

A SEPARATE LOOK

Article by Barry Schwabsky
EMST Exhibition Catalogue
2011

To encounter an artistic original – by which I mean, not necessarily the creator of something entirely unprecedented (since if it were to happen we would probably fail to recognize it) but rather, simply, an artist who has followed a truly independent and solitary path – is a privilege as rare as it is heartening. But this encounter can also be disturbing. It might even give you some sleepless nights, for it means receiving information your mind may not be prepared to process. For man is an animal at once social and solitary – but more social than solitary. Even in what we imagine to be our inner life, in that purely mental activity that is so urgent within us, we like to travel in packs. We feel safer that way, warmer.

So when someone, at least for a while, starts sending back reports from an excursion down some pathway that leads off at some tangent to where we and our pack have been going, it is bound to give us pause. It excites our admiration, certainly, and even jubilation, but also some disquiet. Which path is the tangential one anyway, after all? Perhaps it is the rest of us who are walking into a bog.

I felt something of this kind of euphoria and doubt the first time I encountered some paintings by Apostolos Georgiou, quite by accident, in Paris in 2005. Here suddenly was someone painting with true authority – I wrote at the time of a “seemingly effortless concision and clarity attained by only a few colleagues” – yet in order to articulate a condition of powerlessness, insufficiency, failure. Samuel Beckett, it occurred to me – perhaps this was the influence of Paris – would have appreciated these paintings: Beckett, the personae of whose theater are as rigorous in approaching their ruin as Racinian heroines and as jauntily nonchalant in the face of it as Shakespearian clowns.

Not that Georgiou’s would quite be the art Beckett dreamed of, and which he imagined he had found in the work of Bram van Velde, “an art,” as he told Georges Duthuit, “unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving.” No, that art never existed, certainly not in van

Melde, and besides, Georgiou's art is more resentful than most and more farcical too. As was Beckett's own. The great Irish writer never really managed to exit what he would have liked to have dismissed as merely a "predicament" – at least not until his death – and neither has Georgiou, who in any case recognizes in his predicament as a man and as an artist the matter that is fuel for his existence and his art. He paints his predicament – or should I say painting is his predicament? In English we have an expression, "to paint yourself into a corner," meaning, essentially, to create your own predicament. Georgiou paints the corner he's painted himself into. To do so, of course, he must imagine himself stuck in his corner, his predicament – see it from the outside. And at the same time he must imagine himself viewing himself (as if viewing someone else) from outside the predicament. The situation is theatrical – farcical, as I've said – and the artist is both the actor and the audience at once.

I can't help remembering a line from a poem by Walt Whitman: "That I could look with a separate look on my own crucifixion and bloody crowning." If only, that is, I could transcend my predicament to become the detached spectator to it. Even knowing that after all I brought my predicament upon myself, couldn't I see it, even was it the greatest torment of all, as merely a farce? Another fine mess I've got myself into... (I'm afraid I have expressed this too crudely, as if suffering were somehow unreal, which it's not, but please, reader, imagine to yourself that I said this as delicately as I should have, as delicately as Georgiou paints it even as he paints it farcically.)

It might sound as if I am implicitly taking issue with Georgiou's deepest interpreter – of course I mean Denys Zacharopoulos – who has taken good care to remind us, "The story is that of the painting and not of the artist." Not at all, I don't mean to do so, even though I also have no interest in recounting (which could only mean inventing) the stories suggested by Georgiou's paintings.

What's important is that the relation between painting and artist is allegorical. That is, the only way to talk about the painting is to talk about what it is not, namely the artist. And the only way to talk about the artist is to talk about what he is not, namely the painting.

That admonition from Zacharopoulos echoes, though not exactly, the famous words of D.H. Lawrence: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." As Lawrence himself was an artist and was speaking as an artist, we are left with the famous paradox of the Cretan Liar – but still: Georgiou once told me, "I wish I could be an abstract painter, a Pollock." Is it true? Or was that just another example of the ordinary deceptiveness of artists? Both, of course. It is well known that artists lie in order to tell the truth but less often considered that they tell the truth in order to lie. Georgiou already is an abstract painter; that is, his paintings are predominantly produced by means of pictorial acts that have no particular representational function.

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And as with every good abstract painter, his paintings are all untitled. But he is an abstract painter whose paintings are not abstract – whose paintings, you might say, tell stories. Or perhaps it would be better to say, his paintings illustrate stories, only they are stories that no one knows.

What we glean from these paintings is the sense of a story, its mood, I am almost tempted to say its aroma. It exists in an atmosphere pervaded by irony: the irony of existence, the irony of relationship, the irony of any attempt to do something (and this “doing,” in the paintings, must always be a metaphor for the doing with which Georgiou himself is most concerned, namely painting). Doing, loving, being all somehow turn out otherwise than one thought, and this “otherwise” is the story and also the peculiar absence of story. Still there is that sense or scent of a story, and that is what Georgiou is unwilling to give up. Georgiou saying he’d like to be an abstract painter is like me saying I’d like to be rich – he’s no more willing to give up his (absent) stories in order to be an abstractionist that I am to undertake real remunerative work instead of writing art criticism. He suspects that without the tale there would be only the untrustworthy artist left. As an abstractionist, he told me, “I’d probably play the genius. I’d be too serious. The figures give the work an equilibrium because they allow me to play the clown also.”

Saint Apostolos, magician and clown. Closer in spirit to Buster Keaton than to Charlie Chaplin. “Georgiou’s palette is somber and his themes solemn,” as the critic Catherine Cafopoulos once wrote. He knows how to keep a straight face. Which means I’m out on a limb in claiming that his paintings are comic rather than tragic. But notice how all subjective pathos is drained from the image; if want to see any there you’ll have to supply your own. There are people in the paintings, yes, always, which means we are always tempted to identify with them, but they make no contact with our world. They are sealed off in their own world, a geometrical and artificial realm whose severe limits are the four sides of the rectangular canvas and its imaginary black plane. And isn’t it funny that the imaginary boundary is just as impregnable as the real ones? As in Buñuel’s great film *El ángel exterminador*, in which a group of people at a dinner party are inexplicably trapped in the music room to which they have retired for their postprandial entertainment, Georgiou’s characters inhabit a realm where the idea of “outside” has no meaning. Throughout the history of art, figures in paintings have exchanged significant glances with the viewers who gaze at them from outside; but Georgiou’s never look out at us, never engage in any exchange with the world beyond the canvas. For that matter their eyes are often absent, or else reduced to a line or dot, incommunicado. They know nothing of us, their audience. We observe them, and we imagine therefore that we know something of them, but do we really? Only enough to know that they remain utterly mysterious. Like ourselves, but in a way we’ve never seen before.