

Nikos

Ecstatic Breath of Freedom

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Nikos Kypraios – An Unusual Itinerary

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(Translated by the author)

“... The painter here proposes a new reading, which is primarily an important artistic event. His colours, emphasizing the impression of wear and tear, share, as already stated, interesting affinities with some of the artist’s earlier compositions. The expressionist intent, which is fully within the spirit of Byzantine art, enriches his subjects with both a strange familiarity and a remote austerity. Although such a feeling is inextricably linked to the past, it becomes unexpectedly modern and aesthetically pleasing...”

I came to know Nikos Kypraios’ paintings for the first time through some most attractive flowers presented in Athens in 1992. I remember that I was particularly impressed by their dynamic and predominant position within a somewhat indeterminate space. The impressive isolation and extreme exploitation of every morphological detail, the singular treatment of their marked outlines and of their bold colours had made me think of Thanos Tsingos’ unique flowers; nevertheless, I would never dream of drawing any comparisons between the two. The only characteristic shared between those two unparalleled expressions of modern Greek flower painting may be a peculiar sense of life, and an intense, almost erotic, feeling.

When I recently saw his imposing burnt trees I could not immediately recognize the affinities between those two very different periods of his work. Quite surprisingly and most unexpectedly, it was only the amazing figures of his studies in Byzantine and post Byzantine hagiography

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included in this show that led me to a full understanding of his extremely interesting and quite individual itinerary. Let us try to outline it here.

The fact that Nikos’ compositions are generally enlivened by deeply personal and experienced emotions in all their intensity makes their attribution to current trends and –isms quite difficult. An attempt to define his work as a passage through the expressionistic emphasis on the human figure leading towards a poetic, lyrical treatment of nature with quite unexpected deviations and unforeseen developments may be rather schematic. His relationship with expressionism is unmistakable but idiosyncratic, and does not preclude the simultaneous occurrence of surrealist or other features within an artistic idiom full of feeling and life.

It may not be an exaggeration to say that the human presence pervades all his paintings, even through its

apparent absence. Both the anthropomorphic character of the chimneys of his earlier urban landscapes and that of his later burnt trees lead us to this conclusion. Even his extraordinarily animated still life motifs, treated in a selective and typical way, are more or less immediately related to the human nature.

The evolution of his art would be most appropriately characterized as circular. A few motifs and themes that emerge in his first paintings subsequently follow a process of complete creative transformation. The artist once said that he considers his art as an expression of life, and we know that life is always made up of circles. His recognition of the immense discipline imposed by the practice of art, which enables him to discover his freedom, is equally revealing: the free and explosive treatment of his subject matter does not disregard the importance of a strictly disciplined artistic idiom.

The publication of a book on Nikos’ work already in 1981 is a token of the impression caused by his presence in the artistic milieu of Melbourne. Although his early investigations were undoubtedly interesting, the subsequent development of his painting necessitates an up to date and thorough study.

This artist of the Greek Diaspora was distinguished from the very beginning of his career by the sensitive content of his pictures; the seriousness and consistence of his endeavor in general are equally noteworthy. The most salient feature of the first phase of his career is the exploitation of a rather limited number of human types with intense expressionist deformities. The immigrant’s sorrow and nostalgia, the loneliness deriving from the difficulties of integration within the new surroundings or even of a return to a reality which is no longer idyllic, are expressed through stylized figures, dark and somber colours with occasional explosions, and an emphasis on the figure through its impressive isolation. In those pictures Greece is viewed as an inherent symbol

and idea; on the other hand, the iconographic details reminiscent of familiar, picturesque aspects of our country occur rather sporadically albeit in a very individual style.

The absence of Greece is further emphasized by the lack of light with a few exceptions. The fact that some figures already share a few morphological traits and colours that seem to herald the Virgin, Christ and saints of the present exhibition, is also noteworthy. It is true that the artist's memories of Byzantine and post Byzantine art date from an even older period, that is from the sixties. It may be significant to note that hagiography in the strictest sense of the word was never one of the artist's concerns. An impressive show with such a content organized in 1975-76 shares a rather unconventional approach with the latest developments in this direction. A further search for points in common throughout the different phases of Nikos' work surprises us once more: the anthropomorphism of the chimneys of his urban landscapes strangely recalls his more recent burnt trees.

Later on, in the seventies, the colour contrasts become much more intense; on the other hand, surrealist motifs and inspirations from ancient Greek mythology are now added to his repertory. The young men and women of his attractive 'Erotica' apparently draw their inspiration from ancient Greek art of the classical period, with the same, innovative freedom of drawing and colour that characterizes his later studies of Byzantine hagiography.

Nikos' turn to still life, and more specifically to flower painting and isolated fruit, is also a significant landmark in his career. His is a really novel exploitation of known themes with an interesting history; their role in the work of

many gifted contemporary creators is rather undermined. The bold chromatic explosions are sometimes extreme, in a particularly appealing way. Such an exaltation is quite unusual and possibly unique in his total oeuvre, where the treatment of colour is quite different; the latter is invariably daring and innovative, and could hardly be defined as unsophisticated and austere. In some of his 'burnt' compositions we may even recognize the echoes of the explosive chromatic richness of the still lifes. Finally, the emphasis on the independent presence of the flowers and the fruits makes the most of every detail bringing out their liveliness and eroticism in a striking antinaturalistic mode.

On his return to Greece Nikos' sensitivity was particularly affected by the sight of the immense ecological destruction caused by the fires that we all experience every summer. It may not be accidental that his burnt compositions mark the beginning of an interest in landscape painting. The result is really amazing: the depressing monotony of the burnt earth and the black trees is now changed into a field of endless artistic investigation full of feeling and colour. The grey and black skeletons of the trees are enriched with an incredible wealth of tones and gradations. Their arrangement shows a remarkable variety, while their rendering may be either more naturalistic or more abstract. Some compositions of this group even give the impression of a whirling movement. The fire red, added to the predominantly earthy colours recalls both the scale of colours of the artist's Erotica and that of his studies on Byzantine and post Byzantine art. Nevertheless, other landscapes are eloquent expressions of the emotions emerging from the new discovery of the light and colour of Greece after his immigration.

Nikos' interest in the venerable figures of Christian religion is unexpected rather than inexplicable. I do not wish to dwell on his deeper piety and mysticism that might have led him to this, since I am not familiar with this aspect of his personality. The undoubted success of the artistic endeavor is what interests me more in this connection. But it would be rather unfair to point out simply that every Greek artist practices hagiography at some point of his career. I should confess that before seeing these last works I was rather negatively inclined towards them. I am happy to admit that I found them quite irresistible, and can hardly express what I felt when I saw them. Nikos here achieves something quite impossible: to render most faithfully and at the same time with absolute freedom his imposing model. I believe that today the selection of such themes outside the realm of hagiography is rather dangerous and does not generally appeal to artists. The painter here proposes a new reading, which is primarily an important artistic event. His colours, emphasizing the impression of wear and tear, share, as already stated, interesting affinities with some of the artist's earlier compositions. The expressionist intent, which is fully within the spirit of Byzantine art, enriches his subjects with both a strange familiarity and a remote austerity. Although such a feeling is inextricably linked to the past, it becomes unexpectedly modern and aesthetically pleasing.

I wonder what would be the continuation of such an individual artistic itinerary. I believe that Nikos will always surprise us and impress us with his genuine and passionate artistic investigations. We may now ask how long for. Probably for as long as he feels the same passionate love for his art. Let me close this note by wishing him to feel it until the end of his life.

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Nikos Kypraios
Fishes
Oil on paper | 70 x 70cm | 2010

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Nikos Kypraios
Fish
Oil on paper | 70 x 100cm | 2010

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Nikos Kypraios
Fish
Oil on paper | 70 x 100cm | 2010



The International Young Artists Exchange (IYAE) was set up in 2012 to fuel the ambitions of young promising artists from diverse cultures and backgrounds to make use of their talents to contribute to the progress of society, and gives young deserving talents from disadvantaged backgrounds around the world the opportunity to hone their skills and broaden their horizons through cross-border cultural exchange platforms.

Proceeds from *Ecstatic Breath of Freedom* will aid the IYAE in its endeavours to nurture a new generation of confident and inclusive artists with a desire to bridge cultures and foster friendships with other young talents.