

The necessity of Art

Black occurs frequently in the recent work of Kyriakos Katzourakis. "It is", he says, "a very Greek colour. Black for lost opportunities, lost hopes, lost lives." He was born in Athens in 1944 and his first memories indicate a conflict, a source of tension, that still marks much of his painting; in a phrase - gunfire in the streets of a beautiful city. In the event it was not the civil war that wrought the physical changes he laments in Athens. Developers have changed it practically beyond recognition. They figure in his mind rather like the dealers and speculators of the art world who loom in some of his paintings, as intruders upon the dream, as lethal in their way as those who stalk with the gun. This is not because he believes a city should not change, or that entrepreneurs should not exist in the art world but because the agents of change and the dealers so often show no awareness of the fact that they tread on dreams. His work may be seen in part as an objection to this insensitivity and at the same time as a manifesto for the imaginative possession of reality. More than he is a political artist, or a humanist, he is an artist arguing for, insisting upon, the necessity of art; and were such a necessity recognized it would, he believes, make nonsense of a term like "art world" with its implication of the separation of "art" and "life."

What makes his work the more impressive is that he holds such a position not as a recluse who has turned away from his contemporaries but as someone aware of the flux and vortices of modern life, not blind to the desperate, not deaf to the bomb, the gunshot and the scream. This is something to consider when contemplating work some of which, superficial in style and content, may appear to be looking towards the past, in particular towards that deep and liquid pool represented by the work of Poussin, of Vermeer and Velazquez. More than one writer has remarked the similarity of mood in Vermeer and Velazquez, a kind of reality reverberant with a sense of significance; with Poussin too there is a communion of calm and order. None of these artists has qualities that can be roughly seized. Katzourakis has termed his first, tentative steps towards them not copying but describing, an act of homage through an effort to understand, prompted by a conviction that they are in an essential sense modern painters. This feeling was implanted with the force of revelation when he first visited the National Gallery immediately after his arrival in England nine years ago. It modified what might otherwise have been a feeling of despair that this and subsequent visits to the National tended to induce, that nothing remained to be said in painting. He found very little in the Tate Gallery - a noteworthy exception being the work of Francis Bacon - to contradict such a notion. In the National Gallery he discovered a source of sustenance and inspiration in art which obliterated time and whispered courage to anyone facing the ordeal of consciousness in the confusion of the modern world, a confusion which he felt was reflected in much current art. The strength and the nature of the impression which these visits made upon him cannot be appreciated without some knowledge of the route that had brought him to London, to a point where he felt his artistic energy rekindled and the imperative of new ideas demanding formulation.

In the civil war of 1946-1949 some 80,000 Greeks died. The sound of gunfire, the ominous rattle of Katzourakis' infancy, has re-echoed down the post-war years and through the repressive regime of the Colonels: Greeks have much to forget. It is a background that has inevitably been reflected in Katzourakis's work. In 1950, following his mother's death, he went to live with her parents and stayed with them until 1963. There, he taught himself to draw — chairs, tables, studies in perspective. It became a compulsion strengthened by reading such books as Van Gogh's Letters; statements like "I have a sure faith in art, a sure

confidence that it is a powerful stream, which bears a man to harbour..." seemed addressed directly to him. Art had not provided a sanctuary entirely secure against the intrusion of grief but it had indicated the possibility of creating an environment in which there was room to live and breathe, and in which pain might more easily be born.

The introspective tendencies were tempered by a growing political awareness and this was to develop during his period at the Athens School of Art — the only Art School in Greece then, which he enters in 1963 in a time when political foment among students across Europe was increasing. He was there until 1968, the year after the Colonels' coup. The role of the School of Art in the Greek cultural life is particularly important, partly because of its monopoly position, and partly because of the restricted opportunities which Greece affords to see 20th century art, or indeed much of any art after that of its ancient civilization. Most students would have seen something of the work of leading Greek painters of this century, such as Tsarouchis, Theophilos, Kontoglou and Ghika (the four shown at Wildenstein in London in 1975 during the Greek Month organized by the ICA), but for a broader view would have had to rely largely on reproductions in books and magazines. For example, the first time Katzourakis saw paintings by El Greco and Rubens was after he had entered art school, when part of the collection of the shipowner Stavros Niarchos was exhibited in Athens. Through rare experiences like this but mainly through his own reading Katzourakis developed a view of art that made him wonder even more at the sense of values in the society around him. The physical changes in Athens were lamentable enough; tall blocks were rising as people, scared by the inflation of the Occupation and post-war periods, put their money into property. It seemed to Katzourakis that when they put money into art they bought kitsch, which confirmed the message of cultural impoverishment. Here was another element to which his own art had to be opposed.

He was very fortunate in having as a tutor at the School of Art the painter Yannis Moralis, whose work at the time was in transition from realism to abstraction. He was not an artist who needed the flattery of imitation by his pupils. Katzourakis was encouraged to develop his own identity and he was moving towards a well-structured painterly realism that drew on documentary sources.

While still a student, he had an exhibition which deeply impressed the critics and the public. In 1970, with four friends from the School of Art who all felt they shared the belief that art should be involved in the problems of the world, he founded a group called New Greek Realists.

In 1972 the five members of the group were able to go ahead with their plans and a venue was provided by the Goethe Institute in Athens. Around this time Katzourakis had been producing interesting montage effects, fragmentary images, again from documentary sources, but like frames of news film shot on the run, jostled by the events that were being recorded.

London gave Katzourakis a sense of renewal and liberation, and through St. Martin's and Croydon Schools of Art the long-awaited opportunity to continue his studies. The impact of the paintings in the National Gallery has already been noted. Certainly his period in England, a period begun in an isolation heightened by an alien culture and a foreign language, has produced a new perspective, in personal terms, in terms of the role of art as a political platform and in terms of the relationship between the art of the past and that of today.

Many elements have been fused to produce the strength of Katzourakis's painting over the past few years. He no longer feels bound to spell things out too literally.

yet the individual components of a painting rarely serve a purely formal purpose. Take for example the jar of cobalt blue which he has placed in the foreground of one of the wings in a recent triptych, next to a portrait of Francis Bacon on the cover of a catalogue. The juxtaposition of these things harks back to the Bacon exhibition in Paris in 1977, when Katzourakis discovered, written in the visitors' book "We your investors are waiting for you to die, so eat cobalt blue." These poisonous sentiments seemed to justify his most pessimistic thoughts about the art world. It is important that his painting embraces such things. Yet in the end there seems nothing pessimistic about his work. The structure, the sense of space - a sense, one might say, of the sanctity of space - contain what is essentially a message of hope, brought by a messenger along a hard road and expressed with eloquence.

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