

**MONICA MAJOLI**



**AIR DE PARIS**

# MONICA MAJOLI

Born 1963 in Los Angeles, United States

Lives and works in Los Angeles, United States

«Monica Majoli is an artist, educator, and champion of others in Los Angeles's art and queer communities. She is primarily a painter deeply invested in the traditions of the medium while exploring subjects tied to sex, sexuality, power, and alternative lifestyles such as BDSM.»

Her work often depicts scenes of sexual fetishism, a theme that serves as a decoy for larger underlying political concerns. Majoli's work Investigates «themes and rituals of identity, intimacy, and mortality» and «is both a site for catharsis and an admission of its irresolution.» Her series, Black Mirror, includes portraits of women, «their profiles drawn in close-up in coloured pencil, forming a chiaroscuro effect on the sheets of black paper.

The «polished nocturnal portraits» are made from memory, and according to Majoli, «The otherworldly half-image that is reflected by black mirror coincides with both the internal state of desire and a crisis in belief in representational painting. In these works, the surface itself holds the fetishistic power, rather than the act depicted.»

Monica Majoli has exhibited widely in the United States and abroad. Her Rubberman series was featured in the 2006 Whitney Biennial and the 2006 Berlin Biennial of Contemporary Art at KW Institute of Contemporary Art. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles and the Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco all include her work in their permanent collections.

# **SELECTED EXHIBITIONS**

# **Distant Lover 2009–2024**

## **Curated by Kathrin Bentele**

### **Kunstverein Düsseldorf, Germany**

#### **12.10.2024 — 26.01.2025**

Starting from the idea of the artist as lover, Monica Majoli's exhibition *Distant Lover 2009–2024* traces the artist's long-term engagement with questions of the body, desire, and memory. Informed by experiences of HIV and AIDS in the 1980s and '90s, Majoli explores intimacy and corporeality as proof of physical presence, and as a possibility for projection, encounter, and empathy. Her work consistently examines the body as a site that produces desire and pleasure but is also marked by fleetingness and transience, and in which both of these aspects are always inherently connected to each other.

In *Distant Lover 2009–2024*, body, document, and fictional image enter into close relation: while Majoli's portraits are fictional, they are based on photographs of real people or real encounters from the past, giving them the character of a testimony, a document, a memento, or an obituary. While some of her portraits are explicitly autobiographical, capturing intimate encounters with former lovers (*Black Mirror*), others are based on found erotic photographs taken from queer 'physique' magazines of the 1970s and '80s (*Blueboys*, *Olympus*). These images are characterized by great tenderness and intimacy, while at times they are more directly erotic – their affective presence stands in deliberate contrast to the fact that many of those pictured would die of AIDS only a decade later. Majoli's portraits, in this sense, are also an attempt to make present what is absent, and to make it live on as an artistic document or artifact.

Majoli's exploration of notions of intimacy is also transposed into the physical process of image-making. Her white-line woodcut prints are created using a simplified version of the traditional Japanese *mokuhanga* technique, producing moments of physical imprint and transfer between the (depicted) body and the hand of the artist. The psychological connotations inherent in the term "imprint" also suggest this is a search for moments of affection and of being affected – it indicates a deep artistic involvement with images and images of bodies that have imprinted themselves in the artist's memory and want to be preserved. Majoli expands this into a wider exploration of how images are able to create a sense of presence – how they encounter, confront, and "approach" us as viewers, but also how they challenge our gazes and desires and make them visible.

A tension can be felt throughout the exhibition, between what is permanent and enduring and what is only temporary and transient: while Majoli's works are always preceded by studies produced over multiple years, the moments of bodily presence they record are always fleeting. The newly conceived work cycle *Olympus* (2024) marks the center of this engagement: It is based on the eponymous 1970s queer erotic magazine, which restaged images of bodies from antiquity in an attempt to open up new spaces for desire and allow for a more holistic view of classical ideals of masculinity. Acting as a deliberate counterpoint to the supposed universality and dominance of the canonical body, *Olympus* is a haunting reflection on the vulnerability and evanescence of the body, and on the deeply emotional significance of time for our physical existence.



Exhibition views  
Distant Lover 2009 - 2024  
Kunstverein Düsseldorf, Germany  
2024-2025  
Photo : © Cedric Mussano



Exhibition views

Distant Lover 2009 - 2024

Kunstverein Düsseldorf, Germany

2024-2025

Photo : © Cedric Mussano



Exhibition views

Distant Lover 2009 - 2024

Kunstverein Düsseldorf, Germany

2024-2025

Photo : © Cedric Mussano



Exhibition views

Distant Lover 2009 - 2024

Kunstverein Düsseldorf, Germany

2024-2025

Photo : © Cedric Mussano



## Blueboys

Galerie Buchholz, New York, United States

08.11 — 21.12.2019

Monica Majoli took inspiration for her newest body of work from the sexy post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS hiatus still known as the '70s, particularly centerfolds from Blueboy, which billed itself as “the national magazine about men.”

(...) Blueboy had a small part in the push to transvalue issues of class specificity into issues of taste—what’s classy, what’s not—rather than only into realpolitik. Some of the magazine’s models were trade, which was the vernacular before gay-for-pay, and before the entire mainstreaming of sexual preference—with its radical potential for undoing rote and rigid forms of relationality—became gay-for-pay or pay-for-gay—PayPal (read GayPal) in a sense, before the fact. In the quest to sell its dream, America has always privileged affluence, a dream of financial security, even clout, wooing a striving majority, whether they were part of a minority population or not, to vote with their wallets.

(...) Inspired by mokuhanga, Japanese woodblock printing, Majoli’s large-scale Whiteline woodcut watercolor paintings are based on images from Blueboy, circa 1976-79, a period she considers “the halcyon years of gay liberation, when homosexuality was understood to be politically charged and under threat, presaging the trauma of the AIDS epidemic.” Halcyon provides a way to understand the aesthetic of the soft-core centerfolds of the magazine: the lighting is sun-kissed, the palette warm with rose-golds’ ember glow, the bodies toned and unmanscaped. Mother Nature smiles on these men making themselves available to other men, a possibility she always intended. (Long before homosexuality was legal, porn would show men in showers or out in nature, among flora and fauna, and it would be theoretically stingy not to see such scenarios as emphasizing the cleanliness and naturalness of such pleasures, when they were still seen to be “dirty” and “unnatural.”) The models were known by their first names (“Joe”, “Roger”); some appeared a single time, while others became featured players; they all had histories, lives, and they’re seen in repose that is also work. Their cocks, balls, and buns remain, as they were, magnificent and inviting. The hard-edged, roided body of the 1980s—a “built” body weaponized, Ramboized (apotropaically and/or phantasmatically) against viral invasion and wasting—is nowhere to be seen.

While considering all that is lost when the map of masculinity permits few ways to trace the radical potential of male vulnerability, tenderness, as a source of strength and communing, don’t fail to reckon with what Monica achieves with the gentle but grand shift in scale from the magazine centerfold: these works are history paintings. They chronicle not only soft power rather than toxic masculinity, but also sexual fantasy, intimacy in which the nameable earns no more importance than the nameless or unnameable. The pigments with which the paintings are made, water-soluble, suggest tears and/or sweat (synecdoches for other bodily fluids), no longer mistaken as dangerous, contaminant, but, whether joyfully or sadly, communicating without need of language. These radiant, touching pictures embody a vision of how once we were in love with life.

— Bruce Hainley



Exhibition views

Blueboys

Galerie Buchholz, New York, United States

2019

# Pam

## Air de Paris, Paris, France

### 21.03 — 10.05.2014

Pam is an exhibition comprised of four paintings of the same woman over the span of twenty years. Three recent portraits on view recall the Black Mirror series, which Majoli developed from 2008-2014. The series was based on photographs of former lovers as reflected in the black mirrors which line the bedroom of her Los Angeles home. Here, however, the visual interference is less pronounced, so much so that the artist sees these works as a distinct body of images. For her, in this group of paintings, the return to employing oil paint as a medium is also a return to a face she associates with the history of European painting. The three new portraits are juxtaposed with the artist's first autobiographical painting, made in 1992 and included in her first exhibition at Air de Paris in 1995. This lapidary painting on pentagonal panel documents in a devotional mode the artist with Pam in her bedroom as it was then. Rife with symbolic imagery, Majoli explains that she was challenged by the intensity of the format and sought to paint an image that held the power of the shape itself. She identified Pam with a bird and in this domestic shape she cites a birdcage. In bringing these paintings together for her fourth solo exhibition at Air de Paris, she examines not only her subject, Pam, but herself in the form of the paintings themselves, a depiction of the artist's divergent and related concerns over the course of two decades of painting. Most of all she is reasserting her work's affinity with a personal, domestic history and an ambivalence - the exhaustion/permanence of desire - which her pictures succeed neither in resolving nor truly revivifying precisely because they share its fetishes.





Exhibition views  
Pam  
Air de Paris, Paris, France  
2014

# **SELECTED ARTWORKS**



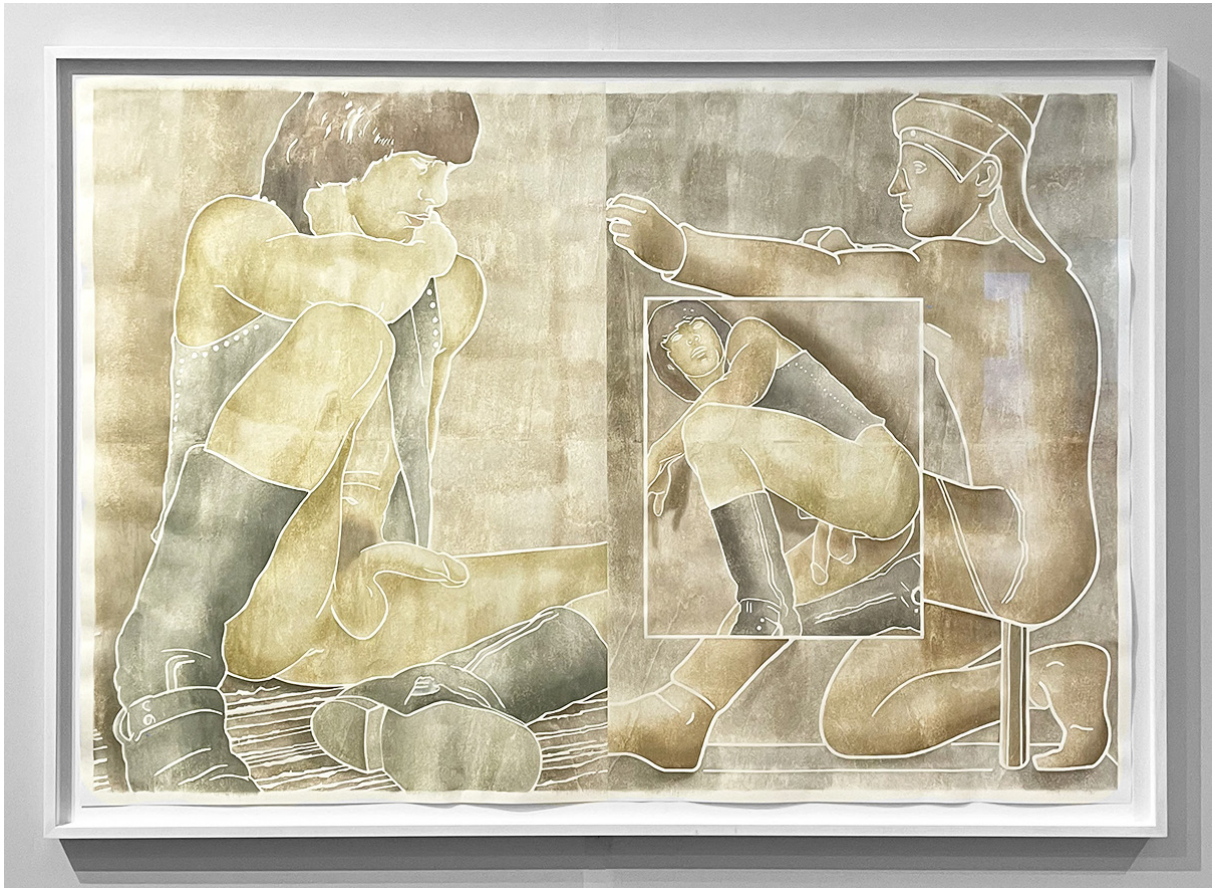
Olympus (Youth / Erron)

2024

Watercolor woodcut transfer on paper, framed

150,5 x 115,5 x 5,5 cm

Unique



Olympus (Erron/Archer)

2024

Watercolor woodcut transfer on paper, framed

150,5 x 214,5 x 5,5 cm

Unique



Olympus (Erron with helmet)

2024

Watercolor woodcut transfer on paper, framed

150,5 x 115,5 x 5,5 cm

Unique





Olympus (Vase / Charioteer)

2024

Watercolor woodcut transfer on paper, framed

150,5 x 214,5 x 5,5 cm

Unique



Playguy (Ben)

2023

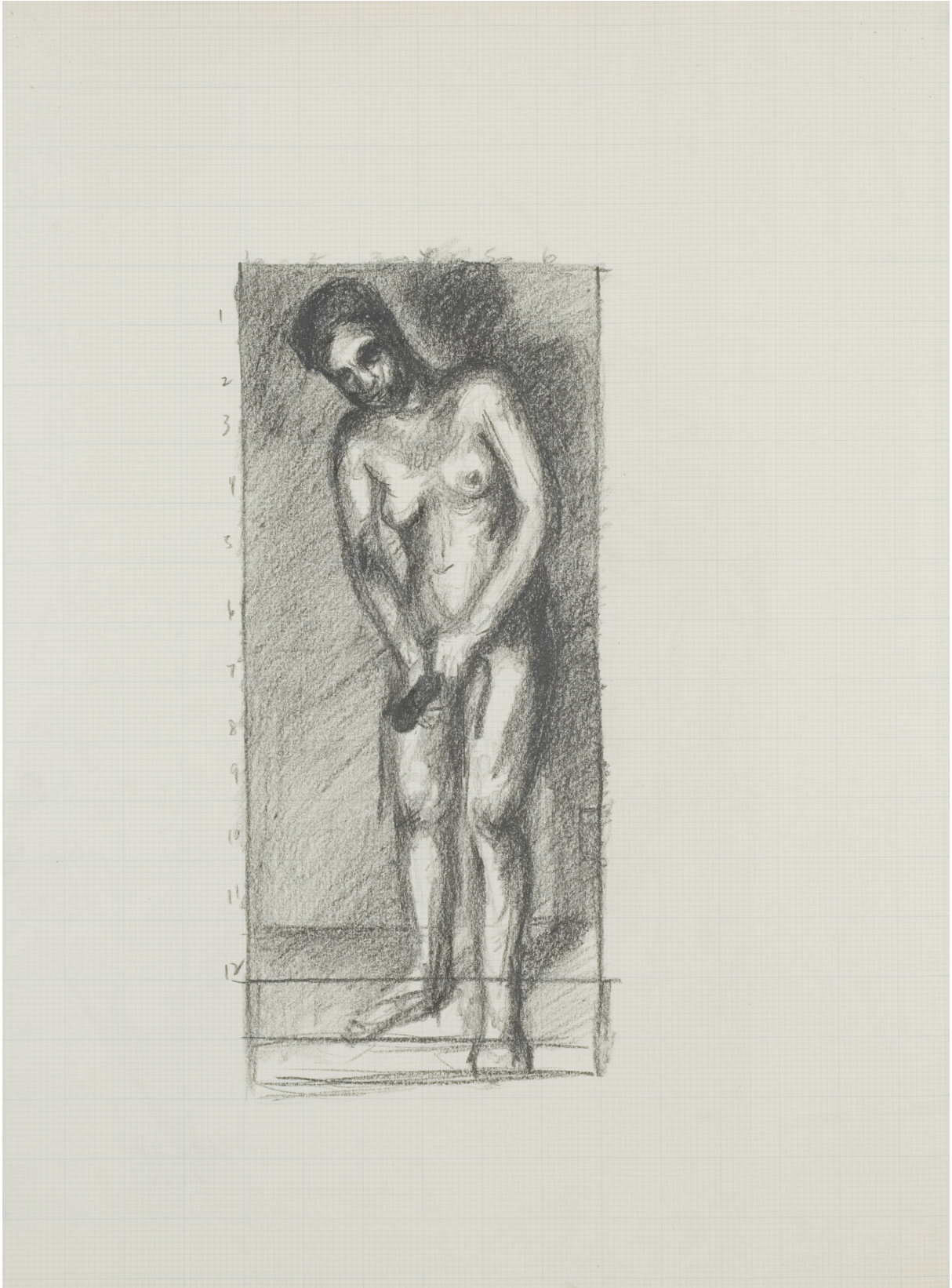
Watercolor woodcut transfer on paper, framed

138,4 x 199,1 x 5,4 cm

Unique



Study Blueboy (Joe)  
2017  
Framed whiteline woodcut, watercolor on paper  
53 x 74 cm  
Unique



Untitled  
1992  
Framed charcoal on paper  
77,3 x 65,2 cm  
Unique



Untitled  
 1992  
 Framed charcoal on paper  
 77 x 65 cm  
 Unique