

The world of Kyriakos Katzourakis

Periodization, classification and reclassification, various specifications and constant re-evaluation are principal elements of both art history and the aesthetic assessment of any artistic creation. Integral elements, albeit constricting ones. Classification facilitates the mind, on the one hand, but inhibits imagination. There exist art movements and artists that serve as safe examples, but there are also instances – usually the most notable and creative ones – that are subject to immeasurable ordeals in order to fit into one category or another. The main theoretical issue arising in this standard procedure concerns the choice and precedence of the specific criteria that ensure each evaluation. In art history, as in human history, more generally, there have been extended eras and periods dominated by deep-rooted, almost stereotypical assessment criteria corresponding to a seeming standstill. By contrast, in transitional periods, where the lines between old and new, present and future are blurred, the criteria become more fluid and dynamic, and possibility, potential and criticism disrupt the firmly established. Especially during the period in history when civil society and the various phases of capitalism were taking shape, and to this day, this dynamic is most distinctive. Thus, the Communist Manifesto states that “constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned...”

To paraphrase Baudelaire, Katzourakis can be considered a modern-day artist, not only because of his art, but also because of his film work. His reality is not the result of sensory, but of lived experience. Something similar is also noted in Angelopoulos; his film representation of daily life, as expressed in modern history, is overcast, fog-bound, aqueous, musty under the weight of socio-political phenomena. It is not the typical daily life of the bustling city, colorful and loud, winded and fleeting. Katzourakis’ daily life is dark, enclosed, tragically substantial; it is neither superfluous nor verbose. His work is dominated by shades of grey and earth-brown within crevices of light. It is the daily life amidst the crisis, not as a news report but as a sensation, a daily experience. Katzourakis doesn’t illustrate; he interprets. In that sense, his work can be classified among painting’s greatest allegorical moments. He himself converses with those moments, which he internalizes and reorganizes into his personal “voice” as craftsman-artist, and not as artist-exhibitionist. Indeed, Katzourakis’ solid, sensitive, and at the same time robust style expresses the “pictorial”

nature of painting – if you allow me the expression – the mastery of the craft as a means and not as an end in itself, the entrapment of the eye into the reflective delightfulness of the image, free of supposedly intellectual declarations and references. References to other artists – Picasso, Malevich, Bacon, Courbet, Grünewald, Rembrandt (to name but a few typical examples) – are reworked and become part of his personal, unique world.

Guernica – the horror of fascism in condensed form – becomes a nest for the crisis we are experiencing, lovingly enclosing Katzourakis' figures; images of loneliness and dissolution, where the modern subject disintegrates in conditions of confinement. The bull of the Spaniard Picasso will become the Minotaur, and bullfighting will be transformed into the ancient ritual of bull-leaping. This Minotaur, who resides in the modern social Labyrinth and poses a constant threat to innocence as a prerequisite for propitiation, lurks in the shadows, symbolizing the intense flavor of limitation, incarceration, and isolation that defines modern human experience. The theme of imprisonment, confinement, and abandonment is a central and constantly repeated one in Katzourakis' paintings, in various levels of abstraction. It could also be construed as a key to understanding both his work and – dare I say – his personal way of internalizing the social. It is a poetics of destruction, exacerbating the raw side of things. Thus, Rembrandt's emblematic and visually primordial Slaughtered Ox – a stimulus for Soutine or Bacon – is translated into a gutted human body tied to the ceiling, horrific in its gloomy realism. The artist will name his painting The Anatomy Lesson, in reference to Rembrandt's similarly titled work. A title referring to scientific terms is given to the image of torture, the ordeal of human dignity for both victim and abuser.

What role does time assume in Katzourakis' visual storytelling? In the 11th book of his Confessions, a philosophical masterpiece, Saint Augustine will reflect on the topic of time, stating that time has three parts: the present of the past as a memory, the present of the present, which encompasses past, present and future as a specific temporal reality, and the present of the future as expectation. Painting is a reproduction of modern daily life, meaning the present, as a realistic view of the present in its timeless existence, as a reflection of the personal life that has been relegated to the past, as a wish for the other future. In this context, Katzourakis converses with art history and with his own personal history, the one he has experienced. Malevich's red triangle-piston is translated into the current awkwardness of the radical act. Poussin's massacre of the innocent acquires the features of the universally abstract. Matthias Grünewald's heartbreakingly Crucifixion, through the eyes of Picasso and Bacon, becomes the torture of the modern subject, its contorted immobility. Like Hamlet's theater within theater and Richard Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos*' opera within

opera, in Katzourakis' works painting within painting gives prominence to the enchanting game that is art when it reflects upon its ontological presence. In a heartbreak painting – the child in prison clothes standing in front of the window-prison the past, the tender still life the child is holding in its hand – the sense of absence-presence of the “unknown” painter of the past in the modern work is now elevated into a pivotal moment of personal mental and intellectual reflection. The children of the orphanage who are missing their lower limbs – again the theme of incarceration and inability to escape – the representations of the artist and his sister at a young age, the image of the mother in a beautiful dress and the child – the female presence as mother or lover is frequent in Katzourakis’ world; the woman is represented as subject, not as object – are typical moments of a personal past that are woven into the creation as present. They define it, illuminate it, and enhance the ambiguity of the realistic as it hovers between being and not being, between the sensations and illusions of psychic vibrations. It is then, most of all, that the painter attributes the essence of reality to its dynamics. That is why, the more I immerse myself in the world of Katzourakis, the more I acknowledge him as a deeply perceptive realist of the modern experience.

The political dimension of Katzourakis’ art is an integral part of his aesthetic world. The essential understanding of his creations, be they painting or cinema or stage design, “requires” that one recognize the continuum of a particular socio-political stance. The quotation marks indicate that this requirement is not an expression of a mechanistic relationship between his art and politics; it is not an external relationship between two positions, but rather the internal dialectic of artistic and social responsibility that defines, explicitly or implicitly, art’s important moments. Katzourakis’ long-standing political commitment is not a stipulation in order for his work to be understood. On the contrary, his work emphasizes the depth of his social awareness, regardless of his political stance. In other words, upon entering Katzourakis’ artistic world, one immediately senses his true – and not ostensible – political self. His style, themes, metaphors, allegories, his expression as a whole, are genuinely artistic, and for that reason deeply political.

Things, situations and ideas that appear as self-evident admissions frequently comprise ingrained preconceptions; ones that are owed to an inability to understand and recognize the historical nature of the categories and evaluations that, when in use, appear as permanent and inherent qualities. Moreover, there is frequently no distinction between the necessarily dogmatic and binding nature of the relevant philosophical declarations and the historical/social aspect of their corresponding philosophical stances. This results in our classifying and evaluating the various art realities and their subsequent overview using criteria that historically arise within a socially and in-

tellectually defined context. One such preconception is, for example, found in the terms of “autonomy” and “commitment/conscription” in art: the historical aspect of their emergence is either missing or marginalized, so that they appear as quasi-ontological categories, as permanent and fixed qualities in the artistic experience. These terms reside in the core of art and politics. In other words, aesthetic labels of the innovative urban era appear as timeless and fixed, as safe, perennial assessment criteria for artistic creation. Consequently, confining the search for art evaluation criteria to the dipole autonomy-conscription is at the very least problematic. Neither of the two terms is politically “innocent,” after all. Conscription for the sake of conscription is equally artistically barren as autonomy for the sake of autonomy. Conscription as an understanding of the artist’s social responsibility, without taking away from his artistic vision – this is the case of Katzourakis – and autonomy as a critical stance, as a refusal to become part of the capitalist-driven system, as a juxtaposition to the vulgar logic of an art bourse, are two sides of the same coin that express the collective and individual outlook.

And what is Katzourakis’ position towards all that comprises modern art? The answer that immediately comes to mind is: one of artistic integrity. A crucial theoretical issue that arises, and not only in art, is how to define the “modern.” Is it everything that exists today? Is it the innovative, at any given time? Is it the expression of a perpetual experimentation? The questions may multiply and the answers may shed light on the conflicting aspects of modern cultural experience. The value of authenticity always rises above these versions in art history; it is the artist’s ability to capture the essence of an era and transform it into an artistically incarnate vision. Kyriakos Katzourakis is one such exemplary case!

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