

SEA: Four Artists - Four Approaches

Group exhibition

June 14 – July 9, 2008

Poros

The word “sea” invites diverse and unlimited associations. With the thought of this endless diversity, we have set up the group exhibition on the subject of the sea with four artists and friends who belong to the same generation, but whose very different personalities establish a visual discourse around the thematic axis of the sea.

For Maria Filopoulou, sea stands as the definition of the joyful and sensual summer itself. The images exhibited in Poros fall into two thematic subunits: the underwater swimmers and the sunbathing nudes. The artist herself has an intense relationship with the sea. She loves her subject. She communicates to the viewer her own experience, her pleasure in sunbathing and diving into the water. Looking at her canvases we feel the warmth of the summer, the freshness of diving into the rejuvenating crisp, blue water, the taste of the salty water in our mouth, the smell of the sunscreens on the sunbathing bodies.

The reflection and the refraction of the light in the water are depicted through a delicate web of line and color with gradations and adjustments of tone. Her work comes out of the long tradition of realism and naturalism, but it focuses not on a photographically depicted scene but the artist’s feelings about what she sees and experiences. As Filopoulou says, *“The subjects I paint are invariably derived from my own experiences. I don’t wish to describe the space, but to convey my feelings about it.”*

Her subjects are often seen in a panoramic way, presented from unconventional viewpoints. In her underwater swimmers, we do not see the line of the horizon or the sky. The edge of the water is undistinguished. Compositionally, the edge of the canvas often cuts figures, establishing a snapshot directness and freshness to the presentation of the subject. The swimmers move in an enclosed space, but Filopoulou wants to express the sense of absolute freedom. The beautiful bodies of the underwater swimmers move unrestricted, often not aware of each other. They are completely naked, often with tan lines visible on their bodies recalling the clothes previously worn and emphasizing the absolute freedom they experience in the water. Her brushstroke emphasizes the fluidity of the water, with a rhythm of line and movement. Her work presents an underwater Arcadia, a celebration of beauty, harmony, tranquility, life. Her work echoes Matisse's desire: "*What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter.*"

Water is equally essential for Tassos Mantzavinos. But nothing could be more different from the serene and joyful world of Filopoulou than that of Mantzavinos. He paints "*the fear of the sea.*" His waters are deep blue, almost black, unfriendly, dangerous, seas ready to metamorphose before our eyes to the snakes and monsters of folk stories. These images come from the material of which dreams are made. They present visual narrations that we cannot completely comprehend and connect, but they petrify us in our darkest nightmares. For Mantzavinos, "*My dreams are the inspiration that influences my paintings, but other times my paintings influence my dreams.*"

The prime material of Mantzavinos's paintings – as the artist admits – is his own childhood memories, fears, traumas. His canvases have become the stages where the past plays out in the present. Their power provokes the viewer to connect by bringing out his own personal and collective experiences. The work at a certain level of reading is culturally determined. In Poros, Mantzavinos presents both paintings and constructions. In both, the sea is central. The paintings provide the context for the constructions – mainly of boats. The artist's childhood memory of the pilgrimage to the miraculous icon of the Virgin in the island of Tinos that he undertook with his grandmother is at the core of the construction entitled *Offering*. The

artist starts with a crude, folk model of a boat to which he adds various elements relevant to the concept of the pilgrimage – the Byzantine cross on the top of the boat, a model church on the deck, a small painting of three frontally painted male pilgrims with their hands crossed in a prayer position on a shocking pink background. Actual filakta are included – a square and a triangular – as well as silver offerings. The whole group is framed by two additional figures: a miniature statue of a male figure in the stern, and a painting of a profile of a man in fayum style in the plori. Greek flags are attached to the masts, and folk elements such as the heart, birds, fish/snake are painted over the boat, playfully emphasizing the folk aspect of the work. Mantzavinos does not stay in the pilgrimage as a cultural phenomenon, but goes deeper. The boat's destination is not just the pilgrimage site; this is a voyage through life.

Parallel issues are explored in his painting with the similar title *Offerings*. The sea is painted in deep blue/black. Compositionally, the canvas is cut in the middle by an olive tree with a snakelike trunk, coming out at the edge of a schematized shore. The human absence is emphasized by an empty, light blue boat that approaches the shore, and is stretched further by the offerings that hang from the branches of the tree – fragments of human parts. One represents an eye – the representation of an offering that we see very often in Mantzavinos's work – and its meaning can extend to multiple interpretations: vision related to art-making; eye as the mirror of the soul; eye as the eye of Pantocrator who sees everything. The other offering is atypical, a cross-section between an offering and a sculptural relief representing a sphinx or a medusa head with her stylized eyes ready to freeze the viewer. The uncomfortable, almost uncanny feeling is further emphasized by the uncertainty as to the time of day. Is it the beginning of the day or its end?

In his work, Mantzavinos rejects any naturalistic tendency through a complete deviation from atmospheric and linear perspective. The forms are distorted and the colors are applied in nonnatural ways, with free brushwork often imitating a childlike simplicity of execution. The figures are presented either in profile or frontal view, outlined, with schematic features. The objects are arranged and depicted in terms of relative importance, and that determines their sizes. It is a sophisticated amalgamation of sources as diverse as Byzantine and folk art, the paintings of Kontoglou and the visual material of

Karagiozis. Stylistically, his work is outside trends and movements; the artist creates a unique and sophisticated expressionism aiming at an emotional and often mystical expression. As the artist says, the aim is “*to paint what we see and what we see is ourself naked*”.

Kostas Papanikolaou's work is realistic but not merely illusionistic. He draws the spectator into an invented realm of meaning related to everyday life. His paintings are results of an intense observation; here the inner seascapes and voyages of Mantzavinos become specific locations and destinations. Papanikolaou's works presented in Poros are closely related to the island and the nearby Peloponnesus coast, a place the artist has chosen to be his residence away from Athens. His paintings in the Citronne exhibition fall into two main categories: pure landscapes and seascapes that map the area, and moments from boat trips to Poros.

Papanikolaou loves and repeatedly paints the view of the sea from in front of his house in Galatas, defined by the Peloponnesus coast on the right and the island of Poros on the left, with the small islets of Cara, Bourtzi, and Modi (or Lion, as it is known locally) in between. Papanikolaou approaches his subjects from unexpected viewpoints and perspectives. A gigantic lemon tree with its branches full of flowers and fruit obscures the seascape and adds the identity of the location as the famous lemon grove of Poros. Papanikolaou is a superb colorist; through the subtle variation of tonality and interplay of hues of blue, green, and ochre he captures the light and the essence of the season and the site. The same color scheme appears again in the *Islet Fortress in Poros*, in which the sea around the islets of Cara, Bourtzi, and Modi is observed from a terrace. Here the landscape is presented in the background, segmented and framed by the architectural and industrial elements of the balcony in the foreground which, in addition to hiding and emphasizing the view, establish the work compositionally through the formal interplay of verticals and horizontals.

The second group of images – scenes from ferry trips to Poros – typically belongs to the category of genre paintings. Even so, the sea and landscape references do not simply serve as background to the arrangement of figures, but are central in terms of the subject as well as composition. They specify the exact location – arriving at Poros, as hinted by the image of the tower clock on the left, or going

from Poros to Hydra, as suggested by the image of the boat going through Tselevinia on the right. The landscapes are presented emphatically framed – paintings inside a painting – seen through the windows of the interior of the boat or, in a parallel visual logic, through the floor and railings of the deck.

Papanikolaou's personal rendering of the everyday reality of contemporary Greek middle-class life follows the aesthetic quest of the earlier twentieth-century Greek modernist tradition defined by the work of Papalouka, Kontoglou, and Tsarouchi. His work – both the landscapes and the genre subjects most intimate impression of nature and life around him. It has an austere beauty of form, space, and especially light that transforms the dullest scene into a harmonious construction of planes and spaces.

In Nana Vetta's paintings, the subject of the specific landscape melts away and disappears from the canvas as the artist moves towards purely abstract visual expression. The surfaces of her paintings have their own reality, rather than being windows onto an illusionistic recreation of this world. She abandons all suggestions of visual representation, moving away from the individual and the particular to create an independent construct of shapes and colors which have an aesthetic appeal in their own right. The texture of the paint and the shape of her brush marks convey her feelings and her response to the subject. These textures – whether wide horizontal, uneven bands of thick paint or freely energetic criss-crossing brushwork – recall the instinctive gestural approach which characterized the New York School of abstract expressionism.

The characteristic idiom of the work is luminous fields of color, large rectangular bands of textured layers of different hues arranged parallel to each other, usually in a horizontal format. Her color areas, without clear-cut edges, seem to dissolve into each other. The edges are softly uneven, giving the paintings a hazy, pulsating quality as if they were suspended and floating on the canvas. The overall feeling is one of calmness and contemplation. The artist explores the psychological, even spiritual effects of color. Her approach to landscapes presents a direct and almost mystical relationship to nature, having the power to submerge the viewer into the mood of her landscapes.