

Capitain Petzel

Mikołaj Sobczak

Le Boudoir de L'Amour

September 11 – October 19, 2024

Capitain Petzel is pleased to announce Mikołaj Sobczak's first solo exhibition with the gallery, opening as part of Berlin Art Week on September 11, 2024.

Mikołaj Sobczak's work focuses on the creation of alternative historical images, blending video and painting with performance, often in collaboration with German artist Nicholas Grafia. Sobczak's surreal, collaged narratives feature protagonists from queer and transgender activism, as well as countercultural emancipatory movements that challenge conventional and canonic historical perspectives through marginalized voices. The exhibition draws inspiration from the cafe and bookstore in the Parisian neighborhood of Montmartre allegedly operated by Eva Kotchever, a Polish-Jewish writer, activist, and queer icon, after her deportation from the US to Europe in the early 20th century. It is dedicated to such rumored and legendary spaces – cabarets, bookstores, cafes, and hotels – where queer individuals could authentically and safely express their identities, highlighting the revolutionary nature of the spaces themselves and forming a sense of community.

The gallery will be transformed into a theatrical setting, utilizing its windows and multiple levels, featuring three scenographic rooms with puppets and furniture, seven wooden cutouts, and a selection of paintings. Central to the exhibition are Kotchever and Sylvain Rubinstein, a Polish-Jewish dancer, performer, and resistance fighter. Both historical figures are closely associated with theater and the organization of spaces for revolutionaries, resistance movements, and queer communities. To further explore these themes, Capitain Petzel will host an Artist Talk with historians Joanna Ostrowska and Suzette Robichon, who are actively involved in reconstructing these biographies.

Eva Kotchever, also known as Eve Adams, was a notable figure in the early 20th-century queer community in New York City, where she ran Eve's Hangout, a tea room and underground lesbian club in Greenwich Village. In 1925, she was deported from the United States back to Europe due to her radical activities and writings. Her life in Poland remains largely undocumented, but she later relocated to Paris, where rumors suggest she organized a lesbian cabaret. In 1943 Kotchever and her partner Hella Olstein were arrested in Paris by German occupation forces and sent to Auschwitz concentration camp. Kotchever died after two days of imprisonment. Her legacy has recently begun to be recognized in France. In 2019, the city of Paris named a school and a street, Rue Eva-Kotchever, in Montmartre in the 18th arrondissement of Paris. The inscription on the street sign honors Kotchever as a 'Pionnière des Droits des Femmes' (Pioneer of Women's Rights).

Sylvain Rubinstein was renowned for his cross-dressing performances, where he performed under the stage name "Dolores". Rubinstein used his theatrical skills as a means of survival and resistance during the Nazi occupation, often disguising himself to evade capture. In Sobczak's dense and intensely stylized compositions, one can discern Rubinstein's likeness in various stages of his life – from his time as a performer alongside his sister Maria in the two-person flamenco act *Imperio and Dolores* to his later years as an aging recluse, recounting curious and tragic memories of his youth to a few interested historians. Rubinstein's involvement in the resistance movements and his ability to create safe spaces for queer individuals and revolutionaries are pivotal to understanding the intersection of art and activism.

The exhibition is organized in collaboration with Jester | Flanders Arts Institute.

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Mikołaj Sobczak (born 1989 in Poznań, Poland) studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in Mirosław Balka's Studio for Spatial Activities, was a scholarship holder at the Berlin University of the Arts, and graduated as a Masters student in 2019 at the Kunstakademie Münster. In 2024 Mikołaj Sobczak was holding an institutional solo exhibition at Jester – Flanders Arts Institute, Genk, Belgium. The artist will have a solo exhibition at Salzburger Kunstverein, Austria in 2025. Recent exhibitions also include Ludwig Forum, Aachen (2023); Kunsthalle Münster (2022-2023); Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2021); MUDAM, Luxembourg (2021) and Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw (2020). Works by Sobczak and Nicholas Grafia were purchased by the Stiftung Junge Kunst of the Friends of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen as part of the 2019 graduate exhibition of the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf.

Sobczak's works are held in the collections of Moderna Museet, Stockholm; Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf; Ludwig Forum, Aachen; The Perimeter, London; Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw and The National Museum, Gdańsk, among others.

In 2021, Sobczak was awarded Poland's most prestigious art prize, the Paszport Polityk. He was an artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam (2021-2023) and from September 2023 until February 2024 Sobczak was participating in the biannual residency program with Art Explora - Cité internationale des arts in Paris.