

## **The Endless Melancholy of the Material Questions to Giorgos Kontis**

A standstill is the end of a movement. But how can you stop the waves? How to keep the footprints in the sand that are constantly being washed away by the water – however long you may have stood in this one place, looking into the far distance, at the sea, here and now. How can you keep what passes, what will have passed? After the first wave, perhaps a small impression remains, blurred. Are they still there, are they still my traces? They have almost disappeared. Another wave and another and yet another wave. How can I not be sad about that? How to accept that all this does not remain, that all this is no more? All you can do is keep making new impressions. Again and again, in vain.

How to stop wanting to see a picture, to recognize something, to look for the familiar even in the abstract? In fact, everything here seems to have been prepared for this: The canvas is stretched and primed. Primed with rabbit-skin glue, which makes the canvas transparent for a moment so that you can see the stretcher on which it is mounted. Until the glue has dried and the canvas becomes opaque again. A square is taped in the middle of the large canvas, a painting surface. At the top of the canvas there are ornaments reminiscent of baroque picture frames, sprawling and yet only there to emphasize the picture. Everything here could be a frame, a frame that allows a picture to appear. A still life, a seascape perhaps. But none of that. Deep red primer has been applied to the square, covered with a layer of silver leaf. In some places, the primer shimmers very slightly through the shiny silver, reflecting and refracting the light. How to capture the moment of transparency that has passed so quickly? How to show that beneath the silver lies the red of the primer and beneath the red the slightly yellowed white of the glue and beneath that the pure white of the canvas and behind

that a wooden frame that carries everything? What is not visible cannot be seen. What is concealed, what is washed away, is only left to memory. Invisible. Nothing is where there should be something. It only shows itself, nothing else, depicts nothing, the image is blind. Revealing only the presence of the material: a silver square (*Untitled [stillstand #1]*, 2023).

And yet there is another work here (*Untitled [stillstand #2]*, 2024), which reveals all that is concealed in the first one, all that has passed and remains only the artist's memory of a brief moment. A painting that preserves the memories created in the process of creating the first piece, updating them and making them visible again – putting them into the picture: The canvas is transparent, the silver leaf does not completely cover the red adhesive ground. In one place, at the bottom right of the square, it is clearly visible. This work seems to be an echo – only mute. A reminiscence of the vanished, the invisible, a stirring of memories. But a memory is never entirely the thing it remembers, it changes every time it enters consciousness. Other memories interfere with it, details become blurred, others are added, what was once beautiful can now be sad when the person with whom you share a memory is no longer there. The work of time leaves traces – like the dark spots on this canvas, which distinctly speckle the canvas, traces of the work on the painting – it says: what you remember here and now, what you see here, is no longer, it is now something else. And what about the new experiences gained in the process of creating this second work? What about the originally non-transparent canvas, what about the brushstrokes that are now covered? What about the silver that didn't adhere so well and has crumbled away?

When should you stop? How should you stop? These are the questions that Giorgos Kontis' works pose. How to preserve the movement, the always-on in the standstill that is every picture. How can one stop laying the canvas in ever new folds, applying ever more green wax, yet more paint, which are only the ground (background and reason at the same time) for the next layer? You cannot. What would be the measure for completion? A successful composition, an aesthetic pleasure that would be a completely different one next week? Kontis knows that you can't stop. I often stood in his studio and asked whether this or that picture was finished. "Not yet, I think I will change something," was usually the answer: with every new fold in the canvas, a new question occurs that needs to be answered. Every day, a new question has occurred overnight, when it was supposedly answered yesterday. Something that emerged during the creation process and then disappeared again. What should be covered up, what should be revealed again (perhaps in another work)? How to respond to the demands of the picture? With a nail, another layer of paint, another fold? Every possibility created means only the non-realization of so many others. The artist will never stop altering the pictures and working on them. The melancholy of the material is that you could always have done something else with it, made a different decision, given another answer with it. And the red part of the second picture, bottom right, will soon be gone too, if it hasn't already. It too was just another question. If everything revolves around the process of creation, around an experience with the picture, how can one find an end? In this case, to stop working on a work of art seems to mean betraying it. Works of art as interruptions, as works in a brief standstill, as if the waves were to stop beating against the surf for a moment, a short stutter before everything resumes its course. "Since what can be seen and what can be painted is never fully realized in the seen and represented, the invisible always remains in the visible, the unrepresentable in the representable, so

that the process of expression never comes to rest."<sup>1</sup>

How to preserve movement at a standstill? How to put an experience into a picture – experiences that will never end until the last breath? Does it mean to end a process (of creation), to bring a movement to a standstill, to forget the becoming, to forget the movement? How to preserve the movement in the motionless – an abstract picture hanging on the wall – to tear it from oblivion, to reminisce it? To preserve the, oh, so beautiful, never-ending waves, in which the sun breaks so glitteringly, *and* the footprints in the sand?

A small green picture (*Untitled [folds series]*, 2023): The canvas is creased in the lower half, as if it had slipped downwards, had given up wanting to be flat, to hold the tension. To be merely a support, a ground for a picture. It seems to have been brought to question itself, to ask what a picture actually is. If you take a step to the side and cast an oblique glance at this painting, a soft pink shimmers on the wall, the turned-over side of the canvas reflects a glow onto the wall. What now appears in deep green – wax and oil on canvas – was once in a completely different colour, was once another answer that gave a momentary satisfying response, an adequate expression for an experience, but is now covered by many other answers. On the reverse side, which actually wants to hide itself from view, something of it has been preserved, flashing gently in the distance like a blurred memory. But what does it remember? It remembers nothing, only memory itself – that something once was, was different from what it is now. Past moments – beginning of a movement, of an emergence.

All the materials Kontis uses are alive in their very own way. Silk, which he often uses instead of canvas, melted wax, animal glue, copper, silver and gold, which reflect the light, play, always appear different, reflect their surroundings, invite the viewer into the

picture. Half-blind mirror glass (*mirror-glass series*, 2018-23), which creates a distance that mixes with the immediate proximity of the traces of colour applied to it. Brown-red clay poliment on ceramics and on canvas (*Untitled [Akrokeramo large]*, 2024), which makes the painting more massive in its presence and the colour matt. Like a withdrawal, an isolation from the outside world, hermetic, repellent, gently confronting. The clay, which has become hard through the firing of the ceramics, was once soft, runs down the canvas again – both states are present in this work. The liberation of the material, in all states, in all time forms. In contrast, the shine and shimmer of the pure wax, which reflects the environment. The clay only allows for questioning, the desire to touch and feel. Again different, a small ceramic on a piece of marble on a fragile metal frame (*Untitled*, 2023): Attempts to balance weights, which are, however, only strengthened in their opposites in this arrangement. Fingerprints in the ceramic show that it was made by someone, an individual, chipped, unworked marble, strictly geometric, thin steel. But could the ceramic piece not also be the pediment of a Greek temple, the rough surfaces a frieze with all the gods and heroes, immortals and eternal? They are just fingerprints – and yet they evoke memories without being concrete. How much can you reduce without destroying memory? How long can you stand still for a moment, pause between two breaths, between now and now again and then continue without suffocating? Fingerprints, footprints, the extreme ends of the body where the nerves touch the world – and the world touches the nervous system. And without the skin, the nerves reach to the stars. Boundary and opening at the same time. Circulated by blood, vulnerable, gentle. Touching ceramics, sand, clay, wax, someone else.

Melancholy is a state of sadness and thoughtfulness that has no specific cause or trigger. Perhaps Kontis' materials and works are melancholic in this sense. They awaken something in us without saying what. They make

us sentimental in a positive sense, they create an openness – they are media for our memory, they say that one can remember. But what exactly we remember is our own business and private. The fact that Kontis' works will probably soon be different again, that they will bear different folds and colours and leaf metals, makes them endlessly melancholic. They let us know that our memory will not stop, will not come to a standstill – always only for a brief moment: *stillstand (reminiscence)*. They too will be others. To put experiences into a picture once and for all would only be dishonesty and deception, untrue to experience. Experiences never cease – as the waves return – never cease to be another, to become another and to have been another. However close one may speak of it, it is a speaking *about* it – an original delay that cannot be made up for. This certainty also makes the works in the exhibition melancholic. It is the impossibility of repetition. An incidental repetition may sometimes succeed, but the planned one never will. It only makes you mourn the fact that nothing can be repeated, nothing comes again. Never in the same form, only transformed, perhaps enriched by other experiences, perhaps impoverished. The unsuccessful repetition only colours what it is supposed to repeat – the dignity of uniqueness – in mourning colours, maybe a very dark green.

You have to detach yourself from the immediate experience, take a step back, bring everything to a standstill for a moment in order to enable memory, to gain reflective distance, that something once was, that it was once happiness that you found (in front of the canvas, with your footprints in the sand). “To happiness the same applies as to truth: one does not have it, but is in it. Indeed, happiness is nothing other than being encompassed, an after-image of the original shelter within the mother. But for this reason no-one who is happy can know that he is so. To see happiness, he would have to pass out of it: to be as if already born. He who says he is happy lies, and invoking happiness, sins

against it. He alone keeps faith who says: I was happy. The only relation of consciousness to happiness is gratitude: in which lies its incomparable dignity.”<sup>2</sup>

And everything that Kontis‘ has wrested from his experiences with and on the pictures – and that is much, so much more – is a moment of standstill, of calm, a deep breath, a pause in the eternal process of creation. (The parenthesis with the addition to the title indicates this). Only in this way can they endure the tension of this exhibition, the forced pause. This is how we can see these paintings here in this exhibition. For two weeks, they can be our questions. Memories can only be preserved as shared ones. That’s why I hope someone will stand next to me by the sea, feet buried in the sand, like the viewer standing in front of Kontis‘ pictures, and say, yes, I too have seen these traces. Yes, I too have seen these pictures here, as they are now and as they will have been.

*Gero Heschl*

### **Postscript:**

Or abort, just abort. And in this way hold on to the fact that you can’t end. Turn around, away from the canvas, turn your back to the sea and leave everything behind. In vain. You can’t finish, you can’t finish. The only movement with art, the only movement with the sea is to leave it, we never go far enough in to bring everything to a standstill forever, to leave lasting footprints, lasting images that are what they are and remain what they are. Eternally true and unforgotten. Once – just once – to achieve a result. A result that cannot be revised, does not need to be changed again, that is complete, has found its true end. That is what it is, and it is good. --- Returning the next day, leaving new footprints, putting the next layer of paint on the canvas, create other folds. The melancholy is that nothing will be finished, nothing will last forever. The hope is that I will always leave new traces in the sand, the hope is that the painting will continue to be worked on, that it will remain alive. Nothing has a measure. None other than this. I’ll take a photo of the footprints and you. And I won’t have the film developed. It will be the most beautiful picture. Art – “what an eternalization of nothing but mortality, and in vain.”<sup>3</sup>

1 Bernhard Waldenfels: *Sinne und Künste im Wechselspiel. Modi ästhetischer Erfahrung*, Frankfurt a.M. 2010, p. 158 [translation by the author].

2 Theodor W. Adorno: *Minima Morlia. Reflections on a damaged life*, London 2005, p. 112.

3 Paul Celan: *The Meridian*, p. 52.