

# Maro Michalakakos opens wide “The Doors of Perception”

by Barbara Polla

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## *The doors of perception*

William Blake, Aldous Huxley, Henri Michaux...

The title of Maro Michalakakos' exhibition,<sup>1</sup> *The Doors of Perception*, is inspired, firstly, by William Blake: “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is: infinite.”<sup>2</sup> Secondly, by Aldous Huxley<sup>3</sup>'s *Doors of Perception* and the eponymous essay in the book that details the effects of mescaline on human perception and emphasizes the concept that all experiences are coloured by one's perception of the world. Thirdly, Michalakakos' “Doors of perception” are also reminiscent of Henri Michaux and his “Exalted Garden,”<sup>4</sup> in which he describes the effects of mescaline, of which he was a serious addict: “An infinite desire opened itself then closed again, a pulsation that did not weaken...an unknown savageness, a delectation above any delectation, a transgression towards the highest and the most intimate, where the unsaid remains secret and sacred. ... a musical heart's beat, the heart of trees, that we didn't know, as they had hidden it, a huge vegetal heart, planetary, participating in the wholeness, found and finally perceived, heard by those

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<sup>1</sup> First solo exhibition in Turkey: Galeri NEV, Istanbul, January 2017.

<sup>2</sup> William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven & Hell*, 1908; CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Doors of Perception*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1954.

<sup>4</sup> Henri Michaux, *Le jardin exalté*, Fata Morgana, 1983.

possessed of the sovereign emotion that accompanies everything and takes over the Universe.”<sup>5</sup>

Maro Michalakakos, driven by a similar, infinite desire and the sovereign emotions that open the paths to creation, is also obsessed by the ambiguities of humanity, between the inevitable finitude and the always-renewed necessity to leave a trace, and also by the dualities of gender. Her work of art is a perpetual oxymoron between beauty and fear, reality and dreams, love and submission, the bond and the shackle, sensuality and cruelty, the soft protection of the domestic interior and the coercion it exerts. The artist spares us any statement, but opens the door of her own world in full elegance and offers us illusions and allusions to share and to look at through the glass of our own feelings. Animated by an infinite desire to express herself, she feels that: “You can take these works and turn them into nightmares. Or not. You can do whatever you want.”

In contrast to Henri Michaux and many other writers and artists, however, Michalakakos does not work at opening the doors of her own perceptions with drugs, whether mescaline, opium or other more contemporary keys to (artificial) paradises. Rather, she works at removing the blur of her own gaze and at opening new doors by using and sharpening her own will and her art.

### ***Open doors of childhood***

Maro Michalakakos spent her childhood in her father’s shop – a shop where antiques were bought, restored, repainted, refurbished, exhibited, sold, talked about, loved. She was the queen of her own childhood’s palace and found in that garden of delights many of the inspirations that still animate her creations. It is no coincidence that she works with furniture, with wood, with velvets, needles, and dust, and that cutting is a

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<sup>5</sup> Et s’ouvrait, se refermait le désir infini, pulsation qui ne faiblissait pas. Entre Terre et Cieux – félicité dépassée – une sauvagerie inconnue renvoyait à une délectation par-dessus toute délectation, à la transgression au plus haut comme au plus intérieur, là où l’indicible reste secret, sacré. S’y ajoutait seulement, s’y agglutinait (venant on ne sait d’où) scansion imperturbable, un rythme sourd, fort, mais également intérieur, tel le martèlement d’un Cœur, qui aurait été musical, un Cœur venu aux arbres, qu’on ne leur connaissait pas, qu’ils nous avaient caché, issu d’un grand cœur végétal (on eût dit planétaire) cœur participant à tout, retrouvé, enfin perçu, audible aux possédés de l’émotion souveraine, celle qui tout accompagne, qui emporte l’Univers (adaptation and free translation from the French to English by Barbara Polla).

constant in her “manner.” Nor is it a coincidence that most of her inspirations come from Greek poets, from myths that all somehow relate to the Mediterranean Sea, and from ancient Central European stories that mothers used to tell their children, such as *Allerleirauh*.<sup>6</sup> Michalakakos actively *remembers*: for her remembering is an essential psychic activity, as is dreaming. Dreaming and remembering are, for this artist, as much a vivid source of images to use in her works as drug-induced visions are for others: “I personally have visions before falling asleep or just before awakening,” she states. I only just found out that this is not the case for all of us. My very personal goal with my art is to open the doors of perception for myself and others, those who take the time to look at my art, and hopefully this will work for a least some of them, in a similar way as mescaline does.” Mescaline usually changes our perception of time and space – and indeed, Michalakakos’ works offer viewers another space-time linking past and present, childhood and adulthood, in a constant back and forth.

In an artist’s statement, Maro Michalakakos wrote: “As a little girl I liked to spend time in my parents’ antique shop where I felt like I was in Ali Baba’s cavern. I was inventing stories about the people who lived with the furniture, the precious objects and the paintings we had in the shop. It was inevitable that I would use all this furniture and all these stories in my work. I ‘draw’ with a scalpel ‘prints’ of the people who sat on these chairs, fell in love, had secrets to hide, spent time with themselves... lived their lives.”

### ***Open doors as a political position***

The concept of “open doors of perception” is also a very political one. “The perception, the apprehension, the sense or the opinion we have of any matter modulates our vision of the world and the ways in which we address the things, the beings to which we relate at any point in time,” explains Maro Michalakakos. The ability to open the doors of our own self, which is a prerequisite for creation, is also a prerequisite for welcoming the other, whoever this other is – stranger, migrant, from another culture,

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<sup>6</sup> Brothers Grimm, 1857. (*Now the king had a daughter, who was just as beautiful as her dead mother, and had the same golden hair. When she was grown up the king looked at her one day, and saw that in every respect she was like his late wife, and suddenly felt a violent love for her.*)

with another gaze, someone with other dust on his own doors of perception. For Michalakakos, daring to take the risk of looking at her own aggressive and negative feelings – or even “ugliness” – and giving them an aesthetic form is an essential way to be able to welcome the other’s aggressive feelings, to enter into a conversation, to negate the immutability of roles and outcomes, to accept change and the possibility of new personal and collective directions, ways and paths – such as the Doors of Perception, which may well be part of a philosophical aphorism today but could be a rock band tomorrow...

Michalakakos is also very aware of the constant dualism that William Blake highlights, and states that life and death (death as the obligatory castration of our life), attraction and repulsion, reason and energy, love and hatred, are all necessary for human life and interactions, and that there cannot be any progress without these oppositions, whether in everyday life or on the political scene.<sup>7</sup> “The extent to which one has ‘cleansed’ one’s ‘doors,’ Eyes, ‘I(s),’ by use of any mean one deems better suited, relates directly to where and what one looks at. And how much light each of us allows to pass through the lens of his or her Eye is a personal choice which is always there and eventually characterizes our position in life.”

### ***Velvet and more***

“The Doors of Perception,” the first solo exhibition by this Greek artist in Istanbul (but far from her first artistic participation in Istanbul<sup>8</sup>), brings together several works by the artist from different periods and highlights the existence of a very singular and personal path, both in terms of themes, of media used (velvet, wood, watercolour, etc.), and of the red thread that becomes more and more perceptible over the years, knitting tightly together the desire for freedom and the impossibility of reaching it.

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<sup>7</sup> “Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate are necessary to Human existence” (William Blake).

<sup>8</sup> Michalakakos’ work was part of the exhibition “Till it’s gone” by Celenk Bafra and Paolo Colombo at Istanbul Modern in 2016, and her work was presented by Analix Forever, in collaboration with The Art Department, at Contemporary Istanbul (CI) in 2015 and 2016 as well as, by the Art Department, in the Collectors’ Stories section of CI.

Michalakakos's use of velvet tells us about her dreams and her taste for lushness and luxury – as well as her constant need for expressing her keen aggressive feelings towards that same lushness and luxury by cutting, wounding, scraping the velvet, mainly using scalpels. “I work with crimson velvet, take out the fabric's pile using surgical instruments,” says the artist. By using scalpels to reveal her sculptures, the artist becomes the surgeon of velvet's flesh. This peculiar artistic expression of aggressive feelings, according to the artist herself, highlights the multiple possibilities for transforming aggression by and into creation and allows the artist, as well as us, the viewers, to open new doors through which, whatever the abyss of differences separating us from our inner self, we can communicate more fluidly with ourselves and each other – and each other.

The artistic history of velvet reveals a lot in terms of techniques, fashion and design. Velvet features in many permanent collections and exhibitions (including a major recent exhibition in The Art Institute of Chicago<sup>9</sup>). While designers, weavers, and manufacturers have explicitly borrowed from historical motifs and techniques, they have also sought to embrace the potential of the new in terms of materials, design, and production methods. With these industrial innovations, velvet continues to inspire designers, offers a unique sensory experience and brings to mind notions of opulence, elegance, and splendour. Velvet is seductive to men and women, males and females, in both religious and secular contexts: an aspect of velvet that makes it even more appealing to Michalakakos.

But velvet also evokes theatre, which is another major inspiration for Michalakakos. The red velvet curtain hides and reveals what is “behind,” and the desire to peep indeed behind that magic curtain tells us even more about the artist's position between voyeurism and exhibitionism than many of her sculptures. Michalakakos has also worked with theatre in many different contexts, designing sets and stagings,<sup>10</sup> and there is more to come

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.artic.edu/exhibition/modern-velvet-sense-luxury-age-industry>

This exhibition, featuring 44 velvets from the permanent collection, examines the various effects of industry on the design and production of this splendid fabric from the 19th century to the present day, showcasing the remarkable diversity of modern velvet. The works in this exhibition demonstrate several modern approaches to the design and production of velvet.

<sup>10</sup> Maro Michalakakos created stage designs for the Poria Theater, directed by Yannis Houvardas (*Death Variation*, text by Jon Fosse, 2013) and for the Little Theater of Ancient Epidaurus, directed by Roura Pateraki (*War Manifesto* part 1, 2014, based on Thucydides' *Peloponnese War*).

on this particular scene where any “exhibition” is made possible as soon as the curtain is raised: as soon as the “doors” of red velvet open.

### ***Future Proofs by a virtuoso of oxymoron***

*Future Proofs*, formerly installed on the wide windows of the Château des Adhémar, a 12<sup>th</sup>-century prison later transformed into an art space,<sup>11</sup> filters the light through frightening faces and wide-open threatening eyes looking at viewers, reminiscent of *La voix humaine* (another large velvet installation, 190 x 320 cm, on which the artist incised, in 2006, approximately 40 skulls with empty sockets, the eyes here taking the form of large circular holes). The eyes of *Future Proofs*, in contrast to the ones of the meridian (see below), don’t immediately charm: rather, they remind us, severely, that revealing ourselves might be a major danger; the seduction here comes at second hand and second sight. Maro Michalakakos, as the virtuoso of oxymoron that she definitively is, incrusts in these eyes and faces a mixture of aggression, fear, Eros, masochism, guilt, shame, suspicion and menace. The eyes here are the seat of obscenity – the obscenity being what they look at, that which is not shown but only suggested to us by these eyes and their gazes – the *Future Proofs* remain elusive, seen only by these red velvet prelates, by the judges. “Keep your secrets though! Don’t reveal them to anyone else!” seems to be the message of the sabre-rattling, brooding, ominous gazes of *Future Proofs*.

But whatever the title of the work, Maro Michalakakos does not need any “future proofs”: the work already contains that “musical heartbeat, ... planetary, participating in the wholeness, found and finally perceived, heard by those possessed by the sovereign emotion that accompanies everything and takes over the Universe.”

### ***The Eye and I***

The major work in the exhibition *Eye I* (1999), or the *Meridian* (commonly known by the French name “mérienne”), invites us to lie down, while simultaneously preventing us from doing so. The psychoanalyst’s couch alludes to knowing “thysself” by discovering one’s coordinates in space, one’s bearings and position in relation to their surroundings. Indeed, the

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<sup>11</sup> “Matières à rêver,” with Isabelle Chappuis and Jan Fabre, Chateau des Adhémar, Montélimar, France, 2016.

soft red velvet has been sculpted, in Maro Michalakakos' usual inverted way of sculpting, by subtraction, and the eyes on the couch now look at us, they eye us greedily; if we let ourselves go, they would unveil and devour our most intimate secrets... But the *Meridian* is both an invitation and, again, a threat. Freud might be sitting nearby, waiting for us, waiting to look deep into our soul and to reveal us to ourselves. Here *lies* the very magic of Michalakakos' manner: revealing us to ourselves. The selection of *Eye, I* as the central piece of the exhibition underlines the abundance and diversity of ways and viewpoints by which each and every one of us is looking at and into things: a plethora of points of view. The soft red velvet of the couch connotes both a luxury fabric and a fetish object. Being seen and seeing, being taken and taking, submitting and being submissive...

*Eye-I*, as an extended oxymoron, is voluptuous yet constrained. Voluptuous because of the velvet, the most sensual fabric, whether one considers in visual, tactile, or symbolic terms. The meridian is like a body, a soft and hairy body inviting another body to lie on it, looking avidly at it through its multiple "Eyes" and inviting it with its gaze: "come closer, please, come closer, lie on me and let me touch your body with my gaze, let me touch your skin with my skin...". Haptic gaze. Usually, and for centuries, erotic games have been played in such a way that the man looks at the woman, the male *mate*<sup>12</sup> the female – would Orpheus have looked back if he had been the woman and Eurydice a man?

While keeping revelation at a distance, with *Eye/I*, Michalakakos pushes the boundaries of our imagination even further: the meridian is a feminine shape, but it has the Eyes – and therefore the question arises: who is "I" in such a case? On the meridian, the doors of perception open wide towards gender indeterminacy and ambiguity. This dangerously attractive artwork was created in a similar vein of inspiration as *Mirror Mirror* (1996) – a standing mirror on which at the right height, a triangle has been shaved. Again, who is Eye, who is I? Michalakakos leaves the answer to the viewer – to our own eyes.

### ***In Between you and I forever***

*In Between* (2003), a piece of wooden furniture, is a more melancholic sculpture, revealing the multifaceted talent of the artist. Man and woman sit at the table in an ancestral face-to-face position. We imagine them – we

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<sup>12</sup> The French verb *mater* means looking as a voyeur, to get pleasure from seeing.

see them: they look at each other, talk to each other and try to reach out to each other with their hands. But the *fossé* [gulf] *between* them is too wide, too deep...

The expandable marquetry table suggests that we never come close enough to the other to be able to *touch* him or her – there always remains a distance, a gulf, an abyss between you and me, no matter how deeply we love each other. And while this *In between* may be one of the secrets of long-lasting love, it might also tell us about love and death, as for Orpheus and Eurydice, Othello and Desdemona, Tristan and Yseult and so many more lovers... As Alain Badiou states in his *Eloge de l'Amour*<sup>13</sup> (*In Praise of Love*): “true love is always overcoming the impossible. [...] Strictly speaking, love isn't a possibility but rather the overcoming of something that might appear to be impossible.” And back to Aldous Huxley's *Doors of Perception*: “Embraced, the lovers desperately try to fuse their insulated ecstasies into a single self-transcendence; in vain. By its very nature, every embodied spirit is doomed to suffer and enjoy in solitude. Sensations, feelings, insights, fancies – all these are private and, except through symbols and at second hand, incommunicable.”

The hand, as the eye, is a remnant image in Maro Michalakakos' work, symbolizing our fundamental inability to communicate. Other works along these lines are *The fortune teller* (1999), and *Jouissance Dyadique* (2004). In *The fortune teller*, hands seem to be looking at each other, trying to understand the secrets written in the open book of their respective palms – but there is again an “in-between” preventing any easy understanding of the other. In this case, the “in-between” is genetic: the hidden genes that in each of us predetermine our palm lines. In *Jouissance Dyadique*, the index of a third party is pointing towards the distance between two unseen bodies, apparently prescribing the required, or “legal” distance between the hands of these unseen bodies. The eyes, the hands – but there are no bodies in Michalakakos' oeuvre: no human bodies (with the exception of an abstract representation of the very mythological body of desire, i.e., Eleni, 2015). The plethoric presence though of animal and hybrid bodies suggests that they might function as a surrogate for the representation of humans.

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<sup>13</sup> A. Badiou, *In Praise of Love*, translated from the French by Peter Bush, New York: The New Press, 2012, p. 68.



### ***Head over heels***

Last but not least, the “Doors of Perception” open for us a wildlife documentary, a birdcage, an ornithology textbook, a study on future biodiversity, an enlarged view of the blurred limits between love and cannibalism, and a cabinet of precious watercolours. In our case, a unique watercolour drawing, reminiscent of the ones shown by the artist at Istanbul Modern just one year ago (these watercolours are now in the collection of the Museum), and part of what co-curator Paolo Colombo called Maro Michalakakos’ “archive of mythological animals, that, through interspecies mating, become the chimeras of our times.” The birds in particular are drawn and coloured as would have been the case in a 19<sup>th</sup>-century species classification – somewhere at the interface between art and science. And indeed, Michalakakos likes to feel that her universe is “on the edge of dreams, with an apparent calm, intentionally positioned midway between reality and imagination.”

“The parallel universe” created by Michalakakos, populated by strange animals, essentially but not exclusively birds, as described by art historian and curator Kostas Stasinopoulos,<sup>14</sup> embraces the inherent creativity that lies in our fantasies and in staying anxious. Staying anxious: an existential position, as well as an inevitable position dictated by the present. And in this most recent and most elaborated watercolour (the first of an upcoming series entitled *Head over Heels*), the artist depicts a beautiful bird couple: both, the male and the female, are “Quetzal Resplendissant,” and tenderly enlaced. Michalakakos has show an interest in this flamboyant species before, and a first drawing of a single “Quetzal Resplendissant” (2009), part of the “Parallel Universe” series, showed the bird enlaced with a small mammal that was apparently sucking its blood from its neck, like a vampire. But now, in 2016, the cruelty has become even more sophisticated. *Head over Heels* depicts two “Quetzal Resplendissant,” apparently a male and a female, tenderly enlaced and kissing each other: the very figure of what we would consider a happy couple. Really? Let’s have another look. Let’s clean our doors of perception. Actually, the beak of the bird that appears to be the male is transfixing the neck of the bird that appears to be the female, while embracing her. Dead or alive? The question remains open as the beauty of the feathers still hides the depth of the wound. But no matter whether dead or alive: with *Head over Heels* Michalakakos offers us her ultimate hybrid vision of the impossible

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<sup>14</sup> Kostas Stasinopoulos, “The Fabric of Our Lives. The Razor-Sharp Art of Maro Michalakakos,” *Honore Magazine*, 2016.

encounter. Here love is cannibalism, here love is a dreadful passion, here love is penetrating, transfixing, wounding, exploring the other's inside, in a constantly erotic "duo/duel" of beauty and violence, love and war, familiar in Michalakakos' heart-grabbing, heart-breaking, sublime imagery. An imagery in which the artist includes even death, in a kind of Nietzschean joy<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> See Maro Michalakakos, *Kiss me like you never kiss me again*, 2015. The artist reminds us that death makes us alive and shapes our human condition. Death shapes our civilizations, our religions, our positions in life, our creativity, our nostalgias, our actions – and our feasts. <https://barbarapolla.wordpress.com/2015/05/04/maro-michalakakos-greek-godess-of-the-joy-to-create/>.

**Maro Michalakakos** (b. 1967, Athens, Greece) studied Fine Arts at the Ecole Nationale d'Arts Plastiques de Paris-Cergy in France and at the Hochschule for Bildende Kunst in Braunschweig, Germany. She has had exhibitions in Greece, France, Switzerland, Germany, Turkey and the United States. Her works have been included in shows at Istanbul Modern Istanbul; Château des Adhémar centre for contemporary art, Montélimar; Athens Epidauros Festival (NEON production); Château de Pierrefonds, France; National Museum of Contemporary Art, Thessaloniki; Deste Foundation for Contemporary Art, Athens among many others. She has also designed staging for theatres in Greece. Her works are part of the collections of FNAC (Fonds National d'Art Contemporain), FRAC (Fond Regional d'art Contemporain) and Istanbul Modern. The artist lives and works in Athens, Greece.

**Barbara Polla** (b. 1950, Geneva, Switzerland) is a medical doctor, a researcher, teacher, politician, gallerist, writer (specialising in essays on gender issues) and an independent curator in France and elsewhere (MAC Lyon 2014; Sydney NSWG, 2015; MEP Paris 2017, among others). She has been running Analix Forever for over 25 years, while pursuing her other activities in parallel. Analix Forever has now welcomed no less than 700 artists, and developed a particular interest in video art and drawings, while continuing to show multiple media (including sculpture: the gallery hosted "Duo/Duel" in 2015, a duo show by Maro Michalakakos and Rachel Lambaste). Barbara Poll & Analix Forever seek to contribute to living culture. As a gallery Analix Forever is unique in benefiting from the inputs of cultural advisors (2011-2016: Paul Ardenne, who also is the author of Maro Michalakakos' catalogue, entitled *Violent Beauty*); and since 2017, Frank Smith). Barbara Polla's latest book, *In Praise of Erection* (2016), results from a conference organized in Athens in collaboration with Maro Michalakakos (Athens Biennial 2013) and includes a text by the artist.

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