

METRO PICTURES

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STUDIO

PAULINA OŁOWSKA

Paulina Ołowska's practice exposes themes of consumerism and feminism in delicately intricate paintings. *The painter*, 2016, acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria and on display during the NGV Triennial, is one of Ołowska's most ambitious paintings. Writer and curator Monika Szewczyk gazes into Ołowska's world of muses gracing her canvases, and questions the relations between Ołowska's physical and imaginary worlds.

Studying Paulina Ołowska's *The painter*, first shown at Metro Pictures in New York in the exhibition entitled (like some spell) *Wisteria, Mystera, Hysteria*, it is tempting to conjure the artist's own studio. But is there a resemblance?

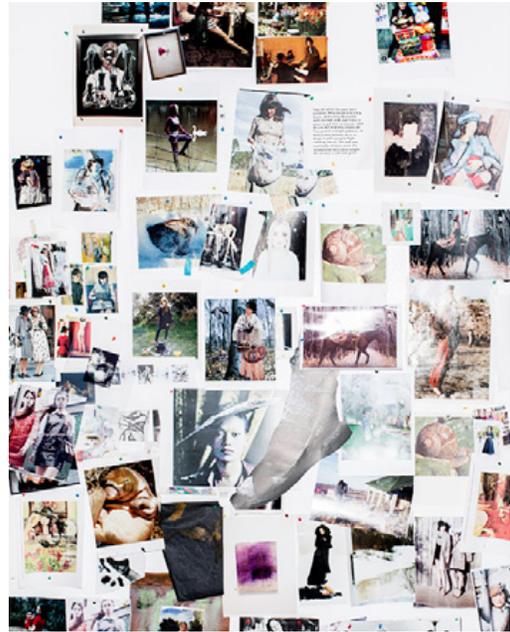
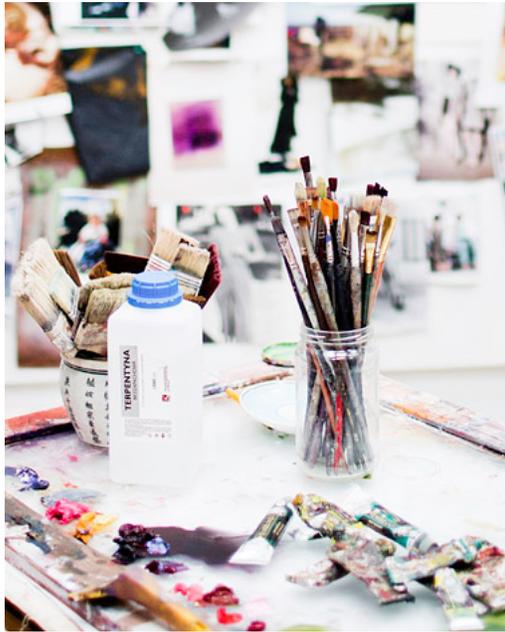
A photograph taken in Ołowska's studio, with her in the foreground, in profile, leaning back on a chair, looking away from her aforementioned larger than life canvas, shows that *The painter* is not exactly a likeness of the artist herself or the space where she works. Ołowska's furniture is more modern, her hair is more boyish, her pose less direct, perhaps more alluring still. Painting covers its tracks and there is no sign on *The painter's* table or elsewhere in her imagined studio of the copious magazine clippings that feed Ołowska's image world. And yet, there is something of the same spirit passing between the two women – the artist and her creation. Spirits are tricky to capture in words – particularly the visibly stirred spirit that orients Ołowska's gaze off-frame or rouses the legs of her imagined painter (knees wide apart, one foot firmly on the

ground, the other seeking her stool's gentle arch). What is clear is that the studio is a place to give birth to complex women.

I started to consider *The painter* as a 'real allegory' of Ołowska's life (to paraphrase the subtitle of Gustave Courbet's infamous *Atelier du peintre* of 1855). Yet, unlike that revolutionary nineteenth-century painter's motley assembly of characters, some known, some composite, and from both sides of the tracks (challenging the 'public' dimension of the official salon of the Academy des Beaux Arts, which refused this work), Ołowska makes space on her canvas for precisely one woman who, like her, is a painter, but is not brandishing a brush to prove it (as Courbet does in his magnum opus). Rather, something strange and downright mystical enters the canvas, for here the painter doubles as the model. Mentioning this to Ołowska as we catch up – she in her studio in Rabka Zdrój, a town south of Kraków en route to the Tatra Mountains; me on the Filopappou Hill in Athens – she responds: 'Yes, she is an active muse'.

Paulina Ołowska in her studio
Photo © Rafal Milach





Here I get curious, as Filipappou is otherwise known as the Hill of the Muses and I have a longstanding fascination with these mystical, inspiring creatures, protecting precise arts and sciences in close range to my home. I've looked for them here, but the problem with most painterly depictions of the muses is that they are rendered with identical physical features and no distinctive sense of style. In short, they are presented to us like latter-day clones. Take away their accessories and it will be difficult to tell them apart. They might resemble the unnamed model behind Courbet in his atelier, rather passive and denuded not only of her clothing but also of personality, gazing with the artist onto the landscape nearing completion on his easel.

By contrast, *The painter* is alone in her studio, a woman whose allure comes as much from her abstraction (she is no one person in this world in particular, but a figment of Ołowska's imagination) as from her specificity (she has both a sense of style and intimate knowledge of a métier). Painting, which predates contemporary art in general by centuries, is her specialised knowledge. And she gazes straight out of her picture, at us, at the world, with all the confidence such special savvy affords. Among such 'active muses' that Ołowska has recently created in her studio, there

is also *The gardener after Valerie Finnis* (sporting the same steady gaze as *The painter*, albeit with her own grounded stance and, of course, wardrobe), *The lepidopterist* (dancing with graceful abandon with a giant butterfly) and *The mycologist* (who could have been part of the actual mushroom hunt Ołowska organised in the autumn of 2016 for artists and friends, reviving a tradition that is dying somewhat with the introduction of mass grocery chains after keeping many a Polish family, certainly mine, better nourished and in touch with the rhythms of the land as far back as stories reach). With varied strokes, each painting is a renewed experiment in how to touch the canvas, allowing a personality to emerge that is given individual life. And – most crucially perhaps – this individuality does not equal isolation. Rather, each woman has a distinct and intimate relationship with her environment.

Clothes, architecture, land, flora, fauna, objects that get the same loving treatment (in paint) as people, suggesting animate possibilities – Ołowska's female figures are all the more alive and distinct because they are taking active part in the life around them. They have a ground to stand on. Continue studying their feet ...

As with these women, so too with the artist in her studio and indeed outside of it. The recent

paintings evidence Ołowska's growing affection for the environs of Rabka Zdrój. They appear in an enchanted key and extend her realm of study and experimentation – the forest where she organised that mushroom hunt as part of *Mycological Theater*; the Kadenówka Villa (seen peeking behind the wisteria tree in the eponymous painting), once owned by a spa developer in the area, which served as a base for the amateur mycologists and which Ołowska continues to develop as an artists' retreat; and the puppet theater that she refurbished with a mural and the Gazda department-store neon, which she restored in continuation of her loving preservations of similar socialist-era artefacts in Warsaw – might all these spaces be real allegories for an expanded notion of the artist's studio?

SEE PAULINA OŁOWSKA'S WORK AT NGV TRIENNIAL UNTIL 15 APRIL 2018.

(left) Paulina Ołowska's studio
Photo © Rafał Milach

(right) Paulina Ołowska, *The painter* (2016)
(bottom) Paulina Ołowska's display during NGV Triennial, National Gallery of Victoria

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