

## In the studio with Apostolos Georgiou

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*“Art is a big compromise. It starts with a big lie and the success is to make it as true as possible. The moment that you want to talk about something, it becomes a copy of it. You leave out so many things or you put in many others that don’t exist.”*

Documenta 14 closes this Sunday in Kassel, Germany. The exhibition takes place every five years. Led by a guest curator, the event carries the political baggage with which it was funded in 1955 as a way to bring international modern and contemporary art to Germany after the IIWW and the Nazi period. I visited back in June and one of my absolute highlights was Georgiou's large canvases installed as a solo show in an apartment frozen in time since the 70s. The muted blue, ocher, maroon, brown and mint green migrate from the paintings to the faded tiles and room fittings. I was sailing in Greece last week and my luck was to meet Apostolos Georgiou (b. 1952, Thessaloniki) on my last stop in Athens.







## **How was your experience at Documenta 14?**

I have never visited a previous Documenta. After leaving for 10 years abroad during the 70s in Austria and in Italy, I came back to Greece and landed on a Greek island and lived there for more than 25 years. I was nearly cut off from the art world, shows, discussions, artists and exhibitions. This island where I wanted to live in since I was a child gave me the opportunity to live surrounded by nature and to get the maximum concentration to work and understand what I was doing without any influences and disturbances. That is what allowed me to come to the conclusion of what I am and how I am going to express it. So even though I have never been a fanatic follower of visual arts, I had all the excuses for missing any information of what it was going on in the World.

**What do you think of the art world? You are represented by galleries here in Athens as well as in London and in New York and you just took part in a major art event but you don't seem to get involved in the machinery of the art industry, the openings, talks, museum activities, etc.**

It's nice to know that you belong to it, especially if you manage to succeed without changing much your lifestyle and to live and breathe out of it. Even though money is a very important thing because it allows us to live in better places and get or do nicer things, the art would have been much better without the involvement of profit. I am afraid that both of us are involved in the art industry. It's just that I always have the chance and luxury to go back to my island and you manage to combine this interview with a sailing week in the Aegean Sea.

**It is your livelihood at the end of the day...**

I am lucky to belong to the group of artists who can make a living out of their art, meaning economically sufficient. Not all of the artists manage to do so and that is not always connected to the artistic sufficiency of their work.

I love art. Specially in the form of music. I can imagine that some people like visual arts. Maybe because I am involved in it, I cannot enjoy it very much. It is a lot of suffering, making efforts and trying to understand it. It is a responsibility.

**I believe there is a sense of time and narrative in your paintings, even if it is very elusive and ambiguous. Do you think in terms of narrative or do you intend to present a narrative?**

I like to start with stories. Nothing exceptional. What I paint is something that I am sure has existed a long time in my mind. It is a feeling that I know well. These stories have passed the test of time. It is not just clever ideas. In science, the greatest inventions come out of simple thoughts sometimes so simple that no one thought about them.



As for the protagonists of my work, the figures are me. But it's not only me. It's a way of talking about everybody because I am no different from anybody else, with my needs, with my fears... Talking about yourself you talk about the *All*.

At Documenta 14, you have one painting where one character is having a shower and the other one is sitting next to him. This is one example in which the characters do very common daily activities.

I wouldn't say that I paint common daily activities but common daily thoughts. On that painting, the man who is taking a shower cannot listen to the man who talks to him because of the water noise and the man who talks thinks the first one is listening to him. How many times in anger we say, "I will kill him". But we don't do it. That is what I paint.



Sometimes, I interpret your characters in one painting as the same person, duplicated or at times even in multiples. Do you see them as different people?

No, it is the same person in a different position, practically or physiologically. One figure can easily be the other. I paint the way we deal with ourselves and with others. Mainly it is about connections. Being in a studio for hours, days, years... which is a complete crazy thing if you take

it seriously, you are surrounded by thoughts that fly around your head like bees. On one hand, you have all these thoughts that never bring you to a conclusion. You try to be objective but to an absolute abstraction. On the other hand, you paint with real colors on a real canvas, creating a concrete painting. Your mind never comes to a definitive conclusion but the painting needs objectivity in order to survive in time. This objectiveness keeps the art piece alive in the future.

I want to talk about things that exist forever. I am not talking only about the quality of the work, which I hope is there... but to say that you work today and you don't care about tomorrow is a lie. All artists want the work to remain forever. It's an amazing feeling you get when you listen to a Bach concerto and addressing him you say "You bastard. You manage to bring me enthusiasm 300 years later." It is not a question of artistic ego. It is about life because nobody wants to die. People need to feel that in the end there is a continuity.

### **Do you find inspiration in other art forms beyond music? Any authors?**

I am not reading at all. I am not a reader because I was pushed to read when I was a child. My sister was reading a lot and they would tell me "Look, your sister...". I was thinking a lot. I was quite lonely and my mother thought I was quiet and I had no problems but I did, like all kids.

Music played and plays a big role for me. It is an expression of art that I like to analyze and I am happy to understand it. Rhythm seems very important to me. Also, what really fascinates me in music is that two different hands create two completely different sounds on the same piano.







*The title of the show I did in London last year, The Same Old Fucking Story is because I am doing the same thing until I die. There are some aesthetic changes that take place over time but it happens very slowly. You need time to understand how your work changes. You cannot change.*

**Forgive me for being so reductive but I believe that many Greek artists have a commonality in their way of approaching the work. It is not a common aesthetic but a deep and profound questioning.**

That's something I cannot respond. For me, it is difficult to distinguish the work of a young Greek artist from a non-Greek. What I know is that in my work, the more direct the image goes to the spectator, the better it is.

**I have read an article where you said, and I paraphrase, that you would have liked to be an abstract artist but you don't have the character. What is the character that you think it is required for abstraction, or what character do you have that brings you to representation?**

It is the part of the clown that I have. A clown cannot be an abstract painter. I'm a provocateur. If I sit in a coffee place with friends, they know something will come out. I'll make a provocation. This is something that I have out of my complexes, to keep attention or who knows... but I like to provoke which means that people have to be there. It is me who provokes.

Secondly, I was ashamed for many years that I was an artist. I felt a little bit bohemian. I am very grounded and ambitious but not through... (gestures with a hand and rolls his eyes). I hated the way people talked when I said I was a painter. "Oh, you are an artist!" I hated that. Being an abstract painter you need to have the character where you won't have this complex. If you draw three lines on a canvas, you seem a little bit like a *maestro* who creates the new world. I prefer to hide all these things behind the characters. Of course, you need to be a *maestro* to also do that. I am not saying that I am, but I hope to be. I try to make my abstraction through hiding this part and then I like to put people in difficulties. I am not talking of people who understand (art). That is not the interesting part. The important thing is to paint for people who don't understand. For common people.

When you paint, you think that a great gallerist will come to your studio and look at your work because he *knows* and that is great. That is the end. When you paint, you want to think of people.

**How do you reach out to those people who don't understand art?**

You don't know them. You never paint for a person. You paint for the world. If you think that you paint for five people, stop painting. In the end, you paint for five but you don't want to think about it. You need to feel that you paint for the good of the world. I am not doing something to damage the world, for sure. I wouldn't be a painter who says lies. I think I am a painter who tries to say the truth and to be objective, up to the point where I cannot even move my hand without



thinking two hundred thousand times if I should put this or that or if this idea is for so long or forever. This is what my political thought is: not to lie. Not to say how it should be but at least not to lie.

**Your ideas navigate existentialism. I am thinking it is very consistent with your wish to paint for people who don't understand art because if there is something they understand is life and the human subject.**

Since I was a kid that I was painting, my work was well known in Thessaloniki. You didn't need to do much to get known there and I remember very clearly that my work was liked by low profile, simple people or by the intellectuals. No one in the middle.

**You haven't had formal training.**

I studied architecture in Vienna. I hated it. My mother pushed me to go and be an architect. I was there two years. I was working as a painter in the academy which means I was working as a painter at home. I just declared them that I did it by force and after two years I left. I didn't want to study painting. I hated studying. I hated schools. I have enough orientation through the things around me. I don't need a mouth to tell me.

**You clearly have spent a lot of time on your own and debating about these ideas with yourself. When was the first time that you said to yourself...**

I was in High School. I was sixteen and I said to myself "I am a professional".

**I like that you say *professional* and not *artist*.**

Yes, which means working a lot, looking a lot, thinking a lot. I had my first show in Athens in 1978 and then I disappeared for 17 years to make my next show. I had moved with my wife to this paradise island and we didn't need much. I never felt that I was isolated. I was always feeling like I was in the middle of Manhattan. I never felt that I was out. I knew that I was doing something very contemporary. If you have the eagerness, you will react on the work.

**You have said before that you are a provocateur but to provoke means that you have a very specific reaction in mind. I wonder if you want to withdraw some information to keep it less obvious...**

Or to make it so precise that you lose the meaning.

## **If you want to provoke someone...**

You cannot provoke in the same way all the time because then they know how to defend themselves.

## **You play some confusion game.**

It is the same confusion we live in.

**I feel some of your works express a drunkenness effect on some level. There is an in-between state of people who are drunk and people who look at those being drunk and yet both are real.**

There is a painting at Documenta 14 where one man is spitting and another one is committing suicide. Both men are next to each other. It is gravity. As kids, we used to spit from balconies to see it falling on the ground. All kids have done that. Suicide is something I wouldn't dare to do. I respect so much people who commit suicide. It is very dramatic. On the other hand, spitting is nothing; it is meaningless. Both are about dropping. That is why I put them together. Sometimes, it is so precise, so clear, that you cannot accept it. Other times, it is so unclear that you get soaked and feel it but can't find it.

