

A Space of Freedom

An interview with Sofia Mitsola

By Jennifer Higgin

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Jennifer Higgin: When did you first become interested in painting?

Sofia Mitsola: My mum told me that as soon as I could hold a pencil, I was making drawings. I was probably around two years old. Painting came a little bit later. I used to paint with my mother – she’s an artist, as well.

JH: Can you remember your first experience of a painting that really held your attention?

SM: I remember when I was about five looking at a catalogue that was printed every year by this company – my dad’s job was to sell zippers – and its cover was the famous anonymous painting of two naked women from the 16<sup>th</sup> century, where one pinches the nipple of the other. [*Portrait présumé de Gabrielle d’Estrées et de sa soeur la duchesse de Villars (Gabrielle d’Estrées and One of Her Sisters)*]. I was thrilled by it, but I also felt like I was doing something bad looking at it. It really provoked me. Thinking back, it’s so interesting to think about the function of the zipper, to reveal and hide.

JH: You’ve said that one of your aims is to ‘paint what I want or like without being ashamed or without feeling that I’m constricted in some way’. Do you think this early transgressive memory unconsciously fed into your desire for painting to be a space of freedom?

SM: Absolutely!

JH: When did you decide to become an artist?

SM: When I was around 12. As a teenager drawing in my bedroom, I felt that it was the only space where I had complete freedom and could do whatever I wanted to. Because when you have a pencil and a paper, you don’t really need anything else. It’s all you need. And not even

that, a piece of charcoal or a piece of wood on the sand. You can imagine anything and then make it, because it doesn't rely on anything but the language of painting. So, I got into art school in Thessaloniki when I was 16 years old. It was the first time that I was with people that were like me.

JH: What kind of education was it?

SM: Very classical. For the first two years we did life drawing every day for four or five hours. We were experimenting with line, how to draw with more detail, or evoke an essence of the model, their shape, in a few seconds.

JH: When you were studying, what kind of paintings first inspired you?

SM: We had five or six books that we passed around: the Thames and Hudson *Painting People*, with John Currin on the cover, and Phaidon's *Vitamin D* and others. We all loved Marlene Dumas and Peter Doig. I loved the patterning and sensuality of Gustav Klimt and Paul Modersohn-Becker's self-portraits. Lisa Yuskavage was important, too. At the time, we only had male tutors. The way we were taught to look and understand art was from a very strong, macho perspective. So, Lisa's painting was like a gateway, it was like, 'oh, here's someone who is very established and is a very good painter, who is doing her own thing and she makes this candy-like world and like makes fun with them and it's still okay and you can do it'.

JH: Did she give you permission to paint what you liked?

SM: Yeah, for sure. I think what I really like about her work is that she paints figures that are both very attractive and very sexual but at the same time be a little bit funny or a little bit appalling. But not appalling in a scary, creepy way, appalling in a teenage girl kind of way.

JH: Who were the Greek artists you were looking at?

SM: I've always loved the work of Konstantinos Parthenis [1878-1967]. He was a fantastic painter: very angelic, very ethereal. And also, Yiannis Moralis [1916-2009]. He made fantastic modernist figurative paintings that became more and more geometric. In terms of contemporary Greek artists, I'm a great admirer of Dimitris Papaioannou, a fantastic theatre director, choreographer, and visual artist.

JH: How important is drawing to you?

SM: It's the basis of everything for me. I've even started to realize that the more I paint, it's almost like I'm drawing with colour. I think painting is something that binds everything together and makes magic, but essentially drawing is the foundation.

JH: Do you do preparatory drawings for each of your oil paintings?

SM: I like to make drawings to get a sense of what the idea or the place or the atmosphere will be like. When I'm drawing, I'm thinking about certain times of the day, colours, and temperatures. And then I make it into the painting. But sometimes it's just notes.

JH: Do you use photographic sources or models?

SM: I only use photographs very rarely, unless it's a pose that I can't make myself, because it's, say, from behind. I usually place a mirror in front of the painting and pose in front of it and make drawings. But it's not so much that I use the drawings to develop the paintings, it's more about loosening up my hand. I've also drawn my sister a lot. Looking at her is almost like looking at myself because we share the same blood and she looks like me. She has a lot of characteristics – physical or the way she behaves or moves – which I really like. The idea of sisterhood and sisterly affection is really evident in my work. I've worked with it in many ways, for example, in the myth of Aquamarina, which is a story I developed, about sisterly love.

I also realized a few years ago that I like to make paintings that have sisters. I might work on a painting and then because I like it or find something interesting in it, I'll paint another painting thinking of the previous one. In my mind, these paintings are sisters.

JH: Generally speaking, what do you think it is that attracts you to a work of art?

SM: Nabokov sums it up: 'Great novels are, above all, great fairy tales.' I'm attracted to work that is surprising and immersive; it might make you feel very comfortable and then suddenly scare you in a very ancient tragedian kind of way – it's not simply about giving pleasure. Like Alex Katz. He's really my favourite artist these days. I'm always seeing something different in his paintings; he never fails. What I particularly like about his work is that it tricks you: you see the image and you say, okay, this is a very commercial, very easy-to-make image. And then you look some more and realise that everything is very carefully chosen. He's like a performer, a ballet dancer.

JH: Yet, you have a much more fantastical aspect to your work than Alex Katz.

SM: Yeah, exactly. He works from life and from real people, whereas I reference them, but then turn them into something else.

JH: What is it about Nabokov's writing that exerts such an influence on you?

SM: He's my superstar! I love his interest in the reader, the fact that he wants to give you pleasure and to experience different emotions. I love the depth of his research and how he's always fooling you: when he's lulled you into feeling sad or perplexed he'll suddenly drop a joke and you laugh your heart out.

JH: How do you translate such an approach into painting?

SM: In lots of different ways. For instance, sometimes, I give half Greek titles to my paintings, so my Greek audience can have a laugh. I painted my sister half naked and titled it *Maria Vizaroo*, which means 'big-boobied Maria'. All the Greeks get it of course; it's a private joke for them.

JH: How did your show 'Villa Venus' come about?

SM: In 2022, I was on the Greek island of Paros in the Cyclades and it got me thinking about fantastical places. I started compiling notes about what this world might be, how the creatures would dress, who they were. I was asking myself: 'How can I make fearless paintings and how can I be fearless?' Then I started thinking about Nabokov's novel *Invitation of a Small Creature* [1969], which is filled with details and riddles but is also super fun. 'Villa Venus' is a story within the novel, that is written by a teenage boy who describes his fantasy brothel. After he dies, a character in the story finds the manuscript and establishes a chain of palatial brothels filled with the most beautiful girls and boys. However, the brothels deteriorate and so the protagonist who was a regular, stops going to them. I really like this idea of creating a fantasy world – be it a brothel, or an invented America, like in *Lolita*'s case – and then polluting it. That was the beginning of my idea with 'Villa Venus': to create a fictitious island.

JH: Although it's fictitious, the landscapes your creatures cavort in is very Cycladic.

SM: Well, the Ancient Greek myths are full of sirens and sphinxes and creatures who are beautiful and provocative, but at the same time they can turn around at any moment and devour you. Very much like the Aegean Sea.

JH: Do all of the titles of your paintings in the show refer to Nabokov?

SM: Just the title of the show and also the title of one of the paintings, *Villa Venus: An Organised Dream*. A viewer might assume that 'Villa Venus' is a reference to the love goddess but any Nabokov fans will get it.

JH: Does the light and colour of Greece influence your palette?

SM: Although I'm always thinking of Cycladic light when I'm painting – the blinding, almost whitish light – colour is something that comes very instinctively to me. I'm always considering the ability of each colour – its atmosphere and time and temperature; the different weights in the painting, and how heavy or light the figures are.

JH: One of the powerful aspects of your work is its theatricality. *Villa Venus: An Organised Dream.*, the painting, is ambiguous: are we part of this cabaret or have we been transported to another world? Are the characters looking at us? Or are they looking at you, the painter?

SM: When I was developing the show, I was thinking about how I need to move more freely around the canvas and I started to think about theatre sets and ballet sets and how the viewer might relate to the characters. In my painting, *Lasso*, for example, they're very playful but they're also part of a scenario that is about being dominated and dominating, but in a pleasurable, fun way, like a game.

JH: Gender is also very ambiguous in many of your paintings. You've described the people you depict as 'woman-like creatures'. Could you elaborate?

SM: I think about all of them in this way because they're in their own realm. What happens in our world doesn't have to apply to theirs – they have their own rules. I was also thinking about Lolita and how she's not a woman or a child but a very specific gender, a nymphette.

JH: Are all of the characters in the show woman-like creatures?

SM: Mostly, but some of them are boys, but you can't really tell – it doesn't really matter. I use the female body because I know it so well, I inhabit it. So for me it's a matter of telling a story from a first-hand perspective, but then when it comes to how the hierarchies work in the paintings, it's more about changing, or challenging, the role of gender, and reinventing the role of women. I'm trying to find ways to create a world where they can enjoy themselves and be free.

JH: In terms of their body shape, they're all long, lean, athletic. Why is that?

SM: I was thinking about how, if I painted a landscape, my characters would dance around the canvas and their bodies would become lean and long to dominate the space. That also evolved from the way I move around the canvas; the extensions of my body became their lines.

JH: Do you dance as you paint?

SM: Yes, to conjure things up! When I'm starting a painting, I place the canvases around the studio and perform a sort of ritual: I dance or walk around the studio at a very strong pace – like a catwalk kind of vibe, which is ridiculous, but it helps me get in the mood, get the rhythm and feel of the picture and stretch my body.

JH: Do you do it to music?

SM: Sometimes. It depends on my mood, but I really like the Egyptian-born Italian singer Dalida, from the 1970s, and Queen and soundtracks from Tarantino movies, especially *Kill Bill*. Also, Japanese animation soundtracks.

JH: In terms of when your scenarios are situated, they're impossible to place. Can you clarify their time frame?

SM: It's 6,000 or 9,000 years ago but with a lot of sci-fi elements, and references to the 1920s and 1960s and now.

JH: Is sci-fi and fantasy something you watch a lot of?

SM: When I was growing up it was a boom time for Disney and Japanese animation, and then of course we had *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* and *Lord of the Rings* and *Spider Man* – there were so many more. I found them all really transporting and liberating. When I was in art school, I was looking at stills from Disney movies and Japanese animation and their colour combinations. I remember Freddie Mercury saying he wanted people to escape with his music and I can relate to that.

JH: Is escapism is an element of your work?

SM: Yes, I'd like viewers to feel that when they're looking at the paintings or the animation,

they can escape their bodies for a moment. That's why I wanted to create a sort of a palace with columns and a stage set: a fantastical place.

JH: *Pipette* is your first animation. How did it come about?

SM: I drew the images frame by frame on a tablet. It's about a figure who enters a stage set, lights up a cigarette, smokes it, throws it on the floor and leaves. The soundtrack, which was composed and performed by my cousin, Nefeli Bravaki, will filter through the space.

JH: What inspired you to make an animation?

SM: I've always dreamed of making one. It's such a great medium to make things that cannot happen ever in in real life, like people flying. But also like the idea that in both painting and animation, you can create miracles and metamorphoses. I love that.

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