

The End of Landscape

In a footnote in *Greek Landscapes after the War of Independence* (1977), Marinos Kalligas points out that “until the end of the last century, modern Greek art had no true landscape painters [...] Only depictions of houses or streets, i.e., a very limited sense of the outdoors, had been successfully created by Greek artists up until that point”.¹ It is a valid observation: it obviously suggests something about the identity of the Greek nation and the function of Greek Enlightenment, the unorthodox way the Greek national identity was put together. The Greek landscape of the 19th century was constructed, or invented, through the eyes of foreign travellers – painters, engravers, photographers, architects, poets – and those who settled in Greece. Moreover, given that “landscape painting as we know it would never have developed without the artist theories of the Italian Renaissance”,² the absence of Greek landscape painters only confirms the oft-repeated view which argues that “we had no Renaissance in Greece”.

Conversely, in the early decades of the twentieth century, landscape painting which, as we know, contributed to the development of modernism (impressionism, post-impressionism), found worthy representatives (Nikos Lytras, Konstantinos Maleas, Michalis Oikonomou, Spyros Papaloukas, Constantinos Parthenis, Gerasimos Steris), and rose to eminence. After the war, landscape in Greek painting gradually transformed into abstract or geometric forms, as in the works of Jannis Spyropoulos and Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika, where it also started to become internal, “revolving”, “mystical”. Yannis Tsarouchis resists the advance of abstraction – which is considered the enemy/antagonist of landscape painting – and remains figurative, giving us urban landscapes that resemble theatre sets. Sensitive to environmental issues, Valerios Kaloutsis portrays the desolation of the landscape and the alienation of man from nature, painting steppes, rocks and bare landscapes in dialogue with the art of photography. The element of “heroism of the landscape” that typifies the painting of Giorgos Sikeliotis ceases to be an object for the young painters of the 60s and 70s, who begin to produce a series of transcendent and conceptual landscapes. Alexis Akriothakis’ cloudy “anti-landscapes, Niki Kanagini’s tapestries, Grigoris Semitekolo’s futuristic landscapes and Rena Papaspyrou’s samplers of substances from the landscape of the city belong in that category. The next generation (George Lappas, Nicos Baikas, Thanasis Totsikas, George Hadjimichalis) will experiment even further with the concept of landscape. Indicatively, Baikas emptied the Greek landscape of its images and filled it up with “hard toil”, as he put it himself.³ On the other hand, in a deliberate anachronistic move, Totsikas sought true sensation by painting the landscape of Thessaly impressionistically, from life, in imitation of Bonnard. The self-taught Achilleas Christidis, who has engaged with landscape painting extensively, paints the genre more than the true landscape, while Vassilis Balatsos named a series of his works “independent landscapes”. Besides, the landscape in painting after Gerhard Richter and his successors is undeniably a meta-landscape.

Continuing this new landscape painting approach and tradition, the fifteen artists taking part in the group exhibition “The End of Landscape” investigate the possibilities of depicting nature in an age ruled by the fake and misinformation. As demonstrated by their works, the contemporary landscape is experienced primarily through memories, with the help of mnemonic techniques and tools. Landscape painting here is not a “symptom of quietism”, nor does it declare “the desire to escape the turmoil of cities into the peace of the countryside”.⁴ The reality of the landscape is

relegated to second place. The relationship of the contemporary artist with nature is a conceptual game of recalling images from real or virtual itineraries. In the works of the fifteen visual artists, Athens – the city, in general – is absent. The landscape is presented as an endangered place, under the constant threat of climate change, natural disasters, overtourism and armed combat; ultimately, a menacing place. Let us bring to mind Thomas Bernhard, who refers to “a hideous landscape”, “just as evil, as mutilated, as despicable as people”, and “an ugly, fake and evil nature”.⁵

“The end of landscape” is an exhibition that explores the boundaries of (Greek) landscape painting. **Vanessa Anastasopoulou** paints microcosms, which are then recast as ceramic compositions, on a clay terrain that invites you to explore it, as you would a landscape scale model – the landscape here functions as a *memento mori*. **Marina Genadieva**’s video performance in the Buffer Zone (Green Line) of Cyprus reveals the hazardous side of the (mine-riddled, post-war, posthumous) landscape and the risk taken by anyone – on this occasion, the artist – daring to cross it, let alone cultivate it, as done by the farmers who have permits to access it. **Miltos Golemas**’ painting portrays a rural landscape at dawn, conveying the emotional charge that is inherent in experiencing a place with all of your senses. **Vaggelis Deligiorgis**’ *Cyclades* and **Argyris Rallias**’ *Kakovolo* propose a different, elliptical approach to the Cycladic landscape, through painting and sculpture, respectively. Deligiorgis’ painting is based on a visual observation, when the artist was crossing the Cyclades on the deck of a ship and began wondering about the circular shape of the island complex. Combining metal and marble, Rallias makes a distinctive, durable pillow, which alludes to the Kakovolo mountain of Kythnos, the island where he grew up and whose virgin landscape he now sees tainted by overtourism. In his “One Breath” series, **Dimitris Efeoglou** paints landscapes of memory, fragmentary aspects of an alpine Mediterranean landscape, which is rendered onto the linen canvas by repeated markings, on the threshold between figurativeness and abstraction. On the other hand, **Stathis-Alexandros Zoulias** approaches the landscape in various ways: he draws rocks in BIC pen, in an attempt to decode them, and photographs cliffs in Amorgos and the hill of Elikonas in Athens to create a series of collages (“Alien localities”), presented here as commemorative photos. At the same time, he paints chaotic landscapes with turbulent flows, employing a technique of his own making, whose basic materials are ink and alcohol on photographic paper. As in most of his photographs, so in *Landscape with kourabiedes II*, **Yiannis Theodoropoulos** explores the idea of transforming the (inner) landscape. His meta-landscape converses with Alexandros Kaloudis’ *Kourabiedes*, a small oil painting that once belonged in the Koutlidis Collection and is now part of the permanent collection of the National Gallery. The “mosaic landscape” of **Andreas Lyberatos** alludes to the transformation of the landscape by the Greek light. Using fragments of his earlier paintings, the artist invites us to reconstitute an image that we haven’t seen before, using only our imagination. **Eleanna Balesi**’s “pocket clouds”, just like her half-moon, comprise a sort of sculpture that pervades the space and knows no boundaries: made of broken and melted CDs, her works transform the exhibition space into a fluid landscape capable of changing. The idea of the architectural fragment also prevails in the large-scale drawing by **Kostas Pappas**, which, standing upright, away from the wall, functions as a gateway to another dimension, a dystopia as captivating as it is frightening. Here, too, are elements of reformulation and changeability, as well as the cusp between abstraction and figurativeness. Equally dystopian is the landscape of **Natassa Poulantza**. In *Floating Acropolis*, Athens has disappeared underwater, and the

Acropolis is swamped after a flood. Just like Dürer's well-known Dream Vision, it is an image from the future that alludes to the present. **Yiannis Selimiotis'** landscape, with its dark sky taking up the largest part of the image, transports us to a primordial world, where time rules, controlling the will of the people. Painted in oil on glass, it is a fragile landscape, impenetrable though ostensibly transparent. As indicated by the title *reveal/conceal*, **Nikos Topalidis'** triptych simultaneously exposes his process of creation and its result. It is a sea in three stages that comes to life through the element of motion, as expressed by the natural phenomena of ebb and flow. **Despina Flessa's** "folding landscapes" teeter between painting and sculpture. Emphasising materiality and bringing out the transformative capacity of paper, the artist transports us to an unspecified location in time and space. Compared to Flessa's unnatural landscapes, **Kostas Christopoulos'** painting focuses on specific aspects of the Greek landscape, guided primarily by geological curiosity. Myrsini beach on tourist Mykonos is condensed to a fragmentary, anti-spectacular picture of rocks. Here, the landscape painter-archivist seeks a missing experience, a relationship with the natural landscape that has become extinct, as if trying to save it before it is irreversibly corrupted or lost.

"The Greek landscape oppresses me, it torments me insufferably. I cannot get away from it," writes the poet Spyros Meimaris.⁶ Contemporary artists seem to have discharged of the weight of the past, engaging with the landscape that surrounds them without guilt or collective purpose. In the age of Artificial Intelligence, the landscape transforms into a malleable material for private use, which you can shape on the screen of your computer by instructing a machine. The twenty-first century is full of landscape painters, who, paradoxically, often create in the absence of the real landscape. Looking at the works in this exhibition, you understand the polysemy of the concept of landscape: internal landscapes, landscapes of the mind, landscapes to escape to, landscapes as refuge, landscapes that penetrate one another, landscapes that come together and reproduce to make new landscapes, landscapes independent but also dependent on memory and recollection. Let's not forget, finally, that an exhibition, too, is a landscape ripe for exploration. This particular exhibition (a meta-landscape in itself) aspires to generate a dialogue on the role of the landscape and our relationship with it today.

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¹ Marinos Kalligas, *Greek Landscapes after the War of Independence, with aquarelles and drawings by C. Rottmann and L. Lange*, Commercial Bank of Greece, 1077, p. 46.

² Ernst H. Gombrich, *Renaissance Artistic Theory and the Development of Landscape Painting*, Greek edition: trans. Nikos Daskalothanasis, in Georg Simmel, Joachim Ritter, Ernst H. Gombrich, *Το τοπίο [The landscape]*, ed. Dionysis Kavvathas, Potamos, Athens 2004, p. 101.

³ A conversation between Nikos Baikas and Christos Pappoulas, *Tefchos*, issue 2, September 1989, p. 59.

⁴ Kenneth Clark, *Landscape Into Art*, Beacon Press 1961, p. 7, 30.

⁵ Thomas Bernhard, *Goethe dies*, Greek edition: trans. Sofia Avgerinou, Kelefhos, Athens 2024, p. 134-5.

⁶ Spyros Meimaris, *Η μεταμόρφωση του τοπίου. Ποιήματα 1961-2014, [The Transformation of the Landscape. Poems 1961-2014]*, Politistiki Drasi – EMSE, Athens 2016, p. 128.

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