the iconographies that have been lacking to her and that she undertakes to contribute to bringing into existence. In doing so, she never paints generic bodies but people whose first names are indicated by the titles of the paintings, and who often take an active part in their own representation.

On the canvases, clues reflect these interpersonal relationships maintained by the painter with her models, conversations that influenced the brush: in the painting *Le Printemps* for example, the centrality of Simone Thiébaud testifies to her active participation in the composition. From another model of the same painting, Apolonia reported the wish of the model – which she respected – to be painted on the left side of the painting. This painting endeavors in fact to respond to that of Botticelli, to its complex iconography having to do with rape (of Flora by Zéphyr), heterosexual marriage (that of Lorenzo di Pierfrancesco de' Medici with Semiramis Appiani) and pregnancy (of Venus), by a representation featuring on the contrary “women [trans and non-binary, whom the artist qualifies as] capable of giving birth to themselves”.

Thus Linda, Nicola, Raya, Dustin, Nirina, Claude, Bella and Dourane frame Simone, who passing one forearm over the other in a strange and almost manneristic gesture lets whoever can decipher it know that she has chosen to be represented at the time of taking her hormonal treatment.

Apolonia is sometimes criticized for appropriating subjects, bodies that are not hers. It seems that her painting problematizes the notion of ally regularly invoked in struggles. As researcher Sara DeTurk points out, identification with certain processes of marginalization through one's own social identities and personal relationships plays an important role: in addition to the friendly circle of Apolonia mentioned above, the artist's mother “is someone who fled, a political refugee [she says]. I come from a diaspora, I speak four languages, it creates empathy. »

The question posed by this category of ally is that of a potential capture of the speech of people in a minority situation by people in a dominant situation, who place themselves in the position of speaking for – this is one of the issues raised by Gayatri Spivak in her work and by her fundamental text *Can the subaltern speak?*. Confronting the problems of positionality highlighted by Spivak, the philosopher Linda Martín Alcoff “aims to privilege speaking to, speaking with. For Alcoff, this strategy promotes dialogue in order to avoid the possibilities of mis-representation and/or epistemic imperialism. Because [if] speaking for contributes to the reaffirmation of its own authority and its own privileges, and more generally of imperialist discourse, [...] speaking with and speaking to could [on the contrary] make it possible to reduce these pitfalls.” As such, that Apolonia Sokol is above all a portrait painter, that all her painting - even the very large formats with collective compositions - stems from this practice of portraiture of those around her and from taking into account the agency of each in her own representation makes her a nartist of painting with and painting for.

Sokol navigates in painting by responding to needs, her own but also those of the people around her – you better paint me –, to their common anger. Her painting is violent as are the silences of an androcentric Western art history against which she positions herself.

Apolonia Sokol is a character, in every sense of the word: in her way of portraying herself in life as in her own paintings, which she sometimes inhabits through a practice of self-portraiture, sometimes by representing herself in the guise of a goat or boar alongside a model friend.

Another way she has of bringing her relationships, her intimacy into her painting is to invite painter friends to four hands – most recently with François Boiron, with Simon Martin. Here again, even more than in the cases mentioned above, we can speak of co-development.

Within the body of works, a small painting stands out. At first by its format, smaller and vertical than the portraits which all proceed from a similar composition; and because of what it represents: it shows three characters in a very tight frame, three women gathered around a demonstration sign on which we can read “if you don’t like foreigners, you shouldn’t have colonized us. »

Here the format caught my attention because it seems to me to indicate to whoever is looking at it how the image was created: these 35 x 45 centimeters indicate the verticality of smartphone photos, the image taken on the spot. From there, we can imagine that this canvas, unlike the portraits and the large formats, could not have been the subject of a co-elaboration with the models - we can imagine it because the artist judges important to let us know, because of her attention to positionality. Indeed, this painting is quite faithfully inspired by a photograph taken by Apolonia during the second demonstration organized at the initiative of Justice for Adama in the context of the Black Lives Matter movement, in June 2020 Place de la République in Paris. The composition of Apolonia, by adding a section of wood between the central figure and the one on the right, both documents the demands of the demonstrators (by this slogan which it transcribes) and introduces a dialogue with the iconography of the crucifixion. Yet this double gesture of recording reality and ‘steering up’ the history of art, in what the first has of humility and the second of recklessness, characterizes the whole ambition of Apolonia’s painting.





← SUELA GENNET  
OIL ON CANVAS  
92 x 65 x 3 CM  
2020-2022

## *On Time-Capsules and Melting Icebergs: Apolonia Sokol's Transtemporal Kinship*

**When starting a new painting, how do you decide upon your subjects?**

All painters have painted the people that surrounded them. Often, unjustly so, using them as an allegory against their free will—this is especially true for female subjects. My paintings bear the name of the people I paint; additionally, I don't consider them as models or muses, but as active constituents in the work's creation. Topics of who is represented and who is not are intrinsically linked with individual and global power relationships.

**How do you look back on the generational portrait that your portraits delineate when seen as an ensemble?**

Given that I often paint the same people, I see them change through time just as I have changed myself. Some of them have had children... Others have changed gender, name or have become non-binary. I also enjoy observing through my portraits how a queer revolution gains ground, and how the multiple consequences of Black Lives Matter and of #metoo unfold.

There are also some people, such as Simon.e, that I have painted several times. She wants her transition to be documented. Her transition is not a subject of mine, but I paint her frequently in several contexts. She is protean.

**You can be seen as in dialogue with contemporary theoreticians that attempt to deconstruct and decenter the post-Vitruvian subject. In this respect, is your practice a tabula rasa of a given art history, or a way to make kin with newer voices?**

As history is always told from the viewpoint of contemporary philosophies, it is a highly enjoyable goldmine where one can forget some artists only to rediscover new ones. Through references to the latter, one can remember them and render them present again. To me, it's not about a tabula rasa but if culture is an iceberg, with its tip being our current historical references, then it would be about melting it to discover everything underneath.



"Apolonia Sokol's rage to paint belongs precisely to these times, where images are endangered by their abundance, fluidity and disembodiment. The artist's project, deliberate or not, is to give flesh to the images, to mold them through the chemistry of the pigments, to offer to the desire of the viewer—a lover of painting is always a voyeur—images made of the very material of the world around us, and of the memory of the world we are in the process of forgetting. Her painting is ambitious, willful and voracious, but also erudite, subtle and refined. Blood-thirsty and haunted, that is to say: scandalously seductive, as a femme fatale would be, and rich in promises."

EXTRACT FROM *BLOODY-THIRSTY AND HAUNTED*,  
DIDIER SEMIN, 2016  
EXHIBITION VIEW: *YOU BETTER PAINT ME*,  
APOLONIA SOKOL, *THE PILL*, 2022



APOLONIA SOKOL



**Apolonia Sokol**  
***Le Printemps (Spring)*** Linda, Nicolas,  
 Raya, Dustin, Simone, Nirina, Claude,  
 Bella, Dourane, 2020  
 Oil on linen  
 78 3/4 x 149 3/8 inches  
 Courtesy of the Artist and THE PILL\*  
 Work produced by MO.CO. Montpellier Contemporain  
 © Apolonia Sokol, Courtesy of the Artist and THE PILL\*  
 Photo: Marc Damage



**Sandro Botticelli**  
***Primavera*, c. 1481**  
 Tempera on wood  
 79 7/8 x 123 3/8 inches  
 Uffizi, Florence  
 Scala / Art Resource, NY

Apolonia Sokol is known for her political portraits that speak to marginalization, femininity, queerness, and body politics in general. Taking its title and elements of its composition from Botticelli's large panel painting *Primavera*, c. 1481—an allegory for spring and the fertility of the earth—*Le Printemps (Spring)* Linda, Nicolas, Raya, Dustin, Simone, Nirina, Claude, Bella, Dourane, 2020, depicts nine figures, all trans women or gender fluid. While Botticelli's frieze illustrates the codes of femininity that operated in his time, Sokol's painting does the same in terms of today. *Le Printemps* emancipates the subjects and represents them without fetishizing or reinforcing transphobia.



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CRITIC'S PICK

## ‘Apolonia, Apolonia’ Review: A Whole Life in Art

The painter Apolonia Sokol is the ostensible subject of a wide-ranging documentary about life itself.



The artist Apolonia Sokol in the documentary “Apolonia, Apolonia.” Lea Glob

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve seen the world through my camera,” a woman’s voice says in the early moments of “Apolonia, Apolonia.” Onscreen, we’re watching — presumably through that same camera — a young woman, strong features, entrancing smile, dark circles under her eyes, bearing the expression of a person who’s not afraid of the lens one bit. “But no motif,” the voice continues, “has caught my eye as she did.”

The face belongs to [Apolonia Sokol](#), but the voice belongs to Lea Glob, the filmmaker who followed Sokol off and on [for 13 years](#). The pair first met in 2009, and Glob, who is Danish (and speaks mostly in Danish throughout the film), decided to make Sokol the subject of a film school assignment: to create a documentary portrait of a person. She was, she tells us, entranced by Sokol’s life. Raised in a theater in Paris, then in Denmark after her parents split up, having weathered a life-threatening disease as a teen, Sokol returned to Paris when she turned 18 with aspirations to “walk in the footsteps of the great painters.” By that time, the theater (which her father had run) was barely holding on, but Sokol created a world in it nonetheless. That world grabbed Glob and wouldn’t let go.

The age-old documentarian’s question — who is really the subject of a nonfiction film? — constitutes a major theme that runs through “Apolonia, Apolonia.” Glob speaks of entering the “magical theater” in which Sokol “played the starring role,” but even as the artist ages, the theater closes and life shifts drastically, Glob stays along for the ride. “Whether I captured Apolonia with my camera or she captured me with her theater, I don’t know,” she says. Glob’s method is observation, without a particular end or point in mind, very nearly to a fault. She even admits, late in the film, that she couldn’t really figure out when to turn off the camera — a question that plagues many an observational documentarian, and most artists and writers, too. Every time Glob thought the film might be finished, Sokol’s life morphed again: a move to New York, to Los Angeles, stints working with artists and for businesspeople. Each time, Glob went back to film some more.

This is not the kind of documentary intended to help you learn about the life of the painter Apolonia Sokol. Unless you're deep in the art world, you may not even know who that is. Instead, it's a movie about life and how it's lived, with Sokol's portraiture forming a pleasing harmony rather than a narrative backbone. The film moves roughly forward in time, but jumps backward and sideways sometimes, as if Glob — in making sense of the present — is remembering something she watched long ago. It's easy to refashion any artist's life as a narrative of inevitability, but Sokol paints with no guarantee that she'll ever break into the mainstream art world. We watch her grueling uncertainty through the eyes of someone who also isn't really sure what she's making. The point here isn't to document the rise of a star, but to observe the process of making.

That fact alone sets “Apolonia, Apolonia” apart from the deluge of subject-approved documentaries that have flooded the market and film festivals in the past several years. Those movies are frequently hagiographic, though not inevitably so. The intended audience is the famous subject's fans, or those who wish to be. Thus these films come with a built-in viewership, which brings along a healthy budget. They're safe investments for funders and streamers, and the ecosystem is built for them. But they offer few surprises.

In a movie like “Apolonia, Apolonia,” however, there's no obvious path along which the story will unfold when filming begins, which makes it hard to pitch to the people who hold the purse strings. Instead, most of the director's work comes in the editing stage, when the recurring threads in all that footage become more clear.

The subject of this film is expulsion, and the way that Sokol's story parallels that of women who have been cast from their homes because they refused to fit established molds, and must make new lives elsewhere. This theme is echoed in a more melancholy key in Sokol's friend [Oksana Shachko](#), a feminist activist whom Sokol took in when she became a refugee from her native Ukraine (and was “already an icon,” as Glob puts it). They live together for years, and describe themselves as a couple, as soul mates, though the nature of their intimacy is kept a bit coy in the film. What matters is their spiritual and creative connection, the support they give to each other in their pursuit of creativity and determination to avoid motherhood.



Glob, on the other hand, gets pregnant and bears a child during the course of the filming — a fact that interests Sokol for how it represents a creative woman evolving her life. At the start of the film, the 20-something Sokol seems to be constantly performing for the camera, showing Glob the tapes her parents made of her own conception and birth. But as time wears on, the friendship between



them, which slips on and off screen, grows into something more symbiotic. Mirrors appear: Sokol's youthful illness is reflected in Glob's life-threatening pregnancy complications. Sokol's portraiture keeps shape-shifting as she matures as a painter, just as Glob's portrait of Sokol keeps mutating.

"Apolonia, Apolonia" is beguiling as a portrait of women with ambition, but also bittersweet. Glob repeatedly refers to her filming and Sokol's painting, their work of creating portraits, as cheating death — something they both do in their real lives, too. "The truth is, I never had that control," Glob says. It took her more than 13 years to understand what she was looking at: "life itself, larger, tougher, and more beautiful than I'd ever imagined."

"Apolonia, I'm going to turn off the camera now," she says, as we see the smiling face of an older, wiser Sokol, less interested in performance now than in a full life. And then the screen goes black.

**Alissa Wilkinson** is a Times movie critic. She's been writing about movies since 2005.



Film // Preview

## A documentary portrait of the artist as a young woman fighting to live and make work

In “Apolonia, Apolonia”, Lea Glob tracks the fitful ascent of French painter Apolonia Sokol and captures something elemental about the artistic spirit



A scene from Lea Glob's *Apolonia, Apolonia* (2022)  
Courtesy of Danish Documentary Production

“Whether I captured Apolonia with my camera or whether she captured me in her theatre, I still don’t know,” says Lea Glob, the writer and director of a new documentary that upends distinctions between artist and object, the viewer and the viewed. A cinematic portrait of a portrait painter, *Apolonia, Apolonia* (2022) chronicles 13 years in the life of Apolonia Sokol, an ebullient, irreverent artist raised by hippie thespians in Lavoisier Moderne Parisien, a washing hall turned experimental theatre in the working-class 18th arrondissement.

Punctuated by Glob’s quiet Danish voiceover, the film provides a verité take on both Sokol’s life and an underground art world imperilled by intensifying market forces. How can an artist—specifically a woman artist—make it these days without selling her soul? And what must she sacrifice to do so?

The presence, and power, of the female gaze—directed at others and at oneself—dominates throughout. In the opening shot, Sokol stares into an oval mirror and snips her dark bangs with a pair of shears, bleach cream spread above her frowning mouth. Accustomed to being in front of the lens from infancy (her birth is literally caught on tape), she displays a patent absence of vanity and self-consciousness, a refreshing turn from the “authenticity” paraded on social media.

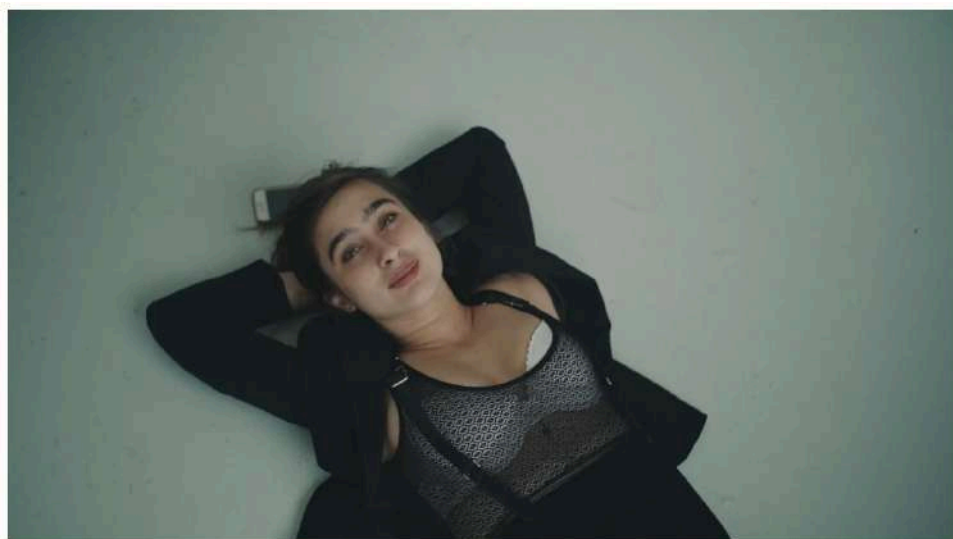


A scene from Lea Glob's *Apolonia, Apolonia* (2022)  
Courtesy of Danish Documentary Production

Glob, who grew up in rural Denmark, serves as a foil to Sokol’s exhibitionist persona. “No motif has caught my eye as she did,” the director says. “She seemed familiar and like a stranger at the same time.” Sokol is portrayed across a sweeping range of situations and life chapters—from receiving the news that she’s getting dumped to telling her Polish grandmother that she is not interested in having children.

Many films aim to capture the grandeur of being an artist, but few capture the reality that being an artist is less defined by grand epiphanies and instant validation than by the gruelling practice of trying things out, failing and trying things out again, all while managing to feed, clothe and house oneself. Sokol is depicted as feeding and housing not just herself, but a community of artists and activists that squat at the Lavoir Moderne, including members of Femen, the Ukrainian feminist revolutionary movement headed by Oksana Shachko, who becomes Sokol's platonic living partner.

The first half of the film chronicles Sokol's struggle to keep the theatre that her parents started. Between threats of eviction, arson and a violent attack by an audience member during a performance, Lavoir Moderne's bohemian utopia crumbles before our eyes. Glob refrains from excessive exposition, such that the series of events speak for themselves: Sokol doesn't receive the prestigious exhibition prize she aspires for at the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts; she is pressured to churn out paintings as rapidly as possible by the Los Angeles-based dealer and collector Stefan Simchowicz.



A scene from Lea Glob's *Apolonia*, *Apolonia* (2022)  
Courtesy of Danish Documentary Production

Whether she is caring for depressed, anorexic Shachko, or cooking for the friends whose portraits she paints, Sokol comes across as an artist who cares for other humans as attentively as she regards her canvases. So, too, does Glob grow to genuinely care for her subject, whose financial and psychological precarity for much of the film seem to intensify by the day.

If anything is clear during the two hours we witness Sokol's peripatetic moves between Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Denmark and back, it's that her work cannot evolve under draconian labour conditions. Artists are not machines; they break down, expire, need naps and smoke breaks to prevent collapse. Nor are artists "brands"—or, if they are, they are so only at the expense of their own sanity and integrity. In one of the most transgressive—and hopeful—moments of the film, when she is living in Los Angeles, Sokol risks arrest by disrobing in front of Paul McCarthy's giant butt plug sculpture. "Fuck America," she says, before pulling a nude back bend in the park.

At that same time, the film never capitulates to cynicism; nor does it kowtow to the pat redemption of the power of art. Glob persists in making—and finally finishing—the film after dwindling funds and her own brush with death during the birth of her son. The camera hovers over Glob as she gently smiles, her face buried in hospital tubes as her newborn snoozes on her chest.

*Apolonia*, *Apolonia* honours the burden of making art in a body that itself has the power to reproduce—and destroy itself in doing so. "The truth is, I never had control," Glob says toward the end of the film. Both subject and object of the gaze, the two women anchor what amounts to a deeply moving feminist excavation of what it means to make art in order to survive, and survive in order to make. "I can't separate what I do and what I am," Sokol tells Glob in Danish. "I can't tell the difference between my identity and my work."



## 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-Art 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

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 Fusilli)*, 2018. Courtesy: The artist and The Pill.



# Le Monde

## La peintre Apolonia Sokol ouvre grand ses toiles au théâtre de l'intimité

« Promesses de 2021 » (5/12). « Le Monde » présente douze artistes à suivre cette année. Aujourd'hui, la jeune peintre, pensionnaire de la Villa Médicis, à Rome.



La peintre Apolonia Sokol, en janvier, à la Fondazione Memmo à Rome. DANIELE MOLAJOLI

Crocs rose fluo aux pieds, collants résille clairs, jupe écossaise et manteau mi-punk mi-chamane de son amie l'artiste Vava Dudu : Apolonia Sokol est une pensionnaire qui détonne sur les hauteurs de Rome, où la Villa Médicis accueille chaque année seize artistes et chercheurs dans son palais Renaissance. A 32 ans, la flamboyante peintre, parmi les plus jeunes de la promotion 2020-2021 de l'Académie de France, trace énergiquement sa route, qui l'a menée du quartier populaire de la Goutte d'Or, à Paris, jusqu'au saint des saints des résidences artistiques françaises.

Elle a grandi au Lavoir Moderne Parisien, petit théâtre fondé par ses parents et nid de rencontres multiculturelles. « *La programmation était dédiée aux pièces d'auteurs vivants, majoritairement africains, mais c'était aussi un espace de vie du quartier, où les habitants organisaient mariages, cérémonies funéraires, ateliers ou même des rendez-vous de planning familial.* » Un cadre artistique et émotionnel puissant qui a nourri sa fascination pour les personnes de l'underground, et où elle a aussi rencontré la peinture : « *A l'étage, il y avait un espace d'exposition où se retrouvaient des peintres amis de ma mère, tous d'origine polonaise, qui m'ont appris le dessin.* »

A 8 ans, un séjour dans un hôpital catholique de Lyon pour soigner une maladie orpheline lui fait appréhender la peinture sur un mode presque mystique : « *Les sœurs m'apportaient des bibles illustrées par les maîtres italiens. Alors que je ne crois en rien, j'ai ensuite voulu me faire baptiser pour me rapprocher de la peinture.* »

La suite de sa formation reste grande ouverte sur le monde : à 13 ans, elle prend des cours du soir de modèle vivant à Copenhague, où elle est partie vivre avec sa mère ; à 16 ans, la peinture allemande l'attire à Düsseldorf ; à 19 ans, elle entre aux Beaux-Arts de Lyon, qu'elle quitte en n'y ayant pas trouvé sa place, et part travailler pour un festival au Maroc. Trois ans plus tard, elle retourne au théâtre vivre avec son père et entre aux Beaux-Arts de Paris. Puis s'installe à New York, où elle est l'assistante du peintre Dan Colen, à Los Angeles, où elle travaille dans l'atelier de Henry Taylor, et à Bruxelles, avant de revenir à Paris « *pour de bon* ».

## Engagement féministe

Ce parcours s'est doublé d'un engagement féministe dont le Lavoir Moderne Parisien, où conteuses et poétesses ont bercé son enfance, est aussi le creuset. C'est là même qu'elle a hébergé la peintre et fondatrice des Femen, Oksana Chatchko, devenue sa meilleure amie, qui s'est donné la mort en 2018.



Pendant le premier confinement, elle a peint sa version du *Printemps*, de Botticelli, tableau sur la fertilité qu'elle a peuplé de femmes trans ou non binaires : « *On pourrait imaginer qu'elles ne sont absolument pas fertiles, j'estime qu'elles le sont plus que quiconque, ayant la capacité de donner naissance à un soi plus juste.* » Le tableau fait actuellement partie de l'exposition « Possédé.es » au Mo.Co, à Montpellier, qui envisage l'art et l'occulte comme moyen de résistance.

Ce portrait de groupe à échelle humaine est le fruit de nombreux échanges avec chacune d'entre elles : « *Il était primordial pour moi de ne pas les objectifier, donc de comprendre leur vie et de les représenter telles qu'elles le désiraient. C'est important de se questionner sur ces choses-là, la femme ayant tellement été réduite, dans la peinture, à une allégorie, un objet de désir, nue et sans nom.* » Comme à chaque fois, entre dans la transe de ses toiles, nourries d'emprunts et de dialogues avec l'histoire de l'art, une famille élargie, tribu de cœur brossée avec soin à la peinture à l'huile.



« Le Printemps, Linda, Nicola(s), Raya, Dustin, Simon.e, Nirina, Claude, Bella & Dourane » (septembre 2020), d'Apolonia Sokol, huile sur toile. COURTESY DE L'ARTISTE & THE PILL

Dans son atelier romain, elle termine une toile de 4 mètres en volume courbe pour une exposition avec le duo Harald Thys et Jos de Gruyter (Pavillon belge de la Biennale de Venise 2019) qui ouvrira à la Fondazione Memmo, voisine, au déconfinement.

Projet d'une période un peu folle, l'exposition a été imaginée comme un dialogue avec *La Nef des fous*, un ouvrage satirique du XV<sup>e</sup> siècle illustré par Dürer, où marginaux et personnes handicapées sont embarqués sur une barque destinée à la noyade. Ici, l'embarcation se mue en une sorte d'arche de l'espoir peuplée de femmes queer, trans, non binaires de tous âges.

Si la situation sanitaire le permet, est prévu, à l'automne 2021, le premier solo parisien de l'artiste avec la jeune galerie The Pill, qui la représente. « *L'idée est de faire deux expos simultanées, l'une dans la galerie à Istanbul, dans le cadre de la Biennale, l'autre dans un lieu pop-up à Paris, où j'aimerais qu'elle prenne la forme d'un petit théâtre peuplé d'artistes, tout en mises en abyme. Une façon de montrer que l'artiste ne travaille jamais seul, et de rendre hommage à tous ces gens qui font les œuvres avec moi, me donnent de leur personne pour faire mes tableaux.* »

2021 devrait aussi être l'année de la sortie d'un documentaire sur son parcours, coproduit par HBO Europe et réalisé par la Danoise Lea Glob, qui la suit depuis plus de dix ans. D'ici là, Apolonia Sokol a repris le flambeau d'une mission à domicile confiée par une précédente pensionnaire, Pauline Curnier-Jardin : questionner la présence des vestiges du colonialisme à la Villa Médicis, fondée en 1666 par Colbert.



Apolonia Sokol. (Ph. Emma Burlet)  
Ci-dessous/below: « La Nuit (d'après Ferdinand  
Hodler) ». 2018. Huile sur toile, 163 x 360 cm.  
(Court. galerie The Pill, Istanbul). Oil on canvas



# APOLONIA SOKOL

Richard Leydier

Ce printemps et une partie de l'été, Apolonia Sokol exposait ses tableaux à The Pill, jeune galerie d'Istanbul. Richard Leydier a fait le voyage d'Orient pour découvrir les nouvelles œuvres de cette artiste prometteuse. Elle participe à l'exposition *Mademoiselle* (commissaire : Tara Londi) au Centre régional d'art contemporain (CRAC) de Sète, jusqu'au 6 janvier 2019.

■ Il se passe très clairement quelque chose du côté de la jeune peinture, et cela concerne plus particulièrement les femmes trentenaires. La génération née à la fin des années 1980 a en effet enfanté, en France comme ailleurs, une théorie de peintres étonnantes, cultivées, dotées d'une forte personnalité, conscientes de l'histoire des formes et de la manière dont il convient de la digérer pour en extraire des choses neuves... et belles.

Née en 1988, Apolonia Sokol est emblématique de cette génération prolifique. Depuis quelques années, je regarde son travail avec admiration, au point de sauter dans un avion pour visiter sa première exposition personnelle à la galerie The Pill, Istanbul. Sur l'un des longs murs de la galerie se succèdent huit tableaux de format 195 x 114 cm. Tous représentent des femmes, jeunes – souvent l'artiste elle-même –, qui se tiennent dans des

intérieurs d'apparence moderne. Elles sont contemporaines et, dans le même temps, intemporelles, car elles invoquent le souvenir d'autres demoiselles, d'Avignon ou des bords de Seine – on aperçoit en effet un fragment du tableau de Courbet accroché sur un mur. Elles ont la beauté d'antiques déesses, et elles semblent nous dire: vous croyez nous posséder mais nous ne vous appartenons pas. Guerrières au repos, nous sommes pourtant capables de grandes choses. Nous paraissions intouchables, mais toutefois, nous sommes éperdues d'amour, et en ce sens nous l'attendons dans cet espace clos, théâtral et mental, qui est aussi celui d'un atelier. Elles sont en attente d'une inspiration. Il émane ainsi de leur regard une sorte de mélancolie pensive. Elles sont en même temps là et ailleurs. Elles rêvent et s'évadent par le biais d'ouvertures ménagées subrepticement. Une fenêtre, un tableau permettent d'envisager au dehors un monde porteur d'espoir, un avenir radieux.

Elles occupent un espace étrange qui les contient dans une géométrie angulaire et close. Il les contraint, mais aussi il les abrite, et l'on saisit combien les perspectives franches, les murs couverts d'aplats et les arêtes aiguës leur fournissent un cadre finalement rassurant. Si bien qu'elles tiennent une position d'équilibre contradictoire: fortes et fragiles, décidées et incertaines. D'ailleurs, elles ne subissent pas totalement la violence des angles; leurs membres en génèrent eux-mêmes. Jambes et bras s'ouvrent comme des équerres ou des compas et engagent avec les lignes froides du mobilier et de l'architecture une conversation graphique. Ils semblent mesurer l'espace qui les enserme, et de cette manière lui résister. Ces corps apparaissent souvent désarticulés, évoquant des pantins.

## HIÉRATIQUES ET SENSUELLES

Marine semble plus incarnée que les autres. Belle métisse, elle est accoudée à un bar. Elle a glissé deux doigts dans la fente de sa minijupe, à hauteur de son sexe. C'est là une attitude plutôt masculine, digne d'un cow-boy déhanché dans un saloon. Mais son regard ne renvoie aucune mâle assurance. Il est vague, perdu dans le lointain. Derrière, l'artiste a peint un fond constitué de pans de murs jaunes et bleus, qui se connectent exactement à



## INTRODUCING

l'aplomb de la jeune femme. Ses pensées oscillent ainsi entre un univers solaire et quelque chose de plus sombre. Elle est partagée. Elle est intensément sexuelle, et aussi empreinte d'une grande douceur. Ces femmes sont à la fois hiératiques et sensuelles. La rigidité des corps évoque la pein-

ture d'Alex Katz, comme leur « vérité » rappelle les portraits d'Henry Taylor. La monumentalité des figures n'est pas sans rappeler, aussi, les tableaux figuratifs de Kazimir Malevitch et, plus loin, l'art d'Antonello de Messine. La source de toutes ces références aimées et assumées, c'est sans doute l'icône. On devine

en effet une ascendance orientale et orthodoxe. La biographie a ici son importance. D'origine polonaise, l'artiste a grandi entre le Danemark et la France. Et elle se sent particulièrement bien à Istanbul, cité byzantine et musulmane, qui se tient à cheval entre Europe et Asie. L'icône règle le rapport entre fond et figure, qui est une métaphore de la manière dont on transpose un corps dans un lieu, un décor, un pays.

« Plus les corps s'affirment, plus je définis les fonds », nous dit Apolonia. Les figures et leur environnement s'accordent au fur et à mesure. Dans des tableaux plus anciens, les intérieurs étaient peuplés d'objets. L'artiste vivait alors dans un théâtre rempli de toutes sortes de choses. Un incendie les a emportées. Si bien qu'elle a recouvert de gris le fond de ses toiles, faisant table rase du passé. Et l'espace est devenu plus théâtral encore, comme dressé de décors minimalistes découpant des espaces métaphysiques. Ces derniers sont des écrans abstraits où se projette l'humour du moment. « Il est bien plus compliqué d'organiser la lutte entre deux carrés de jaune citron et de jaune de nickel, que d'agencer quinze objets disparates. La simplicité est une chose éminemment difficile », nous dit encore l'artiste.

## THÉÂTRE ET CIRQUE

Elle ne choisit pas ses modèles au hasard. Elle a besoin de peindre des gens qui l'impressionnent. Des artistes, des militantes engagées dans des causes diverses, féministes ou LGBT. Elle saisit leur énergie, leur intensité. Ses femmes sont presque surnaturelles, et le mystère pointe dans leurs yeux verts perçants. Dans le même temps, elle capte leur fragilité. Ou bien elle y projette la sienne. Car Apolonia est théâtrale. Elle campe un personnage complexe, à la fois guerrière et un peu pitre. Elle se maquille volontiers en clown. Elle joue le jeu de cet art contemporain qui confine parfois au cirque. Toutefois, elle affirme par sa posture décalée qu'elle n'est pas dupe. Ses tableaux expriment précisément ce que peut éprouver une jeune artiste aujourd'hui. À la fois une grande foi en l'avenir, mais aussi une inquiétude. Elle a trente ans, mais a déjà vécu mille vies. Une cinéaste danoise, Lea Glob, l'accompagne depuis dix ans, caméra à la main. Le film devrait sortir d'ici 2019. Je ne crois pas qu'on ait jamais suivi sur une si longue période l'évolution de la vie d'un jeune artiste. L'émergence d'un talent. Deux grands tableaux, de format horizontal cette fois-ci, sont peints dans une veine plus ouvertement symboliste. *Echo et Narcisse* montre l'artiste et son fiancé, le poète Azzedine Saleck, enlacés au bord d'un plan d'eau, dont la surface reflète exclusivement la jeune

« Odessa », 2018. Huile sur toile. 195 x 114 cm.  
(Court. galerie The Pill, Istanbul). Oil on canvas



femme. *La Nuit* est quant à lui inspiré du tableau éponyme de Ferdinand Hodler. On y voit Apolonia représentée à plusieurs reprises, avec d'autres femmes et Azzedine. La composition est complexe. Les corps y dessinent toutes sortes d'angles. Ce sont eux qui contraignent l'espace, où s'ouvrent deux larges fenêtres. Ce qui est flagrant dans cette œuvre, c'est l'affirmation de la couleur. Le bleu outremer du fond rappelle le lapis-lazuli du mausolée de Galla Placidia, tandis que le jaune irradie comme de l'or. L'icône, à nouveau... ■

Richard Leydier est critique d'art, commissaire d'expositions. Il vit et travaille à Paris.

**In the spring and into part of the summer, Apolonia Sokol had an exhibition of her paintings at The Pill, a young gallery in Istanbul. Richard Leydier travelled East to discover the latest works of this promising new artist. She is taking part in the exhibition *Mademoiselle*, curated by Tara Londi, at the Centre Régional d'Art Contemporain (CRAC) in Sète, until 6 January 2019.**

There is clearly something going on in the area of young painting, and more especially among thirty-something women. The generation born at the end of the 1980s has generated, in France as well as elsewhere, a theoretical trend of painters that are startling, cultured, with strong personalities, and aware of the history of form and the way it needs to be digested in order to extract from it things that are new...and beautiful. Born in 1988, Apolonia Sokol is emblematic of this discursive generation. I have watched her work for some years, to the point of jumping on a plane to see her first solo exhibition at The Pill Gallery in Istanbul. Along one of the gallery walls extend eight paintings each measuring 195 x 114 cm. All represent women who are young – often the artist herself – and situated in modern-looking interiors. They are contemporary to us and also timeless, as they invoke a memory of other young women, from Avignon or the banks of the Seine – in fact one catches a portion of Courbet's painting hanging on a wall. They have the beauty of ancient goddesses and seem to tell us: you think you possess us but we don't belong to you. We may be warriors at rest but we are still capable of great things. We appear untouchable and we are lost in love; in that sense we await it in this enclosed and theatrical mental space, which is also that of an artist's studio. They inhabit an unusual space that contains them within an enclosed and angular geometry. It constrains them but shelters them too. Gradually we see how the open perspectives, the walls covered in flat blocks of

colour, and the sharp edges, provide a framework that is in fact reassuring. This makes for a paradoxical equilibrium: they are strong and fragile, decisive and uncertain. In fact they don't fully suffer the violence of the angles, for their limbs generate angles too. Arms and legs open up like set squares or compasses and engage in visual dialogue with the cold lines of the furniture and architecture. Limbs appear to be measuring the space that confines them, and in so doing resist it. The bodies often seem bent and buckled, like puppets.

## HIERATIC AND SENSUAL

Marine seems to inhabit her body more than the others. She is a beautiful woman of mixed race leaning on a bar. She has slipped two fingers through a slit in her mini-skirt, at the level of her genitals. It is a rather masculine pose, worthy of a cowboy standing with his weight on one leg in a saloon. But her gaze conveys no male assurance; it is vague and lost in the distance. On the wall behind her, the artist has painted a backdrop composed of planes of yellow and blue mirroring exactly the young woman's steady self-possession. Her thoughts waver between a sunny universe and something darker. She is divided: intensely sexual, and also emanating great softness.

These women are both hieratic and sensual. The rigidity of the bodies bring to mind paintings by Alex Katz, just as their "truth" is reminiscent of Henry Taylor's portraits. The figures' monumentality also puts us in mind of those figurative pictures by Kazimir Malevich and later, of art by Antonello de Messine. The source of all these beloved and adopted references is probably the icon, as some eastern or Orthodox roots are discernible. The biographical element is of importance here. Of Polish origin, the artist grew up between Denmark and France. She feels particularly at ease in Istanbul, the Byzantine and Islamic city straddling Europe and Asia. The icon establishes the relationship between background and subject, such that it is a metaphor for the way a figure is transplanted into a place, a backdrop or a country.

Apolonia tells us: "The more the bodies gain in presence, the more I define the backgrounds." The figures and their environment come together gradually. In the older paintings the interiors were full of objects. The artist was then living in a theatre filled with all sorts of things, but a fire destroyed them. This led to her sweeping away the past by covering the background of her canvases in grey. The space became even more theatrical, as if furnished with minimalist backdrops delineating metaphysical spaces. These are abstract screens onto which are projected the mood of the moment. "It's much more complicated to manage the

conflict between two squares of bright yellow and nickel yellow, than to arrange a dozen disparate objects. Simplicity is an exceedingly difficult thing," says the artist.

## THEATRE AND CIRCUS

Her models are not chosen at random. She needs to paint people who impress her, for example artists or activists committed to various causes, be they feminist or LGBT. She captures their energy, their intensity. These women are almost supernatural, and there is a mystery in their piercing green eyes. At the same time she captures their fragility, or projects onto them her own. Because Apolonia is theatrical; she presents a complex character, simultaneously warrior and joker. She likes to make herself up as a clown. She plays the game of a contemporary art that sometimes borders on circus. She does, however, through her offbeat stance, assert that she is not fooled. Her paintings express exactly the likely feelings of a young contemporary artist: great faith in the future but also an apprehension. At thirty she has already lived many lives. A Danish filmmaker, Lea Glob, has been trailing her for ten years, camera in hand, and the film will probably be out by 2019. I don't believe that the life of a young artist has been followed for that long before. It's the emergence of a talent.

Two large pictures, this time horizontal in format, are painted in a more Symbolist vein. *Echo & Narcisse* shows the artist and her fiancé, the poet Azzedine Saleck, embracing at the water's edge with the watery surface reflecting only the young woman. As for *La Nuit (The Night)*, it is inspired by Ferdinand Hodler's eponymous picture, and shows several Apolonias along with other women and with Azzedine. Its composition is complex. The bodies make up all sorts of angles and they confine the space, which has in it two wide-open windows. What is so striking in the work is its affirmation of colour; the ultramarine background brings to mind the lapis lazuli at the Galla Placidia Mausoleum, while the yellow glows like gold. Once again, the icon...

Translation, C. Demaison-Doherty

Richard Leydier is an art critic and exhibition curator. He lives and works in Paris.

## Apolonia Sokol

Née à Paris en 1988 in Paris  
Vit et travaille à / lives and works in Paris  
Expositions récentes / recent shows (sélection):  
2016 Galerie Dutko, Paris; 22Visconti, Paris  
Andersen Contemporary, Copenhagen  
2017 *Tainted Love*, le Confort Moderne, Poitiers  
Musée des beaux-arts, Dôle  
2018 Galerie Carlier-Gebauer, Berlin  
The Pill, Istanbul CRAC, Sète  
2019 Villa Arson, Nice

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