

## Serving the “vertigo of the visible”

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Maria Filopoulou, a beautiful, ethereal young woman, comes to confirm with her painting what I have always believed about art: there is no male and female expression – there is just good and bad art. Maria Filopoulou is a good painter. Indeed, if we were asked to deduce the painter’s gender from style of the works alone, we would describe them as unmistakably robust, brusque.

While at the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris, Maria Filopoulou was fortunate enough to study under one of the last champions of painting of the gaze. The painter Leonardo Cremonini placed more emphasis on cultivating the energy, the sensitivity of the eye than on the act of painting itself. His students were trained to explore what he called “vertigo of the visible”; they were taught to seek ‘revelation’ even in trivial things.

Modern art demonstrated the intrinsic value of painting and led it to autonomy, abolishing the hierarchy of genres and subjects and establishing a democratic equality of motifs and stimuli. Painting was no longer evaluated on what it depicted but on how it turned reality into a painterly, aesthetic event. The prerequisite for this conversion is technical expertise, craftsmanship, poetics.

Cremonini taught his students that painting is not a descriptive process. Painters must devise their own poetics to convey their emotions from the “vertigo of the visible”. Maria Filopoulou has attained a personal gestural idiom which combines traditional ways and modernistic elements. The creative process, the *modus operandi*, is visible but the image emerges effortlessly through the brush strokes, sometimes slow and sometimes furious, through drips or spurts of painting, through the dense or thin patches of material, through *lasures* or *erasures*. This is a vigorous, confident technique based on long practice; a technique that matures alongside her work, from the early interiors with the spiralling stairs to the greenhouses whose lush vitality brings to mind the tropical forests of ‘Douanier’ Rousseau and the carnivorous gardens of Max Ernst.

In the tropical greenhouses the painter found the appropriate size for her gesture: it was the large scale, the expansiveness, the “all over” that started with Monet’s *Nymphéas* and culminated in the exponents of American expressionism after 1950. The monumental scale led Maria Filopoulou to what Monet had discovered earlier: that the image is not confined by the canvas, the frame, but spills out beyond it to radiate in space.

The transcendence of the frame and the diffusion of painting –figurative or non-figurative– into the surrounding space was a natural upshot of the two major changes that modern art had already brought about. The first change was the move away from perspective, which brought to mind a Renaissance stage set; the second change, a natural consequence of the first one, was that painting was identified with the surface that carried it. Let us remember here the definition of Maurice Denis, articulated around the turn of the 20th century: “A painting –before it is a battle horse, a nude model, or some anecdote– is essentially a flat surface covered with colours ...”.

The greenhouses, the seas and the bathers of Maria Filopoulou do not heed any traditional principles of composition. They form part of the visible, a section across the flow of time. This brings us to another aspect of the young painter’s work. Time in its Heraclitean flux is a major element in both her poetics and her imagery. Her gestural script serves this dimension well. The images of Maria Filopoulou may not be impressionistic but they share the same sense of seizing the constantly changing spectacle of the world. Her seas, when they are not choppy, shiver under the touch of a breeze, and the swimmers, half-immersed in the water, move at a cinematic pace. Rhythm, another latent force in the young painter’s work, reigns in the vitality of the gesture and checks the image’s tendency to spill into space by introducing a jazz melody into the composition.

Her colours span the infinite varieties of chlorophyll in the greenhouse and the iridescent blue tones of the sea and find their triumphant culmination in the bathers and the summer beaches. The painter loves both smooth harmonies and striking contrasts, and knows how to boost them.

Active, industrious and dedicated, Maria Filopoulou reaffirms one’s confidence in the creative skills of women and enriches the painting of the gaze and the canvas with a new, contemporary and wholly personal idiom.

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