

Capitain Petzel

Mikołaj Sobczak

Ancora

25 June – 1 August 2026

On view: Zoe Leonard, *East River Park* (with Nancy Brooks Brody, 1991)

Super-8 black-and-white silent film, 4:00 min

Capitain Petzel is pleased to announce Mikołaj Sobczak's second solo exhibition at the gallery. The exhibition centers on three large-format paintings commissioned by the Salzburger Kunstverein. They were first shown in 2025 as part of the exhibition *Moon, Sun, Mercury* at the Salzburger Kunstverein, which was supported by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Poland.

In *Ancora* (Italian for "again" or "still"), Mikołaj Sobczak interweaves historical events with elements of the present, focusing on the recurring cycles through which historical narratives are continually reconfigured. In doing so, he approaches each era through its diverse connections – ranging from political figures and celebrities to pop-cultural references, technological developments, and memes.

The works in the exhibition blend historical allegories, queer identities, and contemporary social critique into a dense, multilayered visual language. The paintings *Moon (Propaganda)*, *Sun (Magical Realism)*, and *Mercury (Underground)* bring together a wide range of historical and contemporary queer activists, revolutionaries, writers, artists, and scholars. They appear in carefully choreographed proximity to antagonistic archetypes, ranging from tech oligarchs to grotesque personifications of capitalism and fascism. By assembling these disparate figures on large-format canvases – a format traditionally associated with history painting – Mikołaj Sobczak reveals narratives of resistance and survival in the face of oppressive power structures.

The left edge of the painting *Moon (Propaganda)* features a horseman inspired by Georg Grosz's *The Pillars of Society* (1926). The swastika that originally adorned the rider's tie has been replaced by the X logo (formerly Twitter). Beside him, a muscular figure reminiscent of the comic-book character Silver Surfer attempts to repair the fractured barrel of "capitalism" by fastening it with a ring inscribed with the word "fascism". As a counterpoint, Sobczak introduces figures such as Paracelsus, Dante Alighieri, and the occult writer Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa. On the right side of the painting appears a self-portrait of the artist, alluding to his performance *Lutzi Puppe Wutzi* (2023), in which he appeared alongside a life-size ventriloquist's dummy of Archduke Ludwig Viktor, who as a member of the Austrian imperial family was able to live openly as a queer man in the 19th century. At the center of this turbulent constellation of opposing forces are refugees, whose presence serves as a reminder of the real consequences of propagandistic strategies: violence, oppression, and ultimately death.

The work *Sun (Magical Realism)* brings together motifs that explore injury and recovery. At its center appears Luigi Mangione in the guise of a superhero. Accused of shooting Brian Thompson, CEO of UnitedHealthcare, the largest U.S. health insurer, in 2024, Mangione has become an online symbolic figure in the struggle against abuses within the American healthcare system, largely due to a manifesto in which he denounces its practices. The back of curator and activist Tomek Pawłowski-Jarmołajew bears the scars of a homophobic attack, while folk healers tend to his wounds. Nearby, a woman who seems to have stepped out of a communist propaganda poster assumes the pose of the Magician from the Tarot. Jeff Bezos, former CEO of Amazon, appears as a vampire, cutting the long hair of a pensive figure seated on a green Uber Eats delivery box – a self-portrait of the artist. At his feet lies an old, burning map of the world featuring a personification of Europe. Together, these motifs form a scene of transformation.

In *Mercury (Underground)*, the third large-scale painting in the series, activists, writers, and artists are gathered in an underground shaft. The lesbian author Eve Adams – depicted with her book *Lesbian Love* – attempts to

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escape the clutches of an investigator. Her arrest in 1927 led to her deportation from the United States; years later, she was murdered at the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. The composition is divided by a stream that originates at the rear of the cave and flows past Catherine Deneuve and a ghostly Martin Luther. On the far side of the stream appears the Polish queer activist Stanisław Chmielewski, who, as part of a resistance network of gay men during the Nazi occupation of Poland, helped smuggle Jews out of the Warsaw Ghetto using forged identity papers. Mercury, known in antiquity as the guide of souls to the afterlife, here stands for salvation and renewal through art and civic engagement.

The exhibition is accompanied by collages that were referred to in Salzburg as “footnotes”. On a smaller scale, they take up the ideas, timelines, and iconographies present in the paintings, lending the exhibition a particular sense of intimacy. Made from materials found on the streets of Berlin, they can be read as an expression of what has been repressed and literally cast out of the private sphere. Figures engaged in sports, science, war, and entertainment intertwine with references to the Battle of Stalingrad, maps of past and present German territories, an article on the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and motifs from the Rider-Waite tarot deck. Also present are images of Orientalist desire, embodied by Rudolph Valentino in a still from *The Sheik* (1921), promotional photographs of Josephine Baker, depictions of women’s suffrage activists, and queer icons such as Vaginal Davis, James Dean, and Marlon Brando.

The artist created three small-format paintings specifically for this exhibition. During his residency at the Villa Romana in Florence, he used slightly sandy pigments that were already in use during the Renaissance. These works – like the self-portrait that appears repeatedly throughout the exhibition – engage with the concept of “Ancora”, which emphasizes how history lives on in our bodies and imagination and shapes our future. The vases on display, crafted in the Delft style at a historic porcelain manufactory in Poland, also reference long-standing craft traditions. Behind these objects lie complex stories of migration, persecution, and cultural exchange. In the 18th century, Mennonite religious refugees brought their craft techniques from the Netherlands to new regions of Europe. Here, the past does not appear as something fixed, but as something that is constantly reimagined and renegotiated in every medium and by every generation.

“What better way to approach the future than through an understanding of the past?”

– Arash Shahali

Mikołaj Sobczak is currently part of the group exhibition *House of Nisaba: New Stories of Painting* at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm. In June, his solo exhibition *Divide and Conquer* will open at the Polish Institute in Düsseldorf; he will also be featured at Manifesta 16 Ruhr and at *FIRE* at the St. Nikolai Memorial in Hamburg. His first book, *Anti-Fascist Art Manifesto*, will be published in the summer of 2026. The artist will present a performance of the same title in July at the NS Documentation Center in Munich.

Mikołaj Sobczak’s recent solo exhibitions include ROZENSTRAAT, Amsterdam; Salzburger Kunstverein; Jester – Flanders Arts Institute, Genk, Belgium; and Kunsthalle Münster. His works have been shown in numerous group exhibitions, including at the Ludwig Forum, Aachen; Shedhalle, Zurich; Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin; MUDAM, Luxembourg; the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; the Whitechapel Gallery, London; and the Folkwang Museum, Essen. His works are included in the collections of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA); Moderna Museet, Stockholm; the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf; the Ludwig Forum, Aachen; The Perimeter, London; the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw; and the National Museum in Gdańsk, among others. In 2021, Sobczak was awarded the Paszport Polityki, Poland’s most prestigious art prize. He has been an artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam and participated in the Art Explora – Cité internationale des arts residency program in Paris. As one of four selected artists, he has recently been awarded the Villa Romana Prize for 2026.