

YIANNIS MANIATAKOS: THE SEA SAID YES

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courtyard
23 July 2022

I have been fantasizing with the idea of conceiving the Ocean as a public space and an art space. But I never dreamt that someone performed this dream already. There is a movie of the Greek artist Yannis Maniatakos painting under water that fills the viewer with lots of emotions. When you belong to a coastal community, and such is my case, you grow up with a culture of salt. Salt is both a powerful preserver and assures you food for the winters and a strong corrosive agent that acts against all the materials you use for shelter. In that regard, painting under water embodies not only an embrace of a space of light, life and liquid but a philosophy of mingled bodies and substances that goes far beyond the human. True! We never were bold enough to ask salt if she would like to be part of painting! By painting inside the Ocean, in a spot where light gets through its surface as if it was marvelous glass turning everything light blue, embracing the painter with its liquid body, he is insisting in a new artistic epistemology, one that departs from mingled bodies. A true non-binary exercise that tries—hard and repeatedly—to depict the sea from inside.

From Nicolas Poussin to Constable, Turner, and Cézanne artists have been approaching nature as a genre, as a subject that animates the matter of painting with the logic of life. Plein air is a term referring to the act of painting outdoors, to the gesture of taking the practice of art out of the controlled environment of the studio. The sun, the winds, the elements of nature do as they wish and not as the artist desires. Also, the nude bodies can only be imagined or replaced by voluptuous clouds, tempests, all the phenomena and moods of the weather. However, for centuries, no one wondered why is there no portrait of the corals, the fishes... Portraits of different histories, histories of the millions of shipwrecks, the unlucky civilizations that ended in the depths, of the traces of all the vestiges and wrongdoings of the humans towards the Ocean...

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Yannis Maniatakos was not so far either in his work. He stayed by porting the familiar environment under the sea that he chose as his own. From there, painting opened up to forms of life and processes that were novel to painting herself. We should see it as a true get together between one of the most —historically, at least—privileged media and the Ocean. Movement has always been a challenge for art. Accused of depicting life frozen, art and artists have been exploring ways of becoming life, instead of representing it. For this reason, dynamism is a key notion. It refers not to the illusion of movement but to the reality of mutualism. To engage physically, mentally and philosophically in a practice that demands radical adaptations — to breath, to the site, to the sight, to the fact that no one except the fishes can stand still while painting. Adaptation even to your co-workers, the co-habitants of the sea while you paint its wonders. A practice truly based in learning, anew, as a human, to be with others. The same exercise that we perform when, every time humans enforce violence to others, we wonder about why is it so difficult to stay in balance to respect diversity, to honor differences, to keep freedom as the most precious value. Yes. Many times in time, in history, we have needed a refuge. Yannis Maniatakos found —at least partially—a shelter, a refuge where to re-program the possibility of a new world in balance, in peace, respectful to each other.

Painting under the Ocean refers to an exile, but refers as well to a promise, the promise to do all we can to keep the conditions of life in all its forms in relation. A move —going under water—that is even more radical if you take into account the deep nostalgic character of the Greek society, obsessively insisting and referring to antiquity, to being the origin of democracy... He does not obviously reject this myth, and yet by leaving this idea of a civilization, incorporates this ties of collective self-depiction into a radical new reality that may become a new foundation of Greek identity and philosophy: the sea. A sea that accepts him, Yannis Maniatakos, that allows for co-creativity and that reminds all of us that the true encyclopedic goal is synthesis.

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