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CRITIC'S PICK

‘Apolonia, Apolonia’ Review: A Whole Life in Art

The painter Apolonia Sokol is the ostensible subject of a wide-ranging documentary about life itself.



The artist Apolonia Sokol in the documentary “Apolonia, Apolonia.” Lea Glob

“For as long as I can remember, I’ve seen the world through my camera,” a woman’s voice says in the early moments of “Apolonia, Apolonia.” Onscreen, we’re watching — presumably through that same camera — a young woman, strong features, entrancing smile, dark circles under her eyes, bearing the expression of a person who’s not afraid of the lens one bit. “But no motif,” the voice continues, “has caught my eye as she did.”

The face belongs to [Apolonia Sokol](#), but the voice belongs to Lea Glob, the filmmaker who followed Sokol off and on [for 13 years](#). The pair first met in 2009, and Glob, who is Danish (and speaks mostly in Danish throughout the film), decided to make Sokol the subject of a film school assignment: to create a documentary portrait of a person. She was, she tells us, entranced by Sokol's life. Raised in a theater in Paris, then in Denmark after her parents split up, having weathered a life-threatening disease as a teen, Sokol returned to Paris when she turned 18 with aspirations to "walk in the footsteps of the great painters." By that time, the theater (which her father had run) was barely holding on, but Sokol created a world in it nonetheless. That world grabbed Glob and wouldn't let go.

The age-old documentarian's question — who is really the subject of a nonfiction film? — constitutes a major theme that runs through "Apolonia, Apolonia." Glob speaks of entering the "magical theater" in which Sokol "played the starring role," but even as the artist ages, the theater closes and life shifts drastically, Glob stays along for the ride. "Whether I captured Apolonia with my camera or she captured me with her theater, I don't know," she says. Glob's method is observation, without a particular end or point in mind, very nearly to a fault. She even admits, late in the film, that she couldn't really figure out when to turn off the camera — a question that plagues many an observational documentarian, and most artists and writers, too. Every time Glob thought the film might be finished, Sokol's life morphed again: a move to New York, to Los Angeles, stints working with artists and for businesspeople. Each time, Glob went back to film some more.

This is not the kind of documentary intended to help you learn about the life of the painter Apolonia Sokol. Unless you're deep in the art world, you may not even know who that is. Instead, it's a movie about life and how it's lived, with Sokol's portraiture forming a pleasing harmony rather than a narrative backbone. The film moves roughly forward in time, but jumps backward and sideways sometimes, as if Glob — in making sense of the present — is remembering something she watched long ago. It's easy to refashion any artist's life as a narrative of inevitability, but Sokol paints with no guarantee that she'll ever break into the mainstream art world. We watch her grueling uncertainty through the eyes of someone who also isn't really sure what she's making. The point here isn't to document the rise of a star, but to observe the process of making.

That fact alone sets "Apolonia, Apolonia" apart from the deluge of subject-approved documentaries that have flooded the market and film festivals in the past several years. Those movies are frequently hagiographic, though not inevitably so. The intended audience is the famous subject's fans, or those who wish to be. Thus these films come with a built-in viewership, which brings along a healthy budget. They're safe investments for funders and streamers, and the ecosystem is built for them. But they offer few surprises.

In a movie like "Apolonia, Apolonia," however, there's no obvious path along which the story will unfold when filming begins, which makes it hard to pitch to the people who hold the purse strings. Instead, most of the director's work comes in the editing stage, when the recurring threads in all that footage become more clear.

The subject of this film is expulsion, and the way that Sokol's story parallels that of women who have been cast from their homes because they refused to fit established molds, and must make new lives elsewhere. This theme is echoed in a more melancholy key in Sokol's friend [Oksana Shachko](#), a feminist activist whom Sokol took in when she became a refugee from her native Ukraine (and was "already an icon," as Glob puts it). They live together for years, and describe themselves as a couple, as soul mates, though the nature of their intimacy is kept a bit coy in the film. What matters is their spiritual and creative connection, the support they give to each other in their pursuit of creativity and determination to avoid motherhood.



Glob, on the other hand, gets pregnant and bears a child during the course of the filming — a fact that interests Sokol for how it represents a creative woman evolving her life. At the start of the film, the 20-something Sokol seems to be constantly performing for the camera, showing Glob the tapes her parents made of her own conception and birth. But as time wears on, the friendship between

them, which slips on and off screen, grows into something more symbiotic. Mirrors appear: Sokol's youthful illness is reflected in Glob's life-threatening pregnancy complications. Sokol's portraiture keeps shape-shifting as she matures as a painter, just as Glob's portrait of Sokol keeps mutating.

"Apolonia, Apolonia" is beguiling as a portrait of women with ambition, but also bittersweet. Glob repeatedly refers to her filming and Sokol's painting, their work of creating portraits, as cheating death — something they both do in their real lives, too. "The truth is, I never had that control," Glob says. It took her more than 13 years to understand what she was looking at: "life itself, larger, tougher, and more beautiful than I'd ever imagined."

"Apolonia, I'm going to turn off the camera now," she says, as we see the smiling face of an older, wiser Sokol, less interested in performance now than in a full life. And then the screen goes black.

Alissa Wilkinson is a Times movie critic. She's been writing about movies since 2005.