



Sonya Derviz
Photographs by Kalpesh Lathigra
Words by Ella Slater

For the inaugural piece in our Features section, photographer Kalpesh Lathigra and writer Ella Slater visit Sonya Derviz in the studio. Six paintings have been made available on the occasion.

When I visit Sonya Derviz in her Dalston studio, there is a large painting leaning against the wall which feels strangely suited to the atmosphere outside, the smell of wet grass and an encompassing dampness filtering into the room. The work in question is a swampy landscape from which a tree emerges chaotically upwards. It's unclear whether this is a vivacious scene or a foreboding one. It reminds me of the seasonal limbo which characterises April, sitting neither completely within winter nor summer, a month in which everything lies in question. To talk about the weather is a cliché, but I've always found it fascinating at this time of the year. It is something unpredictable and undefinable; something wild.

Derviz's work is similarly "wild," by which I predominantly mean it is difficult to define – its subject is feeling, rather than narrative. Though her signature motifs are two archetypes of art history (the female face and the landscape), she engages with them beyond just representation, using the familiarity of her subjects as a way to induce new, more complex ways of viewing them. They are destabilised. The result is enigmatic, and deeply concerned with the human condition, the processes with which these motifs are painted intermingling with the natural mortality of body and nature. Both Derviz's environments and portraits are unknowable (they do not exist, having been constructed from various superimposed found images), yet there is something deeply familiar about them, as if strangers glimpsed in dreams. They evoke a strange, disconcerting sense of recognition despite their anonymity; a common language which eludes words. After all, what connects us more than our impermanence?



The first of Derviz's two subjects, the portrait, particularly treads the line between the known and unknown. The artist imbues faces devoid of names and histories with powerful emotional weight. Through the process of removing identity and instead focusing on individual, layered elements, she strives to paint no woman and all women simultaneously. Both beauty and nature have been utilised to repress and subdue women's individuality throughout history, and Derviz reclaims this, making visible the complexity beyond these archetypal forms; the complexity intrinsic to womanhood. In another sense, her anonymous images remind me of Marlene Dumas's *Chlorosis (Love Sick)* (1994), a series of twenty four portraits thinly washed in colour, apparitions of physical form and an intensely unified realisation of emotion. Like Dumas's work, in removing her subjects' identities, Derviz exacerbates the tension between the suggested, the displayed, and the hidden.

The artist's early works, begun during her BA at the Slade School of Fine Art, from which she graduated in 2018, were monumental and abstract, expressive investigations of beaming light and expansive darkness. When the suggestion of a figure was present, it yearned to emerge from the abstract setting within which it found itself, so the artist's journey to portraiture was a natural progression. In an interview published in *Curatorial Affairs*, Derviz spoke of the possibilities of the face as a site for artistic exploration: "Maybe it's to do with the kind of focus that you get being able to expand something so subjective, or a kind of 'constructed' representation. In a face, everything matters. And everything is emotion."

Recently, the artist tells me, she has been introduced to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which posits that language influences thinking, and therefore perception. She has translated this to the visual, meaning that the way in which we communicate influences what is communicated, hence, "the process becomes the core of meaning". Derviz's charcoal drawings have always played a major role in her development of this approach – they are immediate (often created *en plein air*), and expressive; dense with the moody lines and smudges which the medium allows. Until recently, they have largely remained separate from her works on canvas, but in paintings made over the last year, there is a greater and more direct transposition of these drawn elements.

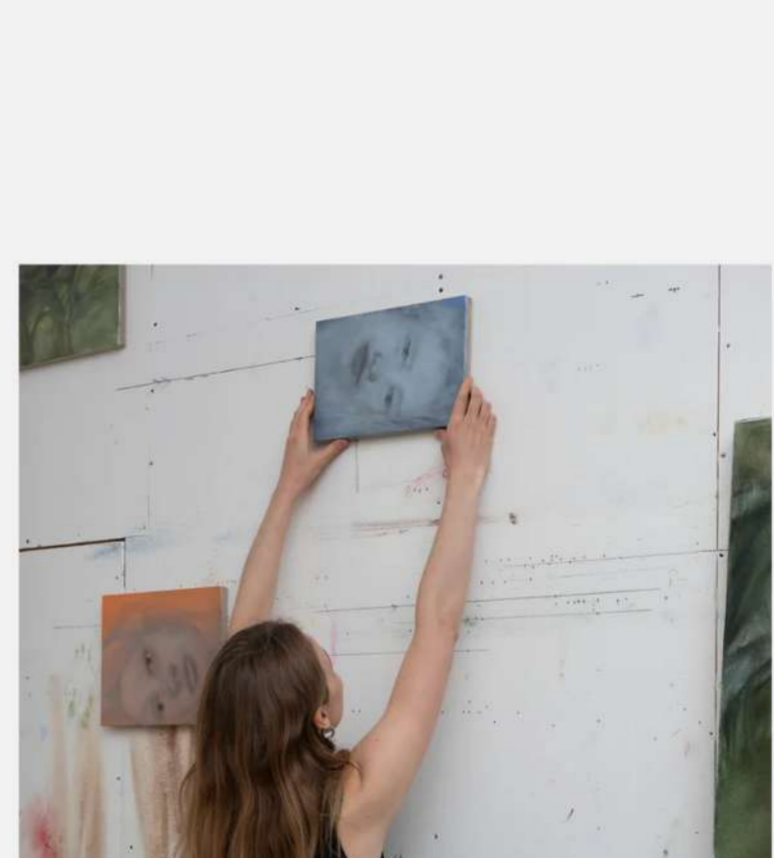


They allow Derviz to further individualise the found imagery with which she starts their creation, and which spans art historical references, film stills, photography and illustration. Drawings, she tells me, help her "let go of what I think a painting should look like". She speaks of the importance of their "rhythm", by which she means they are as much a product of the marks which form them as they are the subjects they depict. *Early rise* (2024) is a sunset coloured painting of a head on its side; resting or in some other realm. Its features are distinct but its eyes are the focal point: drawn in thick charcoal, they are a bank of nebulous expression. Throughout western art history, in which portraiture acted as mask (fattery, or falsehood), charcoal sketches were concealed beneath layers of thick oil paint. By leaving her charcoal marks visible, Derviz exposes what typically lies beneath: a sense of vulnerability, or what she calls a "place of transition".



As I talk to the artist, I get the sense that this approach to painting, rooted in process as meaning (form as content), extends to her understanding of art history. Her early references were primarily rooted in primitivist and self-taught art, such as that of the Georgian painter Niko Pirosmani, or the Yugoslav "naive" artists. She also cites the depictions of nature in paintings by Botticelli or Da Vinci as inspiration – for Derviz, *Primavera* (c.1470–1480)'s fascination lies in its minute particulars, such as the flowers on Flora's white dress, or the translucent gauzy robes of the Three Graces. These references may not be immediately obvious in the content of her own practice. Instead, they act more as facilitators for her investigations of the ways in which technique can be just as evocative as that which it illustrates. "There aren't any specific art movements or sets of references which are continuous for me," the artist tells me. "Instead, I think my practice is where these changing references find a continuity."

This continuity is rooted in the repetition of motif: portrait and landscape. Through this, Derviz fine-tunes the viewer to the subtle variations in these familiar scenes, manifested through changes in colour, mark and scale. Their reiteration is a musical stave, upon which rhythm and melody can be enacted. One of the artist's major influences is the composer, music theorist and painter Arnold Schoenberg, who depicted his self-portrait repeatedly. Though all show the same man, some are melancholy, some haunting, some disturbing. He once spoke of painting as "the same as making music. It was to me a way of expressing myself, of presenting emotions, ideas, and other feelings; and this is perhaps the way to understand these paintings – or not to understand them." Through repetition (limitation), Schoenberg relentlessly pursued the manifestation of the internal state on the external canvas, in a similar manner to Derviz's own practice. It seems to me to be more than a coincidence that the latter speaks often of art in the vocabulary of music.



As I spend more time with Derviz's work, her intuitive, monochromatic drawings become expressions of pure rhythm. The addition of colour, then, is a melodic method of abstraction, removing her figures from immediate reality and placing them in their own anonymous and emotionally loaded realms. For her first solo exhibition with Sherbet Green, *Closer* (2023), Derviz presented a series of paintings comprised of female figures, with titles such as *Mad girl* (2023), *Wild girl* (2023), *Wise girl* (2023) and *Sweet fall* (2023). Some of these women recline nude, others stare upwards and beyond the boundaries of their canvas. Several of the figures are set against a background of cadmium red, at once violent, passionate and revolutionary. Wild girl, which caught my attention, presents a hazy, blush-coloured face whose contours blur into her hair as if a lion's mane, a devastating play of pigment. It was while working on this series that the artist became interested in the subjectivity of chromatic values, as rendered in the works of Josef Albers, or the colour field painters he would influence. In order to enable colour to function as part of her paintings' content, Derviz tells me, she begins from one shade, and works outwards. After the first layer is set, this is an organic process; one of feeling, rather than premeditation. Using a wet-on-wet method further allows these colours to bleed into, and influence, one another, creating the impression that the picture contains a depth of field, while retaining its delicate thinness.

There is an unshakeable vulnerability to these surfaces and their present figures, yet her subjects refuse to be subdued – they are defiant and complex; both individual (a song), and collective (a symphony). They posit art as possibility, resisting definition and resolution, suggesting – but never revealing – their own psychic projections. Derviz not only testifies to the expressive and connective potential of the face and the landscape, but the expressive, connective, and "wild" potential of the act of painting itself.

