



KATHERINA  
OLSCHBAUR

# DIRTY ELEMENTS

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I did not care for what is known as “pleasures of the flesh” because they really are insipid; I cared only for what is classified as “dirty.”<sup>1</sup>

—GEORGES BATAILLE



The law is not patriarchal because it denies the existence, even the power, of women: after all, every king has his queen. The law is patriarchal because it denies the bodies, the sexualities of women. In patriarchy, there is no menstrual blood.<sup>2</sup>

—KATHY ACKER

# PETALS IN THE MUD

ALLYSON  
UNZICKER

Katherina Olschbaur's paintings start as fervently generated sketches and drawings. Dealing with unconscious desire, she applies tactics of Surrealism, creating compositions that meld human bodies, objects, animals, and formal elements. Distorting perspective and proportion, she shifts between representation and abstraction. These dream-scapes are rendered with gestural, expressive strokes that create depth through transparent layering. Olschbaur applies this fluid motion to transfiguring familiar compositions of the Renaissance, Baroque, and Romanticism and deconstructing their overarching narratives. She recomposes these masterworks by identifying their underlying perversions and transforming them into sensual spaces of erotic delight. Olschbaur examines cultural myths—in both the historical and Roland Barthian sense—around gender and patriarchy amidst our current political chaos.<sup>3</sup>

Olschbaur's exhibition *Dirty Elements* was sparked by Hans Baldung Grien's woodcut *Aristotle and Phyllis* (1513), which depicts the tale of Phyllis's triumph over Aristotle. After Aristotle becomes captivated by her, Phyllis agrees to give him what he desires, under the stipulation that he let her ride him like a horse, with her assuming the role of what we would now call a *dominatrix*. Grien's tantalizing work depicts both Phyllis and Aristotle nude, with Phyllis garnishing a whip and riding sidesaddle atop Aristotle. Aristotle, who believed women to be inferior to men, is pictured on all fours, wearing merely a bridle and reins. While this can be seen as an image of female sexual empowerment, it belies the truth of power dynamics between the sexes. As Kathy Acker argues in "Reading the Lack of the Body: The Writing of the Marquis de Sade," in patriarchal society, freedom for women is untenable.<sup>4</sup> The problem of escaping the language of patriarchy is key to the Marquis de Sade's

(1740–1814) oeuvre. In Acker's writing on Sade and other subjects, she utilizes disorder and irrationality as tools for undermining the social order and disrupting narrative. By appropriating stories from classic literature and inserting them directly into her writing, she denies the underlying master narrative. Likewise, Olschbaur appropriates from a history of canonized male painters in order to subvert power structures and challenge the conditions and experiences of desire and female sexuality.

Despite Sade's controversial and scandalous reputation, he was an inspirational revolutionary figure for many, including Georges Bataille and the Surrealists. Sade's work sought the destruction of all limitations—including morality and the law. His writing does not allow for the contemplation of meaning; rather, it performs a labyrinthine logic that rejects the formation of any ideology. In turn, Bataille embraced mysticism and irrationality, finding value in excrement and animality. He noted that the big toe is the primary physical attribute that separates humans from apes, which enables walking upright.<sup>5</sup> Being on all fours emphasizes our primal nature by accentuating the biological axis between our mouth and anus. Bataille sought to bring artmaking down from its idealism to its base materialism and turn it against the grain of modernism, calling it *formless*.<sup>6</sup>

Olschbaur takes this idea of formlessness as a mode of creative production and uses it to disengage art from its loftiness and emphasize its carnality. Olschbaur's paintings magnify erotic desire, both in form and content, by pushing the limits of eroticism in imagining all the sordid possibilities of desire. Her interest in making perversion transparent forces viewers to face their own repressed desires.

Understanding that Bataille and Sade considered violence intrinsic to sexuality and virulently objectified women, Olschbaur problematizes and builds upon this tension by subverting the roles.

In Olschbaur's painting *Sub Red* (2019), a portly man wearing merely a glove and socks lies collapsed on the floor of a lusty, crimson red and sickly green interior. Olschbaur often depicts figures in disarray, partially unclothed or wearing a single piece of clothing, as a tactic of arousal and disruption. The posture in *Sub Red* emulates a photographic series by Martin Kippenberger, taken by his wife Elfie Semotan, in which the artist ironically mimics the poses of the subjects in Théodore Géricault's *The Raft of the Medusa* (1819). The subject of Géricault's gruesome painting depicts a shipwrecked French naval expedition en route to colonize Senegal. One hundred and fifty people were forced onto a raft for a thirteen-day journey, which led to starvation, death, and cannibalism. In one of the photographs, Kippenberger poses falling off a bed, with a sheet draped over his head and wearing only socks and a watch, mimicking the headless corpse in the bottom right corner of *The Raft of the Medusa*. The artist's corpulent body and the prosaic setting deflate the original's drama and romanticism. In *Sub Red*, Olschbaur appropriates Kippenberger's interpretation of Géricault and carries forward its theme of torture and misery, while eroticizing it into a grotesque spectacle of indulgent surrender. Olschbaur weighs in on the art historical canon by implying a scene of violent sexual aftermath, with her title implicating the figure's role as a submissive. The lone figure, rendered in expressive gestural strokes, faces the viewer head on. His face appears to detach from his body and deep red hues imply injury or mutilation. His legs dangle comically overhead while his body slumps

to the ground, incapacitated. *Sub Red* absorbs the corpse-like pose of the original and the humiliating self-indulgence of its copy, yet stands apart as a scene of violent agitation provoked by passion, the anguish of desire, and suffering.<sup>7</sup>

In *Ecstasy* (2019), an angelic figure levitates above an agitated and writhing body emerging from a hole in the ground. The androgynous figure floating above irreverently dons a platform heel on one foot. Olschbaur frequently uses such fetish objects to cast her figures in a state of sexual unrest. In religious iconography, saints are often depicted pointing, as a sacred symbolic gesture; yet here the angel's finger points off into the unknown, as if signaling condemnation. Limbs reach out from the depths below towards the angelic figure, like a shamed ascetic seeking redemption, amidst an apocalyptic red and purple landscape. Loose strokes denote movement beyond the canvas, and the work's unfinished quality adds to the ambiguity. In *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, Gilles Deleuze seeks to separate the literary works of Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch. Deleuze argues that sadism and masochism, although parallel, are not combinative, contrary to Sigmund Freud's analysis. Masochism, unlike sadism, relies on contracts, fantasy, and suspension.<sup>8</sup> The cause of suffering in desire is that it is impossible to satisfy. Lacan describes this enigma of desire as "eternally extending toward the *desire for something else*."<sup>9</sup> Thus, for the masochist, desire is always in the place of the Other.<sup>10</sup> In *Ecstasy*, figures balance between the bestial and the sublime, reveling in the divine ecstasy of religious paintings. Spiritual and physical ecstasy are undifferentiated in these works, which center on the body as a site of repressed desire.

*Into the Open* (2019) features a woman falling off her bucking horse while looking off into the distance, where an ominous tornado is taking shape. Horses are a common motif in Olschbaur's practice, where they symbolize strength and power while also connoting unbridled passion and sexuality. *Into the Open* is structured irrationally, like a dream, wherein objects and bodies meld. Frequently, Olschbaur's figures and landscapes unravel to a point where bodies and their features become obscured or take on surreal proportions. With gestural and disruptive mark making, Olschbaur gives shape to irregularities: limbs go missing, faces blur, and bodies merge into abstract shapes. Toppled over in animated plasticity, the figure balances the weight of her body on an oversized prosthetic arm. A foot erected stiffly in the sky metamorphoses between a high-heeled shoe and a hoof. Hair replaces the figure's face and mimics the flow and movement of the horse's absent tail. A singular high-heeled leg descends from the sky and slices the dystopian landscape. It stands firmly as feminine and dominant, aggressive and sensual, stepping forth in the face of impending doom. In Acker's novel *My Mother: Demonology*, the narrator deals with trauma through imagination and dreams. Similarly, Olschbaur creates a fictitious space that, rather than proposing escape, is generative and offers a means for contemplating unrealized possibilities.<sup>11</sup>

Olschbaur delves into destructive fantasy in *Road Trip* (2019). A woman poses topless across the hood of a shiny, beastly sports car, her erect nipples glowing like headlights. Like in a sleazy car ad, the statuesque figure is erotically charged, yet her cold, expressionless face deflects the male gaze. Reminiscent of Balthus's *La Chambre* (1952–54), the woman's posture conveys that she is consciously

self-aware rather than merely an object of desire. In this provocative scene, a stiff and lifeless arm extends out from underneath the car, implying the gruesome aftermath of a collision. This combination of death and sensuality provokes a “sexual disturbance” rather than pure indulgence.<sup>12</sup> Amidst the disturbance, a serene pastoral landscape echoes the reclining woman’s triumph and repose and pokes fun at the picturesque. In David Cronenberg’s thriller *Crash* (1996), a string of characters find themselves drawn together by their shared erotic attraction to car wrecks. They become sexually entwined, often driving further into extreme acts of violence in order to reach climax. The film takes the link between cars as sexual fetish and the sex appeal of danger to an extreme, where desire and death converge in heated escalation. *Road Trip* alludes to the adrenaline associated with the death drive, where attraction and repulsion are intertwined. In this nexus, orgasms are little deaths edging closer to peril. What makes *Road Trip* especially disturbing is the dehumanizing effect, witnessed in the reclining figure’s deadened awareness towards the violence around her.

Closely examining the paradox of *jouissance*, Olschbaur looks to the practices of S/M for inspiration. In the diptych *Dirty Elements* (2019), Olschbaur takes the divinity of Jusepe de Ribera’s *The Martyrdom of Saint Philip* (1639) and strips it of its moral content. De Ribera’s theatrically composed tableau depicts a group of henchmen tensely drawing rope overhead in preparation for Saint Philip’s crucifixion. Philip’s face is filled with despair, while an indifferent crowd looks on. Olschbaur transforms this drama of human tragedy into a neo-noir dungeon scene. In *Dirty Elements*, the composition is minimized to two henchmen, the crucified, and a single onlooker. Rendered using elements of *chiaroscuro*, the dramatic and richly dark atmosphere

is imbued with artificial neon hues and seductive earth tones, contributing to its macabre undertone. A point of tension in this angular composition centers on the weight of the torturer’s left foot, whose sharpened heel doubles as a weapon. At this menacing juncture, a masked figure lies bound and cocooned in a state of suspended anticipation. A flower-like device trails at the bottom left-hand corner of the painting, a dirty detail that reminds us that, in the words of Bataille, “even the most beautiful flowers are spoiled in their centers by hairy sexual organs.”<sup>13</sup> Rather than offering the spiritual allegory of its historical counterpart, Olschbaur’s iteration dwells in a masochistic realm of persecution. Her work frequently operates in this forbidden territory, within the suspension of reality and fantasy, between pleasure and pain. Pain has a longer duration than pleasure, thus, for the masochist, the expectation of pain *is* the site of pleasure. In this torture scene, the onlooker is a young woman who sits apathetically, dozing off in the background. Her long braid, resembling a rope or whip, signifies a device of torture not otherwise represented. As in all of Olschbaur’s work, violence here is implied rather than explicitly described.

*Liaison* (2019) again features two torturers tying down a figure. Here, a woman actively punishes the person next to her by pulling their hair; a sadistic grin runs across her face as she gazes directly at her acquiescent victim. Like Phyllis, she performs the role of the dominatrix, who represents the empowered woman in charge of her own sexuality. Yet, if the sadist serves to please the masochistic, even if in complete submission to her, where does she find her own *jouissance*? Sade’s character Juliette, in the eponymous novel, provides a possible answer to this question. She is a heartless and bloodthirsty

nymphomaniac who aggressively denies order by using her sexuality, self-determination, and violence to take power over those around her. Despite her cruelty, she is successful and happy, unlike her virtuous sister, Justine, who suffers atrocious cruelty in Sade's companion novel, *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue*. As Acker notes of the Sadeian universe, "a woman who lives in a patriarchal society can have power, control, and pleasure only when she is hypocritical and deceitful."<sup>14</sup> Theoretically, Sade's cold and sadistic woman is liberated by disassembling order and acting only in the interest of her own pleasure, rather than subordinating herself to the desires and needs of others. Yet, Sade's formula leaves us with an incomplete portrait of women's sexuality and dominance. Patriarchy is a trap that even Sade could not escape.

In her exhibition *Dirty Elements*, Olschbaur proposes that we have a long way to go in imagining the extent of female sexuality beyond the phallus. We can take up the tools that Acker left us and use them to reconsider the importance of subjectivity and freedom today, in order to continue thinking outside of phallogocentric myths. In a moment when abuses of power continually recur, this disorder provides an opportunity to cast off the baggage of the past and create new myths. Within this suspended reality, the realm of the imaginary creates a space for real potential. *Dirty Elements* contemplates a space between seduction and malaise, beyond the silent surface of the canvas. Therein, one can find the Deleuzian element of suspension, a heel forever descending from above.<sup>15</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye* (New York: Urizen Books, 1977), 57.
- 2 Kathy Acker, "Reading the Lack of the Body: The Writing of the Marquis de Sade," in *Must We Burn Sade?* ed. Deepak Narang Sawhney (New York: Humanity Books, 1999), 241.
- 3 See Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," *Mythologies* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012).
- 4 Acker, "Reading the Lack of the Body," 232.
- 5 Georges Bataille, "The Big Toe," *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 20.
- 6 Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 16.
- 7 Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986), 19.
- 8 Gilles Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 25-35.
- 9 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1999), 431.
- 10 Lacan, *Écrits*, 690.
- 11 See Kathy Acker, *My Mother: Demonology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).
- 12 Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, 104.
- 13 Bataille, "The Language of Flowers," *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, 12.
- 14 Acker, "Reading the Lack of the Body," 232.
- 15 Deleuze, *Masochism: Coldness and Cruelty*, 70.

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Courtesy of the Artist and  
 Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles

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Printed on the occasion of the exhibition  
Katherina Olschbaur: *Dirty Elements*  
Curated by Allyson Unzicker

Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) Gallery  
University of California, Irvine  
January 11, 2020–March 14, 2020

COPY EDITOR  
Elizabeth Pulsinelli

DESIGN  
Ella Gold

Printed by Nonstop, Los Angeles, CA

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Photography: Lee Thompson

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Special thanks to Nicodim Gallery





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