

Chasing the light

Iris Criticou

*“Free man, you will always cherish the sea!
The sea is your mirror, you contemplate your soul
In the infinite unfolding of its blade/wave”.*

Baudelaire¹

“In this painting I don’t want anyone to be able to imagine the sound of the rain in the light from the sky...”

John Berger, *A painter of our time 2*

CHASING THE LIGHT, a retrospective exhibition of Maria Filopoulou’s work at the Gallery of the Cyclades, could not have invoked a more eloquent title: the retrospective, which includes mainly large-size works from every period of her oeuvre – works from the first years following her studies in Paris, dominated by characteristic wide-angle interior spaces, to the newer “Swimmers”, ever afloat and in motion, which constitute her systematic field of study and experimentation over the past few years – this ceaseless pursuit of light can be quickly perceived as a form of organic connective tissue linking her starting point and her final destination in choice of subject and personal style.

In the chronological order in which the pieces were created, we travel successively through wide-angle spiralling staircases with eddying escape points and frieze-like greenhouses with their fleshy tropical plants; the cyclical coastal landscapes, with indolent bathers; to fragmentary views of ship decks with listless travellers; and to the sharp edges of gleaming yellow speedboats with their hurried passengers; to encounter at the end of this mental journey the familiar bathers in translucent waters and the ancient cisterns of Filopoulou's most recent period. The monumental dimension sought by the artist to liberate the often painstakingly gestural process of painting, features in most of the works shown here, taking pleasure in the limitless expanse freed for the gaze, the frenetic drips of colours, the apparently unorthodox choice of visual angle for an image, which abrogates all frames and diffuses the painting into perpetuity, returning to the viewer’s gaze a poetic, extemporaneous dimension of reality: that alternate reality, which, according to Goethe, “from the instant it is chosen as a theme by an artist, ceases to function solely in nature”.

Maria Filopoulou’s obsessive preoccupation with light begins with her introverted investigation of studio interiors in Paris, during her student years. Fired by a playful and inventive disposition to find and work out the proposed wide-angled viewing focus, and with the added impetus of the unrelenting refraction of light through the dusty perimeter walls of windows at the Parisian Ecole des beaux arts, the painter was led progressively to the liberated surrealist arrangement of her visual information: a gradual abolition of the initial duller chromatic selections in the darker bathrooms –where penetrating electric light bulbs played the role of natural light– re-establishing abolished claustrophobic fields, with successive openings and illicit narrow horizons; with attractive light and dark coexistences and contrasting sharp materials, such as glass and metal; with the reorganisation of spaces that are buoyantly transcendental and paradoxically empty, despite the fact they are obviously inhabited, spaces where a new, upside-down and incompatible dimension of reality is a given, definitively rid of its accumulation of conventional details. Finding a private, deserted yet lambent land with a surfeit of freedom, where the human element is implied, even though it remains unseen, and where the painter herself, having defined that land, can now quietly enter within, exist and manoeuvre...

The spiralling staircases, included in the first chapter of the exhibition, followed Filopoulou’s apprenticeship at the atelier of Leonardo Cremonini, a supporter of the voracious gaze and conspirator

in "the vertigo of the visible". Vigorously leading the viewer through countless exercises in perspective, with successively eddying escape points, at times minimal and at other times gigantic, into successive and self-negating revelations and obfuscations, they came to be identified with the painter's first studio in Trofoniou Street and correspondingly, with oversize canvases with their dominant wide-angle views which, while apparently "enclosing" the limited visual world of the studio, were gradually inhabited by nature, delineating outer worlds that were aesthetically greater, with light and colour as their dominant elements.

The next chapter in the exhibition, greenhouses, is directly linked to the change of venue of the painter's studio. In 1993 with her base in Kifissia and processing a new set of themes, Filopoulou transferred her investigation to the outdoors, extending the dialogue between the inner and the outer, which can be seen in her urban landscapes of the previous period, using a partly covered, floating life. The deserted greenhouses of nearby Schinias, with the fleshy leaves of banana trees and intense tropical greens that seek to penetrate their domed protective nebulae, transcending the coordinate matrix of the composition, were worked in situ by the painter for the next few years, on canvases unattached to stretchers with unlimited dimensions, composing another clearly defined chapter that now consciously abandoned the limitations of the studio. Always seeking the light, the main building elements of Filopoulou's bold compositions are transformed under the viewer's gaze and by using the recurring wide-angle viewing field, that continues to propel the image to limits, abrogating the apparently flat figurative narrative of the outdoor landscape.

Setting aside those greenhouses and proceeding into the third chapter of the exhibition, we follow the artist step by step in her gradual discovery of the sea. Distinct amongst the greenhouses and the vineyards that essentially constitute Filopoulou's first open spaces – one of which is on display in this exhibition - the seaside landscape provokes and challenges the artist's gaze, and initially is encountered in small works, before charging into larger works, before sinking permanently into their meticulously imprint. The first beach scenes are interpreted as studies of light, colour and matter in water, where people constitute elements that are part of the image, that belong in this defined space, but do not constitute portraits. During the same period, while keeping colour and light as fixed parameters, travel is also introduced, one more item exhorting continuous flight and freedom. The consequence of this exploration was the artist's 1999 exhibition, with coastal landscapes and views of passenger ships and speedboats sailing with passengers. With her canvases, which pulsate with light and energy, Maria Filopoulou narrates her personal circumnavigation with a tangible and enthusiastic realism: the beaches are peopled by silence and develop within a mild microclimate, in the tender land of giant greenhouses with no walls. Within this dead calm, the elliptical trajectory of a glance, lithe and restless, captures the off-centre light and encircles the sea craters. The geography of the shorelines is defined anew, as familiar seaside landmarks are sifted through, until only the essence of the components of their landscape remains and they are transformed into mysterious isles with unexplored sand dunes and grey-green underwater valleys. Bathers and hikers, those voluntarily shipwrecked, monitor the splash of the waves and inhabit the secret inlets and coves, even when they cannot be discerned by the viewer. In works that take place at sea, the curve of the gaze is directed toward the line of the horizon, to the open sea that is traversed by flying speedboats and slowly lumbering passenger ships, seeking out the criss-crossing lines of light.

This retrospective on the island of Syros concludes with the swimmers: at times under the surface of the water, and at other times upon it, they are subjugated to the painter's torpid rhythms, voluptuously suspended between the multiple transparencies of the refracted light and the iridescent pale blues, turquoises and deep cyans, or investigating the remains of some ancient temple, sunk in the watery depths. In the sum of her oeuvre over the past few years, Maria Filopoulou examines the potential for

an overall transfer of things through the act of painting. The element of water, pleasurable and life-giving, dotted with swimmers and ancient remains, brings myth and reality together in a unique way. The successive blue transparencies are transformed into a reservoir of light, sown with human presence and ancient fragments. The bent visual viewing angles investigate the pulsating rhythms of the image, through infinitesimal games of light, while a transfer of painted matter into spirit, memory and motion, pushes the realistic aesthetics to their limits.

Conversing with Maria, I can completely understand this path: "on finally going under the water, an event that may, in fact, always have constituted my goal, I re-discovered my security". "Above is the dome (just like the greenhouses) and below, within the sea, are the bodies of swimmers, in the midst of these closed contours of the water, which was always one of my obsessions. With the help of buoyancy, I make my very own what may be a banal image. I can examine the body in an entirely different manner; I can create a new view of things, which, in turn, gives off a strong sense of freedom". "I'm not interested in the national identity of this crowd. There are couples that are erotically involved, there are others swimming freely. Within this watery field which ensues, however, what I am interested in is that one does not disturb the other. I first saw this image that has occupied me so obsessively over the past few years, on Milos: an encounter that was soundless yet life-giving on the boundary of a rare liquid transparency which, even though I am not fond of crowding when I am swimming, did not bother me, because it showed me a new artistic path, bodies that coexist, paradoxical exercises with the reflections of light. Since then I continue to be fascinated by anything that is related to swimmers, hamams, seas, ancient swimming pools with the hovering oleanders and sunken architectural fragments – that also arose from a specific image in the ancient city of Ierapolis. In any case, human reference points always exist, and I continue to return to the human presence, now perhaps more than ever. These starting points help me; rendering the liquid element does not require the boundaries of a frame, which personally I abolish in the painting process. This is also why I work on the floor, or on a wall, on simple cloth, with successive layers of colour, putting off the process of the stretched canvas frame. I love random elements just as much. Which remain organised, attempting to insinuate themselves into the innermost sensation of water, creating fragments of chaos, which will later meet. Operating on instinct, I always want my next piece to go even further, to remain a surprise".

This may be that special category of randomness we also encounter in Pollock, for works that are cosmogonically created, from which nothing can later be removed. For works that are made so that the artist can sink into them herself, works on which the shadow of an illicit reader does not hang so much suspended, precisely because a viewer must sink into them in order to be imbued with them and to truly see them, as "a circle in the water / Which never ceaseth to enlarge itself / Till by broad spreading it disperse to naught".

Iris Criticou
exhibition curator