

## MARO MICHALAKAKOS – VIOLENT BEAUTY

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A long velvet snake slips its body through the eye of an enormous needle and bites its tail. Titled *Entre Dévoration* (Between Devoration), Maro Michalakakos's sculpture condenses, in its refined crudeness, this Greek artist's favorite themes: the relationship with oneself, seductive appearance, violence and allegory.

Born in Greece and raised in Athens, dividing her life between the Hellenic world and France, Maro Michalakakos became known through a substantial body of work in which figures or themes abound that are invariably in a state of tension: men and women, the protective domestic interior and painful intimacy, love and submission, the bond and the shackle. Woven of family memories, cultural references and erotic residual images, Michalakakos's aim is to use the principle of figurative allusion: no description, no frontal statement and even less slogans. The artist's universe is more given to creations on the edge of dreams, filled with an apparent calm, intentionally positioned midway between reality and the imaginary dimension.

### *False peace*

*Le Poulet dominical* (The Sunday Chicken), a sculpture-installation, is a very reassuring work. At the center of the circular top of a heavy table in varnished wood, the artist, using marquetry, has elegantly inserted the appealing image of a roast chicken. This table with its decoration is imposingly placed directly below a crystal chandelier. A comfortable cenobitic atmosphere. Everything gives the impression of the land of plenty, the joy of being at table, those warm Sunday meals during which the family becomes a circle.

An evocation of domestic happiness? Undoubtedly if we take Maro Michalakakos's creation literally. Nothing, however is less sure. Let us now look at *In Between*, a creation of a similar plastic type, a wooden table once again, but in this one, the top is split into two parts. On either end of this top's surface, the artist has inlaid two pairs of bare forearms that extend the outline of the hands, placed flat. These hands, facing each other, are stretched toward each other. But they have trouble touching. The table, whose two parts slide, seems to have been crossed by the equivalent of a fault, which isolates the two half-tops from each other. Tension and retention, desire and restraint. With its play on polemic allusions, this work frankly admits its theme, the inability to communicate. *In Between* adds an ounce of perplexity to its obvious meaning. More than contact, proximity and exchange, would the truth about human relationships possibly lie more in the calculated distance, the gap, the position that each being keeps without necessarily coming too close to the other? To each his territory, perhaps.

### *A body of work focused on interiors*

The work of art is a sign, the sign, in Michalakakos, of ambiguity. We are social animals, us humans, and nature has imposed being together on us. Is proximity with the other, our link with him, nevertheless, obvious? Giving oneself means risking losing oneself. This other creation by the artist frankly bears witness to this, this untitled work, the crude sculpture, in iron rods, of twinned chairs each of which is bound to the other by one of its feet, a link that is the equivalent of a shackle. A solid link, even though it is recommended to forget that such an imperative proximity underlies the sedimentation of identities. The binding of the bottom of each chair, for the occasion, is done in plaster, in the same way as a broken limb is encased in a plaster cast to prevent any movement.

The importance Maro Michalakakos gives to furniture is not random: the spectator must feel that he is on known territory. And what territory is immediately more familiar than that of the home, which its furniture incarnates? Furniture, for Michalakakos, summons intimacy and one's own space, the interiors, living room, bedroom or dressing room. The table where the family eats, the sofa on which it relaxes, the chairs on which it sets its buttocks and where one waits – nothing in these places, cut off from the outside world, can disturb the events, those of the “inside”, carried out sheltered from others' glances and judgment, other people who are “hell” itself, as Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in his play *No Exit*. *Mirror, Mirror*, a sculpture, is presented in the form of a modified “readymade”, using a principle that the surrealists were fond of. A large standing mirror has had its glass replaced by the red of velvet. This velvet has had its surface scraped – to be more precise, shaved – so that a triangle appears on it that evokes, without prevaricating, the triangle of pubic hair. *Mirror, beautiful mirror, tell me if I am desirable, tell me if my genitals are attractive*. Reflection, exhibitionism and desire synergized.

### *Poses, gazes, uncanniness*

The correlation is easy to establish, in this instance, between the domestic and the psychic interior, in a bridging that owes nothing to chance. For Michalakakos, affiliating furniture and psychic life means directing the work toward its genuine territory, critical introspection.

A striking example of this inflection is provided, more than any other, by the very emblematic sculpture *Allerleirauh*, that of a bed closed by brass elements, which evokes the universe of princesses and fairy tales. For this bed on a human scale, the artist was inspired by the tale *All-Kinds-of-Fur*, in which a young woman must fight against the amorous pressure of her father. For the occasion, the Oedipal theme is joined by the more ambiguous one of desire. Protecting oneself against a problematic suitor by imprisoning oneself in a cage-bed can also mean wanting to protect oneself against one's own impulses. The title of this work, a fairy tale by the Grimm Brothers,

is what the heroine decks herself in, fleeing the paternal castle. How can we not avoid metaphorically finding in it every protection that we surround ourselves with when desire is both troublesome and pressing? Protecting myself from myself to protect myself from the other and vice-versa.

In addition to the importance of furniture, we will also see in Maro Michalakakos the recurring importance of hands, besides that of the eye. Whether it concerns drawings – those dedicated to Silvio Berlusconi and titled *Mani pulite*, “Clean Hands”, the name of an anti-corruption campaign launched in Italy in the 1990s – or figures obtained by shaving velvet, the artist is particularly fond of “signifying” her intention by using manual language, expressed by the figurative restitution of specific gestures or positions of the fingers, always very allusive. *In Between*, mentioned above, *Jouissance dyadique* (Dyadic Orgasm), *Boudoir surréaliste* (Surrealist Dressing Room), *La Diseuse de bonne aventure* (The Fortune Teller)... offer this entry a repertory provided with a play of hands each time summoned to give an account of a state or a relationship between people, usually of the opposite sex: the waiting, the approach, the difficulty of the junction...

As for eyes, they are also very present in her, work and take the form of those large circular holes decorating the wallpaper covered with skulls that the artist conceived, as much as that of the classical eye with its Cyclodic outline that decorates her shaved velvet sofa titled *Eye I*, straightforwardly. This presence of the eye is not surprising in an artist who readily confesses an intellectual attraction for the French writer Georges Bataille and for his famous half-witted text, *The Story of the Eye*. Bataille makes the eye the seat of obscenity, that place in which to form the most outrageous visions while the gaze becomes the mediator of things seen called on to nourish fantasy and the imaginary dimension. In Michalakakos, unlike Hans Bellmer, for example, who read a great deal of Bataille himself, nothing will however be shown of the images formed, via the eye canal, by sharpened desire. Bellmer gives us everything, even too much of everything, to the point of nausea. In his works, the sexual imaginary dimension is unleashed and is delivered in the form of pornographic drawings in which the artist openly totes his aversions and libidinous inclinations. Maro Michalakakos keeps revelation, however, at a distance. Not saying everything but suggesting. The eye is a witness here, but a mute one.

Irrigated by *Unheimlichkeit*, the Freudian “uncanniness”, Maro Michalakakos’s work makes this blind spot of our existence, the always decisive part of *eros* resonate as a deafening background noise. The only question here is one of being seen and seeing, being taken and taking, submitting or being submissive, whereas the disease of erotic attraction and narcissistic punishment never leaves us in peace. *L’Amore* (Love), a huge installation taking up the entire floor of an art gallery, takes in this way a form that is both cold and brutal. Large pipes connecting a sink and toilets transplanted there run through the space, their path is enigmatic, just like the geography of the areas they connect. Something is definitely circulating, transitivity reigns but in which direction and to reach what – *whom*? As for *L’Amore*, Michalakakos says that she was inspired by Jean Cocteau’s play *The Human Voice* in which Anna Magnani, in the film

version, gave a stunning performance – a woman talking on the phone with her lover learns that he is getting married the next day to someone else and that he is leaving her.

### **Roots**

The idea of taking root is not alien either to Maro Michalakakos's work. We notice it, already, in the evocation of family scenes. We can guess its presence just beneath the surface in the artist's many creations that show a poorly managed male-female relationship, relating to Michalakakos's personal experience in a strongly phallographic society. We sense it in the many drawings and three-dimensional works by the artists that more clearly refer to roots. *How Deep Can I Go?*, a shaved velvet work by Michalakakos, directly shows the theme of attachment, even shackling, once again: the two legs seen from behind of a skinned being, depicted by a network of veins, are extended at the feet by roots trapping the body and preventing it from moving. More ambivalence than proposal. The roots here draw attention to the body, both nourished and held prisoner by them, simultaneously. Would what nourishes you alienate you? The drawing *Le Ciel est loin, la Terre aussi* (The Sky Is Far, the Earth Too) shows this unusual scaffolding made solid in its parts: a pot in which plants grow rising toward the sky is held elevated by twisted rods forming, at the foundation, a large network of roots. Another of the artist's drawings, this time explicitly evoking smothering, shows a face caught in a large groove overlooking a body shackled by roots, which make it the equivalent of a tree trunk.

We never come from nowhere. Maro Michalakakos, in this respect, never empties out her memory. Creation for her is a subtle and problematized form of the ancient "Remember". Maro Michalakakos's work could not however be made a culturalistic creation determined by the *genius loci*. The latter, undisputedly, is more universal than Hellenistic or rather, as Hellenistic as it is universal. The themes the artist likes and shows are not limited to the interior of civilizational borders. On the contrary, they move from one side to the other, horizontally and vertically – in space as in time. *Atropa Belladonna*, a stele on top of which a model of a house sits enthroned, owes its title to the drops of poison that Roman women in antiquity used to dilate their pupils, a tremendous object of seduction. If this cosmetic preparation guaranteed that one's gaze would be profound, it could also make anyone who used it blind...

Saying that Medea's passions are Greek and archaic before becoming universal and transhistorical, by evaluating them based on geography and history, makes no sense. Jealousy exists everywhere and in every era. The same is true for the themes Michalakakos holds dear, all of which make reference to the psychological question: nothing describes them as specifically dated and located. This being admitted, it would be absurd to wish, at any cost, to deny the influences the artist was subject to because of her national, family and cultural origins. Born in Mani, in the southern part of the Peloponnisos, a region known for the vivacity of its traditions, then having grown up

in a reconstituted family with its host of sometimes painful secrets, subject to a socio-psychological universe distinguished by endogenous codes (the submission demanded of women, the maintenance at whatever cost of appearances, *omertà*), Maro Michalakakos has no intention of erasing a whole section of her personal history. Her artistic work, in this respect, keeps something of the vernacular in it, anchored in the local culture. But first of all for this purpose: setting in motion, based on a historically, geographically or culturally referenced situation, a debate that does everyone good, whoever he or she is, wherever he or she lives and wherever he or she comes from.

### ***Talking about the body but only showing fragments of it, or even nothing at all***

Another intriguing aspect of this body of work: the almost total absence of the physical body. Except for a few drawings – a portrait of Silvio Berlusconi, another of Boris Yeltsin, a face of a Greek woman that is just a quick sketch and has no defined identity... the body is in fact little or not at all represented. This absence is all the more surprising in that Michalakakos's work in fact "talks" only about the body. A strategy of the ellipsis crouched behind the eclipse. A strategy of metonymy as well. The body? It has never better appeared, it has never been so present, in certain cases, than when it is excluded from the scene, or reduced to one of its fragments. Let us point out, in terms of efficient reduction, the artist's painted "coats of arms" or her "metronomes", an incongruous alliance of metronomes and anthropomorphic figurines in Plasticine. Although certain elements of the body are missing in these works, their poses (seated, arms crossed, etc.) would be perfectly analyzable in terms of behavior and symbolic meaning.

A creation that is both simple and eloquent, (*É*)*prise*<sup>1</sup> consists of a single velvet piece of braid to whose ends an outlet and a plug – one female, one male – have been sewn. The plug is plugged in, the cable only powers itself, in a powerful metaphor of narcissism that the title of this work plainly gathers in. Each of Maro Michalakakos's works, in the same spirit, talks about the body or, to put it more exactly, about the major obsessions of which our always unsatisfied body is the permanent seat. What are these obsessions? Narcissism of course, but also desire, love of oneself and of the other, the anguish of death, the fear of abandonment, the secret fear of or hope for submission, possession. Bathed in psychological anguish, creation as Michalakakos conceives it isn't far from uniting in it, in her singular way, two of the therapies often evoked by the subject with the aim of lightening her private emotional surfeit: catharsis on one hand, psychoanalysis on the other. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, defines catharsis as the operation through which passions that have caused pain, once represented and once replayed as drama for the person who suffers from them, show themselves as more surmountable. The Athenians, when Aeschylus had *The Persians*

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<sup>1</sup> *Prise* in French is the adjective "taken" (in the feminine form) or the noun "outlet"; *éprise* means "taken with" or "smitten with".

performed, relived, tearing out their hair and screaming with pain, the suffering that the First Medic War inflicted on them. This “return to” is beneficial, even if it is heart-breaking: it suggests that it is now time to go on to something else, to “let the dead bury the dead” as the Bible puts it and, for the living, to once again find the path of life, faith in the present and in the future. As for psychoanalysis, which forms a pact, in a central manner, with the story – in this instance, for the patient, with his own story –, it is based on a self-examination that the patient carries out with a precise aim, that of a rational development of information that had previously been constituted in the form of fantasies, repressed content or apparently incoherent doings. This enlightenment of the psyche constitutes a form of cure. To the patient, it means that his malaise has its logical determinants, its complete coherence, running counter to the feeling of psychological drowning or being constantly overtaken by his positions or inhibitions.

### *We are friable*

Maro Michalakakos’s artistic universe is that of depth that has resurfaced. Which depth? That of the unconscious and femininity, childhood and intimacy, buried existential violence. Her works must be examined at two different levels. In appearance, they seem to speak for gentleness: the aesthetic tranquility of beds enclosed in beautifully elegant ironwork, plastic compositions using velvet or inlaid wood, always captivating. They also connote, however, a veiled brutality, detectable in the atmosphere of latent crisis that the artist gives shape to: a transparent allusion to a wounded sexuality, to too much phallic power, to the dread that submission and abandonment arouse. A brutality that the exercise of an art ambivalently and productively making use of the beauty of forms pacifies.

Art as Maro Michalakakos conceives it is never gratuitous: no formalism, no quest for the beautiful form called on only to give value through and for itself. In truth, gratuitousness would be guilty. Because the plastic creation would then be assimilated with decoration, a cosmetic work. Form, here, on the contrary, plans to signify, it would cultivate the subtle allusion. If the meaning of Michalakakos’s work remains open – it readily attracts the eye to the tale, the myth, legends, a girl’s dreams...–, it is nonetheless true that these works are always based on that single objective, which is their *raison d’être*: maieutics. The work of art is revelatory or it is nothing. Michalakakos undoubtedly could have been able to write, create novels or diaries – her subject, her style would have unquestionably been that of women who “investigate” themselves and their passions, from Virginia Wolff to Ornela Vorspi. Choosing visual art rather than literature is an interesting option. More than imagining, more than showing, one offers more of it to the person with whom one communicates. Less detail, more depth. Less description, more experience. Hence easier identification with the other. As a spectator of Michalakakos’s creation, I am also a stakeholder in the psychic torments that these enumerate. I become the included third party, invited to enter the circle.

Combining insistence and discretion, Maro Michalakakos's work oscillates between the two poles of anxious metaphysics and uncertain sexual identity. It doesn't reassure us. It reminds us, more judiciously, that we are, here on earth, beings made of chalk, made friable by death that lurks nearby, the power that constantly threatens to see us stop resisting it, desire that handles us roughly or makes us radiant, in various ways.

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