

## A Vibrant Beam of Light Reveals the Rhythm of the World

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Athina Ioannou's work is directly relevant to painting. It is painterly work, the work of an artist – in terms of both the mind that conceived it and the gesture that produced it, through to the eye that perceives it. This is an artwork that explicitly poses the fundamental questions on how art is held together through its distinctive qualities and component parts – light, colour, line, gesture, frame, setting, the virtual space and pictorial essence of the visual event, the materiality of representation, and the inclusion of the artwork into the realm of reality, both through the image it exposes to view and the realities of both things around us and our own experience, the ranks of which it joins. The immateriality of the perception of the artwork by the viewer and the materiality of its projection on the language of physical and visual space become part of the reality that precedes the work and is altered and expanded by the artwork, which becomes a new, inseparable part of that reality.

Athina Ioannou's work immediately concerns fundamental elements that determine a work of painting and differentiate it from one period to another, bringing it before our eyes either in the act of viewing the work itself or as a mediation that enables us to see the world around us. Her artworks lay out before our eyes the processes that deal with presence (the act of capturing life, which is etymologically reflected in the Greek word for painting: ζωγραφική). And in doing that, they reveal the pure act of painting: That which gives absence the power to cover the visible part of a surface and at the same time to reveal, beyond the surface, the viewer's presence in space, emerging through the depths of the materiality of the physical world, permeated by the spectrum of light.

Even if one is able to use formalism to limit associations such as the above to relationships of framework or surface, texture or medium, line or drawing, lived or architectural space, that is, to the 'technical,' as it were, aspects of painting, there is still an aspect that cannot be contained within this 'grammar' of space – an object traditionally defined as a painting, or visual representation. This aspect registers our presence as a mental trajectory across an array of aspects of painting, which history has shown how different they can get from one period to the next, from one society, or culture, to another. The first such aspect is form. This inspires a lingering incertitude, as mutations of form in no way reveal what an artwork means – what the significance of the act of painting itself is – across these mutations. One can hardly speak of architecture with respect to prehistoric parietal art in caves, wall paintings in an Egyptian tomb or Roman villa, or even Fayum mummy portraits or religious icons as manifestations of the divine not made by human hand, mosaics in Byzantine church arches, which bring the realm of the beyond within human material constructions, Gothic stained glass windows, which treat the sky and shadow as both the form and meaning of faith on the Pilgrims' path.

It is precisely such questions that Athina Ioannou's painting work addresses, questions which, despite the historicity in which they are rooted, leave us speechless before the current perception of that distinctive syntax of meaning between space and time, light and shadow, human perception, the materiality of art and our appreciation of it; in them, sensation and thought are just as alive. Artworks by Athina Ioannou bring us face to face with an event that takes place in front of us even as we gaze at it (or not gaze at it, or gaze at it indirectly, or obliquely) and make us feel both present and absent in that moment with respect to ourselves and the work itself. For it transports us to a shadow or a dimness that doesn't belong to any corporeal aspect of the physical space that surrounds us, even if it is the transformation of a window to a visual artwork, whereby the window ceases to be part of the architectural space and becomes one with the light or shadow of the world.

The space in which we find ourselves through the works that inhabit it is removed from the state of stillness; it becomes moving space, setting in motion the perception of the artwork. In this way, Athina Ioannou does not appropriate the building, or space; on the contrary, she liberates it from the state of a static object and transports it, by a subtle move, as if in a game of chess, to the open realm of public juxtaposition with an anonymous humanity. Her gesture and conceptual approach are revealed to us like a tree from the nursery that now finds its place in the forest. Even more so, when the approach is not only naturalistic but also possesses the intellectual aspect of human sensation, one feels that being free means moving in space not necessarily knowing where one is heading, yet certain in the knowledge that there are possible paths and perspectives ahead. In this sense, Athina Ioannou's body of paintings possesses a profoundly poetic quality as well as a palpable linguistic aspect (for there can be no poetry outside of the organic relationship between word and language).

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In a seminal essay, the great linguist Émile Benveniste notes: 'At this point the problem that haunts all modern linguistics arises: [the form–meaning relationship]. Many linguists would like to reduce it to the notion of form alone but somehow they cannot succeed in freeing themselves of the correlative – meaning. What has not been attempted in order to avoid, ignore, or expel meaning? It has been useless; this Medusa's head is always there at the centre of language, fascinating those who contemplate it.' (É. Benveniste, 'Les niveaux de l'analyse linguistique,' *Problèmes de Linguistique générale*, v.1, N.R.F., Gallimard, 1966, cited in Andrew Lohrey, *The Meaning of Consciousness – Studies in literature and science*, University of Michigan Press, 1997, p.89. Retrieved from books.google.gr.)

And so we find ourselves at Athina Ioannou's exhibition before Medusa's head, which turns whoever gazes at her into stone – an iconic image of the power and powerlessness of painting as a representation, reflection or mimesis of reality. Certainly, though, writing these lines and metaphorically using Medusa's head as an image to speak of meaning, which cannot be dissociated from form, Benveniste also poses this query about the particular moment which, as he says, 'fascinates those who confront it.' Obviously by choice, he stops short of mentioning the conclusion of the myth – the terrible gaze and petrifying effect of this fascination on whoever gazes at it, that is, the viewer. Athina Ioannou may not, and need not, be familiar with this essay. She, like Benveniste, does not follow the myth through to its conclusion, leaving the pending question surrounding the image hanging before the viewer, who is suspended between the dazzling void of fascination and the petrifying completion of the artwork. Thus, the question posed is, just like in the linguist's case, aporetic, rather than moralistic. She systematically wonders, or simply contemplates, how painting involves form – formally and technically – as outcome, which narrows down painting to the characteristic act or practice that define the artist's work as a practice involving the 'apparent.' Yet, there comes a moment when form is inhabited ('haunted,' according to Benveniste) by the problem that constitutes its relationship with its correlative – meaning. And here, Athina Ioannou does nothing to release herself from the question of meaning. What is the meaning of a painting? Will its purpose be fulfilled once it achieves the fascinating gaze, once it arrives at a gaze able to turn the viewer into stone?

Only the viewer can answer this question, or at least come face to face with it and react accordingly. The artist can only pose, or transpose the question, letting the artwork overwhelm the viewer with emotion. The latter either turns into stone (if they look at Medusa in the eye) or returns her gaze in a reflection of light (like Perseus, who projected Medusa's gaze back to the monster's eyes using his polished shield as a mirroring surface, petrifying Medusa herself, and safely approached and cut off her head). The artist then leaves the viewer to wander off free in space, after the moment of reflection. All this may be too complicated or obscure for what Athina Ioannou's body of work gives us so simply, the most important thing that painting has taught us over the last few millennia: the form, which transposes the meaning of any gesture and gaze into a vibrant reality is seldom achieved nowadays by artists who seek to interpret or comment on images or processes.

Harnessing an age-old poetics, Athina Ioannou enables light to permeate material, the medium of her work. The oils and dyes she uses to immerse her fabrics in, as well the touch of her fingers on paper encapsulate the traces of both the medium and the gesture which constitute them. Rather than claiming the historicity of an age-old art, Athina Ioannou – and with her, the viewer – experiences the mythical moment of an unpredictable, intense emotion. Her work resonates with us, as we, too, resonate with the light and space that surrounds us, which we assimilate, making sense of the world's movement through the experience of shifting, mutating. Everything continually points towards a constant transformation into an alterity without which there is no art nor culture, language, form, or meaning. This is the poetic suspense of the freedom of language, which allows the 'other' to share the place of the 'self-same,' frozen in time in the artwork, while the place remains active, like volcanic fire, alive beneath its ashes. Specifically, the light that falls on Athina Ioannou's works constantly changes, not due to atmospheric conditions, but because the interplay of oil and fabric never ceases to be alive (just like the interplay of form and meaning), and constantly changes things in turn, gaining in depth by each centimetre of form that emerges before us, alongside its correlative – meaning. The subtle materiality and ethereal gesture sublimate the interplay of form and meaning, moment and history, into the poetic language that substantiates Athina Ioannou's work.

The poetics of language enable poetry to become painting, word to become image, for the eye and the hand communicate with a brain that is not in a formalin container, but alive in its ever-evolving relationship with the world. Similarly, the artwork and the space communicate with the historical time that passes like an imperceptible membrane – a film containing the history of the World. Space and artwork have been baptised like fabric in oil, which makes it translucent, or fused, like paper and the imprint of the hand, which solidifies into an impenetrable materiality incessantly active, experiencing the 'Alchemy of the Word,' as Arthur Rimbaud said of poetry. And we might add, what applies to poetry also applies to painting in the exact same terms: the accuracy that maintains silence and resonance

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as a vibrant cadence of life, which interrupts the architectural stillness of the page and the functional practicality of grammatical structure.

Breaking up these two categories (form and meaning) from being monosemic concepts enables the work to make visible before our eyes, as if through a tiny crack, the Universe, like a word that cannot find its place, suddenly emerging before us either as a never-ending question or as the end of all doubt, apocalyptically. Just as a page of poetry is linked to the book that contains it only on one side, the pictorial form is linked to the side of the fabric that enables us to explore it; as if browsing through a book or navigating the world in our mind or with our eyes, mentally or physically, with the light or the shadow that hail from a distant horizon, beyond the space of the exhibition or site. Thus, we go beyond pragmatic space and follow a crack, or a path that takes us beyond the moment of explicit fascination. And then they let us grasp the power of cadence and the extent of resonance as a reflection from afar, a celestial light against the rumbling silence of the earth, keeping us in tune with meaning, which turns form into transformation.

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