

On the watercolourist Katerina Attalidou

It was in the beginning of 2015, during an unexpected visit to the rock-carved monasteries of Cappadocia, that I first saw Katerina unfolding her colours in a small travel sketchbook.

The mastery of her art impressed me from the moment I encountered it. The aesthetic wholeness, the rhythm, the truth and sincerity of her vision. I don't know of many visual artists nowadays who are able to handle the art of watercolour with such skilfulness.

Her painting is a continuous vibrant contemplation. All the truth of the natural world is revealed before our eyes, as if from the most ignored side of ourselves. Filled with poetic passion.

Where does this work emanate from? How does it breathe? Which is the hidden source of its waters?

Time went by. Katerina continued to fill her heart with the air, the light, the sea of her land. I saw her, in every season, lying down in the thick wheat of the Mesaoria plain, delivering with inexhaustible love and dedication, one after another, her great works.

But most of all, I saw in her vision, in her struggle and anguish, the effort of every human being to listen to, to deeply understand their land. To touch upon its longing. To understand its unique imprint. To join its destiny. All the responses of the land return intact in her art.

Every great work of art, in order to be worthy of its name, should be able to take root in a great breath. This union can only take form in the most hidden root of each place, to draw strength and become able at some moment, if it manages to, to eventually rise up, full of life, into the light of our world. That is, in my understanding, the greatest gift of this work which is delivered to us today.

The path of every avant-garde passes through the human soul. I wish that many more will find the strength to follow this precious example.

Below are some of Katerina's thoughts as she expressed them in our various discussions:

‘Every artist lives in his/her time. An artist today, to my understanding, is someone who dares to be sensitive. This is one of the great imperatives of our time. Sensitive and humble. Because everything around us seems to be so grand and fancy.

‘A visual artist, the one who is called upon to record life, is a person who by essence questions everything. One that questions and doubts the way things seem to be. An impressive artwork may have no meaning today. It seems to me that our times call for a humble and even fragile art, one that has, however, all the necessary courage to carry a truth. With a care which can be almost tangible. The essence of art may or may not be present in different techniques. One needs to be attentive. I'm not just referring to craftsmanship. Craftsmanship is important, and always will be. I am referring to something truly valuable which is often missing: the human soul. The depth and stature that only the human soul can provide to any work of art may sometimes be absent.

‘The watercolours ask of me to work in situ, a disposition that also meets my personal need. The technique in my watercolours is often reduced to the minimum. The surrounding landscape, when one is working in situ, is continuously changing, evading. It takes a specific skill to be able to render these constantly occurring changes. There are a few considerations to take into account. The rendering of a

landscape in the studio, with all its advantages, may, if one is not attentive, also cause a deterioration of its expression. Copying a landscape from a photo may shift the result.

‘I am constantly researching and discovering. This is something I always tell young people, my students, when asked: to find their own way. To be real. To be honest. Because even if they follow every teaching, it is likely they will reach a dead end if they do not get to know well their material and what they are searching for. One needs to find one’s own way.

‘I often think of the watercolours I’ve been creating over the last few years as small poems in colour. Self-contained notes which constitute a collection of impressions from my passing through the places I cherish. There are no drafts. The painting notes constitute the main body of work.

‘I consider myself a contemporary visual artist. And the timeless art of mixing colour with water is urged by a deeper need to find its expression, its voice, in every era. What is contemporary for us? What is truly pioneering? I think we need to take a moment and reflect honestly, anew, on these age-old issues. Two decades ago, when I was producing work on the city of Lefkosia, the city where I was born and raised, this choice of subject may have seemed strange. Today, however, we all deal, without hesitation, with these issues.

‘The medium is always connected to the subject. Nothing in art is accidental. The watercolour box functions as a small studio that you can always carry with you. The choice of medium, but also the way this is applied, is always defined by what needs to be expressed. Watercolour is a challenge. Its character is unpredictable, it is a medium that cannot be tamed. It has a will of its own and it demands your utmost respect. You need to remember to take deep breaths every time you hold a wet brush in your hands. You need to surrender. To be able to accept. To be able to let go. And, of course, to be totally present.

‘It is important to say that the watercolours have been the pretext for me. To be able to spend time in the world, immersed in the landscape, which carries a truth of its own, that one must be capable of hearing. It’s a challenge. While painting, transcribing the side of a hill on paper, I can observe it in a way that I cannot when I am not painting. What fascinates me the most is the connection that sprouts up, during that moment, between myself and the landscape. Sometimes this relationship flares up brazenly. It has the power to breathe, beyond the result. If the watercolour created appeals to me one year later, all the better. This connection, however, fascinates me. It broadens my experience of the world and of time.

‘The moment I transcribe on paper, something occurs. Time loses its familiar sense. The ensuing relationship with time changes, shifts. Something is then born, through this shift, which lives and breathes in a boundless time, with a life of its own. The process is purely poetic. The elements flow in a new direction. The pace changes. Without a doubt, a submersion is taking place.

‘The whole issue takes on philosophical dimensions. One day, I decided to travel from Karpasia towards the Pentadaktylos mountain range, an area I visited many times in the past, which I have traversed step by step, observing its angles, lines, forms, its various faces. I often feel the need to sit and paint in places after having established a relationship with them. I cannot usually simply arrive somewhere and paint. So, I spent the whole day in that area.

‘Time went by around me. I had the opportunity to experience its different levels. When I began to transcribe what I was seeing on paper, all the ages of the world before me found their voice within me. The experience of the landscape, during this day, enabled me to record it as it once was, during other

eras, with each period nesting within. This is a durable, unchanging truth, one of the many that a land can carry. And, certainly, this experience is connected to memory.

‘It seems to me that it is a natural need born in every artist of our time: the need for stability in a world where everything changes at an inhumane speed and without any sense of measure. This work is in dialogue, in relation to everything that occurs around us. It relates to the way we perceive the world nowadays, but also to the way we perceive time.

‘The distortions, the misconceptions that occur today, are infinite. Because contemplation is often absent. Humans can intervene without any consideration, without any prior thought, in a landscape that has remained unchanged for centuries, and which holds a theogenic harmony. We often intervene in order to make a nonsense, a whatever, a structure without any meaning, an unfamiliar and meaningless nothing. Our relationship with time is reflected today, within the space we occupy, in a most tragic way.

‘These watercolours, which are for me a labour of love, articulate with great clarity, I believe, a true query, a question. Because I feel that we are experiencing, on many levels, an ending. The ending of the existence of people who lived in harmony with the surrounding world, for thousands of years, until about sixty years ago. The ending of so many things for which I feel boundless love and respect.

‘The journey to Platanissos, to any Platanissos, was once a real revelation. From Platanissos to the sea, likewise. And yet, if you find yourself today at the seafront of Lemesos, without looking towards the sea, but only towards the buildings, you don’t know where exactly in the world you are. You could be anywhere. It is a completely impersonal image, and therefore brutal, certainly sad. Through such images

emerges the violence of the inarticulate cries of a directionless humanity. And this violence is completely out of place, and so strange, in a land so sacred, so strong and beautiful.

‘If this revelation is no longer our concern, then we should worry about what we really intend to substitute it with. It must be something that should be able to adequately replace the experience of this revelation in the human soul. If this is not possible, then humanity has in one moment turned into something else. Because something fundamental has been shaken within its primordial structure.

‘In this regard, the watercolours that I make have a prominent spiritual character, almost religious I would say, in terms of the search for the sacred. Because they aim to gently touch upon the sanctity that exists within each human being. A bending, a creasing of the human existence in the world that surrounds it, facing the questions that are born and that breathe within this very existence. What is a human being, if not this wrinkle?

‘In Karpasia, where I come from, as well as throughout Cyprus, but also in the entire Mediterranean area, probably all over the world, people once lived their daily lives with a certain respect, the products of their labour honoured their land, every stone was carved and found its place with awe and toil, each action constituted a phrase from a prayer. I am thinking that these are my roots, it is in this tradition that I participate when I bend down and sit on the earth and converse with the surrounding nature. Whether I am in my beloved Karpasia, or in Smyrna, in Ayvalık, Lesvos, Nisyros, Naxos, Anafi, Cappadocia. Or in a garden.

‘The poet put it down wisely:

*‘The human being is not the master of creation, but its priest.’**

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* Nikos A. Panagiotopoulos, *Signum or The Chapters: Porthmeion*, To Rodakio, Athens 2017, p. 48.