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The Entrancement of Ruins



URBAN RUINS: FRAGMENTS OF AN INNER FRESCO

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URBAN RUINS:

FRAGMENTS OF AN INNER

FRESCO

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ABSTRACT

Having as starting point Lila Papoula's exhibition 'Walls That Were Hiding Our Faces' at the Teloglion Foundation of Arts during the 2017 Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art, we examine her work under the prism of three main topics: as social documentary, as a familiar topos full of personal memories and nostalgia and as an architectural itinerary in the urban ruins of the old Athenian neighborhoods. In her compositions Lila Papoula does not merely present the urban ruins but rather she proposes a journey of self-discovery and a return to forgotten values, to activate memory for all of us. For Lila Papoula a derelict building is a 'text', an 'image' that determines its own materiality through what is inscribed into it. Papoula focuses on the thread of an interrupted life, on elements of a human absence which paradoxically still continues to exist and confirm life. In her paintings, based on the 'photography transformed into painting' technique, personal stories and the history of the contemporary city are interconnected and have acquired equal gravity.



Keywords:

urban ruins, materiality, memory.

1. INTRODUCTION

*(...)Carefully draw the curtains
The emboldened mice will lick you
The mirrors will darken
The light bulbs will stop swinging
Then you'll take the key
And with sure movements, without remorse
You'll let it drop the drain
Down deep into thick waters.
Then you will know.
Because poetry is not a way of speaking
But the best wall behind which to hide our faces.
Manolis Anagnostakis [There ...]*

Sometime during the 80's, probably as nostalgia for the house of her childhood which no longer exists, Lila Papoula started to take photographs of walls of derelict houses. She makes use of the instant photography technique, neither arranging the composition nor waiting for the perfect light. She is taking snapshots as a method of remembrance, as taking notes on the pages of a personal diary. Eventually these snapshots are transformed into paintings and these transient notes are turned into narratives, personal frescoes filled with emotion. This 'photography transformed into painting' technique is the main idea behind all her work. Through this process Papoula connects the decayed traces of everyday personal stories with her own memories, creating places where she returns from time to time.

2. PLACE AND MEMORY IN PAPOULA'S ARTWORK

There is a long tradition connecting places to memory. It is a connection famously exemplified in the 'art of memory' and the associated 'method of loci' according to which memory is enabled through the connection of particular images or ideas to be remembered with specific locations

(Yates, 1974). It is also a connection that appears in the work of many twentieth-century thinkers such as Gaston Bachelard (1969) for instance, where memory is explored as it is given in the intimacy of domestic spaces or in the writings of Walter Benjamin, where memory appears in its embedding in the materiality of things. Place and memory are integrally connected such that one cannot understand the first without reference to the other. On first looking at Papoula's paintings of the abandoned houses, viewers are likely to find themselves drawn in several directions. Bolis (2017) remarks on Papoula's exhibition 'Walls That Were Hiding Our Faces' that (...) these works at whose core man finds himself – present by his absence – evoke an impalpably romantic, melancholic disposition. The ruins depicted here have the character of unappealable abandon and irreversible ravages with the indelible marks of their mundane adventure through time(..). On one hand, what appear in these paintings are indeed houses, abandoned in their physical presence but still homes. On the other hand, these houses are scarred by the marks of human activity and habitation and now they have become familiar spaces, and also spaces of silence and a social documentary.



Figure 1: Get Out, 2013, mixed media, 157x53cm.

Looking at the depicted empty facades of buildings, courtyards, stairs and gates in Papoula's paintings we have an impression of silence that sprang from the fact of the desolation of space. We are thinking that nobody is there, including ourselves, and nothing is happening. But the absence of inhabitants doesn't seem enough to prevent an impression of narrative. The stories we read in the paintings are not fiction but are gradually put together from the evidence recorded within them. People always mark the space they live in. Everyday life, events and objects gradually fill in the puzzle of life. What is captured in a photography snap in just a second, takes year in real time: time is stored and compressed in the 'countless alveoli' of space (Bachelard, 1969:8). So depending on the information available about a space we can reconstruct actions and put together its story.

2.1. PAINTING AS A SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY

No memory is completely private. Memories are related differently to different modes of human identity and narrative and the performance of memory connects modes of personal and collective life. Lila Papoula focuses on the thread of an interrupted life, on elements of a human absence which paradoxically still continues to exist and confirm life. Thus, personal stories and the history of the

contemporary city are interconnected and have acquired equal gravity. The walls of these houses carry the history of a city that has undergone several changes in its population and levels of prosperity, as well as other extreme changes in recent years. In Greece today, it's hard to avoid the correlation of Papoula's work with a society in economic, political and social crisis.

Papoula (2017) says that 'As such the harrowing traces of homes that housed the everyday stories of ordinary people, their dreams and certitudes are metaphors for what has transpired during the crisis. A crisis that clearly does not concern only the economic, social and political reality as we knew it and then witnessed its collapse, but primarily the nature of social relations between people which is what has fundamentally altered in the interim. But the landscape of our interior worlds has also been disturbed by the crisis. These multiple ruptures that all of us have lived through and continue to endure served as the incentive for this body of works'. So, Papoula's space becomes space of social documentary.

Greece is currently experiencing a phase of great turmoil, a period of severe economic recession, but which is also deeply social and political. A period that has added a new dimension to the way we see ourselves and redefine our identity, individual or national. And this is expressed in the work of several artists. Her artworks captures the modern Greek re-



Figure 2: You'll Open the Windows to the Light, 2017, mixed media, 130x150cm

ality so directly, perhaps more than journalistic texts or television footage can, as the artist's penetrating view of society illustrates its weaknesses, fears, losses and expectations. The need for artists to be part of political and social events has certainly been one of the main components of the movements or currents of contemporary art. The viewer is called upon, often with an autobiographical charge, to redefine their attitude towards the works by activating memories and exploiting associations.

'Couldn't the life of each of us become a work of art?' Foucault asks in a lecture at University of California, Berkeley. In Papoula's compositions, just as we look at the ruins of a household to understand its people, in the same way we look at the 'ruins' of a political and economic system of a country in crisis. And the viewer may be in danger of being crushed by the weight of the daily life but at the same time, the humanity of Papoula seems to contain hope. The dust from the images of weariness and the nostalgia of Papoula's paintings penetrates us all. These images overpower us and at the same time empower us.

2.2. TOPOS OF THE FAMILIAR

But why is the artist so fond of a house interior and its objects even though are abandoned and ruined? The house is our corner in the world, says Gaston Bachelard, and choosing the objects that surround us is a way to understand our world. 'Of course thanks to the house a great many of our memories are housed and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories refuges that are all the more clearly delineated. All our lives we come back to them in our daydreams' (Bachelard, 1969:8). Refuges that are never erased from our memory Bachelard assure us 'that even when it is forever expunged from the present, when it is alien to all promises of the future, even we no longer have a garret, when the attic room is lost and gone there remains the fact that we once loved a garret and once lived in an attic' (Bachelard, 1969:10).

It is also a fact that the objects of a house create familiar frames of reference. Each one of our homes is a unique collection of objects that sets the context

in which we live in and is an important statement of self-determination. Conversely, seeing a room we can bring to mind its occupants without ever having seen them. The need to get acquainted with the space, the daily needs, the various events, accumulate objects in our private space. Some of them stay there forever in the same place and others are added gradually filling the gaps until the peculiar puzzle of the life of the inhabitants is completed. The living space of the object, no matter how altered or eroded, forms an interpretive framework that facilitates the decoding of its meanings. Provides indications for the function and operation of the objects and the reasons why they were invented or constructed. Incorporated in their natural living space, our objects tell their story. Thus the objects are not connected only with one space, as they usually during their lifetime they are placed in different spaces and acquire different meanings and values in relation to the social dimension of the space in which they are integrated.

So, Lila Papoula (2017) says that in the traces on the walls of dilapidated houses 'and all that remained, what is still there – the vacant wooden shelves and the ramshackle wardrobes, or the rusty metal staircases in the lightwells that arbitrarily spiral in the void – at one point I saw them "secretly" mirrored – as Manolis Anagnostakis writes in his poem 'There....' – the faces of my childhood. I was born and raised in such a 'house,' that no longer exists(...). But the art of painting, like photographic narration, is merely a pretext. Because it is not re-presentation that counts. Re-presentation becomes the measure of the possibility of "giving utterance" to that which we cannot conceive of. Even if just for an instant, in the wink of a camera shutter. In this way always leaving a blank question mark in the thought, an absence – the absence of those who used to be there, but also the abyss left within us after all that we believed we had, was lost'. Papoula's space becomes familiar and at the same time unfamiliar.

2.3. AN ARCHITECTURAL ITINERARY OF THE URBAN RUINS IN ATHENS

The built forms – shapes, structures, and materials – have also a memorial character. Memory is in the inscriptive and dy-



Figure 3: There You'll Find Them, 2016, mixed media, 150x100cm

namic elements of building – in the effects of weathering, decay and renewal, of extension and re-use (Leatherbarrow & Mostafavi 1993). Sometimes the relation to memory may be direct – this particular angle of a wall, this juxtaposition of doorway and window, this fall of light, may immediately evoke a memory of our own. Sometimes the relation to memory may be via certain archetypal forms or schemas that are typically felt and recognized through generalized modes of bodily engagement and responsiveness.

As Bolis (2017) notes '*Papoula creates a personal language using plots of dilapidated and abandoned houses that withstand and resist, stripped bare and wounded, run to weeds and suspended in the absurdly urban landscape of an inhospitable and inimical city, exposed to an informal siege, an undeclared war. Ravaged walls with faded graffiti and posters, rubble; coexistence between interior and exterior spaces, stairways hanging in the void, building shapes, structures, and materials that constitutes a visual alphabet and a structured*

narrative'. Memory is given, not only in the felt or sensed qualities of a building – in the concrete qualities of its presenting – but also in its symbolic and semiotic elements, whether they belong to the particularities of site, orientation, ornament or style. Staircases, brick walls, iron gates, take part in this alphabet and memory is given through the materiality of things.

Lila Papoula examines the space in her work as a carrier of memories. Its theme focuses on the urban ruins, abandonment, the life that disappears, leaving room for the modernity that is coming. She wanders in Kerameikos and Metaxourgeio, two of the old Athenian neighborhoods, and captures with her photographic lens deserted houses still standing, as most of them were demolished between 1955 and 1980, 'like an hecatomb with many dead', as Tsarouchis used to say (Vatopoulos, 2002).

The beauty of these neighborhoods has something heartbreaking, as in many old neighborhoods of central Athens. In these streets there are still houses be-



Figure 4, 5: Carefully Draw the Curtains, 2017, mixed media, 140x100cm, You'll Stay a Little in the Light (detail), 2016



Figure 6, 7: Off the wall II, 2014, mixed media, 80x80cm, Recall II, 2014, mixed media, 80x70cm

hind the walls of a courtyard, half-hidden behind the branches of a lush acacia. These two-story mansions, built mostly during the 1920's, are surrounded by a walled garden, having an iron gate facing the street, now sealed with thick chains. These beautifully crafted gates, crowned with ivy, with their neoclassical spirals and romantic rosettes once filled all of Athens in hundreds of variations, are perhaps the most emblematic element of the houses of that period. The viewer can find one of these gates in the painting *'There You'll Find Them'*, 2016 with the homonymous poem of Manolis Anagnostakis.

Other significant elements in the compositions of Papoula are the service stairways hanging in the void of the backyard, as seen in the paintings *'Carefully Draw the Curtains'*, 2017 and *'You'll Stay a Little in the Light'*, 2016.

The service stairways are also a characteristic element of old houses and apartment buildings from the interwar period or the first postwar decades of the '50s and '60s. These helical structures made of iron were attached to the back façade, connecting the courtyard with

the various levels and the roof terrace. They were used mainly by the maids, but they also served as emergency exits. In the apartment buildings, they started from the yard which was usually at the basement level, and reached all the way up to the roof terrace, where there was a storage room and the laundry. They were accessed from the kitchen of each apartment, next to which was usually the maid's room. In the Greek films of the '50s and '60s, the service stairs were presented as places for gathering and entertainment of the maids or places for children to play.

But walls are the main subject of Papoula's compositions. Ravaged brick walls, exposing glimpses of their former glory under multiple layers of decayed plaster, paint, graffiti and weed, narrating secret stories of dreams and hopes, life and death. Life stories imprinted on the architectural matter, carriers of ambiguity and hybridization of forms. These old walls break with the dominant cultural tropism of purity and youthful vigor and undermine the aesthetic codes of new materials and spatial arrangements. The cracks of matter erode in a redemptive way the obsession of modernity with the state of things immobilized in a constant well-being (Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow 1993:86).

Most of all, however, the action of time on these material constructions mobilizes us sensually. With the superficial presence of a texture created by decay, new stimuli emerge enriching the experience of space. But their atmospheric dynamics are not only connected to the fascinating formations, matière and colors caused by wear. The materials that are altered and stripped function as mediators of



Figure 6: Imago, 2012, mixed media, 153x57cm

elemental forces whose presence has been devitalized in the protected environments of modern everyday life (Manolidis, 2016). Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow (1993) have even argued that the continuous weathering of buildings adds to rather than detracts from architectural meaning and that this indefinite final stage of the construction challenges the conventional notion of a building's completeness.

The walls of these old houses of Athens that appeal so much to Papoula consist

mostly of bricks covered with plaster. This protective layer, left without care to the influence of the natural forces for decades, bear witness to the abandonment of the building by humans. As this skin disintegrates and peels off it partially reveals the carefully arranged units beneath, each one discolored and eroded but still robust in their unity. This wounded but still rich texture offers Papoula the ideal background for her allusive formulations, as in her painting 'Imago', 2012.

CONCLUSION

For Lila Papoula a derelict building is a 'text', an 'image' that determines its own materiality through what is inscribed onto it. This materiality is primarily an image, a story, a representation. There is indeed nothing outside the representational and the representation has become the form of the architectural (Malpas, 2012). The stories of these buildings become her stories, their memories become her memories and all of them are represented in her paintings in a way that they are not substitutes or replacements enjoying a less authentic, more indirect kind of existence but in a way that 'what is represented is itself present in the only way available to it' (H-G. Gadamer, 1986).

I became acquainted with Papoula's work at the exhibition 'Walls That Were Hiding Our Faces' at the Teloglion Foundation of Arts during the 2017 Thessaloniki Biennale of Contemporary Art under the general theme 'Imagined Homes'. As a museologist, I strongly believe that every exhibition should deal with the social and cultural context which created the specific exhibits. According to Pierce (1994), an exhibition forms a complex code of cultural communication since each exhibit is a carrier of multiple meanings. Art works can be studied as an inexhaustible source of information about what they present but also about the different ways in which they were perceived by different social subjects. In the course of history, the whole composition of a work of art is an established moment in the evolution of social change.

The interpretive approach of museum objects and cultural phenomena is accomplished through museum exhibitions. There is intense concern about the need to interpret material culture in the public and how the museum exhibition will take on the role of mediator and the form of 'narratives'. The museum exhibition 'speaks' to the public indirectly through the works exhibited, in a largely suggestive way, and not always clearly for everyone. Certainly the aim is not only to present the works of art themselves. The purpose of the exhibition is also to transform as much as possible the interests, positions and values of the visitors, providing them with a strong mental and emotional experience, during which they will discover the messages of the exhibited objects in their own way.→ In this particular exhibition all the possible scenarios of semantic design were examined, i.e. to exhibit the works of art as a social documentary, as an architectural itinerary or as a familiar topos full of personal memories and nostalgia. The last scenario was chosen because it was the part missing from Biennale 6. In her compositions Lila Papoula does not merely present the urban ruins but rather she proposes a journey of self-discovery and a return to forgotten values, to activate memory for all of us.

CREDITS

Photographs of paintings: Katoufas Brothers

Photographs of Athens: snapshots from Papoula's video for the exhibition

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