

Exploring adoration, worship, heightened awareness and erotic sensuality through the body-inhabited objects of desire with Katherina Olschbaur

Katherina Olschbaur's painted figures exist in a state of constant flux. Refusing to settle in a singular, fixed body, they flit between sexes, gender presentations, human, animal and pre-human forms. In her recent exhibitions, 'The Divine Hermaphrodite' and 'Horses', the haunches of bulls and horses become human feet fitted into too-small, cloven heels; voluptuous, horned beasts pose in thigh-high fetish boots; muscular thighs and calves bend and stretch, attached to broad-shouldered, breasted torsos and equine heads.

Human dominates animal and animal dominates human in an erotic performance of evolutionary metamorphosis. The power of these figures comes from their evident delight in their carnal being, peering over their shoulders at the viewer and flexing their limbs in attitudes of simultaneous enticement and intimidation.

In Katherina's earlier works, object and flesh merge to create semi-abstract visions of pre-human bodily conception—inert matter turning to living flesh. Hard, angular surface becomes softly curving body, which in turn melts into satiny liquid mass. This is the crux of Katherina's paintings: fluidity of form and perception. Seduction meets brutality, pleasure meets agony and evolution meets dissolution. All this is conducted via an interplay of vivid and pastel hues, glowing neons and dusky charcoals. For Katherina, the use of colour and light is what conveys and underpins the semantic and figurative content of her paintings, whether by working in opposition to or in support of the represented narrative.

After years of artistic experimentation within artist residencies, working abroad and collaborating in friends' studios, Katherina now lives and works between Vienna and Los Angeles. She discusses the effect of travelling and living in different places on her creative practice, her understanding of animal subjectivities, and the increasing presence of the living human figure in her paintings.

interview Rebecca Irvin

Featured image:

Katherina Olschbaur
Human Animal
oil on linen
200 x 200 cm

courtesy the Artist and Nicodim Gallery



AMM: Hi Katherina! When did you first start to think of yourself as an artist?

KO: I have always had a strong imagination and I've always been a drawer, but there were no professional artists in my family. When I was around sixteen, after a couple of difficult years, I decided to become an artist. It saved my life. I connected it with being free and independent.

I was accepted to the Angewandte in Vienna—I didn't care which class; I even spelled the name of the teacher wrong. I sold the work I made for the entrance exam to a guy on the train. This made my decision to become an artist seem more absolute than just about 'career'.

AMM: Can you tell us about some of the artist residencies you have participated in and how they have helped to develop your practice?

KO: I was invited to a couple of residencies and also spent time working in friends' studios—such as the painter Panos Papadopoulos in Athens—and had some research projects financed that enabled me to travel to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Ukraine, and London. These were periods between three weeks and four months; they were relatively short. I had some pretty unstable years in Vienna, so the residencies allowed me to work for short periods in great studios without distractions. Painting in these moments was an escape and a vacation to some extent. I loved meeting other artists, exploring places and organising small shows and dinners. During these periods I began working in watercolour and ink on paper, and that definitely influenced my painting practice. I was living in the moment, on the edge, without a stable studio. The nights and the cities, the conversations, the parties, the experience of being out there as a woman and a stranger became art in and of itself. However, now that I have a studio I love, I don't want to go to residencies any more. It would distract me now.

AMM: Your work has been exhibited in Europe, the USA and China. You also live and work between Vienna and Los Angeles; has working internationally had an impact on your painting and your approach to creativity?

KO: Sometimes you are more at peace with a place when you see it from afar. My parents divorced when I was three, so I grew up between my mother, my father, my grandparents, friends, and family's places—I don't have the feeling of a singular home. I am mainly in Los Angeles now; my studio is here. At the same time, I have a whole history in Vienna and in other places too, so my mind is often between different settings.

I think a lot about hell and paradise. They're all invented or artificial locations, so they're not necessarily connected to a specific place, but my paintings are very much influenced by a very specific feeling of a certain locale like

the Fashion District in Los Angeles. I love the Los Angeles horizon and the light as it filters through the polluted atmosphere.

AMM: Who, or what, are your principal artistic influences?

KO: It's my own personal experiences, and how I see the world. It's art history, it's the drag queens of the 80s, it's performance, it's books, it's music. It's all kind of surfaces, and

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- Katherina Olschbaur

the incredible painters that painted in the 20th century, and painters today. When I was seventeen, I was able to see a show of Manet, Velasquez, and Artemisia Gentileschi, that deeply influenced me in terms of textures and colors. Lee Lozano is important to me, Jean Genet, Kafka, Kirchner, and Maria Lassnig too.

AMM: Your solo show last year, *Horses*, was

introduced in the press release with an excerpt from Patti Smith's *'Land'*; does your work often draw on lyrical poetry and music?

KO: Sometimes. It's good to draw on something that's already out there, what you are currently listening to, what you're reading.

AMM: Some of the key themes in your paintings, particularly with your exhibitions *Horses* and *The Divine Hermaphrodite*, seem to be about metamorphosis, transmutation and the relationship between the human figure and the animal body. What is the significance of these concepts in your work?

KO: Often in art history, the animals have a consciousness. They are the silent witnesses of our most intimate moments, when we're naughty or violent. They are the only ones who keep sane when the humans lose their heads or fuck it up.

I often think about the disconnection between the mind and body. Your mind wants you to go one direction, but your body says something else, then you trip over your feet and fall. Through the digital, this disconnection is made bigger; we lose contact with the physical world on the one hand, but we are also able to inhabit many different bodies at the same time. We can be heads without bodies, hands without bodies, half horse or a single leg too.

AMM: A lot of your paintings inhabit a liminal space of becoming – being between states, or between figuration and abstraction – why is this ambiguous, shifting space important in your work?

KO: As I mentioned earlier, I guess that's how I exist in this world. I was always a keen observer of power dynamics, and these dynamics are some of the key elements in my work. I like to look for stories that contradict conventional power play.

AMM: Is there often a narrative element to your paintings?

KO: A narrative grants an access point to the work, so I like my paintings to have that quality. I have too many stories in my head, so when I am painting or drawing, I have to filter them down to arrive at the main key narrative of a single painting. A lot of narrative in my work happens via form, colour and light.

AMM: Your exhibition earlier this year, *The Divine Hermaphrodite*, explores the notion of a third sex in terms of a spiritual "divine oneness". The power and sexuality of these painted figures is explicitly tied to their pregendered, often pre-human state. In what ways does this body of work seek to address and challenge dualistic perceptions of sex and gender?

KO: Like Genesis Breyer P-Orridge said, some people are trapped in a woman's body, some people are trapped in a man's body, and some people simply feel trapped in a body.



“I like to think of the replacement of bodies, or the fetish as a body-inhabited object of desire. This can be seen as perverted—our relationships with objects are often perverted—but I think this is an unfair judgment. I like to explore the fields of adoration, worship, heightened awareness and erotic sensuality, the mistreatment of the objects and our own bodies, like the pain of a foot stuck in a shoe that is too small, or how our relationships with everyday objects change when we are in a rage.”

– Katherina Olschbaur

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AMM: What role does humour play in your work?

KO: My paintings are meant to be fun. What else do we have? I would kill myself if there was no humour left.

AMM: Your palette flits between pastel or dark muted hues and bright neons—is your use of colour important to the themes in your work?

KO: Yes, it's key.

AMM: What mediums do you prefer to work in?

KO: Oil on linen. Or watercolour pencil, ink, everything that comes to hand, on paper.

AMM: When making a work, do you create from memory, your imagination, sketches or life? What is your process like?

KO: I draw all the time or look at art in catalogues, advertising, films and my surroundings. Very seldom, I'll take a picture with my phone, draw from a model or make a maquette. I go out at night to bars and clubs, sometimes just out in the street, but I am very shy of taking pictures of people, so I've learned to memorise certain situations and certain lighting that resonates with me, and I work from there.

AMM: Your brushstrokes tend towards sensuality and voluptuousness, offset by soft shading and subtle transparencies. How would you describe the relationship between your painterly style and your subject matter?

KO: Sometimes it's contradictory. Sometimes a violent situation is rendered soft and seductive, or a sensuous situation is rendered rough. A lot of the real feeling of a painting is transported via colour and texture, rather than the 'story' itself.

AMM: What is your studio setup like?

KO: It tends to get very chaotic after a while, and then I have to clean it up. I make a mess!

AMM: Do you often engage in collaborative practices, either with other visual artists or with practitioners from different disciplines, such as writers?

KO: I used to, a lot, besides my all-consuming painting practice. Vienna gave a lot of opportunities, as there is money, time, and rents are cheap. I organised shows with Arie Amaya Akkermans in Athens and Vienna, a painting symposium with Bianca Regl in Beijing, staged an experimental opera after the drawings of Charlotte Salomon in Vienna (with Anna Mitterer, Réka Kutas, and Katharina Ernst), I invited artists to show their films and do live performances within a painting show of mine, and organised dinners inside a gallery. Paintings are silent, so it

doesn't hurt them to have something going on. But painting will always be my primary medium because this is where I exist. I enjoy being alone most of the time, but every show is a collaboration to some extent.

AMM: What are the most significant ways in which your work has developed since you first started out as a painter?

KO: Getting the self-confidence over time to openly confront my more painful, embarrassing, or darker sides made my work stronger I guess. Around 2007, I stopped painting the human figure and let its essence come into the paintings mainly through replacements, like cloth, gestures, etc. Around 2018, after my arrival in LA, the figure came back to me. Through this I became more aware of colour and light in ways I wasn't before.

AMM: How do you spend your time when you are not working?

KO: I draw or listen to music. If I am in a good mood, then I dress up and go out at night, dance, spend time with friends or my husband, or do something crazy and go to places that I don't know.

AMM: What is next for your work? Are there any upcoming projects you can share with us?

KO: On January 11, my first US museum show opens at the Contemporary Arts Center Gallery of the University of California Irvine, CA, curated by Allyson Unzicker. I will present a new series of large paintings and diptychs. Then there are group shows in LA, Mexico City, and Vienna. Some of my early animations are being shown during Vienna Art Week, and I was nominated for two art prizes in Austria. Next year there are two projects in planning that include drawings, but it's probably too early to mention.



Featured image (p.71):

Katherina Olschbaur
Covered Horse
oil on linen
200 x 200 cm
courtesy the Artist and Nicodim Gallery



Katherina Olschbaur
Crash
oil on linen
200 x 200 cm
courtesy the Artist and Nicodim Gallery



Katherina Olschbaur
Weeping Horses
oil on linen
200 x 200 cm
courtesy the Artist and Nicodim Gallery



Katherina Olschbaur
Fight, (Inhabitation of Multiple Bodies)
oil on linen
200 x 200 cm
courtesy the Artist and Nicodim Gallery



Katherina Olschbaur
Gods or Barbarians, (Blue Nails)
oil on linen
200 x 200 cm
courtesy the Artist and Nicodim Gallery



Katherina Olschbaur
Orgy in Yellow
oil on linen
200 x 400 cm
courtesy the Artist and Nicodim Gallery



Katherina Olschbaur
Horse Creep
oil on linen
200 x 400 cm
courtesy the Artist and Nicodim Gallery



Katherina Olschbaur
Nudes by the Beach
oil on linen
200 x 200 cm
courtesy the Artist and Nicodim Gallery



Katherina Olschbaur
Untitled (Red Land)
oil on linen
200 x 200 cm
courtesy the Artist and Nicodim Gallery