

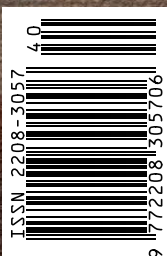
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KARLA MARCHESI

Living in Berlin, and approaching the age of 40, Karla Marchesi has found a strong female voice and the gift of time, fuelled by painterly liberation and a gutsy libido. Her new works exploit scale, humour and conceptual curiosities to climax as ‘impossible bouquets’.

FEATURE *by* LOUISE MARTIN-CHEW

DESIROUS





KARLA MARCHESI
Morning Glory, 2022
oil on linen
180 x 150 cm
Opposite
KARLA MARCHESI
Pleasure Garden, 2022
oil on linen
180 x 150 cm
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KARLA MARCHESI
The Crane Wife, 2022
oil on linen
180 x 150 cm
Courtesy the artist
and Jan Manton
Gallery, Brisbane

catalogue, of Marchesi in a fluoro pink boiler suit, sitting with a phallus-shaped cactus which rears thornily between her twill-clad legs. In the paintings, curtains of human hair conceal and reveal unashamedly vulval shapes, art historical references spin to privilege the female and offer up mythological references to Baubo, the Greek goddess of mirth. The botanical merges with the surreal, the organic and the sexual in these decadently beautiful and spikily revelatory assays into lust and desire, evoking every fetish.

The contemporary context Marchesi refers to emerges from some enforced isolation in Berlin during the pandemic, combined with news of Australia's belated #MeToo movement, with revelations from Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins in 2021, overlaid with her own experiences as an Australian woman.

"I was very much wrestling with those issues even before then. I am approaching 40 now. I've had my own successes and failures in relationships and am very aware of what has taken me to this point in time, how I was socialised as a younger female in the 1990s, taught to make myself small in terms of my behaviour – for personal safety. You're just, in a way, courting patriarchal power, tolerating line-crossing conversations and behaviour, and having to navigate a place that actually makes you diminished, rather than one that supports you and allows you to flourish."

Her residency in Berlin has freed Marchesi from what she identifies as a marked misogyny in Australian society. "I am in Berlin for personal liberty," she tells me. "I can walk home at any point of the day or night and have complete freedom without feeling that someone might follow me. And

Karla Marchesi left Australia ten years ago, already an accomplished painter, highly awarded graduate and artist of promise, noted with prizes, academic awards and grants. In a persuasive example of the power of life lived far from home, one of her opportunities included a six-month residency in Berlin (2012–13), which ended up changing her direction irrevocably.

The paintings she made and exhibited in Australia prior to her move to Berlin were polished expositions of piles of human detritus, the stuff that can accumulate inside and out of domestic suburban situations, like prescient visions of the aftermath of recent floods in Queensland and New South Wales. Yet they seem reserved, even quiet, in contrast to the style and expression of the fecund, floral 'impossible bouquets' (from 17th century Dutch painting) that comprised her

Desire Path exhibition at Jan Manton Gallery early in 2022.

In colour, treatment and sensibility, Marchesi expresses a full bottled and mature self-possession as an artist and woman in these large, surprisingly bawdy paintings crowded with humour, innuendo, musicality, art historical references and a completely contemporary level of rage that simmers hazily beyond their imagery. Between their humour and rage are myths, legends, floral forms and spiky succulents that work together to assert and celebrate the complications of female experience.

Over coffee, Marchesi tells *VAULT*, "I feel like they're all one step away from autobiography when it comes down to it, squared within a contemporary context." This interpretation is encouraged by the photograph on Manton's exhibition



no means no, they generally understand. Whereas in Australia no can somehow become a very threatening and potentially violent situation.”

Her liberation is untrammelled in these works, which are also facilitated by her enhanced skill set as a painter. She has held artist assistant jobs in renowned artist's studios, an experience that extended both her confidence and colour palette. “I feel very competent in my material skills and, being away, the primary thing for me is giving myself the gift of time.”

What Marchesi has unleashed in these works emerges as variously monstrous, hilarious and overwhelming, with seduction both the means and the method in paintings that are pressed close in pictorial space sufficiently shallow to elevate the heart rate.

Even in contrast to other recent exhibitions (such as *Sugar Fever Dream* at Nicholas Thompson Gallery in Melbourne in 2021), what these works possess is a glaring, almost fluorescent light and the disappearance of a level of chiaroscuro. The Baubo she describes as the exhibition's ‘guide’ to the broad territory of modern dating, relationships and the weirdly appropriate and human replicants visible in the botanical world.

The Baubo is known for championing female agency, such as when she lifted her skirt and exposed her vulva to Demeter, goddess of the harvest, who was grieving over the loss of her daughter Persephone to Hades. Other heroines of fecund culture summoned in these works include Sheela na gig, the 12th century architectural icon who revealed her vulva to ward off demons, and



KARLA MARCHESI
Nursery school, 2021
oil on linen
110 x 100 cm
Opposite
KARLA MARCHESI
Namaste bitches, 2021
oil on linen
130 x 100 cm
Courtesy the artist
and Nicholas Thompson
Gallery, Melbourne

Medusa who was assaulted, raped and then cast aside, the first victim to be blamed for her violation by others.

In her exhibition statement, Marchesi wrote: “There is a distance between desire and beliefs, desire and reality, desire and opportunity. Socially constructed myths of hedonic desire and pleasure pose as propositional attitudes; that fulfilment of action tends to bring pleasure. In a Lacanian sense the result of transgressing the pleasure principle is not more pleasure, but instead pain. I’d add disappointment to the list. Slavoj Žižek puts it ‘desire’s *raison d’être* is not to realise its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire.’ At the very least we’ve all recently experienced the complicated relationship between desires, needs unmet and a revaluation of where

authentic satisfaction resides – even if often unobtainable.”

“When things become this absurd in the world,” relates Marchesi in conversation, “adding an absurd layer on your personal life, as an anchor I thought, ‘why not throw it up and drive it off the cliff and have some fun with it.’ There’s been a great liberation [for me] in terms of how I actually construct a painting, how I use colour, and how I allow more freedom and pivots in the making of it. I think that has come with a different level of personal confidence, not caring as much about the sensitivity of it being too close to me.”

Interlaced with the motifs that bind this work together so tightly is luscious colour. *Morning Glory* (2022) unites many different textures, hairy and spikily erect cactuses,



and long narrow blooms, sumptuously laced with vibrant blues and greens that elevate the whole surface to an ever-heightening crescendo. *Swingers* (2022) refers to the figure from Fragonard's *The Swing* (c.1767), ensconced "full frontal and pant-less" at the base of a huge and phallic succulent. Nipples grow ponytails of hair, floral orifices sport lips, leaves have bulging veins and flowers with long piercing stamens suggest unrestrained and healthy appetites emphasised by their size.

"They do have this kind of explosive scale that opens a swirling inner sensibility, you're swirling in the sky with them somehow," suggests Marchesi. "I'm a maximalist, I've always used the device of a visual overwhelm to allow that kind of relationship with it [the artwork]."

While Berlin continues to offer Marchesi incredible opportunities, she remains committed to Australia and continues to contribute to the local arts ecosystem. What is clear is that, wherever she goes next with her work, her trajectory as an artist will only continue to accelerate, driven by her hunger for conceptual curiosities. Her palette, materials and the firm grasp she has on empowered sexual agency make these 'impossible bouquets' objects of fanciful realities and subjective desires. **V**

Karla Marchesi is represented by Jan Manton Gallery, Brisbane and Nicholas Thompson Gallery, Melbourne.
janmantonart.com
nicholasthompsongallery.com.au

KARLA MARCHESI
Swingers, 2022
oil on canvas
89 x 74 cm

Courtesy the artist
and Jan Manton
Gallery, Brisbane