



THEKLA PAPADOPOULOU
TRACES | 1XNH

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ALPHA C.K. ART GALLERY

APRIL 2019



TRACES C' VI, 55x42 cm, mixed media on black card board

Thekla Papadopoulou | Traces

“The continued fascination with artistic likeness is rooted in the infantile reliance on facial recognition, a crucial skill needed equally for attachment to the mother and the development of a separate identity. Portraiture, in effect, duplicates these critical early experiences and reinforces our constant efforts to understand ourselves in relation to others.”

*Dr. Richard Brilliant, Portraiture
(1991) Columbia University*

What do we expect from portraiture? Apparently, a recognizable image of a loved one, a revered figure or a compelling personality. However, the surprise element is expected by such encounter. We want more than “likeness,” and we count on the artist’s imagination and artfulness to help us see past a subject’s outward appearance towards a larger reality. In the beginning of the twenty first century, there was a concern that the traditional methods of portraiture had entered a permanent decline. The expanding practices of photography and video, as well as the supremacy of abstract art, led a number of art critics to the pessimistic assertion that portraiture could no longer successfully claim to accurately render a person’s individuality. Certainly, the very notion of a coherent self that could be defined within the graphic constraint of the drawn line was questioned. Fortunately, the work of contemporary young artists has been awarded with a resurgence of critical interest for the genre of portraiture.

Thekla Papadopoulou’s latest body of work, titled *Traces*, is a series of portraits that continue to mine the genre’s rich and limitless territory for new means of creative expression. Papadopoulou is not a painter, with the strict meaning of the word, but an artist who explores and enriches the creative practice of painting. Consistently throughout her career, she uses a wide range of mixed media techniques. In her portraits, trickily applied oil paints and pastels are combined with collage of pages from her old sketchbooks, journals and photographs of herself and people who are close to her. The richly textured surfaces, that encompass the human figure, allude to the dynamics of unfettered motion and elusive power and capture Papadopoulou’s distinctive and recognizable approach to portraiture. Nevertheless, these evocative portraits are not representational per se but instead seek to elicit the sensations and trigger memories and personal narratives. In fact, the artist’s portraits do not just represent the depicted person but reveal her own interpretation of the sitter, even if this refers to her own self.

The subject matter of the series *Traces* is the artist herself, her life and the people that surround her in the course of time. Papadopoulou creates a lyrical narrative of her life, her influences, the people she

met and the factors that altered herself as a human, a woman and an artist. Her portraits and self-portraits create a timeline that connects the past with the present and, to a certain extent, envisions the future.

Memoirs are of crucial importance for the interpretation and understanding of her work. Besides, the choice of materials is suggestive of the self-reflective character of Papadopoulou's work. Especially in her self-portraits, the image of herself along with the pieces from her old sketchbooks reflect the process of personal discovery and self-definition that she has gone through. It is as if the sketches, the plans she did for the future, part of which is now present, have finally created her present-day image. In fact, the use of sketchbook parts in the formation of her image implies the fragments of the past which have contributed to form her current identity, a process that is true for all humans through their life.

Likewise, the incorporation of old photographs in her compositions constitutes another vestige of the past disclosed in her work. Apparently, photography's main objective is capturing and documenting the moment. What is interesting about Papadopoulou's practice, is that she doesn't use entire photographs, but she takes selected cut-outs of them. Afterwards, she completes or alters them through painting and sketching. In a way, she changes the 'aura' of the photograph (as Walter Benjamin defined the term)ⁱⁱ, reforms and transforms it into the 'aura' of the new work of art. Following Benjamin's line of thinking, Papadopoulou takes a photograph which was uniquely present in time and space when it was taken, brings it to the present and through her work she makes it again uniquely existent in the contemporary context. What is more, through this creative process, she challenges and redefines the authenticity of the photographic work. She uses an original photograph, reproduces it and creates a new original work of art where the old parts are visible and distinguishable. However, despite the fact that she keeps the photographic quality of the picture, her intention is not to replicate the past but to create a new image, based on the bits of the past she has chosen to keep, which accords to her current personal reality.

Thekla Papadopoulou's last series of work does not include meek, stily, stiff portraits. On the contrary, her figures are highly personalized, with playful essence, and their appearance is slightly misshaped as being seen through lenses or blurring filters. This could be considered a pictorial device that the artist uses, like a number of her contemporaries, to help getting her ideas and feelings across to the viewer more effectively. Distortion can make it easier for the artists to share their feelings in a way that makes it more convenient for the viewer to understand. On another reading, this kind of alteration of the figure prevents viewers from seeing the real appearance of the sitter and, thus, from grasping his/her full identity. It seems as if Papadopoulou doesn't intend to expose the full truth of the portrayed person or, in a way, protect and respect the personality of the poser. At the same time, the depicted figures seem to balance between reality and dreams. Especially in the portraits where the people appear with closed eyes, this seems to be more obvious. Another interesting aspect of Papadopoulou's paintings is their liveliness. In some portraits, she combines several superimposed poses of the same figure as if she tries to capture movement, like the early

cubists, or to imitate chrono- photography. Therefore, unlike the traditional still and lifeless portraits, Papadopoulou's works seem to be in constant move like having an internal pulse, making the sitter come alive in front of the beholder's eyes.

Notably prominent, in the majority of the portraits in this series, is the direct gaze of the depicted person, which is one of the principal mechanisms of intimacy in portraiture. The gaze that looks directly outward and engages that of the viewer has a complex force. When we look at a portrait that uses the direct gaze, we feel that the painting has created a hero, or heroine; we have the sitter saying: "This is who I am," with their direct and unreadable expression. Concurrently, the painting seems to begin a dialogue: the sitter is looking outwards, at someone else. We often feel that there was, originally, a specific object of this gaze that has disappeared. But we feel, too, that the painting is saying "you" to a crowd of anonymous, shadowy people: people like us, evanescent, and slipping for a moment into unseeing inspection. Hence, the object of the portrait's gaze constantly changes and its position is assumed by every viewer standing in front of it who unwittingly becomes part of the work.

When it comes to her self-portraits, Thekla Papadopoulou expresses her sense of inner life and her identity as an artist and a woman. Through self-portraiture she presents herself to the world on her own terms. More than just capturing physical features, her self-portraits manifest what matters most about her; her artistic identity. Her figure appears amidst the colors and collages of her works, just like art penetrates her life and mind. In a quite feminist gesture, she doesn't choose to depict herself prominently feminine but as a human being with real depth, in spite of standing on a two-dimensional flat surface. She stands there as a 'heroine' that has come through her experiences stronger and self-assured as human being and artist.

Thekla Papadopoulou, through her series *Traces*, shows that for her each portrait represents a new DNA form, a new self. She completely believes in the notion of the self as an artificial construct, and, through her work, she reinvents her sitters and her own self. Creating a hybrid pictorial language for her portraiture, she manages to depict each person on the intersection of the past, the present and the future. Her portraits connect with the viewers not through 'likeness' but through personal sentiments, contemplation and consciousness. Her intention is the interpretation of the sitter beyond the image and pictorial representation. Papadopoulou, through her work, manages to give new impetus to, probably, the most traditional genre of painting and, to a certain extent, she makes it hers and manages to take us into her own world.

i Brilliant, Richard. *Portraiture*. London: Reaktion, 1991.

ii Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2008.

THEKLA PAPADOPOULOU

Thekla Papadopoulou was born in Limassol in 1978. She graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts "Raffaello" of Urbino, Italy, with distinction.

Solo Exhibitions

- 2019 *Traces*, Alpha C.K. Art Gallery, Nicosia, Cyprus
- 2018 *Traces*, OTE Centre of the Arts, Thessaloniki, Greece (curated by Giannis Argyriadis and Miguel Fernandez Belmonte)
- 2016 *Fragments*, Apocalypse Gallery, Nicosia, Cyprus (curated by Margarita Kounnafi)
- 2013 *Mindscapes*, Kypriaki Gonia Gallery, Larnaca, Cyprus

Group Exhibitions (selection)

- 2019 *Maison de la Grèce*, Paris, France.
Female pros, Municipal Arts Centre Leonidas Canellopoulos, Elefsina, Greece
Perceptions of Self(ie), Mosesian Centre of the Arts, Boston, USA
Artifacts 2019, One Art Space Gallery, New York, USA
- 2018 *International Figurative Biennale*, John Natsoulas Gallery, California, USA
The Sea Within, Limassol Municipal Art Centre, Limassol, Cyprus
Fine Art, Dalton Gallery of Agnes Scott College, Georgia, USA
- 2017 *SENDING/RECEIVING*, General Consulate of Cyprus, New York, USA
- 2016 PARADISE, Skoufa Gallery, Mykonos, Greece.
TO SUM DEGREE, The HUD Gallery, Ventura, California, USA (curated by Dab Art)
Art Takes Manhattan "Extended Consciousness", Caelum Gallery, New York, USA
- 2015 *Donkey Art Prize 3*, Galley 76, Dubai International Art Center, Dubai, UAE
- 2014 Contemporary Painting, The Brick Lane Gallery, London, UK
- 2012 *Europe-Larnaca*, Municipal Art Gallery, Larnaca, Cyprus



TRACES A' XII, 80X60 cm, mixed media on wood panel



TRACES A' IX, 130X105 cm, mixed media on canvas



TRACES B' I, 100X100 cm, mixed media on wood panel



TRACES A' X, 100x100 cm, mixed media on wood panel



TRACES B' III, 85x65 cm, mixed media on wood panel



TRACES C' XIV, 55x42 cm, mixed media on black cardboard



TRACES C' X, 55x42 cm, mixed media on black cardboard



TRACES C' XIII, 55x42 cm, mixed media on black cardboard



TRACES C' XI, 55x42 cm, mixed media on black cardboard



TRACES B' II, 85x65 cm, mixed media on wood panel



TRACES B' V, 185x125 cm, mixed media on canvas



TRACES A' III, 185x125 cm, mixed media on canvas



TRACES C' VII, 55x42 cm, mixed media on black card board



TRACES A' VII, 115x115 cm, mixed media on canvas



TRACES A' VIII, 100x100 cm, mixed media on canvas



TRACES A' V, 60x40 cm, mixed media on wood panel

TRACES A' IV, 60x40 cm, mixed media on wood panel



TRACES A' VI, 50x50 cm, mixed media on canvas



TRACES C' I, 55x42 cm, mixed media on black card board



TRACES C' III, 55x42 cm, mixed media on black card board



TRACES C' IV, 55x42 cm, mixed media on black card board



TRACES C' II, 55x42 cm, mixed media on black card board



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