

**Municipal Gallery of Athens,
Lithuanian Art Museum
EXHIBITION**

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KIKOS LANITIS



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**The alchemical conversion of the material
The Painting**

**Nelli Kyriazi, Director of the Municipal Gallery
of Athens**

Kikos Lanitis was born in Limassol, but he actually grew up in London, where he also came of age during the legendary decade of the 60s. In a crucial age, namely, when one makes choices, he found himself open and uninfluenced, without the interference of a preparatory stage, in a blooming metropolis of Europe, while the artists tried to

"wean" themselves from the teachings of the avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century, turning their attention to new demands, as those shaped under the weight of certain parameters.

The second post-war decade promoted drastic changes in the role of Art in Europe and in America, or rather its potential adjustment to new experiences, imposed by science and by the development of technology. The publicity hail, through the illustration posters and the television screens, supports the syndrome of eudaemonism and consumption with the image - a most distinct susceptibility of the people to the urgent acceptance of a new way of life, far from the painful war memories. The spell of the image is intensified at the end of the same decade by the television broadcasting of the first steps of man on the moon, an achievement that alters the perception of time and space, but also the relation of man to the universe.

As for art in particular, the fascination of supertechnology, as well as the incorporation - for the first time - of the object of art itself in a composed system of trading, are opposed to the steady positions of the past in general, as regards the hermetic character of the work of art, but also the isolationism of the artist in impenetrable spaces. From this point of view, the appearance of Pop Art in London and New York, but also of other

currents with less obvious influence, such as Op Art, Hard Edge painting. Conceptual Art, British Neoconstructivism, American Minimalism - all of them conclusions of the artistic quests after the new exploration of the painting language and of its expressive or, mainly, of its communication possibilities in the framework of a new status of life and of artistic activity, with the Happenings and the Fluxus movement later as an evident testimony - is not at all accidental in this obvious attempt to "democratize" the function of art. Lanitis had the experience - not in the least self-evident for an artist of the periphery - to find himself from the start with unshaped views, in the epicentre of the formation of new movements, even if most of them would end later in a sterile formalism, either losing their fertile aggressiveness or having in fact a date of expiration. The coenobiotic model of the hippie life, as well as the demonstrations against the war in Vietnam during the same decade were preparing effectively in London a climate receptive to unconventional exhibitions, such as those of R. Rauschenberg (1964, Whitechapel Art Gallery), of R. Long (1967, titled "A Line Made by Walking"), or of Yoko Ono's performances and happenings. Lanitis' studies at the Kingsway College have offered him the necessary training, but his attitude and his choices were determined irrevocably by the revolutionary climate of that period: of the expiring

glory of modernism. Embracing this climate with enthusiasm, he creates his first works with painted sacks, which he sets on fire and throws burning in the Thames. After taking them out, he frames this result of the fire and water effect on the material, a clear allusion of his preferring the artistic procedure to the final product, namely the work of art. During this period he lives in a commune, he functions as a stage designer and he works with musicians and stage directors, but what attracts his interest most is the invention of new methods in the batik technique, as a means of expression.



During the time that elapsed until the mid 80s, the artist projects his social concern in figurative painting - advanced abstraction - that is concentrated on the portrayal of the solitary human figure, preferably the female, in indefinite surroundings, with a mainly faint chromatic range.



The "mechanical" men of Lanitis - regardless of the controversy of the particular choice of form-moulding and content in relation to the revolutionary eloquence of his London ventures - do not indicate but the end of an era that has refuted itself in hopes and ambitious plans.



The revolution was not successful; on the contrary: there came the Turkish invasion in Cyprus, while the bright wrapping of consumerism and the television image - a former challenge for the inventiveness of the artists - gradually entrenched the alienation of man.



The student of Lanitis' works detects

though, beside the impression of an adaptation to more traditional form-moulding idioms, the feeling of the concentration, as well as the preliminary stage for the artist's transition to the setup of a distinct vocabulary that is based upon the profit of his London experience.

The review of his artistic course from 1984 until today reveals a service of arduous work, of continuous speculation and of systematic construction of his personal expression. Two are the basic pivots around which his work revolves: the Conversion and the Painting. These two fundamental tendencies had previously, in spite of the frequently congruent styles, diametrically opposed approaches as a starting point: a more "philosophical" one from Europe and a more "materialistic" one from America respectively. The devotees of Duchamp's artistic motto "conversion, conversion, conversion" were in a constant juxtaposition with those who were like-minded with the American F. Stella: "The work of art does not need any further excuse. It just exists. "

Naturally, it would be very risky to claim that the Painting of Lanitis keeps to the motive of an one-way self-existence. On these terms we can in fact interpret his constant concentration on the virtues and on the juices of the colour, the elaboration of which provides the artist with the characteristic idiom of his artistic articulation, although his work belongs to an omnipotent current with features of

the same kind: the act of borrowing secret powers from everyday objects and their incorporation in the work of art. Objects and colour share the leading part in his works, composing a remarkable balance, a product of research into the reality of a three-dimensional surface that abolishes the clear limits between painting and sculpture.



The painted surface however is a carrier of messages for the Cypriote artist with the burdened cultural origin, while art is consequently not just a proposition of aestheticism and a form of individual expression - the opposite he would consider unthinkable. Equivalent to his plastic formations appears the opposition of the creator to a factual bounty of the social function of art, by means of a more expanded role, namely of its potential intervention in life itself.



Three, par excellence, presentations of his work in 1988, in 1992 and in 1993 - at his workshop, at the "Viky Drakos Centre of Contemporary Art" and the "House of Cyprus" respectively - include and underline his attitude towards the intervening role of art.



In all three of them one detects as a starting point the grounds that art has ceased being a form of autonomous freedom on its own accord, but also his intention to abolish the limit between the creator of the work and its spectator: positions rather novel for the broad receptive public that, in search of the lost time,

rushed in our country since 1960 to assimilate mainly, and more collectively, the forms and the currents of modernism.

In Lanitis' work it is the participants that are searched for and not the spectators. In 1988 he alters his atelier into an installation space, covering every wall and the floor with works of his.



Among the participants follows a discussion about art in the singular shell of this ark, which shapes characteristically the symbolic dimension of the attempt. Up to 1993, however, one can easily discern his need to explore means parallel to genuine painting, in order to strengthen the communication system or to define the aspired aim.



The open dialogue (1988), the sound and the Laser rays (1989), the fire (1992), the panels with the texts (1993) are not just results of a

methodical pursuit of self sufficient tools of expression and originality.



They are an organic and uniform part of a composed proposition and sometimes they function by offering the possibility of notional codes with multiple readings and interpretations, sometimes, on the contrary, they lead directly to a single destination.



The fire, for instance, that burns fictitiously in the opening evening of his exhibition of minimalist works - cement surfaces, simple or with incorporated stone plates - accompanies a performance that reveals the transient character of

art, indicates the primitive element of perpetual birth and decay, or simply destroys the old and represents a power of recreation.

Diametrically opposed to sibylline oracles are the contents of his exhibition in 1993 at the "House of Cyprus".



It bears the title "Explosion" and it is the first time that the artist codifies with a text the two-way relationship of art and society. "The attempted existence of colour and organized form, without myths and identity, turns to a claim of space, ending in an uncontrollable explosion, provoking a raving on the colour surface, plunging every chromatic value into darkness." - "The attempted existence of society and organized authority without myths and identity turns to a claim of space, ending uncontrolled in an explosion, provoking a raving in the social organization, plunging every social value into darkness."



The intelligent replacement of words in the articulation of an aesthetical view turns the initial artistic text to a protest against the intrigues in human society. In both parallel texts the key-words are the lack of myth and identity, a timely and reliable comment on globalization and its consequences.



The directness of the texts is supported eloquently by works, where the cautious composition of geometrical forms with distinct colours is obvious - the registration of a feigned order of things, that

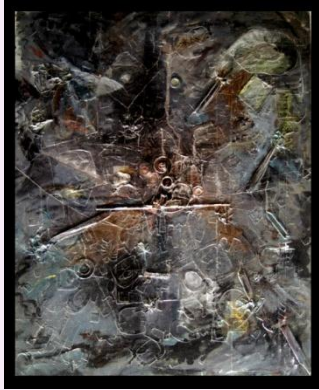
afterwards is decomposed in a second series of works with anarchic chromatic explosions and a vagueness of forms. The texts are projected on photos of a slaughter-house and of an armed boy with a pigeon, but they could surely propose an artistic view on their own accord, without the message-like annotation of works of painting.



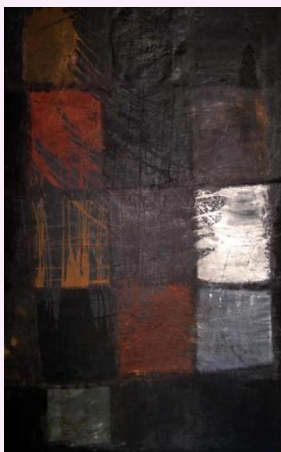
Nevertheless, the artist intensifies and completes with this particular presentation of word and artistic creation a sequence of social and political speculations, considering that he cannot abstain from their declaration in public, at least at this period of time. It is remarkable, however, that the titles and the texts that dictate a predetermined form of perception of the picture of his creation are completely absent from his work, with one single exception: this exhibition of 1993.

Lanitis abandoned figurative painting in 1984 after

the catalytic influence of his acquaintance with Spyropoulos, his mentor in art.



The first exhibition in 1986, after the radical change of his course and, consequently, of his form moulding means, presents works that approach geometrical abstraction in general, but under no circumstances does it escape our notice that the mystic atmosphere of the irregular shapes and of the thick black line are imprinted on a constructed bedding of painting with mixed materials. Already from the beginning of his course, the artist has been engaged productively in the invention of new techniques on old materials - batik, rice, paper, tissue - and the precious experience of this attempt has contributed effectively to his subsequent research.



The "Homage to Giannis Spyropoulos" in 1987 is the first courageous transition to the poetical world of handy or cheap industrial objects, a world that the artist explores with persistence and consistency until today.



The objects exercised a particular fascination on the Dadaists, on the Bauhaus artists and, later, on Pop Art and on the Nouveaux Realistes, because they were free of symbolism, free of artistic interpretations and charging. Initially their use has been subsidized by a sarcastic objection against the convention of painting (Dada), while later, during the 60s, Rauschenberg and Hamilton especially adopted the object as equal to other means-tools, more or less distanced in their artistic proposition. Lanitis, a fan of Object Art, is enchanted by the

cheapness of the objets trouvés, with a fundamental difference though: he brings them back in the foreground of his work reformed and reconstructed, as long as he is not interested in their unassimilated stressing and their identical presence.



Previous to their organic incorporation in the space of the work, the artist has mobilized his deeper manual relationship with the objects and the necessary intervention of his alchemy, so that the conversion of the material may succeed with controlled tensions and aesthetical outlets, and the collages may become incorporated in the painting form. The artist is seriously interested in the

dematerialization of the object - especially after 1995 - and its painting is an appropriate means for the promotion of this aim as well as in the extraction of the each time primary object that will accompany him in his exploring journeys from its industrial "nature". Paper, metal, wood, cement, stone, photographs, fibre glass, phone receivers, wire, pipes compose the language of his materials and turn into carriers of expressive codes, co-operating with the second equivalent element of his work: the colour.

The colour significance could have been pushed aside by the artistic speculation of Object Art. But Lanitis, a colourist par excellence, preserves his interest unimpaired in the masterly working of the colour, claiming chromatic qualities in every painting attempt of his. His choices turn to the basic colours - yellow, blue, red and the equivalent use of their tones - to black and white, which draw sometimes robust geometrical forms and sometimes are cut into infinitesimal particles of material, presupposing the existence of an inviolable, almost natural freedom that attempts to register the explosions in a universe-like space or just to recall bright chromatic kaleidoscopes, without ever seeking refuge in the facility of decorative and aesthetical play.



The experimentation frequently becomes more intense on the relief surfaces with the random rip that replaces the spontaneous line and creates shades, as well as with the addition of parts from damaged works that multiply the angle of perception with new versions.



The energy that is released by the gesticulating

action of the artist runs decisively through the whole of the work. It only constitutes a trace of the course though, without transporting "the experience of the development sufficiently, in other words the sole truth, namely, of the work", as he himself reports characteristically in 1989.

One equally recognizable element in his work is the continuous negotiation of the world of the subject with the object. The dialogue, namely, of the inevitable in the act of painting, of its chromatic fertility with the unchangeable palpability and stability of the object, constitutes eventually a picture of fine harmony between the indefinable and the predetermined that encircles the spectator in its enigma.

In the recent works of the period 1999-2001, Lanitis adopts wrapping undulated cardboard as a painting bedding instead of the canvas. With the possibilities of this material as a basic starting point, he starts a long series of explorations and experimentation, content with the relief that is offered to him in advance.



The undulated relief of the cardboard apportions initially the unity of the composition in wavy rhythmical forms. In another stage his attention turns to the combination of smooth colour surfaces and reliefs, and in the next one he assembles parts of reliefs, cut out from other works, with an opposed flow of the waves, creating a puzzle of colour planes and compositions. As he tries later to exploit his new discovery in every possible version, he inlays parts of female nude shots, which he has previously overpainted; or he tries anew the vividness of the female naked body on the wavy texture of the material.



The general inspection of his course until today projects a particular relationship of the artist, an erotic communion with the artistic adventure, as well as his unlimited curiosity about the expressive function of Art. But mainly he decodes his warm faith in transporting and sharing aesthetical emotions through his work.

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(2003)

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