



1993



1996



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I paint the borderlines of happiness.

This interview took place on August 17, 2011. After a morning dip in the sea, with the bloom of sea salt on our skin and with a view to the sea; accompanied by cicadas and the waves.

MARGARITA POURNARA: *When did you start to paint?*

MARIA FILOPOULOU: From quite early on. Everybody thought I was doing my homework, but I was painting. I filled the inside of the cupboard doors in bedroom with drawings.

MARGARITA: *What did you draw?*

MARIA: Cartoons. What else?

MARGARITA: *Which was the first exhibition you saw?*

MARIA: I was 14 years old, at Porto Heli, and went to a hotel with some friends, because we played billiards. There I saw an exhibition with works by Karavouzis. I got the catalogue, I copied works.

MARGARITA: *And how did you end up studying painting?*

MARIA: It was instinctual, not conscious. My initial plan was to study interior design architecture. I enrolled with a tutor for drawing classes and there I was advised to focus on the School of Fine Arts. That was that. Within two months I discovered my love of painting.

MARGARITA: *But you didn't study in Greece; you went to the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris.*

MARIA: At my drawing class I had a teacher, Stefanos Daskalakis. He talked to me of Leonardo Cremonini and that's how I got into the process of gaining a position at his atelier.

MARGARITA: *How did you manage?*

MARIA: It was the first time in my life that I really wanted something. The first time I felt that my teenage slogan "Do only what I love" really could be put into practice. I had, in fact, decided to go to Paris only if Cremonini would take me. I travelled with my father, who came to keep my morale high. I showed the teacher my private work and he consented to my enrolment at his atelier.

MARGARITA: *How were your student years in Paris?*

MARIA: I was a bit like a wild animal. I lived in a house that was only 12 sq.m., I painted continuously, I talked to my friends only about art, I went to museums every single day. I studied alongside Edward Sakayan, Anna Maria Tsakali,

Yorgos Rorris, Irene Eliopoulou, Stefanos Daskalakis and Alexis Veroukas. I had an amazing teacher, brilliant fellow students, who had graduated from fine arts schools around the world, as well as all the works in the museums to teach me.

MARGARITA: *What was your favourite work of art from all the museums of Paris?*

MARIA: Vermeer's *Lacemaker* in the Louvre. However, the work with greatest healing effect on me was a small portrait from Velazquez's *Las Meninas*. Anything that went wrong for me, it could make me well. Great works are like living organisms, that develop under our gaze, and every time we look at them, they're different. Perhaps they reflect the immense energy, with which they were endowed by the artist who made them.

MARGARITA: *What did you learn from Cremonini?*

MARIA: Two very important things: to trust my own work and to safeguard my gusto for painting.

MARGARITA: *The first pieces you painted in Paris?*

MARIA: I did spaces. I was looking to find light in Paris, which is difficult to manage. I'd place my easel in a corner of Cremonini's atelier, just under the massive skylights in the ceiling and next to three windows that overlooked the garden. I'd keep my eyes fixed, looking up at the skylight, and therefore all the rest formed an imaginary circle. I gained a different wide-angled view, I played optical tricks and, in the end, I created my own universe.

MARGARITA: *Your return to Greece; what was it like?*

MARIA: A return home to light. I wanted to return, I don't think I could stand to live away from Greece. I found a studio around Larissis Station and there I started once more to paint interiors, staircases. I showed my work to Panayiotis Tetsis and Chronis Botsoglou, who provided support. My first exhibition was in 1990 at Baharian's gallery Ora, with works from Paris (the skylights) and some new canvases with work from Athens. This was followed three years later by an exhibition on winding iron service staircases and the studio interiors, at the Zoumboulakis Gallery.

MARGARITA: *Did you paint from nature?*

MARIA: Strictly from nature. Both in the studio and in the countryside. The next chapter of my work was greenhouses, and I started with that to work also in the studio, without looking at my object. The works had grown in size and were impossible to finish ad hoc.



2005

MARGARITA: Why such a preference for the large-scale work?

MARIA: *It's like entering one when you paint. I feel I'm making a set design, within which I live.*

MARGARITA: How did you discover the greenhouses?

MARIA: At Schinias. I'd find an interior and work there. In one sense they were like Cremonini's atelier. There I was again, sitting under a dome – this time a dome of nylon, which allowed the light to enter. It was a protective space with escape hatches. To my mind this combination is the personification of freedom.

MARGARITA: *Was there a human presence in your works?*

MARIA: Almost non-existent. At times I'd add my own figure for a change. Then gradually the plants took over the foreground, particularly the banana trees. Later I drew vineyards protected by a wire mesh. These were my first steps to open myself from interiors to the outdoors.

MARGARITA: *The sea followed?*

MARIA: After painting the greenhouses, I always went for a swim in the sea, winter or summer. So the change of topic came about very naturally. In the beginning I was cautious, because I feared that all these images could appear a bit like picture postcards. As time went by, I got over it. I utilised a wide-angled viewpoint again and added a new element: people.

MARGARITA: *We're coming up to 2002 and the chapter of the Swimmers. Compared to your first works, it's as if you overcome the need to be in an enclosed environment.*

MARIA: Although the sea is endless, the part of its depths that I choose to carve out, plays the same role. Landscape and figures apportion the pictorial space. The evolution in my work is more a reflection of my own personal path. I am more open to people, I want them to be major players in my own life. It's as if I share the 'nests' I paint with them in.

MARGARITA: *In 2009 the Municipality of Ermoupolis in Syros organised a retrospective exhibition. How did you feel navigating the progress you've made?*

MARIA: In the beginning I felt somewhat awkward. Then I recognised all my old works as an inalienable portion of my oeuvre, of my very self. Certainly I consider that my most recent works represent my current condition with far greater clarity. But I feel love and tenderness for my older works; I look upon them with severity and also with lenience.

MARGARITA: *Did it take a few years to go from the swimmers to the waterfalls?*

MARIA: No. I discovered the magic their rushing waters exercised over me, about seven years ago. I first saw a small waterfall at Kythera and later, I made my first trip to Samothrace, which is renowned for its falls. It's one more form of the water element. I was beguiled by the power, the force, the sense of salvation. The magic of exploration. To my eyes, a landscape with waterfalls has something extraordinarily beautiful almost unreal. I feel, in fact, that in putting behind me the serenity and carefree spirit of the swimmers in the sea, and going on to the waterfalls, it is as if I am ready to face my fears.

MARGARITA: *What are the symbolisms in this new chapter?*

MARIA: They are scenes of paradise in the lives of people we see in films. Perhaps the well-being, the relaxation, the union with nature, the eroticism people feel in the water, precedes or follows a difficult, unpleasant experience. My view is that our whole existence is a delicate balance between the knowledge that happy moments are precious and that we need to recognise them and appreciate them. So I paint the borderlines of happiness, isolated from anything that goes before or after. There is no time, only place. I love life and I try to be aware of every day, as it goes by. I hang on to it tooth and nail.

MARGARITA: *When it comes down to it, can we seek a lost paradise in nature?*

MARIA: It may be there that a cultured person can find fulfilment and peace. I myself find happiness, serenity and freedom in nature. It is this sense that I try to transfer with my works.