

Palimpsest Worlds

A house in a beautiful village, a family, a father, a mother, a son, a daughter. One would assume that this is a family with a regularity and an orderly everyday life following, as it were, the linearity of time. Such a representation might even suggest an idyllic state. “Here” –so constituted by the above-mentioned notions of place and roles– can fit neatly into the one-way vector of time, coursing from the past through the present and to the future – with a simplistic assumption and interpretation.

Toula Liasi could have hoped for a promising, if prescribed, stunning future. She could have simply sat back, watched the time and let it go. But in time... everything would be turned upside down.

Toula is that daughter in that house. Hers was the picturesque Turkish–occupied village that would change its name, its inhabitants as well as its identity as a result of a violent event and the subsequent Turkish occupation. An unexpected event that was not limited in its manifestation to a point in time; rather one that has had an enduring impact on people’s lives in manifold ways, for over a half century. She is the daughter –now alone– of a home where life and death cannot be fully comprehended by the concept of time as commonly understood and accepted. Her missing brother’s death –an interminable question– settles in the back of her mind as an ultimate and inevitable possibility or maybe a final “rationalization” of the outcome of fate. The uncertainty of her parents’ lives – in an uncertain, continuously threatening and even dystopian environment– penetrates the safety of the walls of the house, negates the sanctuary it offers. It abolishes the privacy and sanctity of the hearth, while penetrating every object, seemingly shattering and differentiating their meaning, utility and function. Even her mother’s death, in April 2015, takes a tragic twist in a sequence of gruesome events that border on the unreal, even the absurd.

There is no doubt that in order to be able to understand and give meaning to situations and events, Toula Liasi had to distance herself from the outer bounds of logic, but also to make a radical departure from dominant, common-sense perceptions of space and time.

The title of her exhibition *Synchronising History* discloses the approach taken by the artist. I will not express my views regarding methodology yet, but rather about her overcoming the “personal” and the “existential”. Following a transcendental and spiritual mode of expression, she redefines and repositions herself in relation to space and time.

By definition, the term “synchronise” denotes the action of causing events, actions, situations and functions to occur or to process simultaneously. This transcendent act –the mental recasting of historical space and time– is necessary for the artist to align herself with the powerful new dynamic of “becoming.” The writer Yiannis Neonakis considers the past and the future as weighty components in human consciousness – misapprehensions of which, however, can distort a wholesome sense of the present and its proper here-and-now concerns. Nevertheless, the trauma of the past and the anxiety for the future fail to contain the scope and tremendous intensity of the dynamics of an expanded and reimaged “present” that can encompass and invest all past and future with new significance. So, a continuous expansion of a creative life-sphere –with “now” at its core– enriches life’s markings and meanings,

seeking the fullness and the timelessness of a new unified “whole” that wishes for the eternal, the immortal.

Toula Liasi is very well aware that memory is prone to everything that is painful. Having acquired what Karl Jaspers calls tragic knowledge¹ –a prerequisite for a treatise on the concept and results of a tragedy– she adopts a dramatic stance.² She boldly sacrifices her selfhood, denies the subjectivity of sentiments through a certain distancing and sets herself on a course of emotional purification. She tries to create a new present, dealing with the trauma in an apologetic and redemptive way. It offers the viewer a deeply personal and empirical experience. Memory and recollection are filtered and actualized into image and narrative.

The German philosopher of the Enlightenment, Immanuel Kant, asserts that space and time are a priori forms of human sensibility or intuition. As a result, we are dealing always and everywhere with the phenomenal aspect-character of all spatial and temporal objects and not with the objects themselves, strictly speaking. Consequently, we are conditioned only to perceive them, taking into account their transcendental meaning. The same applies to the house as a building and to the artefacts found therein. Toula creates new conditions, as she transforms the “house” from an existing three-dimensional space into a now mediated conceptual place –into a space-time capsule, as it were– where the objects dominate and are integrated into the space as evidence of a new “acceptable” present.

With their colours, dimensions and functionality, the objects collaborate with their former emotional value and are instrumentalised. Grouped and spatialised, they act as entities in a heterotopic environment that defy the dystopic, perhaps embracing the utopic itself. But the usefulness of the objects gives way to non-functionality. Once operating as readymades, the original items and their usage are overturned in order to achieve an aesthetic dimension, thus serving in the transformation of concepts and symbolism. They faithfully serve and perform the narrative act. Exercising absolute authority over them, the artist repurposes them into autonomous works of art possessing great artistic and emotional value.

With her collages, Toula makes the most of the immediacy of expression offered by this particular medium. She transforms the message she wants to convey into a two-dimensional image, using the technique of photography to dematerialise and recompose, sometimes using the criteria of colour and other times focusing on the properties of the original objects. She has no interest in the obvious. She creates a new narrative, a “palimpsest”. A new text that has been superimposed on an earlier one – with the old objects treated as suggestive traces or fragments of some previously existing time and place.

Personally, what I see in Toula Liasi’s oeuvre is a ritualistic and metaphysical vision. Adhering to her own unique methodology, which she follows to the letter. Her creative act is converted into a transformative one – conceptually and spiritually connected to the sublime and the sacred. A journey in search of divinity, in whatever way she herself chooses to interpret it.

In her video *Choreography for Dresses*, the wind gives movement to her mother’s garments hanging in the air, shaping and choreographing the immateriality of her existence as an

expression of continuity. In this perfect timing, the elements of nature collaborate with intention, marking the nascent moment of a metaphysical event.

In her installation titled *Birthday Present*, a rusty barrel –left to the law of entropy and given over to the synergy of time and oxidation– is used. Corrosion accomplishes the work of alteration and transformation with creative precision. In a symbolic juxtaposition of the laws of deterioration and indestructibility, the barrel is placed at the centre of a composition depicting a doily. The latter, made of salt –a mineral with the dual properties of preservation and decay–, evokes a personal Mandala. Swiss psychologist Carl Jung defines Mandala as a “sacred circle” – a universal expression of human life, of the cosmos in its unity and wholeness, of the infinite. Does the relationship between deterioration and indestructibility here suggest an intermediate state, one that allows the artist to complete the process of transformation? To reclaim what she personally considers just, moral, and good, and, perhaps, find respite from sorrow?

We live in an era where memory, which we invoke incessantly, has been relegated to a “bare” term both in our political and historical narrative, even in our modern national story. Cut off from personal experience, it has been instrumentalised and manipulated, reduced into a term of homogenized recollection, which leads to inertia and pessimism.

The synchronised history of Toula Liasi revives something that we have been deprived of for a long time – the virtue of boldness. She creates and reconfigures two “presents”, a new temporality which redefines her existence, her identity, her truth. She discovers that nothing of the past is superfluous. It merely lacks the self-efficiency of essence – the self-efficiency that only art can freely grant. Her own art. And as a viewer and a partaker, I can only confess my admiration and respect.

1, 2 Jaspers, Karl, *Tragedy Is Not Enough*, translated by Theodoros Loupasakis, Athens: Erasmios Publications, 1990.

3. Papagiorgis, Kostis, *Περί Μνήμης*, Athens: Kastaniotis Publications, 2008.