

*WHAT ARE YOU DOING
DOWN THERE
AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA
MR. MANIATAKOS?*

Text by Konstantinos Papageorgiou
YANNIS MANIATAKOS (1935-2017)
FIRE, WOMAN AND SEA WERE CREATED MY SOUL, p. 13-15
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One flower leaps to the surface of the flood,
And in the genial sunshine opens its bud.
Whereon the other, seeing this so fair,
Swims eagerly to seize and kiss her there;

Frederic Mistral, Mireille
[Translated by Harriet Waters Preston]

. Poseidon

I could have dreamed it; a sculptor painting at the Bottom of the sea, a painter who dedicated his life to the conception of light as a solid that eternally escapes. Entrenched for decades in the village of Pyrgos, but deep down ready to surrender. I heard the story from one of his students, he came to Tinos on a boat he built himself, without the slightest knowledge of navigation. It reminds me of the Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader's attempt. But Maniatakos didn't get lost in the ocean, he reached the island and the island embraced him forever. These elements are obviously Odyssean, but Maniatakos' adventures are less epic. I don't know how he has lived his whole life so far, because I met him only a few years ago, and this thanks to Maria (Papadimitriou) who was his student, during her early quests.

SYLVIA KOUVALI

Once, he went out to paint on a boat, and at the sway of the waves the canvas fell into the water. He fished it out of the water as if it were a fish. Nothing had been altered. So this idea crossed his mind, and he took that step which was huge. When I first saw these works, the few that had remained in his possession since the 1960s, when he started exploring the Bottom of the sea, from Gythio to the Cyclades, I was stunned. Old wretched hulls, skeletons of submerged fishing boats, engines without a body or a purpose, parts and planks, shadows and ghosts of ships and caiques, traces of past lives; all these were of course remarkable evidence of an over-sea active life that was destined to him – an ill fate or maybe not? - to go underwater.

The endeavor raises many questions. What do we really see at the bottom, how do we see it and reconstruct it through so many visual distortions and mythological mediations, and what we ultimately perceive, how do we transfer it to the canvas, that is, how do we translate what we see below for the upper, overwater world? The bottom of the sea and the descent become here a metaphor for art itself and perhaps, for life itself.

We look at things in a different light through the mask and not only through the mask. Even the body is caught up in other laws, moves at other rhythms, relates itself slowly to its environment and delays the execution of mental commands. Of course, a frogman moves differently, as his movement is similar to that of a fish; that means that we end up appropriating the characteristics of the species which we are descended from. But the diver doesn't even swim as a human being, they swim and walk on the bottom as a being from another world and a different order of things, weird in his hard-hat equipment like an astronaut or a god from another planet. The diver penetrates the «Poseidon Avenue» without obscuring the identity of his origins in the earthly world of light and shadow, of desire, and knowledge, the world of pure contrasts and harmonious correlations. The slow observer of the bottom of the sea participates in the choreography of the underwater world, records the events with physical difficulty, yet without fully adopting the movement of the seabed. He knows he comes from another world and he does not hide it. But why?

I will venture an answer. The role of the diver played by Yannis Maniatakos has a special virtue, because on the one hand it symbolizes the eternal desire to return to the wet embrace, but on the other it also suggests the ambivalent resistance of human life to the dark, the half-light, the unformed, the strange and weird, no matter how much it may attract us by promising us great, subterranean thrills. The diver Maniatakos comes in contact with it, observes it, converses with it, scrutinizes it, and wanders in it, but he does not identify with it. He leaves the twisted, the unexplained and allusive, buried in the sand of the sea like a secret that must not be broken; but

which at the same time we should be aware of its existence, we should know that it is hidden there. There-

fore, the underwater painting of Yannis Maniatakos encloses all these secrets, all the wonders of the deep, touching perhaps what we might call «the sublime», but without a trace of envy or rhetoric. There are no ghost ships or monsters of the of the abyss here. The paintings of the deep speak to us through all their mediations of objects that have been left to perpetual rocking and perpetual processing, to the history and the fallen culture of the undersea world that the bottom of the sea has been home to for centuries, for the beauty of decay and mutation, for the secret buried forever in the realm of Poseidon, Amphitrite, Triton and the Nereids.

. Aphrodite

I think it is no coincidence that another, parallel and equal activity of Yannis Maniatakos, which concerns his sculpture, also emerges from the liquid element, from the foams, from the absolute revocation of the solid. Of course, in his whole work, there are sculptures with a different theme, such as the sailor's monument, the children's little heads, or the «busts» of people of his family, like the one of his uncle's, a work that masterfully captures the personality through transition, alteration, time. Among those sculptures that we could characterize exceptional exceptions (confirming a rule) is the magnificent sculpture of Demetrius of Phalerum, another “transitional” orator and philosopher, who was forced to establish new worlds of spiritual life. Of course, Maniatakos does not know Demetrius of Phalerum, but he imagines him, I think, as the model of the spiritual but also practically oriented man who has conquered the inner balance and harmony, has become ethereal enough to survive the necessary transition to a different environment. The stoic philosopher can finally cross the frontier, pass through the eye of the needle. Maniatakos has a very particular and fruitful interpretation of the ancient standards, he does not “ruminate”, but passes through the ideal in the context of a personal ritual that will help him find his own, and essentially modern imprint.

The nude female bodies, this unique ensemble of his sculptural practice, also follow the same ritual; they are first of all digested in the same Greek ideal. After all, Maniatakos follows essentially ancient techniques. But it seems to me that this is not exactly the point here. Like underwater painting, sculpture under the exhausting Mediterranean light, conveys the profoundly moving act to “tell things in a different way”. The figures who expose their bodies with all their attractive imperfection are not, I think, ideal figures, they are not maidens, they are not Caryatids, they are not literally goddesses, they do not embody the perfect power, the wisdom, the beauty, the cunning. Their virtue is different. They are ordinary Mediterranean women who can be deified precisely through their process of individuation, through the achievement of the unity of the parts of an imperfect and «wayward» body. The head, the hair, the torso, the chest, the breasts, the

genitals, the inner disposition, the lightness of the body, the controlled desire, find their centre of gravity. The sculptor deifies the precise by giving it the attention it deserves, by working endless hours to say it in a different way. These little goddesses, at first made from metal rods, chicken wire and plaster gauze in natural dimensions and half of natural dimensions, or as micro-sculptures or $\frac{3}{4}$ -size sculptures we may finally see them as an algorithm of transition, adaptation and survival. Maniatakos chooses women in order to talk to us about the eternal model and man's ceaseless effort to find his soul within their body, and even in ever-changing circumstances - from the depths of the sea to the light.

Tinos, 3.3.16