

6

Studio
Visit

N
a
n
a

W
O
l
k
e

Words:
Hana
Čeferin

Photography:
Mateja
Klinc



The emerging artist **Nana Wolke** is known for her glamorous yet unsettling glimpses into the seemingly mundane. Born in Ljubljana, she is currently based in London, where she finished her MFA at Goldsmiths University. During our studio visit, we chat while she's preparing for a large solo exhibition at N1COLETT1, discussing how cinema can take the form of painting, why hunting lights are



her favourite tool, what one sees through a seedy hotel room peephole at five in the morning and what a London taxi driver does while having their car washed.

I arrive to Nana Wolke's studio late, courtesy of two missed trains to Whitechapel and a better half of an hour spent looking for the building entrance to Wolke's studio. Netflix is shooting a series in the industrial complex, having seen the potential to stage hospital sets in the numerous floors and halls of the sprawling grey building. When I finally ascend into the small space where I expect to be awed by Wolke's imposing large-format paintings, I'm caught by surprise – the space is almost completely empty. Apart from a few sketches and empty canvases, waiting to be stretched and prepped for her next work, there is only a small format painting in bright red and light pink hues, revealing an ambiguous detail of a shoulder, a dress strap slipping off it, and wax like liquid dripping over the small portion of the body sketched out on canvas. "I wanted to keep this one," Nana Wolke smiles almost apologetically. The main reason for the blank walls of her studio is the fact that Wolke is highly in demand – the works at her solo exhibition in Vienna's VIN VIN gallery were sold out, and at the time of our conversation she's exhibiting three large format works at a group exhibition in Shanghai's Linseed Projects gallery.

play with the viewer, to pinpoint moments teetering between curiosity and discomfort, awakening desire while reprimanding us for it, is what draws so powerfully to her works.

She approaches her work much like a director approaches a film – there is a script, a scene to be built, music, props. But the final result is still a painterly interpretation, choosing to hide the entirety of the process between the canvases, showing only selected details of a larger whole. "Historically, the role of painting was to show the main event. Instead, I'm utilizing editing techniques of film, pausing and gluing together seemingly random moments in-between. If I am showing you the 'wrong sequence', then there must also be the right one." She's building a narrative through hints and suggestions, leaving the viewer to fill in the blanks on their own. She takes photographs of what later ends up on canvases, often working with both actors and models impersonating a role, as well as real people familiar with locations to build the desired scenes. Yet the space is always the central protagonist of her narratives, setting the tone for the entire course of action. "I'm interested in the liminal spaces of transition, whether a hotel or a



Her studio is soaked in afternoon light, the empty canvases not yet indicating that something sinister often inhabits them. For Wolke, the past two years were busy, with solo shows in Fondazione Coppola, Vicenza (2021), VIN VIN, Vienna (2021), and Castor Gallery, London (2022). Wolke has always been interested in the dark and the eerie, in the delicate line between desire and shame, the forbidden and the tolerated, reality and fiction. When she was younger, she was a metalhead, later a goth – hinted at now only by the Black Sabbath T-shirt she dons for the occasion. Her ability to

car park – these are places you only enter momentarily, they're not designed for one to linger," she says of her fascination with the often grimy, dark spaces inhabiting her works.

Her most expansive project in 2021 was the solo exhibition in VIN VIN gallery in Vienna, where for the first time, she attempted to work with an actual space, transferring its atmosphere into her works. In the exhibition titled 4:28–5:28 am, Wolke was inspired by the Princess Hotel, a seedy two-star establishment near King's Cross, still bearing traces of the area's unsavoury past, marred by

drugs and prostitution. “The format of these types of hotels, in fact ordinary townhouses, is a short stay offer – the people who stay there either miss their trains, can’t afford nicer accommodation or just want a night of fun with no questions asked. These places don’t want you to be a guest, they want you to do your thing and get out.” She spent three full nights in the hotel, staying awake between 4:28 and 5:28 in the morning. “I’m interested in the idea of time and constructing a narrative



through it. I chose this specific window because it’s an hour of the night when no one is supposed to be awake, unless they’re working a night shift – or doing something they would prefer to keep in the shadows. There’s an element of intrigue to night time.”

The paintings are not the only constituents of her projects, which are as much about building an atmosphere as they are about the images themselves. Works from the Princess Hotel were accompanied by a soundscape of this eerie time of night, the recording of switching channels during the so-called “graveyard slot” of TV programming. The musical arrangement sways between sex ads, night-time panorama broadcast and telemarketing programs, building a strange vocal impression of the uncertain hour. She worked with the composer Gašper Torkar to manipulate it into a muddy sound, mimicking the experience of pressing an ear to the hotel room door and hearing only muffled sounds of the activities inside. Even the invitation to the exhibition was a kind of a prop, a page torn out of a fictional Princess Hotel notepad with the meeting hour scribbled on it in a hurry. Wolke’s projects might work with actual spaces yet rarely leave them untouched, adding elements that distort the boundaries between reality and fantasy. In the end, it hardly matters whether the events unfolding in the hotel between 4:28 and 5:28 are fictional or not. The depicted scenes are often intentionally



ambiguous, leaving us struggling to find an explanation for what's unfolding – a partly concealed figure taking off someone's boot, a stranger leaving a hotel room, observed only through a peephole, two figures in an embrace that could either be loving or threatening. Are they friends or foes? The uncomfortable feeling is heightened by the fact that we are looking into something that feels inherently private, almost as if we're trespassing, yet still curious at what we're seeing.

The works presented in VIN VIN, much like the works shown in Fondazione Coppola the same year, are bathed in a bright red light, signifying something between desire and danger. She uses a hunting light to illuminate the action, a small but powerful torch made to seek out animal footprints and find prey in the darkness of the forest. Different colour lenses are used for different terrains – it was only recently that she replaced the deep red with blue and yellow versions of the hunting light. The objective behind this unlikely source of light is connected to ideas of looking and being looked at, the position of the protagonists inside the paintings and the viewer on the other side. "In every work, the relation between the subject and the one looking is important, revealed by their POV, as well as position in the space. The viewer becomes an active witness in looking at the works – much like a split-second glimpse at a car crash when driving by, it's a private moment playing out on the public stage. A brief glance into something you weren't really supposed to see, and probably didn't even want to, but you couldn't make yourself look away." Because the light requires darkness, she always works by night, ideally right at the moment when

day is fading and the darkness is still bright enough to reveal more than it intends. Each painting hints at a scene from a film, except the film seems to be stuck at the wrong frame.

The unsettling feeling that we aren't necessarily seeing what we should be, that something is off, is what all her projects have in common. Rather than focusing on the climactic moment when everything is revealed to the viewer, she portrays glimpses into scenes that are just about to unfold or have just passed, leaving the viewer to make up the rest of the story. What makes this strategy efficient is our inherent fascination with the sinister and forbidden, proven yet again by the recent dramatic rise in popularity of the true crime genre. Wolke provides an intelligent comment on the phenomenon, unmasking the real culprit in her uncanny images – it's us, the viewers, bearing our own responsibility as onlookers.

As we speak, she is preparing for a large solo exhibition in London's hip gallery NICOLETTI, coming together under the title *Wanda's*. On view from November 2022, the focus of the exhibition is Westway, a West London underpass where taxi drivers park their cars for the day and retreat to a football field above in the meantime. Her newest exhibition project builds on the idea of liminal space, a space we often inhabit without being conscious of it, its identity hidden beneath a facade of functionality. The story is set in North Kensington's Westway Roundabout, a carriageway section of the road connecting London's Inner Ring to its western suburbs – already existing on a precarious midpoint between affluent and impoverished parts of the city. In 2017, a devastating fire broke out in the Grenfell Tower block of flats in North Kensington, causing a large community to gather around Westway – playgrounds, football fields and strange parks rose next to the highway's bustle, answering to a demand despite the unlikelihood of its surroundings. Wolke was intrigued by the role of Westway acting as a line between two disparate worlds, as well as its recognizable retro futuristic architecture that most notably, the writer of *Crash* J.G. Ballard used as a setting of several of his novels. In her most ambitious project to date, the central protagonists became a football pitch and a parking garage for taxi drivers sprawled beneath it, both underneath the concrete, tumultuous mass of Westway. It involved not only the artist but an entire film crew. While Wolke is a painter, this work is scripted situation, adapting and morphing the space where it was held: "I'm interested in the space itself, who feels welcome in it, and who reroutes their Uber away from it. If you stick around a place long enough, you can get really carried away in the worlds it opens. I like to keep elements that are already there but add something that shifts the reality of a space, forming a fiction in which it's difficult to discern what is real and what isn't. That uncertainty seems very familiar in today's competitive image economy where everyone is participating in their own personal brand of worldbuilding online."

Invitation to *Wanda's*, NICOLETTI, 2022.
Courtesy of the artist.





Nana Wolke, you, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.



Nana Wolke, In Another, 2021. Courtesy of the artist

Nana Wolke, other lies, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.



Nana Wolke, country, 2021. Courtesy of the artist.





Installation view of *Wanda's*, NICOLETTI, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.

Installation view of *Wanda's*, NICOLETTI, 2022. Courtesy of the artist.



The liminal, transitory space and its unlikely inhabitants drive the new project as much as her earlier work. “The parking garage is the definition of liminal space. You enter only for a short time and your stay is perfunctory,” she says of her choice of scenery. Yet there is a life lived in this unlikely place – taxi drivers bring in their cars, have them washed, and play football on the pitch aboveground in the meantime. “My main interest is not in the personal stories,” she explains. “I’m interested in the mechanics of this transitory life.” While the setting is already intriguing, Wolke brings in her own protagonist – Wanda, a master of ceremonies and alter ego of the visual artist and performer Jean-François Krebs. She arrives at the scene – the car park – in a god-like glow of deep blue light to a crowd gathered there to greet her. While Wanda and her followers engage in a choreographed ritual, a religious practice of sorts, the taxi drivers play out a game of sweaty football on the pitch above. The two scenes connect in an array of large format canvases, the red light so representative of her earlier work now replaced by hues of blue, interrupted by flashes of sickly yellow and ominous black. We see only carefully chosen glimpses into this absurd scenario: close ups of Wanda’s manicured hands and an obscenely large diamond ring in a work titled *No Thank You*, the gathered black cabs and surreal Great Danes in *Ladies and Gentlemen*, and the carefully folded football shirts in *Without Even Taking Off His Makeup*.

Of course, the viewer is not given the luxury of grasping the whole story. In the exhibition at *NICOLETTI*, the short film portraying the events unfolding in *Westway* is positioned so that we cannot see it fully, screen against the wall, allowing the viewers to discern only an outline of what might be happening in its sequences. “It’s like watching people through the windows of their living rooms and seeing the television light change the colours of the room, but not what’s on the screens. The desire to see is mixed with the shame of looking, a voyeurism of sorts,” she says of her choice to conceal the film in the exhibition. “When you’re at the cinema you have to sit down and submit to the timeframe of the narrative, start to finish. But in a painting, time appears to have an eternal quality to it. Combining characteristics of both – the soundtrack moving forward without a moving image, and nonlinear jumps into scenes mapping out each section of the space where the action is unfolding – allows me to play with the perception of time specific to each of these mediums.” Wolke has a cinematic language of her own, constructed through painting as well as sound. Her newest project perhaps most vividly shows how her works are constructed like film sets, even the invitation to the show reminiscent of a film poster, which could easily belong to Kubrick.

The mood Wolke’s works emanate is exacerbated by the overarching feeling that we should not really be looking into these private spaces, that what’s unfolding in them couldn’t really have happened, yet being intrigued by the possibility that

it did. It’s like seeing something out of the corner of our eye for the briefest moment and being left with the uncanny feeling that our sense of reality was somehow disrupted. Of course, the unsettling scenes are often conveyed through an aesthetic of glamour and elegance, Wolke being well aware that intrigue and a longing for beauty are friends of sin and transgression. The ideas of desire and shame, looking and being looked at, are something the artist is very good at manipulating. On purpose, her scenarios unfold before the gaze of someone left out of the painting. Who is the missing link? In an intricate game of whodunnit, Wolke builds a complex relationship between the desire to look and the shameful act of looking – and it makes us want to see all the more.

By the time this article was published, Wolke has already changed studios, being at the mercy of London’s real estate whirlpool. Her red leather sofa was moved with her, as well as her paints, brushes and a worn-down metal trolley. Her new works will most likely be sold, clearing up space for her next immersive project. Wolke gives the feeling that she’s comfortable with her success, almost effortlessly manoeuvring the often-toxic world of contemporary art. Her hyper productive way of making new works for each exhibition must take a toll, I ask reluctantly, especially when spaces like the *Princess Hotel* and *Westway* become an obsession, capturing her full attention for longer periods of time. She smiles at this, a defiant glint in her eyes. I’m sure her next obsession is already in the works.

