“The White Mirror”: The painting of Anna Papamarkaki Evans

How does abstraction function today? Is there space for the evolution of the genre? What else can we expect from abstract painting? What are its new “strategies”? Does it prefer to reproduce the essentialist language of the past or is it capable of configuring new languages and narratives? And, most importantly: can it sustain its transgressive power?

Looking at Anna Papamarkaki’s paintings, I recall Paul Klee’s work *Architecture at night* (*Architektur abends*, 1937). It is an abstract image of architecture and what it could mean. At the same time, it is a lesson on how colour creates architectural space. Vertical and horizontal lines form a grid and structure the space of the image in segmented surfaces, in geometrical shapes and fields. As the work in question reveals, the constructive nature of Klee's painting is indisputable and exerted considerable influence on the next generations of artists.

In a different direction to Klee, Papamarkaki doesn’t attempt to form a structure and approaches the surface, instead, in a more fluid way. In her paintings, colours have no borders or boundaries. The grid doesn't dominate; it loosens, fades or retreats, creating atmospheric space. Her painting possesses architecture, but the painter does not project it, does not reveal it, nor does she position it on the foreground. If Klee 's painting is an imposing cathedral, a building with a clear and recognisable architecture, her own works are built again and again, with consecutive layers and gestures. And, certainly, her painting is not the image of an architecture in a particular moment in time, but an architecture taking shape gradually over time, over the passage of several years and in different moments. In other words, Papamarkaki's works are made in stages. Her painting surfaces preserve a controlled vagueness and variety, as if they were in constant motion in time. Each of the works has or follows a route, which is formed by colour and gesture or, more accurately, by the combination of the two. And most importantly: each work has a pre-history.

But let us look at what exactly we have here, i.e., the basic attributes of the artist’s practise: expressive surfaces, vibrating physical surfaces, sparkling and relief textures, rhythmic brush strokes, controlled overlaps of colour, decisive erasures and corrections, marks and scrapes, skilful and repeated gestures, improvisations, vague atmospheres, transparency and opacity, presence and absence (of the figure and the shape), as well as intimacy.

Papamarkaki doesn’t copy – she doesn’t paint by copying – real objects or existing bodies that she has before her. She puts particular emphasis on the use of colours

and on their emotional intensity and impact. She likes to use dark blue, yellow, beige, aqua, off-white, aubergine, petrol blue, fluorescent pink, grey, green-grey, forest green, and to create series based on colour, such as, for example, the blue and red in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*. She likes to investigate and to discover relationships *within* colour and affinities between the colours. She enjoys painting in earthy colours, like in *The White Mirror* (through the metaphorical mirror we can see her studio, the space where she works, which is constantly changing, which is never stable). That doesn't mean that her works lack narrative features. In some of them you recognise landscapes, a grid, a sunset worked in darkness. And there are also works of a more figurative nature, works containing bodies, which allude to the dynamic between a man and a woman, works that engage with the male-female pair.

Papamarkaki appreciates and seeks clarity in painting, without however overlooking the necessity and the inevitable action of the arbitrary, as well as of expediencies. There are works that incorporate features that are ostensibly random – traces from cleaning a paintbrush or unforeseen brush strokes – which are, however, an organic part of the process. The painter writes poems from which arise her works and, in general, points out the catalytic significance of words in relation to her practice. “It is through these works that I speak”, she says tellingly and gives the series *Colori e Parole* (*Colours and Words*) as an example. And she adds: “here, writing functions as an internal mechanism; words often lie dormant or configure the image”. Indeed, in Papamarkaki’s painting, words have their own paintings. So there are works with writing, “linear” works, works that function in pairs, some that are bright and light-hearted and others that are darker, which refer to difficult periods in her life and bear an emotional weight and the element of decline. Often, the painter is called upon to manage the concept of cancellation: of subject, of gesture, of thought, of memory. The pre-history of each work (which affects the production of meaning) is thus expressed in various and unexpected ways, which surprise even the artist herself.

To Papamarkaki, painting ought to have consistency and character, an inner breath. Naivete and hesitation are enemies that she will do anything to avoid. Just as she interferes with the surface in various ways – sometimes by removing layers, other times by softening the texture – in order to calm the image and bring out its chromatic balance, she encourages the viewers to take a similar approach to her painting: “if you don't like what you see, you may give your own interpretation so that what you want [to see] is revealed”. The work, in a nutshell, is completed by the viewers, through their sensitivity and their imagination. To be precise, there is no completed or finished work, the “beautiful image” is subjective. In my opinion, the prevalent feature of the widely travelled artist’s paintings is an understated

lyricism, an “elegiac” vision, as per Irving Sandler’s pertinent description of the American expressionist Bradley Walker Tomlinon.

Having said that, the answer to my first two questions emerges effortlessly: abstraction is a democratic form of art, perhaps the most democratic and, for that same reason, the hardest and most demanding. The renewal of the genre depends on the depth and the wealth of the painter’s emotions, from their digested experiences, their ability to absorb and transform them into attractive images, into symbolic and illustrative spaces of pure colour. Beyond doubt, Anna Papamarkaki has the emotional intelligence and the requisite sensitivity. Her first solo exhibition reveals a painter who has already developed a distinctive voice and signals the start of an interesting – as it appears – career. The journey of a talented painter has already begun.

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