

THANASIS TOSIKAS: “YOU CANNOT DEAL WITH A FOOL. HE WILL KILL YOU WITH HIS FOOLISHNESS”

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The visual artist that no one can forget, even though they may not know him well, was in Athens for a unique performance.

He slightly raises his Karelia Filters pack, which may refer to something retro as is the case; it magnetizes the look, and as an homage to its standing in time, it is as if it asks for the death warning sign to be lifted. Meanwhile, he opens the pack and removes the thin, elegant etiquette whose only use seems to be no other than illusional reminder of an old type of luxury. It all plays out as if it were a scene in an Aki Kaurismaki film.

Thanasis Totsikas is now holding the etiquette which is thin as a cigarette paper. Then, he bends and picks one of the metallic knives that are part of his visual composition that is placed on the floor of the exhibition hall. He shows that this simply tears the cigarette paper softly. Without weighing it down or straining it. As if the etiquette does not resist or make the slightest, whiny sound. But it is an admirable blade! Even a Japanese expert of metallurgy would envy it.

“We speak on equal terms with the Japanese guy”, Thanasis Totsikas says while he cannot remember how many are these strange knives that look like axes and that he has been creating during the last three years. “Only the ones I made for the exhibition “Hypnos” at Onassis Stegi in 2016, were 200.”

Nevertheless, most people link Thanasis Totsikas to the coarsest misunderstanding in the history of modern art of the country. The one that involved a young woman who, in 2003, tore off a piece of a photograph that was part of a big composition with no title. It was made of more photographic panels crafted by the artist and was included in the famous exhibition “Outlook” occasioned by “Athens 2004”.

The cause of that vandalism was that that part of the composition showed the artist having intercourse with a watermelon. “People would say things, mostly irrelevant, however. They would say, for example, that this was ‘rape of nature’”, Totsikas recalls today. Sure enough, a lot of things which made no sense were heard or were written. Like, for example, that the watermelon was being sodomized or, yet, that the artist would create by far better pieces of art had he used a melon instead. Someone else was in favor of the work... What he said may have been worse because he condescended that, “you must have had your own reasons for doing this!”

For Totsikas, “what was hard was that none of all those who talked about the scene with the watermelon referred to the rest of that work. Maybe they never saw it, even if it was a work that resembled a Renaissance mural or a Fra Angelico fresco. That is what it looked like to me, what interested me. However, only a fragment of the work was projected, and if they could further zoom in that disputed part, they would most probably do it. As for the rest of the people, their stance is one of indifference and of non-involvement.

Therefore, I felt that I had to do something... I had to register my presence, to capture something strong, of big volume, not just the beauty of nature which was terrific with the plane trees and all, but to show the beauty of existence as well. The soothing harmony in everything. The fact that your inner and your outer selves meet with the ideal.”

Thanasis Totsikas was born in Larissa. He lives and works there, at a secluded place in the pristine nature.

Ever since he was a boy, he has been painting. “I would go water the fields and would carry colors with me. I would go in the shade of the hut and make sketches using a pen and a small block of paper. I would pick up a straw and draw it. Painting from nature. A vine-leaf. I was fifteen.”

His family showed no admiration for his work – quite the contrary. His father could not come to

terms with the fact that his son was an artist. He thought it was shameful.

Nonetheless, at the age of sixteen, Totsikas came to Athens and after attending only a few tutorial sessions he passed the exams for the preliminary year at the Athens School of Fine Arts. It was 1967. Following the preliminary year, he took the exam for the laboratory courses but did not pass. However, he stayed in Athens. In approximately the same way is how his academic career developed later in Paris. He enrolled at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, but was not interested enough to graduate from it. He is an unruffled genuine autodidact.

“I was interested in Paris which is itself the greatest school: museums, stores, the Museum of Mankind where all those pre-historic exhibits are displayed. So, while in Paris I discovered Paris where at the time, in the early ‘80s, the aura of Picasso as well as his prestige were still lingering in the visual arts.” On the other hand, what artistic benefit can one gain by living in an isolated place in the countryside? “The fact that you can focus on your work. It has nothing to do with isolation”, he replies. Let alone that it can be stimulating: “I like lilacs and I have put many around the house. In Spring, you see a lilac, you prepare the camera and you start shooting. A breeze starts blowing, moving the lilac and thus create an amazing kind of lyricism.”

It seems that every time, the mechanism used by Thanasis Totsikas in creating a work is set in motion by an idyllic scenery of the countryside of Thessaly. This is what inspires his belief in the primordial element which we should rather perceive as an undefined force of life that always leads man towards moments of bliss.

Therefore, the belief in the primordial becomes a catalyst for fantasies to take shape. These are created by using simple ingredients which are at one’s fingertips, such as trivial and everyday experiences or experiences which are the result of being involved in crafting things. He describes “craftsmanship” as something fascinating which provides a source of inspiration of forms. Its charm lies in the “Da Vinci-an” status in which it engages you.” It yields unexpected sensations, because in order to advance in front of it, one dares to rely on his intuition.

The target is one and it is always the same: to conquest or just draw attention to a place which is not necessarily portrayed as a landscape, even if this is usually the case. It may be a place in the mathematical sense of the word (which could include imaginary fields such as a utopia or a dystopia). That place may constitute a magical “there” which escapes the grip of distress created by civilization.

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More often than not in Totsikas' work one can detect a playful intent which may carry as a way of a golden backup, the necessary ingredients to become self-sarcastic. Due to that occasionally well-hidden playfulness, one can possibly detect faint hints of irony. However, this has to do with a kind of irony that does not relish its scathing power but, rather, with a melancholic mood which stems from an undetected fatal frustration.

Otherwise, how's everyday life? Can one keep a schedule in such an artistic way of life? "Yes, yes! Of course! First, I must wake up! I must see in front of me the set of everyday life. Then, one can take a stance on matters."