

A delightful and charming encounter with Papalouka's Work

I first came across Niko Papalouka by the end of the 1990s when I was teaching Art History at the Aristoteles University of Fine Arts of Salonica with him being one of the new coming students from Cyprus. I remember me keeping an eye on young cyriot students, not just because Cyprus is my homeland of origin, but also because I've always believed or felt moreover, that the people of this small place with their great and profound history have inherited throughout the ages an impressive skill of dealing with structure and colour. During the few times I happened to be on the island, whether to attend to cultural missions or to teach, I've always discovered with big surprise and not less emotion that most of the people throughout rural and urban areas have always been and still are avid amateur sculptors and painters. I would even say, in the case of Kosta Stathi (1913-1987) from Askas – his excellent talent being recognised unfortunately very late – is a convincing proof of the above thoughts.

How is it possible, that somebody who didn't even finish his studies in Athens because of the approaching war and his personal poverty, to have given us such a pioneer legacy, living at the same time in complete social isolation in his village Askas? It seems that - as opposed to common dominating beliefs - a rising artist and creator doesn't have to be constantly nourished by metropolitan centres of abroad in order to be on the highest level of his time.

This is what I was thinking of, when I visited again Niko Papalouka in his atelier in Nicosia. Once I had seen quite a number of his recent works (small and bigger paintings, polypticha in acrylic or collages that he completed during his master's studies in England, or even metallic jewelry in different original shapes) I spontaneously showed my enthusiasm about the maturity, the flowless shapes and the juvenile strength of his work. For me, Nikos Papaloukas is another case of an artist, who despite the fact that he resides and works in a rather periferal cultural region, in Cyprus, he manages to make an excellent use not only of modern and artistic education, but also of the whole artistic tradition of his country.

Nevertheless, it so often happens, that we being Art Historians tend to rush into giving an artistic identity whenever we come to meet an artist, mainly based upon influences he has had through Artists and movements of Modern or Postmodern tradition. It is of course helpful to recognise in Papalouka's work influences from Cezanne, Matisse or Picasso but however inadequate, as it's the whole artistic production of the last century that has been

inspired or based upon these great artists. Therefore, the point isn't the fact that one might recognise in Papalouka's work the influence of female nude of Matisse, or Picasso's compositional period, but to better understand the way Papaloukas – or any other gifted artist – uses, applies and optimizes artistically all of what he has been taught by all these great figures of Modernism. Besides that, from the beginning of the last century up to nowadays, there have been a lot of evolutionary stages in modernism, that have embodied new aesthetic ideologies and tendencies within the field of Art, like the culture of Pop-Art, Minimalism, Poststructuralism, the aesthetics of new graphics, Video-Art or New Technologies, without having to give up any conquered revolutionary avant-gardistic ideas.

Nikos Papaloukas is a plain and gentle, often lyric narrator, who always seeks for the spirit, regardless of the matters he is dealing with. Landscapes, people, erotic couples, birds, mythological themes, the tragedy of the turkish invasion of 1974 in a very special narrative figure, the wonderful polyptichon of dance, as well as blond girls on the beach, geometrically scissored from flashy coloured paper, are some of recent years' series that show the artist's conscious course towards a deeply researched geometrical abstraction (both morphologic and substancial). It's about a quest for the actual substance of things and life itself in its modern everyday life throughout exercises of geometrical composition that seek to reach for a somehow plain and clean-cut simplification. The collage works of 2011 as well as the acrylic ones on canvas of 2012 are perfect samples of this effort. One might think after looking at them for quite some time, that taking even a simple line away from them, this might take their special structural balance away.

Something I would like to point out, too, is that memories of the tough but well inspired efforts of charismatic Cypriot painters are always present in Papalouka's works; these painters contributed to the development of a considerable peripheral Modernism, enriched by light, colour and humble materials of Cypriot everyday rural life. I am pretty sure, that Nikos Papaloukas by studying the works of Christoforos Savva or Giorgos Polyviou Georgiou for example, realized in depth that an artist who hasn't understood himself, thus not having filtered all the experiences of his next environment could never stand up for universality. Works like the 'Kafenion' 1 and 2 of 2007 or the 'Balcony' of 2008 are in my opinion works par excellence of artistic transformation – full of light, colour and rhythm - of cyprus mediterranean landscape. Of course I don't need to stress that Nikos Papaloukas is not a landscape painter or an artist of everyday urban life, wherever this might be. All of these themes, even mythological ones where ancient heroes or centaures in love grab

nymphs and brave amazons, witness their own drama within urban landscapes and modern avenues; they are a rich cultural and fantasy mixture, that deals first and last with rhythm and form in a gentle humoristic narration.

I would like to finish with something I felt about the way the artist faces his work. His seriousness and organization do not keep him up from being modest and humble, a fact that shows up in his works in form of a smooth and charming, undeclared yet existing humor. This is what prevents him from acting narcissistically in different successful periods of his work. Our country is a small and closed place and it's very easy to lose your seriousness if you take yourself too seriously.

Niki Loizidi

Professor of Art History

Department of Theory and History of Art

University of Fine Arts, Athens

translated from Greek by: A. Pavlou