

On Katherina Olschbaur's exhibition "Prayers, Divinations" at Nicodim Gallery, New York, 2022

In *Prayers, Divinations*, Katherina Olschbaur's fourth solo exhibition with Nicodim, the Austrian-born Los Angeles-based artist combines small portraits with large-scale paintings in her signature surrealist oeuvre, blending figuration and abstraction with sweeping gestural marks. Her drawings, though never included in an exhibition, are integral to Olschbaur's practice, and form the backdrop of her fascination with Renaissance and Baroque-style paintings where themes of religious authority often take center stage. Leaning towards the freedom found in rebellion, she recenters our gaze giving grace and reverence to her figures. Colorful sketches reveal illuminating compositions in luscious oils. Abstract bodies leap off canvases and traverse into dark shadows in a series of electrifying hues. An ensemble of worlds collides where figures blend and reemerge in faraway landscapes only to be unearthed in the recesses of vivid imaginings. The narratives of each work are open ended suggesting layers of memory, lapses in time, and fleeting moments recaptured.

There is a tenderness in Olschbaur's portraiture, an earnestness in her striking use of color. Prayers are asked, answered, and faith is questioned and tested again and again. A sense of tranquility blends with the contrasting vibrancy of her palette. Warm yellows, golds, and soft greens create peaceful scenes that lend themselves to the unconventional beauty of the surreal. Piercing magentas sit comfortably next to cool blues and a dizzying visual effect takes hold. In her approach to oil painting, like the medium itself, Olschbaur slows down, savoring the passage of time over hours, days, and weeks. She reexamines works to uncover hidden mysteries and an underlying moodiness with each new revision. Methodically accessing memories layer by layer, she relishes in her imagination.

Lay down, beloved (2022), depicts three figures in the foreground and two smaller bodies lying close together farther afield. It's a mythical scene where the emotionality of rich colors hurdles off the canvas and jumps out toward the viewer. The woman in the foreground is flanked by two male sisters who discover her sleeping body under the shadow of a tree. Is she dying, or has she already transitioned? Since her grandmother passed on the last day of her 2021 residency at Black Rock in Dakar, Senegal, Olschbaur has been captivated by notions of death and the transition of life. Portraiture, place, and the ever-present gaze are explored throughout *Prayers, Divinations*. Deeply rooted in her personal experiences over the last two years the works presented are at once

intimate and formal, questioning notions of selfhood and the responsibility of the artist when depicting someone else. For Olschbaur, portraiture is the ultimate prayer and in this exhibition, with which she begs a most pressing question: How can I capture the spirit of another person?

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