

THANASIS TOSIKAS: “THE ART I MAKE IS LIKE A FRUIT MORE LIKE A NEW KIND OF FRUIT”

Thanasis Totsikas interviewed by Alexandra Koroxenidis
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Amidst the tranquility of nature, in the green rural area just outside Polydendri, Larissa, the multidimensional and mainly self-taught artist observes nature, “the greatest teacher” as he calls it, is inspired by his experiences, uses every kind of materials and tools, and lives a life which is authentic and committed to the creation of art. He combines art with life, experience with intellect and instinct, function with form, manual work with intellectual work, and art with technology as a means of expressing the law of physics. He follows his instinct and his spontaneity and stretches his observation of things to extremes, to its peak. In his hands, the simplest object is transformed into a work of art. Life, vital strength, energy, perseverance, openness towards things, the authentic and the elementary, the drive as well as the patience are tools that he uses both in his art and in his way of life. They connect all the different kinds of work he has produced: the work of his first solo exhibition (1982), a reproduction of a stone hut with tools, his paintings of geometrical shapes in vigorous colors, the “Ducati” installation at the “Venice Biennale 1997”, the rotating cylindrical machinery at “Documenta 1992”, the landscape photographs at the “Outlook” exhibition (part of this work provoked reaction), the sculptures, the musical instruments, his performance with a sitar, and recently, the “Knives”.

Thanasis Totsikas often uses the word “craftsmanship”. “Craft” is about manual work; it involves different materials. For the artist, however, it is also a broader way of perceiving manual work by way of a deep understanding of things through the study and the observation of the laws of nature. Once we grasp the concept of this, then the appreciation of the human soul and of the self, follows. Art is an expression of the culmination of such an understanding; it is the tipping point.

Alexandra Koroxenidis: *Your latest exhibition at “Akwa Ibom” (www.akwaibomathens.org) was a series of paintings about crucifixion. Suffering and violence are recurrent themes in some of your works. On the other hand, there is the affirmation of life and the comprehension of the force of life. How do you perceive these dynamics?*

Thanasis Totsikas: This last series titled “Crucifixion”, is autobiographical. It is some sort of personal Crucifixion related to matters of survival and to the space and time in my life. It is also about the fact that there are no mechanisms, either from an institutional or from a human point of view, to help someone in need. In my other performance involving a horseman, violence and oppression among humans had to do with the concept of primitivism, of survival. However, I do not want to get into political matters; I am more interested in the social and human conditions. What I want is to interpret matters of the psyche. Death interests me as something existential, as a transition from one state to another, even in terms of colors. For example, from red to green, from cold to warm, from spring to autumn; how the transition occurs, whether it is done smoothly or violently; this is a “plastic” interpretation. It is the meeting point, of the intersection seen in geometrical artworks. Transition per se has energy, life. I believe in the vital force of things. I am interested in the element of energy, how, for example, the metallic cylinders in my work at “Documenta 1992” were rotating. Or in how colors are iridescent which is why I used car paint colors – which is hard to do (...) Also in fire, hence the incandescent house that I showed at an earlier exhibition.

I am interested in the mystery of life and in the awe it evokes. One must do something in life. Participating, developing, acting, is a matter of survival, it is primordial. In art, the less you participate the more tense your work becomes. For example, you notice the powerful, erratic brushstrokes in Van Gogh’s works, but they are serene; you see the gray color even if they are so colorful. When there is

a lot of activity, there is more tranquility.

These are existential matters: it is a matter of observing your own existence in its surroundings – this is what art is about. I cannot understand what I am going through this period, maybe because of the COVID pandemic, I find myself working in a state of ecstasy, like those firewalkers. Once I achieve something, I nail something, I relax. It is a feeling of pure existence.

AK: You talk about the virtues of an artwork. Which are these and how can one perceive them?

TT: It is not about the subject of an artwork. What is crucial is to manifest something that has to do with you. The artist must “show” himself in the work. A work has virtues when it involves craftsmanship. That is when it evokes admiration; when it seems unattainable.

Art presupposes an acute perception of how things are created. Making art means training the intellect, being aware that you are a craftsman. Craftsmanship equals resourcefulness. Even the digital works that I have created involve craftsmanship, studiousness. In art something extra occurs, like the transcendence of logic for instance, so that the dimension of the psyche becomes apparent beyond any rationalism. Art demands the ability of intuition which goes undetected.

I would like to create works that are like a natural fruit, a new kind of fruit that no one would conceive unless they created it. For something like this to occur, you need to be in a state in which there is no agenda, because there are several agendas everywhere that prevent you from being natural.

AK: You work a lot with materials, with objects. For example, you make musical instruments, you draw from your experiences. How are function and aesthetics linked, how do everyday life and aesthetics mix?

TT: With just a small shift you can see something that is real and common and has a metaphysical dimension, as something more comprehensive. During this shift, the brain functions at its maximum, it is a training of the mind. Through craftsmanship you understand the laws of nature such as the durability of the materials, the gravity, the speed, the rhythm, the sounds. Aesthetics is the affirmation of the laws of nature in any form. The “plastic” dimension helps you indulge in things and

make them even more real, to become one with them. Art grants them a different dimension. In the “Knives” series at the “Geometry” exhibition, as well as at other places, I am interested in how functional they are, how their blade is like a razor, something that is hard to achieve. Form, however, matters as well; many works remind us of forms of constructivism or statuettes, of neolithic tools. I have designed more than five thousand forms. Some have barely noticeable differences but this is a way of practicing balance and understanding. This requires diligence. Imagine that in ancient pottery drawing, drawing the perfect line with a single stroke meant extreme practice. I am fascinated by the trajectory of the form, by the way the line “senses” the space, how rich the volume is within the space that exists in the neolithic tools. These are the result of functionality and of several laws of nature. So, it is not only about matter and functionality, but also about the way humans comprehend these laws, how they develop them through know-how and technology. It is an anthropocentric way of looking at how we came about creating so many things.

AK: You live in a rural area and from time to time you stay at a completely secluded place, where you have renovated an old bullpen. Many of your paintings and your sculptures are inspired by nature. They all bring out the vitality of nature as well as a sort of reverence for this vitality. What does nature offer you? What do you get from it? Was your work in “Outlook” a form of landscape painting?

TT: Nature is the greatest teacher. Life is a phenomenon I confront every day; it is a mystery I constantly try to unravel. Maybe I have taken it too far by staying, occasionally, in the middle of nowhere where things are a bit “prehistorical”. I feel a kind of reverence when I am surrounded by nature; it can lift the everyday burdens. I am in awe and this fills me with energy. The environment there is orgiastic, frenzied. That is where I created the paintings, by throwing paint on the canvas and creating color pixels. In the “Outlook” exhibition I wanted to decipher that heavenly place, the water and the trees, the feeling of bliss it conveyed. By placing all those photos together, it felt as if it was a mural created by Piero Della Francesca; there was a similarity, an interpretation. I kept recalling Cezanne and his obsession with landscapes. It was also a comment on my stance towards art. The naked body was meant as a metaphor for the primitive, the pure. For me, landscape painting is about my presence in nature.

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AK: Even in abstract paintings, do geometric forms refer to structures in nature?

TT: These works are about nature, about alignment, about aesthetics. They are about many things. I was interested in the energy, the movement. There are times that you cannot mimic nature and you apply technology.

AK: You have worked a lot on musical instruments, their construction, their sound... mostly on the Indian sitar and the old folk music. Sound in the form of sculpture, sound and performance, musical instrument, technology, object as well as intangible element... Your work exists either combined with another component or by itself. Is sound a living thing, linked to the interpretation of an experience as well as to human accomplishments?

TT: Years ago, when I participated in the “Argos” Festival, I created a huge sculpture in the ancient theater of Argos. It was a work that looked like an ancient Greek flute and would produce sounds once air ran through it. I have also exhibited drums that produced sounds with the help of the wind. I have created several artworks. I like sound, I understand it. Even when the knives are being painted, they produce sounds. The most important thing in music is the sound of speech and the musicality it produces. I traveled to India not to see the museums but to learn how to play this extremely complicated instrument, the sitar. I wanted to experience this sound, the very essence of the music which is derived from melancholy and grief. I am interested in the words of the Greek traditional dirges. I have the impression that modern musicians tend to rush things.

AK: You have mentioned that through arbitrariness something new may be born because by acting arbitrarily you bypass fear and you act more freely. How do you use arbitrariness in the way you work?

TT: Each person has their own way of studying. When I went to France, I did it because I wanted to be close to the other students, not because I had something to learn. You learn from observing, from everything and everyone, from the people you meet. The procedure is also a part of learning. Many times, something may be done in an arbitrary way but it turns out to add creativity in the development of

the project. What should guide you is your mood, what you feel like doing, and the will to do what your heart desires. I believe in following your instinct, in knowing what you need to do and this constitutes the orientation of the “self”.

AK: You constantly challenge yourself and you surprise the audience with the diversity of the ways you express yourself. Are innovation and challenge what you look for in art?

TT: I have no intention of provoking anyone. What I want is to push myself to the limits, to explore my potential. Take the “Knives” for example. You struggle for months and by observation you manage to reach a point where you make the knife as sharp as a razor. Its tip is so sharp it is like splitting the atom. When you attain this, it is catharsis, it relaxes you. We, artists, work in the field of the psyche. Through art one can realize how the psyche is shaped, how it changes with time. Everything starts with the self you have created. The artist must not be afraid. He must do what he wants. Art, my work, is a way of life. It is also a way of communication: I would like to show a deeper understanding of the conscious existence.