

THEGUIDE.ART

PROFILE: Becky Kolsrud



Photography: Marc Gabor

Becky Kolsrud's paintings are meta, mythic, and metamorphic: things stand in for other things, parts represent a whole, and everything in them is somehow more than—or at least not exactly—what it seems. “I never really made portraiture,” she says. “I made paintings of women *about* portraiture.”

In her latest solo show at JTT, the 37-year-old, Los Angeles-based artist presents 12 new paintings and one installation. In these works, nonplussed and ambiguous women—sometimes metamorphosed, sometimes featureless, sometimes dismembered—inhabit gloaming, water-soaked landscapes. They draw from a rich resource of art history and myth: *The Chorus* (2021), for instance, depicts dryads—cypress tree torsos atop a pair of distinctly feminine legs—circled ritualistically around a figure adrift in a boat. Composed as a triptych, a format with roots in early Christian art, the work also calls to mind the Greek myth of Apollo and Cyparissus. Elsewhere in the show, Kolsrud references Catholic reliquaries,

Roman iconography, and, of course, the long history of bathers in art history.

The seeming repetition of the figures across canvases, their flatly unsurprised expressions upon seeing us, and the otherworldly features of the terrain—hot pink skies and wide expanses of blue that are simultaneously water, atmosphere, and garment—contribute to the sense that the landscape these figures inhabit is one unlike our own, and yet one not entirely foreign to us. One senses that the feet-less figures in *Face/Figure Conflation* (2021) might pop on the figure-less feet of *Inscape (Blue)* (2021), or that the painted women of *The Three Graces* (2021) might spill into the third dimension. These women are both inhabitants of and one with a larger psychic landscape of which we are only offered glimpses.

TheGuide.art spoke with Kolsrud about her new work, the fantastical nature of California, and isolation as a condition for and subject in her art.

LISA YIN ZHANG: You've painted women your entire career. Why women?

BECKY KOLSRUD: I started out painting women because it was what I was most drawn to in art history and also in my personal life. When I went to museums, I was drawn—physically drawn in—by classical



Becky Kolsrud, *The Chorus*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 84 x 180 inches. Courtesy of JTT, New York.

paintings of bathers, mythology scenes, portraits.

My first paintings of women were an index of fashion from the late sixties. I was interested in the patterns and garments that were popular during that time, around 1969, when women started wearing pants. It [became] a more political statement, your fashion choices, going from the '50s, when there was a more conventional expectation for women's dress.

My work has shifted over time. Now, my interest is not about a specific woman or women in contemporary culture— it's in women as a symbol for humanity more generally.

ZHANG: When you started making this new work for the JTT show, what was on your mind?

KOLSRUD: I was looking at my personal experience in quarantine. The subjects I was interested in were isolation and collective trauma related to this very real mass death. I'm not painting cadavers, but I'm painting the body in a way such that it can be taken out of the living state, to another level.

This was a really different way of making a show for me, because I made it in quarantine and didn't have anyone see the work until it was in the show. I was struggling with how my work could capture the experience of all of the things that were happening: COVID, the political climate, the social uprising and Black Lives Matter movements, all these things that felt more urgent than oil paintings. So I wanted to make a show that was not responding directly to the current events of the world, but that was responding directly to my experience in the trajectory of where the work was leading me. A lot of the works are titled



Becky Kolsrud, *Three Graces*, 2021. Oil on canvas, Hydrocal, paint, plastic painting: 76 x 90 inches; shoes: 8 x 9 x 5 inches each. Courtesy of JTT, New York.

“Inscapes.” I was thinking of them as interior landscapes.

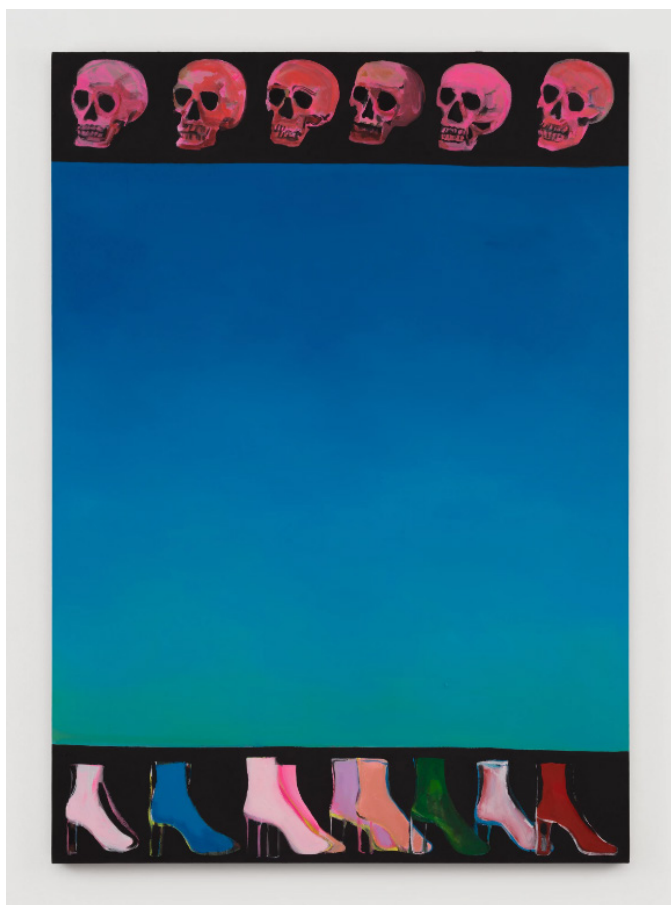
ZHANG: I noticed that these figures are exclusively dark-eyed, dark-haired, red-lipped. I can’t help but notice that they look like you.

KOLSRUD: They are not explicitly images of me, but I feel most comfortable using these features in my work because they are familiar to me.

ZHANG: In your early work, your references were clear: they were culled from catalogues, yearbooks, stock photos, or inspired by the Filipinotown seamstresses near your studio in LA. More recently, your subjects have become almost allegorical in their non-specificity. How did you arrive at these bathers?

KOLSRUD: Around 2016, I stopped using any reference material, and I started painting just from my imagination. I wanted to take my personal experience, which meant making these figures that had a frontal gaze. They knew they were posing, or being observed, so there was not this spying-on-them feeling. They were clothed—but they were also nude.

Bathers are a genre in painting I’ve always had problematic feelings toward. They represent the purity of virginal women; they’re about peeking through the bushes and desiring them as an interloper, as the male gaze. My bather paintings were a way of making allegorical paintings that I hadn’t seen in the



Becky Kolsrud, *Inscape (Blue)*, 2021. Oil on canvas, 84 x 60 inches.
Courtesy of JTT, New York.

history of allegorical paintings, that felt like an exciting way of portraying female figures.

ZHANG: Your discussion of these “virginal women” reminds me of this idea of the “virginal wilderness,” and their relationship to artificiality and unspoiled landscape. It’s unnatural that there’s any body of water where you are in California.

KOLSRUD: I grew up here. I’m a third generation Angelino, and my parents were both in the film industry. I really appreciate the artifice of LA. Its relationship to nature is not straightforward. It is a fantasy landscape for a city that’s built on the cult of fantasy.

I think of Los Angeles as being a metaphor for some of the ways that artifice and surrealism enter my work. I live in this house where the alleged Black Dahlia murderer was raised. It’s like a historical house that’s supposed to look like a Swiss chalet, built by a Russian architect. I started to research this guy, George Hodel, and realized that he was friends with

the surrealists. Man Ray was a close friend of his, and he connected him to other surrealists, like Duchamp. It was almost like Los Angeles was a found object of surrealism. And then there was a relationship with this murderer that was informed by surrealist images, possibly.

The gardens and plants and landscape have become integral to my work now: the way I think about nature, the artifice of nature, and the idea of compression and fragmentation as a metaphor in painting.

ZHANG: Learning that your house was the home of the alleged Black Dahlia killer makes this question take on a different valence. Many of these women are cut off at the ankles, the shoulders, even the heads—or transformed into cypresses. Yet they don’t feel mutilated, or disfigured to me—just somehow transformed. What is the intent behind depicting the women in these ways?

KOLSRUD: It happened organically, when I started covering these women with these swaths of blue, these fields of color. It was functioning almost as clothing, and I realized that I wasn’t interested in the anatomy of the figure. Things could float away, body parts could float away from each other. What would start as a scarf would turn into a way of decapitating the figure.

I’m not precious with the figures. I don’t want to make explicitly gory paintings, but I feel like there’s a space between beauty and violence. I think the body can become more interesting, it can be seen and

discovered in a new way when it's cut up, bisected.

ZHANG: A number of the paintings here draw on a series of Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings which she made after the death of her husband. What made you turn to her?

KOLSRUD: I wasn't thinking of interpreting her work so directly. I've been inspired by her work more for the formal qualities. I think she can imbue a lot of emotion into simple, precise forms. She has such a desirable elegance in her work.

I think she's also under-appreciated for how radical she was in her personal life. When she was just married to [Alfred] Stieglitz, she moved into one of the tallest buildings in Manhattan, and had a studio on the second to top floor, and painted the city being built. She saw the Chrysler building and the Empire State Building built in front of her eyes. She was truly trying to see the modern view—the view no one had seen before.

ZHANG: The installation *Three Graces* (2021) [pictured] includes not just the titular graces but sixty individual feet encased in plastic shoes. Why did this work include a three-dimensional feature?

KOLSRUD: The feet were a motif I was already working with, but I wanted to create a physical barrier from the painting to the viewer. It's a way of populating the gallery during a time of solitude, of COVID social distancing, as well as creating a physical barrier so you cannot walk up to the painting and get close to it.

For me, that painting is also about desire. It's inspired by a sculpture at the Met, a fragment of a sculpture. How wild is it that beauty is defined by a broken fragment of a headless body? It's like we as humans don't want to see everything: we want to hold space for memory, time, decay, shared meaning, simultaneity.