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THE CRUCIFIXION
OF THANASIS TOTSIKAS

ON VIEW

June 15 – July 10, September 10 – October 10, 2020
Wednesday four – eight p.m., Saturday two – six p.m.
and by appointment

Thanasis Totsikas

In 1985 Thanasis painted a depiction of life's ladder and titled it 'The stairway of life'. In 1988 he made a sculpture in metal with the same title. I found these in the digital archive of his work a few days ago and called him up to ask about them, but he appeared pretty unenthusiastic, so I let it go. This morning as I sat down to write this text – I had a whole outline for it – it wouldn't come out. I went back to looking at the 80s ladders. We haven't reproduced them for you here, but just imagine, these are full of dynamism, strength and forward hope. Now it is more than two decades later, and Thanasis has repainted the ladders in a series of drawings he's now charged with a very different emotion. In the recent works, a Sisyphus-like figure appears carrying a boulder, bent-over, tired, as if about to collapse on the floor. Thanasis has replaced hope with exhaustion, strength and dynamism with unelected perseverance. The transition leaves one with that feeling of never knowing if you're well or not, though admittedly you remember, at some point, knowing.

Coming to this thought, I remembered something else I came across in the digital archive – a scan of the backside of a postcard on which Thanasis had scribbled something. I couldn't totally make out what it said so I sent it to him on Messenger, and he wrote back:

"This is what I've written", he said. "I slowly forget all about life's ladder...we have sour cherry juice here...it seems like my taste comes from my mother's side of the family". "This postcard is from a drawing. I must have forgotten about it. I used to send things like that to the house. Sometimes I'd write in the back. This one reminds me of a (Yannoulis) Chalepas drawing."

If Thanasis hadn't painted his Crucifixion, I'd never see those images. I kept thinking about that. That they're real – autobiographical, as he says, but not necessary. There's an enormity of feeling that comes with that simple realisation, and it's hard to know how to speak about it when it concerns another person, someone you don't know, except for a few conversations and the work of course. The work is the testimony. Then there's the realisation that you'll never fully access what lies behind it.

In the exhibition, we are showing 200 or so drawings Thanasis has made in the last couple of years. Most of them depict his Crucifixion, he raised on the cross, being taken down and placed in his mother's arms. I find it hard to look at them. It's not so much the violence and the suffering that I find difficult but the sheer quantity of them—the relentless repetition of the pain he gave time to sediment. I also fear people might look past these drawings and pass judgment on Thanasis personally for the amount of suffering to which, he has laid claim. I have a feeling Thanasis might have crucified himself to fulfil an advance sentence he'd come to expect from the outside.

In these last few weeks of self-isolation, I looked at the histories of the Crucifixion as Christian Passion, Roman punishment and subject in art and certain things resonated with the work.

The punishment of the Crucifixion Romans would mainly impose on deserters, murderers, traitors and criminals of humble origin. Depending on their social status, Romans used to place convicts at different heights on the pillar of the cross. The higher their situation, the higher they hung. That was both symbolic like in their annual dog crucifying ceremonies, and practical. A way to ensure that different bodies would end up in the stomachs of different animals. It was typical for bodies not taken down quickly to end up as food for vultures while dogs and other wild animals would feed on the legs of those that hung closer to the ground. Also, death by Crucifixion was often slow and rarely solitary. There are accounts of people speaking to each other on the cross for hours, laughing, spitting at spectators, even singing songs in protest. I can see this irreverence in Thanasis' drawings as well. When I asked him about why he's painted his Crucifixion, Thanasis said he had turned aggression he once felt for others inwardly towards himself. In an older interview with Kostas Bitopoulos about an exhibition at Epikentro Gallery in Patra, Thanasis had said then: "I didn't do it to exalt it. I did it so I could rid myself from it."

In Christianity, the cross is a handle that God's frail and light body uses to lift the world. According to the philosopher, mystic and political activist Simone Weil, the cross – one's personal cross, is a needle that pierces the quivering soul that is like scales out of balance to give it stability. The act of piercing, the suffering, the cross, is what allows each of us individually to realise that we are not the centre of the world. It is the breakdown of our sense of self-importance, of our ego, through the painful but necessary realisation that we're bound to a force of gravity matched only by grace. For Weil, the original question that supposedly remained unanswered – "Why have you forsaken me?" – was responded in silence. For others, it's never received a response. Thinking about the Armenian women that were nailed alive upon the cross, the words of Scottish painter Craigie Aitchison come to mind. Aitchison, who must have painted thousands of crucifixion scenes during his life, and who never professed to be particularly religious either, when asked about his enduring interest in the subject had said that he considered: "the Crucifixion the most horrific story he'd ever heard and little more; the ganging up against one person; as long as the world exists one should attempt to recall it." Aitchison was by all accounts, a charming man who lived his life among animals he loved dearly. For some time, he had canaries living in his studio. They'd made their nest inside an old mattress. Once, the police caught him driving with his Bedlington terrier on his shoulder.

Thinking about a sequence of crucifixions across art history almost exclusively painted by men, I realised that seeing myself as a woman I'd never identified with the figure of Christ. I wondered if other female or female-identifying artists had been able to look past such markers of difference in identity and create representations of him in their way.

The first work that came to my mind was a photograph by American photographer Francesca Woodman, "Untitled" in which Woodman places the Crucifixion inside her home picturing herself as Christ hanging above the door. As Deborah Garcia says about this work, this unusual depiction of the Crucifixion which has a mise-en-scene quality is characterised by a mundane hierophany that is seldom found in common depictions of the Passion. In the 1977 self-portrait "On Being an Angel #1", Woodman has placed the camera above her head producing a distorted image where her lower body disappears. The unusual angle Woodman has used to picture herself in this work reminded me of another depiction of the Crucifixion by artist Salvador Dali, "Christ of St John of the Cross, 1951". To create this image, Dali employed Hollywood stuntman Russell Saunders to pose for him suspended from an overhead gantry so that he could study the effect of gravity on his body. Woodman's photograph reminded me of Dali's painting because of how they both position the viewer in space but seeing both works alongside each other made me aware of a fundamental difference between them. In January of 1981 Woodman's body was found in a New York morgue as that of an unidentified young woman. According to witnesses, she had fallen off a building that same morning, and the fall had disfigured her face. Woodman struggled with depression for years. That struggle is visible in her photographs permeated by a thick atmosphere of melancholy, albeit her use of motifs and interpretation of symbols such as that of the Crucifixion is singular like pain is singular and at the same time novel. That embodied experience with the affective reach that it has is not present in Dali's work which is characterised by a formal intention – a stylistic, distanced contouring of the subject.

Woodman's intimate and embodied approach to showing suffering brings to mind not only the words of Aitchison and Weil who suffered from migraines that kept her in bed for days and who had written about this experience as a basis for her philosophy – but also Ana Mendieta's work. Mendieta created a series of works in response to the rape and murder of Sara Ann Otten in 1973. In one performance she covered herself in blood recreating the victim's poses as they were described in newspaper articles. Mendieta has said that all her works are in some sense a personal response to issues she cannot see herself responding to theoretically. Mendieta used blood like it is used in rituals of the Afro-Cuban religion of Santeria but did not subscribe to one religion. In her notebook from 1980, she stated: "my art is grounded in the belief of one universal energy which runs through everything: from insect to man, from man to spectre, from spectre to plant from plant to galaxy. My works are the irrigation veins of this universal fluid. Through them ascend the ancestral sap, the original beliefs, the primordial accumulations, the unconscious thoughts that animate the world".

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Totsikas' drawings are characterised by specific craftsmanship and a sense of immediacy that is embodied and also comes from self-identifying with the motif – they're autobiographical. This attitude places his drawings of the Crucifixion and of Christ being taken down from the cross closer to the works of Mendieta, Woodman and Aitchison, and further away from the more conventional and established depictions of the Crucifixion by Giotto, Fra Angelico, Michelangelo, Ingres, Klimt, Bosch, Duccio and Lorenzetti. Totsikas' drawings – their systematic and repeated studies on the angles of the body or the curvature of the neck, the personal scale of the works, as well as the period of the last two years during which he produced them expresses a kind of immediacy that implies the daily following of a personal ritual. Totsikas' drawings reveal pain, protestation, even repressed or inverted anger coexisting with an undercurrent of black humour. As journalist Yannis Konstantinidis eloquently wrote in a recent interview with the artist "often in Totsikas' works, we can detect a playful intention that carries as a reserve the necessary supplies to transform itself into self-sarcasm quickly. This irony in work does not enjoy its biting power but carries with it a melancholy mood that may come from some invisible but fatal inner defeat."

The exhibition also includes a series of drawings titled "Bikini" showing women sunbathing on the beach and "Seascapes" inspired from the views near Totsikas' house in Polydendri which he says "is like an Amazonian, like a prehistoric jungle." There, eight years ago, Totsikas bought a small ruin and built it up into a small house. "He was charged that way then," he says. In these drawings, there's a feeling of enjoyment coming through, of celebrating life.

Text by Maya Tounta

BIO

Thanasis Totsikas (born 1951) lives and works in Nikaia, Larissa. He is a skilled luthier, cutler and autobody-repair technician. This expertness has shaped his artistic practice and has been present in his work since his first solo presentation at Desmos Gallery in 1982. His prolific career has included participations at the Venice Biennale and Documenta. His artworks, expressive of a way of life more than the outcome of vocation, often incorporate objects and materials from his every day as diverse as mud and reeds and a Ducati motorcycle.