

Small introduction to Kyriakos Katzourakis's exhibition at the Benaki Museum

Kyriakos Katzourakis's art has at times been classified as "political," "accusational" and "social," terms which can easily be used by someone who wants to get it over with conveniently, without having to delve into the work's essence. The artist's active participation in the creation of the New Greek Realists team, along with Yannis Valavanidis, Cleopatra Digka, Chronis Botsoglou and Yannis Psychopaidis, as well as the works created as a result of this collaboration, partially justify such classifications, they don't, however, present the whole truth.

Indeed, in the years that preceded his departure for England (1972), Katzourakis's art was obviously influenced on the one hand by critical realism and on the other hand by the consequences of a period heavily affected by political events, the most important being the Colonels' Coup. A tendency for criticism, often combined with discernible irony and a satirical mood, is obvious. The works of this period express his intention to communicate with the audience, as well as an awakening of the collective consciousness and finally a synergy against the new reality that was imposing itself more and more each day in an authoritative and ever-consuming manner.

Apart from providing a refuge, England also revealed a new world to Katzourakis. The transition from Athens' authoritarian regime, which was already counting five years, to London's total freedom, would have been a catalyst in itself for a young artist. Apart from that, the visits to museums and the acquaintance with the great painters of the past, the contact with art's modern tendencies and, of course, the experience of studying in a wholly different environment, in time created a solid background. Moreover, his sojourn in London contributed to his re-evaluating his Greek "role models," such as Tsarouchis, Kontoglou and Theophilos. This procedure did not stem from a nostalgic quest for the lost "Greekness," but was the result of an effort to combine elements from two different worlds, something that has concerned Katzourakis ever since.

His return to Greece is connected with his effort to bring out the relationship between painting and other arts (photography, cinema, theatre, poetry, literature) and the possibility of merging them into one work. In this context he embarks on important collaborations with people from other fields, besides art. The work that marks not only the culmination of the effort, but also his decision upon choices that still mark his work today, \s Templo- House of Guilt (1991-1994).

Templo, a monumental work which combines painting, theatre, cinema and music, forms Katzourakis's relationship with the past and with History. Despite its ideologically charged form, Templo sheds its piousness and becomes the bearer of a personal religion. Its creator writes that it is dedicated to one woman's ordeal. However, from the Kurds depicted on the bottom to the emblematic form of Angelos Elefantis and from the visitor's sacrilegious entrance to the interior through "the Gate to the painting depicting the woman's crucifixion, Templo constitutes a worship area for the individual and collective Memory. Seen from this view, it is a predominantly political work, much more than those of the dictatorship period, which classified Katzourakis among the politicized artists.

In his Portrait (1997-1998), which is the continuation of Templo, Katzourakis again combines painting and theatre, based on a text by Dionysis Kapsalis. As in Templo, here also the main idea is a woman's life and ordeals. The following year (1999) sees the completion of the first part of The Way to the West, with the subheading /era Odos, and 2001 sees the second part, with the subheading The Adventure of Immigration. In these works, where painting, photography, theatre and cinema coexist, Katzourakis places immigrants at the centre of his interests. The immigrant is regarded from the philosophical aspect of the Foreigner, of someone who is different, hovering outside the others' comfort zone and thus potentially threatening. It is the person who is outside of our own value system and the way in which he will be regarded determines the status not

only of a person, but of society as a whole. The immigrant, in particular, is a foreigner often pursued, scared and a victim of exploitation, bearer, finally, of a tragic experience which can be understood only if it becomes part of our own existence.

From 2001, when The Way to the West was completed, until today, twelve years later, this work is unfortunately timelier than ever. Amidst the financial crisis' devastating consequences, which we have been experiencing in recent years, the gap between the "Self" and the "Other" is becoming wider, which is justified, to an extent. The biggest problem, which has barely been discussed so far, is the gradual mutation of a democratic nation into a matrix of

violent and bigoted behaviours. Daily murders and attacks against immigrants are barely mentioned in the papers and are largely ignored by the news on television; peaceful demonstrations of citizens turn into violent conflicts with the police; a neo-Nazi party constitutes almost 10% of the electorate and a vote in their favour is regarded as a "protest." Even more worrying, however, is the apathy with which most of us are regarding all this, without reacting, voiceless, only with fear, repulsion and perhaps uneasiness.

Kyriakos Katzourakis's exhibition at the Benaki Museum cannot, of course, alter everything that is happening. However, at least two concepts that have been tormenting him all these years can change the way in which we view things. The first one is the concept of Memory, as a necessary prerequisite for the advancement of man and civilization. The second one is Empathy, the ability to put ourselves in the shoes of the weak and to view the world through their eyes. Transferring these concepts from the realm of theory into everyday practice may be able to lead to the awakening of our dormant sensitivity and, ultimately, to the revealing of our lost self-dignity.

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