

Painting – A theater of the world

1.

There are artists who embellish History, and yet others who change it...

M. S.

How much life can death contain? And how legitimate is the reversal of this question? That is, how much death can life contain in order to be truly worthy of its name? Finally, can we withstand this balance between our craving for life and our fear of death, and to what extent? Art, with all its facets, represents hope, and acts as a buoy against this fear. It is an invaluable key, with which to unlock the hermetically sealed world. Yannis Tsarouchis, painter and intellectual, used to say: “There are two schools of expression. On the one hand, the imagination of reality, and on the other hand, the reality of the imagination.” Allow me to introduce a third one: the uncertain journey between the object and its demystification, the cause of today’s alienation, according to Roland Barthes. In other words, the drama of those things that cannot (we cannot) withstand their meaning.

Katzourakis’ art has been developing on a multidimensional level for half a century, straightforwardly assimilating the great moments of both local and modernist, western European tradition, and transforming them into a personal declaration. He does so knowingly, with small or bigger twists in the already conquered style of creators such as Édouard Manet, Max Beckmann, or Francis Bacon, as a type of postmodern commentary on the history of the modern, or a type of two-dimensional theater within the three-dimensional theater of the world. His compositions, serving as a means for descending into his deeper self, and as exercises in morphoplastic memory, address the discredited and stale nature of the obvious, and claim that all realism should be magical, that is to say poetic, soaring, if it aspires to establish itself as true art. This is it. The image becomes the means with which to render the unseen and comment upon the human condition. All art, after all, whether intentionally or unintentionally, is also a political declaration. Just like Orpheus’ descent into the kingdom of Persephone, who aspired to conquer death through art (music) and resurrect love, as the highest form of art – and revolution!

The savvy spectator follows with great interest the creator’s struggle to conquer not only his personal style, but the form that will reflect the proportionate, reflective, confessional content. Here, the conquered *virtuosité*, the architecture of the design, the precision of the line, the dynamism of the gesture become the means, and not the objective. In Sebastian Smee’s well-known book about Lucian Freud, 1 there is a chapter entitled «Realism as Theater». I would also add the word “mythology.” This is the personal mythology that Kiri-

akos Katzourakis is sharing with us at this moment. Opening up a window to its very own Theater of Ideas that transmute into images, and images that carry ideas.

2. .

L'incompréhension s'est installée entre des parties entières de la société qui ne parlent plus le même langage. Ce n'est plus une fracture sociale mais une fracture morale.

Marcel Gauchet

In recent years, amidst the prevalence of the financial crisis, Kyriakos Katzourakis has painted a series of works-commentaries on the Guernica. This mythical work of 1937, which dramatically seals another period of crisis – or rather horror – and which has since been haunting

1 Sebastian Smee, Lucian Freud, Taschen, 2007.

European awareness as the ultimate emblematic painting, seems to be torturing the artist's memory and imagination, wishing to exist in a different way. This is rather common in art history; an old work claiming a second chance to exist via a newer one, as the artists' main inspiration and spark derives from the work of other artists. The power of the image lies in the fact that it has the ability to inspire other images. This litany of forms, this tug-of-war of visual information endows art with both wealth and meaning; both amplitude and depth. Katzourakis' Guernica extends across more than forty small and large compositions, stirring up the main symbols of Picassian mythology and bringing out a series of new ones. His familiar world – the rood screen of his own saints, the naked girl, the child with its toy, the couple embracing on a bed-altar, the prisoner, the tortured, the sleeping woman, the prison, the woman walking away, the slaughter house, the dying woman, the walking march etc. – is here, albeit charged with an unprecedented tension. While one would expect the artist's dialogue with the most famous anti-war work in the history of art, and the milestone painting of late European avant-garde, to be more reflective and more inclined towards deepening History's pathways and dead ends, the Greek Guernica abounds with bitterness, accumulated anger, and, at times, despair.

It is well-known, and we have discussed it at length elsewhere, 2 that Katzourakis is a deeply political artist, who doesn't, however, throw himself fully into finding "easy," that is to say conscripted, artistic solutions, and who always approaches the political with regard to the personal. Or, if you prefer, his personal experience. That is why in all his paintings, as happens in Tsarouchis, Bacon, or Freud, the protagonist isn't just the body, but the body that is crucified countless times, without ever succeeding in resurrecting itself. This pain of men and things is not, and never was, a literary pose in his work, but a

painful realization of all those mistakes and omissions of the past that have led to the present. Picasso's Guernica is grieving above the ruins of democracy and revolution, seeing the approaching calamity

2 Kyriakos Katzourakis, Works 1963-2013. Painting, Theater, Cinema, Militos Editions, Benaki Museum, Grigoriadis Gallery, 2013.

through the eyes of Cassandra. Picasso is mourning the crimes of Frankism and Nazism that are wounding his country and, balancing between epic and drama, he is painting the extinction of human awareness; the end of dignity as a fundamental condition for the political subject.

Pinpointing analogies between then and now, between Greece of the dictatorship and Greece of the financial crisis, between the fall of political orientation and the rise of populism, between the pompous arrogance of the smoke free and the furious silence of those who fought for the obvious and were betrayed, Katzourakis deposits his unavoidable conclusions... Namely that it wasn't the ideas, struggles or beliefs of a lifetime that were wrong, but their vulgar exploitation, their mockery, if you prefer, by some "sorcerers' apprentices" of authority for the sake of authority. He expresses this bitter truth with decency and circumspection, positing that if some ideology professionals were proven to be inferior to historical circumstances, History doesn't end with them, nor is the Leftist ideology – the vision of a fairer and less violent society; the rights of the majority above the arbitrariness of the minority – irrelevant or surreal.

The quality of a culture is directly proportional to the prestige and ethos of all the things comprising this culture (institutional factors, creators, teachers, theoreticians, critics, politicians involved etc.). In our country, the term "culture" usually entails public relations, scheming, personal strategies, and partisan speculation of a low level. Such an environment implies a lack of essential dialogue, ideological conflicts, general intellectual disquiet, and, consequently, great creations. Just ask yourselves who has succeeded today names such as Himonas, Carousos, Tachtsis, Karapanou, Koun, Horn, Paxinou, Zavitianou, Moralis, Diamantis Diamantopoulos, Katraki, Sklavos, Hatzidakis, Caniaris, Vassilis Diamantopoulos, Gikas, Volanakis, Lapas, Mourselas, Matesis, Synodinou, Costas Paschalis, Dragatakis, Vassilis Fotopoulos, to name but a few (what I would call the aesthetic register of an era). Small people, by and large, filling big shoes. The moment has come, then – and sooner than we had anticipated – to pay for the basic "truth" of the post-modern condition around which the web (and noose) of our post-affluence period was woven; namely that there isn't one truth, but many, all equal to each other, and that a lie isn't the opposite of truth, but another one of its metonymies – that is, a different form of truth. It is time, though, to

rewrite the history of the political changeover, free of deceptive rightist or leftist ideas; as you know, such a priori pledges have been beclouding our knowledge regarding the country's conservative or radical course. They are befuddling, finally, our sense of reality. Let our experience of recent years function not only as a shock, but as a lesson for our social memory and collective judgement. As a salve and an antidote for the decadence that has been bleeding our land dry, leaving our youth to wither away, or driving them out altogether. Our culture is undoubtedly in the midst of an era of melancholy. This land has withstood persecutions, catastrophes, civil wars, hunger and exile, and for what? To be sinking today down the hole of decline and bankruptcy, apathy and illiteracy, in an era of affluence... This land is truly home to the dead.

3. .

... I am wary of those people who used to shut the door on you, fearing you were going to give them coupons, and now you see them at the Institute of Technology offering carnations with tears in their eyes...

Manolis Anagnostakis

Art is that labyrinth where the thread is given not at the entrance, but at the exit. What I mean to say is that what matters in art is the riddle, and not its solution, and that only art can support that minimum, deplorable immortality the unbearably mortal man deserves. Personally, I love the art that stands up for despair and existential drama in a dignified way; the art that does not hesitate to showcase its wounds instead of covering them up, not as a melodramatic display, but as an exercise in laborious self-knowledge. What else is a work of art, even the most superficial or decorative one, if not an exercise in self-knowledge? Even the mortals' so-called happiness is usually an act of compromise, while sorrow is bravery's final refuge, the most profound expression not only of morality, but also of aesthetics. I am referring to that heroism that defines the life and works of Nietzsche, Halepas, Bouzianis.

This is one of the problems with art: the tear that comes easily; the emotion produced in installments and sold in cash, even if art offers pain relief in the sea of sorrow, in the insightful words of Kiki Dimoula. The other danger is the fake, which has become the norm; the bourgeois tediousness that presents itself as sensibility, and the nouveau riche snobbery posing as avant-garde.

I am becoming more and more aware that there are two forms of art: the art of the easy, and the art of the difficult. An art that balances out, adorns, and flatters, and an art that disputes, frequently disturbs, and inconveniences. This has nothing to do with aesthetics or beauty, which is the constant goal of every artistic expression, whether con-

fessed or guiltily suppressed. I am saying this because modernité frequently stood mirthless in front of our desperate need for even more, and arrant, beauty. The reason may lie in the fact that some theoreticians associate beauty with power and aesthetics with order, a logical model that inductively leads to the monster we call established art or academy.

It is indeed a cliché that art is the lie that can nevertheless defend the sole truth for man. It is also a cliché that “knowledge” is the refined way with which intelligent people usually conceal their unconquered existential ignorance. In the beginning, there was the drama of the images that concealed words, and the drama of the words that revealed images. These images, in turn, kept seeking for new meanings, hauling out new possibilities of expression: ancient words that return to life in new forms, ancient images that magically reveal themselves in order to recount the same, antediluvian tale of the beginning of the world. Then the primordial image, the face of the enchanted Narcissus reflected on the tranquil waters, produced the first “painting,” a bright, fleeting reflection of the ephemeral on the eternal, like the outline of a shadow on the wall. Before all, then, there was the reflection on the water and the shadow on the wall, followed by their relevant stories, which served to make the myths even more essential. Oral, in the beginning, then in writing. Since then, if one wishes to see the face of another (or their own), they turn to a text. History, on the other hand, is that narrative that is slowly being rewritten. We owe it to ourselves to write it, consistently revising our loose, fleeting relationship with reality, as a fundamental act of self-knowledge. That does not fall under the category of “post-modern.” The ultimate Guernica has yet to be painted.

This ideological bubble, this paradise of relativism, these shaky foundations of the fake supported all other bubbles, financial, ideological, and political, which afflicted the planet and our country. Thus, we came to the agreement, explicitly or implicitly, that such a lie is enough to create a story... to the extent that a truth – or something we consider truth – is also necessary. If we reflect on how relevant and disreputable each truth is, with its theoretical dependencies or scientific commitments, then we will very conveniently come to the conclusion that stories are more or less made out of lies. These lies are much more straightforward deep down, because they have nothing to prove. The perfect alibi of post-modern bliss, which released us from the doctrinal moralism of the modern. When there isn't an absolute truth, then everything is relative; even the morally reprehensible, what moralists call “evil.” The post-modern wiped out the ontologically evil on a philosophical level, but it didn't do the same for malice or for evil people; they still exist in the world. Failure as success in painting 3 is one way to put it! In the end, truth remains that loose signifier to which infinite literal signifieds correspond. This

is fortunate for all those not hiding behind convenient lies. Let me phrase it as an aphorism: The classicist painter paints the world; the expressionist paints the chaos in the world. The internal abyss. The internal landscape. The existential anxiety. The question regarding what art can and cannot reveal. Art doesn't change the world. What it does is make its subjects more aware, more courageous in their despair. What is art, then? The human way towards a self-serving immortality. A joke that can, nonetheless, bring order to chaos. The prize for melancholy!

3 Gwenaël Keridou, Failure as Success in Painting: Bram van Velde, the Invisible, 14/2/2015, webpage, Hyperallergic.

4.

What Guernica? Every place, every era has its own Guernica...
And if it hasn't already created one, so much the worse for it.
K. K.

We observe the phenomenon of life sometimes horrified, sometimes ecstatic. That's the way it is. We are part of it, even if we don't realize it. We pretend to be observers of our own lives, while life is the one observing us, with wide, dilated eyes. Art is something similar. We are part of it, allowing it to lead us however far we are ready to go, often exceeding ourselves in the process.

In painting, more specifically, it is the art works that are observing us as we are leisurely gazing at them, and not the other way around. The paintings know all that we pretend to know, before we actually do. In reality, though, paintings reveal only what they wish to reveal, and nothing more. As far as the audience is concerned, they see what they can. Every painting is a potential bet with eternity, and a conversation with another art work. Art history is essentially the thick chain binding those conversations together. Kyriakos Katzourakis selects his own references in a conscious, or rather unconscious, way. This osmosis results in his own unmistakable personal style: a constant game of forms hovering between History and the agonizing present; a body that traverses time, sometimes erotic, sometimes burdened by external and internal distress; the bosom of a young girl suddenly exposed; a dog by the side of the road; a dog in the middle of a room; Guernica's inquisitorial lamp at the recruits' chamber in Corinth; the "still life" his mother painted; the disemboweled horse at the center of the composition, above the dead soldier; the yellowed photographs of the orphanage; the yellowed smiles of the children; Picasso's bull harrowing the bloodstained trenches in Grammos and Vitsi; the nightscape of Belogiannis' execution; the Minotaur soiling Ploumidis' white linen suit with its hooves. Once men, now effigies. Once serving as reference points, now causing aversion. And yet,

painting can convey a lot more in its own silent way. Much more than any theoretical analysis.

We perceive reality via the creative paradoxes of our internal landscape, and we reach reality via the powerful fantasies of our internal reality, as Winnicott would claim. A work of art is gestated in a similar way, since the subconscious comprises solely images, which in turn breed other images that will become concepts, which, emerging at the surface of our conscious mind, will end up as words: fear, desire, despair, love, anger, pleasure, pain, aversion.

For Katzourakis, some obsessive images of the subconscious become the starting point for every one of his creations. If the *Guernica*, in this instance, is the leitmotif of his recent years' creations, the driving force behind his work are the images he collects in bulk, whether intentionally or not, walking from Exarchia to Omonia and from Isavron street to Alexandras Avenue: the youths shooting up in the middle of the day on Menandrou street in front of the astounded tourists, the Afghan immigrants sleeping at Victoria Square in the heart of the winter, the young Pakistani men crowding in the houses on Filis street trying to "seduce" the Albanian girls in exchange for 10 euros (the same ones organized rings have been bringing to Greece for years; this modern-day slave trade is legalized by respectable legal officials and police officers – in a way that no one can dispute that the state not only exists, but functions perfectly), and, finally, all those pitiful people diving into the trash bins, even on Skoufa street; especially there, since it is where the scraps of the one-time powerful bourgeoisie reside, whose rubbish has always been considered valuable...

These are the images of a tormenting reality. The large-scale, modernist *Guernica*, in this instance, is broken down into smaller post-modern *Guernicas* of local interest, where the absurd competes with sorrow, and disappointment with disgust. The artist's naturalism doesn't go against his profound, romantic lyricism, and his deep desire to use fantasy to escape from the historical present that is smothering him doesn't prevent him from acting as a political entity, as History's artistic conscience, in a way.

Here I believe lies *Guernica*'s great contribution, this manifold work that strives towards the longed-for catharsis through pity and fear, if not on a collective, albeit on a personal level. In Katzourakis' personal mythology, after all, Christianity's soteriological triptych of Hell-Purgatory-Paradise has been condensed into the more argumentative Hell-Purgatory-Hell. More specifically, experiencing in the heart of post-modernism the older drama of the romantics of the 19th century, he himself constantly endeavors to produce ecstatic, and at the same time manic, art! If academic art strived towards aesthetic delight, and to please the eye ("let's make love"), the avant-

garde of modernism rejected pleasure as a vulgar concession to “good taste,” and adopted mind games and riddles (“let’s make fun”). The riddle, in other words, above all emotion.

In Katzourakis, as well as in his constant references – Tsarouchis, Diamantopoulos, Moralis, Bacon, Kitaj, Freud, Balthus, Hamilton, Niki Karagatsi, to name but a few – pleasure is not cast out, provided it has been acquired at a heavy, physical price. The pleasure in his paintings resembles the pound of flesh that Shylock requested of his disputant. And that is where his deeper political concerns lie. The crisis in our country is not only connected with values, ideas or institutions, but with specific people, who failed to rise up to the occasion and proved to be unworthy of the hopes that society had placed in them. 4

I am referring to that short-term prosperity that led to the parasitic governance model and the frenzied divestment of our national wealth; when the production system, despite seriously lacking in resources that would address the country’s consumer needs, embarked on a brainless borrowing spree. The Greek crisis, of course, is connected with the more general circumstance that also affects the rest of the world, especially Europe, whose values and finances are suffering. There is, however, a particularity: it is the “Greek oddity.” Our parasitic, consumerist society is not the product of a natural evolution; it emerged suddenly, with borrowed money and an unjust, unequal production system, in a way that caught the country unawares, rendering it defenseless and leading to its dissolution. The ancient régime, the old order, posed a historical threat before the new society was formed, and thus we found ourselves where we are today, caught between two eras, a place ruled by a confusion of ideas and a lack of tried and tested institutions, and where the old combative spirit of sacrifice has been replaced by theatrical hypocrisy, populist slogans and a lust for power. Today we find ourselves even more isolated among the loners of the world, with the relationship between state and citizen being again at the forefront, since the suspicion that institutions continue to serve personal interests is still holding strong. Confronted with this peculiar loneliness of the intellectual facing a system that is constantly changing, but in the end stays the same, and a throng of politicians who transform themselves to act out the new while wearing the well-worn masks of the old, the artist has no choice but to express his despair. And that is a very positive thing.

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