

Painting Mythologies in Contemporary Times

essay by Dr. Jareh Das

The show's title will be Sirens...

sirEns

a state of alarm or Voices.

One or many, who seduce

a person (...) on a journey.

Groups of people travelling from one place to another.

in transition.

women, groups of women,

women -BiRDS - who seduce

A state of fear.

multi-tonality, a choRus. whispered voices.

women who appear in groups.

Lingering

GRAViTY- Antigravity - water.

- Extract from an email exchange between the artist and the writer on 2 August 2023

A painterly imagination informed by historical, literary and personal references characterises Katherina Olschbaur's paintings. For over a decade, Olschbaur has challenged art historical accounts in painting that have made dominant patriarchal stereotyping of female representation, male-centric characterizations of female sexuality, and in turn, their bodies. Olschbaur and her contemporaries including Christina Quarles, Shadi Al-Atallah, Miranda Forrester, Mira Dancy and Ilana Savdie all in their individual ways contort and deliberately paint ambiguous images of bodies or rather bodies that present spaces for the speculative and reach through history, trouble categories of the 'the nude figure' and unseat normativity. Her paintings are now recognisable for their signatory explorations of light, colour and figuration, importantly, colour also serves as a tool for expressing a range of emotions and feelings whilst allowing the artist to reinterpret history painting's recurring use of mythological and religious iconographies, notably from the Renaissance, Baroque, and Romantic periods.

Olschbaur's paintings begin their life as fervent sketches or outlines on paper that are suggestive of figures. Depicting these forms with charcoals, pencils, crayons, inks and pens, her preparatory drawings are never exhibited as finished works yet they have come to represent a way for mapping out compositional gestures that later inform scenes in future paintings. To witness Olschbaur begin compositions in this way is hypnotic as she sketches very quickly and in succession, rendering lines into forms as a way to think through formal compositions of figures. Her painting style is situated somewhere between abstraction and figuration, yet in contrast to the fastness and fervour of her drawings, her painterly process is much slower taking a few months to years as she brings together a coalescence of light (natural and man-made), colour, form and meanings from both an excavation of art histories and lived experiences.

What results is a now identifiable vernacular of tender portraits of single/groups of figures that expertly blend figuration and abstraction, but reimagine these age-old art historical genres anew, alongside exploring recurring themes of devotion, submission, adoration, worship and religion, in a broad sense. The artist's approach to painting entails a process of excavating the past to make sense of the present. As the exhibition text for *Dirty Elements (2020)* at the University Art Galleries, UC Irvine states, "For Olschbaur, art historical tropes are appropriated and used like garments, worn and cast aside in a process that is ever-changing and moving within each work."¹ Olschbaur's practice takes root in mythology, religious and historical paintings, the subcultures of S/M, and film. Embracing Georges Bataille's concept of the formless, provocative and erotically charged scenes that are at times humorous and disturbing. Writing about Olschbaur's exhibition *Dirty Elements* curator, Alison Unzicker states: "If we cannot escape patriarchy as we cannot escape language, women must continually challenge and subvert these roles and myths, she adds."² The subcultures of S/M, in particular, is something Olschbaur continues to expand on in her painterly practice by juxtaposing queer BDSM and religious narratives, whilst also considering this overlap as transferable also to painting, which in itself involves continual acts of dominating and submitting to the medium of paint and processes of painting.

¹ Exhibition text, *Katherina Olschbaur: Dirty Elements*, University Art Galleries, UC Irvine <https://uag.arts.uci.edu/exhibit/dirty-elements-katherina-olschbaur>.

² Allyson Unzicker, 'Petals in the Mud'. in *Katherina Olschbaur: Dirty Elements*, ed. Allyson Unzicker, University Art Galleries, UC Irvine © 2020.

The artist has previously stated and made explicit that any explorations of religiosity are through a secular lens, and this serves as an approach to understanding religion from an erotic or ecstatic point of view. Olschbaur has long rejected and criticised any form of organised religion even though she grew up as the daughter of a pastor in the city of Bregenz near Lake Constance in Austria. Whilst her upbringing and formative years growing up in Austria mean she is familiar with religious motifs and their accompanying iconographies, Olschbaur left home at the age of seventeen to study painting at the University of Applied Arts, Vienna.

Vienna proved a critical time for shaping Olschbaur's critical thinking as she engaged deeply with film and theatre design which she studied at the time. Filmmakers and artists working with moving images she resonated with included Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Harun Farocki, Hito Steyerl, and Ulrike Ottinger. She also cites theatre and performance, the aftermath of the failures of the Austrian avant-garde, feminism, and the Viennese actionists as schools of thought that exposed machoism and gestures that initially tried to overcome but eventually reinforced patriarchal hierarchical structures. She explains; "I was thinking critically about the complicity of women in proximity to those in power i.e., the patriarchy and wondered how it is even possible to paint within these frameworks yet even though I felt almost a thing of impossibility, I developed a kind of stubbornness to still do it... painting that is. "I was always looking for more freedom in spaces of resistance and underground scenes, in nightclubs and bars, considering how the weird and dark disrupts and the intimacy of certain moments in such encounters, she adds."

Informed by a sense of curiosity and desire to shift a rigidity of perspective from the formalities of Austrian life. Olschbaur was not born into an art aristocracy or wealthy background and worked on a low on budget but found ways to be able to travel through and cultivate a global practice to experience other ways of living and learning about different cultures and people. More recent residencies as part of Kehinde Wiley's Black Rock residency in Dakar, Senegal in 2021 and Red Gate Residency, Beijing, China in 2017 have allowed moments of cross-cultural exchanges and a transnational understanding of the world we live in. Olschbaur now resides in Los Angeles and is the first member of her family to have migrated abroad. Travel does continue to shape her perspective and approach to painting in a style that implodes both the rigidity of art history and situated from a female perspective.

These cross-fertilizations across time, place and space are profoundly cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic in their nature, and whilst this approach might be read as a pushback or rebellion against growing up in a religious household and wider context of one of Europe's most quintessential countries full of classical art, opulent palaces and rich musical heritage, a more astute reading of the artist would attend to how travelling and living across different geographies creates a profound reassessment of the self, familiar ways of seeing and being in the world, allowing for a critical distance to what was given and known.

Influenced by art movements that celebrate the gestural, informal and spontaneous, Olschbaur's paintings can be read through the lens of surrealism, particularly the movements' use of an array of light sources to illustrate ideas - the light at dawn, pre-sunset, or the dark of the darkest night to achieve strange and dreamlike works. Surrealists, particularly female artists from the movement including Kay Sage, Leonora Carrington, Remedios Varo, Dorothea Tanning and Toyen, all worked in a manner that was disorienting, introspective and with a highly contemplative air.³ Curator, Cecelia Alemani has aptly described these women surrealist's contribution to art histories as 'having a defiant faith in the possibility of self-invention to summon a domain of the marvellous where anatomies and identities can shift and change, following the desire for transformation and emancipation'.⁴ Importantly, these women artists also rebelled against gender-specific role behaviour and often represented themselves with strikingly androgynous features or in unusual roles or disguises. Part-figurative, part-abstract paintings that bring legacies of surrealism to the present, her most recent work also offers a perspective on female figures depicted with an uncanny use of light from a source that is never quite clear or easily discernible. Light is an explorative tool for figuration whether it is from the changes in seasons/at times of day; or the dominance of artificial light from a range of courses in contemporary life—neon signs to strobe lighting in night clubs; street lights and even screens from devices illuminating faces and bodies, In her own words, she explains: "I'm interested in finding a syntax,

³ Living and working closely with Leonora Carrington in Mexico was fellow World War II expatriate Remedios Varo. With the addition of Surreal occultist Kati Horna, these three women were often referred to as "the three witches," tapping into their individual and distinctly feminine spiritualities as a source of power and a way to subvert the patriarchy.

⁴ Hettie Judah, 'The Venice Biennale's Forgotten Female Surrealists', Opinion, *Frieze*, 13 April 2022, online, <https://www.frieze.com/article/venice-biennales-forgotten-female-surrealists>

in painting...in the gestures, overlapping, an accumulation of voices and noises in the painterly zones. I'm interested in those areas that confuse us, causing a soft sense of longing."⁵

In *Midnight Spill* held recently at Perrotin, Hong Kong (19 March - 22 April 2022), Olschbaur took as her point of departure, the lunar spectacle of 'Moon dog' which she first encountered through an exchange with the writer, Lili Luqi Wang. Moon dog, according to folklore, represents signs of approaching storms or bad weather, but in actuality, they are distinct bright spots attached to a halo around the Moon's left or right side. This phenomenon of light allowed for an astute overarching framework for exploring recurring themes of tenderness, coldness, affection, and silent commiseration.⁶ Over a dozen portraits, mostly depicted women/female-identifying, some men individually or in groups, some based on friends, others a distortion of the artist's self-portrait posit a contradiction between the real and imagined; fact and fiction, yet they also create spaces that allude to the imaginary due to the artist's use of light as both a dazzling and subdued force. One is a portrait of an artist who is non-binary *Saturn Revers*, other self-portraits blurring gender binaries, a double portrait with a man and a woman *Silent Afternoon* and an androgynous melancholic figure *Bildnis Hannah* (all works 2022-2-23). Natural and man-made light sources draw from art historical techniques including shading, chiaroscuro, sfumato, or tenebrism, yet her use of line and colour gives her characters unprecedented sexual prowess and agency. When men appear, they are often depicted as passive, hybrid or feminine yet all her characters imbue a sense of being part mystical and part hybrid, half human and half otherworldly.

Whereas in the previous work, this female emancipation has been at times depicted alongside male figures that are rendered passive and androgynous, for her current exhibition *Sirens at Dangxia Art Space*, Beijing, Olschbaur continues with concerns of blurring gender and of blurring feminine and masculine attributes of figures. Gender is

⁵ Katherina Olschbaur in conversation with Jareh Das via Zoom, 26 June 2023.

⁶ This description of mood dog is expanded upon in the exhibition text of the light illuminating Olschbaur's paintings that were on view at *Midnight Spill* that states, "When moonlight refracts off hexagonal ice crystals in cirrus clouds, a pair of elusive, bright spots will appear in the inky sky at the same altitude as the moon, followed by an iris-coloured arc of light. Dubbed 'moon dogs', this lunar spectacle is a rare sight in atmospheric optics." Katherina Olschbaur, *Midnight Spill*, Perrotin, Hong Kong (19 March - 22 April 2023), <https://leaflet.perrotin.com/view/464/midnight-spill>.

expanded through abstraction, and it creates tension in Olschbaur's figures painted in what the artist sees as a way to demonstrate a push and pull; a back and forth of gestures of intrusion and of penetration, alongside and receiving areas of tenderness, gentleness, rest and of violent marks; spills and erasures. As the artist explained in an email conversation: "We live in a time of so much violation of bodies, and boundaries when these bodies are female, we see misogyny, but there is also violence towards men who show sensitivity or melancholy, or androgyny are equally important in my paintings, she explains."⁷ "I don't see the bodies as entirely 'female' bodies, sometimes in a way they are men and woman in one, yet I want all female figures definitely to appear very strong and muscular, but there are very feminine men as well, she adds".⁸

This current exhibition centres on the figure of the siren in Greek mythology which is often depicted as a bird-human hybrid and feared by the Greeks due to the dominant belief that these otherworldly creatures lured sailors to their deaths with their beautiful singing voices. Throughout history, beauty, rebellion, the sexual prowess and the idea of women appearing in groups have long been a source of fear and panic. Women who challenged male authority also garnered accusations of witchcraft, as could women suspected of sexual immorality. Witch-hunting functioned as a method of social control that sought to channel female behaviour into certain acceptable moulds. "Beautiful women have always been considered powerful and dangerous, so for many thousands of years, women have been viewed as a danger to men, especially women who could not be seemingly controlled or had the potential ability to control the minds of men."⁹ Several of the paintings on view mediate this notion or feeling of women (and at times men) congregating as dangerous and distinct colour fields express this overarching theme whether it is a dominance of reds, blues or purples which also fluctuate between capturing emotions and experiments with light and figuration. Red in particular is a colour highly charged that conjures a range of meanings as it can be read as either the colour of war, the colour of communism, the colour of seduction, the colour of warning, or the colour of luck. For Olschbaur, red is the colour that doesn't let you enter but at the same time completely absorbs. It can also reveal humour,

⁷ Katherina Olschbaur in an email exchange with the writer, 1 September 2023.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Tindall-Gibson, Annie Rose. "Sirens In Art, Music, and Literature." *International Journal of Asian Social Science Research* (2021): n. pag. Print.

melancholy, different feelings and emotions. One such red-colour-filled painting is *The Qualities of Witches 2*, 2023, featuring sitting abstracted figures wreathed in smoke. A cat is stretched on its hind legs, a figure rides a flying horse and there are some treelike structures, a distinct palm tree and a boat with people sailing by. A medley of figure studies and portraits of people and animals are in a phantasmagorical scene.

Her largest to date, a triptych titled *Sirens*, 2023 is dominated by boldly expressive painted hues of blues and purples interspersed with reds, browns and green measuring almost three metres in height invites the viewer into a contemplative world of female agency, reversed gender roles and a dismantling of the patriarchy. *Sirens* is a scene inhabited by multiple figures in an array of poses with some reclining alone or in pairs, while others are standing up or sitting leisurely. Some of the figures have serene facial expressions whilst others are devoid of expression and are completely abstracted. Two small figures in the right panel are running side-by-side holding hands. Another is flanked by birds and a dog sits obediently at the foot of a reclining figure. Whilst. At the top right corner of the painting is the most prominent figure, blue-hued and like an angel descending from the heavens with one hand pointing downwards, and the other outstretched. This figure brings to mind depictions of angels in Italian Renaissance paintings and renderings of biblical tales focused on the subject of angels and angelic communication announcing good or bad news signalling redemption or judgement. Olschbaur explained in this work “The blue triptych was inspired by contradictions of insomnia and feeling blue. It also captures the in-between day and night hours, lightness and at the same time, gravity as well as transition.” “It is set in a landscape close to water, a shore with an Angel guiding or damning or arriving? We don’t know, she adds”.¹⁰ This not knowing speaks to an ambiguity of the scene depicted. Is it one of reckless abandon, or one of contemplation? The viewer is left to make meaning of the scene unfolding before their eyes.

Conversely, for *Musings of the Morning Hour*, 2023, a diptych populated by female figures some with rabbit ears, others with horns draws on nightlife and a scene of revelry based on a party attended by the artist. The central figure is composed of hues of mauve, white, and greenish brown. Her back is turned with hands on her hip and

¹⁰ Katherina Olschbaur in conversation with Jareh Das via Zoom, 26 June 2023.

her gaze is direct yet seductive. Nearby to the right, two women are grinding against each other alongside nude figures in intimate embraces, and abstracted hybrid animal-human figures populate the painting. Nothing is what it seems, and these two works expertly demonstrate different perspectives as they exist in relation to one another. A subjunctive mood also gives this world its animist pulse.

Throughout history, humankind has sought to make sense of the world through myths. These stories, often taking visual forms, have been both preserved and transformed over the years as they have been recaptured and retold. Artists have long considered mythology part of their aesthetic language, a tradition continued by modern and contemporary artists who address and reinterpret mythologies in their works. Olschbaur's boldly expressive, brightly coloured oil paintings represent contemporary depictions of classical mythologies, the artists' own imaginary cosmologies for figuration that exist in an ever-evolving fictional world. In her paintings, the articulation of subjective experience is consistently called into question, and she is motivated by the perils of trusting too much in any one perspective and offers instead a dizzying array of ways of looking at things, yet everything looks, and acts, like something else.