

PRESS RELEASE

Sofia Mitsola

Villa Venus: An Organized Dream

November 11 – December 22, 2023

Opening on Friday, November 10, 6 – 8 pm

Artist talk with Sofia Mitsola and Pamela Kort, Friday, November 10, 6.30 pm

Waldmannstrasse, Waldmannstr. 6, CH-8001, Zurich

Galerie Eva Presenhuber is pleased to present *Villa Venus: An Organized Dream*, its first solo exhibition with the London based, Greek artist Sofia Mitsola.

In 1902, the Austrian artist Gustav Klimt painted three naked female figures and a goldfish. Despite its gorgeous meshing of sensual lines and shimmering layers of gold-inflected colour, at its unveiling, the work created a scandal. Seen from behind, the buttocks of one of the women dominates the picture; she peers out at us over her shoulder, through her blazing curtain of red hair, smiling provocatively. Klimt created the work as a riposte to his critics; originally titled *To My Detractors*, he changed it to *Goldfish* when he exhibited it in 1903.

When I visited the Greek artist Sofia Mitsola in her London studio in August, she cited *Goldfish* as 'a painting that I always have at the back of my mind'.¹ 'It's basically' she said, 'a fuck you painting. And I wanted to make a fuck you painting, too.' Mitsola has long admired Klimt's unabashed depiction of women's erotic lives. She says: 'Even now, for me to see a painting from that time of a female figure masturbating, it's very empowering.' However, the Austrian painter is only one of the influences Mitsola cites: during the course of our conversation she mentions sources as disparate as Japanese animation, ancient Greek and Egyptian art, the Wiener Werkstätte, antique jewellery, Edvard Munch's nudes; Nicholas Georgiadis's 1960s costumes; Alex Katz, a print by the 19th-century Japanese artist Utagawa Kuniyoshi, in which 'rain feels like streams of energy' and the Instagram account of the Lebanese American media celebrity and former porn star, Mia Khalifa. In a PDF she sent me of images that inspire her, categories include 'coquettish bodies', 'half-innocent bodies', 'strong bodies', 'degenerate bodies', 'sexy creepy bodies' and 'funny bodies'.

The artist's latest series of oil paintings – swiftly rendered in bold, bright colours that switch, in a heartbeat, from the textured to the translucent – explores both the deep past and possible futures via a cast of 'women-like creatures' who emit a muscular, joyful sensuality. A contemporary take on sphinxes and sirens, the intimation hovers that Mitsola's powerful beings might either seduce or devour you, depending on their mood. Holding our eye contact, they cavort, often smiling, on the shores of an unnamed utopia, a landscape of big skies, blue seas and dry, dazzling terrain. Mitsola says: 'I'm always thinking of the Cycladic light when I'm painting [...] its blinding, almost whitish light.'

At more than two or even three metres tall, many of these new works are as monumental as they're exuberant. *Infinity Pool* (all works 2023) features a tanned creature who reclines on a bed of blue water; beside her, a figure, who appears to be standing on water, recalls *Kore*, the free-standing, Ancient Greek sculptures of enigmatically smiling women from the Archaic period. In *Bazooka*, a voluptuous creature smokes, naked apart from her thigh-high boots, in a sci-fi agora of giant red balls and a red pillar. In *Goldfish*, titled after the Klimt, she crouches, smiling, knees wide apart, peeing into the sand. In *Taka Taka Wedgie Tanga*, a royal blue nightscape, the crouch becomes a dance, 'a ritual [that is] meant to welcome but also to startle the viewer [like Sphinxes or the phalluses on Delos island]'

Mitsola has long been preoccupied with a central question: 'How can I make fearless paintings?' Before she begins a new work, she 'thinks about atmosphere, about time and temperature; how heavy or light the figures are.' She often affixes a large sheet of paper to her studio wall and 'draws on it to feel the space I'm going to paint later on'.

¹ All quotes from Jennifer Higgie's studio visit to Sofia Mitsola, August 5, 2023, and follow-up notes.

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When she applies paint, it's important for her to be able 'to move freely around'. She showed me how she approaches a canvas, her body a physical incantation from which to spin an image. Her aim is ambitious: she's striving to create a visceral as well as a philosophical freedom; a painterly space in which shame plays no part. As a result, many of her paintings express a real delight in the possibilities of mark-making – from hard-edged boots and blazing skies, to geometric patterns and skin that appears to breathe; otherworldly eyes, shining bright.

The new body of work, which hums with a barely contained energy, is titled *Villa Venus: An Organized Dream* after the name of a fantasy brothel in Vladimir Nabokov's 1969 novel *Ada or Ardor: A Family Chronicle*. The book, which Mitsola loves, prompted her to ask: 'what is bodily freedom, what is sexual freedom?' Her paintings are, in a sense, an attempt at an answer. In her complex three-metre painting *Villa Venus: An Organised Dream*, a womanly creature, rendered like a sea creature in washy blues, enters a stage-like environment, greeted by eight dancing female figures, as regimented as the chorus in a Busby Berkley film, naked apart from their boots and neck ribbons. It's an ambiguous, exultant, scenario, stilled, like all paintings, in the midst of movement. What happens next is anyone's guess.

Jennifer Higgin

Sofia Mitsola was born in 1992 in Thessaloniki, GR, and lives and works in London, UK. In 2018, she received her MFA in painting from the Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, UK. She has had solo exhibitions at The Portland Collection at the Harley Gallery, Welbeck, Nottinghamshire, UK (2022); Pilar Corrias, London, UK (2021; 2020; 2019); and Jerwood Space, London, UK (2019). She has participated in group exhibitions at institutions including Pilar Corrias, London, UK (2023); Galerie Eva Presenhuber, Zurich, CH (2022); Jerwood Collection at the Harley Gallery, Welbeck, Nottinghamshire, UK (2021); 125 Charing Cross, London, UK (2019); Clifford Chance, London, UK (2018); Tiffany & Co, London, UK (2018); The Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, London, UK (2018); Royal Academy of Arts, London, UK (2018); Macedonian Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki, GR (2017); and The Refugees Museum, Thessaloniki, GR (2016). Her work is included in the collections of institutions including the Start Museum, Shanghai, CN; X Museum, Beijing, CN; K11 Art Foundation, Hong Kong, HK; Zabudowicz Collection, London, UK; Jerwood Collection, London, UK; and UCL Art Museum Collection, London, UK.

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