

Tassos Stephanides (1917-1996)¹

Tassos Stephanides constitutes a particular and most interesting case of a multifarious creator: poet, novelist and painter, who at the same time wrote literary, art and theatre criticism, and journalist articles in general, as well as scripts for revue productions. Moreover, all of his activities seem to have developed as branches of a common creative trunk, and are thus imbued with common ideological-conceptual traits: existential anxieties, contemplations on interpersonal relations, concerns and preoccupations of socio-political character, and an agony over the course of humanity and of the world – of planet Earth – in general.

An additional point that makes Stephanides an even more intriguing topic of examination is the fact that after his secondary schooling he did not proceed to any higher studies, whether in the arts or in literature. Nevertheless, his contribution to Cypriot literature has been important,² as much important as his artistic oeuvre. Even though he was a self-taught painter, his production does not exhibit the qualitative fluctuations that we can observe in the work of some, also important, art-school educated artists of his generation or younger.

Stephanides was born in 1917 in Nicosia, to parents that came from Asia Minor. He graduated from the Pancyprian Gymnasium in 1935 (having had sculptor Andreas Thymopoulos among his teachers), and attended the English School for a year. He had already begun drawing and painting in high school, and he had his first encounter with journalism a few years later, at the *Esperini* newspaper.³

The socio-political concerns that occupied Stephanides all of his life surfaced early on, firstly, with his embracing of Marxism. Soon, however, he reacted against the development of Soviet Communism, especially during the infamous Moscow trials of 1936. In the Trotskyite magazine *Prolatis*, which he published with others, he wrote scathing critiques of both Stalin and the prominent Greek communist Nikos

¹ Many thanks to the Stephanides family for a most pleasant collaboration, especially, to Katy Stephanidou, for putting at my disposal all available material concerning Tassos Stephanides, and for her wonderful hospitality at the beautiful village of Pera Orinis.

All translations from Greek are mine.

² Theoklis Kouyialis, who has dealt extensively with Stephanides' literary work, places him among those who established "modernist writing" in Cypriot literature in the 1950s, and believes that Stephanides' contribution has not yet been fully evaluated. See, Theoklis Kouyialis, "Tassos Stephanides: his contribution in the renewal of our literature" [in Greek]. Typed text, photocopy in Tassos Stephanides' file, Archive of the State Gallery of Contemporary Cypriot Art, Nicosia.

³ See, "Tassos Stephanides: The spirit cannot be subdued" [in Greek], by Philippos Stylianou, *Simerini* newspaper, 9/06/84. Photocopy no. 48, T. Stephanides' file, Archive of the State Gallery.

Zachariades.⁴ This did not stop, nevertheless, the colonial authorities in Cyprus to view Stephanides as an “anti-British troublemaker”, and thus exile him to the village of Peghia, between 1940 and 1942. He was let free only after Nazi Germany’s attack against the Soviet Union.

In 1948, he opened a printing (zincographer’s) shop, where he put together newspaper clichés (in fact, he was the only one doing so during the EOKA anti-colonial struggle, in the late 1950s). The shop lasted until 1974; longer was the life of the advertising office, “Grammi”, which he also established.⁵ In addition to various journalist articles (critiques for theatre, art, books, etc.) that he published,⁶ he also wrote texts for revue shows, which were produced in the 1940s.

His more systematic occupation with literature and painting began in the 1950s. In 1955, he published the poetry collection *Anysichies (Anxieties)*, while his poems were also published in the literary and other periodical press of the time – magazines such as, *Kypriaka Grammata* and *Dimiourghia*.⁷ From 1956 and through 1960, Stephanides exhibited paintings at the shows of the Pancyprian Union of Art Votaries, of which he was a founding member, and of the Pancyprian Society of Art Votaries, which replaced the “Union” in 1958. From 1960 onwards, he exhibited at the group shows of the *Apophasis* Gallery, founded by fellow artists Christoforos Savva and Glyn Hughes. Moreover, from 1964 onwards, he participated in the exhibitions organised by the Chamber of Fine Arts (E.KA.TE.), of which he was also a founding member.

In 1960, Stephanides published his first novel, *O Yios ton Ydaton (The Son of the Waters)*, with a prologue by Nikos Kranidiotis and with cover and other illustration by the painter Telemachos Kanthos. Poet and literary expert, Theoklis Kouyialis, considers this novel to have been the first modernist prose work in Cypriot literature, and he criticises other literary experts, who “usually overlook Stephanides”.⁸ Beyond whatever

⁴ Ibid. Some of this information, which was apparently provided by Stephanides himself, is also included in the article-interview to Aliki Mazi-Papayianni, “*Skies* by Tassos Stephanides” [in Greek], *Simerini* newspaper, 9/01/83. Photocopy no. 37, T. Stephanides’ file, Archive of the State Gallery.

⁵ Stylianou, op. cit.

⁶ For instance, L. Papaleontiou refers to the debate over the current state of Cypriot theatre, which took place in the pages of the theatre magazine *To Theatro*, between K. Montis and K. Makrides, on one hand, and K. Prousis, L. Yiannides and T. Stephanides, on the other, in the years 1944-45. Lefteris Papaleontiou, *Cypriot Literary Magazines during the Years of English Rule* [in Greek] (Nicosia: Centre for Scientific Studies, 2001), p. 70.

⁷ Papaleontiou comments on the poems that Stephanides published in 1955, in *Kypriaka Grammata*, as “texts of novel [mode of] expression [...], but without sufficient degree of obscurity [...]” (ibid., p. 146). Papaleontiou’s reference to “obscurity” as the “trademark of modernism, *par excellence*” (ibid., p. 148), constitutes, I believe, a rather limited definition of literary modernism.

⁸ Kouyialis, op. cit.

“scientific” evaluation this novel merits, the *Yios ton Ydaton* makes for fascinating reading, both in terms of form and of content. With regard to the latter in particular, this work contains elements which are also frequently encountered in his painting oeuvre: biographical experiences and reminiscences, which are often rendered within a dream-like, “metaphysical” ambience; and existential, erotic and spiritual anxieties, which surface either through the physical-sensual contact of the individual with the natural environment, or via the emergence of nature as the receiver and the agent that embodies and expresses these agonies. Such memories and experiences, images and anxieties, are most prominently present in his post-1974 work.

Back in 1964, Stephanides had his first solo exhibition, at the Trust Club in Nicosia [fig. 1]. The works he showed can be divided into two large groups: the first includes his earliest paintings up to and including those made in 1963. These are pictures that exhibit a variety of style and technique. Some of them, mostly landscapes, are rendered in an expressionistic idiom (though more bright and less anxiety-ridden than equivalent north-European expressionistic manifestations from the early 20th century), combined with elements derived from naïf or popular art. Among these are the *Platania* (1960) [fig. 2] and *Slope* (1960) [fig. 3]. Some other paintings in this group, mostly still lifes, manifest another gamut of influences, also from early European modernism, with particular references to artists such as, Henri Matisse and Paul Cézanne – for instance, *Still Life* (c. 1955) [fig. 4] and *Still Life* (c. 1963) [fig. 5].

In such formalist explorations as the above, Stephanides is fully in tune with artistic developments unfolding at the time in Cyprus. In the 1960s and early 1970s, in particular, artists from the first generation of Cypriot art (born in the first two decades of the 20th century), worked within a more modernist direction, in comparison to their earlier production. For instance, Adamantios Diamantis, Telemachos Kanthos and Charilaos Dikaios moved emphatically toward Expressionism, creating what are perhaps their most important works: Diamantis’ *Agonies*, Kanthos’ sea-side views of Salamina, and Dikaios’ expressionistic paintings.

Even more important than these, were the explorations, also in the 1960s, toward much more contemporary expressions, undertaken by members of Cypriot art’s second generation (born in the interwar period), who had returned to Cyprus after their studies abroad: Christoforos Savva, Stelios Votsis, Andreas Chrysochos and others. It is closer to these artists’ searches that we can place the second group of works from Stephanides’ 1964 exhibition, all created in that year (as well as a few others, from 1965). I consider

these paintings more important than his earlier ones, both because they present themselves as a real group – characterised by thematic as well as formal consistency – and, especially, because for the first time, a unique, personal style of the artist emerges.

There exists here a combination of surrealist allusions (particularly, in the tradition of Miró) and of influences from late Cubist idioms, such as Orphism [figs. 6, 7, 8, 9, 10]. We have, therefore, two seemingly contradictory efforts: the creation of dream-like, fantasy landscapes (the shape of a ship sailing through mythological places, being the dominant motif), on the one hand, and on the other, the “rational” arrangement of space, with greater emphasis (than in his earlier work) on the two-dimensional, painterly surface.⁹ At the same time, the images of this group introduce into Stephanides’ art an ecumenical symbolism – an element that will be even more dominant in his later work, especially, from the late 1970s onwards.

Meanwhile, in the late 1960s his painting moved close to abstraction or non-representational art. This is the time that the Greek art-critic and curator Tonis Spiteris, having been appointed as advisor on artistic matters to the Cypriot government, urges the local art production toward abstraction, Minimalism and other current tendencies of the international art scene. At the same time, he enables the participation of the more “progressive” Cypriot artists in the most important biennials and other international exhibitions. Even though Stephanides was not within the “hard core” of the above group of artists, during these years he took part in the Alexandria Biennial of 1968 and he participated in the “Contemporary Cypriot Art” show at the Commonwealth Institute in London and Edinburgh in 1970. Among his paintings, at the time, are *Echoes* (1967) [fig. 11] and *Memories* (1968) [fig. 12]. His experimentations with various techniques and materials, such as his mixed media collages, which incorporated pieces of pre-existing photographs [fig. 13], are also of special interest.

The political and military events of 1974 in Cyprus caused Stephanides to enter a period of non-productivity – barring his journalistic writing. Back in 1973, he had published the article “The spirit cannot be subdued” [in Greek], in an Athenian journal

⁹ Painter Stelios Votsis, in “Painting exhibition by Tassos Stephanides: Some thoughts on his work” [in Greek], *Kypriaka Chronika*, no. 46 (February 1965), p. 63, remarks: “His art, from the local framework within which it used to develop in terms of subject matter, has begun adopting a new language, the symbols of which extend to, and can be received by, all those people whose restless character causes them, often painfully, to reflect on [the concepts of] ‘emotion’ and ‘reason’ and their place within the notion of a ‘complete’ person. Two-dimensionality has begun dominating [his] painting, and the outlines are more pronounced. In contrast to the works of the first cycle, colour has become cooler, not for lack of warmth [by the artist] toward man, but due to a greater rationalising force”.

that was published by various intellectuals, including E. Papanoutsos, who opposed the military regime in Greece.¹⁰

Stephanides resumed painting in 1979, on the encouragement of his wife, Katy Fasouliotou-Stephanidou, also a painter. The result of this return was the group of works, *Νήσος τις ἔστιν* (*Nisos tis estin – There is an island*).¹¹ Their first instalment was included in his second solo show (the first in fifteen years), at Acropolis Gallery in Nicosia. In 1980, he exhibited the second instalment (Zygos Gallery, Nicosia), to which more pictures were added in 1981 (shown at Curium Palace, Limassol).

In terms of both subject matter and form, the pictures of *Nisos tis Estin* constitute the artist's response to the 1974 events. In contrast to other important Cypriot painters, whose reaction to these events was expressed via mostly anthropocentric pictures, Stephanides created a series of “landscapes” (like images out of the *Apocalypse*), in which the human figure is generally absent [figs. 14, 15]. Formalistically, he returns to Expressionism – this time, a more violent and colouristically intense idiom, close to expressionistic creations in the second half of the 20th century, such as the new German Expressionism of the 1960s.

Despite the specific historical references, these paintings are on the verge of abstraction. Interestingly, in a 1979 interview, Stephanides expressed his disdain at the prospect of a “come back”, in international art, of representational painting.¹² Nevertheless, he was too restless and dynamic of a spirit to confine himself in producing art in which all subject matter is abolished, and one that is preoccupied with formalistic problems alone. In several of the pictures from the first cycle of *Nisos tis Estin*, there are recognisable traces of the Cypriot landscape. In particular, the painting with the “overturned” Pentadaktylos mountain [fig. 16] attracted most of the attention. The comments by the poet Kostas Montis are indicative: “[...] I went to Stephanides' house, and I was overturned myself, not just with his *Pentadaktylos*, but also with the entire, terrible, transubstantiated drama of the island, incandescent, circling me, with the

¹⁰ Stylianou, op. cit.

¹¹ The phrase derives, originally, from the tragic play *The Persians*, by Aeschylus, line 441: “νῆσός τις ἔστι πρόσθε Σαλαμῖνος τόπων” [“there is an island opposite Salamina”]. The Greek poet Yiorgos Seferis included it in one of his “Cypriot Poems”, “Salamina of Cyprus”. See, Yiorgos Seferis, *Poems* [in Greek] (Athens: Icarus, 2004), pp. 263-265. Seferis was most possibly Stephanides' source for the phrase, adding, perhaps by mistake, a final “n” to the word “estin” – remaining thus to all subsequent references to his work.

¹² “If there is really a come back, then we should mourn for art.” I.A.S., “T. Stephanides: Painting is spirituality and contemplation” [in Greek], *Simerini* newspaper, 16/10/79. Photocopy no. 6, T. Stephanides' file, Archive of the State Gallery.

thrashed, grim land, with the diffused tragedy of all things, filtered in pain, and with the petrified mother[-figure], mute, alone and indescribable, embodying humanity itself”.¹³

The pictures of *Nisos tis Estin* were also shown in Athens, in 1981 (Nees Morphes Gallery), receiving favourable reviews: “Violently but also whisperingly, beneath what is depicted, tormented Cyprus becomes a cloud, an explosion and mayhem. Suspended mountains, rootless, scarred by darkness and flames. Demolished houses, bright shimmerings and heavy skies, overhanging, ready for dawn or for deluge”.¹⁴

In all of these works, the natural environment is presented as the receiver but also the reflection of the rape, the destruction and of the tragic character of the recent historical events. In the paintings of the second cycle, to which the artist himself referred as “more spiritual, more aesthetically accomplished”,¹⁵ the agony and the tragedy transcend the particularities of the Cypriot space and its history, and acquire more ecumenical character and relevance [figs. 17, 18].

Stephanides’ next group of works, *Ouranoi (Skies)*, was first presented in 1982 (Gloria Gallery, Nicosia). It is probably the largest unit in his oeuvre, since he continued painting “Skies” as late as 1995, one year before his death, in parallel to other groups of works. As in the images of *Nisos tis Estin*, the human figure is largely absent, but the greater agonies of humanity are fully present, given expression once more in the world of nature.

In terms of technique and media, however, the pictures here are produced without the tense, gestural placing of the paint, and without the emphasis on the physicality of the material on the canvas.¹⁶ Whatever expressionistic inclinations are still present, they are now focused on the rendering of the subject’s “atmosphere” – something arrived at both iconographically as much as colouristically. The desolate, melancholy, cloudy landscapes (reminiscent of the idiosyncratic romanticism of 19th-century German artist Caspar David Friedrich) “speak” of loneliness and death [figs. 19, 20], while the rough

¹³ Kostas Montis [from his speech, at the opening of the exhibition at the Acropolis Gallery], “Fires of hope: For the painting of T. Stephanides” [in Greek], *Phileleftheros* newspaper, 17/10/79. Photocopy no. 7, T. Stephanides’ file, Archive of the State Gallery.

¹⁴ From an article [in Greek] by Nikos Alexiou, in the Athenian newspaper *Rizospastis* (19/11/81), reprinted in *Phileleftheros* newspaper, 15/12/81. Photocopy no. 28, T. Stephanides’ file, Archive of the State Gallery.

¹⁵ Ivi A. Samuel, “*Nisos tis estin*: A new exhibition by T. Stephanides” [in Greek], *Simerini* newspaper, 28/09/80. Photocopy no. 14, T. Stephanides’ file, Archive of the State Gallery.

¹⁶ Characteristically, some of the *Skies* (from 1985-87) are painted with acrylic (diluted as in aquarelle) on cloth (e.g. fig. 20).

seas and heavy-cast skies (reference to the other idiosyncratic 19th-century romantic, the Englishman William Turner) carry the tragedy of conflict and destruction [figs. 21, 22]. In a 1983 interview, Stephanides comments: “The sky is very difficult [subject]. [...] But I wanted to toy with colour because painting is a game, as well as art, and I wanted the infinity of tones and colours; but I also wanted to live in [be of] my own time and of the foreign place that has become our home. I suggest man’s loneliness. In some of my works, I am stormy, cyclonic, and in others, tranquil”.¹⁷ In another interview: “The *Skies* was a challenge for my painting skills, but also a poetic call. I wanted to give these visually, with colour and light. Moreover, because I am metaphysical [spiritual], I have perhaps found a refuge in the “skies”. [...] Of course, my landscapes are not specific, but a repository of my childhood, when nature exercised a particular and, at times, tortuous attraction on me. I still see her as something living, which is why I have tried to place ‘souls’ within the natural environment. Often I have the impression that nature is asking us for a contact, for a conversation”.¹⁸

It is such a “conversation” that Stephanides would try to visualise in the last unit of works, in the early 1990s. Meanwhile, in the 1980s, he created another group of paintings in which, for the first and only time, the focus is on the human being. A first unit of these pictures was first presented in 1985, under the title *Mythology* (Rembrandt Gallery, Nicosia). These works (as well as those of a sub-unit, titled *Cry of the Forest*) are part of the greater group *Situations* (1984-87), first presented under this title in 1987 (Opus 39 Gallery, Nicosia) [figs. 23, 24, 25].

In these pictures, the canvas surface is divided into simple geometric shapes, each containing a “still”, but they are all interconnected, both formalistically and thematically. In the exhibition’s booklet, Stephanides refers to the present works with the following: “One could say that the *Situations* constitute theatrical images: they are not realistic depictions of life, but rather, exaggeration and expressionistic distortion, imbued with existential anxiety. Unforgivingly, we applauded the protagonists of an irreverent farce, which fatally ended up in tragedy. The tragic or comic performances must be seen as aesthetic category”. Despite these references to the political and military events of 1974, the “dramas” depicted here tend toward a wider survey of the human condition: existential anxieties and erotic-interpersonal tensions, rendered theatrically

¹⁷ Mazi-Papayianni, op. cit.

¹⁸ Lambros Kefallinos, “In conversation with Tassos Stephanides” [in Greek], *Enimerosi* magazine, no. 1 (23/12/82), p. 53.

(the “boxes” on the painted surface allude to the theatre stage), and especially with a heavy dose of the grotesque in the depiction of the human figure.

Human figures as comic-tragic caricatures in the above images, are no doubt in contrast to the glorifying, awesome rendition of nature by Stephanides. This antithesis is even more apparent in the few pictures, from *Situations*, where in the all-dominant natural environment, tiny human shapes are placed, looking like images from children’s paintings [fig. 26]. If these compositions constitute a visualisation of the “discourse” between man and nature, to which Stephanides referred earlier, this interaction is far from balanced: in an interesting parallelism with traditional Chinese landscape painting, the minute presence of man (just like his total absence in earlier works) juxtaposes the magnificence of nature to human insignificance.

This imbalance intensifies further the agony for nature’s destruction and for the course of the planet, in general. Such agonies and concerns constitute the nucleus of Stephanides’ last group of works, entitled, *The Agony of Planet Earth* (1990-92). In art, nature often becomes – as in Stephanides’ earlier paintings, above – the visually and ideologically expressive vehicle for the tragedy of the human condition. The natural environment may, however, also be the receiver of man’s brutality and irrationality. In the images from *The Agony of Planet Earth*, some of which are on the verge of complete abstraction, the strong and at places dark colour range offers a vision of the natural environment that is both savagely beautiful and imbued with a strong sense of impending doom. A doom that will be not the result of natural causes but of human action. Man, wherever present in these works, has been once again reduced to a tiny, naïf-like caricature [figs. 27, 28, 29, 30].

As in the *Skies*, the views of nature’s grandeur and the resulting emotions of awe, admiration and anxiety in these later works, are the result of both subject matter, but mostly of the expressiveness of colour.¹⁹ Stephanides’ painting, without ever abandoning representation completely, was throughout its course the outcome of his “struggle” with materials and form. This constant process of exploration kept his creative output – both the literary as well as the artistic one – clear of the trap of resting on its past achievements and of repetitive mannerism. At the same time, this “fight” was always imbued with ideological-spiritual concerns: “Painting, like all fine arts, is contemplation, spirituality. [...] It is not representation or abstraction that constitutes

¹⁹ Several works by Stephanides from the early 1990s could well be placed within both the *Skies* and the *Agony of the Planet Earth* (e.g. fig. 29).

art's value, but the creation of an aesthetic space, where man can find balance and tranquillity".²⁰ "My intention is to create, through painting, another world, different from the actual environment, one that is imaginary or dream-like. [...] The human being is tragic because is mortal. A possible reason [for man's tragic nature] is the subconscious tendency to transcend death, by leaving behind some creation. This I believe is achieved through art and literature [...]"²¹

The Agony of Planet Earth contains the above intentions and beliefs of Stephanides. These pictures amount to a fitting epilogue to the oeuvre of a man who, in all of his creative work – literary, artistic, journalistic, etc. –, expressed the concern and the agony for the course and the tragic fate of the world.

Man needs to become more humane. It is not enough that he is a natural thinking being who, having transcended the state of the animal, has become a creator. He must also be moral, otherwise he is debased and heads to destruction.²²

²⁰ From the interview given by Stephanides to I.A.S., op. cit.

²¹ From the interview given by Stephanides to Ivi A. Samuel, op. cit.

²² Ibid.