



REVIEW - 22 MAR 2017

# Flying Over the Abyss

NEON at the Athens Conservatoire, Greece

BY CATHRYN DRAKE

Seeking nothing less than to convey the existential trajectory of human life, 'Flying over the Abyss', the culmination of shows in Rethymnon and Thessaloniki, comprised the work of 34 artists culled from the Daskalopoulos Collection by curators Dimitris Paleocrassas and Maria Marangou. The heart of the exhibition was *Ascesis: The Saviors of God* (1923), a spiritual treatise by Nikos Kazantzakis, whose prologue states: 'We come from a dark abyss, we end in a dark abyss, and we call the luminous interval life.'

Progressing through spaces that sought to portray different stages of being, the show opened with 'Genesis/Trauma'. From the singular viewpoint of the crotch as a livid red wound, Louise Bourgeois's watercolour *Birth* (2007) renders the female body headless and disfigured, as the sole origin of our formation and suffering.

*After Courbet: 1-18* (2009) – Sherrie Levine’s appropriation of postcards of Gustave Courbet’s *L’Origine du monde* (Origin of the World, 1866) – toys with reproduction, proximity and perspective. Mike Kelley’s *Glorious Wound* (1986) provided a deranged, cathartic totem of red vaginal slashes painted on a white sheet topped with a rainbow-coloured clown’s wig. In the centre, Hans Bellmer’s deformed and eroticized doll, *La Demi-Poupée* (The Half Doll, 1972), slouched in a chair reflecting the dysfunctional psyche of an abused child.

In *Ascesis*, Kazantzakis declares: ‘All that I see, hear, taste, smell and touch are the creations of my mind.’ The second chamber, ‘Life Struggle: An Affirmation’, displayed Robert Gober’s *Untitled* (1992–96): a self-portrait by way of an altered *New York Times* advertisement, in which an image of the artist dressed as a beautiful bride takes the place of the female model. Arranged in rows, Aliko Palaska’s casts of her belly in disparate materials, *Breathing Space* (2015), evokes a countdown to our demise in terms of the air we consume – and a reminder that every instant is both loss and gain. Indeed, it is in the mundane moments between momentous events that we often experience the most joy: Maro Michalakakos’s *Happy Days* (2012) – two fuzzy mounds conjuring giant trolls formed of velvet particles cast off from years of art-making – embody the vitality contained in the interstices of things.

Expressions of the will to stave off mortality and to survive were displayed in a cavernous, dimly lit space. Ioanna Pantazopoulou’s *Reconfigured Etiquette* (2012), a sublime explosion of household furniture suspended mid-air, portrays the kind of family dinner table where you struggle for self-preservation under threat of collective control. In the words of Kazantzakis: ‘I will not accept boundaries; appearance cannot contain me; I choke!’ Abraham Cruzvillegas’s sculptural ensemble *Autoconstrucción Room* (2009), on the other hand, invokes a hardscrabble habitat of scrap transformed miraculously into shelter – a relic of retrofuturism? To wit, the jarring sound of car alarms erupted now and then from the apocalyptic landscape of Paul Chan’s animation *My Birds ... Trash ... the Future* (2004). Kazantzakis’s meticulously handwritten manuscript was displayed nearby, like a glowing spirit, in a glass case conjuring a coffin.

The ultimate stage was accessed through a brightly lit passage guarded by Costas Tsoclis’s serpentlike sculpture *Danger, Risk of Death* (1968). This led to a room dominated by Jenny Holzer’s sleek tombstone, *Laments (No Record of Joy)* (1989), its inscription comparing the life force to an orgasm, as a brief but potent form of resistance. Projected on the final wall, Mark Wallinger’s *Threshold to the Kingdom* (2000) – airport arrivals in slow motion accompanied by Gregorio Allegri’s angelic *Miserere* (1582–1652) – provided a moving allegory for passing into the afterlife.

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The headless winged everyman of Vlassis Caniaris’s *Big Swing* (1974) recalls both Icarus and Bud Cort’s mad character in the film *Brewster McCloud* (1970), whose defiance of human limitation seems to end in tragedy – or does it? If you stare fearlessly into the abyss, Kazantzakis suggests, you are rewarded with transcendence.

Lead image: Hans Bellmer, *La Demi-Poupée* (The Half-Doll), 1972, and Stathis Logothetis, *Triptych*, 1972, installation view. Courtesy: Ubu Gallery, New York, and Galerie Berinson, Berlin