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PRESS RELEASE

Read These Leaves

Maria Kozak

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The Conduit, 2026, oil on jute, 50 x 40 cm

Maria Kozak
Into the Fold

Maria Kozak's recent painting *The Conduit* (2026) depicts a feminine protagonist standing poised in a manner that recalls the chic of an undetermined epoch past, looking out of what might be a window or door onto a field of mostly brushy bright green. Her black garment, belted around a neat waist, appears chosen to set off her coiffure and pale skin. One of her hands is angled upwards, exposing her palm, indicating a moment of surprise and wonder. In the garden is a large, startlingly white rabbit minding its own business. The image invites us to hold our breath. It suspends us in a moment of heightened recognition. Visually, in the mark-making, palette, and line, there is an intriguing stylistic anachronism at work. An ambiguity about origins and intentions, dates and context, suggests a scene that might be remembered or wholly invented. Regardless, it appears summoned from a subconscious, revealing its secrets as fragmentary riddles. To arrive at this effect, the artist often reworks old paintings, believing that 'we are constantly changing and evolving, and that all matter recycles the same energy.' Kozak herself thinks of her paintings as portals to the other side, another colourful and lucid dimension of being.

In recent years, Kozak has been enjoying more attention. Her recent works are strikingly confident, and deploy a rich and evocative Symbolist–cum–expressionist aesthetic. It is easy to be captivated by the directness of Kozak's physical application of paint, utilising both impasto and delicate strokes, and the surety of her wistful and wandering organic lines. Accordingly, we can think of *The Conduit* not as 'about' something but as a sensual demonstration of how painting might seduce and resonate with a receptive viewer.

For her solo exhibition *Read These Leaves* (2026) at Fabienne Levy Gallery in Zurich the artist was inspired by the spiritual ecology and soulful expansiveness of Walt Whitman's preface to the poem *Leaves of Grass* (1855) – 'dismiss whatever insults your own soul / and your very flesh shall be a great poem'. Connectivity is at stake, and so is the idea of embodied experience in the world beyond institutional structures. It is no surprise that Whitman's wholistic ethos remains a touchstone for us. The pun in Whitman's title repurposed by Kozak here invites us to experience the potent physicality of her paintings as we 'read' them.

In the gallery, the woman and her rabbit share space with a psychedelic, large-scale, layered composition titled *Everything in its Right Place* (2026) after the opening track of Radiohead's legendary album *Kid A* (2000). The large work depicts a reclining female nude integrated into a swirling landscape of various kinds of 'electromagnetic waves and scientific energies'[1] made visible, and at the bottom, 'an earthy geological layer'. The figure is embedded in the landscape, entangled, coextensive with nature rather than dominating it from a vantage point. Kozak's women are abstract enough to be projection fields for the like-minded, but too self-contained to be too easily objectified by contrary forces. As she noted: 'I think there's always this presumption that when a woman paints a naked woman in a landscape that it's just them. And I really like the idea that it's something more like an evocation of all women actually or your own genealogy – any woman that seeks to have a connection and be self-determined in a place.'

1 All quotes from the artist are from a conversation with the author, September 2026.

It seems poignant that the composition at once evokes not only Radiohead's angsty lyricism along with the poetry of Whitman, in a style redolent of Edvard Munch (1863–1944). This is especially the case if one remembers that in Munch's best-known image originally titled *Der Schrei der Natur* (1893) it is nature herself not the foregrounded figure that is screaming. We could also recall lesser-known German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907) and her *Lebensreform* (life reform) period around 1906. None of the challenges she faced and the need for artistic responses have gone away.[2]

Women have featured in Kozak's work too, since she picked up a pencil as a child. She remembers, 'Since I was a girl, I've always drawn women. And I think it comes from maybe being a girl too and like knowing my anatomy. When I was a kid, I also always drew dresses and the Virgin Mary.' This continues to be true even if today her principal drafting tool is an iPad on which she perfects her compositions in great detail before committing to the adventure which is canvas. For Kozak, the digital tool is part of a workflow that also produces some amorphous and hallucinatory moments. The composition *Into the Fold* (2026), a lush ensemble of blue-grey tones depicting a group of women manifests a communal, mutually supportive world of enchanted nuance, enfolding and quiet self-containment that seems to have always existed on its own terms regardless of patriarchy. The artist admits that 'A lot of my most intimate relationships are with women. We keep each other's secrets.'

The open-endedness of Kozak's vision begs the question of her own origins through the absence of specifics. In a recent museum solo exhibition, the artist, who was raised by Polish immigrant parents in the American Midwest and now lives between Poland and Upstate New York, directly responded to her own family's roots. The exhibition *My Home is My Castle, My Body, My Temple* (2026) took place at the Niepołomice Museum in Niepołomice Royal Castle,[3] incidentally near to where the artist spent her infancy. The family immigrated in 1983 at the height of martial law. In this homecoming of sorts, being and biography are enfolded, entwined. Appropriately, then, for the exhibition, the artist produced lush tapestries, including *Generous with Their Flowers* (2026), showing women on the edge of a chasm populated by flying creatures. Strange and meaningful patterns and shapes are woven into the very fabric of Kozak's worldview.

Dominic Eichler, Berlin, September 2026

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See the two person exhibition: Paula Modersohn-Becker and Edvard Munch. The Big Questions of Life (2026) Albertinum, Dresden. Modersohn-Becker painted in a time of technological and ecological anxiety, against a backdrop of social change and tension. For a contemporary art historical reflection see art writer Jennifer Higgie's two books, The Mirror and the Palette: Rebellion and Revolution: 500 years of Women's Self-Portraits (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2021) and also The Other Side: A Journey into Women, Art and the Spirit World (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2023). I note this as Kozak directly credits reading Higgie with an unapologetic opening up to the metaphysical dimension of her work. In terms of a contemporary lineage for her approach, Kozak speaks of her admiration for painter Peter Doig (b.1959) but we might also add Gdańsk-born artist Paulina Olowska (b.1976) as important precursors. Artists like them allowed for an oil-on-canvas led reinvigoration of avant-garde styles past in the service of a painterly and critically aware search for autonomy and personal freedom in the present.

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Incidentally, the museum's collection also currently houses a splendid portrait of the artist's prominent great grandfather Piotr Mosynski (1800–1879) by 19th century Polish painter Jan Matejko (1838–1893). The artist told me she is always fascinated about the enfolded connectivity of things.

Maria Kozak (b. 1981, Poland) is a multidisciplinary artist living and working between upstate New York and Warsaw, Poland. She holds a Master's degree in Painting from the New York Academy of Art and is an alumna of NEW INC, the New Museum's incubator for art and technology, and is currently Editor-at-Large of Przekrój, Poland's oldest cultural magazine.
Her drawings and paintings are intuitive, psychological landscapes populated by figures that exist beyond conventional boundaries of time and space, transcribing relationships with the self, others, and the sublime. Driven by existential inquiries into the nature of reality and the construction of society, Kozak's practice embraces the full spectrum of human experience, from the sacred to the profane. Compositions are born digitally as sketchings on a tablet. Kozak pushes and pulls at abstract fields of color, excavating shapes and forms. Prone to pareidolia, figures gradually emerge. These drawings are then manipulated, cut, and pasted into endless layers of color combinations, often remixed with other drawings until the composition is resolved. Existing as numerous files and multiple realities, the works ultimately become large-scale canvases—morphologies that live between screens and the physical world. Thin washes create atmospheric depth, while textured impasto passages provide moments of sensual materiality. The paintings operate in a fertile territory between recognition and mystery, presenting viewers with figures that feel simultaneously familiar and unknowable. Her work draws on German Expressionism, Surrealism, psychedelia, and the Transavanguardia. Kozak has been featured in Artsy, The Wall Street Journal, Cool Hunting, and Surface magazine. Her work has been shown most recently at LETO Gallery in Warsaw, Dreamsong in Minneapolis, and the Detroit Public Library. She is a recipient of a NYFA/NYSCA Grant and a Schusterman Foundation Fellowship for her work in emerging technology.