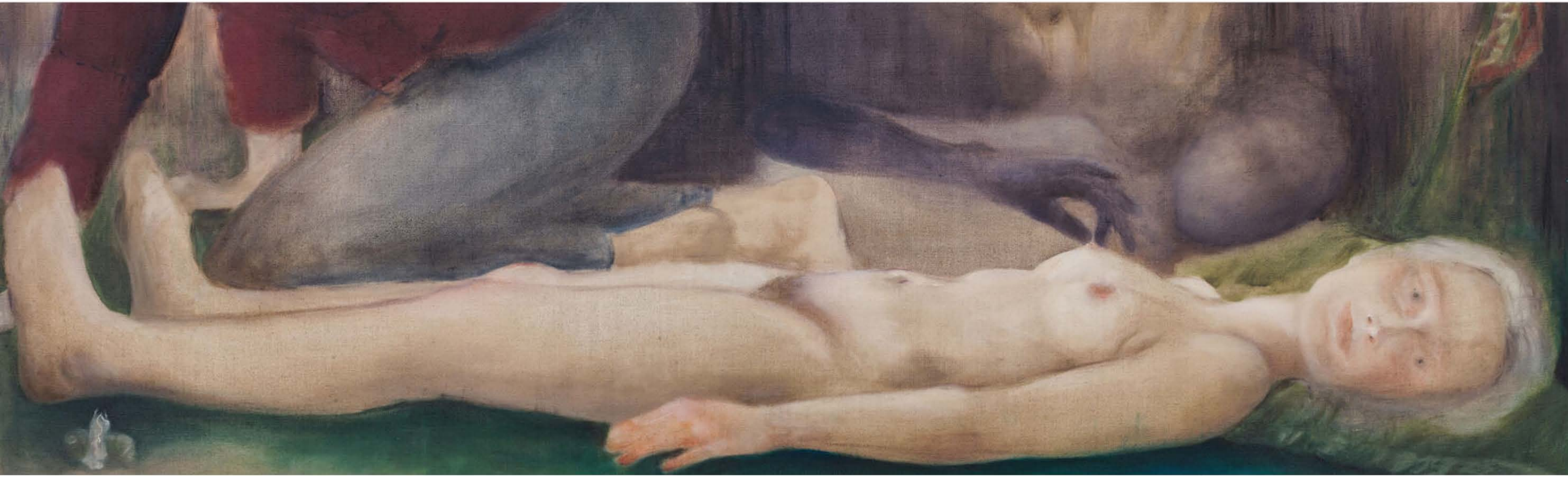




## Joanna Woś Dances the Line Between the Permitted and the Taboo

Laden with scenes of sex, the artist's new paintings at Croy Nielsen, Vienna, test the border of the disturbing

BY KRZYSZTOF KOŚCIUCZUK IN EU REVIEWS, EXHIBITION REVIEWS | 25 APR 22



A large canvas, nearly two metres tall, is the first thing to catch your eye. It appears to be a restaging of El Greco's *Holy Trinity* (1577–1579), with God the father holding the dead body of Christ surrounded by cherubs and angels, yet soon unfolds into a perplexing scene in toned-down, earthy hues. In Joanna Woś's *Untitled* (all works 2022), currently on view in 'Precious and Tender', a solo exhibition at Vienna's Croy Nielsen, Christ is replaced by a woman in a long dark jacket and pink stockings, her attire reminiscent of Pierre Klossowski or Balthus more than an altarpiece for a Benedictine abbey.



Joanna Woś, *Untitled*, 2022, installation view, Croy Nielsen, Vienna. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen; photo: Kunst-dokumentation.com

The Father and the Holy Ghost behind her now resemble a couple from a vintage wedding or baptism photo. A male figure to the right has their back to the viewer, hands to their side in a stiff pose, while another man to the left is delivering a kick to the nude woman, or possibly pressing his foot down on the head of yet another figure, a woman attempting to rise from the ground, propped up on her hands. Much like El Greco's *Trinity*, based in part on an engraving of Albrecht Dürer, the work abounds with references. But there's an element that seems out of place: a green plant in the lower left-hand corner. The artist tells me it was a reference to the surrealist painter Leonor Fini, at which point it becomes clear that in Woś's compositions not much is left to chance.



Joanna Woś, 'Precious and Tender', 2022, exhibition view, Croy Nielsen, Vienna. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen; photo: Kunst-dokumentation.com

These references, however, do not signal the artist's allegiance to a specific style or technique. They exist on an equal footing with other images that emerge within the multiple intermeshing perspectives, or materialize in the different sections of canvas and exist alongside one another, reminiscent of transition sequences in cinematic montage. In another notebook-sized work, two heads locked in a kiss seep through a contoured, ethereal image of a face with an open mouth. Some of Woś's fragments, however, are drawn from an utterly different realm: that of online images, including pornography and stock photography. Woś populates her pictures with characters from both history and lived experience, as well as with those existing as pure potentiality. Conceived as actors to be deployed in as many scenes and scenarios as possible, their exaggerated, denatured, emotions, seem as artificial as those of 16th-century models.



Joanna Woś, 'Precious and Tender', 2022, exhibition view, Croy Nielsen, Vienna. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen; photo: Kunst-dokumentation.com

Born in Poland, Woś studied architecture there before taking up visual arts in Wrocław and Vienna, where she is currently based. Her paintings are laden with scenes of sex, which often feature the artist's alter ego engaged in intimate acts that test the border of the disturbing. In many cases these works evoke historical or religious imagery, as in the reference to the *Trinity* discussed above, as well as a small-scale painting (all Woś's most recent works are untitled), which features a couple during intercourse surrounded by – and perhaps engaging with – a group of skeletons, an echo of earlier masterpieces such as *Death and the Woman* by Hans Baldung Grien (c. 1520).



Joanna Woś, *Untitled* 2022, oil on linen, 34 × 24 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; photo: Kunst-dokumentation.com

The sophisticated and yet raw scenes of sex, tension and violence in Woś's works are as much uncurbed visions of desire enacted by different characters as they are attempts at negotiating the nature of the obscene. Beneath the dream-like layer that conjures up explicit fantasies, Woś's paintings ask questions about the practices determining what may and may not be seen, between the permitted and the taboo. Where does the act of transgression truly lie: in the indecent scene portrayed, in the indecorous quotation, the irreverent modification, the profane juxtaposition – or a mere thought of them?

Joanna Woś's *'Precious and Tender'* is on view at Croy Nielsen, Vienna, until 30 April 2022

Main image: Joanna Woś, *Untitled*, 2022, oil on linen, 70 × 140 cm. Courtesy: the artist and Croy Nielsen, Vienna; photo: Kunst-dokumentation.com