

Gaze, Identity and Femininity in the works of Maro Michalakakos

Pınar Arslantürk

“The look is blind”

Jacques Lacan

Maro Michalakakos has developed a special technique that we can see in some of her works exhibited in Galeri Nev İstanbul. She carves the velvet with surgical instruments like the scalpel and creates an image on the fabric. She installs her works by taking the architecture and the history of the exhibition space into consideration. Therefore, when we enter the exhibition hall, we encounter a different or an unexpected version of the space.

For instance, in her *Prison dorée de la beauté et du désir* (The Golden Prison of Beauty and Desire), her velvet works cover the large windows of the building, and in the middle of the room lies the bed of Sleeping Beauty. Since the fabric works stand in front of the windows, the light filters in through their carved parts and images become visible in daylight. What can enter through the windows of a house, other than mere light and fresh air, is the look of neighbors across, the look of outsiders. That is why, it is not a coincidence that children draw doors as mouths, and windows as eyes! Unlike walls, windows are see-through and they make a house vulnerable and open to the gaze. In this context, when we enter the room in which the artist places the eyes and the looks of the figures, the position of the gaze is highlighted and reconstructed through the works. The emotional state of the room seems to be charged with intimidation.

In a different installation work titled *Tapis rouge* (Red Carpet), the artist depicts a pair of hands that seem to carve out the floor beneath. The work hangs down from inside the fireplace of *Château de Pierrefonds*. When observed from a distance, the fireplace resembles a mouth, and the carpet resembles a tongue. It is as if the mouth and the tongue placed in this historical castle give voice to history of the place.

Just like in her work titled *Happy Days* exhibited at *Illena Tounta Gallery* (Athens), in a solo show titled “I would prefer not to” the artist sometimes uses the leftover parts from the carved velvet fabric. For her show in Athens, she covered and transformed the columns that divided up the gallery space and had no other function than to support the building. By covering them up, she gave them a purpose and an artistic value. As we see, the way the artist places her works in a setting is never naive or arbitrary. On the contrary, they encourage the viewer to think. In that case, what does the works of Michalakos make us feel and think?

In order to answer this, we should perhaps start by looking at her pensive figure. The thinking figure who takes the head in his hand, and whose sunken eyes make us wonder about what he sees, is titled as *Future proof*. This comes out as a striking caption. Featured in her show in Galeri Nev İstanbul, this piece was first exhibited on the windows of a former prison from 12th century, later transformed into an art space: *Château des Adhémar*.

The way this work is presented in the castle makes one think back to the lives and perspectives of the people who were locked up in dungeons before the renaissance and the birth of humanism movement in psychiatry. These dungeons, where the mentally ill, the anarchists and the criminals were shut as if they were all the same, indeed had no exit and no future. Even though the castle is now transformed into an art space, the way the work is installed and titled as such is poignant, and it reveals the subconscious and the history of the place.

Dozens of people had never been able to get out of that castle ever again to freely run under the blue skies, to love a yellow flower, to feel the warmth of their family and be there with them in their hard times. Maybe an artist too was locked up in there and had never been able to touch the clay again, just like Camille Claudel had been in Montfavet. As writes Nazım Hikmet, a celebrated Turkish poet whom Michalakakos also admires: since they have been in jail, “New squares have opened up in their distant city... And [their] families, are living in a house they have never seen on a street they do not know.”...1

In addition to referencing history, and reminding us the way imprisoned people looked at the life outside, this work compels us to question the position of the look. It is not only the dungeon that is future-proof for the imprisoned ones of the past centuries! It is the look itself that is future-proof as well. It reminds one of the words of the renowned thinker and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan: “The look is blind and the sound is deaf”.2 It is natural for one to ask what is it that blinds the sight, or what the eyes see in a state of blindness. Perhaps, the artist knew about this saying. Or maybe she discovered its meaning on a psychoanalyst couch, like anyone who is undergoing psychoanalysis, by encountering the limitations of her own perspective. It may be that through her work, the artist answers a number of questions about one’s look at oneself and the looks of others: the look is futureproof.

As we look at the works of Michalakakos, we also face questions such as “who am I, what do I see, where do I stand, and what was there in my place when I was not?”. Her works seem to pursue and make us face these questions in different sites, with objects and stories.

Another one of Michalakakos works which can be read in a similar vein is a psychoanalyst couch titled Eye-I. The couch is covered with red velvet and features eyes carved out on its fabric. With this work, the artist references the French word for sofa, “meridienne”, and calls to mind parallels and meridians that help locate one’s place on earth. It is known that by sitting behind the couch, psychoanalysts give their patients the opportunity to separate themselves from their look, and freely speak what comes to their minds. In this case, to whom belongs these eyes and looks, at the exact place where one is to scrutinize oneself, speak oneself out and take a distance from everyone’s gaze? Can they help escape The Golden Prison of Beauty and Desire? The work helps us comprehend these questions: while the thing that Eye sees at first is I, a word woven with its homonymous “eye”, to foresee the future and to construct it is difficult, and in fact impossible. Several questions arise with this thought: what is time, and what is the use of a psychoanalyst couch and a work of art?

With her couch referencing meridians and parallels, it may be that Michalakakos thinks that art for every individual, and psychoanalysis for every analysand³, can be a place where new perspectives, insights and dreams are born as one situates one's position in the world. The artist may be helping us discover this answer.

No matter how attractive and beautiful it looks, the subject must get up from her golden bed and switch to a position in which she speaks up and stands behind her own desires. There lies a long road from Sleeping Beauty's bed surrounded with looks, to the psychoanalyst's couch; from being somebody else's object of desire, to being a desiring subject. In this context, can the works of Michalakakos be read as an artistic research of the different positions women take in 21st century, in which our culture is built on the imagery reflecting from screens? To pose the question differently, what does it mean to be a woman and to be in love in the 21st century?

For every lucky individual, the essence of life is love and sexuality. And it is death that prepares the individual for the end. Where and how is love and sexuality positioned between life and death in our century? What do the watercolors of Michalakakos depicting beautiful animals doomed for death, and the bed of sleeping beauty, The golden prison of love and desire tell us about the love of the woman, who is an object of desire, stuck between selfies and photoshopped images of beauty?

Endnotes

1. Nazım Hikmet, Since I have been in jail.
2. Lacan, Jacques. 11th Seminar: The Four Principles of Psychoanalysis.
3. The name given to a person undergoing psychoanalysis.
4. Translated from its French original, the phrase "Matiere à reverf" is also the title of a show by the artist took place in Château des Adhemar in 2016.

Pınar Arslantürk (d.1985, Istanbul) completed her bachelor degree at Yıldız Teknik University, Istanbul in Modern Dance. She has changed her area of study and to Aix-Marseille University, France to do her bachelor and masters in psychology. She then completed her PhD in psychoanalysis in 2016. In addition to her clinical studies, given her education in art, she has written her thesis titled A Psychoanalytic Overview of Vincent Willem Van Gogh's Creativity. Today, her passion for art has pushed her to compile a book called Works and Features which features the intersections between art and psychoanalysis. She is also the founder of Mira Psychotherapy Center, Istanbul where she works with her patients. She also gives lectures in various universities and continues her psychoanalysis studies in France.