

The Shyness of the Image

Time is key in Theofanous' work. Processes are initiated, matters become open and unfolded, and Theofanous is confronted with what is not there; with the possibility of a result and the journey towards it. His acts and gestures are limited, nothing is superfluous, and nothing aspires to take an emblematic role. What is there instead is the capacity for sensuousness and a sense of responsibility -an act of care- to allow the image to find its place, to breathe, to clarify itself.

His acts are merely interventions in this making, and time, as mentioned above, is of great significance. Theofanous begins with an image, a primal image, mostly found, which comes as raw, uncut material seemingly triggering to him. There is a sense of reconciliation with this image and of an elliptical gesture that may allow things to unfold and be said without necessarily addressing them directly. Time allows the fermentation to take place, allows matters to settle, yet, to emerge as well. Time asks one to surrender to it, it allows a function of memory to come to the surface; a memory that may not even be of the artist, and, most importantly, a memory which has taken a different form. It has become transubstantiated; it has become image.

Georges Didi-Huberman begins *Confronting Images*, which has since become a seminal work in the theory of images, with the description of a cell from the San Marco monastery in Florenceⁱ. This particular cell hosts Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* fresco, and yet Didi-Huberman begins his work not by talking about the fresco but about the scenery, the way the light is cast, and the time our eyes need to adjust to the dimmed light of the cell. Instead of describing the image he talks about the seeing of it, about a *phenomenological gaze* and a sense of *withdrawal* of the imageⁱⁱ. The phenomenological approach and the shift in focus from the image to the seeing of it highlight the individual experience of the viewer. Most importantly it confronts how, or whether at all, the image may come in place to transmit any knowledge or whether it is a matter of a fiction which, in its turn, becomes part of another fiction, namely the one of the viewer.

The question of how one sees and relates to an image, the way the latter functions, and how one's individual world intertwines with it, particularly from the maker's standpoint, is one of the reasons I have become interested in the work of Savvas Theofanous.

The case with Theofanous' work is not one of an effort to find an image. An effort to search persistently and painstakingly for that one image, as a vehicle for what the artist aspires to convey. In Theofanous' case the weight falls more upon the handling of the image after its initial finding, opening the question of how it can be dealt with, of how one deals with an image that triggers something in them. Theofanous' approach is neither one of appropriation nor one of post-production. It is not a matter of celebrating technique or striving for justifying itself through any sense of mastery. Theofanous takes up the challenge of aiming straight to the core of things. It is a striving for ownness, one that moves beyond appropriation. An ownness of elements of the image that relate mostly to a sense of memory. Whose memory this is remains unavoidably vague and unanswered. Not that there is any necessity as such to provide an answer, especially since in its vagueness it broadens and becomes more inclusive. He does not try to find such triggering elements of the image and open them up or highlight them. On the contrary, he applies several printing layers upon them, the characteristics of which are mostly transparency and a particular relation to the light. He works with the diligence of an alchemist, using traditional techniques varying from Japanese to Egyptian.

The glistening gold or silver on Theofanous' works is like the glistening surface of the water, like the sunlight on the surface of the sea. A retraction of light blinding one for a moment and giving a

surprise to the eye, rendering it unable to see the actual surface, perhaps the actual image. A smoke screen of light that veils what it falls upon. It reflects but does not mirror. It stands rather shy and introverted, despite its distinctiveness and attractive character. It seems as a matter of appearances, it is yet unpretentious; it's meant to neither impress nor to allure, but instead deals with what's apparent; unintentionally and in a substantial manner. The image -the initial image- withdraws, it remains present but withheld. The withdrawal comes as a necessity for it to become more complete, to allow the parts that have triggered Theofanous' interest to become more present. A non-apparent coming into presence, subdued and lateral.

Everything plays a deeply significant role in this process, and even though every element, line, and dot is of utmost importance, intuition holds an important place as well. There is a celebration of materials, of their tactility and their relation to light in such a subtle and minimal manner. The process itself requires a high degree of patience and precision. It is very much related to a sense of repetition, one that becomes almost ritualistic. Time and care, to name them again, become key in the process; everything falls where it should and the simplicity of every decision or gesture becomes simply disarming. Theofanous manages to unfold the images, or the elements of them that are of significance to him, to unconceal their stories and essence through concealing them. He manages to let the images open up while applying layers of paint on them.

A process of illumination through a seeming embrace of the blinding light.

A process of unconcealment through a seeming concealment.

This text was written for the solo exhibition of Savvas Theofanous at Eins Gallery in Limassol, Cyprus, in September – October 2023.

ⁱ Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images*, The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 16

“Something like a suspended attention, a prolonged suspension of the moment of reaching conclusions, where interpretation would have time to deploy itself in several dimensions, between the grasped visible and the lived ordeal of a relinquishment.”

Representation and interpretation are very interesting matters in the text of Didi-Huberman, as is the withdrawal of the image as well as a distancing from it in order for its 'letting oneself to be grasped by it'