

Towards
Guernica

Kyriakos Katzourakis in Conversation
with Hameed Haroon

Kyriakos Katzourakis sits across his studio table from me. Around us lie scattered dozens of canvases that are to constitute his upcoming exhibition that opens in late winter at the Katsigras Museum, Larissa and MIET, Athens. A former Professor of Fine Arts at the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Katzourakis is one of the few giants left living on the art agenda in Greece today. His work is an amalgam of art movements that are permeated across Southern Europe in the last century. It reflects elements of expressionism, cubism, as well as the skeletal remains of the giants of modernism that have dominated the panorama of Greek painting in the last hundred years. Nor are the forebears of pan-European modernism missing from the mosaic of his work.

He smiles as he explains his preoccupations with a new phase in his art. Normally after two major retrospectives, a mature artist will enter a final dark phase where his line and palette reflect a synthesis and even a further development on his earlier work. But Katzourakis would call that choosing the easier route. He has by no means finished making the major statements he feels he as yet needs to make. There is a complexity in his work where modernism, classicism, symbolism and social realism appear to alternate in a delicate aesthetic tension, and his canvases are imbued with the kind of vigor that we usually credit the works of Francis Bacon with. As he puts it with characteristic bluntness: "I move from expressionism to impressionism and then onwards to cubism and surrealism without difficulty, and this is confusing for young art historians today." His vast retrospectives contain a mosaic of canvases sometimes blending elements, at other times juxtaposing them in counterpoint. The artist would counter that by arguing that he is simply deploying a series of visual aesthetic planes, the style of which has been carefully fused with the contours of his philosophical perspective.

Below are some of the excerpts of my conversation with Kyriakos Katzourakis with reference to the important upcoming exhibition of his work in Larissa and Athens.

Q You refer to your upcoming exhibition as your Guernica project. Why?

KK I was first struck by Picasso's Guernica in 1964 when I was a student under Moralis. At the time I was thunderstruck. How on earth had Picasso managed to give form and shape to ideas as early as 1937 when the blood had not yet dried on Guernica's victims? This indeed was "History" beginning with a capital H. Picasso opened a new chap-

ter and this transition released from within him a wealth of drawings as if done by a magic hand – the hand of a man who loved reading comic books and reaching out towards a childlike primitive art.

Remember Guernica was not simply a painting. From inside himself Picasso produced a huge number of drawings and studies that led to the final Guernica canvas. Picasso was not a philosopher, he was not a man of books and letters. How was this man able to lend his being to initiating this completely new chapter in his art?

I was helped to understand the transformation Picasso went through while working under my teacher Moralis. Moralis was a straightforward painter, who released his innermost feelings in his art without wishing to add any double meanings. One day he showed me images of Guernica and said to me, “My boy, you can do in painting what you choose to do in life.” There was a directness within Moralis’ painting, and this led me to understand the directness of the connection between politics and art. Remember Moralis was a very conservative man. He was not communist or even left-wing.

We in Greece today live in a destructive country. We had a history of invasion by the Germans in 1944, twenty years before I became Moralis’ student. By the 1960s I was beginning to have the same feelings that Picasso encountered in the 1930s while creating Guernica.

The kind of destruction you have seen in Greece for the last few decades is irreversible. You begin to feel things will never get better – they are simply going to get worse. When Picasso saw a small town like Guernica bombed, he had the same bitterness and disappointment that I was to encounter as I grew up.

In the upcoming exhibition there is a group portrait of myself as a growing child at an orphanage, together with my sister. Before her death, my mother had painted a still life which instilled in me a feeling of the power of painting. Although my mother was dead, I felt I could do new things using this power.

I wanted to paint the disappointment that I felt at the destruction I saw in Greece after my initial encounter with Guernica. Picasso had managed to transform his bitterness into the power of painting. How precisely this transformation occurred remains a mystery.

Gradually I came to understand that every society and epoch has to create its own Guernica, and if a society does not have a Guernica, it is only a matter of time before it will create one. I thus began my decades-long Odyssey to evolve towards my own Guernica.

Q And yet if you look at this period today the link between politics and art is considered nothing if not unfashionable. At that time why did you find politics so irresistible in the practice of your art?

KK No, this link was always unfashionable. But when I talk about Guernica, it is its specific politics that I have in mind. I love Guernica

the same way that I love Tintoretto. He has nothing to do with politics and it is very difficult to explain his work. Very difficult, indeed!

Q But wasn't Guernica a splendid political statement aimed at mobilizing the forces arrayed against fascism?

KK Giacometti's sculpture betrays evidences of living in the era of the nuclear bomb, which is a far more serious issue. However, it is simply not politics one has in mind when one views Giacometti's sculptures. It is his way of sculpting that makes you wonder – why and how were these magnificent sculptures and drawings created? And yet they are infused with a sense of fear that accompanies a nuclear blowout. It was in that sense that Picasso's Guernica in its own day was a premonition of the destruction that was to come. And that is why I feel it is time again for a Guernica for this age, however unfashionable this may be.

upcoming exhibition is the story of my life. It is the story of my life in fifty paintings. How I managed to survive and sustain my creativity. It is a statement not only about Guernica but about the mind which is completely imbrued with the Guernica idea, and it is not an arbitrary or accidental development in my career as an artist.

Q And yet if you look at it, Picasso when he executed Guernica had forty odd years of a full artistic career. Why is your Guernica coming at a point in your career which people feel might be close to your final statement?

KK Guernica is a prelude to a new decade in my art. Today I have the feeling like I have just begun to paint. This is a beginning for me. This is a period that follows exhibitions of two major retrospectives of my work in Athens. I know that after this exhibition I am not going to stop painting. My life has turned a full circle and I am in a process of regeneration. My full response to Guernica is not in this exhibition. It will be in my next one. But already the elements that constitute my future Guernica are on display in this exhibition. Perhaps like Picasso's preparatory drawings they are an essential stage in completing my full Guernica.

As excitement mounts in art circles in Athens with respect to the forthcoming developments in Katzourakis' new art exhibition, he sits within the same studio looking at his wife and companion of many years, the brilliant Greek actor Katia Yerou. She places a hand on his shoulder as the artist's new canvases continue to glow in preparation for an impending public display. Collectively these canvases have morphed beyond the usual conception of the retrospectives that dot a mature artist's late career. In them, Katzourakis has posed dialectical questions that arise from his art in terms of a vital understanding of the here and now. He has fashioned his ideas not as a crystal-ball looking into the future, but instead into a vision that underlines how

contemporary Greece looks at the future. And he is fearful of this future.

What the artist needs to encounter is a Greece that changes fundamentally. He needs to see that citizens of the world today understand the resource constraints facing the world of tomorrow. And more than that he needs to envision a society that is prepared to amend its current abhorrent behavior, its ecological waste, its state of drifting ruthlessness, and to introduce new elements of humanism in interaction with each other. As the next couple of years progress, Katzourakis' new Guernica will be unveiled. And after that begins the wait for the next one. A new artist, a new composite vision, that is the need of the hour. Katzourakis may not be there, but he will certainly be smiling as a new Picasso works his way to such a vision.