

Katerina Tsebeli, painter of fugitive moments

Katerina Tsebeli employs pastels, acrylics and occasionally chalk for painting mainly bus interiors. Her paintings are non-symmetrical compositions mostly with a dark or black and white palette, tightly rendered yet with arguably simplified passages. Pastel application is complex with a predilection to dense line texture adorned with intervals of relatively blank surface, a testimony to nerve and excitement when painting. Free strokes are scribbled to model the forms, backgrounds are simplified and the dominant impression of the viewer is that of the fugitive moment of life, solemnly captured and rendered by art.

Tsebeli's subjects never pose and give the impression of not being selected. They are also unaware of the painter's gaze. The painter takes extra care to be totally inconspicuous when observing her subjects; she draws them very quickly in sketch books, being herself a passenger on the bus, and then composes her paintings at the studio, sometimes supplementing her memory and sketchbook with photographs of the scenes. In fact, the scenes she depicts look as if they were photographed, as if they are captions by the photographic camera since they extend beyond the picture frame and are thus open-ended depictions of reality as Wolfflin would have said of baroque. Parts and pieces of reality, fragments of life are isolated and revealed in Tsebeli's painting. White is used for the representation of light, washing and covering the scribbled lines, indicating thereby time, a certain hour during the day, at which the scene unfolds in front of our eyes. The composition follows the precepts of impressionism that favored off-centered depictions of moving images of subjects that did not care to pose.

Sometimes Tsebeli's realism goes to the extreme and then body parts are depicted without faces. It is then clear that the fidelity that Tsebeli seeks to establish does not solely concern reality and its representation but rather aims to follow the painter's gaze and moreover, thematize everyone's customary and absent minded gazing of eye-catching, yet trivial details and specifics of others. Tsebeli's gaze is discreet and solely depicts without yielding to feelings and yet the way she some-times paints reveals a tenderness towards her subjects, a sure sign of thinking that has occupied their condition, from the part of the painter.

Equally discreet are her painting titles: Boarding, Scene, Woman and child, The Reader, The red dress, Touch, Standing and sitting. The viewer is thus encouraged to consider exactly those moments from everyone's lives that Tsebeli describes, to reflect upon and assess them, perhaps for the very first time, ever. Nostalgia is here playing a deliberately moderate role but the liberty is essentially assigned to the viewer to make what he/she thinks of the paintings. It comes as no surprise then, the painter's attachment to Edgar Degas who negated impressionism and aligned himself with the realists and made a point to observe, without passing judgment, human isolation, which greatly interests Tsempeli too. Degas's famous pastels of nudes, like *La Toilette* (Woman Combing her Hair), c. 1884-1886, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, demonstrates the extent to which Tsebeli is inspired by

his method, technique and approach. Although less meticulous than Degas, Henri Toulouse de Lautrec, his pupil, continued his master's precepts and could, along with Honoré Daumier, be listed in Tsebeli's sources establishing a genealogy for her oeuvre.

Tsebeli's individuals are left free. So are her viewers. This freedom does not have the heroic or authentic character that Michel Tapié celebrated in 1952, at the height of existentialism. ¹ Tsebeli's art does not seek to stupefy to be art and does not emphasize becoming, process or possibility. It is a quiet realism coming from far back, as already indicated, but also having contemporary alliances both in Greece and internationally. Gerhard Richter has been exhibiting since the 1960's a series of pictures which blur the image and distort the focus as if depicting life and movement without any care for expressivity and based "on the compositional and formal qualities of photography."² Accordingly, Andrew Otwell claims that Richter's "ideas evolved largely out of a consideration of photography as a mass medium."³ However Tsebeli does not merely employ photography. Her image repertory is also derived from the internet as well as from video stills. A considerable part of her work reveals her research in the international depository of images, like for example the two Asian men sitting inside the metropolitan train bench or the two men inside a car, carrying an indubitable atmosphere of film noir. Therefore it becomes clear that Tsebeli is not exclusively relying on painting conventions but exploits other arts having to do with the image. According to Douglas Crimp who explicitly criticizes Michael Fried's notion of theater:

*The work that has laid most serious claim to our attention throughout the seventies has been situated between, or outside the individual arts, with the result that the integrity of the various mediums-those categories the exploration of whose essences and limits constituted the very project of modernism-has dispersed into meaninglessness.*⁴

Crimp refers to American artists like Jack Goldstein, Cindy Sherman, Robert Longo and Sherrie Levine but one could arguably include to his consideration the European artists Francesco Clemente and R. B. Kitaj who are closer to painting rather than mixed media and therefore represent paradigms with which Tsebeli's work could be more relevant.

In her picture with the two Asian men in the metro or at the scene on the boat deck, Tsebeli ventures into exploiting color, though still restricting her palette to few hues and showing that she is essentially an artist of the line, tone and contrast, in black and white. Such images evoke pop art and encourage the viewer to think of her work from the point of view of its heritage that brought artistic concerns back to life and everydayness. Eleni Vakalo pinpoints the protagonists of this hard core realism who permeated the Greek artworld from the nineteen seventies onwards. She mentions Chronis Botsoglou's work *Metro A'* a diptych from 1970 as well as works by Panayotes Gravvalos, Dimitris Perdikidis, Yannis Psychopedis, Petris Zoumboulakis and Lefteris Kanakakis from the same period, as indicative of tendencies in the Greek artworld establishing a lasting influence. ⁵ Vakalo's prophetic assessments are realized in the work of many contemporary painters like Tsebeli as well as in the work of even younger artists like Mandalena Psoma. Tsebeli's realism with its loans from 19th century France and twentieth century European pop art and its dependence on photography, video and the internet, is endowed with an enthusiasm for the fugitive, the

transitory and the contingent moment, “la moiti de l’art, don’t l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable 6 .

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1. Michel Tapié, “A New Beyond” in Herschel B. Chipp, ed. *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968, p. 603.
2. Andrew Otwell, “Gerhard Richter and the Simulacrum” 1997, <http://www.heyotwell.com/work/arthistory/Richter.html>
3. Ibid.
4. Douglas Crimp, “Pictures” in Brian Wallis, ed., *Art After Modernism. Rethinking Representation*, New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991, p. 176.
5. Eleni Vakalo, *The physiognomy of postwar art in Greece*, vol. 4, “After abstraction”, (in Greek) Athens: Kedros, 1985, pp.69-81.
6. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris; Seuil, 1968, p. 553. The translation to English is “the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable” in Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, transl. and ed. Jonathan Mayne, New York: Da Capo Press/ Phaidon Press, 1964, σελ. 13.