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The anxieties of the body: spirituality and eroticism in Nikolas Panayi's painting

The art (mostly, painting) by Nikolas Panayi is anthropocentric; better still, it is somatocentric. The human body, specifically, the nude male body constitutes the nucleus and framework, as well as the agent of both the formalistic and the conceptual, thematic and ideological parameters of his art. Yet, in spite of his long, constant negotiation of this theme, Panayi's painting has avoided the trap of mannerism and of barren repetition, due to his equally persistent exploration of form and materials.

Formalistically, the nude human figure - the epicentre of his work - alludes to the ideal, heroic male nude of Classical Greece and its variations during the Hellenistic era, as well as to the revival of this tradition, within both the Italian Renaissance and the (late 18th-early 19th century) European Neoclassicism. The male bodies in the works by Panayi are imbued with the - anatomically and philosophically - ideal proportions of Classical Greek art. At the same time, however, they manifest, and are subjected to, emotions, expressions, conflicts, passions and, at times, catharsis - elements that are not encountered in the Classical era. The quality of 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur' of Classical Greek art, as J. J. Winckelmann would say centuries later, was replaced, in the Hellenistic (and Roman) times, with expressions of pathos, passions, pain and psycho-emotional tensions. At the same time, the art of these later eras retained, to a degree, the earlier physical idealisation of the nude male figure. This combination was revived and transformed during both the Italian Renaissance and Neoclassicism.

This mixture is also encountered in the figures in Panayi's works, where it functions as the vehicle for the spiritual and emotional anxieties of the artist, which are also ecumenical: the course

from birth to creation and to death; the spiritual journey from darkness to light; the existential absurdity of the human condition; the metaphysical-religious agony.

The last element, in particular, is reinforced by Panayi's frequent adoption of the triptych, which alludes to the corresponding Christian tradition. The triptych arrangement was also utilised in many works by Francis Bacon - one of the most important anthropocentric-somatocentric artists of the 20th century. As in Bacon's art, the ecumenical anxieties-agonies in the works by Panayi are, before all else, the artist's own. This is particularly apparent in his more recent works, where the struggle of the figures towards light, salvation or truth, constitutes a visualisation of his own, internal struggle. The forms that emerge from, or branch out of, each other, or that hide within each other, derive from the painter's own internal conflicts and anxieties.

As far as technique is concerned, Panayi's art contains elements and influences from areas of 20th-century modern art. It derives, on one hand, from mild, post-Impressionist expressions in the early 20th century, and on the other, from Expressionist painting's revival in the 1980s. His persistence, however, with the idealised, 'heroic', nude male figure keeps his art at a distance from the more angst-ridden, deformed renderings of the above expressions, referring us, instead, to the older traditions of Neoclassicism, of Italian Renaissance, and of Hellenistic art.

It is precisely this relation in his work that brings me, in conclusion, to another important element in his pictures: eroticism. The erotic element was the main characteristic of the human figure, especially, the nude male body, both in the 'calm-grandiose', idealised forms of Classical Greek art, as well as in its more expressive variations in the Hellenistic era. It was also a strong element in the Renaissance revival and development of the ancient

tradition, despite the now-added Christian element (greatest example, perhaps, Michelangelo's art), and in Antiquity's re-invention in European Neoclassicism.

This very eroticism imbues many of the paintings by Nikolas Panayi: it is an eroticism which is both spiritual and physical, and which is as much ideal and perennial, as it is tangible and contemporary.

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